

ADDRESS  
BY  
MR. BRUCE CATTON  
AT  
THE ONE HUNDRETH ANNIVERSARY  
OF THE  
SURRENDER AT APPOMATTOX  
Friday, April 9, 1965

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BRUCE CANTON  
100 CIVIL WAR CENTENNIAL

We are met here today to commemorate the centennial of a great moment in American History. A moment when General Robert E. Lee, in this place, surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia to General U.S. Grant. That was the final act in an unforgettable story. The story of the American Civil War, in which the people of our country struggled with each other for four years at immeasurable costs to work out the basis upon which they would go forward together to greatness. The cost of that war has been paid in full. As we look back to that dramatic scene in the McLean House, a century ago, we are no longer torn by the fierce emotions that possessed the men and women of that generation. At the same time we are compelled to realize that when we do look back we are looking at a profound tragic event. What happened here was the closing scene in an enormous drama wherein men and women were compelled to contend with a force greater than themselves. As Abraham Lincoln said: "Neither party in that war had looked for a struggle so long and so costly or for a result so fundamental and astounding." During those war years the American people had been to grips with fate itself serving an end larger than they could understand. Such a struggle is the essence of tragedy. Yet, we need to remember one saving fact: The final note of a great tragedy is not a note of denial or despair. No man arises from Hamlet feeling that the answer to the drama he has seen is one of frustration or futility. On the contrary, it is precisely from the greatest tragedies that we get our most significant and uplifting experiences. For although tragedy does show man an ending against fate, fighting a battle that perhaps he must lose; It also shows that he has something unconquerable and magnificent within himself. And it is that magnificence of the human spirit, that it is the unconquerable something in man that finally matters, which at last stays with us. There is a spirit in man that triumphs even in the hour of disaster. Grim and terrible as the story of our civil war is, we at least know that great men were involved in it.

Great men, whose living example, is part of our heritage today. Two of the greatest of these are, of course, were Robert E. Lee and U.S. Grant. And on this centennial anniversary it is worth our while to spend a moment considering what they did here. The scene at Appomattox Court House is one of the great moments in the American story. Quite properly, it was underplayed. Nobody tried to strike an attitude or intone suitable words for history. And the two principles, Grant and Lee, behaved with quiet dignity and a deep sense of responsibility. Their meeting was proof that these leaders of rival armies would henceforth have a common country. And on April 9th, they served that country well. Their armies, of course, had had their final confrontation that morning. Lee was fleeing from the siege lines of Petersburg trying desperately to reach some safe spot where his army could get supplies, regroup, and go on with the fight. Grant's army had overtaken it and put troops in front of it. And on the morning of April 9, the army of Northern Virginia was at bay, drawn up in the open fields not far from here. It was surrounded, it was exhausted, it was badly outnumbered. Now the Federal army was ready to drive on a shattering charge that could end in only one way. The troops were in line, ready; just beginning to move, when suddenly, out of the Confederate lines came a young officer on horseback bearing a staff with a white flag galloping toward the Yankee line. Movement was frozen, the guns stopped firing, the officer was taken off to headquarters, and then the war was over. There was no charge; no killing. There was a truce and all that remained was that meeting between Lee and Grant. So Grant and Lee met in the parlor of the McLean House. The courtly southerner of aristocratic lineage, gray and knightly in his best uniform, presentation sword belted at his waist; and the middle-westerner whose father was a tanner who never managed to look like anything but the run-of-the-mill soldier, wearing a mud splashed uniform and no sword at all. Lee was accompanied by a military aide; Grant admitted several of his generals to the room, but all of these people were here chiefly as spectators. Essentially, the only actors present were Grant and Lee. This was undoubtedly the hardest moment of Lee's life.

Grant tried to smooth the way making small talk. Lee, himself, had to call the meeting to order, so-to-speak, by remarking that they knew what they were there for and they had better get down to it. So Grant scribbled out the terms in pencil while Lee waited. Finishing the job, Grant handed his orderly book over to General Lee. As Lee read, he discovered this was not grim old 'unconditional surrender' who had been writing. Lee's army was to be surrendered but it was not to be paraded off to a northern prison camp. It was not to be humiliated. Men could lay down their arms; turning over flags and weapons and government property; then they would be free to go to their homes. With a saving clause that protected them and all like them, from any post war reprisals. Once these soldiers got home, said Grant's document, they were not to be disturbed by the United States authorities so long as they observed their paroles and laws in force where they reside. With Grant's waiting signature under this document, Confederate soldiers who had fought so hard, could not be hanged, imprisoned, or otherwise prosecuted as traitors. The vengeance a victorious government might wish to inflict after four years of civil strife was ruled out forever. Lee raised one point. In the confederate service, calvery horses and some artillery horses were not government issue. They were owned by the men themselves. The written terms stated that the horses had to be given up. Could not these terms be softened? Grant remarked that he had not known that the soldiers had owned their own horses and he didn't think he could change the written terms. However he said that most of the soldiers that were being surrendered were small farmers. They would need horses if they were going to put in a crop and make a living. So he would instruct the officers in charge of receiving captured property to give a horse or a mule to any soldier who claimed to own it. In that way, he said, the men could work their little farms once they got back to it. Lee said that this would have a very good effect, and on this only note the ceremony ended. Lee left the room, mounted his horse, received a salute from the federal officers who stood waiting, and rode off into legend.

Grant went off to his own lines, angrily stopping the firing of jubilee salutes that had just begun, reminding his soldiers that the rebels were now their fellow countrymen again, and saw to it that wagonloads of bacon andhardtack were sent through the lines to the confederate camp. The big surrender scene was over. As far as Grant and Lee could determine it, the nation could begin healing the dreadful wound the war had left. That is the note this scene at Appomattox leaves with us: the attempt to heal the wounds. I would like to remind you that one essential part of this healing is something General Lee did before he got to Appomattox. After he had made up his mind to meet General Grant, General Lee quietly spoke a few words that were fully as important as the future of the country as the surrender ceremony itself. To him, as he prepared to go see General Grant, came a trusted lieutenant who urged him not to surrender, but to simply to tell his army to disperse; each man taking to the hills with his rifle. Let the Yankee's handle guerrilla warfare for awhile and see what they could make of that. Lee replied he would do nothing of the kind. It would create a state of things in the south, he said, from which it would take years to recover. Federal cavalry would hurry the length and breadth of the land. He himself was too old to go bushwacking. Even if the army did break up into die-hard band of irreconcilables, he said, the only course for me to take would be to surrender myself to General Grant. This was the last anyone heard about taking to the hills. The officer who suggested the course wrote that 'Lee showed him a situation "a plane which I have not risen. And when he finished speaking I had not a word to say." Now the unquenchable guerrilla warfare this officer had been hinting at was perhaps the one thing that would have ruined America forever. It was precisely what Federal soldiers like Grant dread most. A long slow burning, furious uprising, that goes on and on after formal armies have been broken up. With desperate men using violence to provoke more violence. Harassing the victor and their own people with the solomen fury, that the dragoons can never quite put down.

On November 7, 1864, Jefferson Davis strongly hinted at this kind of warfare, and he told the Confederate Congress that "there are no vital points on the preservation of which the Confederacy depends. There is no military success for the enemy which can accomplish it's destruction. Not the fall of Richmond or Wilmington, or Savannah, nor Mobile, nor a long line can save the enemy from the constant and exhausting drain of blood and drudgery which must continue until each other discover that no peace is attainable unless based on recognition of our indivisible rights." What Mr. Davis was talking about was obviously an evocation of the revolution. . . Confederacy that refused to make. A Confederacy that abandoned its cities and relied no longer on fixed bases would survive, if it survived at all, by gurillia warfare; counting military coup in terms of crossroads, ambushes, and the shooting of traitors. Living in the desperate hope that the victors would eventually be poisoned by hatred and terror. The Civil War might very well ended that way because civil wars often do end so. But because of Lee's decision in the last stage on the road to Appomattox, this war did not have that kind of an ending. The conquered south did not become another Ireland or another Poland with generation after generation learning hatred and the arts of back-alley warfare. General Lee ruled it out. Not only because he was General Lee, but because he had never seen this war as that kind of a struggle. He understood the cause he served with complete clarity. The south had meant neither revolution nor rebellion. It simply desired to detatch itself, preserving its cherished principles and living in a chosen part of an unchanging past. And Mr. Davis had defined it perfectly earlier when he said "all we want is to be left alone." Worn out by that desire, the Confederacy had endured four years of war. And it broke up at last as this potential that inspired the human spirit had become exhausted. To go on fighting from the woods, in the lanes, and in the swamps, might impede and plague the Yankees and infect a deep wound beyond healing; but the one thing on earth it would not have done was to give the south a chance to be left alone with what it wanted. So Lee met with Grant and agreed to surrender the men who had followed him so long and so magnificently.

Then he returned to his camp, making his way through the broken ranks of men who were trying, numbly to adjust themselves to the blow that had fallen. After a brief conversation with his officers he told an aide to write a farewell address to his men. The first version did not quite suit him. He struck out a line here, the general likely to keep had feeling alive. At last he had what he wanted and the next day it was published to the troops and I think its worth admitting here. "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 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 valour and devotion could accomplish nothing that could compensate for the loss that would have attended the continuation of the contest, I have 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 there 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 increasing admiration of your constancy and devotion to your country, and a grateful remembrance of your kind and generous consideration of myself, I bid you an affectionate farewell." - R. E. Lee, General.

That was the end of it. Lee, himself, returned to Richmond. Grant started back to Washington; a day or so later, the Confederates formally paraded, gave up their arms and their flags, receiving a salute from the waiting Federals; giving a salute in return. Then the men who had been paroled broke ranks. The Army of Northern Virginia went away from its last parade ground. Now it would be easy to make too much of the general air of reconciliation of that day. Lee's soldiers were hard, passionate fighters. They did not enjoy defeat, they were not ready to start loving their enemies with sentimental fondness, and there were wounds that would be a long time healing.

And yet, by any standard, this was almost an unbelievable way to end a terrible war, which by all tradition, is the worst kind of war there is. Living for the rest of their lives in the lengthening shadow of a lost cause, these men were nevertheless going on toward the future. General Lee who had set the pattern had also used just the right words: unsurpassed courage and fortitude, steadfast to the last, the consciousness of duty faithfully performed, pride in work they had done would grow with the years; but it would turn them into a romantic army of legend and not into a solemn battalion of death. Here is how that legend worked. Fifteen years after the surrender, one of Lee's veterans, a soldier from South Carolina, who had been in the worst of it from beginning to end, set down to write his memoirs. A little job of writing that did not get published until many years after his death. Looking back, this Confederate veteran seemed to see something worth everything it had cost him. Something that a man would almost like to get back to if he could. He wrote, remember, as a man who had 'been through the mill' and not as a 'starry eyed recruit.' And this is how he put it: "Who knows, but that it may be given to us after this life, to meet again in the old quarters, to play chess and drafts, to get up soon to answer the morning roll call, to fall in at the tap of the drum to drill and dress parade; And again to hastily don our war gear while the momentous patter of the long roll summons to battle. Who knows but that again the old flags, ragged and torn, snapping in the wind, may face each other and flutter, pursuing and pursued; while the cries of victory fill the summer day. And after the battle, the slain and wounded will arise. And all will meet together under two flags, sound and well. And there will be talking and laughter, cheers, and all will say 'Did it not seem real? Was it not as in the old days?' " The worst experience on earth could be remembered that way. With a still youthful veteran dreaming about foes meeting under two flags in one all embracing destiny. No civil war in history ever ended quite like that. Instead of leaving an indigestible legacy of hatred and bitterness this one left a great legend and a long remembered one.



the story of the lost cause became a positive asset to the entire nation. What was left of the passionate desire to create an independent southern nation crystallized into this magnificent myth that contained and still contains a beautiful essence of truth. In place of warring armies and battles we have that which has destroyed forever the central force of the American dream, we got this legend that has helped us all. The legend of a great leader and great followers who did their utmost for something they believed in, accepted defeat when it came, rose in trying their broken hopes in a romantic story which helped the country put itself back together again. That is our abiding legacy from Appomattox. We have a memory that unites us; the memory of brave men who fought each other to the limit of endurance and then struck hands across a silent battlefield and asked "Is it not as in the old days?" We have one country now. Bought at a terrible price. Cemented everlastingly together. Because at the end of our most fearful war, the men who had fought so hard decided they had had enough of hatred.

Thank you.