

Charles Lee: Self Before Country**Dominick Mazzagetti****Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick and London, 2013****304 pages, 1 illustration, 1 map****Hardcover, \$32.95****ISBN: 9780813562377*****Renegade Revolutionary: The Life of General Charles Lee*****Phillip Papas****New York University Press: New York and London, 2014****410 pages, 41 halftones, 5 maps****Hardcover, \$40.00****ISBN: 9780814767658****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v2i2.56>**

For eight years at a former job, my office sat around the corner from Emanuel Leutze's "Washington Rallying the Troops at Monmouth" (1857), and for eight years I listened as docents told the tale of how second-in-command General Charles Lee blatantly ignored George Washington's order to lead an advance detachment against the British, and instead called a retreat. The painting depicts the pivotal moment where Washington arrived with the main body of troops and, seeing the disorderly retreat, bellowed at Lee, "causing the leaves to shake on the trees" as one witness would later remark. Hero Washington sat proudly atop his trusty steed Nelson, sword held high, jaw set, and confidently ordered the retreating men to reverse and fight. Huzzah for the great General whose leadership restored morale and order and drove off the British as they retreated to Sandy Hook in what would become the American Revolution's largest land battle. In the middle of it all slouched a cowardly Lee astride his horse, dejected and humiliated; a failure and an incompetent who single-handedly nearly lost the war for independence.

Leutze was known for painting idealized scenes of historical significance decades after they occurred, as seen through the gauzy haze of time, but the actual circumstances surrounding this incident have been in debate for over two centuries. Researchers are still divided over the

contributions made by Charles Lee, as evidenced by the publication of these two new books within months of one another.

Lee has been portrayed as a misunderstood yet brilliant military leader, a scapegoat, a traitor, a crude self-promoter with a legendary ego, a romantic with notions of heroism, and the general most likely to have taken over Washington's command had things turned out differently and if he hadn't been his own worst enemy.

From the beginning pages of *Self Before Country*, author Mazzagetti's stance is clear: Lee was a traitor and his court martial after Monmouth was well-deserved. Mazzagetti's argument centers around the damning evidence of the 1857 discovery of "Mr. Lee's Plan" in which Lee brokered a deal with the British to help defeat the Continentals, written apparently in his own hand after being captured in New Jersey in 1776. Mazzagetti says that everything Lee would do from that point (and even before) casts doubt on the intentions behind all of his actions.

Author Papas is a little more forgiving. In *Renegade Revolutionary*, he states that besides physical ailments of gout and rheumatism, Lee also probably suffered from what is now known to be manic depression. Lee's mother was critical and disapproving and may have also suffered a similar mental affliction. Papas makes a point to include statements from those who witnessed Lee's erratic and eccentric behavior, his arrogance and outbursts, his preference of his dogs to human company, and his slovenly appearance. While Papas never uses this as a way to excuse Lee's behavior, it is difficult to be unsympathetic once this idea has been put forth.

Unlike Mazzagetti, who believes that Lee only gave the *appearance* that he had greater military experience, Papas dedicates a large portion of his book to demonstrate that Lee was indeed a competent military man; one who was always seeking a promotion and who would take every opportunity to demonstrate his abilities on the battlefield. Previously a major general in the

Polish army, a lieutenant colonel in the British army, and an advisor to the Russian army, he was Washington's most experienced officer and was put in charge of defending New York, one of the Continental army's most difficult challenges, which Lee accomplished successfully.

While Papas highlights Lee's strong support of the American cause, Mazzagetti attributes this to Lee's problems with authority and anyone with opposing viewpoints. Lee criticized his commanding officers, the British government, and George III; all of these criticisms were similar to those of the American patriots at that time. Mazzagetti points to an unfulfilled promise for promotion in 1761 from King George III that he believes was Lee's "ultimate undoing." Lee suffered from an inflated self-worth and, as he became more dissatisfied, the American Revolution offered him a cause. He wasn't so much for the colonists as he was for himself. Whether or not that was true, Lee had called for a war for independence in 1774, two years before Thomas Paine's "Common Sense."

Both authors suggest that Lee's downfall began at the end of 1776 when he was captured by the British in New Jersey. Suddenly he was out of the picture as Washington began achieving a series of military successes. In March of the next year, while still in captivity, Lee wrote his Plan and presented it to British General Sir William Howe. Howe thought little of it and put it aside (it disappeared until 1857 when it was found with Howe's papers). Mazzagetti goes on in detail to discuss how this proved beyond a reasonable doubt Lee's betrayal. Papas only briefly mentions the Plan and explains it as being Lee's attempt to misinform the British so as to distract them from the plans he knew were being made by the Continental army.

What actually happened at Monmouth has been debated from the day it happened, and once again, Mazzagetti and Papas take differing viewpoints. Was Lee's retreat because he was

hoping to aid the British, or had Washington's orders been discretionary and Lee's chief subordinates were the ones who actually started the retreat without orders?

Papas believes Lee's retreat was a delaying tactic in order to allow Washington a second line of defense against the British advance. It was a general retreat to regroup. Papas writes that British General Sir Henry Clinton himself said that had not Lee retreated, the Continentals would have been annihilated long before Washington's arrival. By retreating, Lee pulled the British into an unfavorable position by the time Washington arrived, in effect helping to save the army from a probable defeat.

After the events at Monmouth, Lee demanded a court martial to clear his name because he believed he deserved to be praised for his actions, not reprimanded. Had Lee simply let the matter drop, chances are good that Washington would have also. Unfortunately for Lee, that was not in his nature. By this time Washington had had enough of Lee and happily obliged. Although he presented a relatively strong defense, Lee was found guilty on all three accounts by a jury of men who were clearly friends of Washington. Mazzagetti believes the reason Lee was so adamant to prove he did nothing wrong at Monmouth was due to his fear that at any moment his Plan would be exposed and he would be hung for treason.

Advocates for Lee have pointed out that his sentence was unusually light for a guilty verdict in a court martial: one year suspension from military service. They argue that this proved the court believed Lee was not fully in the wrong.

But considering the war was still going on, what was the court to do? To find in favor of Lee would have cast doubt on Washington's image, and a vote of no confidence in Washington might have thrown the army into turmoil and perhaps would have resulted in Washington's

resignation. Lee was doomed because he was “disruptive” and had to go. He was disliked, rubbed people the wrong way, and lacked political tact.

Mazzagetti and Papas definitely add to the scholarship about Charles Lee, even though their books result in a “draw” in terms of Lee’s place in history. Both books present convincing arguments through their interpretation of the information available. One thing that both authors do agree upon is that Lee has been “forgotten,” with Papas going so far as to state that it is Lee’s contributions to the cause of America’s independence that have been forgotten by Americans. As long as Charles Lee remains that paradox who historians love to debate, forgetting him is most unlikely.

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