Did President Lincoln offer Robert E. Lee the command of the Federal Army?

At this late day it would seem hardly wise to unnecessarily dig into the records of the Civil War to correct any of the many errors that have found their way into its history, yet it is due to the memory of Abraham Lincoln to correct the impression, now grown to be quite general, that he offered the command of the Federal Army to an officer of the army of whose loyalty there was a shadow of doubt.

A sketch of General Lee, in Rev. Jesse Bowman Young's interesting book on the Battle of Gettysburg, gives credence to the story that Mr. Lincoln offered Col. Lee of the 2nd Cavalry, the command of the Federal Army and that it was refused by General Lee, led me to make such examination into the origin and verity of this story as was within my reach.

When Mr. Lincoln was inaugurated Lieutenant, General Scott was the military head of the Army. While too old for active service he was intensely loyal to his country. Many of the best officers in the Army had resigned when their native states seceded, and these repeated resignations led to a distrust of every officer of southern birth. Even the "Rock of Chickamauga" wrote Gov. Letcher March 12, 1861, " * * it is not my wish to leave the service of the United States as long as it is honorable for me to remain in it, and therefore as long as my native state (Virginia) remains in the Union, it is my purpose to remainin the army." (Piatt's Biography of General

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Thomas, page 82). Possessing such distrust of officers of southern birth, it is incredible that President Lincoln should offer the command of the army to any officer of whose loyalty he was not absolutely certain; and equally incredible that he should send Blair, a Virginian, to make such a deal.

The story that Lee was offered the command of the Army by President Lincoln rests solely upon an interview the elder Blair had with Lee on April 18, 1861. There are some facts leading up to that interview that may throw some light on the situation. Bvt.Colonel R. E. Lee was in Command of the Department of Texas from some time in February to some time in December, 1860, when he was relieved by Bvt. Major General Twiggs.

On January 15, 1861 General Twiggs wrote General Scott that he was placed in an embarrassing situation. That he was a southern man and that as soon as he knew "that Georgia has separated from the Union" he must follow her.

(Series 1, Vol. 1, p. 581 War Records.)

This letter was endorsed by General Scott as follows:

"Relieve Major General Twigg and ask the Secretary of War to devolve the Command on Col. Waite, First Infantry with an assignment according to his brevet". W.S.

The assignment was made as follows:

"WAR DEPARTMENT

SPECIAL ORDER ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE

No. 22.

Washington, Jan. 28, 1861.

I, Bvt. Maj. Gen. David E. Twiggs is relieved

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from the command of the Department of Texas and the Command of that Department is devolved upon Colonel Carlos A. White, First Infantry, who is assigned to duty according to his brevet rank.

By Order of the Secretary of War,

S. COOPER,

Adjutant General."

(Series 1, Vol. 1, p. 584, War Records).

Only a week after the foregoing order was issued at Washington, and evidently very soon after it was received at San Antonio, Texas, the following special order was issued by General Twiggs:

"SPECIAL ORDER NO. 16.

Hdqrs. Department of Texas.

San Antonio, Feb. 4, 1861.

*** In compliance with instructions from the Headquarters of the Army, Bvt. Col. Robert E. Lee, Second Cavalry, is relieved from duty in this department and will repair forthwith to Washington and report in person to the General in Chief.

By Order of

Bvt. Maj. Gen. Twiggs

W. A. Nichols

A.A.G."

(War Records Vol. 1, p. 586, Series 1.)

There is no evidence to be found in the "War Records" of the existence of any such instructions from the "Headquarters of the Army" to General Twiggs, and as Col. Lee did

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not "repair forthwith to Washington", nor "report in person to the General in Chief" as required, the conclusion is inevitable that Lee was a little sore at the appointment of Col. Waite to Command the Department so recently commanded by himself and did not care to wait until Waite arrived. Lee reached Washington March 1st, (White's Lee and the Confederacy, p. 99) and did not see the General in Chief until April 19th (Townsend's Anecdotes p. 39).

On March 1st, 1861, General Twiggs was dismissed from the Army "for his treachery to the flag" by Secretary Holt of the War Department (1, Series, Vol. 1, p. 597) War Records).

Albert Sidney Johnson, Colonel Second Cavalry had resigned when his state seceded and that regignment was commanded by Bvt. Colonel Lee. On March 18, 1861, Lee was promoted to the Colonelcy of that regiment.

Such is a brief statement of the situation up to the Blair Interview, in which it is said Blair, on behalf of Mr. Lincoln, offered Colonel Lee the command of the Union Army and which Lee refused.

There are several different accounts of this interview, relied on to sustain the story. Prof. White, in his "Lee and the Confederacy", at page 100, has the following:

"April 18, Francis P. Blair, at the suggestion of Mr. Lincoln, came to offer Lee the command of the proposed army of invasion. Afterwards (February 25, 1868) Lee thus described the interview: 'After listening to his remarks I declined the offer he made me to take command of the

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army that was to be brought into the field, stating, as candidly and courteously as I could, that though opposed to secession and deprecating war, I could take no part in an invasion of the Southern States.

Iwent directly from the interview with Mr' Blair to the office of General Scott, - told him of the proposition that had been made to me, and my decision. Upon reflection, after returning home, I concluded that I ought no longer to retain any commission I held in the United States army, and on the second morning thereafter I forwarded my resignation to General Scott.

At the time I hoped that peace would have been preserved, - that some way would be found to save the country from the calamities of war; and I then had no other intention than to pass the remainder of my life as a private citizen.

Two days afterward, on the invitation of the Governor of Virginia, I repaired to Richmond, found that the convention then in session, had passed the ordinance withdrawing the State from the Union, and accepted the commissinn of Commander of its forces, which was tendered to me. These are the simple facts of the case.' "
(White's Lee and the Confederacy, Vol 4 p. 100).

In Nicolay and Hays "Abraham Lincoln", page 98, we find this reference to the "Blair Interview":

"On the 18th of April, the third day after the president's call for troops, the day after Virginia's secret secession ordinance, and the day before the Baltimore riot, Mr. Blair invited Lee to an interview, informed him of the promotion and duties to which he was soon likely to be

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called, and thus unofficially offered him the command of the Union Army". A flat contradiction exists as to the character of Lee's answer. Cameron, then Secretary of War, says he accepted the offer. Montgomery Blair, then Postmaster-General, says he was undecided what he would do. Both these gentlemen apparently derived their information from the elder Blair.

Simon Cameron, Secretary of War in 1861 and a Senator in 1868, made this statement in the senate:

"General Lee called on a gentleman who had my entire confidence, and intimated that he would like to have the command of the army. He assured that gentleman, who was a man in the confidence of the administration, of his entire loyalty, and his devotion to the interests of the Administration, and of the counrty. I consulted with General Scott, and General Scott approved of placing him at the head of the Army. The place was offered him unofficially with my approbation, and with the approbation of General Scott. It was accepted by him verbally, with the premise that he would go into Virginia and settle his business, and then come back to take command." - Hon. Simon Cameron, in the U. S. Senate, Feb. 19, 1868. (Globe", p. 1270).

Montgomery Blair, in a letter published in the National Intelligences, says:

"General Lee said to my father when he was sounded by him, at the request of President Lincoln, about taking command of our army against the rebellion, then hanging upon the decision of the Virginia Convention, - 'Mr. Blair, I look upon secession as anarchy. If I owned the four millions of slaves at the south, I would sacrifice them all to the Union; but how can I draw my sword upon Virginia, my native

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state?" He could not determine then; said he would consult with his friend, General Scott, and went on the same day to Richmond, probably to arbitrate difficulties; and we see the result." Hon. Montgomery Blair to Bryant, "National Intelligencer" August 9, 1866 (Life of Lincoln, Nicolay & Hay, Vol 4 p. 98).

In a letter to Reverdy Johnson, dated a few days after Senator Cameron's speech in the Senate, and doubtless in reply thereto, General Lee wrote as follows:

"I never intimated to anyone that I desired the command of the United States Army, nor did I ever have a conversation but with one gentleman, Mr. Francis Preston Blair, on the subject, which was at his invitation, and, as I understood, at the instance of President Lincoln. After listening to his remarks, I declined the offer he made me, to take command of the Army that was to be brought into the field, stating, as candidly and courteously as I could, that, though opposed to secession and deprecating war, I could take no part in an invasion of the Southern States." (Lee to Reverdy Johnson, February 25, 1868. J. W. Jones' "Life of Lee", page 141.)

In his reminiscences, Vol. 2, p. 72, Ben. Perley Poore gives his version of Lee's position:

"Among other officers of the army who resigned their commissions was Colonel Robert E. Lee, who was sent for by General Scott, and asked point-blank whether he intended to resign with those officers who proposed to take part with their respective States, or to remain in the service of the Union. Colonel Lee made no reply, whereupon 'Old Chapultepec' came directly to the point, saying, 'I suppose you will go

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with the rest. If you propose to resign, it is proper you should do so at once. Your present attitude is an equivocal one'. 'General', Colonel Lee then answered, 'the property belonging to my children, all that they possess, lies in Virginia. They will be ruined if they do not go with their state. I cannot raise my hand against my children.' General Scott then signified that he had nothing further to say. Colonel Lee, with a respectful bow, withdrew, and the next morning tendered his resignation, which was accepted five days afterward. Between the interview and the acceptance of Colonel Lee's resignation, General Shiras was sitting in the room of Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas, when Colonel Lee came in and walked up to the side of the table opposite to that at which General Thomas was sitting, saying: 'General Thomas, I am told you said I was a traitor'. General Thomas arose, and looking him in the eye, replied, 'I have said so; do you wish to know on what authority?' 'Yes', said Colonel Lee. 'Well, on the authority of General Scott'. Colonel Lee muttered 'There must be some mistake', turned on his heel and left the room."

Adjutant General Townsend, in his book, "Anecdotes of the Civil War", Chapter IX, p. 29, says:

"Robert E. Lee was Colonel of the Second (now Fifth) Regiment United States Cavalry, stationed in Texas. He had commanded that military department, and in April, 1861, was on leave of absence. General Scott knew that he was at Arlington Heights, at the house of his father-in-law, Mr. Custis, and one day asked me if I had seen or heard of him lately. I replied in the negative, except that he was on leave and at Arlington Heights.

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Said the General, 'It is time he should show his hand, and, if he remains loyal, should take an important command.' I then suggested that I should write a note to Lee, and ask him to call at the General's headquarters. 'I wish you would', replied the General. The note was written, and the next day, April 19, 1861, Colonel Lee came to the office. The general's was the front room of the second story. His round-table stood in the center of the room, and I had a desk in one corner. The aides were in an adjoining room, with a door opening into the general's. When Lee came in I was alone in the room with the general, and the door to the aides' room was closed. (Foot Note: General Callum thinks he was also in the room with the general, and present at this interview, but I am quite confident no one but myself witnessed the conversation between General Scott and Colonel Lee.) I quietly arose, keeping my eye on the general, for it seemed probable he might wish to be alone with Lee. He, however, secretly motioned me to keep my seat, and I sat down without Lee having a chance to notice that I had arisen. The general having invited Lee to be seated, the following conversation, as nearly as I can remember, took place:

GENERAL SCOTT: You are at present on leave of absence, Colonel Lee?

COLONEL LEE: Yes, General, I am staying with my family at Arlington Heights.

GENERAL SCOTT: These are times when every officer in the United States service should fully determine what course he will pursue, and frankly declare it. No one should continue in Government employ without being actively engaged. (No response from Lee).

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GENERAL SCOTT: (after a pause). Some of the Southern Officers are resigning, possibly with the intention of taking part with their states. They make a fatal mistake. The contest may be long and severe, but eventually the issue must be in favor of the Union. (Another paude, and no reply from Lee.)

GENERAL SCOTT: (seeing evidently that Lee showed no disposition to declare himself loyal, or even in doubt), I suppose you will go with the rest. If you propose to resign, it is proper you should do so at once; your present attitude is an equivocal one.

COLONEL LEE: General, the property belonging to my children, all they possess, lies in Virginia. They will be ruined if they do not go with their state. I can not raise my hand against my children.

The general then signified that he had nothing further to say, and Colonel Lee withdrew. The next day, April 20, 1861, he tendered his resignation, and it was accepted the 25th. General Scott made no remark upon the subject, but he was evidently much grieved at thus parting with a man of whom he had been justly proud, and for whom he had cherished the higheet personal regard. He had no more devoted or efficient staff officer than Lee was in the Mexican War."

It was probably near the same day as the interview with General Scott that the following incident, related to me by the late General Shiras, occurred. Shiras was in the office of Adjutant-General L. Thomas, when Colonel Lee came in there. Standing on the side of the table opposite where Thomas was sitting, Lee said: 'General Thomas, I am told you said I was a traitor!' Thomas arose,

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and, looking him in the eye, replied: 'I have said so; do you wish to know on what authority?' 'Yes', said Lee. 'Well, on the authority of General Scott!' Lee muttered, 'There must be some mistake', turned and left the room."

John G. Nicolay and John Hay were private secretaries of Mr. Lincoln, and probably knew why Blair was sent to interview Lee. In their book on Abraham Lincoln, Vol. 4, Page 98, they say:

"Repeated resignations and defections (in the army) had very naturally engendered in the mind of the President and the Cabinet, a distrust of every officer of southern birth. Lincoln therefore requested F. P. Blair, senior, an intimate friend, to ascertain Lee's feelings and intentions."

Blair told Secretary Cameron that Lee was willing to take command of the army; he told his son Montgomery Blair that Lee said "He could not determine then; said he would consult General Scott, and went on the same day to Richmond."

In his letter to Reverdy Johnson, Lee says he told Blair that he "could take no part in an invasion of the southern states".

Lee says, (Prof. White's "Lee and the Confederacy", p. 100) - "I went directly from the interview with Mr. Blair to the office of General Scott, told him of the proposition that had been made to me and my decision", and adds, "on the second morning thereafter I forwarded my resignation to General Scott."

Two days after his resignation he accepted the command of the Virginia forces.

All agree that the interview with Blair was on April 18th. It was on April 18th, that General Scott asked

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Adjutant-General Townsend if he had seen or heard of Lee lately. Townsend replied in the negative. The General said: "It is time he should show his hand, and if he remains loyal, should take an important command."

In obedience to a request of General Scott, Lee called the next day and the interview recorded by Townsend took place. The interview with General Thomas took place the same afternoon.

The Virginia convention adopted a secession ordinance on the 17th day of April, 1861, and provided that it should be submitted to the voters of the state at an election to be held on the 4th Thursday in May. The passage of the ordinance doubtless suggested to Mr. Lincoln, as it did to General Scott, an inquiry into Colonel Lee's position.

On the 18th of April, the day after the passage of the ordinance, General Scott said to General Townsend: "It is time he (Lee) should show his hand and if he remains loyal he should take an important command." At the suggestion of General Scott, General Townsend wrote Col. Lee and requested him to call at Generals' Headquarters. Col. Lee, on April 19, called upon General Scott as requested.

It is doubtless true that the elder Blair had an interview with Col. Lee, and reported to the Secretary of War the result of that interview and assured him of Col. Lee's loyalty. He told Postmaster General Blair quite a different story about that interview. If he had the interview at the suggestion of Mr. Lincoln he would doubtless have reported the result of the interview to him. There is no intimation that Blair ever mentioned it to Mr. Lincoln. Col. Lee, in his letter to Reverdy Johnson, says that the

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interview took place April 18th, and that "I went directly from the interview with Mr. Blair to the office of General Scott, told him of the proposition that had been made to me and my decision."

Townsend was present at the only interview between General Scott and Colonel Lee since Lee left Texas in February, and has given his evidence as to what took place. Montgomery Blair says his father reported that Colonel Lee said he "looked upon secession as anarchy". Yet, on the fourth day thereafter and before the people of Virginia had voted upon the secession ordinance, Colonel Lee accepted the commission of commander of the Virginia forces, and for the moment forgot that "secession was anarchy".

No man who knew Mr. Lincoln can ever believe that he offered the command of the army to any man of whose loyalty there was a shadow of doubt, or that he employed a Blair to sound Colonel Lee in the matter. Mr. Lincoln had implicit confidence in General Scott, and would have had Scott sound Lee as to his loyalty rather than Blair.

The most remarkable part of the affair is the statement that Blair, at the suggestion of Mr. Lincoln, offered Colonel Lee "the command of the proposed army of invasion," before he ascertained whether Colonel Lee was loyal (Lee and the Confederacy, p. 100). Mr. Lincoln never authorized Blair to tempt Colonel Lee by such an offer.

Lincoln never authorized Blair to offer Lee the command of the Army. Lee was a Virginian, of a distinguished family and a great favorite in the old army. The President was anxious to know how he stood. He came to Washington from the Department of Texas, whose commander had been dismissed from the service for treachery to the flag.

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