

***Dr. William M.S. Rasmussen '68: June 28, 2020 Letter to Washington and Lee University President William Dudley, The Rector and Board of Trustees:***

***Dr. Rasmussen, a graduate and former professor at Washington and Lee, historian, and acclaimed author, condemns the current faculty's extreme attacks on Robert E. Lee as a misrepresentation of President Lee's extraordinary service to the school and to the country as a principal proponent of National reconciliation. Dr. Rasmussen questions the depth of the faculty's study and knowledge of Lee's life as they cut quotes short and***

TO: President William C. Dudley <[wcdudley@wlu.edu](mailto:wcdudley@wlu.edu)>  
Rector and Washington and Lee Board of Trustees

As a graduate of and former professor and parent (son, class of 2001) at Washington and Lee, and an historian who has studied Robert E. Lee in depth, I feel compelled to write to you regarding the faculty's recent extremist posturing. I believe that the University community should not be concerned with Lee's Confederate past, which is not relevant to Washington and Lee; we should look only at his extraordinary performance while at the school. Unfortunately, attempts are being made to misrepresent that service. The historical facts show that Lee functioned admirably in Lexington as a major proponent of national reconciliation. This record seems to be lost on the general public, and sadly on a certain population of the current faculty.

As to Lee's service in the Confederate army, I am told by current W&L parents that today's student body is not perplexed by it. From your information to alumni, I see that Confederate history has not hampered the fruitful recruitment of minority students for the incoming freshman class. Surely, we can pardon Lee for Confederate service if we can forgive George Floyd's long criminal record by naming an endowment after him. Lee made great efforts to prevent the Civil War from ever happening, and when it did, he felt as trapped by the course of events as my generation was by the Vietnam War. Some would say that the latter was an evil war. Should participants in that failure be condemned? How about our ancestors who were drafted into the Confederate army; are we to condemn them as well?

I am dismayed by the superficial attacks being written by individuals who have never studied Lee's entire life and thus have no insight into his character. They twist references and distort a few limited facts to fit them into liberal narratives. They fail to understand that it was Lee's commitment to duty and to honorable activity that caused him to reject

lucrative business offers and instead accept rector John Brockenbrough's request to save a college that was near extinction and at the same time provide an example to the nation of how to accept reconciliation.

The current faculty should not simply bend to the will of current leftist politics without thoughtful deliberation. One wonders if some members ever took a relevant history course to study the real facts. They might read the chapter about Lee after the war in my book *Lee and Grant* (London, 2007), for which Washington and Lee University was a sponsor. There they will not find the superficial opinions of non-historians, but actual period letters that were even published in newspapers and that prove Lee's huge influence in the reunion process. The book cites documents that prove the fragility of reunion when Lee was in Lexington, and that his influence on a national level was enormously more important than the few inconsequential accounts cited by some of Lee's modern detractors. They attempt to color him as racist and to give importance to racial incidents in Lexington that had little to do with him and were ridiculously trivial in comparison to Lee's national role. They cherry-pick incidents that suggest hatred similar to their own. How can you fairly cite bitterness such as that of William Lloyd Garrison but never mention Henry Ward Beecher's praise for Lee and admission that he might have followed Lee's path had he lived in Virginia. The detractors cut quotations short, and imply that they have not made such omissions, as, for example, with Lee's testimony before Congress in 1866. Or they lay down their own conclusions as if stating facts. In *Lee and Grant*, the authors present facts as journalists are supposed to do—report, not function as opinion writers.

The Lee detractors might check out George Will's "A Progressive's Guide to Political Correctness," which is humorous but also enlightening. Serious repercussions to the University's culture and reputation may ensue if you and the trustees listen to the loud vocal minority while alienating the very large silent majority. If today's smug virtue-signaling faculty members wish to erase Lee's contributions to the university, where does this end, and who is the judge of who is morally superior, fair or just?

Do we want to erase or rewrite history? Do we support an education that fails to recognize the value of history? Do we not study the past to learn from our mistakes? I am reminded of a famous passage from Orwell's *1984*:

*"Do you realize," Winston says to his girlfriend, Julia, "that the past... has been actually abolished?... Every record has been destroyed... every book has been rewritten, every picture has been re-painted, every statue and street and building has been renamed, every date has been altered. And that process is continuing day by day and minute by minute. History has stopped."*

Lee's goal in Lexington was to promote harmony and the immediate reunion of the nation. He was extremely effective. As part of an ideological agenda that is based on "subjective" moral superiority, some of your faculty members are on a collision course to do the opposite. Their threatened, misguided action may prove to be just as effective, in promoting hatred and disunion.

Dr. William M. S. Rasmussen  
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