

Facing Disaster

The greatest disaster in American history was not Hurricane Katrina, but the War of Northern Aggression, commonly called the Civil War. At the conclusion of the four-year conflict, the southern states were largely decimated. Martial law was instituted widely throughout the South and administered by the Union Army.

Most confederate soldiers lost everything. Enlisted men left the military with essentially the clothes on their backs. Officers left with their side-arms and horses, if they had them. They returned to what was left of their homes, which in many cases was virtually nothing. They had no jobs and their assets had been seized or destroyed. Since they were considered traitors, they were no longer citizens of the United States. They received little mercy and help from the northern forces who occupied their states. There was no outpouring of federal relief. There was only misery and poverty and great angst over the loss of the war.

Lexington, Virginia, a typical southern town, was home to Washington College, formerly Liberty Hall Academy and originally Augusta Academy, a small liberal arts college whose genesis goes back to 1749. In the summer of 1865, the school's buildings were decimated. The student population stood at forty and the faculty consisted of four professors. The school's financial assets were drained by the war and the school did not have a president. Against this backdrop, the trustees were faced with the gargantuan challenge of preparing the school for the fall semester. There was little doubt in their minds what needed to happen first: they needed to find an able administrator to serve as president. Without a great leader, there was no hope. They didn't have the luxury of much time nor could they afford to make a wrong hire; they had to hire the right person the first time and they had to do it quickly. If they did not, the fragile state of the school would not give them time to rectify the mistake.

After deliberations, the trustees agreed on Bob, a fifty-eight-year-old gentleman who had served the confederacy as a military officer with distinction. Bob was well known to the trustees and his reputation was outstanding, but he was physically and emotionally weak after four long years of fighting. During the war he had suffered a respiratory illness and had never fully recovered. And the defeat of the confederacy by the union was very traumatic for Bob, as it was for every confederate soldier.

Initially, Bob declined the offer to become president of the college. The trustees would not give up, however, and they continued to cajole him. Bob's response to the persistence of the trustees was to pray and seek counsel. After several days of due consideration, Bob realized that there were few ways that he could invest the remainder of his life more profitably than in the education of young people. On August 24, 1865, to the surprise and glee of the trustees, Bob accepted the position.

A few weeks later, Bob rode into Lexington to assume his duties as president of Washington College. On October 2, 1865, Dr. William S. White administered the oath of office. The ceremony included fervent prayer, which was more than a simple formality to Bob. The prayer was a cry to the heavenly Father for wisdom to lead an institution that was nearly totally destroyed by the ravages of war.

The trustees agree to pay Bob an annual salary of \$1500, but they readily admitted that they didn't have the money or know where to get it. Their action was either extreme faith or highly delusional, but they didn't know which.

Bob knew the financial condition of the academy. He knew that the facilities had been essentially destroyed. There was no money to make repairs, much less pay salaries. The school had forty students and four faculty members. Nevertheless, Bob was determined to look past the physical reality to discern the will of God. This was the ultimate question that was always on Bob's mind. He realized that his job on earth was to do what God led him to do and trust God with the results. Hence, Bob did not measure success the way most men do, in terms of physical assets, such as money, but in terms of obedience to God. This included running a school.

Bob was a man driven by values and principles, that is, God's values and principles. There could be no real success in life for him except that which God calls success. And Bob was very clear that God's definition of success was unconditional obedience to Him. To achieve something by means of lies and deception was hardly success. Hence, success in education was first and foremost defined in terms of imparting Christian character to the students. To do this, the faculty, administration, and trustees of Washington College had to model Christian character with impeccable integrity. Living this way was no problem for Bob; he already followed godly values and principles.

It is an amazing thing to realize that Christian character was so important that it trumped even the concern about the chaos and great needs of the time. Most of us would have focused on surviving—not on values and principles. But for Bob, there was no true survival unless it was based on Godly character. The most important element of educating the young people was the impartation of Christian character. Bob knew that educated people without Christian character were no more than mercenaries and terrorists.

Bob was an orderly, disciplined man. Shortly after arriving at the academy, he instituted daily chapel services. From 7:45 to 8:00 every morning except Sundays, services were conducted. Attendance at the services was not mandatory, but strongly encouraged. Since Bob believed in the maxim "do what I do" not "practice what I preach," he modeled regular chapel attendance for everyone.

The students were Bob's primary focus. He personally knew each student's name and tracked his or her progress. His near photographic memory enabled him to remember not only students' names, but also their grades. He routinely corresponded with their parents and

sought to partner with the parents in the education of the students. Dutifully and personally, Bob answered every letter from every parent. He was encouraging but always faced truth.

Bob personally attended to student disciplinary matters. He strongly believed that the disciplinary process was an essential part of education and that Christian character comes by virtue of trials and tribulations. He believed it was important for students to draw wise conclusions from their mistakes. Despite the seriousness of disciplinary action, however, Bob understood that sometimes a little levity was in order. On one occasion, a student noticed that someone was stealing firewood from his supply. He decided to lay a trap. Carving out a hole in the center of one of the logs, he inserted gunpowder and then carefully covered the hole. A few days later, the stove of one of the faculty members exploded. The student was identified as the culprit and dispatched to see Bob. Knowing that justice required hearing both sides of an issue, Bob ask the student to give an account. The student explained that the explosion had not been a prank played on the faculty member; rather that someone had been stealing his firewood so he had set a trap to identify the offender. As it turned out, the thief was the faculty member. After thoroughly hearing the matter, Bob told the student that next time he needed to use less gunpowder.

As much as Christian character mattered to Bob, he also recognized the importance of a rigorous education. Upon Bob's arrival, he found that the academy was primarily a liberal arts college. He believed that the vision for the school needed to be expanded to include the sciences and advanced mathematics. During the five years that he served as president, the school dramatically improved its course and degree offerings.

Not only did the academy survive under Bob's leadership, it thrived. At a time when most ventures were failing, Washington College came back to life in no small part due to Bob. He was an incredible man with well-honed leadership skills and profound humility. Those who knew him personally commented on the simplicity and spirituality that characterized his life. He was the consummate gentleman who viewed every human being as created by God and therefore inherently valuable and worthy of respect.

On one occasion he had been attending church in Richmond shortly before accepting the position at the academy. The invitation was given to receive communion. In the Episcopal tradition, people go forward to the prayer rail to receive communion. The first person to go forward was a black man. This was highly unusual in the segregated South of 1865. But Bob did not see color, he saw a man who was seeking communion with his Maker. So without hesitation, Bob joined the black man at the prayer rail. Soon many more went forward following Bob's lead. Bob treated everyone with respect and dignity. Color and social standing were never issues with Bob because he knew that, in the end, we are all the same—people created by God for His pleasure and to accomplish His purpose.

Bob was truly an incredible man, one who lived his faith in every area of life. Some claim he was the most outstanding Christian man whom America has ever seen. His commitment to live according to a biblical worldview was reflected in his values and principles. One would expect

such behavior from a pastor, but Bob was not a pastor. Bob lived and worked just like every other human being. He struggled with issues of provision for his family, balancing work and family time and personal time, and serving his community. Nevertheless, he achieved a level of excellence in walking with God that few have. What shaped this man and facilitated his incredible ability to live his faith with such integrity? To find the answer to this question, we have to start at the beginning of his life.

Bob was born on January 19, 1807, the fourth son of Henry and Anne. His father was a distinguished military officer during the Revolutionary War, but found civilian life difficult. In addition, Henry struggled with physical ailments. When Bob was six years old, his father left home to find medical care for himself, but he never returned. He died five years later. At eleven years of age, Bob was fatherless.

The driving influence in Bob's life was his mother, who taught him the Christian faith. Bob's father did not exert a strong influence, except that Bob wanted to be a military officer like his father. Because of Henry's service under George Washington in the Revolutionary War, Henry's family enjoyed a close relationship to the Washingtons, and therefore, a close relationship to the political leaders of the country. This relationship enabled Bob, as a teenager, to meet President Andrew Jackson who recommended Bob to receive an appointment to the military academy at West Point.

In 1825, Bob left his invalid mother to attend West Point. Life at the academy was difficult. The buildings were not well heated and the food was not well prepared. Each year some students died because the conditions were so difficult. Many times success was simply completing a course, but not for Bob. He had learned the lessons of self-denial, sacrifice, and service growing up. Being essentially fatherless meant that he had to take on adult responsibility early in life to help the family survive.

During his teenage years, his mother's health failed and she became an invalid. Bob was the only child who could care for his mother, and so he did. Faithfully and dutifully he sacrificed his own personal interests to lovingly care for his mother.

Now at West Point, these lessons of self-denial, sacrifice, and service were paying big dividends. He was able to not just survive but to do well in his classes. He completed four years without a single demerit. In June 1829, he graduated from West Point as a distinguished cadet, was commissioned as a second lieutenant, and was presented his choice of assignments. He chose to be an engineer.

Before reporting for his first duty assignment, he returned home to find his mother gravely ill. He resumed his duties as her caretaker for the last few weeks of her life. She died on July 10, 1829. Bob spent the rest of the month settling the affairs of her estate.

Bob was now 5'7" tall and twenty-two years old. He had arguably the best education that any institution in the country could offer. From his godly mother, he had learned both the theory and practice of a biblical worldview. The values of self-denial, sacrifice, and service were deeply

engrained in him. His commitment to God was firmly in place. Bob knew that God was in control and that his job was simply to do the will of God.

In August 1829, he left home and went to visit friends—the Washingtons—before reporting for his first duty assignment. It had been some time since he had seen them. To his surprise, the great granddaughter of George Washington, whom he had played with as a child, was now a beautiful young lady. They began to see each other and were married two years later.

Bob's first duty assignment as a young military officer was Fort Monroe in New York. He was assigned to strengthen the defensive fortifications. From 1829 to 1846, Bob was assigned various engineering projects throughout the country, all of which he performed with excellence. Through this experience, he learned the importance of contentment and perseverance. Sometimes he didn't like his work, but he always looked for ways to make it more enjoyable.

From 1846 to 1848, Bob served in the Mexican War. During this time, he distinguished himself as an engineer and leader. He learned the value of audacity (taking a daring course when the advantage is yours). He also learned to lead by trusting his subordinates. In other words, the role of the senior officers in any organization is to develop the high-level strategic plan leaving the tactical execution to the junior officers or managers. This leadership style demonstrated trust in the subordinates, which is a great motivator. Everyone likes to be trusted.

In 1848, after a brief assignment in Washington, he was assigned to build a new fort in Baltimore.

Then in 1852, after twenty-three years as an engineer for the army, he was assigned to become the ninth superintendent of West Point. Though not trained as an educator, Bob quickly understood that his role was to model for the students the leadership traits and character expected of military officers. He took this role very seriously. His heart was to develop the students into officers and gentlemen. To him, a gentleman was a Christian and a Christian was a gentleman—the terms were interchangeable. Officers were to be gentlemen to insure that they performed their duties with integrity and honor.

Bob made sure he knew each cadet's name. He encouraged those who were not doing well and showed compassion to those who were ill. On the rare occasion when a student died, Bob wrote the parents explaining the circumstances and expressing his condolences. His time at the academy honed his leadership and motivational skills. It also enhanced his own education as he had time to read and study a wide variety of subjects.

After three years at the academy, Bob, who was then a colonel, became the senior officer of the new 2nd Cavalry unit. The next two years were hard duty away from home. He traveled all over the country; much of the time he was in Texas. Living conditions were arduous and lonely. Work was frequently pedantic and depressing. Nevertheless he performed his duties with his usual selflessness.

In the fall of 1857, he learned that his seventy-seven-year-old father-in-law, the grandson of George Washington, had died. Bob requested leave to return home to handle the affairs of his father-in-law's estate. His father-in-law had left his farm in disrepair and had left a considerable amount of debt. There was little ready cash. Bob requested an extended leave from the army and spent the next two years probating the will and getting the farm working again. During this time, Bob was forced to perform tasks that he was not naturally gifted to do. Nevertheless, he gave himself to the work with a profound sense of duty and respect for his family.

Neither Bob nor his wife was wealthy. With the death of her father, she inherited the family farm located near Washington DC. This was clearly the largest asset that Bob and his wife owned. His father-in-law had a few slaves to run the farm, but his will stipulated that the slaves were to be freed at a specified time. Bob made sure this was done, even though it created a hardship for him in running the family farm without slave labor. Nevertheless, Bob's commitment to honor his father-in-law's wishes was firm, regardless of the hardship it might cause himself, plus Bob was opposed to slavery.

After 2½ years of tending to his father-in-law's affairs, he returned to his duties in Texas in early 1860. This was very difficult for Bob. He left behind an invalid wife who had to direct the affairs of the family farm. Bob knew the loneliness and boredom of the duty that he would face, but Bob return to his post. It was his duty to return and Bob was a man who did his duty.

On February 1, 1861, Texas voted to secede from the union. Bob was still at his duty post in Texas at the time. Shortly thereafter, he was ordered to report to Washington no later than April 1st. During this time, the southern states were voting on the issue of secession, and one by one they were seceding. Bob believed in the union and did not support secession. But he did support his home state and viewed loyalty to his state as a superior value to loyalty to the union. He believed that the union of states was a voluntary relationship; hence, any state had the right to dissolve the relationship with the union at will. To his surprise, he discovered that President Lincoln, among others, did not share his perspective.

On April 18, 1861, Bob was offered the job opportunity of his life. General Winfield Scott, the commander of the army, recognized Bob as the ablest military officer in the army and recommended to President Lincoln that Bob be given overall command of the United States Army, even though Bob was only a colonel. For thirty-two years, Bob had faithfully served the United States Army with distinction, even though many times in boring assignments. He never failed to perform his duties well. He had paid his dues and was deserving of this promotion.

He was offered a promotion from colonel to major general and the command of more than 100,000 troops, plus the full support of the federal government. But Bob was never tempted. His value system did not permit him to even entertain the offer. To do so would have meant that he would have had to invade his own state and fight his fellow citizens—he could not do that. With dignity and respect, this godly man graciously declined the offer and resigned his commission in the United States Army, walking away from his lifelong dream of becoming a career military officer.

Not only did he pass on the opportunity of a lifetime and walk away from his dream career, but he also forfeited virtually all of his worldly possessions. He knew full well that resigning his commission meant that his farm, his major asset, would be confiscated. The farm was located just across the Potomac River from Washington. He knew that the South had little hope of winning against the industrially stronger and more populous North; hence, he never entertained the expectation that he would be able to retain his farm.

Based on principle, Bob turned down his dream job and forfeited almost all of his tangible assets. To him the superior principle was loyalty to his family and friends, divinely ordained relationships. He could not in good conscience sever these relationships; particularly not to seek to preserve a relationship with other states that he viewed as optional.

The United Nations provides a modern day analogy of Bob's convictions. The United Nations is a confederation of independent nations; each nation exercising its own sovereignty over its territory. In principle, the United Nations exists for the common good of its members, who adopt resolutions reflecting the consensus opinion of the organization on various issues. I believe it is fair to say that each nation views loyalty to the United Nations as subordinate to loyalty to itself. Such was the perspective of the states that comprised the United States in 1860. The states enjoyed individual sovereignty and chose to unite for the common good; hence, to choose to not support one's state was tantamount to an American choosing to support the United Nations against the United States.

This was Bob's driving perspective when he turned down his dream job and sacrificed virtually all of his tangible assets. Such action required incredible maturity and courage. Bob was that kind of man.

Knowing the intent of the United States government to seek to enforce the union, Bob knew that he must enlist to help his state. Now a private citizen, he reported to Richmond prepared to enlist in the Confederate Army as a private. Soon the southern leaders recognized Bob's credentials and commissioned him as a general in the army. Eventually, Confederate President Jefferson Davis promoted Bob, better known as Robert E. Lee, to commander of the Army of Northern Virginia and overall commander of the Confederate Army.

As with other assignments, he served with great distinction for four years, despite the fact that he was almost always outnumbered, had inferior equipment, had almost no navy, lacked adequate medical support, and was frequently short of ammunition and rations. One observer noted that any leader of the confederate forces other than Robert E. Lee would have been defeated within a few months. Robert E. Lee was able to preserve the confederacy for four years—a truly amazing feat.

In the end, however, Robert E. Lee's army lost. He lost the war, his citizenship, his dream job, his family farm, and most of his worldly assets. But for the support of General Grant, he would have been court marshaled for treason. How could a man of God suffer such indignation? To humans who measure success in worldly terms such as money, it may have looked as if the Lord's judgment was on Robert E. Lee. But in reality, God was honing Lee's character—

something that money cannot buy. Lee's maturity as a man of God was greatly accelerated by virtue of his service to the confederacy.

What made this gentleman the great man he was? He was a man who truly lived based on a biblical worldview. Success was not denominated in terms of money or tangible assets; it was measured in terms of obedience to God. What drove him was the inner knowing every day that he was called by God to do what he was doing that day. He was persuaded that his job each day was to seek God's will and do it; victory or defeat was in the hands of God.

Robert E. Lee was an incredible man of faith. Unlike most of us, he was a man of integrity. Most of us simply want to talk about our faith, but he lived it. He faced the greatest disaster this country has ever seen, the Civil War, and his only reward was the self-satisfaction of knowing that he had done his duty and obeyed the Lord.

He came into the world with nothing and left with nothing, but his bank in heaven was full. This is the bank that really counts. Note some of his habits in life.

- ❑ *He was a man of conviction.* He believed and walked faithfully in a biblical worldview.
- ❑ *He was a man of prayer.* Despite a very busy life, he found time to pray daily.
- ❑ *He was a man of the Scripture.* As with prayer, he found time to read the Bible daily. After the war, he was president of his county's Bible club.
- ❑ *He was a man of integrity.* He was well known and everyone knew he was a committed, godly man.
- ❑ *He was a man of community.* When he decided to serve the confederacy, he knew that most of his worldly possessions would be lost. He never held out much hope that the confederacy could win against the North, which was industrially much more powerful. His only hope, and a dim one at that, was that the confederacy could out-think or outsmart the North and therefore obtain acceptable terms for peace. Nevertheless, his identity as a Virginian would not allow him to sit back and allow his state to be attacked. He was part of the community and defended the community.
- ❑ *He was a man submitted to authority.* Despite his years of service as a military officer, he was willing to enlist in the Confederate Army as a private. He never asked to lead, but was requested to lead. And he never forgot that God ordained all authority and, therefore, he must submit.
- ❑ *He was a man who believed in the sovereignty of God.* He never forgot that God was in charge and that real success was not defined in human terms, but real success was measured by obedience to God. He understood his role was to do his best and that God controlled the outcome.

Robert E. Lee's integrity was so well known that even though he lost his U.S. citizenship as a result of his service to the confederacy, many wanted him to become president of the United States. When he died, he was eulogized by all—in the South and in the North—for the godly man he was.

Lord, give us the grace to live as Robert E. Lee lived. Give us the grace to face adversity with courage and commitment to biblical values and principles. May we measure our success not in terms of money or tangible assets, but in terms of obedience and faithfulness to God.

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Sources: ***Call of Duty*** by J. Steven Wilkins
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