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PROLOGUE

*And when our work is done,
Our course on earth is run,
May it be said, "Well done"
Be thou at peace.*

—WEST POINT'S ALMA MATER

The book is just eight inches tall and fourteen wide, with a fraying orange cloth cover. Some of the pages are torn but after two lifetimes of rough service, it is in remarkably good shape. I should be so lucky.

The tattered children's book *Greek Tales for Tiny Tots* was originally purchased in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1929 for a young girl named Mary, who treasured it. In the late 1950s Mary, by then my mother, read from it to me. In the 1980s I read it to my son and recently gave my oldest granddaughter, Emmylou, her first look at the worn pages.

The work is special to me. With simply drawn pictures and brief text, it tells stories of Greek and Roman heroes: Theseus, Hercules, Ulysses, Ariadne, and others who struggled against nature, fate, and sometimes each other. It is mythology, but the narratives of individuals whose heroism, vision, or genius, often combined with dogged perseverance, were the dominant force in shaping events resonated deeply with me.

When I could read larger volumes my mother shared Roland, Julius Caesar, William Wallace, and Robin Hood. In my grade school library I found biographies crafted for young readers and remember being caught during arithmetic by my second grade teacher reading a book on John Paul Jones, too intently focused on the story to pretend I was paying attention

in class. Later in life, I was given a chess set inscribed with the truism that “pawns are the soul of the game.” But as a boy, to me history seemed a game in which leaders were kings, queens, bishops, rooks, and knights who stood in sharp contrast in stature, power, and importance to the lowly pawns.

My early lessons in leadership didn’t come only from ancient history. My father was a soldier, and I was ten when he deployed on his first tour in Vietnam. Although young, I read to understand the geopolitical labyrinth my father, and my nation, had entered. I came to view the unfolding events primarily as the actions of leaders, political and military—those who would be successful heroes if the story would cooperate. It did not, but I still believed.

West Point, the familiar name for the United States Military Academy, was founded in 1802 at a scenic bend in the Hudson River. During the Revolutionary War it had been the Continental Army’s most strategic post, as it denied British access to the vital waterway north from New York City. In July 1942, my father, himself the son of a career soldier, traveled to West Point to join the Corps of Cadets. Thirty years later, I followed him.

The Academy likes to remind visitors that “much of the history we teach was made by leaders we taught,” and today it celebrates the role of leadership in America’s past while forging military leaders for her future. West Point’s mission is, in part, “to educate, train, and inspire the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate is a commissioned leader of character.”

But it is not the mission statement that dominates the future soldier’s experience. From the first day, cadets’ expectations of leaders, and of themselves, are shaped by the visceral experience of being physically surrounded by reminders of past leaders. Cadets clad in traditional gray move among icons of those who once wore the same uniform. I lived in Pershing Barracks, named for the officer who led America’s Expeditionary Force to France in World War I. When I walked to attend class in Thayer Hall, named for the officer who set the course of West Point in its early years, I passed a bronze George Patton, the aggressive World War II commander. Portraits of famous officers gazed down on every meal, never letting us forget that West Point’s *raison d’être* was to mold us into leaders.

At the same time, we were reminded, it was not about us. We were being developed to serve the larger purpose of the nation by extending West

Point's Long Gray Line, the term used to describe West Point's alumni who kept unbroken commitments to the Academy and the nation's ideals.

We were taught the beliefs and behaviors of great leaders, not by academics, but largely by young officers recently off the battlefields of Southeast Asia. We inhaled their stories of combat and envied their accomplishments. We admired their integrity, courage, and sense of duty, and we learned to look, walk, and talk in the way they taught us. If we did so, we were told, and believed, we might not be famous leaders, but we would serve well. And we suspected, but never openly speculated, that some of us would make the history future cadets would study.

Soon after graduation it was my turn to lead, first as a Platoon Leader—an infantry lieutenant responsible for twenty 1970s American paratroopers. Although the post-Vietnam Army was a troubled institution, the majority of soldiers, like generations before them, did their jobs with stoic patience. And like leaders of generations before me, I progressed through the ranks to Captain (commanding 150 men), Battalion (commanding 600), and Regiment (about 2,200), before becoming a General Officer.

At that point, my experience took me into territory I'd not studied at West Point. In the post-9/11 environments of Iraq and Afghanistan I spent almost five years commanding the Joint Special Operations Command, a one-of-a-kind Task Force composed of the nation's most elite forces. As an over-fifty-year-old product of earlier-era leadership models, I was challenged by this new environment. I found command on a twenty-first-century, technology-enabled battlefield required not just traditional skills, but also intuitive adaptations.

Throughout my years in military leadership, my reading continued. I had a strong preference for history, frequently reading biographies, like those of George Washington and George Marshall, and the memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant. Novels periodically crept onto my nightstand, although typically they were historically and often militarily grounded. I remember being fascinated by *The Killer Angels*, in which author Michael Shaara made me feel like a confidant of the well-known leaders at the battle of Gettysburg.

While I enjoyed the study of history and leaders, as I matured, the concepts of leadership that I had willingly accepted increasingly contrasted

with some of what I read, and much of what I experienced. The patrician warrior Robert E. Lee lost to nondescript “Sam” Grant. The inspiring ideas of Thomas Jefferson stood in contrast to his position as a slaveholder. And emerging insights about Allied successes in breaking Axis codes revealed that victories once attributed to superior generalship were actually the result of a combination of other factors.

I found that leaders who exhibited all the right traits often fell short, while others who possessed none of the characteristics of traditional leadership succeeded. The things we sought and celebrated in leaders had confusingly little linkage to outcomes. The study of leadership increasingly seemed to be a study of myth, with a significant gap between how we speak of it and how it is experienced.

In the fall of 2010 this mythology of leadership became more personal. Partnered with Sam Ayres, a recent Yale graduate who would later enlist in the Army and serve as a Sergeant in the 75th Ranger Regiment, I undertook the task of writing my memoir. Having not kept records or a journal (to avoid retaining classified information), I had to begin by creating a decades-long timeline of my life.

The process was invaluable but humbling. As we deconstructed events, we discovered that even where my recollections were accurate, they were stunningly incomplete accounts of history. I was often unaware of the actions, decisions, and drama that had actually driven outcomes. Successes I credited to a decision I’d made felt less impressive once I recognized the myriad factors and players who often had far more to do with the result than I had. The idea that my memoir would convey a story of which I was the central figure shifted. I mattered, just not to the extent I thought I had.

This was the final push toward accepting the reality that over a lifetime, my leader-centric view of the world had increasingly come into conflict with uncomfortable questions.

IN 2013, author and journalist David Brooks gave a talk at Yale titled “Who Would Plutarch Write About Today?” The first-to-second-century Greek-turned-Roman historian’s *Lives*—in which he profiled forty-eight ancient

personalities—was not long ago a staple of nearly all educated readers. References to Plutarch may sound pretentious to an audience less familiar with him today, but Brooks’s inquiry into which leaders a modern Plutarch would choose was a fascinating one and, for me, a compelling and consuming one.

Brooks’s question might be reformulated: “What is leadership today?” Leaders are the subject of constant scrutiny and study, but too many of us, seduced by the mythology of what good leadership looks like, miss the reality. As a result, our models for identifying, educating, and evaluating leaders falter, or feel incomplete. We intuitively know that leadership is critical to success in the modern world, but we don’t really understand what that leadership consists of.

In 1905, Albert Einstein redefined how we consider time, space, and motion. He overturned Newtonian physics, but his special theory of relativity wasn’t complete, since it didn’t account for acceleration. For the next ten years, Einstein struggled before producing his general theory of relativity that more completely described the reality of our universe.

We lack the leadership equivalent to a general theory of relativity, a theory that accurately and comprehensively predicts which leadership qualities and strategies result in success. Such a model is still out of reach, far beyond the scope of this book, but a step in its direction is possible. That first step is learning where the mythology and reality diverge.

As authors, we come at this endeavor with the experience and curiosity of practitioners who know there is a deeper understanding to be had. We each began in uniform. Jason Mangone graduated from Boston College to serve as a United States Marine Corps Infantry Officer in Iraq before graduate school at Yale and then two years as director of the Service Year Alliance, a nonprofit effort to make a year of national service a reality for every young American. Jeff Eggers is a United States Naval Academy graduate and former SEAL officer with a graduate degree from Oxford University, combat service in Iraq and Afghanistan, and six years in the White House on the National Security staff. I spent more than thirty-eight years in uniform from West Point to command of all US and NATO forces in Afghanistan before leaving the Army in 2010. Since retiring, I’ve focused on leadership, teaching at Yale’s Jackson Institute and authoring two books.

Each of us carries successes, failures, lessons, and scar tissue from years of leading, but more than anything else we bring unanswered questions. We all share a fascination with, and passion for, leadership, along with a sense that despite all the scholarship, more understanding of leadership is needed.

This book is our attempt to take that first step toward a general theory of leadership. Inspired by Brooks's question, we have mimicked Plutarch's structure by profiling thirteen famous leaders in six pairs and one stand-alone: Robert E. Lee. Like Plutarch, each of our paired chapters opens with a brief introduction and ends with a comparison of the two profiled leaders, in hopes that the juxtaposition of the profiles will reveal the complexity of leadership and shed light on the way most of us end up seeing the myth instead of the reality. Readers will notice that the authors occasionally use personal pronouns. Where "I" is used, most often in the introductions of every profile, it refers to me, Stan. Where "we" is used, this refers to all three authors, myself included.

The profiles are selected and crafted to be educational and entertaining. Not all of our figures were good leaders, or even good people. Some succeeded because they were talented, some because they were extraordinarily committed, some through luck, and some never truly tasted success at all. Right or wrong, success or failure, each was a significant factor in the outcome we see as history today. Their relevance is indisputable. But they are not the entire story.

We've consciously chosen the experiences of thirteen leaders as a lens through which to view leadership. But they are not laboratory animals best viewed with clinical detachment. Their stories are human and are better *experienced* rather than read with analytical dispassion. No life is lived, no crisis navigated, in anticipation of being an interesting case study. Let yourself into the character's world, and into the experience of the leaders themselves.

Don't scan the text for new leadership checklists. We will use stories to challenge traditional leadership models, but we stop short of prescribing how to lead. It is our hope that by helping to dismantle some common myths we will create space for you and other leaders to interact with reality and respond to your challenges with clear thinking and humility.

Finally, by itself, *Leaders* will not make you into a great leader. It won't overcome weak values, a lack of self-discipline, or personal stupidity.

Instead of simplifying the challenge of leading, *Leaders* will outline and underscore the complexities. Leadership has always been difficult, and in the face of a rapidly changing environment, it will only get harder.

But it won't be impossible, and it will be essential.

—GENERAL STAN MCCHRYSTAL (US ARMY, RETIRED)

LEADERS

One

THE MYTHOLOGY

*Things are not always as they seem;
the first appearance deceives many.*

—PHAEDRUS, ROMAN POET, CA. 15 BCE–50 CE

In 49 BCE, with the dramatic proclamation “The die is cast,” Julius Caesar made the fateful decision to cross the Rubicon River at the head of his 13th Legion. The crossing of the Rubicon was momentous because the river demarcated the boundary between Italy and the province of Gaul to the north, where Caesar was serving as governor. Suspicious of his growing power, the Senate had ordered him to disband his army and return to Rome. But Caesar, defying the Senate, decided to return not in submission but in rebellion, marching on Rome with his legion. By crossing into Italian territory with an army, Caesar had irrevocably made himself a traitor.

For all its notoriety, Caesar’s river crossing was a relatively modest affair in which the future ruler and his legionnaires merely waded across a shin-deep stream. Nonetheless, this act put him in irreconcilable opposition to Rome’s Senate, making the expression “crossing the Rubicon” forever synonymous with passing a point of no return.

The story about how Caesar and his legion marched on Rome survived on the parchment of the *Lives*, a series of profiles of famous men recorded by the Greek biographer Plutarch. Plutarch also recorded that the Senate—five years later—“in the hope that the government of a single person would give them time to breathe after so many civil wars and calamities,” made Caesar



The original and iconic Washington Crossing the Delaware.

(PHOTOGRAPH BY VCG WILSON/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES)

“dictator for life.” And yet within two months he was assassinated, the knives wielded by many of those same senators. As Plutarch explains, Caesar’s “pretension” and the “extravagance” of his new title had motivated the group, including Caesar’s close friend Marcus Junius Brutus, to conspire against him.

Today, those of us who know Julius Caesar’s story most likely learned it not from reading Plutarch, but from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. In the bard’s telling of the assassination, Caesar struggles until he sees Brutus among the attackers and realizes the depth of his betrayal. Famously, his dying utterance is the poignant “Et tu, Brute? Then fall, Caesar!”

ALMOST TWO MILLENNIA LATER, another General would become famous by crossing a river. Unlike the modest Rubicon, the Delaware could not be crossed by wading, so George Washington had no choice but to cross by boat, a scene memorialized in *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, one of America’s most recognizable paintings. On a canvas measuring over twenty-one feet wide, Emanuel Leutze captured the daring of America’s founding father and first president.

The parallels between Caesar and Washington go beyond the rivers they

crossed as generals. Just as Caesar's final phase of leadership was reenacted by Shakespeare through the rhythm of iambic pentameter, the final act of Washington's leadership was depicted by the playwright Lin-Manuel Miranda, who four centuries later chose hip-hop as the rhythm to dramatize Washington's retirement in his theatrical story of Alexander Hamilton. And where Shakespeare had turned to Plutarch's *Lives*, Miranda found his inspiration within the pages of Ron Chernow's biography *Alexander Hamilton*.

The musical closes with the rap song "One Last Time," in which George Washington's 1796 decision to step down after his second term is met by a disbelieving Hamilton:

Hamilton: Why do you have to say goodbye?

Washington: If I say goodbye, the nation learns to move on.

It outlives me when I'm gone.

Miranda said later that he sought to celebrate Washington's "humanity" and "frailty," lifting up the rare example of a leader who voluntarily relinquishes power. In the playwright's drama, Washington selflessly prioritizes the fledgling nation's democracy over the pursuit of power, consistent with the founding father's legacy of leadership.

For would-be leaders, the oft-told stories of audacious river crossings and of the dramatic finales of Julius Caesar and George Washington are both inspiring and intimidating. The stories would be more helpful, though, if leadership actually worked the way the legends imply. In fact, for both Caesar and Washington, leadership was hardly so simple.

History codified Caesar's "The die is cast" as a declaration of courage and decisiveness, but the proclamation also marked a moment of profound doubt. Plutarch tells us, but popular history forgets, that Caesar "ordered a halt" when he approached the river, and that he "wavered much in his mind . . . and often changed his opinion one way and the other." Before pressing on, he sought counsel when "his purposes fluctuated most." And yet "halting," "wavering," and "fluctuating" are not how we tend to view leaders, nor how leaders seek to be remembered. Truly effective leaders, we like to believe, are not susceptible to the fog of doubt—they act decisively and face the consequences. But few real leaders have actually operated this way.

So, too, Caesar's dying words, "Et tu, Brute?" were likely dramatic license taken by Shakespeare and other Elizabethan playwrights. Plutarch's version of the assassination itself was the stuff of a very different drama.

When he is first attacked, rather than make an exclamation that might endear him to history, Caesar, more naturally, grabbed the offending dagger and tried to stop himself from being stabbed. Instead of calling to Brutus, he exclaims, "Vile Casca, what does this mean?" The rest of the struggle is an awkward affair, the great Caesar writhing to avoid the blows of his attackers, who in their own bungling efforts end up stabbing one another: "Some say that he fought and resisted all the rest, shifting his body to avoid the blows, and calling out for help, but that when he saw Brutus's sword drawn, he covered his face with his robe and submitted. . . . And the conspirators themselves were many of them wounded by each other, whilst they all levelled their blows at the same person."

Where Shakespeare's play focuses on the tension and conflict between two of his play's main characters, Plutarch's account zeroes in on Caesar's behavior in the course of dying a violent death.

In truth, neither Plutarch nor Shakespeare knew exactly what happened, and neither do we. We have no choice but to interpret events through the words they've given us. Both the biographer and the playwright do their best to capture the complexity in their own way. Alas, what we remember selectively is that Caesar crossed the Rubicon boldly and then died while uttering the three famous words that he probably never said.

LOOKING AT THE BIOGRAPHER'S and playwright's versions of history side by side, we see that Caesar's leadership was not as heroic as it's often remembered. So too was the case with Washington.

Inside the West Wing lobby of the White House hangs a reproduction of Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. The painting is a favorite stop for White House staffers giving tours to guests, who are entertained with a catalog of the painting's historical flaws: the Delaware River never froze in this way, the river is far too wide, the boat is heading the wrong way, the flag is wrong for the period, and so on. But the most interesting factual flaw is the boat itself. Rather than the rickety whaling rowboat



Mort Künstler's modern and more realistic depiction of Washington's crossing.
 (FROM THE ORIGINAL PAINTING BY MORT KÜNSTLER, WASHINGTON'S CROSSING © 2011 MORT KÜNSTLER, INC.)

depicted by Leutze, Washington is believed to have used a sixty-foot flat-bottom barge complete with artillery, a far better option for an army conducting a winter's night river crossing.

In 2011, a radically different depiction of the crossing was unveiled at the New-York Historical Society, complete with the flat-bottom barge. Artist Mort Künstler had been commissioned by a Mr. Thomas R. Suozzi, who told him, "I want to go up against the existing painting. The other painting is great, but it doesn't tell the realistic story." Aside from the boat, the most striking difference between the Leutze and Künstler versions is Washington himself. In the original, the General is fully upright in the tiny boat, seemingly lunging forward, his center of gravity elevated and perched over a miniature iceberg. In the remake, he's still standing, but he's carefully balanced, his right hand holding a firm grip on a nearby cannon to steady himself.

Künstler's work corrected inaccuracies of history, while also fixing a critical flaw in how we often depict the practice of leadership. It is, of course, human nature to steady oneself in a boat at night, for human balance is imperfect. Few real leaders, even military generals, present themselves riskily in a rowboat, refusing support, as if posing for posterity.

And yet observers rarely see the depiction of Washington towering above a small boat in a freezing body of water—at night—as peculiar. Instead, we often accept such absurdly displayed feats of heroic leadership as normal.

Miranda's depiction of Washington as the American founder too selfless to accept a crown was similarly skewed, and there was more to the idealized story. As Chernow explains, by the time of his resignation, Washington "was suffering from an aching back, bad dentures, and rheumatism; visitors noted his haggard, careworn look." America's founding father was, after all, still human. Washington was certainly motivated by the principle of civic rule—but he was also physically and mentally tired.

A quick scan of these various accounts of two leaders tells us as much about methods of storytelling as about the leaders themselves. Biographers typically tell the stories of individual leaders, emphasizing the significance of their decision making. Unsurprisingly, leaders who draw most of their leadership ideas from biographies learn to adjust their own narrative frames to keep themselves at the center. The stories they tell themselves and others are misleading in a way that we humans crave in a complex world; biography simplifies the complexity of collective human systems down to more manageable individual elements.

The playwright often has a different perspective, focusing on the relationships *among* individuals, particularly when those relationships contain conflict or comedy. While the biographer helps the reader to *know* the attributes of the leader, the playwright gets the theatergoer to *experience* the drama of relationships enveloping that leader.

In truth, we crave both the biographer *and* the playwright. As individuals we appreciate the biographer's focus on the actors, and as social animals we enjoy the playwright's dramatic depiction of their relationships. Yet both storytellers have contributed to the mythology of leadership. Where the biographer fuels our leader-centrism, the playwright (or the painter) enables leader romanticism. Between the two effects, we devise narratives that obscure the role of followers and wrongly attribute complex outcomes to mere individuals: Caesar's strength both defined and ended his empire, and Washington won the Revolutionary War and founded the United States.

In reality, the lessons of leadership are not the ones we most naturally derive from the legends. The Rubicon reminds us that real leaders experience doubt and consult with others. Similarly, the lesson of the Delaware is not that good leaders are blasé in taking on unnecessary risk. A real leader might not utter a pithy line upon being stabbed; he might just quietly die of internal bleeding. When a real leader relinquishes power, he might be upholding the principles of democracy, or he might also simply be fatigued.

“LEADERSHIP” IS A FAMOUSLY difficult term to define. As *The Bass Handbook of Leadership* observes, “often, a two-day meeting to discuss leadership has started with a day of argument over the definition.” Bass also notes that leadership expert Joseph Rost found 221 definitions of leadership in 587 examined publications.

Of course, few leaders are so concerned with quibbling over definitions. In our experience, most people think of leadership as the *process* of influencing a *group* toward some defined *outcome*. This definition suggests that leadership is the process of one person herding the group toward goals, and that leaders at the top craft and direct those endpoints. Perhaps worse, our quest to understand leadership has followed a consistent but always insufficient pattern: we’ve studied individual leaders and come to think of leadership as simply what leaders do.

Here lies the root cause of the mythology of leadership—its relentless focus on the leader. For years, human beings have searched for the secret of leadership by studying why certain leaders achieve enviable results where others do not. To the detriment of the study of leadership, rarely do we look to the individuals around the senior leader. We assume the leader controls the process, undervaluing the role of followers and situational context. Moreover, we pretend that leadership is goals-driven, and that good *outcomes* can be gained through the correct formula of effective leadership. We wrongly believe that what happened in one leadership instance can be replicated in another.

This common understanding of leadership, when held up against the reality of how leadership actually works, reveals three myths, which we’ll discuss in more detail in the book’s final two chapters:

The Formulaic Myth: In our attempt to understand process, we strive to tame leadership into a static checklist, ignoring the reality that leadership is intensely contextual, and always dependent upon particular circumstances.

The Attribution Myth: We attribute too much to leaders, having a biased form of tunnel vision focused on leaders themselves, and neglecting the agency of the group that surrounds them. We're led to believe that leadership is what the leader does, but in reality, outcomes are attributable to far more than the individual leader.

The Results Myth: We say that leadership is the process of driving groups of people toward outcomes. That's true, to a point, but it's much broader than that. In reality, leadership describes what leaders symbolize more than what they achieve. Productive leadership requires that followers find a sense of purpose and meaning in what their leaders represent, such as social identity or some future opportunity.

The power and prevalence of this mythology of leadership rival those of religion or romance—these myths seem universal and inseparable from our existence as humans. They reflect a disconnect between how things should be and how we find them in practice and yet we knowingly live with this disconnect. For instance, corporate executives often speak of the importance of leadership, but when they're asked to list the threats to their business, they generally list exogenous factors, rarely listing their own leadership as a risk factor.

In part, we live with this mythology because it serves a useful function. As with religion, leadership offers value by crafting a narrative that helps make sense of the world around us, even when it eludes our comprehension. Leadership provides a framework for assigning causality when things go well, and equally a way to assign blame when things go otherwise. And as with romance, leadership holds our attention and captures our imagination, stirring feelings that we don't always understand.

Despite this utility, the mythology often leads us astray with adverse consequences and risks to society. When we buy into the mythology, our leadership models are made less effective, and we construct elaborate processes to select, assess, and train leaders who perpetuate existing weaknesses.

And dangerously, we create and sustain false expectations about leaders. In some cases, savvy leaders exploit the mythology, enriching themselves while corroding the prosperity of the organizations they lead. In others, the mythology becomes exposed, leading to disappointment and cynicism about leadership.

So we might ask, Why do we live with this mythology and how might leadership be redefined? Is it really a process, or more a property? What is the role of leadership in human systems, and why does it seem so necessary in the first instance?

In reality, and across the profiles in this book, we see that leadership is about much more than outcomes; it is equally concerned with how complex human groups optimize their cooperation and how individuals find symbols of meaning and purpose in life. This optimization and sense of meaning emerge from the interaction of a wide range of constantly shifting variables that include far more than the individual leader. Leadership is coproduced by leaders and followers, emerging between the influential and charismatic who crave it and the hopeful and fearful who demand it.

The mythology of leadership is caught up in the duality that makes us human, whereby we find value as part of a social collective and also as autonomous individuals. Being human, we're also wired to experience some separation between how things should be and how things are within the human experience, with the cognitive gift of being able to imagine the future and the unreal. The flip side is that things are never precisely as we wish them to be. And perhaps leadership is no different, bound up in our tendency to always want more from it than it is capable of delivering.

IN LATE 1777, a year following his famous crossing of the Delaware, then-General Washington dispatched Captain Alexander Hamilton to travel to upstate New York and assess the situation. Returning in early 1778, the trusted aide rejoined Washington at winter quarters in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania.

It had been a busy winter for Hamilton. In addition to his survey north, he had been helping his commander in chief draft a letter to the Continental Congress on the almost desperate state of the Army. And so,

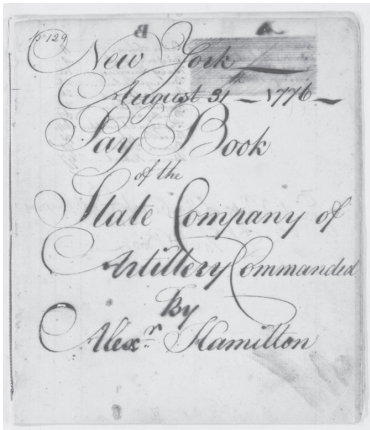
fatigued from travel and the cold, and in the midst of a war his side was losing, he focused his mind on the future—by looking back.

At day's end, in a room shared with several others, Hamilton sat down at a small desk and removed a worn little notebook from his bag. On its cover was stamped "Pay Book of the State Company of Artillery"—a reference to the New York artillery company he'd commanded when he'd first written in it in August 1776. But the notebook, and its owner, had moved on to bigger things. He set the repurposed book on the desk, opened it to where his last set of notes had ended, prepared his quill, and turned his attention to a 1,700-year-old text: Plutarch's *Lives*.

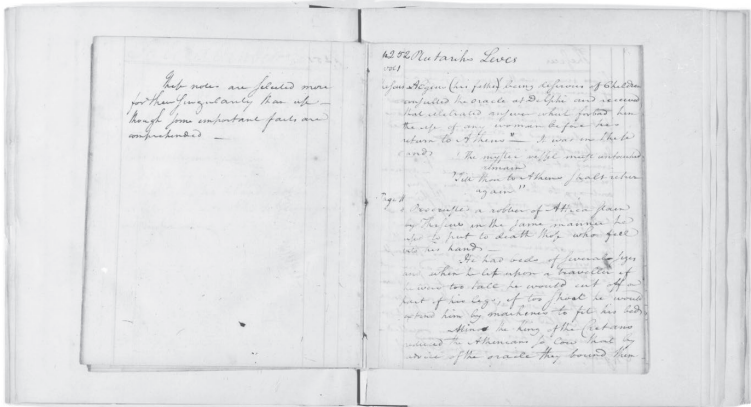
In the winter of 1777–78, while holed up at Valley Forge, Hamilton took copious notes on the *Lives* in the margins of his notebook, analyzing the stories of Theseus and Romulus, the mythical founders of Athens and Rome, as well as Lycurgus and Numa, lawgivers of Sparta and Rome. Reading the *Lives* was then a common practice, and would continue to be for another 150 years. Teddy Roosevelt kept a copy in his breastpocket: "I've read this little volume close to a thousand times," he said, "but it is ever new." Plutarch's works were found in Machiavelli's Florentine court; in President John Adams's letters; and in the libraries and writings of Montaigne, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Emerson. Well through the early twentieth century, Plutarch's biographical profiles of famous Greeks and Romans were a standard companion for leaders.

Plutarch was a Greek writer who lived from about 46 to about 120 CE. In his *Lives*, he profiled forty-eight leaders, creating pairs of Greek and Roman leaders who shared a common experience or trait—such as Theseus and Romulus. Each of Plutarch's paired—or "parallel"—lives generally begins with an informal introduction that speaks to his motives, followed by one Greek and one Roman "life," and then concludes with a comparison of the two lives. Four of the lives are unpaired. This book mimics Plutarch's structure with thirteen famous leaders profiled in six pairs and one standalone profile. Like Plutarch, each of our paired chapters opens with a brief introduction and ends with a comparison of the two profiled leaders.

Plutarch wrote ancient biography, not history. He was more interested in the question "What sort of man was he?" rather than "What did he do?"



The cover of Hamilton's notebook and his first page of notes on Plutarch's Lives.



(LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, MANUSCRIPT DIVISION, ALEXANDER HAMILTON PAPERS)

He was focused on matters of personal character. Plutarch's aim was to study virtue so that it could be imitated. In his introduction to the "Life of Pericles," he writes:

... Virtue, by the bare statement of its actions, can so affect men's minds as to create at once an admiration of the things done and desire to imitate the doers of them. . . . Moral good is a practical stimulus; it is no sooner seen, than it inspires an impulse to practice, and influences the

mind and character not by a mere imitation which we look at, but by the statement of fact creates a moral purpose which we form. And so, we have thought fit to spend our time and pains in writing of the lives of famous persons.

While the structure of our book is similar, our intent is different. We offer accounts of those who have led and, importantly, also their context and surroundings, with the hope that these stories will help frame a deeper understanding of what it means to lead and what we mean by leadership. Where Plutarch asked, “What sort of man was he?” we started by asking, “What sort of leader was she?”

Why Plutarch chose his comparisons, or even his precise reason for pairing Greeks and Romans, remains the subject of debate. We are more transparent about our intent and method. In that spirit, we offer some preliminary notes to the reader.

First, unlike Plutarch, we did not select our pairings with any formal structure, such as one Greek and one Roman. Nor did we select them with an end in mind, cherry-picking those who would stand up to a thesis that we sought to prove. Rather, our selection process was incremental, mostly organic, and we applied only a few simple criteria. We began with the idea that we sought a group of leaders that would be interesting to read about, and from whose stories we might learn something about the realities of leadership.

Second, and unlike the relatively limited set of Plutarch’s orators and military generals, we were far less constrained in our selection process. Not by design, our six genres of leaders—zealots, founders, power brokers, geniuses, reformers, and heroes—encompass several different leadership types. This is not to say that we thought leadership is the same as political leadership, or that to lead a cause is comparable to leading a start-up. Rather, we take such an expansive approach because we hope to learn more about leadership as a broad concept, rather than further segmenting an already fragmented field of inquiry.

In doing so, we made our task more difficult, for this breadth reflects the challenge that leadership is often an ill-defined, loose mosaic of disciplines. Ultimately, this breadth reflects the slipperiness of leadership and

how and where it is practiced; it is something that is everywhere, and yet difficult to pin down. There are of course alternative ways of dividing leadership into different types and genres, but this book is interested in the prevalence of mythologies that emanate through them all.

Third, in considering notable leaders in human history, it was not easy to settle on thirteen. Reviewing the hundreds of candidates who might qualify, we sought a cohort who would be representative across a number of dimensions: profession, region, gender, race, and so on. Unsurprisingly, we found women and minorities to be poorly represented in the canon on leaders. In the end, we settled on leaders who would offer the most diversity in terms of how they led, while remaining clear-eyed to the fact that leadership's history has been a largely patriarchal one.

Fourth, Plutarch hoped that his leaders would offer an example to emulate, or, where he chose immoral examples, to teach us to "avoid the wildness of extremes. . . ." Readers will notice, through our inclusion of leaders most would abhor, that we believe there is much to learn from immoral leaders. Such people have always led and will continue to do so, and so our study must consider this reality carefully. Good leaders, we want to believe, are virtuous, but immoral leaders have been just as effective as the most admirable.

Finally, a major historical criticism of Plutarch is that he judged leaders across a millennium of history by a single moral standard, rather than in the context of their own times. Plutarch thought about context mostly as it related to how much credit a hero deserved for his success, or, in his words, "whether they owe their greatest achievements to good fortune, or their own prudence and conduct." Our view is that effective leadership is intensely behavioral, and not necessarily virtuous, so we see context as a central determinant of whether leaders are remembered or celebrated, much more than moral integrity. Using an individual's actions to tell a story of change comes at the cost of understanding networks, group agency, and contextual restraints. Accordingly, our reliance on the individual leader is contingent.

But there is an obvious irony in this method. If leadership is more than the aggregate of leader behavior, how could a useful landscape be generated by aggregating the portraits of thirteen leaders? Where possible, we looked at our leaders from the point of view of their followers and were particularly

sensitive to their environment and the role of context. But it is admittedly difficult to step out of the trap of leader-centrism, even for authors looking to reframe leadership as less leader-centric. Ultimately, this book became an exploration of why this is so.

We say “ultimately” because the fundamental questions that drove our research changed as we wrote the book. Plutarch wrote of a shift in his own motivations as he went about writing his forty-eight *Lives*, telling readers that “it was for the sake of others that I first commenced writing biographies; but I find myself proceeding and attaching myself to it for my own. . . .” Each of the authors of this book began with self-centered motivations—we wanted to be able to explain leadership as we’d experienced it. We began the writing of our profiles with the simple question “How did they lead?” Over time, we came to explore more illuminating questions such as “Why did they emerge as a leader?” and “What was it about the situation that made this style of leadership effective?”

We do draw some conclusions, and even suggest a new definition for leadership in the book’s final chapter—one that addresses some of the embedded assumptions of the one described earlier. The three myths, we suggest, are sticky for a reason, and so we return to them in the penultimate and final chapters to reiterate the gap between the myths and the realities of leadership.

Reading Plutarch’s *Lives* inspired us to profile leadership as it was experienced. But it also opened our eyes to the fact that individual leaders are never sufficient to understanding cause and effect. As such, our lens of leadership shifts the focus toward the ecosystem of which the leader is a part. We strive to contextualize these leaders’ actions into the messy realities they faced, insistent that a less mythological model cannot be prescriptive and should instead describe leadership in the context of the variability and duality of the human condition.

Accordingly, we make contingent our reliance on the individual leader, for using an individual’s actions to serve a story of change comes at the cost of understanding networks, group agency, and contextual restraints. Leading is more about being part of a feedback loop within a system than it is about being at the top of a command chain. Indeed, the age-old mythology of leadership may yet come to be understood best through the more

modern lens of complex adaptive systems, where outcomes are irreducibly driven by the interplay of followers and context as much as they are by the visionary privilege of the leader.

While an improved understanding of leadership would necessarily be less dependent on—and expect less of—our leaders, they remain indispensable. Indeed, leaders matter tremendously, just not in the way we typically think they do.

Two

THE MARBLE MAN: ROBERT E. LEE

In all of us, however common-place we may be, there lurks an enigma, something which neither we nor others understand. We call it personality, a vague word meaning many things—courage, common sense, quick wit, frankness, determination, self-command, and many other qualities, none of which can openly express themselves unless occasion is propitious and circumstances are favourable. Most of us live and die in a dungeon, and the enigma dies with us; a few of us escape, mostly by chance, and then, if our personality is strong, we accomplish something worth accomplishing, and by doing so the enigma is more often than not transformed into a myth. We cease to be what we really were, and become something we never could be—something which flatters the common mind.

—MAJOR-GENERAL J. F. C. FULLER

The Picture

On a Sunday morning in 2017 I took down his picture, and by afternoon it was in the alley with the other rubbish awaiting transport to the local landfill for final burial. Hardly a hero's end.

The painting had no monetary value; it was really just a print of an original overlaid with brush strokes to appear authentic. But forty years earlier it had been a gift from a young Army wife to her Lieutenant husband when the \$25 price (framed) required juggling other needs in our budget.

The dignified likeness of General Robert E. Lee in his Confederate Army uniform had been a prized possession of mine. I'd grown up not far

from the Custis-Lee Mansion and been an impressionable seven-year-old boy when the nation's Civil War centennial began. At West Point, Lee, the near-perfect cadet, Mexican War hero, Academy Superintendent, and finally the commander of the Confederacy's Army of Northern Virginia, cast a long, ever-present shadow. Later, in Army quarters from Fort Benning, Georgia, to Fort Lewis, Washington, the painting reflected my fascination with leadership, and spoke of duty and selfless service.

Although a portrait of a man, to many it evoked wider ideas and emotions. For like an object bathed in the light of the setting sun, Robert E. Lee's shadow took on exaggerated size and grew steadily as America's Civil War retreated ever further into the softer glow of history.

A mythology grew around Lee and the cause he served. For many, Lee's qualities and accomplishments, already impressive, took on godlike proportions. This was the Lee I first came to know: a leader whose flaws and failures were sanded off, the very human figure recast as a two-dimensional hero whose shadow had eclipsed the man from whom it came.

But as time passed, the myth was reexamined. The darker side of Lee's legacy, and the picture in my office, now communicated ideas about race and equality with which I sought no association. Down it came.

It was not a simple decision. For almost 150 years, Lee had been a subject of study, and of admiration, not only for his skill, but also as a symbol of stoic commitment to duty, a term he once supposedly described as "the sublimest word in the English language." And while I could appreciate the visceral association with slavery and injustice that images of the Confederacy's most famous commander evoke, for a lifetime, that's not the association I'd drawn. I'd read and largely believed Winston Churchill's statements that "Lee was one of the noblest Americans who ever lived and one of the greatest captains known to the annals of war." And President Franklin Roosevelt's tribute when unveiling a statue of Lee in 1936:

All over the United States we recognize him as a great leader of men, as a great general. But, also, all over the United States I believe that we recognize him as something much more important than that. We



The picture of Robert E. Lee, the soldier, that hung in many of the Army quarters Annie and I occupied for more than thirty years.

(PHOTOGRAPH BY BUYEN LARGE/GETTY IMAGES)

recognize Robert E. Lee as one of our greatest American Christians and one of our greatest American gentlemen.

Ironically, at age sixty-three, the same age at which Lee died, I concluded I was wrong. To some extent, wrong about Lee as a leader, but certainly about the message that Lee as a symbol conveyed. And although I was slow to appreciate it, a significant part of American society, many still impacted by the legacy of slavery, had felt it all along.

Still, as I pondered Plutarch, and began a personal journey to consider leadership through a lens of notable leaders, I knew that without Lee, whatever list I chose would be incomplete. Not because Lee was the most intelligent, most powerful, or most successful leader, but because his story was personal to my own. I'd lived a soldier's life. I'd traveled a similar road, often walking the very same pathways, attempting to master the art and science of leading. Like Lee, I'd savored success and known bitter failure. And often the role model against which I'd measured my conduct, sometimes deliberately, and sometimes not, was the soldier Robert E. Lee.

Including Lee in a study of leadership carries risk of misinterpretation,

controversy, and even outrage. When Plutarch profiled the Roman general Coriolanus, who vanquished the Volscians only to later lead his former foe against Rome, it allowed him to deepen his study of virtue. Similarly, examining Lee offers us an opportunity to deepen our understanding of leadership. It is a conscious choice to begin with the leader I thought I knew best, and to take a new, clear-eyed look, leavened with a lifetime of personal experiences that have shaped and matured my thoughts on leadership.

Most accounts of Lee as a man, and a leader—his physical presence, demeanor, valor, and apparent serenity—reflect almost quintessentially desirable leadership traits. But staring into a bright light makes it difficult to see clearly. More than most, Lee is portrayed either in a glare of adulation or, more recently, under a dark shadow of disdain.

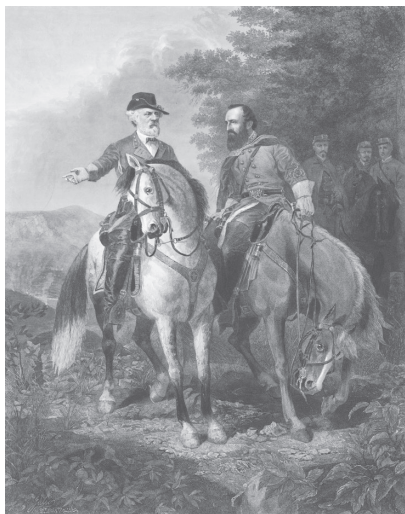
It is often difficult to separate the leader from the mythology that has grown around him or her, and Lee is no exception. As we look more closely, the reality of Lee's story pushes back the myth. We fixate on him as a major player in the drama of the Civil War, but many of the outcomes of that war were the result of a combination of other factors, not the results of his actions. As for his character? In some ways, he was a good man, and in other ways a bad one. Yet this shouldn't frame our reading of his leadership. Leadership is itself neither good nor evil. Malevolent leaders emerge with surprising frequency, as often as those we judge to be good. Leadership is better judged as either effective or not. Was Lee effective? In large ways yes, and in many ways no.

The Intersection

"With my whole command," the younger general said firmly, and the die was cast.

The two men, fifty-six-year-old General Robert E. Lee and thirty-nine-year-old Thomas Jonathan Jackson, the latter nicknamed "Stonewall" since the opening days of the Civil War, had arrived on horseback, discussed the day's fighting, and laid plans for the morrow.

I remember the scene well. Their meeting was romantically depicted in an 1869 oil painting by an immigrant from St. Helena named Everett B. D. Julio, a black-and-white print of which had hung prominently in my



A print of Everett B. D. Julio's 1869 romantic, and largely inaccurate, depiction of Generals Lee and Jackson's final meeting on the battlefield in Chancellorsville. A copy hung in Stonewall Jackson Elementary School in Arlington, Virginia, where I attended first through fourth grades.

Virginia elementary school. In the picture, the generals, on horseback, in immaculate uniforms, seemed poised for battle. A distinctive ridge-line, nonexistent on Chancellorsville's actual terrain, dramatizes the depiction.

War is rarely like that, and neither was it then. The two generals met at night, after dismounting where Plank and Furnace roads met, an obscure intersection of dirt tracks in thickly wooded terrain, appropriately called "The Wilderness." They were just south of another intersection—ambitiously named Chancellorsville for the lone home there, a brick dwelling owned by the Chancellor family.

It was Friday, May 1, 1863, and the temperature in nearby Washington, DC, that afternoon had reached 74 degrees. But as darkness fell, the chill infiltrating the forest caught up with soldiers who had been too active earlier to notice. The ground was damp after recent rains and greatcoats were hastily pulled over uniform tunics. Joints, veterans of countless campaigns, stiffened in the cool night air, and hats covered hair matted with sweat. Moist wool uniforms retain some warmth, but also the stains and smells of uninterrupted wear. As it is in combat, the men looked, and felt, old beyond their years.

The discussion was in earnest. The previous days' fighting had been bloody but inconclusive, and like boxers cautiously testing their opponent, they sought an advantage against their foe. As they conversed, a familiar cavalry commander, thirty-year-old General J. E. B. Stuart, in knee-high boots, arrived in the darkness. At about that time the three generals learned that the enemy's flank was vulnerable and additional scouting soon found a route through the thick forest to reach it.

For Robert E. Lee, the murkiness of the entire situation mirrored the darkened woods around him. The North's Army of the Potomac, after months of relative inactivity following their defeat at Fredericksburg in December 1862, had reorganized under a new commanding general, Major General "Fighting Joe" Hooker, and was on the move headed south. It was Lee's job to stop them, and in response to Union movement on his flank, he had already split his outnumbered army once, detaching roughly 12,000 soldiers (or 20 percent of his force) to enable him to maneuver the remaining forces to confront Hooker's 70,000-man main body.

Now, at the night-shrouded trail junction, he needed to decide whether to split his small force again. Jackson and Lee discussed the risky option and Lee asked Jackson how much of his unit he would place on the flanking wager. Jackson's answer was simple—all of it.

As was his nature, Lee accepted his trusted subordinate's decision. He decided to retain just two divisions, about 14,000 Confederate soldiers, to face Hooker's entire command—gambling he could hold long enough for Jackson's now-separate force to conduct a fourteen-mile forced march on poorly mapped forest roads, and that Jackson's attack would then succeed. If Hooker attacked aggressively at midday and cracked Lee's line, disaster was likely. Defeat could end the South's existence as a fledgling nation.

In violation of conventional military doctrine, in the face of an enemy army of superior strength led by a seasoned, aggressive commander, they would split their poorly equipped and inadequately supplied force—again. It was a decision for which generals are labeled audacious—if they win.

The next day, the 750th of a war that would grind on for 711 more, was difficult. As they do in war, things went awry from the start. Union pressure on Lee's army's weakened front threatened ruin while Jackson's corps moved.

Jackson's columns were late in beginning their march and were spotted by Federal forces early in the movement. But fate smiled, and by late afternoon Confederate regiments, preceded by a rush of frightened wildlife, burst upon Union General Oliver O. Howard's XI Corps and the deed was done. Jackson's infantry caved in the Union right wing at Chancellorsville in a victory capping a string of battlefield successes that seemed to confirm stories of Lee's extraordinary military genius. As Richmond's *Daily Dispatch* explained at the conclusion of the Battle of Chancellorsville,

By a prompt and rapid movement by Gen. Lee, [the Yankees] were routed. . . . Saturday and Sunday are amongst the most brilliant in the annals of the Southern Confederacy, already illumined with triumphs which, for number and magnitude, are not surpassed in history.

The scene, and the actors in it, fit comfortably into a narrative of heroism and sacrifice. Lee, the noble patrician with snow-white hair and beard and a fatherly countenance, provided a calming foil to the disheveled appearance and boiling intensity of Jackson and the youthful, dashing Stuart. Two years earlier Lee had forsworn command of Union forces to reluctantly take up arms in the defense of his beloved Virginia, and was the inspiration and architect of victory, with his passionate lieutenant, Jackson, the decisive thrust that humbled their foe. Defending their native state and newly formed nation against foreign invaders, they had triumphed. And as if in a tragedy, the meeting of brothers-in-arms would be their last. In the evening, after victory was complete, Jackson was wounded and with his devoted wife beside his bed, died a hero's death eight days later. Lee noted the magnitude of the loss, saying that he had lost his "right arm."

The generals who had met that evening were seasoned soldiers. All were graduates of West Point, had served with distinction in the pre-Civil War United States Army and, as time passed, were fated to achieve almost mythological status. In the years ahead, statues and paintings proliferated. Lee and Jackson appeared on a 1925 US half dollar, a World War II tank was named after J. E. B. Stuart, and the United States Army would name a military installation after Lee. I began my own education in 1960 at Stonewall Jackson Elementary School and later played sports for the Washington-Lee High

School Generals. Although long dead as soldiers (only Lee survived the war and died five years later), as heroes often do, they lived on.

From 1942 to 1944, Lee biographer and devoted admirer Douglas Southall Freeman published his magisterial work, *Lee's Lieutenants*. The three-volume study of Lee's army commanders became a consistent part of the professional reading of twentieth-century American military leaders, and I remember thumbing through my father's copies while still a boy.

Freeman began the trilogy with a question: "Were ever men more consistently themselves?" When applied to Robert E. Lee and his celebrated subordinates, the question is illuminating. In many ways, Lee was remarkably reliable in reflecting the standards he set for himself, although some of his choices are confounding. In his continual search for rules to govern his conduct, Lee dependably adhered to values and responsibilities he felt appropriate for himself as a soldier, a husband, a father, a Christian, an American, a Southern slaveholder, and a Virginian.

One hundred and nine years after Chancellorsville, in the shadow of monuments to heroes that stand on West Point's Trophy Point, I'd taken the same oath Lee, Jackson, Stuart, and others had. From my first day wearing the cadet gray uniform, one that had changed little in the intervening years, I was determined to become a leader. At the time it felt straightforward enough, but I found there was much of life and leadership to learn.

New soldiers expect, and in some ways seek, hardship and periodic danger; it is the inevitable complexity of life that is always the harshest reality. In the end, the West Point-trained heroes of Chancellorsville became icons of Southern heritage. But they also betrayed the oath we shared, took up arms against their nation, and fought to kill former comrades—all in the defense of a cause ultimately committed to the morally indefensible maintenance of slavery.

The Perfect Cadet

Thirty-eight years before General Robert E. Lee led his army to victory at Chancellorsville, the eighteen-year-old son of Revolutionary War hero Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee had entered the United States Military Academy at West Point to begin a soldier's life. And as I found when I

followed in 1972, he'd never really left. A portrait of Academy Superintendent Colonel Lee in the blue uniform of the United States Army reminded me and my classmates of his thirty-one years of service before secession, and massive granite barracks named in his honor spoke volumes about the unique place where my chosen profession positioned his memory.

In many ways, this reverence was a curious outcome. In 1780, General Benedict Arnold had conspired to betray his army and his country by surrendering the same West Point, then a strategic fort dominating the vital Hudson River, to the British, and has suffered unrelenting condemnation since. Other generals like Eisenhower, MacArthur, and Patton were depicted in statues and held up for study, but for Lee was reserved the special honor of emulation. I, along with many other young leaders, venerated him for his unwavering dignity, stoic commitment, and courageous leadership, allowing these qualities to eclipse the reality of his service against the nation he'd sworn to defend. The naturally studious, self-disciplined Cadet Lee had grown up in Alexandria, Virginia, ten miles from George Washington's Mount Vernon estate, with the first president's legacy of duty omnipresent. Young Robert was acutely aware of the Lee family's respected position in Virginia society, which implied a noblesse oblige for those who carried the famous name.

The perceptive youth admired his own father's Continental Army service but from an early age eschewed the older Lee's financial and familial irresponsibility. Bright, handsome, and willing to accept West Point's rigorous, yet often petty discipline, during his four years at the Academy, Lee set a rarely achieved record of zero demerits and enviable academic marks. More fundamentally, he seemed to internalize the Academy's values captured in her motto of "Duty, Honor, Country." At some point, fellow cadets, who included a number of future comrades and battlefield opponents, gave their charismatic yet serious comrade the moniker of "Marble Man," as though anticipating the role he would play for the last decade of his life, and the first 150 years following his death.

The Engineer Officer

In 1829, recently graduated Robert E. Lee entered the 6,332-strong United States Army as a Lieutenant of Engineers, joining what was then the most respected branch of the service. But it was peacetime, and there was little glory. He spent the first seventeen years of his career working on projects fortifying America's extensive coastline against foreign invasion and improving navigation on the vital Mississippi River. Although keenly aware that the glory of his task paled in comparison to that of his father's combat exploits, or Napoleon Bonaparte's battlefield mastery, Lee had studied at West Point, his work was a duty to be performed with skill and diligence.

Lee's marriage in 1831 to Mary Anna Custis, the great-granddaughter of George Washington's wife, Martha Custis Washington, reinforced his already strong psychological and emotional ties to Virginia and her patrician class. Stately Arlington House, overlooking Washington City, became his home. When not deployed on military service, Lee focused on his growing family.

The young officer matured as a leader. Dignified and reflexively courteous, to others Lee exuded quiet professionalism and a self-control that eluded many of his peers, who often turned to alcohol to deal with the loneliness of remote postings in a peacetime force. Instinctively self-disciplined, Lee acted out a part he'd written for himself. The examples of those he admired, like Washington, the values he had inherited from the society he came from, the history he read, and his incubation at West Point shaped the image of the leader he wanted to be, and the leader he molded himself into.

The Mexican War Hero

By most measures, the Mexican War that began in 1846 was an unfortunate, unnecessary, and unfair conflict between two mismatched opponents, and like many, Lee was distressed by these realities. But it's doubtful that the thirty-nine-year-old Captain was entirely unhappy when it began. It is axiomatic that soldiers abhor war, but that is primarily true of those who



A young Robert E. Lee. Highborn, disciplined, and bright, his pre-Civil War career centered on his oversight of engineering projects around the United States, valor on the battlefield in Mexico, and leadership of West Point.

(BETTMANN / CONTRIBUTOR)

have already experienced one. In reality, most members of the profession quietly yearn for an opportunity to test themselves in battle. For some, it is in hope of promotion or glory; in most it is a subtler need to prove to themselves and justify to others their legitimacy as soldiers. My military peers and I had few strong views on Grenada in 1983, Panama in 1989, or even Saddam Hussein's occupation of Kuwait in 1990, but the vast majority sought battlefield service. It would have been natural for Lee to feel the same.

Still, like those of his future opponent, Ulysses S. Grant, Lee's feelings about the war were conflicted. In Mexico, Lee was not fighting in a war he wanted his country to fight and would write that "we bullied [Mexico] . . . for that I am ashamed, for she was the weaker party." Still, by instinct, upbringing, and education he, as soldiers still do, mentally compartmentalized the broader politics to pursue what he considered his duty.

On the ground, the war with Mexico was a complex endeavor, and Lee's previous experiences building coastal fortifications bore little resemblance to his new role. Instead of supervising workers laboriously sinking piles into muddy American coastal soil, Lee found himself on foreign soil in

what was, for its time, a fast-moving and risky military operation. For all soldiers, until tested, performance in combat is a great unknown, and Lee was no different. He knew his father's reputation for courage would not automatically pass to him, and peacetime proficiency is an incomplete predictor of wartime competence. But assigned to a prestigious position on Winfield Scott's staff, Lee found that war suited him well. Whether siting artillery while under enemy fire or conducting nighttime reconnaissance to locate and determine the best route on which to attack the foe, Lee performed brilliantly.

Ahead of the Battle of Cerro Gordo in April 1847, Lee was sent to reconnoiter a path through the mountains, in doing so bringing himself within several feet of gossiping Mexican soldiers. Lee spent hours lying silently and motionlessly under a log until darkness allowed him to escape and return to his own army.

He'd nearly been captured, but he'd found a route by which the American army might be able to outflank their enemy. After relaying his discovery back to General Scott, plans were changed, and it was decided that a group of "pioneers" would hack out a path through the inhospitable terrain. A force of soldiers under the aggressive General David Twiggs would then be guided by Lee along the route, surprising the Mexican defenders.

It was a clever plan, but all hell broke loose when Twiggs's poorly disciplined troopers made so much noise they lost the element of surprise. Mexicans began assembling in formation on the mountaintop, and the impetuous Twiggs suddenly gave an order to "charge them to hell." The Americans initially overran the Mexican positions but, while attempting to gain the next summit of Cerro Gordo, found themselves pinned down by cannon fire. Lee responded and rapidly deployed three light artillery pieces to ease the pressure on Twiggs's men—saving them from certain slaughter. Praise came in reports from the grateful Twiggs and other high-ranking witnesses to his "intrepid coolness and gallantry" in the midst of this ordeal. For soldiers, from such exploits legends begin.

Lee's performance in Mexico established his reputation in the eyes of the Army as a gifted professional and, in the view of some, as the most impressive officer to emerge from the conflict. His credibility grew from his noted competence as an engineer, from his courage under fire, and for the

kind of noteworthy leadership that periodically appears in the crucible of combat. Even the formidable, if somewhat pompous, Major General Winfield Scott, nicknamed “Old Fuss and Feathers,” who commanded an outnumbered force in a brilliant campaign to capture Mexico’s capital city, frequently mentioned Lee in his dispatches, judging him to be “the very best soldier I ever saw in the field.” The achievement was significant, and improbable, because Lee had served as a staff officer, advising, interpreting, and executing the orders of others, and not as a commander. Still, it identified him within the Army as a man to watch.

The Southerner

Lee returned from Mexico in 1848 to an Army quickly reverting to its peacetime culture and size, which meant that Brevet Colonel Lee returned to his regular Army rank of Captain and his prewar role constructing fortifications along the American coastline. He also returned to his family, now including four sons, three daughters, and a wife, and to the Virginia society from which he had come and to which he still felt a gravitational pull—to his family legacy, his earliest loyalties, and the things that were deeply familiar and deeply rooted in how he defined himself.

But he remained in uniform, taking the high-profile post as the Superintendent of West Point in 1852 and, in 1855, a promotion to Lieutenant Colonel and transfer to the cavalry. His posting to Texas as second in command of the 2nd Cavalry Regiment meant another separation from his family, who remained in Arlington, but offered active service against Comanches—and greater possibility for promotion.

The death in 1857 of his wife’s father, George Washington Parke Custis, the owner of Arlington House and several other income-producing properties in Virginia, caused Lee to take extended leave from his unit in order to settle family affairs. That process involved more than executing Custis’s last will and testament. The slave-worked estates were poorly run and heavily in debt, and the professional soldier found himself in an active role within the landed, slave-owning gentry for which the South was known.

For that culture in the first half of the nineteenth century, slavery was always an issue. It was the subject of often-contentious discussion, political wrangling, and periodic violence, as in 1859, when Lieutenant Colonel