

ROBERT E. LEE'S FINAL VICTORY: DUTY, ADAPTATION, AND POSTWAR CIVILIAN LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT: Confederate General Robert E. Lee offers a compelling historical example of a Civil War military leader who translated the experiences and wisdom gained during wartime generalship into successful postwar civilian leadership. The parallels between how he commanded the Army of Northern Virginia from 1862-1865 and how he led as president of struggling Washington College, in Lexington, Virginia, from 1865-1870 are striking and provide a case study in successful leader adaptation and perseverance. Like academic, business, government, and military leaders today, Lee faced seemingly insurmountable challenges both as general and college president; ironically, it was in the latter capacity that he triumphed and which suggest the most valuable insights for contemporary leaders.

As Confederate General Robert E. Lee turned Traveler's nose away from Appomattox in April 1865 and rode towards a new chapter in his life, the weight of catastrophic defeat was upon him. It was an immediate, crushing, all-consuming burden known only to a select group of "great captains" before him who had also fought for their country, lost, and in so doing lost their country's sovereignty: Hannibal, Vercengetorix, and even Napoleon all had experienced what Lee now felt. As a student of history, vignettes from the past, learned while superintendent at West Point or during lonely hours posted in Texas as commander of the 2nd Cavalry, must have fluttered in and out of his head. He knew he now occupied a place in world history akin to those earlier storied commanders, but that was no salve for his wearied conscience. Ever the pragmatic thinker, he understood he had to lay aside philosophical musings and deal with the pressing issues at hand: what to tell the men who had followed him so faithfully in war, how to

best take care of his family, and how to help the prostrate, devastated South. Lee realized he was now not just the defeated commander of the Confederacy's principal field army, the surrender of which chimed the death knell of the southern nation: he was more than that—the living symbol of the South, the beau ideal of the southern people. Their hopes and fears, as in the war, still rested with him. What he said, what he did, how he comported himself—all would reflect upon the South as a whole and be at once mercilessly judged by its enemies and applauded by its advocates. As one future student from Maryland wrote, “it was a general belief in all the Southern States, as expressed by the students therefrom, that the example of General Lee would weigh far more in the restoration of normal conditions and true peace than any other factor in a war-torn country.”¹

How to achieve the delicate balance necessary would be a task beyond the abilities of most great men, especially those suffering from the burden of military defeat, but Lee succeeded brilliantly in navigating the political, economic, and social tightrope. He took it on as his personal duty, just as he had applied all his faculties in doing his professional duty as a general. He began by telling his soldiers to go home, lay down their arms, and become countrymen again with “those people” (as he termed the Federals during the war), and accepting, in all forms, the Union victory. In reply to Brigadier General E. Porter Alexander, who one day before the surrender suggested guerrilla warfare as a way to carry on the struggle, Lee resolutely exclaimed that such a course would destroy what was left of the South. The time had come to accept reality, as painful as that may be, and look to the future—to one's continued duty in life. After considering and accepting the offer to accept the presidency of struggling Washington College, in rural Lexington, Virginia, he expressed this new sense of purpose in a letter to the trustees:

I think it the duty of every citizen, in the present condition of the Country, to do all in his power to aid in the restoration of peace and harmony, and in no way to oppose the policy of the State or General Government directed to that object. It is particularly incumbent upon those charged with the instructions of the young to set them an example of submission to authority....²

In these initial actions and words he matched the magnanimity of Grant in his surrender terms and Lincoln in his Second Inaugural Address, and thus helped create with them a foundation for the reunited republic. Yet Lee would go much further in fulfilling his new educational duty over the coming five years, all the while maintaining the outer calm and decorum that had characterized his leadership of the Army of Northern Virginia. Those historians who have gotten to know the “inner Lee” during his presidency of Washington College—Freeman, Crenshaw, Flood, and Pryor, for instance—all agree that President Lee was equally as admirable a human being, as General Lee. His accomplishments in Lexington are still felt and evidently noticeable. How did Robert E. Lee achieve final victory—victory in civilian leadership?³

This article proposes that, as a bold leader of teams, critical thinker and communicator, and strategic visionary, he applied the skills required of him as chief Confederate general to chief civilian leader of the College. He did not apply them, however, by rote automatic instinct. Instead, he adapted what he already knew and believed true as a military leader to educational leadership, whether that be counseling wayward students, instilling a dream of institutional success in the faculty and trustees, or dealing with difficult Federal authorities. Good leadership, the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz reminds us, does not occur simply because the leader in question possesses qualities that make him great. It is *how* those skills, whether

inherent or painstakingly honed over time, are adapted to the specific context in question that matters. Lee never read Clausewitz, but comparing the latter's thoughts on what distinguishes "great" from "mediocre" captains in war to the former's actual deeds as President makes it abundantly clear that Lee had perfected the most important military skill of all: adaptation. Let us explore how he adapted what he knew as a general to his new duty as college president.⁴

OFFENSIVE-MINDEDNESS

An initial point to consider was his unswerving belief in the correctness of the offensive. Strategically, operationally, and tactically, Lee believed in bringing the war to the enemy as often and with as much force as possible.⁵ The entire Seven Days Campaign outside of Richmond in the spring and summer of 1862 and the ensuing Second Manassas and Sharpsburg campaigns of the same year are all evidence of Lee's offensive planning. His greatest victory, at Chancellorsville, Virginia, in May 1863, may even be considered a tactical offensive that wrested victory from the jaws of defeat and set the stage for the Pennsylvania Campaign, arguably his greatest offensive of the war. Even after his army's numbers had dwindled to a point at which going on the offensive at any level of war was inadvisable, Lee still yearned to "strike a blow." Lieutenant General James Longstreet's famous flank attack in the Wilderness in May 1864 and the Confederate assaults during the Petersburg siege along the Darbytown Road and at Fort Stedman, both late in the war, give proof that Lee believed in the offensive to the end. Most historians now agree that the general's offensive-mindedness, although costly in troops the South could ill afford to lose, was in the best strategic interests of the Confederacy, which could only win by exhausting the North's will to fight. Too many lost battles to Lee, in rapid succession, almost achieved that end. Simultaneously, the southern will to continue the struggle

for independence was buoyed by his offensive victories. “Two Fredericksburgs”, one historian hypothetically mused in reference to Lee’s greatest defensive battle, “were not worth one Chancellorsville.”⁶

Taking the war to one’s foe and hitting him hard was by no means a trait exclusive to Lee. Other Civil War generals, such as Ulysses S. Grant, William T. Sherman, Stonewall Jackson, and Philip Sheridan also adhered to this policy. It was something drilled into them at West Point by Professor Dennis Hart Mahan, who distilled Baron Antoine Jomini’s famous book, *The Art of War*—then the leading theoretical work on the military art—into basic, understandable lessons. Lee absorbed them well, and, like the other superior leaders on both sides, practically applied this particular Jominian theory on the battlefields of the war.⁷ His offensive-minded spirit did not fade, however, with the end of the fighting. It would be channeled in how Lee tackled problems in Lexington. Even in his very acceptance of the presidency, he stridently informed the trustees that he could not possibly teach a course along with completing his administrative work, quickly removing in one stroke of the pen an unnecessary burden that he foresaw would hamper the discharge of his primary duty—the resurrection of Washington College. Then, upon arriving at his new post, the new president got down to business quickly, surprising the trustees with his relentless and immediate assault on paperwork and refusing a fancy inauguration that he believed would be ill-advised for a financially hobbled institution. Such an event would have become a distraction from his main objective of setting the college back on track, he believed, a mission that he attacked head-on by establishing a rigid daily schedule for himself that allowed for fast, maximum exposure to the college’s troubles. Educational and administrative problems,

Lee proposed, were best dispensed with quickly, efficiently, and with an adroit combination of forcefulness and tact.⁸

GOOD INTELLIGENCE ANALYSIS

As he sat down behind his desk each day, Lee also exercised another of his learned wartime skills: good analysis of intelligence. As in the war, he took very few actions unless he had a full accounting of the facts from the most reliable and objective sources, and as a new president unsettling “facts” arced their way toward him every week. How was he to sort through all of this information, some of it contradictory and most of it depressing? Instead of relying on his old cavalry chief, Major General J.E.B. Stuart, to bring him trustworthy and confirming intelligence, President Lee carefully questioned students himself who had committed public misdemeanors and compared their answers to public authorities’ accounts to arrive at fair and judicious courses of action. Especially regarding severe infractions, Lee analyzed the problem from every angle conceivable, asking himself the same questions he asked about his former Federal opponents: how was the “adversary” (i.e., Federal authorities in Rockbridge County) likely to react, and why? What would they expect him to do? As he did with Union Major General Joseph Hooker at Chancellorsville, how might he beat his opponent to the punch and diffuse the situation for the good of the college and the South?⁹ In a similar fashion, he thought hard about the financial worries besetting the college and how to solve them, refusing to leap at every possible fundraising scheme concocted by the trustees while still striking boldly when practicable. For instance, he wisely massaged the *right* benefactors by composing carefully-crafted letters, such as one to inventor and philanthropist Cyrus McCormick (who ultimately donated \$15000, mainly as a result of Lee’s efforts). He also spoke to the *right* people in power at the proper time, as he

did when he traveled to Richmond in January 1866 to appeal to the Virginia House of Delegates' Committee on Schools and Colleges for back interest owed to the institution. That particular trip, one undertaken against Lee's personal predilections but ably performed as a duty of the president, garnered several thousand much-needed dollars and much goodwill among Virginia lawmakers that persisted well past Lee's death and the trials of Reconstruction. By taking the figurative offensive at the right time and place through careful analysis of intelligence, Lee brought Washington College back from the brink of oblivion by 1867.¹⁰

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Hand-in-hand with his administrative offensive-mindedness and circumspect evaluation of the facts, Lee succeeded in communicating his intent as college president. Realizing he could not possibly keep up with all the incoming correspondence on a daily basis (much of it unrelated to his official position) and still faithfully discharge his duties as president, Lee prioritized his time, dealing first with crises, then with pressing matters, and lastly with auxiliary concerns. This process mirrored that which he utilized throughout the war, sometimes to the chagrin of his staff officers. In most cases he employed direct, polite, but forcefully-reasoned communication that efficiently dealt with the issue at hand and removed it from the table, even if temporarily. Lee knew both during the war and as president that he could not hope to deal with every task permanently, but he could ensure that he put his, the College's, and the South's best foot forward by communicating clearly, concisely, and with power, and in so doing move a given problem closer to resolution. It is a truism among senior leaders today that they rarely can "solve" the dilemmas confronting them because of the very nature of these volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous issues. The best they can achieve in most cases, exerting all of their skills and

intellect, is successful management. Good, candid communication—among subordinates, with peers, and with superiors—is key to that management. Lee understood this, and adapted methods as president that had worked well as a general.¹¹

As an example, Lee had to reorganize his army's leadership following every major campaign. The deaths of able brigade or divisional officers, let alone those of chief lieutenants such as Jackson or Stuart, necessitated shuffling in and among commands, as did demonstrations of incompetence. Two of the most famous reorganizations, the one following the Seven Days in 1862 in which Lee removed inept generals John B. Magruder and Theophilus Holmes and created the famous "two wing structure" of Longstreet and Jackson, and the one following Chancellorsville after Jackson's demise, fundamentally changed the character of his army. The risk of ruffling political feathers and damaging morale in the lower ranks was high on both occasions, but Lee carefully conferred with officers in a position either to offer good advice or create problems, smoothed over concerns with personal visits to those officers and letters to their political patrons, and communicated frankly with President Jefferson Davis and the various Confederate secretaries of war. He frequently asked himself, "why and how would general X or senator Y think the way they do," and "what can I do to palliate their anxiety?" With Davis, he unfailingly demonstrated acquiescence to his civilian authority, and through polite words backed up by successful action, revealed his sagacity in judgment. This usually obliged Davis to agree to whatever Lee desired. One instance from Lee's presidency encapsulates a similar approach to communication. On March 13, 1867, Congress passed the First Reconstruction Act which effectively placed the former Confederate states under Federal military rule. In such an environment, any adverse incident could cause irreparable harm to the College, and Lee knew it.

Nine days later, five students indignantly approached a nighttime meeting of the local Freedman's Bureau where northern visitors were scheduled to speak, intent on causing trouble. To their credit, they initially satisfied themselves with simply looking inside a window at the proceedings, but when a black man approached them asking questions, they were startled, and one of them drew a pistol and began beating his would-be assailant. The other students pulled the two apart, thereby avoiding bloodshed, but were promptly thrown in the town jail, and in the melee that ensued the pistol-bearer escaped. The entire student body was soon alerted, and nearly four-hundred angry Washington College students descended on the town, many of them rebel veterans, intent on freeing their friends by force. Thanks to a former soldier who had been Captain of the famed Liberty Hall Volunteers (Jackson's bodyguard), who shouted down his classmates, exclaiming, "Remember General Lee! No violence!... You must do what General Lee would wish," a disaster was averted, but now President Lee had a wicked problem to deal with. First, he immediately summoned the four jailed students to his office, reprimanded them, and put them on probation. The student with the pistol, feeling obligated by the Honor Code that Lee had recently established, came forward voluntarily, admitted his guilt, and was dismissed. By the time the Freedman's Bureau sent a threatening letter of inquiry into the matter, Lee could claim he had taken care of it in a delicately worded response that effectively settled the issue. Prompt, clear communication, coupled with swift action, had saved the day.¹²

KNOWING YOUR PEOPLE

Another major military lesson Lee applied from the war years regarded knowing his "people": his section and its attitudes, his subordinates, and his soldiers. Clearly, Lee's decision to side with Virginia when the state seceded and resign his commission in the U.S. Army was an

indication of this knowledge. His special awareness--almost from the beginning of his Confederate service--of the predilections and hopes of the southern people writ large, influenced much of his wartime strategy, including his penchant for the offensive. He also came to know well all of his chief lieutenants both personally and professionally, especially Longstreet, Jackson, A. P. Hill, and Stuart, yet managed to preserve an element of authoritative reserve in each relationship that offered him a means to achieve what he wanted when confronted with reluctance or obstinacy. As he once advised Major General A. P. Hill about a troublesome subordinate, "You'll have to do what I do: when a man makes a mistake, I call him to my tent, and use the authority of my position to make him do the right thing the next time." Practically every day in the first years of his presidency Lee adapted this sage advice to difficult students. It is important to remember that the student body immediately after the war contained a majority of Confederate veterans, some of them the very soldiers Lee had led into battle. These young men were wizened beyond their chronological years and often believed class attendance was optional. Lee did not. Thus, it was relatively easy for him to upbraid a neglectful student who had served, including a young man who suddenly disappeared one bright morning, only to reappear after dark. Lee called the individual into his office and asked him to explain himself. The offender answered respectfully that he had been fox-hunting, as if nothing were amiss. Lee paused before replying and then looked him straight in the eye: "We did not come here to hunt foxes," he said. A friend of the former fox-hunter later wrote, "that boy never even WANTED (emphasis orig.) to go after foxes anymore."¹³

As in this case, Lee's approach to people he dealt with while president was tailored, thoughtful, and delivered to obtain the maximum effect for the object desired. If the student was not a

grizzled veteran, for instance, and committed some minor infraction, the general was often kind, understanding, and encouraging, knowing that honey would produce greater results than vinegar. He wrote students' parents constantly, asking them to assist him in perfecting the ethical and intellectual development of their offspring, to the point that some families in the deep South were amazed at how well Lee knew their sons. He *did* know them well, memorizing their names upon their admission to the college and inviting them, one by one, to his personal residence for dinner, a practice that is still emulated today by Washington and Lee University presidents. As with the men in the ranks of the Army of Northern Virginia, Lee took a genuine interest in "his boys," their education, and general welfare. He knew that doing this not only made them feel special: it also helped ensure Washington College would prosper. Just as General Lee ceaselessly petitioned Brigadier General Lucius Northrup, the Confederate Commissary-General, for shoes, clothing, and provisions for his soldiers, actions calculated to improve the fighting ability of his army, President Lee frequently could be found in the Jackson House, the first executive residence on campus, writing letters to local businesses in hopes of securing a summer job for one of his students. If those students got jobs, they could pay their tuition. If tuition fees were paid, the greater goal of the College's long term security moved a little closer to reality.¹⁴ As in the war, knowing one's people well could lead to victory.

During the war this maxim was most evident in how Lee worked with his principal lieutenants. Sometimes criticized by scholars who have never experienced the burdens he felt, Lee exercised both out of necessity and preference what modern military doctrine terms "mission command," a method of leadership in which the primary intent of the superior is clearly conveyed to subordinates, with the understanding that they will take care of the details to accomplish the

greater objective. Lee felt not only that he had little choice but to trust the acumen of his generals due to the expanded scope of mid-nineteenth century warfare, but also preferred to allow them this freedom of action, believing that it offered the best avenues to military success. Sometimes this command style failed him, as at Gettysburg when Lieutenant General Richard Ewell refused to attack Cemetery Hill on the evening of the first day, or when Longstreet in the same battle sluggishly moved to attack the Federal left flank on the second day. Most of the time, however, and especially when his army operated in two wings under Longstreet and Jackson, mission command produced spectacular results, as the victories at Second Manassas, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville attest. Even at Antietam and in the Overland Campaign of 1864 Lee gave his subordinates considerable flexibility and achieved miracles against the numerical odds. Only when his best generals were dead and his army permanently depleted in numbers did Lee resort to a more direct command style, and then with reluctance, as some of his actions during the Petersburg siege illustrate.¹⁵

President Lee adapted his mission command-oriented leadership style to his principal “subordinates” at the College, namely the trustees and the faculty.¹⁶ He knew fully well the demands of his position ensured that he could not look over the shoulder of every professor or official, nor did he want to. One instructor wrote, “he audited every account; he presided at every faculty meeting; studied and signed every report,” but did not micromanage the actual daily and weekly tasks of his underlings.¹⁷ From his first days in the army, Lee had learned that paying attention to administrative details produced a more efficient military unit, regardless of its size, and as general he continued this practice, sometimes to the point of personal exhaustion (his staff, like most Civil War staffs, were not information-synthesizers but rather clerical assistants).

But when it came to the specific execution of flank marches, cavalry rides, and infantry attacks, Lee gave his lieutenants the authority. It was natural for him, then, as president, to continue the practice of administrative oversight while trusting that the trustees oversaw the logistical needs of the college and the faculty taught the students professionally and effectively. Occasionally, he would slip quietly into the back of some classroom and listen to the instruction of particular professors, but refrain from saying a word, and then leave equally as quietly. During his tenure at Washington College, Lee created and administered the overall vision; the faculty and trustees executed the details that achieved that vision. It was a recipe for strategic success.¹⁸

STRATEGIC VISION

Providing that vision as president was the final major application of his wartime experiences. Lee was unquestionably one of the top strategic thinkers, as well as a principal field general, in the southern nation. Advised by both Jackson (before his death) and Longstreet throughout the war, Lee synthesized their ideas and combined them with his own as he himself advised President Davis on Confederate strategy. Davis rarely chose to ignore Lee's vision, which some scholars have criticized was too "Virginia-centric." Regardless of which side of the historical debate one falls, it is indisputable Lee believed that only in the East could the South hope to prevail in its quest for independence, especially after the fall of 1862. *If* he was preoccupied with Virginia, it was for good reason from a strategic perspective, since by that time in the war the Mississippi River Valley had been all but lost as well as much of Tennessee and Arkansas. Lee realized early on that only if the northern people's will to preserve the Union was broken would the Confederacy achieve its goal of separate statehood, and only by winning repeated, offensive victories in the East could that civilian will be exhausted. The two great northern raids

that culminated at Antietam and Gettysburg were, strategically, Lee's attempt to clinch that objective. Were it not for some bad luck in the former campaign (the famous "Lost Orders" #191) and very good Union generalship in the latter, Lee's vision may well have become reality.¹⁹

Strategic leaders are supposed to provide a visionary framework, a grand intellectual structure, in which their organizations, whether they be countries or colleges, will realize their primary goals. Robert E. Lee worked closely with Davis to that end during the war, and as president of the college succeeded in establishing the same thing in Lexington. It was probably his most remarkable achievement. In the winter of 1866, after returning from a grueling testimony in Washington to the Joint Committee on Reconstruction—which unsuccessfully tried to find him guilty of treason—Lee encapsulated his vision for the institution he now led:

I consider the proper education of (the South's) youth one of the most important objects now to be attained, and one from which the greatest benefits may be expected. Nothing will compensate us for the depression of the standard of our moral and intellectual culture, and each state should take the most energetic measures to revive its schools and colleges, and, if possible, to increase the facilities of instruction, and to elevate the standard of living.²⁰

The trustees had already arrived at a wish list of new professorships and departments they wanted to see established, and, with Lee's leadership and the new monies that began to swell the institution's coffers, the "proper education" of Washington College's youth, who hailed from all over the South, could now commence. Lee certainly "revived" his school: because of his vision

and the attachment of his name to the College, the academic year after his arrival witnessed the quadrupling of student enrollments and the addition of ten new faculty members from a nadir of only four. Subsequent years would see the faculty continue to grow, especially in the practical sciences and modern languages—Lee personally spearheaded the development of a Spanish major—and the student body swell well into the hundreds. The president also ushered in the elective system, something quite novel in American education at the time and pushed for the establishment of the Engineering and Law Schools, partly as a result of his vision to educate southern youth in a modern, pragmatic fashion that would make them useful members of the New South. This was consistent with Lee's personal philosophy of accepting the verdict of Union victory, rebuilding his section, and making the best of current realities. Modern, comprehensive, and rigorous education was his strategy for the new, postwar South. He was therefore perfectly placed to marry philosophy with method.²¹

The moral restoration of the southern states was also part of his strategic vision, and he translated that at Washington College through the auspices of mandatory chapel attendance and, importantly, the creation of the Honor Code. Although the mandatory religious worship ended after his first year as president, Lee set the example as president by never failing to take his customary seat on the north wall, second pew, of the chapel that that now bears his name. Rarely did students fail to appear for the morning service each day, knowing as they did that Lee desired their presence. The honor code, once established, became akin to holy writ just as it is today at the University, and helped solidify that ethical foundation that Lee envisioned was absolutely necessary for the long term survival of the college and of the South overall. In many ways, that

code may well be Lee's longest-standing legacy and greatest visionary gift to the institution he once led.²²

MODERN SIGNIFICANCE OF LEE'S EXAMPLE

Considering these examples of how General Lee adapted his experiences in the Civil War to make him the successful President Lee of Washington College, how may we today adapt this knowledge to better perform our own professional or private duties? First, it may be helpful, regardless of the problem at hand and the profession involved, to gather as much information in the very beginning as possible and allocate adequate resources (time, money, personnel, etc.) to analyze that information and turn it into useable intelligence. Intelligence is, in a phrase, "synthesized information." It is the accurate and timely distillation and synopsis of disparate pieces of information into helpful intelligence that allows leaders to make informed, judicious decisions. Lee found himself doing much of this process in Lexington, but during the war he had subordinates such as Stuart to help him. Regardless, the job had to be done in order to lead effectively and it was especially important when approaching problems in a determined, forthright manner. This offensive-mindedness, something Lee found positively necessary as a general and helpful as president of a struggling institution, should become second nature for those involved in national security, governance, and education. Waiting for issues to become problems is not good enough, and may often lead to strategic disaster. Had Lee not thrown himself headfirst into the administrative milieu, tackling the paperwork directly and methodically and courting would-be donors, the college may have failed despite his association with it. "Carpe Diem"—seize the day—is not just a cliché from an oft-quoted movie, but the mantra of the forward-thinking, innovative individual who realizes that he/she must take charge of the

situation confronting them and, like President Lee, seize the initiative, regardless of how hopeless the initial prospects may be. In today's fast-paced, complex, and dangerous world, there may be little other way to proceed.

Second, clear, direct, and frank communication characterized both Lee the general and Lee the civilian. To his military subordinates and superiors, his soldiers and students, the trustees, to potential benefactors, Federal congressmen, and even the Freedman's Bureau, Lee made his position unquestionably transparent and well-understood. No one doubted his word, and no one asked again what he meant when he said something. Such qualities are needful in us all, but especially in persons of authority and power who have little time to re-explain their thoughts and even less energy to devote to a re-examination of them. Lee's example teaches us that effective communication is one of the hallmarks of successful leaders.

Third, both as commander of the Army of Northern Virginia and as president of Washington College, Lee became acquainted with the particular characters, strengths, and weaknesses of all who constituted "his team." Whether that individual was a member of his military command team or his later civilian faculty and students, he took the time to get to know his people and thus made his own goals more attainable. Today this is practically an altruism among senior leaders in politics, business, and defense, but in other professional fields such personal knowledge of one's co-workers and employees may be essential for achievement of both individual and group objectives. Although it makes sense, and most leaders inherently understand it must be done, it is easier said than done, especially in large bureaucratic organizations where promotion is not

always based on merit or quality of work. People can be elevated to high positions simply through “time put in” or, worse, nepotism or political patronage, at which point the question arises if the new leader’s personal fitness and ability to adapt to the new position will be sufficient. Lee was a natural and seasoned leader for the college after the war, and thus never faced the question of his ability to perform his duties. But he did have to adapt, and did it well.

Fourth, and perhaps most significantly, Lee innately accepted as his duty the necessity to create a strategic vision. From 1861-1865 he assisted Jefferson Davis in crafting Confederate strategy, and in many instances throughout the conflict his vision actually led the process of that creation. From 1865 to his death in 1870, Lee set the strategic vision for the institution that would later bear his name, in gratitude for that very forward thinking. Without a guiding structure that looked to the future and promised stability and prosperity in an uncertain age when those qualities were fleeting, it is quite possible Washington College would have suffered the same fate as many other southern schools that could not change, or change enough, to meet the realities of the New South. One statistic speaks volumes about Lee’s impact in this critical area: for the 1865 academic year, the University of Alabama witnessed one lone student report for classes. When none of his expected classmates joined him, he was sent home and the university temporarily closed.²³ That same year, Washington College kept its doors open by massively expanding its student body, its endowment, and its faculty. Most of that was the result, either directly or indirectly, of Robert E. Lee’s vision: what a worthy example for all leaders and followers, students, faculty, and citizens, regardless of time or place. Thinking hard about the present will only address the present’s problems. Thinking about and acting on behalf of future generations is a sign of true and wise leadership, offering a foundation to a better tomorrow.

With *his* vision, coupled with other skills and experience gained during the Civil War, Lee established the foundation for a great modern university that still educates the youth of the United States as well as numerous other nations. We would all do well to develop such vision to build the strategic future we wish to bequeath tomorrow's generations.

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¹ Quoted in Charles Bracelen Flood, *Lee: The Last Years* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981), 104.

² Lee to trustees of Washington College, 24 August 1865, in Lee Papers, Washington and Lee University Special Collections, Lexington, VA (hereafter WLSC).

³ The following are among the best references on Lee in the postwar period: Douglas Southall Freeman, *R. E. Lee*, 4 vols (New York: Scribner's, 1934-1935); Ollinger Crenshaw, *General Lee's College: The Rise and Growth of Washington and Lee University* (New York: Random House, 1969); Flood, op cit.; Elizabeth Brown Pryor, *Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee Through His Private Letters* (New York: Viking, 2007). All of them, with the possible exception of Pryor, view Lee as an agent of healing for the defeated South and a positive force for reunion during the early Reconstruction period. Recently, Elizabeth R. Varon, among others, has argued that Lee had a definite sectional agenda that superseded any reconciliationist motives, going so far as to suggest Lee was a "polarizing figure" who disappointed Grant after the war with his strongly pro-southern views. See Elizabeth R. Varon, *Appomattox: Victory, Defeat, and Freedom at the End of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), especially p. 184. This article contends that the postwar Lee was, not surprisingly, a southern partisan who also understood the practical necessities of swift, peaceful reunion and the educational reconstruction of the South.

⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret eds. and trans. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 101-109; 190-191.

⁵ According to the U.S. Department of Defense, the tactical level of war involves battles and smaller engagements that are fought to achieve military objectives. The strategic level of war denotes the decision-making conducted by a nation's chief policy makers and military leaders, in which they determine national objectives and how national resources will be mobilized. The operational level occupies the theoretical space in between strategy and tactics, in which campaigns are planned and conducted in support of national military objectives, thereby linking the tactical and strategic levels of war. See *Joint Publication 1-02, Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 8 December 2010 (as amended through 15 June 2014), 196, 251, 258.

⁶ This quote is attributable to a prominent Civil War historian present at the 2014 Civil War Institute, Gettysburg College, PA. The individual has requested anonymity.

⁷ Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973), 82-84. Recently, Weigley's thesis regarding the influence of Jomini on Civil War military leaders' thinking and decision-making has been updated by Carol Reardon's *With a Sword in One Hand and Jomini in the Other: The Problem of Military Thought in the Civil War North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012). Reardon convincingly argues that the theoretical influence of Jomini on Civil War military leaders may have been significantly less than previously thought. However, the fundamental

principles of Napoleonic warfare seem to have been firmly ensconced in the minds of the best leaders, who, depending on the context at hand, adapted them as they saw fit.

⁸ Freeman, *Robert E. Lee*, vol. 4: 229-231.

⁹ At Chancellorsville, Union Major General Joseph Hooker, commanding the Army of the Potomac, temporarily surprised Lee by operationally outflanking him and advancing on the Confederate rear. Lee was informed of this event in time by J.E.B. Stuart, analyzed the bad situation he found himself in with clarity and objectivity, and rose to Hooker's challenge. With the help of Stonewall Jackson, Lee then reacted quickly to the Federal threat and met it head-on May 1, 1863, so shocking the Union commander with his bold attack that Hooker relinquished the initiative to Lee and retreated back into the Wilderness. The next day, Lee sent Jackson on a flank march that caved in Hooker's right and set the stage for a great Confederate victory.

¹⁰ Douglas Southall Freeman, *Lee: An Abridgment in One Volume of the Four-Volume R. E. Lee*. Abridgment by Richard Harwell (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), 525-526. McCormick's statue, which still stands on the Washington and Lee campus, is ironically confused by first-time visitors to the campus for one representing Lee himself.

¹¹ Stephen J. Gerras, "Thinking Critically about Critical Thinking: A Fundamental Guide for Strategic Leaders," in *Planner's Handbook for Operations Design*, Version 1.0 (Suffolk, VA: Joint Staff, J-7, October 7, 2011), 17.

¹² Freeman, *Robert E. Lee*, vol. 4: 316-317; Henry R. Wickham, *Address*. Virginia Senate Document No. 10. (Richmond, VA: n.p., 1940). Sometimes Davis' agreement to Lee's propositions resulted in misfortune for the Confederacy, as in the Antietam and Gettysburg campaigns, but at the time of the president's acquiescence (in these and other campaigns) no one could predict their future outcomes. A superb analysis of the Lee-Davis civil-military relationship may be found, among other fine studies, in William C. Davis, "Lee and Jefferson Davis," in Gary W. Gallagher, ed., *Lee the Soldier* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 291-308.

¹³ Douglas Southall Freeman, *Lee's Lieutenants*, 3 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1945), vol. 3: 331; Franklin L. Riley, ed., *General Robert E. Lee After Appomattox* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), 135-136; Flood, *Lee: The Last Years*, 106-108.

¹⁴ Trustees' Minutes, August 4, 1865, WLSC; Freeman, *Lee* (Harwell abridgment), 529.

¹⁵ "Mission Command," Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms (as Amended Through 15 June 2013)*, accessed 22 April 2015 at: http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/dod_dictionary; for a comprehensive assessment of Lee's mission command-oriented generalship, see Gary W. Gallagher, ed., *Lee the Soldier*, especially the essays by Charles P. Roland, Albert Castel, Gary W. Gallagher, and Robert K. Krick. Also see Joseph T. Glatthaar, *General Lee's Army: From Victory to Collapse* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 336-337.

¹⁶ The trustees of the College at this time were technically Lee's superiors in the administration hierarchy, but Lee's prestige, industry, and efficacy as a leader soon earned him de-facto pre-eminence.

¹⁷ Quoted in Thomas Nelson Page, *Robert E. Lee, Man and Soldier* (New York: Scribner's, 1911), 661.

¹⁸ Freeman, *Robert E. Lee*, vol. 4: 230-231.

¹⁹ Glatthaar, *General Lee's Army*, 335-336; Gary W. Gallagher, "Another Look at the Generalship of Robert E. Lee," in Gallagher, ed., *Lee the Soldier*, 281-285; and Joseph L. Harsh, *Confederate Tide Rising: Robert E. Lee and the Making Southern Strategy, 1861-1862* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1998), 2-5. This author is of the opinion that the Confederates failed to achieve victory at Gettysburg as a result of superior Union leadership at all levels of war (tactical, operational, and strategic) coupled with decisive mistakes committed by the Confederate leadership, also at each level of war. Much of the content in this paragraph is drawn from Christian B. Keller, *The Great Partnership: Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and the Fate of the Confederacy* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2019), especially the introduction, chapter six, and the appendix.

²⁰ R. E. Lee to G. W. Leyburn, March 20, 1866, in Lee's Manuscript Letter Book, Lee Papers, WLSC.

²¹ Flood, *Lee: The Last Years*, 111-112; Freeman, *Lee* (Harwell abridgment), 528.

²² Freeman, *Robert E. Lee*, vol 4: 278, 282.

²³ Flood, *Lee: The Last Years*, 94.