

# LETTERS TO HIS FAMILY

1861

----- Robert E. Lee -----

Confederate general Robert E. Lee was renowned for his strategic brilliance and daring as the leader of the Confederate Army during the Civil War. Written only three months before the outbreak of the Civil War, Lee's letters to his wife and son reflect his deep aversion to the prospect of disunion and armed conflict between the states.

## THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Identifying Problems

What are some of the contradictions within these letters?

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### TO HIS WIFE

Fort Mason, Texas, January 23, 1861

I received Everett's *Life of Washington* which you sent me, and enjoyed its perusal. How his spirit would be grieved could he see the wreck of his mighty labors! I will not, however, permit myself to believe, until all ground of hope is gone, that the fruit of his noble deeds will be destroyed, and that his precious advice and virtuous example will so soon be forgotten by his countrymen. As far as I can judge by the papers, we are between a state of anarchy and civil war. May God avert both of these evils from us! I fear that mankind will not for years be sufficiently Christianized to bear the absence of restraint and force. I see that four States have declared themselves out of the Union; four more will apparently follow their example. Then, if the border States are brought into the gulf of revolution, one half of the country will be arrayed against the other. I must try and be patient and await the end, for I can do nothing to hasten or retard it....

### TO HIS SON

The South, in my opinion, has been aggrieved by the acts of the North, as you say. I feel the aggression, and am willing to take every proper step for redress. It is the principle I contend for, not individual or private benefit. As an American citizen, I take great pride in my country, her prosperity and institutions, and would defend any State, if her rights were invaded. But I can anticipate no greater calamity for the country than a dissolution of the Union. It would be an accumulation of all the evils we complain of, and I am willing to sacrifice everything but honor for its preservation. I hope, therefore, that all

constitutional means will be exhausted before there is a resort to force. Secession is nothing but revolution. The framers of our Constitution never exhausted so much labor, wisdom, and forbearance in its formation, and surrounded it with so many guards and securities, if it was intended to be broken by every member of the Confederacy at will. It was intended for "perpetual union," so expressed in the preamble, and for the establishment of a government, not a compact, which can only be dissolved by revolution, or the consent of all the people in convention assembled. It is idle to talk of secession. Anarchy would have been established, and not a government, by Washington, Hamilton, Jefferson, Madison, and the other patriots of the Revolution....Still a Union that can only be maintained by swords and bayonets, and in which strife and civil war are to take the place of brotherly love and kindness, has no charm for me. I shall mourn for my country and for the welfare and progress of mankind. If the Union is dissolved, and the Government disrupted, I shall return to my native State and share the miseries of my people, and save in defense will draw my sword on none.

Source: *Personal Reminiscences of General Robert E. Lee*, edited by Reverend J. William Jones, D.D. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), pp. 138–139.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER**

One answer may be that these letters reflect Lee's divided opinion about whether the nation would or should be split by a civil war. For example, in the letter to his wife, Lee writes to his wife that George Washington "would be grieved could he see the wreck of his mighty labors," yet he also writes that he does not believe "that the fruit of his [Washington's] noble deeds will be destroyed." Another citation could be Lee's letter to his son, in which he writes that "I can anticipate no greater calamity for the country than a dissolution of the union." In that same letter, Lee also writes, "The South, in my opinion, has been aggrieved by the Acts of the North."