

Robert E. Lee's message to his troops before the Battle of Spotsylvania, 1864

Introduction

Just after the devastating fighting in Virginia at the Battle of the Wilderness and prior to the Battle of Spotsylvania in 1864, Confederate General Robert E. Lee drafted this inspirational message to his troops on the back of a telegram from John D. Imboden. The address reminds his soldiers of the recent victories of other Confederate forces, rallies them around their country's cause, and imbues them with a sense of mission: "Some of our bravest officers and men have fallen, but their comrades not less brave will emulate their glorious examples." Lee made sure the men knew that they were fighting for the survival of a nation and a people, and stated that any temptation to desert the Confederate cause was also a temptation to desert one's family, friends, and compatriots. His speech, which provided solace for those who had endured three years of death and suffering, is reminiscent of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. In November 1863, President Lincoln had transformed the Union war effort with that historic oration. Lee would have been familiar with the text, as it was widely published in the nation's newspapers. The final paragraph in Lee's message closely echoes the conclusion of the Gettysburg Address. Gilder Lehrman Institute's draft of Lee's speech shows the many edits he made. These revisions are a testament to Lee's struggle to find exactly the right words to comfort his soldiers and the Confederate nation.

Lee's message was not well received in the North, where the *New York Times* printed an editorial on May 23, 1864, blasting Lee for lying about the progress of the war. While the draft in the Gilder Lehrman Collection is undated, the *New York Times* article states that the address was issued on May 14, 1864.

<http://www.nytimes.com/1864/05/23/news/the-chivalry-of-the-rebel-gen-lee.html>

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and transcript in order to answer these questions. You may also wish to consult a battlefield map of the Civil War.

1. Why did General Robert E. Lee also include mention of a few Confederate losses in this message to his troops?
2. Using a battlefield map that can be reproduced or displayed, locate the battle sites mentioned by General Lee. If possible, identify each site as a victory for either the Confederacy or the Union.
3. Select two or three of Lee's deletions or insertions. Why do you think Lee made these specific changes?

Robert E. Lee's message to his troops before the Battle of Spotsylvania, 1864

thirty five pieces of artillery
 and a large number of wagons.
 Several or some of the most for-
 midable gunboats that accom-
 panied the expedition ~~have~~
 and many transports have
 been destroyed by the enemy
 to ~~prevent~~ ^{save} them from falling
 capture, and the forces are
~~reported in Northern papers~~
~~have~~ report that only two ~~troops~~
 interrupted the navigation of the
 River below Alexandria, thereby
~~endangering the safe passage of~~
~~the remainder of the Army of~~
~~Gen Banks.~~
 The expedition of Gen Steele into
 Western Arkansas has been driven
 back by Gen Price who ^{with the loss of his} captured
 all the ^{his} army's wagons and
 artillery. A command ~~part~~
 only a small part of Gen
 Steele's army has succeeded in
 reaching Little Rock.
 The cavalry force sent by
 Gen Grant to attack Richardson
 has been repulsed and retreated
 towards York the Pennsylvania
 and every demonstration of the
 enemy south of James River
^{has} been
 successfully repulsed.

Robert E. Lee, Draft message before Battle of Spotsylvania, May 14, 1864 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC04429 p. 2B)

Robert E. Lee's message to his troops before the Battle of Spotsylvania, 1864

The ^{heroic} valor and of this Army, un-
 der the blessing of Almighty God
 has thus far ~~off~~ checked the pro-
 gress of the principal army of
 the enemy towards Richmond,
 and inflicted ^{upon it} heavy loss ~~upon it~~.
~~The eyes of your country~~
~~and~~ looks to you in your
 noble gallant struggle with
 confidence and hope.
 Encouraged by the successes that
 have been accomplished to date,
 stimulated by the great interests
 that depend upon the issue, and
 sustained by the prayers of the
^{thou} dear ones in whose defence
 you fight, let every man
 resolve to put forth his utmost
 efforts, to endure all and brave
 all, until by the assistance of
 a just and merciful God, a
~~of~~ ~~success~~ shall crown the
 enemy shall be driven back,
 and a speedy peace be secured
 to our country.
~~Some of our bravest officers~~
~~many of your brave~~ ~~have~~ ~~fallen~~, but they have left the exam-
 ple of their glorious sacrifice to

Robert E. Lee's message to his troops before the Battle of Spotsylvania, 1864

Robert E. Lee, Draft message before Battle of Spotsylvania, May 14, 1864 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC04429 p. 4B)

Transcript

The Command^e Gen [struck: is gratified] takes great pleasure in announcing to the Army the series of successes which by the blessing of God, have recently been achieved by our Arms. A part of the enemy's force [struck: that was] threatening the Valley [?] of Virginia [struck: has been intercepted and] [inserted: has been] [illegible] by Gen Imboden's [struck: command, with the loss of its] and driven [struck: into Maryland] [inserted: back to the Potomac], with the loss of their wagon train and a number of prisoners.

Another body of the enemy under Gen Averill penetrated to the Va and Tennessee Rail Road at Dublin's Depot, A portion of this force has been [struck: dispersed] [inserted: defeated] by Gen^l [inserted: Morgan &] WE Jones, [struck: who when and] [inserted: who are in pursuit of] the remainder [struck: is slowly retreating before Him.]

The [struck: T illegible] Army of Gen Banks which invaded western La, [struck: has] sustained a severe defeat at the hands of Gen Kirby Smith, and retreated to Alexandria with the loss of several thousand prisoners, [2] thirty five pieces of artillery and a large number of wagons. [struck: Several] & some of the most formidable gunboats that accompanied the expedition [struck: have] and many transports have been destroyed by the enemy to [struck: prevent] [inserted: save] them from [struck: further] capture, and [struck: our forces are reported in] Northern papers. I [struck: have] report that our troops have interrupted the navigation of Red River below Alexandria, [struck: thereby undergoing the saf safety of the remainder of the Army of Gen Banks].

The expedition of Gen Steele into Western Arkansas has been driven back by Gen Price [inserted: with the loss of his] who captured all [struck: the enemy's] [inserted: his] wagons and artillery. [struck: A remnant But], Only a small part of Gen Steele's army has succeeded in reaching Little Rock. The cavalry force sent by Gen Grant to attack Richmond has been repulsed and retreated towards [struck: York R] the Peninsula and every demonstration of the enemy south of James River [inserted: so far] successfully repelled.

[3] The [inserted: heroic] valor [struck: and] of this Army, under the blessing of Almighty God has thus far [struck: off] checked the progress of the principal Army of the enemy towards Richmond, and inflicted [inserted: upon it] heavy loss [struck: upon it]. [struck: The eyes of] Your country [struck: illegible are

Robert E. Lee's message to his troops before the Battle of Spotsylvania, 1864

illegible] looks to you in your [*struck*: noble] gallant struggle with confidence and hope. Encouraged by the successes that have been vouchsafed to us, stimulated by the great interests that depend upon the issue, and sustained by prayers of [*struck*: the dear ones] [*inserted*: those] in whose defense you fight, let every man resolve to put forth his utmost efforts, to endure all and brave all, until by the assistance of a just and merciful God [*struck*: a as success shall crown] the enemy shall be driven back and [*struck*: a speedy] peace [*struck*: be] secured to our country.

[*struck*: Some of our bravest [*sic*] officers & men Many of your brave comrades] have fallen, [*struck*: but they have left (*inserted*: a durable) the example of their glorious sacrifice to]

[4] Some of our bravest officers and men have fallen, [*struck*: Let their ex] but their [*inserted*: surviving] comrades not less brave will emulate their glorious examples, and Continue to emulate the valor of your brave comrades who have fallen [*illegible phrase*] that it [*struck*: rests with the] [*inserted*: depends on] you to see that they [*struck*: shall not] [*inserted*: shall not] have died in vain. With the blessing of God, it is in your power to defeat the last great effort of the enemy, secure [*struck*: safety and] independence to your native land, and earn for yourselves the [*inserted*: lasting] love and gratitude of your country men, and the admiration of [*struck*: the world] [*inserted*: mankind.] [*struck*: Let your effects be worthy of]