

In early September of 1862, Confederate General Robert E. Lee was on a roll. His Army of Northern Virginia had just won a decisive battle against Union forces at the second battle of Bull Run, freeing Lee to cross the Potomac River in the Confederates' first major push into Union territory. Lee's 55,000 men waded into Maryland at White's Ford near Leesburg, Virginia, and headed north to Frederick.

Maryland was a severely divided state, and the Union's hold on the Free State was tenuous at best. One purpose of Lee's foray was to try and turn Marylanders' allegiance southward, and on September 8, while encamped outside Frederick, Lee issued a proclamation offering to help Marylanders throw off the "foreign yoke" and "restore independence and sovereignty to your State." Lee's appeal might have been better received in eastern and southern Maryland, where there was more pro-Southern sympathy, but he ultimately gained few recruits in the predominantly pro-Union western part of the state.

On that same day in September, however, Lee also tested another idea. What if, considering the location of Lee's army on northern soil and only sixty miles from the Union capital, the Southern government proposed to the North that this might be a good time to recognize the independence of the Confederate states? Lee posed this question to Jefferson Davis in the following letter:

*H'dq'rs near Fredericktown, Md.*

*Sept 8th 1862.*

*His Excellency Jefferson Davis  
President of the Confederate States.  
Richmond, Va.*

*Mr. President,*

*The present position of affairs, in my opinion, places it in the power of the Government of the Confederate States, to propose with propriety to that of the United States, the recognition of our independence.*

*For more than a year both sections of the country have been devastated by hostilities which have brought sorrow and suffering upon thousands of homes, without advancing the objects which our enemies proposed to themselves in beginning the contest.*

# Robert E. Lee's

Dean Herrin

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*For more than a year both sections of the country have been devastated by hostilities which have brought sorrow and suffering upon thousands of homes, without advancing the objects which our enemies proposed to themselves in beginning the combat. contest.*

*Such a proposition coming from us at this time, could in no way be regarded as suing for peace, but being made when it is in our power to inflict injury upon our adversary would show conclusively to the world that our sole object is the establishment of our independence, and the attainment*

# "Peace Letter"

of an honorable peace. The rejection of this offer would prove to the country that the responsibility of the continuance of the war does not rest upon us, but that the party in power in the United States elect to prosecute it for purposes of their own. The proposal of peace would enable the people of the United States to determine at their coming elections whether they will support those who favor a prolongation of the war, or those who wish to bring it to a termination, which can but be productive of good to both parties without affecting the honor of either.

I have the honor to be with high respect,

Your ob't servant,  
R. E. Lee  
General.

Such a proposition coming from us at this time, could in no way be regarded as suing for peace, but being made when it is in our power to inflict injury upon our adversary, would show conclusively to the world that our sole object is the establishment of our independence, and the attainment of an honorable peace. The rejection of this offer would prove to the country that the responsibility of the continuance of the war does not rest upon us, but that the party in power in the United States elect to prosecute it for purposes of their own. The proposal of peace would enable the people of the United States to determine at their coming elections whether they will support those who favor a prolongation of the war, or those who wish to bring it to a termination, which can but be productive of good to both parties without affecting the honor of either.

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A copy of Lee's "peace letter," in the collections of the National Archives, is reprinted here.<sup>1</sup> One of Lee's eminent biographers, Douglas Southall Freeman, claims this letter was Lee's "first and almost last adventure" in diplomacy on behalf of the Confederates.<sup>2</sup> The Union Army's arrival in mid-Maryland changed the situation on the ground, and the ensuing Battle of Antietam on September 17 sent Lee and his men back into Virginia. Whether because of the changing military fortunes or because he did not care for the idea, there is no evidence that Davis ever replied to Lee's proposal. The war would drag on for another two and a half years.

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<sup>1</sup> Record Group 109, War Department Collection of Confederate Records, Entry 4, Documents Printed in the *War of the Rebellion*, National Archives, Washington, DC. The author would like to thank DeAnne Blanton of the National Archives for her assistance in finding this document.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Southall Freeman, *R.E. Lee: A Biography*, Vol. II (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), 358.