

# *The Treachery of Charles Lee*

by Paul J. Burrow

One of the most enigmatic military leaders of the American Revolution was the erratic and talented General Charles Lee. Born in Cheshire, England, Lee began his military career at the age of fourteen for the British and his brash and often abrasive attitude earned him many enemies that prevented advancement to the level he felt he deserved. He left England to serve as Chief of Staff under King Stanislaus Augustus until 1762 when he returned to England and was finally promoted to lieutenant colonel on half pay.<sup>1</sup> By the time he returned to England, he had already developed strong anti-imperialist feelings towards King George III and the destruction of British liberty. Upon his arrival in America, he became a prolific pamphleteer for the burgeoning Independence cause. Lee quickly became one of the strongest voices for liberty and resigned his royal commission to accept appointment as second major general in the Continental army in June of 1775.<sup>2</sup>

Lee's time in the Continental army was filled with controversy, some of which was not revealed until after his death. Appointed by Congress to command the American army in the southern military district, he repelled a British assault on Fort Moultrie and eventually joined General Washington in 1776.<sup>3</sup> The interactions between Washington and Lee blossomed into a rivalry between the men that led to Lee's demise. In December, Lee was taken captive by the British and held for the next sixteen months.<sup>4</sup> It was during this time that Lee wrote letters to General Howe of the British army on how to win a swift and decisive victory over the revolutionaries. These letters were not discovered until after Lee's death.

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<sup>1</sup> Jared Sparks, *Lives of Charles Lee and Joseph Read* (Boston: C. C. Little and J. Brown, 1846).

<sup>2</sup> Phillip Pappas, *Renegade Revolutionary: The Life of General Charles Lee* (New York: NYU Press, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Sparks.

<sup>4</sup> George Henry Moore, *Mr. Lee's Plan—March 29, 1777 The Treason of Charles Lee, Major General, Second in Command in the American Army of the Revolution* (Port Washington, N. Y.: Kennikat Press, 1860).

After his eventual release in a prisoner exchange, Lee resumed his command of the Continental Army and the conflict with Washington finally boiled over on the battlefield after the battle of Monmouth in June of 1778. Having doubts about facing the British in the open field, Lee retreated his forces against orders. Washington accused Lee of disobeying orders and sent him to the rear after taking command and stopping the advancing British army. After the battle, Lee demanded a court martial trial in order to clear his name. Washington obliged and brought Lee up on charges of disobedience, making an unnecessary retreat, and disrespect to a superior officer. Congress approved a sentence of a one year suspension from service in the army, although only the charge of disrespect held any merit. He spent the remainder of his life attempting to clear his name of the charges.<sup>5</sup>

Despite being a strong advocate of the patriot cause his ensuing conviction for treason tarnished the contributions he made. Over the past few centuries, historians have questioned his allegiance to the colonial army and the outcome of his trial for treason. Even though popular belief at the time was that the conviction was motivated by political reasons, later historians uncovered evidence of an even greater betrayal. It is because of this betrayal rather than his conviction that keeps Lee in the role of traitor to most historians. Should General Lee be considered as a patriot or a traitor? More recent historians have taken a more clinical view of Lee's shortcomings and consider his actions as a result of larger psychological conditions. While early historians condemned Lee as a traitor, later studies have brought into question his conviction and seek to give him credit as a father of the Revolution.

In 1860, almost 100 years after Lee's death, George Henry Moore was the first to publish a plan by Lee to hand the British Empire a swift and complete victory. Until Moore published *Mr. Lee's Plan—March 29, 1777 The Treason of Charles Lee, Major General, Second in Command in the American Army of the Revolution*, the consensus had been that Lee was convicted of treason because of his confrontation with Washington on the battlefield at Monmouth. For the first time the "Lee Plan," conceived during his capture, was considered as the primary source for his treason. Moore asserts that "with his own capture he had lost all hope for success of the Americans."<sup>6</sup> This loss of hope, contends Moore, prompted Lee to create a plan for British victory in order to regain favor with the British forces and therefore "eagerly purchase safety by treachery."<sup>7</sup> Moore believes Howe heeded Lee's advice

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

by leaving Burgoyne deserted as he moved against Philadelphia and that the plan was “conceived in as wicked a spirit of treason as ever existed.”<sup>8</sup>

John Richard Alden confronts Moore’s work in 1951, by calling it “permeated by strong prejudice against its subject.”<sup>9</sup> Alden adds that it is “filled with distortions of facts, baseless charges, and unsupported insinuations.”<sup>10</sup> Alden contends that Lee was “remarkable personality and should not be denied a place among the leaders of the American Revolution generation.”<sup>11</sup> Through letters written by Lee, Alden insists that he was one of the first to pledge allegiance to an independent American republic. Alden presents evidence that as early as September 1775, Lee was pushing for independence for America. A proposal sent to John Adams requested ports be opened to European commerce and a plan sent to Benjamin Franklin for reasoning to wage the war provide ammunition for the staunch support of Lee.

Theodore Thayer in the 1976 book *The Making of a Scapegoat: Washington and Lee at Monmouth* addresses the plan, brought to light by Moore, by concluding that “if it had any bearing on Howe’s going south instead of staying to help Burgoyne, it rendered America a great service.”<sup>12</sup> Thayer instead focuses on the idea that Lee’s conviction of treason was motivated by political reasons. After the confrontation on the battlefield, Washington did not bring Lee up on charges until Lee demanded reparations for Washington’s “cruel injustice” towards him.<sup>13</sup> This leads Thayer to the idea that Washington was not critical of Lee’s actions at Monmouth but rather used as a scapegoat in order to maintain the positive public view of Washington. Thayer comes to the conclusion that Lee’s actions saved the army from defeat by strategically retreating, and should be considered as an important figure in the American Revolution.

Counter to Thayer’s assertion, Dominick Mazzagetti presents the evidence that Lee had all but abandoned the cause of the Revolution during his time in captivity in his 2013 book *Charles Lee: Self before Country*. Mazzagetti portrays Lee’s difficult formative years as contributing to his arrogant and ambitious nature, whose only real allegiance was to himself. His assertion is underscored by the idea that Lee only took command at

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Richard John Alden, *General Charles Lee, Traitor or Patriot?* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 302.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Theodore Thayer, *The Making of a Scapegoat: Washington and Lee at Monmouth* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1976), 12.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Monmouth in order to keep Lafayette from grabbing all the glory in the event of a victory. During Lee's captivity, Mazzagetti contends, that Congress's refusal to grant him an audience left Lee feeling "marginalized and frustrated."<sup>14</sup> Mazzagetti uses this slight to Lee's ego as the catalyst for his betrayal and the reasoning for Lee to send his plan to Howe. Mazzagetti comes to his conclusion of Lee's treacherous actions by comparing his attributes against those of Washington.

Not long after, in 2014, Phillip Papas came to the defense of Lee in his book *Renegade Revolutionary: The Life of General Charles Lee*. The most contemporary of Lee's autobiographies takes into account the fact the Lee could have possibly suffered from "bipolar disorder and manic depression."<sup>15</sup> This assertion by Papas leads him to the conclusion that because of these afflictions Lee's ideals and beliefs during his captivity had faltered. Despite Lee's philosophical departure from the idea of an independent republic, Papas contends that his plan was a way for him to express his desire to end the war with the least amount of bloodshed on both sides. Papas's work reinforces Thayer and Alden's contention that Lee was instrumental in beginning the Revolutionary War.

Until recently the legacy of Charles Lee has been largely forgotten in the chronicles the Revolutionary War. His inability to handle defeat and marginalization led to his eventual conviction of treason that sealed his fate in history. Without knowing Lee's true intentions with the development of his "Plan," the true nature of his actions can never be fully revealed. Lee was condemned as a coward for actions that he felt best served the fight for independence. Despite the revelation of his letters to Howe, his contribution shouldn't be ignored. There can be no denying his military acumen was instrumental in many victories over the British Forces. His contribution through patriotism before the war place him as one of the founders of the fight for independence.

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<sup>14</sup> Dominick A. Mazzagetti, *Charles Lee: Self before Country* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 142.

<sup>15</sup> Papas, *Renegade Revolutionary: The Life of General Charles Lee*.