ON HALLOWED GROUND
Show me the manner
in which a nation or a community cares for its dead and
I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender sympathies of
its people, their respect for the laws of the land
and their loyalty to high ideals.

WILLIAM GLADSTONE
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It was a beautiful day for a funeral. The last of the season’s cherry blossoms drifted on a cool breeze, which carried the scent of fresh cut grass and wet stone over Arlington National Cemetery. Somewhere in the distance, the early morning mowing subsided, soon to be overtaken by the all-day crack of rifles, the rattle of horse-drawn caissons, and the mournful sound of “Taps” floating among the tombstones.

Along Eisenhower Drive, as far as the eye could see, the grave markers formed into bone-white brigades, climbed from the flats of the Potomac River, and scattered over the green Virginia hills in perfect order. They reached Arlington’s highest point, where they encircled an old cream-colored mansion with thick columns and a commanding view of the cemetery, the river, and the city beyond. The mansion’s flag, just lowered to half-staff, signaled that it was time to start another day of funerals, which would add more than 20 new conscripts to Arlington’s army of the dead, now more than 300,000 strong.

This day at Arlington—May 10, 2005—would be much like any other, with funerals taking place from morning until evening. Most of the ceremonies would be small affairs honoring the aging veterans of World War II
and Vietnam. Other burials would be for young combatants returning from Afghanistan or Iraq, now headed for Section 60 of the cemetery, where their numbers had grown in recent years. Every funeral, run by specialty units from the uniformed services, was made memorable by the solemn ritual and the attention to detail that crisply-pressed young soldiers, sailors, marines, airmen, or coast guardsmen brought to the assignment—carrying caskets, firing salutes, slow-marching in formation, driving caissons, folding flags, and offering comfort to friends and family around the grave.

* * * * *

No other nation goes to the effort the United States does to recover and pay tribute its war dead, a military tradition older than ancient Athens. There, in 431 B.C., selected warriors were returned from the Peloponnesian battlefield with great ceremony, each tribe represented by a dead fighter borne home in a cypress coffin, with one empty bier representing all of the missing, “that is, for those whose bodies could not be recovered,” wrote Thucydides. “The bones are laid in the public burial place, which is in the most beautiful quarter outside the city walls. Here the Athenians always bury those who have fallen in war.”

The historian might have been describing Arlington. Since the time of Thucydides, societies have developed countless ways of honoring their war dead—by building monuments to those they could not recover, by elevating one unknown warrior to stand for all who sacrificed, by designating holidays for decorating graves with flowers, by establishing national cemeteries on foreign soil to recognize those who died far from home.

Thousands who sleep at Arlington today were brought there by the Civil War, a national trauma so unexpected and so extensive that, five years after Appomattox, recovery teams were still combing old battlefields around Washington to find, identify, and reinter thousands of casualties from both sides. Learning from the mistakes of that war, the United States created a national cemetery system, with Arlington at its heart, and slowly developed expertise in treating its war dead with exquisite care. That tradition continues, as the United States dispatches specialty teams around the world to recover its war dead from active theatres of conflict, as well as those from earlier wars.

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It was such an effort that finally brought the members of Breaker Patrol, Third Reconnaissance Battalion, Third Marine Division, to Arlington for a long-delayed homecoming on May 10, 2005—exactly 38 years after they disappeared in Vietnam: They were Navy Petty Officer 3 Class Malcolm T. Miller, Marine 2 Lt. Heinz Ahlmeyer, Jr., Marine Sgt. James N. Tycz, and Marine Lance Cpl. Samuel A. Sharp, Jr. All had died in a fierce fight for the high ground near Khe Sanh, on May 10, 1967. While their wounded comrades were evacuated by helicopter, it was too late for Miller, Ahlmeyer, Tycz, and Sharp—left behind but not forgotten. Years after the war ended, forensic teams returned to the battlefield in 2002 and 2003, recovered 31 bone fragments, some teeth, and enough supporting evidence to make positive identifications of the four men. Lance Cpl. Samuel Sharp was the first to reach home, where he was buried in his native California a few days before the Arlington ceremony. He would be remembered at Arlington, where four caskets stood ready for burial in Section 60—one for Miller, one for Ahlmeyer, one for Tycz, and one for unidentifiable remains representing all of the dead from Breaker Patrol.

The fourth casket containing commingled bones was on its way down to Section 60 from the chapel at Fort Myer. You could gauge its progress by the rattle of drums drawing closer, setting the pace for a slow parade of 200 mourners, a Marine rifle platoon in dress blues and white trousers, a Marine band in gold braid and scarlet, and, bringing up the rear, a squadron of Rolling Thunder—Vietnam veterans on Harleys. This mismatched procession streamed down the hills in brilliant sunlight, turned left on Marshall Drive, and came to a halt on Bradley Drive, where the earth was laid open to make four new graves.

Six burly Marines from the burial detail drew the fourth casket from a silver hearse, marched it across the grass, and stopped by the last grave. The Marine Band struck up the Navy Hymn. The body bearers hoisted the last casket shoulder-high until the song was done, then eased it onto a catafalque, lifted away its flag, pulled the edges tight, and held it there as a navy chaplain began to murmur the familiar words of comfort, but these were snatched away by the sounds of life intruding from all around the cemetery, in the drone of commuter traffic just outside the stone walls, in the whine of jets straining up from Reagan National Airport, in the thump of helicopters lumbering to and from the Pentagon. No matter how solemn the rituals at
Arlington, life continued asserting itself from outside. And even in the cemetery, the living formed a link with all of the dead who had gone before—by speaking their names, by recounting their acts of duty and valor, by suspending the other imperatives of life for a few minutes of ritual and remembrance. These acts convey a sort of immortality upon the dead, who continue to live as long as they are remembered.

Out among the tombstones, the long journey of Breaker Patrol was drawing to its conclusion. A firing party snapped off a three-gun volley, a lone bugler stepped forward to sound “Taps,” and the honor guard began folding the last flag, pulling the fabric taut, creasing it, gathering it, and passing it down the line until it formed a tight blue triangle. With a sharp salute, the flag passed to a gunnery sergeant, who cradled it like a baby, marched it across the turf, and presented it to a chaplain. The chaplain, in turn, passed it to a retired Marine commandant acting as next of kin for all of those in Breaker Patrol.

Last of all, the motorcycle vets padded onto the grass and knelt, one by one, at each of the caskets to retire their MIA bracelets. Dressed in faded jeans and camouflage, the bikers looked incongruous among the spit-and-polish crowd that day, but when they stepped up to a grave, stood straight, and snapped off a salute, you could see that they had been soldiers too, and some of them were crying.

With minor modifications, Arlington’s rituals would be familiar to Thucydides or to Homer, who places the climactic scene of his Iliad not in battle, but during a lull in the fighting, as Hector’s body is carried home by his father and prepared for a grand public burial.2 The old pattern endures at Arlington, where friends, family, and comrades gather to give thanks for a warrior’s sacrifice, to honor the military virtues, and all too often to make bearable the most unbearable loss of all, the death of a young combatant cut down in the prime of life. The age-old rituals ease the grief, if only for a moment, in a flourish of ceremony, with brass bands, a blaze of rifle salutes, and flags streaming their battle ribbons from the old wars in Mexico, Germany, Guadalcanal, Belleau Wood, and all the others which link today’s warriors with those who marched into combat before them.

Every conflict the United States ever fought is remembered in ceremony and stone at Arlington, none more so than the Civil War, which gave the cemetery its most recognizable traditions—the three-gun salute signaling the end of a cease-fire; the haunting tune we know as “Taps,” described as the most beautiful of all trumpet calls; the horse-drawn caissons for transporting dead soldiers from the front; the elaborate honors reserved for unknown soldiers—all of these originated in America’s bloodiest conflict.3

The scars from that war remain etched deep in Arlington’s topography, which also tells the story of the nation’s recovery and healing, of a young country’s growing realization of its power, of its willingness to exercise that power on the world stage, through two world wars, the Korean conflict, the Cold War, Vietnam, and subsequent hostilities, each with its flashes of glory, its moments of doubt and agony, and its added burials for Arlington, which continues to grow; from an initial 200 acres established in 1864, the national cemetery covers 624 acres today.

Few images linger in the national imagination as vividly as this hallowed ground, with its ghostly white tombstones, its deep green turf, its gnarled trees alive with songbirds and cicadas. Almost four million people visit the place each year, to pay homage at President Kennedy’s eternal flame on the hillside, to watch the silent, solemn changing of the guard, to walk among the scientists, explorers, jurists, writers, spies, actors, criminals, generals, admirals, and thousands of ordinary citizen-warriors resting at Arlington.

For many visitors, a pilgrimage to Arlington is a devotional act—to seek out a buried relative, to pay respects to a treasured friend, to leave a promised beer or cigarette at the tomb an army buddy, to brush off a wife’s grave and bring her up to date on the latest headlines. Sisters come to Arlington with photographs of brothers now gone forever; girlfriends bring bouquets and balloons; someone provides a few lines of poetry sheathed in plastic and propped by a grave; someone hangs wind-chimes in a dogwood, which rings with music when the limbs shiver. A Marine’s parents drive down from Pennsylvania, unpack their lawn chairs, set them up in Section 60, and pass a spring afternoon with their son, recently killed in Iraq. They speak to his tombstone as if it is the most natural thing in the world. It is at Arlington, where other pilgrims do the same thing every day.

Do the tombstones speak back? Of course they do. Each one tells a story. The marker on James Parks’s grave, up in Section 15, speaks for a slave born at Arlington who found his freedom there, stayed on, and saw the world around him utterly transformed. In Section Three, a tombstone marks the resting place of young Thomas Selfridge, a 26-year old Army pilot who fell to earth at nearby Fort Myer, where he helped inaugurate the age of aerial war-
fare. Just across the way in Section Eight lies Rear Adm. Robert E. Peary, the explorer who claimed the North Pole in 1909 but failed to credit his associate, Matthew Henson, the African-American guide who got him there. Henson finally won recognition in 1988, when he was disinterred, conveyed to Arlington, and buried with high ceremony. Other tombstones speak for the revolutionary war soldier who died at the hands of a mob while defending the first amendment; of one-armed John Wesley Powell, explorer of the Colorado River; of one-legged Daniel Sickles, Civil War general, ambassador, congressman, scoundrel. Famous generals from Fort Myer—among them John J. Pershing, George C. Marshall, and Omar Bradley—walked among these tombstones in life, a sobering exercise even for non-generals, and returned to lie among them in death, surrounded by the men they sent into battle. Less prominent are the inhabitants of Arlington’s Section 13, where a sea of weathered stones preserves the memory of slaves and freedmen named George Washington, Robert Lee, Bertsey Murray, Selina Brown, Moses Jackson, and thousands of others, segregated in death as they had been in life. Like all of the dead at Arlington, they have stories to tell if you will listen.

New chapters are added daily, as new tombstones appear, 25 or so per day, five days a week, all year long. They continue the narrative of war, loss, growth, and remembering, which began long before there was any honor attached to burial at Arlington. That was when a promising colonel named Robert E. Lee lived in its cream colored mansion, surrounded by a contingent of slaves and 1,100 acres of choice plantation land. If not for him, there would have been no Arlington National Cemetery.
Col. Robert E. Lee finished a fateful round of interviews and rode away from Washington, D.C., crossing the Long Bridge to Alexandria on April 18, 1861. It was a beautiful spring day, with the trees in young leaf and the Potomac River reflecting a benign sky, but there was no joy in Lee’s journey home. He had just turned down a major Army promotion, and now, headed back across the river, he struggled with a momentous decision: Should he remain in the Army, which he had served faithfully for 32 years, or should he resign his commission to avoid the coming war, which threatened to break apart the country he loved?

The conflict between North and South, brewing for months, would trap Lee between his loyalties to the Union and allegiance to his family, his neighbors, and his home in Virginia, where the Lees had shaped events since 1641. “All the Lees had been Americans,” wrote Douglas Southall Freeman, Lee’s biographer, “but they had been Virginians first.”

Lee brooded over these matters as he crossed the bridge that day, determined to stay with the Union if Virginia remained loyal, or to leave the Army if Virginia joined the growing list of southern states plunging toward rebel-
peer ed down from its eminence upon the raw, half-finished capital at its feet.

Although Lee’s father, Henry “Light Horse Harry” Lee, had been a command ing presence in the formative years of the United States—a friend and comrade of George Washington, a hero of the Revolution, a governor of Vir ginia, a member of Congress, a champion of the Bill of Rights—he had left his son and family with very little aside from his legend. The elder Lee spent im petuously in land speculation, drew little income, and was finally imprisoned for debt. He fell into ill health. He abandoned the family for the West Indies, where he lived for several years. He was returning to Virginia in 1818, still broken and poor at age 62, when he died at Cumberland Island, Georgia. His son Robert, who had been six when his father sailed away, was eleven when word of his death reached home.

This straitened legacy, combined with Robert E. Lee’s career as a profes sional soldier, had kept him functionally homeless for most of his adult life. Living out of trunks, sleeping in tents, lodging in a succession of borrowed houses, he finally found a home in Arlington—along with a web of domestic, moral, and business entanglements—when his wife Mary Custis Lee inherited a life interest in the estate, along with 196 slaves and a portfolio of scattered Virginia properties, upon the death of her father in 1857.

That father, George Washington Parke Custis, was the grandson of Martha Washington and the adopted son of George Washington. Custis had inherited the Arlington plantation from his biological father, John Parke Custis, who had been an aide-de-camp to General Washington. The elder Custis died in 1791, before his son was a year old, at which point Washington took charge of the boy. After George and Martha Washington died, young Custis was left holding not only the land at Arlington, but also some 17,000 acres which included two forested islands and two plantations of some 4,000 acres each; known as White House and Romancoc k, both farms were located on the Pamunkey River in eastern Virginia.

G.W.P. Custis, a dilettante who dabbled at painting, public oratory, experi mental sheep farming, grist-milling, ferry operations, real estate develop ment, and a hundred other business schemes which went nowhere, determined to build a grand dwelling for himself on the Potomac River. He began construction on a wing of the house in 1802, and in 1804 hired George Hadfield, an important English architect originally commissioned to super vise the building of Washington’s Capitol, to design his Arlington House.
Construction resumed that year, proceeding in fits and starts until the home was finally finished in 1818. Inspired in part by the Temple of Hephaestus in Athens, the Custis mansion displayed the clean lines and balanced appearance of a neoclassic edifice, anchored by a prominent central hall, offset with low wings spreading to the north and south. Perched on a hill with a view clear down to the river, the mansion was meant to be seen, a symbol of its owner’s refinement and taste.

“It is visible for many miles,” a British visitor wrote, “and in the distance has the appearance of a superior English country residence beyond any place I had seen in the states.” But he added, “As I came close to it, I was woefully disappointed.” The mansion’s thick Doric columns, which appeared to be marble when seen from a distance, turned out to be rough plaster, with dark veins painted in to fool the eye. And once you passed Arlington’s majestic portico and crossed the threshold, the rooms inside were dark and cramped—and all out of proportion to the mansion’s external promise.

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Robert E. Lee felt the weight of family obligation when Mary Anna Custis Lee inherited the plantation, and he acquired the dubious honor of serving not only as Arlington’s master but also as the chief executor of his late father-in-law’s tangled will. The mansion and surrounding grounds at Arlington had fallen into decline during Custis’s final years. The big house leaked, the slaves were restless, the fields sodden and unproductive. Beginning in 1857, Lee took an extended leave from his Army duties and set about putting the place in order. Using as many of Arlington’s 90 slaves as he could press into service, Lee drained and fertilized the fields, planted oats and corn, restored the fences, attacked encroaching brush, laid the foundations for a new barn, repaired the grist mill, roofed the mansion with new slates, and shored up its rafters. He made the dank old house more family-friendly, installing its first water closet and wood-burning furnace. Mrs. Lee’s garden flourished with jasmine, honeysuckle, moss roses, and the colonel’s favorite, the delicate Safronia rose, which Lee made a ritual of gathering before breakfast, leaving a rosebud for each of his daughters at the table. Arlington began to feel like home.

It was a mixed blessing. “I am getting along as usual, trying to get a little work done and to mend up some things,” he wrote his second son, William...
the territories, and, like many of his contemporaries, he viewed blacks as inferior to whites. He believed that African-Americans were ill prepared for citizenship. On a personal level, he felt duty-bound to protect the Custis family property—slaves included—until his father-in-law’s estate could be settled and properly divided. Given the messy nature of Custis’s business affairs and the conflicting requirements of his will, this would take years to unscramble. Custis had, for instance, flamboyantly left his four Lee granddaughters legacies of $10,000 each, but with no funds to pay for them. His estate was $10,000 in debt when Lee stepped in as executor. In one part of the will, Custis decreed that money for the legacies could come from selling land; a few paragraphs later, he suggested that the legacies should be paid from operations on the Romancock and White House estates. To complicate matters, Custis directed that his slaves should be freed within five years of his death, after the debts of his estate had been cleared. Lee made a choice. Instead of selling land, he intended to keep the slaves in bondage until they could work off their late master’s debt and pay the bequests for his granddaughters.

“He has left me an unpleasant legacy,” Lee told his eldest son, George Washington Custis Lee, in 1859. The moral burden was onerous, as were the complications of farm and family life. After a few years on leave at Arlington, Lee longed for the simplicity of soldiering again. “I am no farmer myself, & do not except to be always here,” he wrote a cousin. He told another relative that he felt “very much in the way of everybody” at Arlington. Having restored the old place to a respectable degree, whittled down Custis’s debts, planned for his daughters’ legacies, and placed Romancock and White House on a functioning basis, Lee declared provisional victory and decamped from Arlington in February 1860 to rejoin his cavalry unit in Texas. The slaves were not yet liberated, but it appeared to Lee that they soon would be.

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Within a year, however, events pulled Lee back to Washington, where the Civil War was about to break upon the nation. Texas had seceded in February 1861, declaring itself an independent republic and ejecting Union forces—including Lee’s cavalry regiment. Six other states from the Deep South had already joined the Confederate States of America. With his native Virginia still on the fence, Lee made a slow and sorrowful journey across the country, wrestling with the hard choices he would face at home.

“If Virginia stands by the old Union,” he told a friend as he prepared to leave Texas, “so will I. But if she secedes … then I will still follow my native state with my sword, and if need be with my life.” He expressed similar sentiments in a letter to his son Rooney: “Things look very alarming from this point of view,” he wrote from Texas. “I prize the Union very highly & know of no personal sacrifice that I would not make to preserve it,” he wrote—but then added a portentous caveat, “save that of honour.” At other times, he expressed the unrealistic notion that, in the event of war, he might quit the Army and sit out the storm at Arlington. “I shall resign and go to planting corn,” he said.

These conflicting impulses were still stirring in Lee when he arrived home from Texas on March 1, 1861, in time for dinner. “Found all well,” he noted in his diary: Within days he went to see his old commander and mentor, Lt. Gen. Winfield Scott, by then commander-in-chief of the U.S. Army. The two soldiers, friends since serving together in the Mexican War, met privately in Scott’s office for three hours. They must have frankly discussed secession fever, the prospects of war, and the possibility that Lee would take command of U.S. forces in the field. Scott had nothing but admiration for this fellow Virginian, whom he considered “the very best soldier I ever saw in the field.” Yet the details of their crucial meeting were never revealed: Neither man spoke about what transpired between them that day.

By April 18, as Union troops prepared Washington’s defenses and delegates gathered to discuss secession in Richmond, Lee was summoned to meet with Scott again. That same day he was invited to see Francis P. Blair, Sr., a close friend and advisor to President Lincoln. Lee met Lincoln’s friend first, calling at the pale yellow townhouse since known as Blair House, just across Pennsylvania Avenue from the President’s mansion. Lincoln had apparently authorized Blair to offer Lee command of the Union forces that day. If he accepted, Lee would be head of a powerful army staffed with seasoned colleagues he knew from West Point and the Mexican War. He would be promoted to major general. He would be at the pinnacle of his career, with the ample resources of the federal government at his command. If Lee was tempted by this momentous proposal, he did not show it, taking no more than a few seconds to absorb Blair’s offer. Then he declined it.
“Mr. Blair,” Lee said. “I look upon secession as anarchy. If I owned four millions of slaves in the South I would sacrifice them all to the Union; but how can I draw my sword upon Virginia, my native state?” Years later Lee recalled that he had turned down the command “as candidly and as courteously as I could,” before leaving Blair House, crossing Pennsylvania Avenue, and climbing the worn stairs to the War Department to keep his appointment with General Scott.

- Lee briefed his old friend on Blair’s offer
- And on his response to it
- Which prompted an explosion from General Scott and on his response to it and on his response to it

Seen together, the elderly, rotund general and the elegant, middle-aged colonel made for an odd couple indeed. Sitting behind a desk in Washington had swollen the commanding officer’s six-foot-five-inch frame to operatic proportions, aggravating the gout that occasionally confined him to a wheelchair. Scabrous and cloudy-eyed, he was nearing the end of his career just as his understudy, at age 54, was reaching his peak. Not yet the familiar graybeard figure of the war years, the Robert E. Lee of 1861 might have been an advertising poster for military recruiters. He was, said one eager young lieutenant, “the handsomest man in the army.” Powerfully built, Lee carried himself with the easy dignity and soldierly bearing that had earned him perfect marks for deportment as a West Point cadet. Even three decades later, Lee stood with his back as straight as a door, his hair and moustache thick and black, his chin clean-shaven. The picture of ruddy good health, Lee seemed taller than his five-foot-eleven-inch height. His eyes, a depthless brown that appeared black in some lights, shone with calm intelligence, and a touch of sadness.

Lee briefed his old friend on Blair’s offer, and on his response to it, which prompted an explosion from General Scott. “Lee, you have made the greatest mistake of your life,” he growled, then softened his outburst with a postscript, “but I feared it would be so.” Accounts of their subsequent conversation vary, but it seems likely that Scott offered Lee some fatherly advice that day: If the younger man was ambivalent about remaining in the Army, he should resign right away. Otherwise, he might find himself compromised by fast-breaking developments. If war came and he was ordered into action against Virginia, Lee would have to resign under orders—anathema for any professional soldier. Without resolving the issue, Lee and Scott said goodbye for the last time.

Still undecided and troubled, Lee made his final call in Washington that day, stopping to see his brother Sydney Smith Lee, who found himself in a similar quandary. Like his brother, Smith Lee was a federal officer, and he was resolved to resign his Navy commission rather than attack Virginia. Talking things over, the brothers decided that neither would act until they knew the outcome of the Virginia secession convention in Richmond. Even if the convention opted for disunion, voters still had to ratify the decision in a statewide referendum. That bought some time. With that glimmer of hope before them, thin though it was, the brothers agreed to stay in Federal service until they discussed the matter again. At that, Robert E. Lee crossed the river to Arlington, where he would await news from Richmond.

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It came swiftly. Running errands in Alexandria the next day, April 19, Lee learned that the Virginia convention had voted overwhelmingly to secede, which prompted a flood of excitement in the old port city. One enthusiast had already hoisted the Confederate stars-and-bars over the Marshall House Tavern, and when Lee visited a drugstore to settle a bill that day, he encountered a citizen celebrating the prospect of secession. This prompted a gentle rebuke from Lee. “I must say that I am one of those dull creatures that cannot see the good of secession,” he said. As soon as Lee left the store, the druggist recorded his remark in a ledger.

The lights blazed on the hill at Arlington that Friday, when the family convened to face the crisis together. Lee paced the garden alone. He resumed pacing among the shadows on Arlington’s broad portico with its grand view of Washington just across the way, where the capital’s lights shimmered in the dark. As the night lengthened, he continued his deliberations upstairs, pacing alone in his narrow bedroom.

The pine floorboards creaked as Lee walked to the north, to thesouth, and back again, retracing his steps and telegraphing his anguish to family
members listening below. At one point Mary Lee, sitting in the downstairs parlor, heard the creaking stop. Then it started again as Lee resumed pacing. “Nothing here is talked or thought of except our troubles,” one of Lee’s daughters wrote to another. “Our poor country & our Fathers & brothers need all our prayers.” Tension permeated the house on the hill. George Upsur, a four-year-old relative visiting that night, burst into tears as the anxiety built around him. “Cousin Mary Lee and other ladies of her family were greatly excited,” he recalled. “I recollect that I began to cry and was put in the large room on the left….Peering out of the window, I could see Cousin Robert pacing up and down among the trees, and wondered why he was out there.” Another witness who remembered that night was James Parks, an Arlington slave born on the estate, who recalled how Lee seemed to age before his eyes. “He looked fine—keen as a briar—tall and straight,” said Parks. “He walked backward and forward on the porch studying. He looked downhearted. He didn’t care to go. No…he didn’t care to go.”

But he did go, of course. Perhaps his conversation with General Scott, followed by the avid secessionists he had met in Alexandria, convinced Lee that there was no point in waiting for the Virginians to ratify secession, which seemed inevitable. After midnight Lee stopped pacing, sat at his desk, and wrote out two letters. When they were done, he scraped back his chair, made his way down the narrow stairs at Arlington, and found his wife waiting. “Well, Mary,” he announced, handing the papers to her. “The question is settled. Here is my letter of resignation and a letter I have written General Scott.”

The first letter, dated April 20, 1861 and addressed to Simon Cameron, the U.S. Secretary of War, was written in Lee’s clear, firm hand. It was brief and to the point: “Sir,” it said. “I have the honour to tender the resignation of my commission as Colonel of the 1 Regt. of Cavalry. Very respectfully your obt servt, R.E. Lee, Col. 1 Cavalry.”

The second letter, to General Scott, shed more light on Lee’s thinking. Referring to their April 18 interview, Lee hinted that he had taken Scott’s advice to heart and felt “that I ought not longer to retain my commission in the Army,” he wrote.

I therefore tender my resignation, which I request you will recommend for acceptance.

It would have been presented at once, but for the struggle it has cost me to separate myself from a service to which I have devoted all the best years of my life & all the ability I possessed.

During the whole of that time, more than 30 years, I have experienced nothing but kindness from my superiors, & the most cordial friendship from my companions. To no one Genl have I been as much indebted as to yourself for uniform kindness & consideration, & it has always been my ardent desire to merit your approbation.

I shall carry with me to the grave the most grateful recollections of your kind consideration, & your name & fame will always be dear to me. Save in the defence of my native State, I never desire again to draw my sword.

Be pleased to accept my most earnest wishes for the continuance of your happiness & prosperity & believe me most truly yours

R.E. Lee

After dealing with these professional obligations, it is likely that Lee got some sleep before sitting down to write more letters that day. The second round of correspondence went to key members of his family. Lee felt the need to explain to his brother Smith why he had resigned without further consultation. “The question which was the subject of my earnest consultation with you on the 18 instant has in my own mind been decided,” Lee announced in his April 20 note.

After the most anxious inquiry as to the correct course for me to pursue, I concluded to resign, and sent in my resignation this morning. I wished to wait till the Ordinance of Secession should be acted upon by the people of Virginia; but war seems to have commenced, and I am liable at any time to be ordered on duty which I could not conscientiously perform. To save me from
such a position, and to prevent the necessity of resigning under orders, I had to act at once, and before I could see you again on the subject, as I had wished. I am now a private citizen, and have no other ambition than to remain at home. Save in defense of my native State, I have no desire ever again to draw my sword. I send you my warmest love.”

Lee’s brother would shortly follow his example by resigning from the Navy. Their sister, Anne Lee Marshall, was in a more delicate position. Living in Baltimore, she was married to an ardent Union sympathizer, and she was the mother of a U.S. Army captain who would soon be drawn into the war. Robert E. Lee wrote to ask for her understanding, if not her forgiveness, as their own family was forced to choose sides in a conflict that would estrange them, just as it would scar and sometimes break thousands of other families on opposing sides.

“The whole South is in a state of revolution, into which Virginia, after a long struggle, has been drawn,” he wrote Anne Marshall that day. Repeating his reluctance to lead forces against Virginia, Lee told his sister that he had no choice but to quit the Army.

With all my devotion to the Union, and the feeling of loyalty and duty of an American citizen, I have not been able to make up my mind to raise my hand against my relatives, my children, my home. I have, therefore, resigned my commission in the Army, and save in the defense of my native State (with the sincere hope that my poor services may never be needed) I hope I may never be called upon to draw my sword.

I know you will blame me, but you must think as kindly as you can, and believe that I have endeavored to do what I thought right. To show you the feeling and struggle it has cost me I send you a copy of my letter of resignation. I have no time for more. May God guard and protect you and yours and show upon you everlasting blessings, is the prayer of

Your devoted brother,
R.E. Lee

Once Lee made a decision, he was never one to dwell upon what might have been. But his break from the familiar rhythms of Army life, and his foreboding over the troubles that war would rain down upon his family at Arlington, strained even Lee’s legendary composure. A service comrade noticed this about the time of Lee’s resignation.

“Are you not feeling well, Colonel Lee?” asked the friend.

“Well in body but not in mind,” Lee answered. “In the prime of life I quit a service in which were all my hopes and expectations in this world.” For the first time in his adult life, Robert E. Lee was out of a job. He must have worried, if only briefly, that he was destined to follow his father’s path from early promise into late disgrace. But unlike the elder Lee, the younger one had prospects. Long before Virginia’s secession convention, Lee had received an offer from the Confederate Secretary of War, L.P. Walker, who had written in mid-March offering him command as a brigadier general, the highest rank then available in Confederate service. There is no record that Lee ever answered Walker. But even then Lee must have known that he was destined to join the conflict if war broke out; this, despite his often-stated desire to put down his sword and take up his plow, a self-conscious refrain running through his prewar correspondence. The truth is that, with both Federals and Confederates competing for his services, Lee was assured of a command on one side or the other. And so his life as a citizen-farmer was destined to be a brief one, lasting all of two days.

With little fanfare, Lee emerged from Arlington on Monday, April 22, and climbed into his carriage. Dressed in a black suit and a black silk hat, he disappeared down the long gravel driveway, past the greening fields where slaves bent to their work, and down past the brown Potomac with its silver counter-current of shad pushing upstream to spawn, right on schedule. Lee made his way downstream toward the Alexandria train station, which bustled with passengers and buzzed with war talk. He pressed through the crowd and boarded the car for Richmond, where he had been summoned for an interview with Gov. John Letcher. There on April 23, 1861, Lee accepted command of Virginia’s military and naval forces, with the rank of major general.

From that moment Arlington was lost.
When Lee rode away from Arlington in April 1861, he left behind not only a choice piece of real estate, but one also essential to Washington’s defenses. It did not take a military genius to appreciate the strategic importance of the old plantation, where the heights climbed more than two hundred feet above the surrounding countryside. Any artillerist occupying that position could easily harass troop-ships plying the Potomac River, blow up the capital’s bridge crossings, and lob shells at the most tempting target of all—the White House, its roof peeking from the green fringe of trees.

There was no way that war planners in Washington were going to cede the high ground of Arlington to enemy forces, and within days of her husband’s departure, Mary Custis Lee received notice of the Federal intent. A young Union officer friendly to the family came rushing into the Arlington mansion in early May, urging Mrs. Lee to begin preparations for her evacuation. “You must pack up all you value immediately and send it off in the morning,” Orton Williams told her. Since Williams worked for Lt. Gen. Winfield Scott, Mrs. Lee took the warning seriously.

That night she and her daughters supervised some frantic packing by slaves, who put the family silver in boxes for transfer to Richmond, crated the papers of George Washington and G.W.P. Custis, and arranged Lee’s papers in a separate box. Mrs. Lee gathered up some Washington memorabilia for shipping, while stowing the larger pieces—his campaign tent, a punch bowl, and crates of Washington’s Cincinnati china—in the mansion’s basement and attic.

After the night of organizing for her escape, Mary Lee tried to get some sleep, only to be awakened just after dawn by Orton Williams, who returned with word that the Union advance upon Arlington had been delayed. Although he stressed that occupation was inevitable—merely postponed—Mrs. Lee took the respite as an excuse for lingering several more days at the home she had known since childhood. She wrote newsy letters to her daughters, gossiped with visiting friends, and lamented the pushiness of South Carolina and other states so eager for war. She savored the time remaining at Arlington, where she sat for hours in her favorite roost, a garden arbor to the south of the mansion, where spring flowers were making a luxuriant start on the season. Their promise of renewal seemed mockingly out of place as the country hurried toward conflict.

“I never saw the country more beautiful, perfectly radiant,” she wrote to Lee. “The yellow jasmine in full bloom and perfuming the air; but a death like stillness prevails everywhere. You hear no sounds from Washington, not a soul moving about.”

In that lull before the clash, General Lee sat stranded at a desk in Richmond, feverishly mobilizing Virginia’s forces, organizing his blankets and camping kit for what he expected to be a long season afield, and worrying about his wife’s safety. Effectively immobilized by arthritis, she had grown feeble in recent years, which only heightened her husband’s concern. He tried to prod her into leaving.

“I am very anxious about you,” he wrote on April 26. “You have to move, & make arrangements to go to some point of safety… War is inevitable & there is no telling when it will burst around you.”

A few days later he wrote again: “When the war commences no place will be exempt….You had better prepare all things for removal, that is the plate, pictures, &c. & be prepared at any moment. Where to go is the difficulty.”

The newspapers added credence to Lee’s fears. On May 10, the New York Daily Tribune reported that a volunteer regiment of New York Zouaves...
Through the first year of the Civil War, Mary Custis Lee lived a precarious existence, nursing her worsening arthritic condition, fretting over the famous husband she had not seen since he left Arlington in April 1861. Two of her sons had also joined the Confederate Army, with a third soon to follow. They would be on the firing line when Federal troops renewed their campaign for Richmond in the spring.

Uncertain about where the season’s fighting would erupt, Mrs. Lee finally settled on her son Rooney’s White House plantation as 1861 drew to a close. The farm, a 4,000 acre spread nestled among the pines on Virginia’s languorous Pamunkey River, had been an important family holding since Martha Washington’s day. Located some 20 miles northeast of Richmond, the property seemed to offer a reasonable haven from the war. Placed well away from Manassas and Richmond, it was situated far north of the James River, the most likely aquatic approach to the Confederate capital. Surrounded by two of her daughters, a daughter-in-law, her only grandson, relays of visiting relatives, a few servants, and a thousand family associations, Mrs. Lee felt safe on the plantation, which provided a transitory sense of
appendix i

ARLINGTON CHRONOLOGY

June 30, 1831 Mary Anna Custis marries Robert E. Lee at Arlington House
April 12, 1861 Confederates fire on Fort Sumter, precipitating Civil War.
April 18, 1861 Lt. Gen. Winfield Scott offers Lee command of Union forces in the field.
April 20-23, 1861 Robert E. Lee resigns from the Union Army and leaves Arlington for Richmond. There he accepts command of Virginia’s military forces as a major general.
May 15, 1861 Mary Custis Lee leaves Arlington, leaving the keys to the mansion with a trusted slave and housekeeper Selina Gray.
May 24, 1861 Some 14,000 Federal troops cross the river to Virginia, taking control of Alexandria, bridge crossings, and the Lee’s 1,100 acre Arlington estate. Gen. Irvin McDowell established his command at Arlington.
June 1861 Virginia joins the Confederacy, which transfers its capital from Montgomery, Alabama, to Richmond, Virginia. Lee is given the rank of brigadier general and named as chief military advisor to Confederate President Jefferson Davis.
July 21, 1861 The first major battle of the Civil War takes place at Manas-
APPENDIX II

REGULATIONS FOR BURIAL

Qualifying for Burial or Inurnment at Arlington

BURIAL

• Current and former Presidents of the United States
• Any former member of the Armed Forces who served on active duty and held an elective office of the Federal government, the office of Chief Justice or Associate Justice of the Supreme Court
• Service members dying on active duty
• Those with at least 20 years of active duty
• Those on active reserve service qualifying for retired pay upon retirement or at age 60
• Those retired for disability
• Veterans honorable discharged with a disability of 30 percent or greater before October 1, 1949
• Those who have received one of the following: the Medal of Honor, the Distinguished Service Cross, the Air Force Cross, the Navy Cross, the Distinguished Service Medal, the Silver Star, or the Purple Heart
• Former Prisoners of War
• Spouses or unmarried minors of any of the above
Any reader who has gotten this far knows that On Hallowed Ground reaches across a broad expanse of time and geography, far beyond the well-fenced borders of Arlington National Cemetery. For this reason, I am indebted to an army of writers who have gone before me, exploring parts of the Arlington story I had no hope of mastering to the extent they have done. I freely acknowledge my obligation to:

Ernest B. Furgurson and to the late Margaret Leech, for their studies of Washington in the Civil War, Freedom Rising and Reveille in Washington, respectively; and to Margaret Leech for her book, In the Days of McKinley, which treats the McKinley Presidency and the Spanish-American War.

The best recent biography of Robert E. Lee is Reading the Man, masterfully researched and written by Elizabeth Brown Pryor. Her book should be read in apposition to Emory Thomas’s Robert E. Lee. Thomas judges his subject by what Lee did, Pryor by what Lee said or wrote. Both make for compelling reading. The most thorough study of Lee is the late Douglas Southall Freeman’s four volume R.E. Lee: A Biography, considered to be old-fashioned and inexcusably worshipful these days—but it is essential reading for anyone exploring the Confederate general’s life in detail. Murray H. Nelligan, a former historian for the National Park Service, has written the definitive study of the Lee family estate and its restoration in Arlington House.

No history of Arlington National Cemetery would be complete without attention to the pioneering, clear-eyed work of Drew Gilpin Faust, whose book, This Republic of Suffering, examines American attitudes toward death at the time of the Civil War and recounts the nation’s remarkable effort to recover, rebury, and honor those sacrificed to the conflict.


The late Barbara Tuchman provides a beautifully written and thoroughly documented account of conditions leading to World War I in The Proud Tower and in her magisterial The Guns of August. By far the best single volume on that conflict is John Keegan’s First World War. Indeed, if the subject is the history of war—any war—I turn first to Keegan, which is why...
you see his name cited frequently below. To examine the traditions that inspired Americans to honor an Unknown from World War I, see Neil Hanson’s *Unknown Soldiers*, which takes place largely in Europe but includes an excellent chapter on the Unknown’s path to Arlington.

Thomas B. Allen and Paul Dickson, two friends from Washington, D.C., documented the veterans’ march on the capital following World War I in their excellent book, *The Bonus Army*, which provided material for my treatment of the subject.

The late William Manchester’s minute-by-minute account of President Kennedy’s funeral, *The Death of a President*, was the starting point for Chapter 12. I benefited greatly from Manchester’s research files, which were made available to me by Wesleyan University. Recent oral histories gathered by Kenneth S. Pond and other members of the Army’s Old Guard provided fresh perspectives on an exhaustively covered event.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge an enormous debt to Steve Vogel of *The Washington Post*. His recent book, *The Pentagon: A History*, is a marvel of painstaking research and fine storytelling, the bedrock on which my Chapter 10 was constructed.

Full citations for these references appear below.

To save space in the endnotes, I have employed these abbreviations:

- **ACL**: Arlington County Public Library
- **AHA**: Arlington House Archives, The National Park Service
- **D-E**: CollectionDeButts-Ely Collection, Library of Congress
- **LOC**: Library of Congress
- **NARA**: National Archives and Records Administration
- **HSTL**: Harry S. Truman Presidential Library
- **JFKL**: John F. Kennedy Presidential Library
- **MCM**: PapersMontgomery C. Meigs Papers
- **RRL**: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library
- **VHS**: Virginia Historical Society
- **WUL**: Wesleyan University Library
- **WWL**: Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library

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**PROLOGUE: REVÉILLE**

3. Note: The three gun volley, which is rendered at all honors funerals, may be rooted in the ancient burial practices of Rome. Romans, who were guided by numerology, believed the number three to be auspicious. When a friend or family member was buried, loved ones cast three handfuls of earth onto the coffin and called out the name of the dead three times to the end of the ceremony.

**1: LEAVING ARLINGTON**

3. Leech, 64

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6. Robert E. Lee to Martha Custis “Markie” Williams, Mar. 15, 1854, D-E Collection, LOC
7. Note: “Romancock” is renamed “Romancock” by the Lee family; for the sake of clarity, I have retained the original name throughout.
10. Ibid.
11. Nelligan, 359
13. Note: Slaves also escaped when Custis was running the plantation. He offered a $50 reward for the return of a 24-year-old named Eleanor, *Daily National Intelligencer*, Oct. 29, 1829, in AHA
14. Records of Arlington County, Virginia, March 15, 1858, May 22, 1858, June 29, 1858, and July 23, 1858, in Will Book 7, pp. 485, 487, 488 in AHA.
15. Freeman, I, 390-394.
16. Robert E. Lee to G.W.C. Lee, July 2, 1859, in Freeman I, 392
22. Robert E. Lee to Anne Lee, August 27, 1860 in Thomas, 184
23. Freeman, I,428-429
25. Thomas, 187
26. Diary of Robert E. Lee, March 1, 1861, D-E Collection, LOC
28. Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 350, quoting from William Ernest Smith, *The Francis Preston Blair Family in Politics*, Vol. II (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1933), 17. Note: Douglas Southall Freeman was skeptical of the quotation attributed to Lee, which was based on the second-hand testimony of Montgomery Blair, the son of Francis Preston Blair. While the sense of the quotation is plausible, Freeman doubted that Lee would have expressed reluctance to draw his sword upon Virginia on April 18, 1861, when he did not yet know that Virginia had acceded. (Freeman, 1, 633-635)
30. Thomas, 145
31. Freeman, I,437
For all of the dead at Arlington, thank you for your service.

*Requiescant In Pace.*

For all of the living, a line of hard-won wisdom from an Army chaplain who has buried hundreds of comrades at Arlington:

“Life is short. Live it well.”

**Benediction**