

Gettysburg

A MEDITATION ON

WAR AND VALUES

Kent Gramm

INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS BLOOMINGTON • INDIANAPOLIS

If I should soon bring
this meditation to an
end, would another so
sweet occasion be likely
to offer?

—Thoreau

Nothing human except ignorance could have produced this war. Ignorance is not a lack of knowledge but the map of our condition, the tragic field we are concentrated in. Lack of understanding is the territory of an illness, a consumption that can't be cured by feeding it the facts. Curses can't be assuaged by information. Their germs and principalities don't fight according to the book. Good and evil, dark and light, the human mind itself, are fruits of some divided root, the pattern and articulation of some deep struggle in the heart. Narrow-eyed shadows pace the crest of Cemetery Ridge, mumbling multitudes approach; they clash across gray depth and distance; we turn on our beds and cry out in the night, battling with sticks and stones. Civil war is our perennial human theme.

Perhaps all of us are veterans of battles long forgotten. We have only dreams, our mysterious loves, our reverence for beauty, and the long faint call of duty to tell us what those ghostly advances and retreats were that have given us our faces and our fates. Like the virtue that enables it, duty is its own reward. Each duty is a vessel in which to carry forward courage, until the wall is breached, and courage flowers into glory.

There's nothing between us and eternity but our bodies. I think we all suspect an eternity, otherwise we would not be so afraid of time. We know that whatever is wrong is terribly wrong, and its consequences are too vast to face. What we want are lives that will wear well. What we make are lives that will wear out. There are no slaves in Valhalla;

each of us must do our own work, and a jewel among gifts is the grace of an eternity to do it in.

As courage is the primary virtue, cowardice is the primary vice. But fear is our ruling passion—our primary passion; it stands behind all the others that endanger us.

A person who is afraid, really afraid, is capable of anything, and will do it to anyone, including and perhaps especially, those closest—wives, husbands, and children. These are the easiest and softest targets—and when a person is afraid it is exactly such a target he or she wants. Ethics, reason, practicality are alike taken under the rule and into the service of this passion. Hunger, lust, all the drives give way to abject fear. Only love seems to be resistant, because it is willing to forget the basis of fear: self-preservation. Thus courage is born.

A running soldier cannot be stopped. In a Civil War infantry engagement there was a line of officers, and sometimes a special detachment of men, called "file-closers." The officers would stand a couple of paces behind the firing line and constantly talk to the men: "Steady, boys." "Give 'em hell, boys!" "Aim low." "Load your musket." When holes were shot through the line, these officers would encourage the men to close up, to stay in formation. Men under pressure would have two natural tendencies—and discipline in battle is meant to negate the natural tendencies, which are based on self-preservation. One tendency is to bunch up, breaking the line's integrity. The bolder men tend to advance a step or two while firing; the less bold tend to edge in behind such men in clumps, partly protected by the body of the leader. The other tendency is to drift backward; unchecked, this could result in actually leaving the line for the rear. These tendencies are rational, and can be neutralized by discipline, reason, threats, and all the other motivators of people in battle. It is in itself insane to stand in a line out in the open and trade bullets with a well-armed enemy; a gerbil would know better. Human beings can be induced to do it for a number of reasons, in addition to killer instinct or death wish: shame at being seen as cowardly, for instance, a culturally induced phenomenon more effective, obviously, at some times and places than at others; hatred of the enemy; discipline inculcated by intense training; fear of punishment—the old British navy comes

to mind; ideology—applicable to the volunteers of 1861; devotion to comrades; stupidity; mass psychological influences; sense of duty. But sometimes soldiers cannot be reached by any of these.

Occasionally a man runs from the line, eyes wide and unfocused, and no amount of exhortation, cajoling, threats, or profanity can stop him. The officer may hit him full force with the flat of his sword—but he could also slice off a hand and have the same noneffect. The soldier is in what was called “shell-shock” in World War I. In World War II it was called “battle fatigue.” A man may have been steady, even valorous, in all previous battles, and might be so again. But unreasoning fear takes control; the only instinct is to get away, either by running or by falling into a catatonic world. File closers knew by experience that such men could not be turned, though no doubt many were struck, beaten, even shot in exasperation. It was known during World War II that *all* soldiers eventually reach that state, if subjected to continuous battle. The nineteenth-century ideas of courage, character, and conscious will gave way to the facts of modern war. Under the stress of constant combat, the soldier breaks down if he survives long enough. Death or shock: there is no third alternative for anyone—assuming no end to combat. Some will hold out longer than others: those are the ones we are interested in.

In modern war this reality is provided for by tours of duty. In the Civil War there was no such provision. Shock was considered a failure of character. There was no sustained combat of twentieth-century proportions until Grant’s offensive in 1864. Though it was not Verdun or the Somme, fighting was fairly constant, and casualties horrific, from the Wilderness to Petersburg. The armies coped in two major ways: on the macro level, they went into siege. On the individual level, the soldiers became “battle wise,” and would not pose in battle lines to get shot. Gettysburg was about the last of the old standup battles. At Spotsylvania the two sides at the Bloody Angle went to ground, keeping up constant fire for more than twelve hours within yards or feet of each other, but the attrition did not match one hour at Antietam or in the Wheatfield. Men took cover and stayed there. When Grant ordered his troops to attack frontally at Cold Harbor, they eventually refused. It can be said that the 1861 volunteers fought more valiantly than the draftees of 1864, which is probably true, but

the veteran volunteers of 1864 (re-enlistees) had also learned that stand-up charges were murder, as well as indecisive. No more of this bullshit.

Until 1864 the soldiers fought only one, two, or three days at a time, only several times a year. The greatest intensity occurred in the summer of 1862, when Jackson’s men fought a series of small battles in the Valley in June, took part somewhat in the Seven Days in July, were heavily engaged at Brawner’s Farm and Manassas in late August, and went to Sharpsburg in mid-September. Otherwise the men spent months in camp, in drill and boredom. In 1863 there were five days of heavy combat. It was attitudes—primarily of Grant and Lee—rather than technology or tactics that changed the American Civil War from a Napoleonic war through 1863 into a somewhat twentieth-century war in 1864–65. Until Grant, nobody but Lee was willing to fight it out on one line all summer.

But what contemporary Americans find amazing is not the long-term fighting of 1864 but the stand-up fighting and attacks, epitomized by Pickett’s Charge. Realistic movies depicting lines of men blazing away at 50 yards, and attacking shoulder-to-shoulder, or better, elbow-to-elbow, surprise and awe audiences who are not familiar with Civil War tactics. How could they do it? The question, really, is, Could I have done it?

That was the essential question for Civil War soldiers too. What will I do in battle? Will I run when I “see the elephant”? They rightly interpreted courage as being the key to character. And under their circumstances—one or two hours of shocking combat at a time—the traditional measure of it had some feasibility. Today, when war is different, there are different ways of testing our mettle. But the elephant is still out there.

Or rather, he’s in the kitchen.

We would like courage to be easy, but it’s only the tawdry substitutes that are easy. When Webb’s regiments put their national flags at the stone wall in front of Lee’s men on July 3, and stuck to them, it was not easy. Today the largest American flag is at K-Mart. At Gettysburg that flag in the smoke, torn by bullets and held up by grimy, bleeding men, must have been one of the most beautiful sights on earth. The other day in the supermarket I saw an individual wearing a

T shirt, a U.S. flag printed on it stretched across his beer belly, above it the words: "If you want to burn a flag burn this one"—and under it, "ASSHOLE." I don't think Pickett's men would have bothered to charge such breastworks.

Like fourteenth-century Europe, which was also obsessed, though more openly, by death, we have a good deal to be afraid of. As in the days of the bubonic plague, we have black death looming over us. Either our weapons will annihilate the world, or our industry will. (We might ask, Would a nuclear bomb find many of us alive enough to kill?)

Those crippled by a fear hasten the very thing they fear. A man in battle who becomes catatonic or disoriented is an especially easy target, and if his unit's discipline is harsh he will be shot or court-martialed. Likewise an all-consuming fear of death: we are the ones consumed; we will come to our death not having lived. The ones who stand to the work die no sooner, and have a better chance of surviving—and feel, in the end, that they have lived. They outlive their monuments. But do we live a better life than a Toyota does?

Life in America is in some ways a nightmare made visible. What a troubled sleep we sleep. As Thoreau says, "the nearest approach to what we are is in dreams." The New American Dream has become a cruel reality, like the appropriate tortures in Dante's *Inferno*, as palpable as plastic. The dark demons of our beds approach with heavy steps—and we have left our formations, dropped our weapons, and are beyond all appeals to honor. We are about to be overwhelmed.

The frantic nature of our occupations and amusements show that we don't believe in what we are doing.

The sustainer of humankind—which lives, as a whole, a tragic and unhappy existence, hounded by death and trying to limp away from it on aging legs—has been love that becomes action, that is, faith. In America the dominant religion has not been a faith but a drug; while the enemy advances, we are stoned. Literalism and legalism have mixed well with our material fantasy; it is a mixture brought on by circumstances, and as circumstances change, which they will, only the nasty side will remain. Fundamentalists are sinister. Most American "evangelicals" are fundamentalists who shop at Marshall Field's.

I may be a patriot who did not survive the Civil War, but I have nothing against something new in religion.

Something very new and untried. Our massive popular religion, characterized by self-righteous, sectarian, willful ignorance, is based on exactly the wrong thing: fear. As such, it will readily join hands with any other movement so based. That is the evil of contemporary "patriotism": it is based upon fear—helpless fear for the future of this country—a well-founded fear; but our reaction is that of battle fatigue. It is desperate rather than hopeful. Patriotism today, like fundamentalism, can turn pathetic and nasty, rather than, as Gibbon's men and those Virginians would have said, "manly and true."

Afraid fundamentally of death, how can we be unselfish? Compassion, justice—all the virtues assume the unselfishness only courage can impart. Religion, then, should be difficult to reconcile with our economy of selfishness; instead of its ally, it should be its enemy. If you pay the devil to beat the devil, the devil always wins.

We should instead try something entirely new, something that has not been tried before—something so mad and valorous that it would confound fundamentalists and liberals alike, arouse envious scorn from them and all pagans, and do us not one whit of material advantage: something like Christianity. The faith, not the religion.

One could characterize Dorsey Pender's faith by three things: his performance of duty, his love for his wife, and his trust in God's providence. This is not to say that one faith is as good as another. I don't say ours is as good.

His faith never did him any good in the world, just as his soldiers' battle at Gettysburg didn't do them any good in the world of cause, effect, and desire. He didn't get the one thing he wanted: "May God protect us from all danger" and "preserve us for each other to a good old age." But his wishes were not masters of his faith, even his strongest wishes. God turned out to be more mysterious than Dorsey Pender knew. But he had had his intimations. Always a prudent man, the general had not left himself unprovided. Perhaps one thing faith is, is confidence in God's mysteries.

At strange, profound times, locked in the mysteries of some deep and surprising battle, taken out of ourselves in the stunning stare of beauty, we almost see God. We feel the reins of time's chariot in our

hands; we are not afraid. Meanwhile, we play out the mean and cringing lives we live, doing illimitable damage. The battle has passed; let the war rage on.

General Lee looked back to Chancellorsville in explaining to himself his failure at Gettysburg. Indeed there was a sense in which Chancellorsville contributed to the loss in Pennsylvania, though quite opposite to what Lee was thinking, that is, Jackson's death. In the minds of Lee and much of his army, Chancellorsville reinforced the wrong lesson. Chancellorsville looked like a great victory for the South, but really it was an unnecessary loss for the Union. The Army of Northern Virginia won that battle only because Joseph Hooker lost it, because, as he said, "I lost confidence in Joe Hooker." Jackson's flank attack demoralized—but did not destroy or even fatally disorder—the weakest corps in the Army of the Potomac, the Eleventh. Just arriving from Fredericksburg was the best corps in the army, and second largest—Reynolds's First Corps. E. P. Alexander wrote that Hooker's retreat saved Lee's men from a horrendous defeat, a frontal assault against a prepared position. But the order had been given; Lee had decided to throw his whole army against the new Union line and was "saved," not by strategy, or by his best executive officer, or by audacity, but by fate or luck—perhaps bad luck after all.

Which division commander made the most ghastly mistake at Gettysburg? Rodes. Rodes, who had done so well in that all-out attack at Chancellorsville. So coming down from Oak Hill toward Paul's and Baxter's concealed men behind that stone wall the First Day, Rodes tried to duplicate the rushing, spirited assault. The slaughter of Iverson's Brigade was exceeded only by Garnett's loss, and that was no division commander's fault.

Perhaps Hill and Archer and Davis suffered from the same fault on the First Day. But the big problem was with Lee; he didn't need more lessons on how an attack would make huge numbers of Yankees run; he didn't need to learn that his men, "if properly led, can do anything."

Another lesson from Chancellorsville was that there is no point in brilliant victories if the Union army can walk away, stoke itself up again in safety, then come back when it's ready. Lee wanted to do two

things after May 1863. One was to win a victory where it would not be possible for the Army of the Potomac to pull away and recover: win in the North, where a victory would mean the capture of Washington or some other city.

The other thing was to destroy the Army of the Potomac, not merely smack it one. I think Lee's otherwise absurd deployment of his army at Gettysburg was made in hopes of achieving a Cannae, a double envelopment. Don't hit them on one flank only, as at Chancellorsville; cup both flanks and scoop 'em up. Never have to mess with those people again. (I sometimes wonder whether Lee's phrase for the enemy—"those people"—was, instead of a magnanimous euphemism, a disdainful epithet, expressing something close to abhorrence or revulsion.)

Surely even the audacious Lee would not have spread his line twice as far as the Union line unless it was for some such reason. He may have had contempt for Union numbers and density, but surely he would not have so overestimated his own officers' and staff's ability to communicate and coordinate—without a compelling reason to take such a risk. Long risks he knew he must take. In this case it was to grasp the supreme prize.

An element in his thinking must have been Stuart's absence. Not making optimal use of the cavalry he had (Jenkins's Brigade), Lee felt himself to be in the dark, and if he had no eyes he would use his hands—both hands, like William the Conqueror, grip those people, box their ears, and then, if they were still standing, belt 'em between the eyes.

The decisions were calculated, but not cool. The Third Day shows this. Lee wouldn't have done that if he hadn't been—as Eisenhower or Montgomery said when they toured the battlefield together—mad as hell at that guy over there and just wanted to hit him. What you see when you look at some of the pictures of Lee—especially the one in Richmond in April 1865 with Walter Taylor—is a man who's mad as hell. Not a kindly grampa. No saint. A man who's mad as hell.

He did have a frightening temper, though his Southern manners compelled him to rein it in most of the time in social situations. But he was monumentally irritated at Gettysburg. "Where is Stuart?" "Has anyone heard from my cavalry?" Throw in diarrhea. (I don't think he

was the impaired heart patient portrayed in a recent good novel about Gettysburg, however.) Throw in his irritation with Longstreet. And, most important, throw in his dislike of Yankees and his belief that his men could whip twice or more their numbers of them (as Chancellorsville seemed to prove), and you get attacks on the strong natural positions of the Yankees, culminating in Pickett's Charge.

They hadn't told him how bad off Heth's Division was. (Its general was still suffering from having been konked July 1.) That division should be in good trim; all it did was plow through the Yankees in the great victory Wednesday. In fact, it had been ground up by the First Corps. If Lee had received an accurate report of the First Day's damage to Heth's Division, would he have been converted? Would he have learned not to order headlong frontal assaults?

Nah. At most he would have thrown in Pender's or Anderson's Division instead. What he learned, he learned by watching Pickett's Charge—watching it fray and melt and disintegrate before the Yankee guns and infantry. Then, *then*, he became the great general he was in the summer of 1864. But even then, how he itched for the offensive. Champaign taste on a beer budget.

Lee was the worst brilliant general in American history, something like Napoleon. The South could have won the War, as Alan Nolan observes; no battle was lost for lack of supplies, munitions, men. Livermore shows that the manpower ratio was really only about 2:3 overall. (As he factored for enlistment terms, however, should Livermore have factored for ages of Confederate versus Union draftees? Seventeen- and forty-five-year-olds should not be as effective as twenty-year-olds. Or was this balanced by noncombat use of slaves?) Follow Kutusov's strategy against Napoleon; follow Lee's hero Washington's strategy against the British. But no. The two worst battles in American history, Antietam—the bloodiest single day's battle—and Gettysburg, were fought by Lee needlessly and unwisely. Together, those two battles finished off the South. The officers and men couldn't be replaced, nor the propitious times.

Robert E. Lee had indeed saved the South in the summer of 1862, but Sharpsburg should never have been fought. After McClellan foolishly failed to attack and wipe out Lee's fragment army on September 16, Lee should have got out. Outnumbered two to one, troops bare-

foot, footsore, hungry, ragged, tired after a nearly continual summer campaign, unsure of what they were doing in Maryland—backs to a river, relying upon one very exposed ford—and McClellan in possession of orders showing exactly what Lee had and where. Lee may have known McClellan, but he didn't know physics. What was the best he could have hoped for?

McClellan fought only 53,000 of his men; still, they were successful in nearly every attack, to the verge of breaking Lee's line decisively. The Army of Northern Virginia was most heroic, and most lucky, that day. What could be learned from that useless battle?

When the Yankees made their frontal assaults that winter at Fredericksburg, Lee answered the question of why he would attack at Gettysburg. It was not only pride, though it was that; nor was it only pride with anger. Lee, like many great soldiers, was a war lover. "It is well that war is so terrible, else we should grow too fond of it," he said as the long lines of Union blue came toward his wolfish cannons on Marye's Heights—a logically screwy statement. It is not what it appears to be, a wise lament on the attractiveness of battle. It's a nineteenth-century genteel, educated aristocrat's way of saying, "*Hot damn!*"

But one large caution should be made regarding criticism of Robert E. Lee. What would we think of a modern general who took Lee or Grant as their examples? We would admire that student of history. And what would we say of a general who studied closely one of the greatest generals of them all? For this is what Lee did. Lee, who graduated first in his class at West Point, was one of the best students in American military history. Whom did he study? Of the perhaps four greatest commanders known to history, he did not primarily study Alexander, Hannibal, or Ghengis Khan—but rather the equal of them who was almost contemporary with Lee, who was fighting some of the great battles of history during Lee's early childhood—the man whose weapons and armies resembled most closely what Lee would have to work with. It made sense for Lee to learn thoroughly the strategy and tactics—though not the character—of the world's greatest winner and loser—that "very great, very bad man," Napoleon Bonaparte. It is not to fault Lee to realize that he was following the example of the general who, in his own time, had revolutionized

strategy and tactics, and who had fought under circumstances sometimes similar to Lee's: pressed on several frontiers by "overwhelming numbers and resources."

Insufficient attention has been paid to the raw material of Lee's military education: Napoleon's battles. Why did Lee show such apparent avidity for the offensive? It was the first principle of Napoleon. And it had been borne out by Lee's own experience during 1862–63. On the Peninsula and at Chancellorsville, Lee's offensives against greatly superior forces had saved the Confederacy. At Sharpsburg, Lee had stood on the defensive and was almost destroyed. Lee had learned, he thought, that he must either whip them or they would whip him. A complex interaction among character, personality, education, and experience moved within Robert E. Lee.

Before Gettysburg, Lee had successfully followed Napoleon's strategic and tactical principles. Where practicable, there was Napoleon's favored strategic-tactical combination, *manoeuvre sur les derrières* (movement upon the rear): take and keep the initiative, thereby throwing the enemy off balance; continue the psychological intimidation by fast, unexpected movements and threats to the enemy's line of communications; then employ the circling tactic upon the enemy at a location of one's own choice. This tactic began with a series of pinning attacks which encouraged the enemy to establish and reinforce his main, straight line of battle; but an undetected large detachment would make an encircling march and fall upon the rear of one of the enemy's flanks. The enemy would then bend his line to face the startling new threat and commit his reserves to that wing. At this point Napoleon would throw his own reserve right at the point where the enemy had bent his line. All good Civil War generals knew about this. McClellan, in his grandly torpid way, had tried it at Antietam; and, I think, Lee had something like this in mind for Longstreet and Hill's offensive on the Second Day at Gettysburg. But Lee had also studied his Hannibal, and the idea of a double envelopment predominated on the Second Day. However, when neither flank attack, much less coordination, proved successful, Lee planned yet another kind of Napoleonic battle for the Third Day: Waterloo.

It should be interjected that Napoleon used a different strategic method when threatened by more than one army. The "strategy of

the central position," in modified form, provided Lee with a pattern for coping with the Federals' multiple armies and contingents. Using cavalry to gather exact information as to the enemy contingents' positions, Napoleon would move to a carefully calculated point between the enemy bodies, then strike one while holding the other with a small force; then turn on the other enemy with a reunited force. It was a matter of economy. In Napoleon's words: "The art of generalship consists in, when actually inferior in numbers to the enemy [overall], being superior to him on the battlefield." Part of the brilliance—and luck—of Chancellorsville was that Lee successfully combined both the "strategy of the central position" and the *manoeuvre sur les derrières*. The two largest Union corps were temporarily held at Fredericksburg by one Confederate division; the rest of Lee's army marched to Chancellorsville to face Hooker's main body. Pinning Hooker with McLaws's Division, Lee again split his force, sending most of it under Jackson around to the Union rear. When the demoralized Hooker retreated, Lee turned with his whole army back to the Union contingent at Fredericksburg. Civil War books often note, with an intake of breath, that Lee "divided his force in the face of the enemy." Napoleon did it all the time.

When the flank and fulcrum movements failed at Gettysburg, Lee resorted to Napoleon's battle at Waterloo. This was not foolish. Napoleon had lost at Waterloo because a second army, Bluecher's, came to Wellington's relief; but there was no second Union army coming. Indeed, when one looks at Lee's thinking at Gettysburg in general, a strongly Napoleonic pattern emerges, with a strange confirmation supplied by Meade: he knew Lee was following Napoleon; that in part explains Meade's intuition the night of July 2 that next day Lee would hit his center with a frontal assault.

He might have even guessed that Lee would first barrage him with massed artillery and then try to advance some guns during the infantry attack itself. These were Napoleonic tactics. So was massed cavalry, though Lee had only light horse, not Napoleon's breastplated *cuirassiers*; Meade could oppose his own massed cavalry. Waterloo was spread across two days at Gettysburg: after two failed flank attacks, the culmination would come at the center—not Napoleon's Imperial Guard, but the Confederate counterpart: Lee's own Virginians.

(One might even see the counterparts of Wellington and Napoleon in Meade and Lee at Gettysburg: Wellington and Meade riding to various points all along the lines; Napoleon and Lee doing the initial work, then on principle leaving the actual battle to subordinates at the points of attack. The hands-off role is natural for offensive battle, however, where plans have been drawn; the active role is natural for defensive battle, which is reactive and requires continual decision making and direction.)

The evening attacks by Marshall Ney and the Guard nearly broke the stalwart English lines at Waterloo, but the Redcoats held all day, if barely, until the Prussians arrived to turn the French flank. Lee knew that Wellington's tactics had been successful in every battle the Duke had fought against Napoleon's subordinates, and finally against Napoleon himself. He had studied the Iron Duke's reverse slope formations. French attacks would wash up an elevation that Wellington had chosen, capturing the artillery on the crest and sending the British skirmishers flying. Panting, flushed with what they thought was victory, the French would pour over the crest only to confront the long, thin red line of British infantry, waiting silent as death.

But Lee had learned this lesson too well. He thought Meade was playing Wellington to his Napoleon. He thought there was a long blue line waiting on the reverse slope of Cemetery Ridge. That is why the Confederate artillery bombardment was ineffective: it was too smart. And finally, it was a little arrogant. Surely the Yankees would want to have plenty of men along that ridge. (And just as surely, Pickett's disciplined advance would be as intimidating as an attack made by the tall Guards, with their high plumes and shimmering helmets.)

But if Lee's military character was a flawed household of prejudices, emotions, beliefs, training, and experience, Lee must also be credited with being one of the best economists of all time. "Strategy is the art of making use of time and space," Napoleon said. Lee gave the Confederacy nearly three years of life past the point where it should have died. And he did it with skill and the content of his character—parts of which were pride and audacity, the very things that the ironic art of history making must call flaws.

Robert E. Lee is one of us. And more so. Larger, more able, but cursed as we are cursed, weak as we are weak, noble to a degree

despite this. As a general he ranks with the brilliant lovers of war—Napoleon, Patton, Stonewall Jackson; but not with Washington, in whom wisdom was in fact the better part of strategy. Temperamentally, Lee was in part a curious mixture of fundamentalist Christian and hot dog. Vain and impatient by nature, he curbed his tendencies valiantly according to Christian virtues—but missed some big ones, including "truth in the inward parts."

His correspondence is strangely disharmonious, euphemistic, removed from common reality. I refer to his letters. The letters of Hawthorne, Whitman, Lincoln are direct, and they sound, even to us in this century, like normal talk. Lee's farewell order (General Order No. 9) at Appomattox, written by an aide, is a good imitation by a man closely familiar with Lee:

After four years of arduous service marked by unsurpassed courage and fortitude, the Army of Northern Virginia has been compelled to yield to overwhelming numbers and resources.

This is in its way lovely, rhythmic, and memorable. (Not having seen or heard it for twenty years, I still remember it.)

I need not tell the brave survivors of so many hard fought battles who have remained steadfast to the last, that I have consented to this result from no distrust of them.

But feeling that valor and devotion could accomplish nothing that would compensate for the loss that must have attended the continuance of the contest, I have determined to avoid the useless sacrifice of those whose past services have endeared them to their countrymen.

Those words are typical Lee. Polished, removed, euphonious, genteel, educated, aristocratic, and somewhat Pentagonese. Not that it would be entirely preferable, but one could imagine Grant writing, "I surrendered not because I lost faith in you but because I didn't want you to die for nothing." Lee's prose, like his strategy and tactics—and postwar statements—attempts to avoid reality. There is an element of the heroic in this, as well as of the neurotic or pathologic. Lee, like other geniuses in any field, changed or nearly changed reality to suit

his view or his wishes. He is as such an epic representation of human life: the attempt to defeat circumstances. The failure was noble.

What was Lee, then? Not a tragic hero, not a tragic figure at all, but a charismatic, gifted soldier. Onto charismatic figures we put our wishes, and we dress them according to our dreams. They stand in front of our quiet desperation, and the last thing we will let them be is what they are.

The man that Lee made, that we have made of him, is a phantom, more devouring than someone who sends his soldiers into the maws of cannons. General Lee was indeed a man to be afraid of, but we have made him our slave—poetic justice, it may be, but the very worst we could do to him; perhaps now he is a tragic hero after all. He did not deserve this. But we have all become slaves to our Hollywood fantasies, and the Great Emancipator is dead.

Courage sees things for what they are. We have yet to distinguish dreams from fantasies, and ourselves from the advertised commercial world. When we do this, it will be with the courage of the best at Gettysburg. I am convinced that life is meant to rouse in us this courage.

One learns much about the Battle of Gettysburg by reading such things as Gregory Coco's work on the hospitals (*A Vast Sea of Misery*) and the dead (*Wasted Valor*). Similarly it was Whitman, who worked in the hospitals, and Lincoln, who dreamed of its dead, who knew most about the War. Such dreams may be our nearest approach to what the battle was. History is the penumbra of the soul. In the delirium and sleep afterward, some understanding of the battle comes.

Suppose you knew nothing of the battle and found yourself on the field July 5 or 6. What had happened? Your first effort would not be to look around and solve the puzzle, but to get out of there.

Before the visual horrors registered, you might be overcome physically. The smell fills your head and becomes a slippery growth in your stomach. One veteran wrote of throwing himself face to the ground and vomiting himself empty. Many were made quite ill by the odor alone.

Before the stretcher-bearers and ambulances finished their work picking up the perhaps ten thousand wounded actually lying on the

field, you would have heard the constant moans and screams, the unceasing pleas for water whispered, sobbed, screamed, begged—a nightmarish and pathetic cacophony everywhere rising across the fields and at your feet. You would have seen men with every conceivable bullet and artillery wound, mouths bubbling blood, shot lungs and throats foaming and whistling, blood-soaked shattered limbs.

And the dead. In all positions—some restful, some in frozen, open-eyed terror or rage, some twisted with agony. In some of the fields you could have walked in any direction just stepping on the mutilated dead. Hundreds of Southerners were buried on the Rose Farm. The dead were bloated, sometimes moving before your eyes as gasses inside them shifted. Their faces were blackened by the hot sun; perhaps their fishlike mouths were ringed with gunpowder from the cartridges they had bitten open before being stricken. Their eyes bulged. Some seemed twice the size they should be.

That was not all: the dead were dismembered, lacerated, some naked in their death agonies having torn off their clothing, some shoeless and with pockets and haversacks turned inside-out, some with sides or abdomens shot away and organs spilled and rotten, crawling with maggots. (Green bottle flies were everywhere in the millions, covering dead and living.) Visitors reported hands and arms in tree limbs, boots lying with feet and legs still in them, heads on the fields and among the rocks: artillery was hideous in its effects. One female nurse described the headless trunk of a man sitting against a tree, arms shot off, the torn clothing of the drained body flapping in the breeze. Shell concussions flattened bodies against rocks, into shapeless horrors. All these were you and me, hit by bullets (21 inches of human body mass was needed to stop a bullet at 150 yards, a doctor calculated), by iron shell fragments, by solid shot. Clubbed muskets and bayonets. Heat, thirst, delirium. After a few days, buzzards.

Hospitals everywhere behind the battle lines and in town: farmhouses, barns, public buildings, schools, churches, stores, houses. Some of these buildings still have bloodstains on the floors. Hundreds lay on boards placed over pews in churches; men were put on floors, tables; they covered all the space in Gettysburg side by side, with only a few nurses and doctors for every several hundred wounded. A woman who nursed Confederates at the main building of Pennsylva-

nia College said that each morning a dozen or more corpses lay outside the door for burial.

Doctors operated and sawed, sleeves rolled up, covered all over with blood, hundreds of men waiting for each of them. Some stood for thirty-six hours at a time, held up like Moses by others; at least one doctor became hysterical. There was little support staff, no understanding of germ theory, and the big, soft Minié bullet smashed bones, leaving nothing much to reconstruct: outside windows of temporary hospitals and piled in front of the big tents lay arms, hands, legs, feet. Union doctors had chloroform and ether; when Southern doctors ran short they resorted to "Confederate chloroform"—whisky. Men lay for hours, then days, on hard floors and balconies, with little or no straw under them, as long as six days without food—waiting for such treatment as could be given.

Back on the fields burial groups, some men with handkerchiefs tied uselessly across their faces, dug graves and marked them for the Union casualties. Soldiers talked loudly—deafened by two or three days of battle—doing the horrifying, disgusting, sad, numbing work. Lee's dead men had no one but the Yankees to bury them. (That is why most of the photographed dead at Gettysburg are Southern—their bodies were still there when the photographers arrived.) Several days after Lee retreated, the remaining bodies were turned into shallow trenches, dirt hastily shoveled back over them. Visitors reported that hands, feet, even faces protruded from the soil—and that at night the decomposing bodies so near the surface gave a phosphorescent glow across the ground.

Southern prisoners were ordered to help with burials, but the work was done in revulsive haste. Sometimes penciled lettering on a shingle or piece of bark said "54 Rebs."; sometimes someone would write a name and company on a board half-buried or on a cartridge-box flap. But in a short time all such markings would be gone. There are probably still Southern bodies in the Valley of Death and elsewhere at Gettysburg. Gregory Coco reports findings of bones as recently as 1977, and figures that a thousand Confederate graves still remain undiscovered in Adams County.

The fields were covered with ramrods, rifles, bayonets, clothing, and every item a soldier might have carried: toothbrushes, Bibles,

books, photographs, cards, letters, paper, pens. The trees were pocked with bullets; during the next thirty years many trees in McPherson's Woods died from lead poisoning.

Dead horses lay everywhere, about five thousand. Crops were trampled, fruit trees were shattered, fences had been torn apart and burned, barns were partly disassembled; carpets, walls, mattresses, blankets, sofas, tables, yards, and parcels of earth everywhere were soaked with human blood. In the Northern states, and in towns and villages of the South, people stood and read the lists.

At the end of anger are grief, horror, revulsion, pity. As you stand in the dizzying stench and gasp your disbelief, you wonder what these creatures fought for. Were the issues as important as whatever set the red ants on the black in *Walden*, and had there been heroics? What was it all for? The aftermath of battle, and the fighting itself, are clean divorced from the causes of the war; things went on under their own power. It could have been Oates attacked on Seminary Ridge by Cutler's Brigade as easily as the Alabamians charging Little Round Top. "O my people, they which lead thee cause thee to err!" What is all this waste and guilt, this sorrow and despair, the suffering and ghastly death—*for*? What is the meaning of the battle?

At the new cemetery 3,512 bodies were buried. Nearly everything else has disappeared, but the bodies are still there, still holding the field against loss of memory. The North lost 3,155 killed, according to Livermore, the South 3,903; 18,735 Southerners were wounded, 14,529 Northerners. Busey and Martin calculate 3,149 and 4,559; 12,355 plus an unknown number, and 14,501. The Southerners left thousands of their wounded (though reporting only about 700)—spared the horror of Lee's seventeen-mile train of bleeding men on his retreat—to be paroled or to die in Northern prisons. Ten thousand North and South were captured by the other side, or went unaccounted for.

Suppose sometime during the battle one act of humanity, clear and arresting, had startled both armies, and the men on both sides had stopped. Would that not have been a moment of sanity in a sea of insane convulsion? Men by thousands settle their muskets to the ground and look as if awakened; gunners drop their hands and ram-

mers clatter to the ground, no artillery fires; has someone cried, "What are you doing?" The generals, and any of the men still fighting or trying to fight in that silence, would look like raving maniacs. Wouldn't they be? But if everyone fights, battle is sanity?

However, no such reveille sounded, and the battle built to its madened, incredible climax on July 3. And then, not sanity but a kind of battle wisdom, as Meade did the best and only thing: nothing, except allow Lee's defeat to ripen. Now the witnesses shake off their transfixed silence—Haskell has written, "the impassioned soul is all eyes"—and the grieving raise their wail. When all we see is waste and carnage, the shot-dead and the battlefield litter, what evidence exists for sanity or hope?

In Washington, New York, and Richmond—all across North and South—the politicians, businessmen, lawyers, everyone who profited got away scot-free and left the widow at her door. The Gilded Age would follow. Electoral swindles, city political machines, racism, and violence would ride the sleep of Gettysburg like dragons in the nineteenth century; and now the violence of horses has drained to this callous parade of inadequacy 130 years later.

When somebody asked him why there was no monument to him at Gettysburg, Daniel Sickles said, The whole damn place is my monument. In a way he was right. Sickles was a politician.

Thousands of men found themselves, one moment healthy and normal, the next—or a few days later—without a leg, without a jaw, no right arm, freaks for life now. *Never* able again to plow or write or talk. And thousands more dead. *Why?* Whitman had it right: because of the politicians.

So it is in the world and always has been. We think the world is under some kind of human control, but it isn't. We speak of notifying "the authorities," but there aren't any authorities. The people who run the world are people like you and me. Right before the Civil War the politicians, who should have solved the *political* problems, caused mortal ones. *Massa damnata*. Politicians are not always patriots. Dorsey Pender thought patriotism and honesty are connected.

Patriotism tends to call forth the deep virtues we see in Dorsey Pender—honor, sense of duty, courage, honesty. But in recent years a supposedly superpatriotic President was not capable of such virtues,

only a cheesy sentimentality which the country accepted in place of patriotism. Now self-proclaimed patriots marry the flag to obscenities on their T shirts—"louts" is Pender's decent term. They have not done the country any good.

After 1865, without much pause, America has been sold down the river by corporate greed and political cowardice. Today we are a colonial country, still scrambling after manufactured evils we can't even produce by ourselves any more—losing at our-own wicked game. All this at the expense not mainly of power or economic well-being, but of justice.

What is American patriotism? Patriots both North and South fought at Gettysburg for freedom. The battle, the War were ways of figuring out—all other ways failing as too subtle or too much trouble—what freedom is, particularly American freedom. Pender's idea and to an extent Lincoln's and Lee's, was that there is no freedom without justice. *No freedom for me if the ones I touch are not free*. The Great Emancipator is dead; now "it is for us, the living," to look into the eyes of the poor.

Courage! Patriots "dream of things that never were," a waking dream that rolls up its sleeves and plants its tattered flag. At stake are things more sacred than we know. The battle spreads across the stars.

Oh my God, I cry by day,
but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

So the wounded on the field. (It is the prayer quoted on the Cross.)
Joshua Chamberlain was miraculously spared, but why not

Adams, Aaron
Beadle, Charles M.
Billings, Charles W.
Walker, Orrin
Wentworth, John
Wyer, Oscar
York, George H.

and all the others? Why did Lincoln die?