

## Charles Lee: A Patriot's Path to Infamy

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This applicant learned of the essay contest by recommendation from family friends.

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In examining the reputation of Charles Lee in *Self Before Country*, Dominick Mazzagetti says, "Lee reached heights that might otherwise have been improbable, only to fall just as quickly from those heights" (Mazzagetti ix). Lee's actions as second-in-command in the Continental Army at the Battle of Monmouth led to the destruction of his reputation, and his notes later further incriminated him to General Howe describing how to defeat George Washington. But his military successes and importance during the beginning of the Revolutionary War have been overlooked. Charles Lee was not a ruinous general, but instead a promising and popular military leader whose overconfidence, strong sense of self-preservation, and lack of respect for his superiors ultimately led to his downfall.

Charles Lee was born in 1731 to a relatively influential family in England. His father, a colonel in the English army, decided his son would also carry on the family's customary military service. Lee fought in the French and Indian War and during this time he met the daughter of an Indian chief who he ended up marrying. After an injury in 1758 and recovery in New York, he returned to England in 1761. For the next decade, he would be involved in multiple wars across the European continent, but his polarizing nature angered many and kept him from a promotion. He had become a radical Whig Republican, abhorring the current monarch King George III (Nelson). After quarreling with the King in 1773, he deserted his post in the English military and departed for America, arriving during the rise of rebellious sentiment and beginning to support the patriotic cause.

After the Revolutionary War had begun, Charles was upset by the appointment of George Washington as commander of the Continental Army over himself. But he was appeased when put as third-in-command and in charge of the Southern Department in 1776. In the South, he pushed boundaries in attempting to unseat British rulers, even those in Northern states such

as the Governor of Maryland. While he was unsuccessful in that attempt, he was able to cease Lord Dunmore's use of Norfolk for supplies and information and captured multiple well-known Tories in Virginia. After spending about six weeks in Virginia, he rushed to Charleston, South Carolina where locals were attempting to arm themselves for a British attack. Despite the Southern colony lacking a sustainable supply of artillery and ammunition, Lee set up more defenses in Charleston and supported those in Fort Sullivan. Surprisingly, the British attack failed and the South Carolinians were successful in their defense. Although modern historians don't give Lee much credit for the success, many South Carolinians at the time thanked him, saying they wouldn't have succeeded without his support. Following this, he stayed in the south until the autumn of 1776 when he was summoned to assist Washington up North. Up North, the lack of success of the Continental Army invited grim prospects for the future of the war and Lee's victories in the South seemed to be the only source of hope. It was during this time he started to develop doubt in Washington's leadership; he was reluctant to respond to Washington's orders and tended to answer to these commands unhurriedly (Alden). At one point, he was ordered to retreat to New Jersey. When he had reached Basking Ridge, New Jersey on December 12th, he decided to spend the night at a tavern near the camp, unknowingly marking the beginning of his descent to infamy.

The next morning at White's Tavern, Charles Lee awoke to a small British cavalry invading the tavern, and he was imprisoned and brought to New York. He spent the next 16 months imprisoned. He tried to initiate peace negotiations in February of 1777 in a request to Congress to help bargain his release but was rejected due to suspicion of the suggestion being a British ploy. He was also concerned about being put on trial for the desertion of his British military position. In an attempt to save himself from a trial he drafted plans for his captors revealing the ways the British could go about defeating the Americans. Some historians have

argued over the intent of these plans, as some feel it was treachery and others see it as a masterful manipulation, forcing the British to waste time and not revealing too much information about American tactics. It's more probable to say that Lee's intentions were more focused on being able to effectively and swiftly end the war more than anything else, leading a peaceful settlement for the colonies. These plans weren't found until 80 years later and only gave more evidence to the negative opinion many historians had already developed of him. The rest of his time in prison wasn't as eventful, but his imprisonment changed the course of his military career, and one could go as far to say the entire American Revolution. In his biography of Lee, John Alden points out, "Had Lee...avoided capture, had he successfully attacked the British...he would have been the savior of America, as many expected him to be. As the most successful general in the American army, it is possible that he might have been exalted above Washington" (Alden 163). Alden concludes that Lee could have taken over for Washington and would have been able to lead the Continental Army in 1777 more successfully. Finally released in the spring of 1778, Charles Lee returned to his post and reported to Valley Forge.

When he arrived in Pennsylvania, Lee immediately disagreed with George Washington, who had decided to launch a small attack on the British currently retreating to New York. Lee reluctantly agreed to take control of this attack and challenged the British forces at Monmouth in June 1778. When faced with chaos he began to retreat, but Washington arrived with the rest of the Continental Army and took control of the army, restoring order. He was angered by Lee's attempt to retreat and accused him of disobeying his orders (Lossing). Lee was so offended by Washington's accusations that he "beg[ged]...that a Court of inquiry should be immediately ordered" to clear his name. But the court and Congress found him guilty on all accounts in the court martial and suspended him for a year (Nelson). The infuriated Lee attacked Washington for his leadership and tactics, spurning widespread hatred and even a challenge to duel (during

which he was shot in the arm). At this point, Lee gave up attempting to restore his reputation and retired to Virginia until his death in 1782.

Although Charles Lee's real intentions regarding the American Revolution may never be known, his impact is important to note, especially in the South before his imprisonment. His success in the South seemed to be the only hope during 1776 for the Continental Army, and his strong radical ideas were influential in drawing local military support. Although retreat during the Battle of Monmouth and the court martial decision solidified his position of infamy, it was the plans drawn up during his imprisonment that ultimately declared him a traitor. Charles Lee served as a dynamic character in the American Revolution's history as the infamous second-in-command of the Continental Army.

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## Biography

Caroline Fox is currently a junior at Princess Anne High School in the International Baccalaureate program. At the top of her class, she is the recipient of the Virginian-Pilot Scholastic Achievement Award and was selected to represent her school at the Virginia HOBY Leadership Conference. After school, she is heavily involved in her school's theater department, currently serving as the chair of the costumes department and being cast in the school's state-winning competition shows since the beginning of sophomore year. She is also on the board for the school's Model United Nations and has received Verbal Commendations at the ODU Model UN Conference. Outside of school, she is an overnight summer camp counselor for 4-H and is in the Cavalier Society of the Children of the American Revolution, having previously been the society president and having held multiple state chairman positions. Although having not applied for college yet, she hopes to major in International Business and Economics at the University of South Carolina's Honors College.