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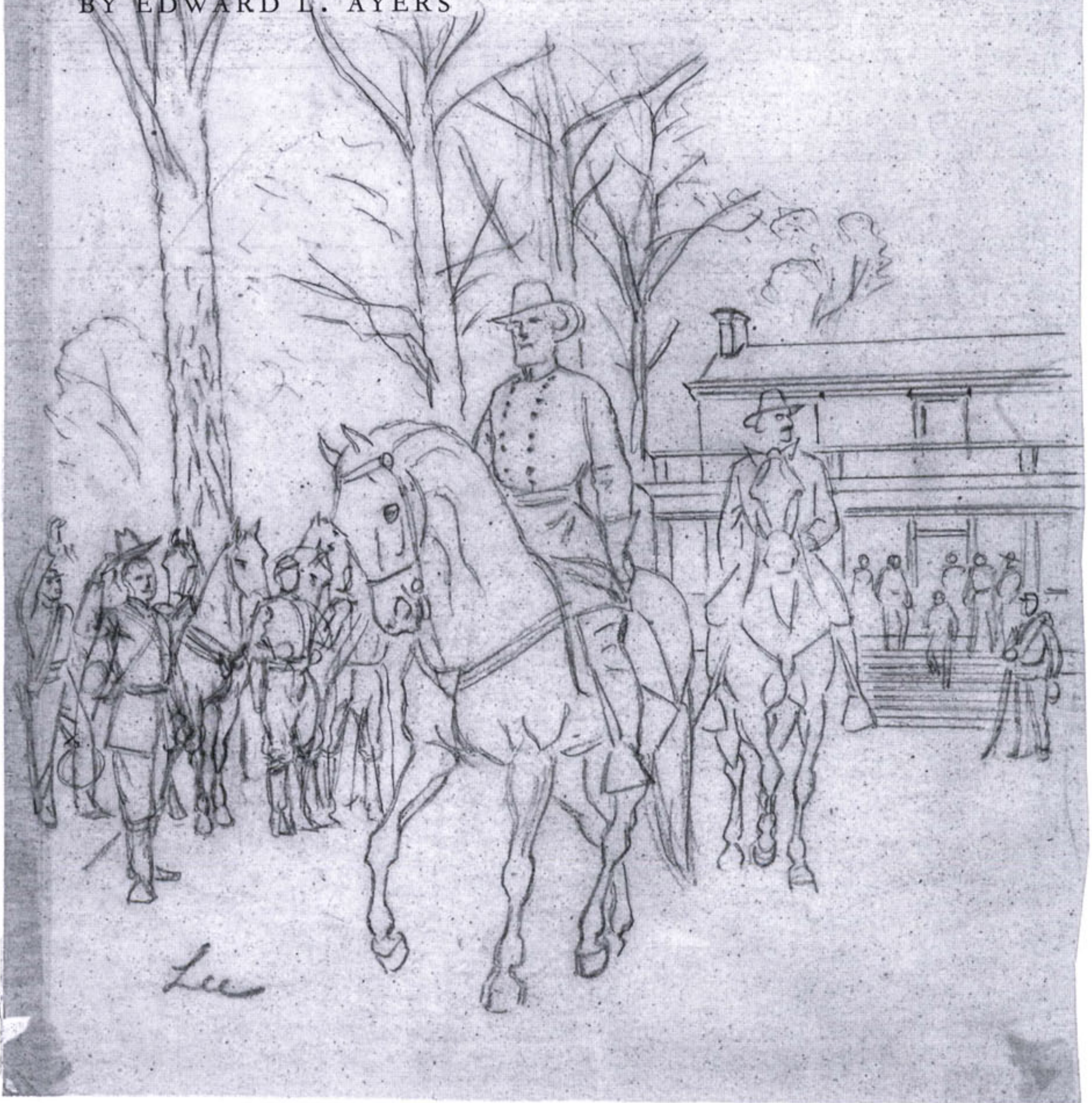
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Not Forgotten

Remembering Appomattox

BY EDWARD L. AYERS



Despite later fantasies of guerilla fighting, a soldier such as Lee would not support such a desperate and undisciplined tactic as that. He knew the war was over at Appomattox, the Confederacy was over at Appomattox.

"Robert E. Lee leaving the McLean House following his surrender to Ulysses S. Grant," by Alfred R. Waud, April 9, 1865, pencil on yellow tracing paper, Library of Congress.

The meaning of the events at the McLean House on April 9, 1865, seem firmly embedded in our national story. In our country's understanding, Appomattox is America at its best. The gentlemanly drama on this landscape showed Americans to be principled, generous, and fundamentally decent. The shaking of hands, the refusal of the sword, the unpretentious setting, the role of the Seneca Eli Parker, the humility of General Grant—all those things tell us that the bloodletting of the previous four years had been an anomaly. The paired stories of Confederate soldiers permitted to keep their horses and guns and of them melting away, suddenly civilians, back to their homes, has reassured generations of Americans that Americans are different from other nations. We are fundamentally unwarlike, fundamentally unified.

This is the story in the textbooks and in our recent bestsellers—and in our reenactments. It shows us as our best selves. It elevates soldiers into men of discipline, principle, restraint, and courage. It allows everyone to be a hero, even an icon, with the defeated Lee enshrined for his dignity and constraint. General Grant himself did much to create this version of the story. Here is what he wrote in his great memoirs, twenty years later. He ordered that there would be no firing of salutes or other “unnecessary humiliation” of the Confederates. They “were now our prisoners, and we did not want to exult over their downfall.” Indeed, Grant’s own feelings, which had been quite jubilant at the receipt of his letter, were sad and depressed: “I felt like anything rather than rejoicing at the downfall of a foe who fought so long and valiantly, and had suffered so much for a cause, though that cause was, I believe, one of the worst for which a people ever fought, and one for which there was the least excuse.”¹

That’s a remarkable sentence and, in fact, a complete contradiction, with nothing but a comma between clauses that don’t seem to follow one another. But it is the non sequitur that has defined our understanding of this event ever since: the cause could not have been worse, and there was no excuse for that fight, and yet the man who led the fight had fought “long and valiantly.” The “cause” Grant identified was the disuniting of the United States, the world’s most hopeful democracy, to create a new nation that would be explicitly based on slavery.

It was that severing of the cause and of the fight that established the bargain that the white North and the white South would hold to for the next 150 years. As Grant continued, “I do not question, however, the sincerity of the great mass of those who were opposed to us.”²

Sincerity. Who could have doubted the sincerity of the Confederacy, who had bled itself to death in pursuit of that cause? The Confederacy was profoundly sincere. The soldiers were sincere in their longing to leave the United States, sincere in their hatred of what they saw as an invading army, sincere in their hatred of the abolitionists and black Republicans they blamed for starting the war, sincere in their belief that they had the best army and the best generals. They were never

shaken in those beliefs all the way up to Appomattox and beyond—for generations.

Appomattox gave the white South what it most wanted and thought it had earned: respect for its armies and their men. The soldiers were not fooled into fighting, were not traitors, they declared, but sincere believers that they upheld the same ideals that other Americans upheld: their own freedom, their own independence, their own rights. They used the same words as their northern counterparts.

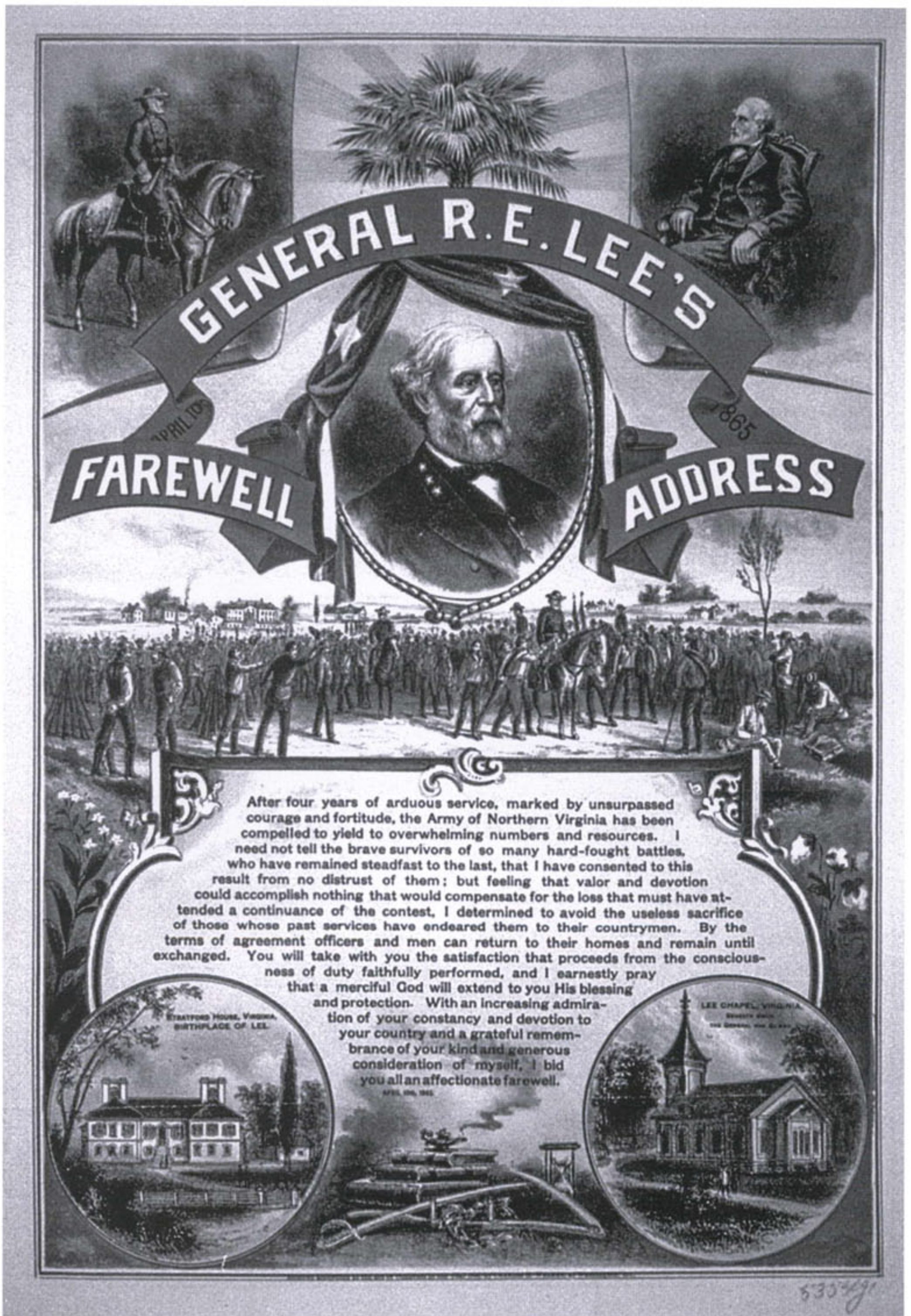
The fighting, in their eyes, could be and was divorced from the “worst for which ever a people fought.” If the worst cause was slavery, they could say that they did not fight for slavery but rather for home and for rights. They would say that three-fourths of them were not slaveholders but that all were citizens and soldiers. The root cause was buried so deeply most of the time during the war that it could not be seen. The Confederates never charged into battle shouting about slavery; their generals never exhorted them to fight over slavery. The fact that the nation they fought to create was based on slavery was not the rallying cry even though it was a reality.

Even as people met at the McLean House, slavery was dying elsewhere. It had been mortally wounded across the South during the war itself, dissolving everywhere it could dissolve, everywhere the United States Army went, everywhere the slaveholders fled. Now, it was dying in the legislative halls in Washington, where the 13th Amendment had passed the U.S. Senate the day before this ceremony occurred.

If the “worst cause” was the destruction of the United States, that, too, had been decided by the time people met here. The Confederacy’s purpose had already disappeared, with Richmond fallen, with Jefferson Davis fleeing into the southern night, with Sherman marching into the southern spring, with the Confederate army scattered and powerless. Despite later fantasies of guerilla fighting, a soldier such as Lee would not support such a desperate and undisciplined tactic as that. He knew the war was over at Appomattox, the Confederacy was over at Appomattox. The other Confederate generals followed his lead.

But ending the war, slavery, and the Confederacy was not the same as knowing what would come next. The historian Elizabeth Varon has helped us understand that Grant’s conflicted words from twenty years later, long after Lee had died, did not convey the sense of what happened here in 1865. Here is how she puts it:

For Grant, the Union victory was one of right over wrong. He believed that his magnanimity, less than his victory, vindicated free society and the Union’s way of war. Grant’s eyes were on the future—a future in which southerners, chastened and repentant, would join their Northern brethren in the march towards moral and material progress. Lee, by contrast, believed that the Union victory



It did matter enormously that the death, the suffering, and the chaos ended as it did at the McLean House. It did matter that the Union army was gracious. It did matter that the Confederates went home peacefully. On the other hand, it did matter that fundamental issues of freedom, of rights, and of power were not settled on April 9, 1865. "General R. E. Lee's farewell address," Charles H. Walker, Library of Congress.

was one of might over right. In his view, southerners had nothing to repent of and had survived the war with their honor and principles intact. He was intent on restoration—on turning the clock back, as much as possible, to the days when Virginia led the nation and before sectional extremism alienated the North from the South. Each man believed that he alone held the moral high ground.³

For supporters of Lincoln and the Republicans, including abolitionists black and white, Grant's generosity of spirit proved their cause's moral as well as military superiority. They were giving the South a chance to repent, to acknowledge that it was wrong as well as defeated. For supporters of the Confederacy and for the many northern enemies of Lincoln and his party, Lee's dignity proved that the South could be restored to its place in the nation and that whatever slavery became would change the racial order as little as possible.

Lee and Grant grew farther and farther apart as the days, months, and years passed. This moment, which seemed to stand outside of war and outside of politics, became more and more entangled in the messy politics that followed. Both the Republicans and the Democrats, the North and the South, claimed victory in this ceremony, claimed vindication for their cause, even though they claimed different things.

Appomattox became ever more elevated in our national imagination not because it resolved what would follow but because everyone could see in it what they wanted. The white South envisioned nothing like the Reconstruction that would follow and thought that their quiet and peaceful surrender here meant that nothing more would happen. They saw Appomattox as the end, as resolution, not as the beginning of a more profound revolution in American life, a revolution in which formerly enslaved men would vote as well as fight, a revolution in which the North would call the shots in American politics and public life for generations to follow.

The North, by contrast, saw Appomattox as only a cessation of hostilities, not as the culmination of all that the war had been fought over. Enemies of slavery knew that merely ending the legality of slavery did not end its spirit, that the freed-people would have to be given a chance to make lives for themselves with law, with education, with an opportunity to gain property. And enemies of the South determined that it would not be permitted an honored place in the White House, in Congress, and in the Supreme Court that it had enjoyed since the founding of the nation.

Lee and Grant admitted their disappointment in each other over the next few years. That was one reason that Grant became more devoted to black rights as President in 1868 than he had been in 1865: he thought that Lee had not fulfilled the spirit of surrender struck at Appomattox. Lee, for his part, burned with re-

sentment that even though he had surrendered in good faith, bringing the war and its purposes to an end, Grant and the North continued to press for more and more in the five years after Appomattox. Lee wrote his cousin that “Our boasted self-Govt. is fast becoming the jeer and laughing stock of the world.”⁴ From his perspective, Reconstruction was a violation of the bargain struck here, a bargain that would have restored things as close to the way they had been in 1861 as possible.

These debates never stopped, of course, and they go on today. People see in the events at Appomattox what they want to see: testimony to Americans’ shared greatness or testimony to promises unfulfilled. Both of those things are real. It did matter enormously that the death, the suffering, and the chaos ended as it did at the McLean House. It did matter that the Union army was gracious. It did matter that the Confederates went home peacefully. On the other hand, it did also matter that fundamental issues of freedom, of rights, and of power were not settled on April 9, 1865.

That’s why the anniversary of that event remains important. It is not merely a celebration but a commemoration, a remembering of just what was at stake here. And what was at stake here was nothing less than the future of the United States. Appomattox was not an ending, but a beginning of a long journey on which we are still traveling.

NOTES

This essay is adapted from an address at the Appomattox Court House National Park on April 9, 2015.

1. *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant*, Volume 1 (New York: Charles L. Webster and Company, 1885), 469–70.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Elizabeth Varon, *Appomattox: Victory, Defeat, and Freedom at the End of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2.

4. *Ibid.*, 246.