

The surrender of Robert E. Lee, 1865

Introduction

Left with no route of escape after the fall of Petersburg, Virginia, on April 2, 1865, Confederate General Robert E. Lee was faced with a difficult choice: keep fighting in an increasingly hopeless war or surrender to Ulysses S. Grant. At 4 a.m. on April 9, Major General Edward O. C. Ord, commander of the Army of the James, arrived with the XXIV Corps to support the Union forces and Lee's fate was decided. Lee wrote to Grant and asked to meet to discuss terms of surrender. Throughout the morning, as communications concerning the surrender flew back and forth between Grant and Lee, their troops were still fighting at Appomattox Court House. Shortly before noon, Lee sent a message to Grant's lines asking for a "suspension of hostilities pending the discussion of the Terms of surrender of this army." It was received and recorded by General Ord, who wrote on it: "men at rest – firing stopped." By the end of the day, Lee had accepted Grant's terms for surrender.

The next day, Lee issued General Order No. 9, a farewell message to his troops. Explaining his decision to surrender, Lee—whose army was just 35,000 men compared to Grant's total of 113,000—wrote that he was "compelled to yield to overwhelming numbers and resources" and that continuing combat would be a "useless sacrifice of those whose past services have endeared them to their Countrymen." The war was essentially over, and Lee, having accepted that fate, praised his troops for their "duty faithfully performed," bidding them "an affectionate farewell."

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction and the transcripts and view the images. Then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions:

1. How important was it that of all the Confederate commands, it was the Army of Northern Virginia under the command of General Robert E. Lee that requested and agreed to terms of surrender?
2. In what way does Major General Ord's brief note on Lee's request indicate: a) compliance with Lee's request; and b) Ord's military concerns?
3. In your own words, describe the argument Lee used to convince his soldiers that surrender was preferable to the continuation of the war.
4. Describe and explain the emotions Confederate soldiers might have had upon reading Lee's orders.

The surrender of Robert E. Lee, 1865

Transcript

Duplicate

9th April 1865

General,

I ask a suspension of hostilities pending the discussion of the Terms of surrender of this army in the interview which I requested in my former communication of Today

Lt Gen U S Grant	Very respectfully
Commanding U.S. Armies	Your ob ^t serv ^t .
	R E Lee
	Genl

[endorsement]

April 9th 11.55 am

The

Within read –
acted on – my troops
and Genl Sheridans
being south &
west of Appomattox
covering Exits that
way. and men
at rest – firing
stopped –

E O C Ord

M^{jr} Gen^l –

The surrender of Robert E. Lee, 1865

Image

Head Quarters, Army of Va.
April 10th 1865

General Order No 9

After four years of arduous service, marked by unsurpassed courage and fortitude, the Army of Northern Virginia has been compelled to yield to overwhelming numbers. I need not tell the survivors of so many hard fought battles who have remained steadfast to the last, that I have confidence in their ability to meet the exigencies of this result from no distrust of them. But feeling that valor and devotion could accomplish nothing that would compensate the loss that would attend the continuance of the contest, I determined to avoid the useless sacrifice of those whose past services have endeared them to their countrymen. By the terms of the agreement Officers and men are returned to their homes and remain until exchanged. You will take with you the satisfaction that proceeds from the consciousness of duty faithfully performed, and I earnestly pray that a merciful God will extend to you His blessing and protection. With unceasing admiration of your constancy and devotion to your country, and a grateful remembrance of your kind and generous consideration of myself, I bid you an affectionate farewell.

R. E. Lee
Genl

Robert E. Lee, General Order No. 9, April 10, 1865. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC00035)

The surrender of Robert E. Lee, 1865

Transcript

Head Qrs Army N Va

April 10, 1865

General Order No. 9

After four years of arduous service, marked by unsurpassed courage and fortitude the Army of Northern Virginia has been compelled to yeild [*sic*] to overwhelming numbers. I need not tell the survivors of so many hard fought battles who have remained steadfast to the last, that I have consented to this result from no distrust of them. But feeling, that valor and devotion could accomplish nothing that would compensate the loss that would attend the continuance of the contest – I determined to avoid the useless sacrifice of those whose finest services have endeared them to their countrymen. By the terms of the agreement Officers and men can return to their homes and remain until exchanged. You will take with you the satisfaction that proceeds from the consciousness of duty faithfully performed, and I earnestly pray that a merciful God will extend to you His blessing and protection – With unceasing admiration of your constancy and devotion to your country, and a grateful remembrance of your kind and generous consideration of myself, I bid you an affectionate farewell.

R. E. Lee

Gen -