General Robert E. Lee: An Absolute Commander?

In his famous book *On War*, General Carl von Clausewitz defined war as "an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfill our will." Ideally, to realize this enforcing of one's will, people, army, and government need to be aligned. Political and military leaders have to work co-operatively and public opinion has to be managed. The full application of this so-called 'social trinity' leads to the concept of absolute war. In 1863, the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia was fully behind its commander, Robert E. Lee (Taylor xi). But was this also the case for both the Southern people and its government? Was Robert E. Lee part of the trinity exemplifying the ideal of a general leading an absolute war?

Absolute war, which "is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means," refers to the idea of social trinity, which is seldom achieved (von Clausewitz 87). However, the more powerful the motives to wage a war, the closer it approaches the concept of total war. An absolute war cannot just be waged by one side. One side, however, can oblige the other to employ equal or more means in order to counterbalance its force. If the other side doesn't yield to this obligation, it faces outright annihilation (von Clausewitz 78).

The American Civil War was probably an absolute war as each of the three following significant observations during the war demonstrates characteristics of the absolute war as outlined by von Clausewitz. By the time Lincoln passed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, the Union was already enlisting free slaves, the most famous African American regiment being the Massachusetts 54th Infantry (Brinkley 381). Even the Confederacy, a collection of pro-slavery states, considered this recruitment method when they realized that it was essential to Southern survival (Taylor 200). Additionally, the Southern states used guerilla tactics against the

Union in an attempt to win the Civil War, although the high command resented this idea (Fellman 220). These examples are the first component indicating a move towards absolute war: the utmost exertion of all powers, even those of which the use goes against one's beliefs. The second principle is the destruction of the enemy's army, which is illustrated by what Hooker told his officers, "My plans are perfect, and when I start to carry them out, may God have mercy on General Lee, for I will have none" (Taylor 117). Or by what Robert B. Mitchell described: "What Sherman had in mind was his own version of "shock and awe," with Union troops moving southeast from Atlanta toward the port city of Savannah. The march would deprive Confederate troops of valuable foodstuffs and destroy railroads. More important, it would demoralize Southern civilians with a punitive demonstration of Northern military might deep in the heart of the Confederacy… The total war for which Sherman had long argued would finally be unleashed." Union General William Sherman's great march during the Civil War not only aimed at the physical destruction of the Southern army, but also at breaking its will, the people. The third and final reciprocal action is the utmost use of force. Throughout the course of war, military leaders have sent an increasing amount of troops into battle. During the First Battle of Bull Run, 35,000 Union forces tried to force 21,000 Confederate soldiers into retreat by flanking them (Hardy; and Kennedy). Comparing this battle to the turning point of the Civil War, the Battle at Gettysburg, this is just a trifling amount. That battle involved approximately 90,000 Union soldiers and 75,000 Confederates (Kennedy).

The above-mentioned observations show that the Civil War evolved from being a limited war to a total war, aiming at the destruction of the enemy by all force available as von Clausewitz predicted a real war would. Is such an evolution also evident in the figure of Robert E. Lee as the supreme commander?

To make his reputation grow, Robert E. Lee needed the consent of the government and the people. At the brink of the Civil War, Lee verbally attacked the seceded states for their radical decisions (Fellman 81). He believed that the behavior of the Southern states would only be temporary, as "secession was nothing but a revolution" (Fellman 87). When Lee declined General Winfield Scott's offer to command Union forces and started fighting for the Confederacy solely because of his fondness of Virginia, he stated that he had been compelled to choose between being a Unionist and fighting for Washington, or being a Virginian and joining the Confederate states (Sobel; and Fellman 83-85). As the war raged on, General Lee, initially a Unionist, gained the unconditional trust of the secessionist government. When Joseph E. Johnston "told Lee that the Army of Northern Virginia was now his," he was convinced that the government finally had somebody to vest their confidence in (Taylor 66). The Confederacy grew so fond and trustworthy of him that they even supported him when he lost the Battle of Gettysburg (McCaslin 156).

Also the general's opinion on slavery was seemingly not in line with the Southern mainstream. Robert's view on slavery is something entirely different and more complicated than achieving social consent. Although his outlooks were generally parallel to those of President Lincoln and barely changed throughout the course of war, there were some notable changes. He took an ambiguous middle ground on African American servitude (Pryor). The easiest way of explaining his stand on slavery is by saying that he wasn't pro-slavery, but he wouldn't have known what to do with the slaves once they would have been freed. "He was personally against slavery the way a Nike executive might personally be against Indonesian sweatshops if he had to feed, clothe, and house the workers and live surrounded by them" (Blount 201-202). He believed that slavery would eventually fade as time went on, but this would ultimately be decided by God

(Fellman 79). During the struggle against the Union, the Confederate general was okay with being the emancipator of slaves, but he continued to fight for the preservation of both the peculiar institution and the Confederacy (Fellman 200). But when the survival of the Confederacy was at stake, Robert sponsored a bill that enlisted blacks into the Confederate army (McCaslin 179; and Taylor 200). In exchange for their loyal service, he promised the slaves some sort of compensation. During the war, Lee replaced white Southerners that were fighting in the front lines with these conscripted slaves (Fellman 210). This would prevent the loss of valuable soldiers in battle.

Besides gaining the trust of the Southern governments, Lee also attained the public's approval. "By this time Lee had achieved such popular fame that he received many gifts of food from local admirers" (Taylor 114). This led him to believe that people were willing to contribute to the cause of war (Fellman 210). Even after his defeat at Appomattox, people still honored Robert E. Lee as a true hero. In their eyes, Lee proofed that even "good men do not always succeed" (Taylor 6). Important political figures like former Confederate President Jefferson Davis also noted Lee's contributions to the Confederacy. Davis remarked that "when the monument we build shall have crumbled into dust, his virtues will still live, a high model for the imitation of generations yet unborn" (Sobel). More than that, the Union saw him as a military genius and the conflict's best soldier (Gallagher xx). Even after he died, the great Confederate general's legacy continued.

As the Civil War transformed into a quasi-absolute war, the Southern people, its government, and its army by its commander became one unit. Although this was not so evident at the beginning of the American Civil War, Robert E. Lee evolved from a soldier who wanted to defend his country into a great example of a general waging an absolute war.

Works Cited

Blount, Roy. Robert E. Lee. New York: Penguin Books, 2003. 197-206. Print.

Brinkley, Alan. *American History: A Survey*. 13th ed. New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, 2009. 381. Print.

Fellman, Michael. The Making of Robert E. Lee. New York: Random House, 2000. Print.

Gallagher, Gary W. Lee the Soldier. N.p.: University of Nebraska Press, 1996. xvii-xxi. Print.

Hardy, Michael C. "The most unpopular man in America: two words came to define McDowell's military prowess for the general's most critical superiors: 'Bull' and 'Run'." America's Civil War Jan. 2010: 52+. US History Collection. Web. 1 Feb. 2016.

Kennedy, Francis H. "Gettysburg Campaign: June-July 1863." The Civil War Battlefield Guide. Dec. 1 1998: n.p. SIRS Issues Researcher. Web. 01 Feb. 2016.

Kennedy, Francis H. Manassas Campaign: July 1861. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998. eLibrary. Web. 01 Feb. 2016.

McCaslin, Richard B. Lee in the Shadow of Washington. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001. Print.

Mitchell, Robert B. "Terrible beyond endurance: there was logic behind Sherman's ruinous romp through Georgia--but was it right?" America's Civil War Nov. 2014: 30+. US History Collection. Web. 1 Feb. 2016.

Pryor, Elizabeth Brown. "Robert E. Lee and Slavery." Civil War Times Vol. 48 No. 1. Feb. 2009: 30-39. SIRS Issues Researcher. Web. 01 Feb. 2016.

Sobel, Brian. "Battlefield Leader: General Robert E. Lee." Armchair General. May 2007: 58-65. SIRS Issues Researcher. Web. 01 Feb. 2016.

Taylor, John M. Duty Faithfully Performed: Robert E. Lee and His Critics. Dulles: Brassey's, 1999. Print.

von Clausewitz, Carl. On War. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976/84. Print.