

REMARKS OF LEWIS L. STRAUSS AT DINNER OF THE VIRGINIANS
OF MARYLAND, IN BALTIMORE ON 19 JANUARY 1951

Ladies and Gentlemen -

When some months ago our mutual friend, Colonel McAdams, informed me that you had selected me to be the recipient of this honor, I accepted with what must have seemed to him an indecent alacrity. My son and daughter-in-law are now Baltimoreans. True, I made a small show of modesty. I inquired whether a truly distinguished Virginian such as Douglas Freeman or Senator Byrd might not be a more fitting object of your recognition.

Colonel McAdams heartily agreed -- but added that both had been already so honored as also had Admiral Byrd, Colgate Darden, Lady Astor, and a long and illustrious list. I cautiously intimated that the bottom of the barrel now clearly had been reached. The Colonel was too honest to deny the general accuracy of that self-imposed soft impeachment.

I was not even sure that I qualified for other reasons. My Virginia origins are recent by Virginia standards. I have heard it said that a citizen of Los Angeles is considered to be an "old settler" if he arrived there during the last Republican Administration -- and come to think of it, that was a long time ago -- but my progenitors only settled in Culpeper County a little over 100 years ago which, by local chronology, still makes us fairly recent arrivals.

There are a good many kinds of Virginians. For instance, a parson near Senator Byrd's home in Berryville preached a sermon to his congregation one Sabbath on the text, "They was twelve Virginians what lit their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. And six of them was wise Virginians and six of them was foolish Virginians." After the services one of his vestrymen ventured to suggest that the Reverend had misquoted the passage. "It seems to me," he said, "that you got your percentage of foolish Virginians too high."

However that may be, aside from wise and foolish Virginians, there are also resident and non-resident Virginians. This Society is proof of the vigorous existence of the latter variety. Virginians, however, do not make exemplary expatriates. It is true that we follow the injunction of the prophet Jeremiah who said, "When thou comest to dwell in a strange city, pray unto the Lord for it, for in the peace of that city ye shall find peace." We do that, but we also remember in our orisons the State where we have left a part of our hearts behind us -- in those happy regions south of the Potomac.

It has been said that the disposition to be proud of one's country and to boast of it is a natural feeling, indulged in or not according to the pride, vanity and boastfulness of the individual, but that with a Virginian, it is a passion; that it inheres in him even as does the flavor of Maryland terrapin in that creature; and no exile, no silver toureen of a gracious prosperity and no pickling in the sharp vinegars of adversity can destroy it. The Virginian loves Virginia. He loves to talk about her, for out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaketh. He never gets

entirely spiritually acclimated elsewhere -- no, not even in this neighboring paradise of Maryland. Expatriation remains an abstraction. He may breathe -- a Virginian may breathe even in Boston -- but he lives in Virginia. His youth is there and there his heart is also.

The aromatic fragrance of the tobacco factories, the summer morning calls from the watermelon and canteloupe carts -- the remembered savors of spoon-bread and salt-roe-herring for breakfast can take him back in a twinkling to the golden days of youth.

These, however, are but the outward things, the things sensed, which make the Virginia tradition a very real thing for us. For there is an entirely different order and magnitude of ties which make us proud, kindles a fire in the eyes, expands the lungs, and fills the heart with a feeling at once indefinable and glorious. It is because we honestly believe that Virginia is in some mysterious and ancient way the home -- the native home -- of virtues which we were early taught to admire and which are the foundation stones of our American inheritance.

We see these virtues personified and raised to their superlative perfection in the life of the great Virginian whose birth occurred 144 years ago today -- Robert Edward Lee -- that Lee, who said that Duty was the sublimest word in the language and who proved it by his life. He typified for us the virtues of Faith, of Charity, of Patriotism, and Chivalry and Courage. All of these are qualities which today, over a large part of the earth's surface, are either unknown, or forgotten abstractions, or concepts perverted by selfish men to their own selfish ends. We are losing our grip on some of them ourselves. The measure of our survival as a free people will be our ability, or lack of it, to preserve these virtues, to reinforce them, to rebuild them into the structure of our country, reweave them into the fabric of our own personal lives.

A very few examples will suffice to make my points clear. I first mentioned the virtue of Faith. Lee, like Washington, was a sincere believer in the existence of a Supreme Being, concerned with the beautiful and tragic experiment which is humanity on earth, Benign, Omniscient, Inscrutable. Only a few years before Lee's birth, Washington had written in his Farewell Address, "...reason and experience both forbid us to expect national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle." Lee was reared in that tradition. His constant companions in the field were the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. He once wrote, "I prefer the Bible to any other book. There is enough in that to satisfy the most ardent thirst; to open the way to true wisdom. It is not above human comprehension. The difficulty is to conform the heart and mind and thoughts to its teaching." He accepted the Scriptures literally. It is reliably recorded of him that, like Washington, he began and ended every day on his knees, and in his daily prayers, all human-kind were included, even to those Northern Armies on whom he was preparing to train his artillery the following morning. He disapproved the repining in the Lee family for the loss of Arlington for he said, "Our heavenly Father has found it necessary to deprive us of what He has given us."

As to the virtue of Charity, we know well that Lee loved his fellow man without distinction of any sort. He regarded slavery with horror, not only because it was an injury to the black, but to the white as well.

He began to free his own bondsmen before the war and continued it even amidst the tornado of the conflict. Once on a visit to this city five years after Appomattox, he said, "So far from engaging in a war to perpetuate slavery, I am rejoiced that slavery is abolished. I believe it will be greatly for the interests of the South. So fully am I satisfied of this, as regards Virginia especially, that I would cheerfully have lost all I have lost by the war, and have suffered all I have suffered to have this object attained."

That visit to Baltimore parenthetically may interest you. Lee had been here earlier as a young engineer officer in 1849-1852. His return in 1869 was as a prematurely aging man, now president of a small college in Lexington, Virginia, then called Washington College, now known as Washington and Lee. He came with a delegation to seek financing for a railroad to make the little college town, 23 miles from a rail head, more accessible. He was received with ovations everywhere he appeared in this city and was showered with evidences of public affection and respect. Leaving Baltimore for Washington, he visited President Grant at the White House. This was their first meeting since the historic scene at Appomattox and it was to be their last. There were no witnesses and no full account of what transpired was ever written by either man. But it was evident to Motley, the historian, who was in the White House at the time, that they parted as friends, Lee stoical, Grant clearly deeply moved.

Lee made one final visit here in July of the following year. His health had failed rapidly and he had been persuaded to consult Dr. Thomas Hepburn Buckler, a prominent Baltimore physician of that time. The three days journey from Lexington here by canal boat and railroad in the heat of summer was an exhausting one and he did not survive it by many weeks after returning to the land he loved.

Lee truly loved Virginia. "I felt so elated," he wrote at the age of 33, to a cousin, on his return from a visit to the Mississippi River, "when I found myself within the confines of the ancient Dominion that I nodded to all the trees as I passed, chatted with the drivers and stable boys, shook hands with all the landlords and, in the fulness of my heart -- don't tell Mary -- wanted to kiss all the pretty girls I met." The gaiety of the young man sobered into a deep abiding passion. For his love of Virginia, he later sacrificed his career, his fortune and the best of his life. Such was his virtue of Patriotism.

The virtue of Chivalry is an almost forgotten quality in a world of mass bombings of civil populations and the philosophy of total war. Here is something to quicken the pulse. In a little town in Georgia, there is a collection of letters which Jefferson Davis took with him when Richmond was evacuated. They were the records he most desired to save. All are from Lee. A short one is dated 26 August 1862. It reads, "His Excellency Jefferson Davis, President, C.S.A. Mr. President: I sent you herewith a letter written by A.A. Tomlinson, an officer of the Federal Army, which was picked up on the road by which they had marched and which contains some facts in relation to the battle near Cedar Mountain yesterday which may be interesting and which show how they regarded the ~~issue~~ issue of that engagement. I would suggest, however, that as the letter is of a wholly private character that no publicity be given to the name of the writer, though the facts could be made known if you deem fit, for the publication of his name would in all probability injure him without materially benefiting us. I am very respectfully, Your Obedient Servant, R. E. Lee, General."

I have read that letter an hundred times -- never without emotion.

Observe, my friends, that this was conduct toward an unknown enemy officer in the midst of a bitter war. Many examples could be cited -- none more exemplary of the virtue of Chivalry than this.

And when finally the cause of the Confederacy lay prostrate in disaster, several of Lee's officers demurred at the proposed surrender. What would history say? "That is not the question," Lee replied. "The question is: is it right to surrender this army? If it is right, then I'll will take all the responsibility." That, my friends, is the virtue of Courage -- of courage in the darkest hour.

At my home on the battlefield of Brandy Station, I am the custodian, during my lifetime, of a yellowed sheet of writing paper. It is inscribed in a faded but legible, round hand, "Headquarters Army of Northern Virginia, General Orders #9. April 10, 1865." It reads as follows: "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. 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 could compensate for the loss that must have attended the continuance of the contest, I determined to avoid the useless sacrifice of those whose past services have endeared them to their countrymen. By the terms of the agreement, officers and men can return to their homes and remain until exchanged. 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. With an unceasing admiration of your constancy and devotion to your country and a grateful remembrance of your kind and generous consideration for myself, I bid you all an affectionate farewell." It is signed "R. E. Lee, Gen'l."

That would be an epitome of all the virtues.

A few weeks ago I visited the grave of my late friend, James Forrestal, in Arlington cemetery. Returning, I passed the beautiful Lee Mansion and stood a while under the nobly proportioned portico which overlooks the city of Washington. In the distance and joined to Arlington by the Memorial Bridge are the monuments a grateful nation has erected to the memories of Lincoln, Washington and Jefferson. It is fitting that physically as well as spiritually, they are part of the same soul-stirring picture.

An old Negro preacher, named John Jasper, was popular with white and black folk alike in the Richmond of my childhood. He used to preach a favorite and often requested sermon. His theme was, "De earth am flat and de sun do move." As a small boy I was once taken to hear him. Either from recollection of the event or its frequent retelling -- I cannot say which -- I know his concluding sentences by heart. "You goes out yo front door in de mawnin'," he declaimed, "and dar am de sun risin' in de Eas'. You goes out yo back door in de evenin' and dar am de sun settin' in de Wes'. How in de name o' glory do de sun git from yo front door to yo back door if he don't move?"

And so I think that like John Jasper's sun, the twilight subsidence of morals and virtues in the world may be more apparent than real. The principles for which Virginia stands -- that rather intense individualism which has been America -- the principles and virtues of Lee -- do not really move and never will set. Lee, like Washington, and Jefferson and those of the noble company who charted Virginia's course has become one of the fixed stars by which the future course is laid. May they continue to illumine the skies of Virginia and the firmament of our land to the end of time.