

*Lee's Surrender*

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“Discretion is the better part of valor” is a well known and, for the most part, true adage. This most certainly applies to Robert E. Lee’s decision to surrender at Appomattox in 1865. Some may say, what other choice did he have? But as this essay will show, there were other options. Lee was right to surrender for three reasons: surrender was the best chance for peace, It was the best way forward, and it was best for the South.

First of all, surrendering the best chance for peace. It was the option that entailed the least loss of life, of which there had already been far too much. It was also the best option for the southern people, who were in a bad situation at the time because of the destruction of much of their infrastructure. In short, it was the least damaging option, and the only responsible one.

Secondly, it was the best way forward. By this point in the war, the Confederacy was severely damaged. To continue the war to preserve it would in fact result in its destruction. All it would do was make a bad situation worse. However, if Lee surrendered, then the war would end, and the reconstruction could begin.

Finally, it was best for the South. The Civil War was never a justified war. In order for a war to be just, among other things, the harm that the enemy is causing before the war must be of the grave and certain variety. This was not the case with the South in 1860. They seceded because of the election of a president, Abraham Lincoln, whom they were worried would decide to heavily restrict, or even ban slavery completely. However, Lincoln was no extremist, and the possible emancipation of the slaves did not qualify as a grave enough harm, since it was likely that their owners would be

remunerated. To begin an unjust war is bad enough, but to continue one that is a lost cause is even worse. The south did not need that on its collective conscience.

There are those who say that Lee should not have surrendered at Appomattox. This may sound like an illogical argument. After all, Lee's forces were almost at the end of their rope. However, continuing to fight would not have been impossible. Lee could have marched his men, stealing what they had to in order to survive, to Texas, where the Confederate government had moved. From there, it could refit, rearm and continue to fight. Doing this would effectively change battlefields, leaving behind the decimated remains of the East Coast for the untouched frontier. They could even attack California, which was undefended at the time. I could go on and on explaining how this theoretical extension to the war would play out, but the point is, in this scenario, the Confederacy would have a very good chance of winning. The North was already stretched to the brink, with draft riots in major northern cities. The war was, from the perspective of the average northerner, costly, dangerous, and pointless. This country is controlled by the opinion of average citizens, and In the end, the South would have its way, and its independence.

But, what good would this do the South? Its land would be in ruins, its economy more so. The best of a generation of young men would have died fighting the war. And what would they have gained? Independence, and not from a tyrannical government either, but from a government of their fellow countrymen.

My response to those who say that Lee should not have surrendered is as follows: in a reversal of the old phrase, "Better to serve in Heaven than rule in hell." Lee

was a God-fearing man, and I think that the reason that he did not take this course was that his conscience would not have allowed it. He knew that in the end, he would be responsible for the death and damage a continuation of the war would cause.

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