Robert E. Lee
Program Transcript

Robert E. Lee (Chris Sarandon): I, Robert Edward Lee, do solemnly swear that I will support the Constitution of the United States... I do solemnly swear to bear true allegiance to the United States of America and to serve them honestly...

Narrator: From the moment he arrived at the nation's military academy in West Point, Robert Edward Lee eagerly absorbed the strict and selfless ethic of the United States Army.

Robert E. Lee (Chris Sarandon): ...and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to the rules and articles of war.

Narrator: The beauty of it was, the high-minded ideals provided him a proper channel for his ardent desire for recognition.

Lesley J. Gordon, Historian: West Point was founded to take these young men -- 16, 17, 18 years old -- and reshape them and give them a new sense of, of values, of, of honor and duty and loyalty to country.

It really was a pretty austere experience. Apparently the food was awful and pretty sparse. Most of the men that went there just they were happy to literally survive it. But Robert E. Lee seemed to thrive there. There were opportunities to, to really show yourself in front of men and be tested.

Michael Fellman, Historian: He was always aware of the impression he was making. He was a deeply perfectionist person who had an image of who he ought to be. He would try extremely hard to be a paragon. And he wanted to shine.

Narrator: Cadet Lee was mindful of his personal talents, and of his place in the world. He was born into the Virginia aristocracy: his extended clan included a president, a chief justice of the United States, signers of the Declaration of Independence.

And Lee's own father had been one of the nation's most celebrated Revolutionary War heroes. As a daring young cavalry commander, Light Horse Harry Lee had won the esteem of General George Washington and a medal of honor from the Continental Congress.

EXCLUSIVE CORPORATE FUNDING FOR *AMERICAN EXPERIENCE* PROVIDED BY LIBERTY MUTUAL.
MAJOR FUNDING PROVIDED BY THE ALFRED P. SLOAN FOUNDATION, THE CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING AND PUBLIC TELEVISION VIEWERS.
AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IS PRODUCED FOR PBS BY WGBH BOSTON.
Liberty Mutual. ALFRED P. SLOAN FOUNDATION cpb Corporation for Public Broadcasting A private corporation funded by the American people WGBH

Even at 18, Robert E. Lee carried himself as if the command of men was his destiny... as well as his duty.

Peter S. Carmichael, Historian: I'm personally struck by how many of his peers were just impressed by his physical presence alone. When he walked into a room I think that there was a sense of dignity and seriousness that immediately got the attention of those around him.

Elizabeth Brown Pryor, Biographer: People remember that when he would give them a little nod of approval or somehow show that he thought that they were doing a good job, that they felt as if Jove had come down from Olympus and given him a sign of his greatness.

Narrator: Lee went through the academy with sober and single-minded purpose. When his fellow cadets went out carousing, or got liquored up in their rooms, Lee worked: French, applied mathematics, mechanical drawing, topographical engineering, artillery. He let nothing slip.

Every day, for four years, Lee bent himself to attaining the top spot in his class at West Point. "Number one," he would later write. "It is a fine number. Easily found and remembered."

Elizabeth Brown Pryor, Biographer: He was a naturally self-disciplined person but of course it was part of his ethos also, duty, self-discipline, denial and achievement.

Joseph T. Glatthaar, Historian: He was one of six cadets in his graduating class who received no demerits. He scored perfectly in artillery and in infantry and in cavalry. His math scores were superb.

Gary W. Gallagher, Historian: I think Lee's peers at West Point had mixed feelings about him. I think that many of them admired him but it would be hard not to admire someone who did so well; did so well in his class work; did so well in terms of behaving according to the Academy's rules. But I think others saw him as perhaps a little bit over-the-top in that regard. They called him the Marble Model, some of them did. And I don't think that's an entirely flattering epithet.

Robert E. Lee (Chris Sarandon): Do you ever think of me, my own sweet Mary? And how much do you want to see me? Not half as much as I want to see you . . . I declare I cannot wait any longer . . .

Narrator: At 22, Second Lieutenant Robert E. Lee set his sights on a bride to match his idea of himself and his future.

EXCLUSIVE CORPORATE FUNDING FOR *AMERICAN EXPERIENCE* PROVIDED BY LIBERTY MUTUAL.
MAJOR FUNDING PROVIDED BY THE ALFRED P. SLOAN FOUNDATION, THE CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING AND PUBLIC TELEVISION VIEWERS.
AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IS PRODUCED FOR PBS BY WGBH BOSTON.
Liberty Mutual. ALFRED P. SLOAN FOUNDATION cpb Corporation for Public Broadcasting A private corporation funded by the American people WGBH

Lesley J. Gordon, Historian: Mary Custis really came from what I would call Virginia royalty. Now Lee himself did come from very good sort of bloodlines. But hers are much cleaner and to have any kind of claim to George Washington and Virginia that's just instant gold.

Narrator: Mary Custis was the great-granddaughter of George and Martha Washington; her inheritance included thousands of acres of prime Virginia land, nearly 200 slaves, and a main estate high on a hill near Washington City: Arlington.

From that perch across the Potomac, her family peered down on the White House, and the Capitol building. For 30 years, Presidents had made pilgrimage to Arlington to dine with the Custises on George Washington's china.

Elizabeth Brown Pryor, Biographer: Mary was really not easy to woo. She called herself an impregnable fortress. Robert was so nervous around her that he got his younger sister to pass messages to her rather than give them himself. And one of his brothers had to send him a little 'buck up' poem that started out saying, if you want to win the fair maiden you must be brave because only the brave deserve the fair.

Lesley J. Gordon, Historian: When Robert began to court Mary it seems apparent that Mary's father, George Parke Custis, was not very keen on this match.

Emory M. Thomas, Biographer: He was afraid that this young lieutenant was going to marry his daughter primarily for her for her money.

Narrator: The Second Lieutenant knew what he was up against. Lee's father may have been a war hero, but that wasn't the whole story. Sordid tales of Light-Horse Harry Lee had been at large among the elite of the Virginia Tidewater for a generation.

Emory M. Thomas, Biographer: He managed to lose an extraordinary amount of money in land deals and many of these deals were working with other people's money. He had the distinction of having written George Washington a bad check. He wrote his own father a bad check.

Gary W. Gallagher, Historian: He had lost the family fortune; he'd lost the ancestral home at Stratford; he ended up in debtor's prison.

Narrator: "Should I be able to escape the sins into which my father has fallen," Lee wrote to Mary, "I hope the blame which is justly his due, will not be laid to me."

Robert E. Lee (Chris Sarandon): ... And I am so black and handsome and my nose so red and fingers so white and tapering, Oh you will admire to see them. But I wonder if you are as anxious as I am....

Michael Fellman, Historian: Certainly he had the right breeding and that was a good thing. And he was stunningly handsome which Mary probably noticed.

He had beautiful hair and sparkling eyes. And as a young man he had an ebullient manner actually.

Robert E. Lee (Chris Sarandon): Is there no way for me to get there again? To read to you, walk with you, ride with you ... And now my sweet Mary, you know what I would say to you if I was there, but I cannot write it.

Mary Custis (Kara Jackson): I wish you were here today to amuse me while I am sitting for my portrait. Indeed I wish for you very often though I am still content.

Narrator: The courtship never did get easy. Mary refused at least one of Robert's marriage proposals. But when she finally succumbed, her father fell in line.

Unlike Mr. Custis, Mary's mother saw the capable young soldier as a perfect addition to the family, and she hoped her new son-in-law might take control of the farming operation from her own flighty husband.

Lee declined the offer. Fame and glory did not often attach themselves to farmers, no matter how wealthy.

Lee explained his decision otherwise. His sworn duty, he would often remind his new wife, was that of professional soldier.

Narrator: Robert E. Lee's precise professionalism and orderly intellect made him what the military most needed in the 1830s and 1840s: a gifted civil engineer. He redirected a major river, fortified harbors, defied tides and storms to build new forts.

Duty kept him on the move: Savannah, Hampton Roads, Baltimore, St. Louis, New York. Mary tried to follow at first, but a brief taste of camp life made her reluctant to leave her father's comfortable Virginia plantation.

The Lees were together enough between 1832 and 1845 to conceive three sons -- Custis,

Rooney and Rob -- and four daughters -- Mary, Annie, Agnes and Mildred.

The Lee children grew up at their Grandfather's plantation, tended by the family's numerous slaves. Mary Lee wrote to friends of the fragrant gardens, with the woodbine and the roses in bloom, the dense forest that backed the house, "the sweet green shades of Arlington."

Mary Custis (Kara Jackson): My dear Caroline... We are all very much as you left us with the addition of Mr. Lee to our circle, but this happiness we are always expecting to be deprived of as he will probably be obliged to go North on Engineer duty.

Robert E. Lee (Chris Sarandon): My dear daughter -- when I come home we must have such little concerts composed of my sons & daughters. You must be the Prima Donna, Custis the Tenor & Rooney the bass. But who shall be the nightingale? Rob or Mildred? I expect it will be Rob. For if he can sing as sweet as he looks, all music would be a creaking cartwheel to him...

Lesley J. Gordon, Historian: Lee seemed to want to be a present father through his letters although he couldn't always physically be there. And they are very detailed. It seems what he's writing are the things that he wished that he could be telling them in person. And they do show an extremely loving and affectionate father. But you also get a sense from those letters of the, of a real pain that Lee felt from those separations.

Narrator: Mary Lee never fully understood her husband's willingness to sacrifice time with his family, but she did learn it was unwise to press him. Near the end of a tough pregnancy, when she asked him to take a leave and return home, he lashed out: "Why do you... endeavour to get me excused from the performance of a duty imposed on me by my Profession," he wrote, "for the pure gratification of private feelings?"

For his part, Lee was never entirely at home at Arlington. And his wife's indifference to domestic engineering rankled. "I don't know," Lee wrote to a friend, "that I shall ever overcome my propensity for order."

Elizabeth Brown Pryor, Biographer: Mary is a free spirit and she has this confidence that comes from this sort of unassailable social background. She was less punctual than Robert, he complained about that all the time. And she was more given to creative dress, shall we say there are some wonderful descriptions of her in some pretty outlandish outfits.

Emory M. Thomas, Biographer: The children and family life he enjoyed, he reveled in it but it

was also confusing. And it sometimes provoked him. He felt, I think, some relief at being away and simply doing whatever the army demanded of him, obeying orders as it happened.

Narrator: In March 1847, on a remote beachhead nearly 3,000 miles from home, calculating the arc and trajectory of artillery shells "so beautiful in their flight and so destructive in their fall," he would say, Robert E. Lee finally went to war.

Lee wished he was "better satisfied as to the justice of our cause," but politics was a secondary concern to him. He'd been preparing for battle for more than 20 years... and the Mexican War was a chance, he wrote, to "gain distinction and honor and therefore not to be regretted."

And his sterling reputation within the army had landed Lee a spot on the personal staff of Commanding General Winfield Scott.

Gary W. Gallagher, Historian: There are few campaigns in the United States' military history that are more audacious than Winfield Scott's campaign from Veracruz to Mexico City. It involved a much smaller invading army moving into the heartland of a very large nation, facing tremendous logistical problems and capturing one of the great cities of the Western Hemisphere with a relative handful of soldiers.

Joseph T. Glatthaar, Historian: Winfield Scott had to land, he had to seize Veracruz and then he had to advance to the highlands before the malaria season hit. So there was a lot of pressure on him to execute effectively. And one of his right hand people was Robert E. Lee.

Narrator: General Scott drove his army relentlessly across Mexico, racing dangerously ahead of his own supply line, and he piled up victories: Veracruz, Cerro Gordo, Churubusco, Chapultepec.

Gary W. Gallagher, Historian: Anyone who served under Scott, or anyone who observed what Scott was doing from a distance, could learn that in some instances audacity can carry the day in military affairs.

Emory M. Thomas, Biographer: From Scott, Lee learned the lesson of the attack. And he never forgot it.

Narrator: Robert E. Lee was at the center of Scott's success. He was the commanding general's eyes, always out front, and often alone, hunting the perfect artillery placement, or an

unexpected way to outflank the larger Mexican Army.

Peter S. Carmichael, Historian: What Scott emphasized during the Mexican War was something called headwork. And Lee excelled in headwork. Headwork was going out and scouting the fields, knowing the topography and coming up with imaginative, imaginative responses to what your adversary was doing.

Elizabeth Brown Pryor, Biographer: He volunteers to go across this large lava field called the Pedregal, which had sharp, glass-like points at every turn to see if he could find a way to actually get across it. Even some of the generals say well this was maybe, you know, a little more risky than anybody should have undertaken.

Narrator: Lee made his way through the perilous lava fields three separate times - once alone, in the dark, in a driving rain, within range of enemy fire -- and he found a path for Scott's army to run a surprise attack that drove the Mexicans from the high ground at Contreras.

Peter S. Carmichael, Historian: He now had proof, conclusive proof, that he was an extraordinarily gifted soldier.

I think that he also discovered to some degree that the challenge, the danger, the excitement of combat, that it appealed to him.

Narrator: On September 14, 1847, after a seven-month campaign, Lee marched into the Grand Plaza of Mexico City with a place of honor in the victory parade... his name would be conspicuous in Winfield Scott's after-battle reports.

America's commanding general called Lee's crossings of the Pedregal "the greatest feat of physical and moral courage performed by any individual to my knowledge."

Emory M. Thomas, Biographer: Winfield Scott called him the best soldier in the American army and said that in the event of a war the thing that the United States government should do is take out an immediate life insurance policy on Robert E. Lee.

Joseph T. Glatthaar, Historian: What's clear is Lee emerged from the Mexican War as the rising star in the United States Army.

Narrator: Robert E. Lee had never felt more alive -- or in greater control of his own destiny -- than when he was in battle in Mexico... and on his return home, he had trouble readjusting

himself to the peace, and to the work-a-day engineering and administrative jobs assigned him.

Just a few years after his triumph in Mexico, Lee tried to talk his eldest son out of military service. "I wish I was out of the Army myself," he confided.

Elizabeth Brown Pryor, Biographer: He wants to leave the army and he just can't find a way to do it. His wife is getting sick probably from mercury poisoning. She starts being unable to walk and move comfortably around that time. And not only does his mother-in-law die, but his favorite sister dies. It's a period where it appears that his life is almost out of control, or he believes his life is out of control. And he does turn to the religion at that time.

Gary W. Gallagher, Historian: Lee came to religion rather late in life. He is not a fervent Christian early in his life -- not at West Point, not in Mexico, not as a young man on the move and even an early middle aged man on the move.

But when he arrived he was absolutely on board and it became central to how he dealt with almost everything.

Robert E. Lee (Chris Sarandon): My dearest Mary... I only wish to obey His Commandments, to neglect nothing on our part for the accomplishment of that which is plainly our duty and to leave the results in His hands."

Narrator: In 1857, 10 years after Lee's triumph in Mexico, and the year Lee turned 50, his father-in-law died. And Mary begged Lee to take a leave from the army and come home to look after the family estate.

Ervin L. Jordan, Jr., Historian: Lee returned to Arlington after the death of his father-in-law because of his sense of duty. He was the man at that point of the family. And he felt he was obligated to take up the task of straightening out his father-in-law's finances, which were never in the best of condition.

Narrator: The estate was in worse shape than he suspected: the plantations willed to his sons were barely functioning and heavily mortgaged, there was no cash to pay his daughters their promised inheritances, and most of the 195 slaves were unwilling to bend their backs to restoring the farms and working off the family debt. They had been promised their freedom in Custis's will and many wanted it immediately.

Emory M. Thomas, Biographer: The problem with Lee owning slaves was his orders didn't

always get followed right away, as they might in the army. Lee was having a terrible time with insubordination.

Ervin L. Jordan, Jr., Historian: Lee very much felt that the slaves who ran away had violated what he probably felt was a contract, a contract of duty and honor to him as their slave owner. So as a consequence he was entitled to punish them because they had violated their duty to him.

Narrator: Lee paid to have runaways captured and whipped. An eyewitness recalled him urging a county constable who was lashing a female slave to "lay it on well." One slave at Arlington called Lee "the worst man I ever see."

At the end of his two years at Arlington, Lee had accomplished little. The plantations remained unprofitable, his daughters' inheritances unpaid and the slaves still in chains and aggrieved.

And when Lee finally returned to the United States Army in 1859, he found himself stuck at a desolate cavalry out-post in Texas, with little to do but oversee court-martials of derelict soldiers and chase stray Comanche Indians.

Peter S. Carmichael, Historian: He certainly had to wonder what was ahead. Had his best days had they passed during the Mexican War? Was there an opportunity for him to fulfill that ambition that had animated him when he was a young cadet at West Point? Here you have RE Lee, this ambition driving him, looking to a military career that would give him the ultimate source of fame and maybe thinking that that's really not in the works any more.

Mary Custis (Kara Jackson): The Ides of March are almost here... We of the South have had great provocation, yet for my part I would rather endure the ills we know than rush madly into greater evils, and what could be greater than the Division of our glorious Republic.

Ervin L. Jordan, Jr., Historian: Lee very much anticipated what secession meant. He knew it was going to be war. In one of his letters to his sons he wrote that the war would probably last 10 years and that it would be very, very bloody.

Robert E. Lee (Chris Sarandon): Tell Charles he must not allow Maryland to be tacked on to South Carolina before just demands of the South have been fairly presented to the North and rejected. Then if the rights guaranteed by the Constitution are denied us... we can, with a clear Conscience separate....

As an American citizen, I prize my government and Country highly, and there is no sacrifice I am

not willing to make for their preservation save that of honor.

Ervin L. Jordan, Jr., Historian: South Carolina had seceded because it thought that Lincoln and the Republican Party would interfere with the institution of slavery, plain and simple.

Joseph T. Glatthaar, Historian: South Carolina has a 2,500 word explanation which is more an accusation of Northern interference with their institution of slavery. Mississippi states it baldly, "Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery, the greatest material interest of the world."

Narrator: Through the first few months of the secession crisis, the leaders of the South's most powerful state refused to be swept into the Confederacy. The preservation of slavery, the Virginia aristocracy understood, was a shaky foundation on which to build a revolution. Many southerners were incensed that Virginia was trying to play the peace broker.

Ervin L. Jordan, Jr., Historian: Virginia was America's leading slave state. There were more slaves in Virginia than anywhere else in the western hemisphere with the exception of Cuba. People like Jefferson Davis, Howell Cobb, Alexander Stephens, all knew that the Confederacy would not be able to survive without Virginia being a part of it. There was a tremendous amount of pressure on Virginia to secede.

And Lee was very carefully keeping an eye on what Virginia was going to do.

Narrator: Lee had spent much of his adult life away from his home . . . but he was absolutely attached to the idea of Virginia. It was, to his mind, a divinely-ordered society. In Virginia - as in all the South -- well-born, well-bred white Christian gentry had the freedom to rule as they saw fit. Poor and unpropertied whites lived in peonage, with little ability to sway their "betters"; slaves toiled under benevolent masters. When God had a better plan, Lee believed, He would reveal it.

Elizabeth Brown Pryor, Biographer: His feelings were generally along the lines of a group of people who were called the Slavery Apologists. Now these people recognized that there were moral problems with this institution and they believed that eventually it would fade away. But they absolutely upheld the right to own human property. And they also had elaborate justifications about how the slaves were better off under slavery in the United States than they would have been back in Africa. And Lee's writings are absolutely along those lines.

Michael Fellman, Historian: He certainly never questioned the values of his class. He would

talk about "my people." And by that he meant the white people of his social class, born to rule. And his honor is involved in the defense of his people.

Narrator: On April 12, 1861, the secession crisis became a shooting war. When Confederate forces attacked Fort Sumter in South Carolina, President Abraham Lincoln called for every state in the union to provide troops to assist in putting down the rebellion.

That presidential decree gave the secessionist bloc in Virginia a powerful public argument for breaking from the Union. This was about much more than slavery, they argued. This was about defending Virginia against a federal attack on state sovereignty. This was about defending the honor of the state of Virginia.

"The requisition made upon me... will not be complied with," wrote Virginia governor, John Letcher, in answer to Lincoln. "You have chosen to inaugurate civil war, and, having done so, we will meet it."

Lincoln's move -- and Virginia's response -- put Robert E. Lee in a bind. Like all military officers, he had sworn to serve the United States of America and to obey its President. And the President wanted Lee's help.

Peter S. Carmichael, Historian: Francis Blair who was a close associate of Abraham Lincoln called R.E. Lee to his office. And in this meeting Blair expressed to him Lincoln's desire to offer R.E. Lee command of the Union Army. This of course was really everything that R.E. Lee had been striving and working for his entire career put out there for him in this amazing offer, opportunity.

Elizabeth Brown Pryor, Biographer: He declined the offer on the spot right then. He didn't take time to think about it. And he marches straight over to the War Department, which was a couple of blocks away at that point. And apparently goes immediately into Scott's office. This is a man that he most reveres in the army, Winfield Scott. And he tells Scott that he cannot lead an army that would invade the South.

Lee then tries to convince Scott that what he'd like to do is sit out the war. And Scott cuts him off and, and says, "No. You can't do that. I have no room in my army for people who have divided loyalties. And if you're going to resign you better do it before you're ordered to take a job that you don't want."

Narrator: Lee went home to Arlington to decide his future; the ideals that had ordered his life -- honor, duty, country -- did not light a clear path.

For two days, Lee anguished over his decision. Slaves noted him pacing back and forth on the front porch by day... praying in his room late into the night.

Whichever side he chose, Lee knew, the biggest challenge of his military life awaited.

Robert E. Lee (Chris Sarandon): General Winfield Scott -- Since my interview with you on the 18th, I have felt that I ought no longer to retain my commission in the Army. I, therefore, tender my resignation, which I request you will recommend for acceptance....

Ervin L. Jordan, Jr., Historian: It was a very fateful decision and it was not one that he took lightly. Winfield Scott did tell Lee, "I think you've made the greatest mistake of your life."

Narrator: Two days after he resigned from the United States Army, Robert E. Lee answered a summons to Richmond, Virginia, soon to be the capital of the new Confederacy.

He listened as leaders of the secession convention sang new praises of his long-disfavored father, Light Horse Harry Lee; compared Robert E. Lee himself to George Washington, hero-general of the other American Revolution; and offered Lee command of the forces defending Virginia from the federal tyrant.

After 30 years of dutiful service in the United States Army, a path toward a monumental destiny had finally opened itself to Robert E. Lee. He would be the military leader of a country fighting for independence... a general leading an army in righteous cause against overwhelming odds. If Lee triumphed, he knew, his name would live through the ages.

Narrator: From the moment he signed on, Robert E. Lee was acknowledged as the military savior of the South. That he had no actual experience commanding large bodies of soldiers seemed beside the point. "No man is more worthy to head our forces and lead our army," wrote one Richmond newspaper. "His reputation, his acknowledged ability... his honor... his Christian life and conduct make his very name a 'tower of strength.'"

The first year of the war brought Lee little but misery. One of his sisters declared for Union and never spoke to him again. All three of Lee's sons left home to join the Confederate army.

And two weeks after Lee's resignation, Union soldiers occupied Arlington, and chased Lee's

wife and daughters from their estate. Mary Lee was bereft. "[I have lost] a place dearer to me than my life," she wrote, "the home of every memory of that life whether of joy or sorrow, birthplace of my children, where I was wedded...".

Two months later, in his first field command, Lee was undone by an untrained officer corps, green soldiers and bad weather.

Lee's army got stuck in the mud of western Virginia... then retreated without landing a single blow on the invading Union Army.

Elizabeth Brown Pryor, Biographer: At the beginning of the war, 1861, he has black hair and six months later he looks like an entirely changed person with the white beard, white hair. His family can't believe it. They look at pictures of him they see published and they don't think it's the same person.

Narrator: Southern legislators wondered aloud if their celebrated general was to soft to attack, too content to dig in and play defense. And word got back to him that men in his own army had taken to calling him "Granny Lee."

In the spring of 1862, the South's "tower of strength" was stewing in Richmond; President Jefferson Davis had relieved Lee of his field command and made him his personal military advisor.

As a general without an army, Lee had to stand by and watch as the Confederacy lost Nashville and New Orleans, Fort Henry, Fort Donelson and Shiloh.

And he had to watch as the Union general-in-chief -- the dashing, 34-year-old George McClellan -- led his Army of the Potomac, the largest single fighting force in American history, up the Virginia Peninsula toward the jewel of the Confederate Nation, its capital city: Richmond.

Ervin L. Jordan, Jr., Historian: McClellan moved a hundred thousand men to the outskirts of Richmond. Some of McClellan's forces got so close to Richmond they could hear the church bells peeling. They could see the chimneys of Richmond. There were plans made to evacuate. Jefferson Davis sent his family off to safety. The Confederate archives and papers and things were packed up to be shipped away. They thought that this was going to be the end.

Gary W. Gallagher, Historian: The loss of Richmond would have been the death-blow of the Confederacy because so much had gone wrong in so many other places. There would have

been nothing for the Confederate people to cling to in a positive sense if Richmond had fallen to McClellan's advancing army.

Narrator: Richmond awoke to more bad news on June 2, 1862. The commander of the army defending the city, General Joseph Johnston, had been shot off his horse. He was done for a while.

With nowhere else to turn, President Davis handed the reins of the Army of Northern Virginia to Robert E. Lee.

The soldiers did not rejoice. Memories of Lee's timidity in his previous field command were still fresh.

Peter S. Carmichael, Historian: Those reservations and concerns in the eyes of many were confirmed by his first order to have the troops dig in around Richmond. The Richmond papers were particularly savage. They claimed that this was the West Point way of doing war, that you exchange muskets for shovels.

Elizabeth Brown Pryor, Biographer: One of the Georgians who was under the command called him, "The Failure" in capital letters. "They have given us The Failure and how did they expect us to perform with The Failure in capital letters in charge of us?"

Narrator: Lee himself was unfazed by the carping in the ranks. He had never lacked for confidence. And from the moment he took command outside Richmond, Lee was thinking attack. He knew his army could not win a long war of attrition. His best hope of winning victory for the Confederacy was a speedy knock-out of McClellan's army.

Ervin L. Jordan, Jr., Historian: Lee had this idea that one or two battles would solve everything. So while Lee wasn't happy about McClellan approaching Richmond, he looked upon his opportunity to destroy the Army of the Potomac.

Peter S. Carmichael, Historian: What Lee saw on the map was that the Chickahominy River divided McClellan's army into two parts. That the right flank of the Union Army was hanging in the air cut off from the bulk of the Union forces. And so Lee decided to pounce on that isolated right wing of the Union Army above the Chickahominy River.

He envisioned a grand turning maneuver that would not only drive the Union Army away from Richmond but that it would also destroy the Union Army.

Narrator: Lee was willing to risk disaster to pull off his flanking maneuver. His attack would leave a miniscule force to defend the city of Richmond; if McClellan counter-attacked and drove toward the capital while Lee's attack was underway, Richmond would surely fall. The entire Confederacy would likely go down with it.

Newspaper correspondents, photographers and field artists had flocked to the outskirts of Richmond, to record the fall of the South... and Robert E. Lee gave them a show.

When Lee attacked, McClellan panicked and began pulling his army toward the cover of his gunboats on James River, more than 20 miles from Richmond.

Lee drove his soldiers to the chase... possessed by a vision of McClellan's army destroyed. For six days, he narrowly missed chances to bag the retreating enemy troops.

And Lee knew his opportunities were running out on the seventh day, when the two armies re-engaged at a place near the James called Malvern Hill.

Joseph T. Glatthaar, Historian: Lee was really desperate to get at the Union this last day. Malvern Hill had three slopes wide open with fields under cultivation. And so the Union troops were on the top with artillery positioned there. Lee's artillery was stuck to the rear; it didn't get forward in time. The Union was able to concentrate on the guns that did arrive. And then one of Lee's subordinates nonetheless ordered a frontal attack.

Winston Groom, Writer: Lee made an ill-advised attack on a very powerful Union position which was his bete noir all through the war. These, these attacks on fortified positions never worked out very well for him.

Joseph T. Glatthaar, Historian: It was just a wave of Confederate troops assaulting up through fields and just getting slaughtered.

Gary W. Gallagher, Historian: Lee is the bloodiest general in United States history if you're gauging that by what percentage of his soldiers get shot. And the Seven Days showed that for the first time. His army suffered 20,000 casualties in the Seven Days. The United States Army: 16,000 in the same campaign.

Joseph T. Glatthaar, Historian: The soldiers saw the massive destruction, saw the huge loss of life. But they also saw the results. And Lee had knocked the Union Army back 20 miles.

Gary W. Gallagher, Historian: This is the kind of generalship they wanted. Here is somebody who would really go after the Federals. That's what they had wanted, that's what they got.

Narrator: "General Lee is rapidly regaining... the confidence of the army," wrote a fellow officer, "You cannot imagine how gratifying is the feeling to Soldiers to know that their Chief is Competent."

In the weeks after Seven Days, Lee made the Army of Northern Virginia his army -- instilling discipline and order. He replaced dozens of officers who had not measured up to his exacting standard; and consolidated power in the few commanders he'd come to trust. And above all, he trusted himself.

Robert E. Lee was one of a handful of civil war generals who had the imagination to conceive a grand military strategy, the focus to plan a large campaign to the smallest detail... and the energy to drive it.

And he was already bringing to bear all those talents, planning his next move: a move designed to force President Lincoln to consider the wisdom of a negotiated peace.

Gary W. Gallagher, Historian: Lee knew that the key to which side would win the war lay with the civilian populations. Whichever civilian population decided it wasn't worth it first, that's the end of the war. And he believed there was no better way to depress United States morale than to take his army on the offensive and defeat major United States forces.

Joseph T. Glatthaar, Historian: What he wanted to do was give the Northern public a taste of war. He wanted them to experience it, to know what it was like to have an invading army pass through their neighborhoods, he wanted them to suffer the humiliation of being occupied temporarily by an enemy army.

Narrator: In mid-summer 1862 -- with his Army in order -- Lee struck north. Weeks of skirmishing came to a crescendo at the Battle of Second Manassas -- where Lee's Army sent Union troops reeling back toward the fortifications of Washington.

A week later, the Army of Northern Virginia crossed the Potomac River into Union territory for the first time.

Robert E. Lee (Chris Sarandon): Soldiers, press onward! and our sister States will soon be released from tyranny, and our independence be established on a sure and abiding basis.

Peter S. Carmichael, Historian: The Army of Northern Virginia is an army that has really sort of a split personality. One personality is this extraordinary confidence in their leader, extraordinary high morale, a belief they can't be conquered. But at the same time it is an army that was being worn down. Lee was pushing these men beyond the logistical capacity of that army.

Narrator: By the middle of September, after weeks of long hot marches on short rations, Lee's army was divided and badly damaged: a third of his men were gone -- killed, wounded, captured or simply scared off. "When I say that they were hungry," a Maryland citizen wrote of Lee's soldiers, "I convey no impression of the gaunt starvation that looked from their cavernous eyes ... that they would march or fight at all seemed incredible."

And yet when he got reports of McClellan's much larger force readying an attack at Sharpsburg, Maryland, near Antietam Creek, Lee refused to retreat. And he stood with his ragged undermanned force, personification of what one observer later called "antique heroism."

Winston Groom, Writer: At Antietam, Sharpsburg, when McClellan made his big assault it's hard to imagine the amount of dangerous material that's flying around at any given time. And these guns could put up 50- or 100,000 bullets in the air at any given moment. People were getting hit and killed all the time and, and artillery is exploding. And people screaming and hollering.

Gary W. Gallagher, Historian: Lee literally moved back and forth along the lines. He came under fire more than once. He clearly understood that his army was in a desperate position. But outwardly he was absolutely calm in very difficult circumstances. And I think that was part of his self-control; that was part of his belief that you needed to demonstrate the kind of behavior that you wanted your soldiers and your subordinates to exhibit.

Elizabeth Brown Pryor, Biographer: He parries very well. It's almost like a fencing match that he's able to ward off every blow that the Union gives them -- which are some pretty substantial blows -- by somehow patching together the right number of people, getting them into the right place.

Narrator: Across a four-mile front, through the "savage continual thunder" of artillery, through wave after wave of attack -- while ammunition ran short and men scattered and Lee scrambled reinforcements into the line -- the Army of Northern Virginia stood its ground... for 14 hours.

When nightfall finally brought to a halt the bloodiest single day of combat in American history, Lee's army was on the brink of destruction: almost 14,000 of his men had been captured, wounded or killed. And McClellan had fresh troops to throw at the battle the next day.

But as a new dawn rose over those killing fields, the Army of Northern Virginia remained. And General Lee kept his men there throughout that day, daring McClellan to try them again, shoving the carnage under McClellan's nose.

Emory M. Thomas, Biographer: Lee himself, I think, had his fighting blood up and believed that he could withstand more attacks. But he I also think he wanted to make his army know that they were tougher than their enemies.

Narrator: McClellan shied again; and the following day, Lee grudgingly began to pull his army back home to Virginia. But the Confederate commander had brought the war home to the North.

A Union soldier from Connecticut, surveying the bloated and blackening corpses near Sharpsburg, wrote to his family: "Think now of the horrors of such a scene as lies all around us. There were hundreds of horses, too, all mangled and putrifying, scattered everywhere! ...The farm-houses and barns knocked to pieces and burned down, the crops trampled and wasted, the whole country forlorn and desolate."

Lee's campaign had struck a blow at northern morale, but he hadn't anticipated the grit of the Union leader. In the days after the battle, Abraham Lincoln chastised, then fired George McClellan, declared Antietam a victory for Union, and then issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed the slaves in every state in rebellion.

Winston Groom, Writer: That was in effect throwing down yet another gauntlet to the South because after that a negotiated settlement would be a practical impossibility.

Gary W. Gallagher, Historian: The Emancipation Proclamation changed the terms of the whole war in Lee's view. It was a war where everything was at stake now in the Confederacy, the entire social fabric -- not just whether or not you'd have a new slave holding republic, but whether or not you would have the slave-based social system that had been present for more than 200 years.

Narrator: "What we have hitherto seen," wrote the *Richmond Examiner*, "is but the prelude of the war which will now begin."

Lee's prophecy of a long and bloody fight had come to pass. After two full years, and scores of thousands of lives lost, the war was a stalemate. Neither side had gained much ground.

In March 1863, the opposing armies were settled in on either side of the Rappahannock River, near Fredericksburg, Virginia, awaiting the spring thaw. For nearly four months, General Lee had been living in a canvas tent, in an island of mud. "The general was never so comfortable," wrote a staff aide, "as when he was uncomfortable."

But the quiet wore on Lee... and shortened his temper. His staff officers had learned to read the signs: when they saw the general's neck and head twitch -- "snapping at his ear," one aide called it -- they knew he was about to kick.

Joseph T. Glatthaar, Historian: Lee was notorious for a very difficult temper. He exploded on staff officers. He could be nasty. And he yelled at A.P. Hill on several occasions, actually humiliated him in front of others.

Elizabeth Brown Pryor, Biographer: He's not particularly easy to work with. He sometimes blames his staff for things that he has done wrong, mistakes he has made and then he can't apologize. He has trouble apologizing.

At one point he wrote to his daughter, Agnes, and said that, you know, "The young soldiers don't really enjoy the company of the old general." And he said, "Actually I'm so cross that I'm not worth being around anymore anyway."

Narrator: Lee would not permit himself the luxury of friendship and society that winter. No one heard him complain about the loss of Arlington, or the unexpected deaths of his only two grandchildren -- a two-year-old boy and an infant girl he'd never seen. And when Lee received news that his daughter Annie had died of scarlet fever, he mourned her alone.

Robert E. Lee (Chris Sarandon): My dearest Mary... Old age and sorrow is wearing me away... I feel oppressed by what I have to undergo for the first time in my life.

In the quiet hours of the night, when there is nothing to lighten my grief, I feel as if I should be overwhelmed.

Joseph T. Glatthaar, Historian: The amount of paperwork that was flowing into his headquarters was absolutely staggering. He was blitzed with paperwork and he was trying to plan for the spring campaign. All the while he was feeling terrible. The evidence seems to

indicate that Lee suffered a massive heart attack.

Emory M. Thomas, Biographer: He did begin this physical decline, really, in the spring of 1863. And most people don't realize it because Lee denied it himself to himself and tried to rise above it and not act the invalid, which at that time he certainly was.

Narrator: In the last days of April, as Lee struggled to regain his physical strength, the Union Army, under a new commander, General Joseph Hooker, made the sort of bold and precise flanking move Lee had dreamed of for his own army.

Peter S. Carmichael, Historian: Hooker, in dividing his army, put Lee in a, in a vice essentially. There were Union forces that were at Fredericksburg and then the bulk of the Union army was advancing from the West toward Lee's forces.

One would expect that Lee would have retreated to the South closer to Richmond. And that would seem to have been really the only option.

Narrator: Even ailing and outmaneuvered, Robert E. Lee was not about to turn and run. Instead, he countered with his most daring and dangerous move to date. He sent half his army, led by his most aggressive commander, Stonewall Jackson, on a 14-mile stealth march to attack Hooker's right flank.

If the attack failed, the Army of Northern Virginia would likely be destroyed.

Jackson's attack caused a panic in the Union lines... and for the next two days, Lee's divided army fought its way through Hooker's men.

Gary W. Gallagher, Historian: The climactic fighting at Chancellorsville came on May 3rd. It was a hugely costly day -- more than 8,000 Confederate casualties. But at the end of the morning's fighting the two wings of Lee's army came together in one of the few clearings in this heavily wooded part of Virginia. And as the army's wings came together Lee rode into an amazing scene.

Peter S. Carmichael, Historian: They were of course driving the Union army away from the field. And there was Robert E. Lee amongst his victorious troops, the Chancellor House in flames, and those men cheering on their general.

Emory M. Thomas, Biographer: One of his staff officers says it was from a scene like this

that in the olden days men rose to the dignity of gods. And this was probably Lee's finest hour. And he knew it.

Gary W. Gallagher, Historian: It's the moment at which the bond between Lee and his soldiers was absolutely sealed. His men came to believe that they could achieve anything as long as he was in command. And I think he believed that with his soldiers he could do almost anything.

Robert E. Lee (Chris Sarandon): There never were such men -- in any army before and there never can be better in any army again. If properly led, they will go anywhere and never falter at the work before them.

Narrator: Lee knew northern morale was badly shaken by the stunning Confederate victory at Chancellorsville. Now was the time, he reckoned, to drive a stake through the heart of the Union cause. This army of his, these men, could do it.

Lee got his chance in the first days of July 1863, when the opposing armies stumbled onto each other near the Pennsylvania town of Gettysburg. For two full days of long light, Lee pushed his men to break the lines of the Army of the Potomac . . . and they came tantalizingly close to taking the well-entrenched Union positions. On the third day, July 3rd, Lee decided to go for broke. He ordered a barrage of artillery to soften up Union positions on Cemetery Ridge, where General Pickett's infantry division would spearhead a full-force, every-man-on-the-line frontal assault. When subordinate commanders warned that their enemy's defenses were too strong, and their own men too fatigued, Lee waved them off.

Winston Groom, Writer: I believe that he had every confidence that those men that he sent up there with General Pickett on that final day were gonna split that Union Army in two and get 'em off that hill and send 'em flying back to Washington. He was wrong.

Lesley J. Gordon, Historian: He was stunned. He was shocked to see the results. The reinforcements that were supposed to come in didn't happen. Men got lost, men panicked. And he's devastated by this -- devastated by it -- watching this moment unfold before his eyes.

Narrator: Lee saw more than half his infantry fall that day; Pickett alone lost two-thirds of his division. Lee did manage to avert fatal destruction. But the army he'd created... and loved so well... and trusted so deeply... was wrecked. That night, when battle finally ceased, an aide caught a glimpse of Lee in the moonlight; revealing an "expression of sadness I had never before seen upon his face."

Robert E. Lee (Chris Sarandon): Soldiers! We have sinned against Almighty God. We have cultivated a revengeful, haughty, and boastful spirit. We have not remembered that the defenders of a just cause should be pure in His eyes... Let us humble ourselves before Him. Let us confess our many sins, and beseech Him to give us a higher courage, a purer patriotism, and more determined will.

Gary W. Gallagher, Historian: He really did believe that God was ordering things. And if difficult things happen that meant you had to just try harder. You had to deal with them and move on. You couldn't wallow in self-pity.

Michael Fellman, Historian: Even though there fewer of us, and even though things are desperate, if we are internally true servants of God and have cleansed ourselves of our pride God will shine his light on us and we will win despite the odds. And so he did believe that they could stand at the pass. And if they're brave enough and strong enough they can yet win.

Narrator: The forces against Lee's cause had grown stronger, the cost of the war more dear. One of Lee's sons was a prisoner of war; his daughter-in-law was on her deathbed; and his wife and daughters were camped out at a rented house in Richmond.

And Robert E. Lee was more committed than ever to the dream of winning independence for a slave-holding Confederate nation... but that meant he would have to rally his people to meet his standards. There was no room for doubt, for fear, for anything less than absolute devotion to the Confederate cause.

Michael Fellman, Historian: There's some incredible letters to his daughters during the war saying stop having so much fun. Stop going to parties. Behave yourself. Sew more socks for the soldiers. Discipline yourselves. This is a trial for us all and we're sent here to fight this trial with every ounce of our being.

Gary W. Gallagher, Historian: Lee was not sympathetic to soldiers who didn't do their duty from his perspective -- deserters, shirkers. Lee's response to desertion was often, "we need to hang some people."

Peter S. Carmichael, Historian: So what we have in September of 1863 is not just a spike in desertion, but a spike in execution. There's nearly 40 men who are killed in Lee's army while in Virginia in September of 1863.

He recognized that the cohesiveness of his army, its military efficiency, depended upon him making those kinds of tough decisions. And he was willing to live with the moral consequences of it.

Gary W. Gallagher, Historian: Executions were elaborately choreographed for maximum effect. Large numbers of men would be drawn up in a three-sided formation. The accused put at the open end. The coffin would be there. The grave would be there. The man would be executed and then sometimes several thousand soldiers would be marched past the corpse before the whole event was over. These were meant to send a message.

Narrator: First reports of troop movements started coming into Lee's headquarters just after midnight, May 4th, 1864. The Army of the Potomac -- now nearly twice the size of Lee's own -- was thundering across two pontoon bridges to the south shore of the Rapidan River near Fredericksburg, Virginia, disappearing into the dark tangle of woods where Lee's men had dug in.

The President of the United States had drawn a bulls-eye on Robert E. Lee and his army... and pointed it out to his new general-in-chief, the hero of the war in the West.

Gary W. Gallagher, Historian: Ulysses S. Grant's taking the field in Virginia in the spring of 1864 absolutely underscores how important Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia were. Grant could have run the war from anywhere. His friend, Sherman, said, "For God's sake, don't go to the East. Congress is in the East. Newspapers are in the East. Run the war from the West with the telegraph." But Grant knew he had to go east because the people of the United States demanded that their great soldier, Grant, go head-to-head with Lee.

Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia were not intimidated by the arrival of U.S. Grant. Their attitude was "Grant's done great things in the West. He hasn't faced us or R.E. Lee in the West. And now he's gonna find out what it's like to be up against the first string."

Winston Groom, Writer: The Southerners believed that they were gonna win somehow. They believed God was on their side. So did the North. And I don't know I don't think God can be on everybody's side, but that's what they thought. They all thought that.

Narrator: Grant commenced his attack at first light, the 5th of May. And for three days in that mottled jack-oak forest, with wildfires devouring the wounded and soldiers engaged in desperate hand-to-hand combat, Lee's men held off Grant's larger force -- then shoved it back. It

appeared that Grant -- like McClellan and Hooker before him -- was going to be forcibly ejected from Virginia by Lee's army.

Ervin L. Jordan, Jr., Historian: The Union troops, the Army of the Potomac, was a bit dispirited because you take on Lee you lose. And they actually said to themselves, you know, "licked again." And Grant had ordered a retreat for the moment. And as they were retreating they came to this fork in the road. And Grant and his staff were on horseback sitting there. Now if they were told to go to the left the soldiers knew they were retreating and heading back to the safety of Washington D.C. If they went to the right they were gonna be circling, continuing on to probably take on Lee again.

So as the soldiers approached, Grant's sitting on horseback, his cigar's in his mouth, and he very silently just points to the right. Grant was not retreating.

Winston Groom, Writer: Grant hung on like a pit bull. And everywhere Lee went he followed him. He chased him all over Virginia.

Gary W. Gallagher, Historian: The Overland Campaign between May and mid-June 1864 was a complete break with what had come before during the Civil War; before there had been a battle and then a long period perhaps before another one. But when Lee and Grant hooked up, there are gigantic battles one after another with virtually no respite.

Narrator: Lincoln had finally found a commander who was willing to apply the terrifying mathematical reality: the North simply had more men to throw on the pile.

And as Grant pressed his advantage, the Army of Northern Virginia bled... three of Lee's corps commanders were knocked out of the battle; his trusted calvary commander, Jeb Stuart, was killed.

Peter S. Carmichael, Historian: Lee had to, on a number of occasions, assert himself in the field, expose himself to enemy fire because of the fact that he could not either trust certain commanders or he had lost men in the field. And so taking on those increased demands and those burdens in the field they took a tremendous physical and emotional toll on him.

Gary W. Gallagher, Historian: He got very little sleep. One of his staff officers said not more than two hours of sleep per night in a row. Lee was past his mid-50s. This was a very difficult period for him. And the one time that we know for certain that he broke down physically came at

the North Anna in late May when he literally was confined to his cot and could not take the field even though there was an opening to deal a significant blow against Grant's army.

Narrator: As Lee languished, officers closest to him wondered if their commander was finally spent. His heart troubles had never really abated; he'd talked at various times about taking himself out of the battle... and now it appeared to some he'd be compelled to do so.

Instead, Lee hauled himself out of his army cot and back to the campaign.

Gary W. Gallagher, Historian: He was doing everything he'd done before and more. He was absolutely unsparing of himself in that regard, held himself to a very high standard. And he expected no less from everyone who served under him.

Peter S. Carmichael, Historian: Lee could never see in other people weakness. He saw in himself this amazing ability to sacrifice physically as well as emotionally, to go at great lengths to fulfill his obligations to the Confederacy and he expected, demanded, that everyone below him, all the way down to the private, no matter how difficult their hardships may, might be that they also do their duty.

Narrator: Lee stood toe-to-toe with Grant for six bloody weeks. When the Overland campaign ground to a halt at the end of June, 100,000 men had been killed or maimed. The wastage backed up into both capitals. Washington's hospitals overflowed; its cemeteries were full.

U.S. Quartermaster Montgomery C. Meigs got permission from Abraham Lincoln to turn Lee's home, Arlington, into a military burial ground. And he made sure some of the first graves were right next to the house, in Mary Lee's flower garden.

Elizabeth Brown Pryor, Biographer: Meigs felt that Lee should have to look at this. Should he ever be able to come home again he would have to look at what he had been responsible for. He would have to look at these graves and see the carnage that he had created.

Narrator: By the fall of 1864 Grant had shoved Lee's Army of Northern Virginia back into its holes, into muddy defensive trenches outside Petersburg, Virginia.

The last, best hope for the Confederacy was politics: the presidential election of 1864. But that hope died when Abraham Lincoln defeated the Peace Party candidate, George McClellan.

Winston Groom, Writer: I think Lee knew certainly that the cause was lost. He knew when

you're besieged, you're besieged. There was no way out.

Emory M. Thomas, Biographer: I think Lee persisted in the belief that he was a professional. He was a soldier. His duty was to fight.

Narrator: The hurt for Lee was watching the demise of his Army. He had birthed and nurtured it -- had made it an extension of his own person -- and now he had to watch it suffer in the muddy trench.

Winston Groom, Writer: It was an ongoing tragedy the last day of the -- well the last week of the war. I mean he saw his army falling apart in front of him and there was nothing he could do about it. He knew that basically the game was up. The choices were getting fewer by the hour.

Narrator: In early April, 1865, Grant began inviting Lee to give up the fight... and Lee finally relented. "I suppose there is nothing for me to do but go and see General Grant," he told an aide. "And I would rather die a thousand deaths."

Emory M. Thomas: Lee went off by himself in an orchard. His staff tried to keep people away from him because he had to come to terms really with the death of his army. This was what he had given his life to and he realized I'm sure that he would never do anything so important again. And he'd failed. And it was over.

Narrator: In a meeting with Grant at a private home in Appomattox, Virginia, in April 1865, Lee agreed to surrender his Army of Northern Virginia... on Grant's terms.

Lee was obliged to beg Grant for food for his defeated men, but he refused to betray a scintilla of emotion to his conquerer. "Whatever his feelings," Grant later wrote, "they were entirely concealed from my observation."

As Lee strode out onto the porch following the meeting, one of his staff officers saw the familiar twitch and flush at the general's neck... heard Lee's voice break as he called for his horse.

Joseph T. Glatthaar, Historian: And then he returned back to his headquarters tent. As he went by, Porter Alexander had arranged for soldiers to be standing along alongside the road to salute their commander. Then Lee, in conjunction with Charles Marshall, drafted General Order Number Nine in which he announced the surrender to the troops.

Robert E. Lee (Chris Sarandon): 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.

Michael Fellman, Historian: He's saying, "it wasn't our inward fortitude that lost, it wasn't that our cause wasn't just. They had more guns and they had more men and they crushed us with superior material force. And that implies we still have superior moral force. The cause for which we fought is as noble as it always was."

Elizabeth Brown Pryor, Biographer: Lee is saying to himself, "Yes, it was still worth the effort." He had given it his all and never shirked from doing that and that that was meritorious in itself.

Robert E. Lee (Chris Sarandon): You will take with you the satisfaction that proceeds from the consciousness of duty faithfully performed and I earnestly pray that a merciful God will extend to you His blessing and protection....

"I, Robert Edward Lee... do solemnly swear, in the presence of Almighty God, that I will henceforth faithfully support, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States, and the Union of the States thereunder, and that I will, in like manner, abide by and faithfully support all laws and proclamations which have been made during the existing rebellion with reference to the emancipation of slaves, so help me God."

Narrator: In April of 1865, a defeated Robert E. Lee returned to his wife and family... at their rented home on Franklin Street in Richmond. Only the charity of President Lincoln and General Grant saved him from being hanged as a traitor.

For the next five years, Lee hid himself away at the presidency of a small college in the mountains of western Virginia. When he felt able, Lee took solitary rides on his horse, Traveller, confiding to his old war-time companion. "I feel sure of his discretion," he wrote to a friend.

Gary W. Gallagher, Historian: He was extremely unhappy with much of the political landscape in the wake of the war. But he kept that to himself. He believed that if you lose a war you do what the winner says to do. And I think that's what he tried to do after the Civil War in a public sense. In a public sense it was all about reunion and reconciliation. In a private sense a very different story.

Peter S. Carmichael, Historian: R.E. Lee to the day he died believed that the wrong side had

won this war. And that was something that he could not explain away easily. And so the faith that he had that there was a God who would in fact favor his people and that God was just and righteous -- R.E. Lee had a very difficult time reconciling that belief to what he had seen on the battlefront and what he saw after Appomattox.

He saw a landscape now peopled with individuals that he couldn't recognize. These are not slaves anymore, they're free black people and they're asserting their political rights. There are poor white people who are demanding to be treated with the same respect that a slave-holder was treated with. So Lee comes into those that post period bewildered.

Narrator: Robert E. Lee had little inclination to work through what his life and his war had meant... and even less time. In October of 1870, just five and a half years after his surrender, Lee suffered a massive stroke and died a few days later, at home in Virginia, surrounded by his family.

In death, as in life, Robert E. Lee divided the nation. The former slave Frederick Douglass spoke for those who were offended by the "nauseating flatteries of Robert E. Lee"... "It would seem that the soldier who kills the most men in battle, even in a bad cause, is the greatest Christian, and entitled to the highest place in heaven."

Southern partisans deified their now-fallen commander, placing his memory at the head of a grand and noble Lost Cause. The glory that eluded Lee in life attached itself to him in death, turning him, literally, into a bronzed god, a marble man.

Michael Fellman, Historian: The minute he dies at the first memorial services both General Early, who was really the political leader of this Lost Cause movement, and Jefferson Davis gave eulogies. And they said, "More than being a great general and a great man he was a pure Christian. And his soul was clear and clean." It was as if they are saying he was a saint. So he can stand in for all that's best in us and we can strive the way he strove and reach this place of a Christian white commonwealth where all is pure.

Narrator: For the next quarter century, admirers of the Confederate cause funded and erected monuments to Robert E. Lee by the scores. And for a full century after his death, the memory of General Lee was rigorously burnished... and not just by Southerners. President Theodore Roosevelt called Lee, "the very greatest of all the great captains that the English-speaking peoples have brought forth."

"We recognize Robert E. Lee as one of our greatest American Christians," said President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "and one of our greatest American gentlemen."

Lee himself had had to face the hard and un-idealized truth. He looked around at the end of his life, and what he saw was misery. His soaring ambition, his superhuman physical stamina and his unbending resolve had been devastating to those closest to him.

Virginia had been driven to its knees, his family estate lost, his sons financially beleagured, his daughters homebound and unhappy... none would marry, partly because a generation of well-bred Southern males had died in their father's army.

Lesley J. Gordon, Historian: This is a man who had pretty much devoted his whole adult life to being a professional soldier. And really the biggest trial and test of his career was the Civil War, which meant turning on his former comrades, his nation, which of course his own father had helped to create. And he failed.

Elizabeth Brown Pryor, Biographer: He told one of his colleagues at Washington College that he thought the great mistake of his life, the great mistake of his life was having taken a military education. And I think it's rather tragic if he truly believed that because it's almost like showing a sense of disappointment in his whole life, that the whole trajectory of his life from the time that he first went to West Point had come out to be something that he viewed as being a mistake, a failure, something he regretted.