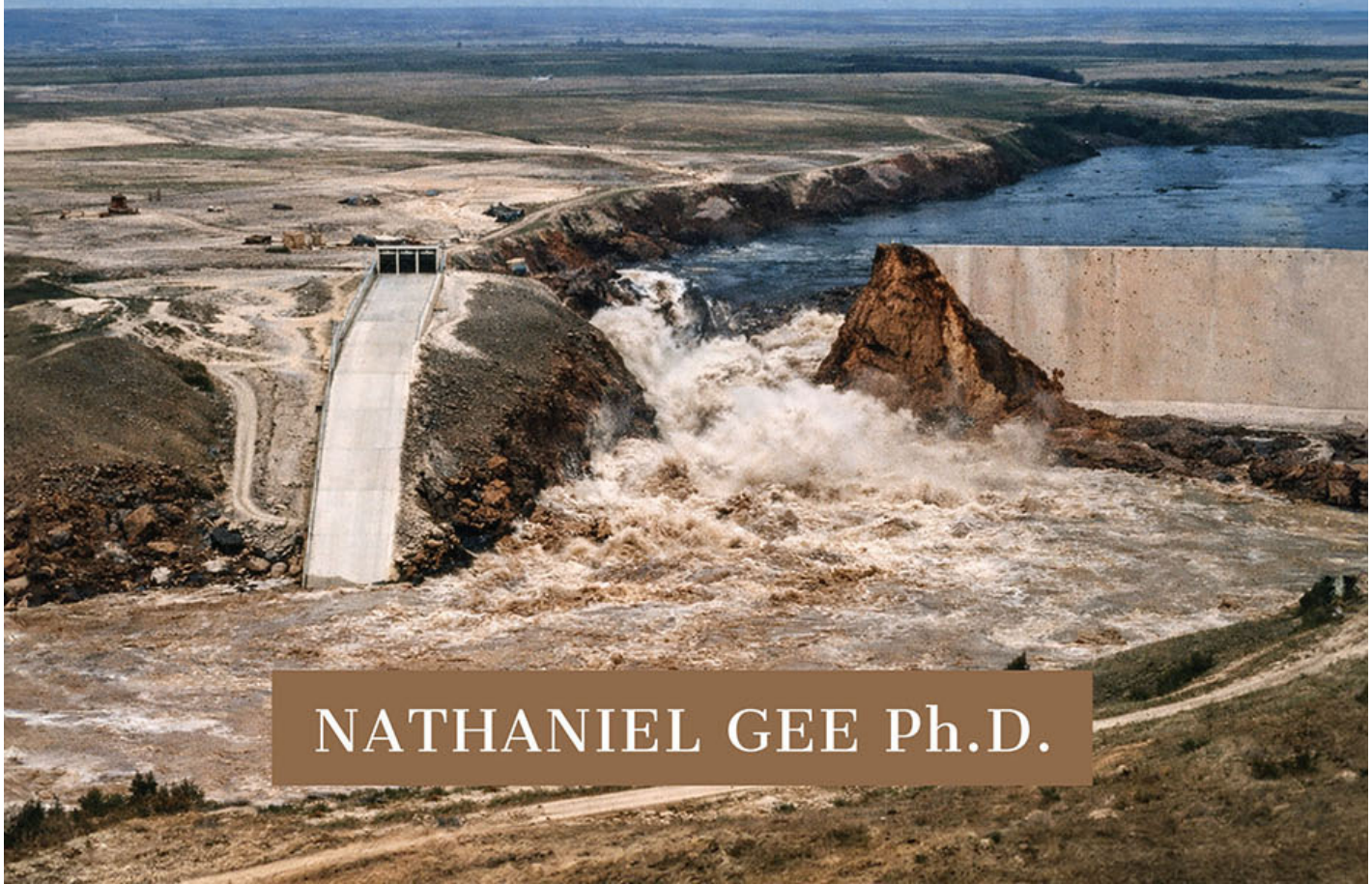
FAILURE AND FORTITUDE

HOW FAITH, POLITICS, AND POWER SHAPED THE TETON DAM DISASTER



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About the Author

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Saturday Morning

June 5, 1976, was a perfect Saturday morning. Daryl Griggs, a twenty-one-year-old sawmill worker, was eager to take advantage of it. He lived in Saint Anthony, Idaho, a small farming community on the north end of the Teton River Valley. At 9:30, Daryl threw his fishing gear into his vehicle and headed south through the little town of Wilford and the many farm fields that filled the valley. As the crisp morning air streamed through the window, filling Daryl's lungs, he knew it would be a great day. He was on his way to pick up David Benson, also twenty-one years old, who lived directly south of the river in the small town of Teton. Their sole plan: relax and fish.[1]

At that exact time, 9:30 a.m., ten miles upstream, nobody was relaxed. Robert R. Robison, the project construction engineer on the Teton Dam project, urgently phoned Harry Stivers, assistant regional director for the Pacific Northwest Region of the Bureau of Reclamation out of Boise, Idaho. On a Saturday morning, the assistant regional director, Harry Stivers, was the only one available.

"We have a critical situation here at the Teton Dam site," Robison told Stivers.[2] An hour earlier, Robison had received a call about a large leak at the dam. "You better get on-site," the workers urged him. By 9 a.m. he stood at the base of the newly constructed Teton Dam looking up at two separate seepage paths. The dam represented the Bureau of Reclamation's latest masterpiece. The Bureau of Reclamation, often simply called Reclamation, had been founded in 1902 as the Reclamation Service, one of President Theodore Roosevelt's many initiatives. Their claim to fame would later become the tagline "Managing Water in the West."

The dam was busy doing just that for the water that flowed down the Teton River. While not the largest dam in Reclamation's inventory, it was no slouch either. Standing 305 feet tall, it was a zoned earth-fill structure composed of silt, gravel, and cobbles, meticulously placed one truckload at a time during the three years of construction.[3]

All dams experience seepage, with water finding its way through or around the structure, and Teton was no exception. The first signs of seepage had been noted two days earlier, on June 3, 1976, over a thousand feet downstream on the canyon wall. The canyon was formed of steep, highly fractured volcanic rock called rhyolite. The seepage rate was about a hundred gallons per minute. It was considered a good sign. The dam was filling; it was expected that the water table downstream would rise and create some seepage. And most importantly, the seepage was clear. Clear seepage indicates passage of water—and only water. Dam engineers feel differently when they encounter turbid or cloudy seepage, as it signifies that sediment is also passing through. This flow of sediment can erode out material and compromise the dam's integrity.

On Friday, June 4, 1976, additional seepage was noted closer to the dam, about twenty gallons per minute, but it remained clear. Again, no cause for concern. Before leaving that day, Robison conducted one final inspection of the upstream and downstream face of the dam. Nothing unusual. But in the rising sunlight of June 5, the seepage spot he now noted was significantly different. The area where the dam connects to the solid canyon walls is known as the abutment, and it was along the right abutment[4] that the seepage poured out. One seepage point was in the abutment, not the dam itself, near the base or toe of the dam. The flow was tremendous, over 22,000 gallons per minute, and most alarmingly, it was turbid. Robison noted another seepage spot, about 150 feet up along the abutment, flowing at 1,000 gallons per minute, also cloudy. The only good news was that both seepage points were in the canyon wall, downstream just enough that it didn't appear that they were cutting into the dam itself.[5]

"Do you think you can get this under control?" Stivers, the assistant regional director, asked.

"I think it's critical, but we *can* get it under control," Robison reassured Stivers. Just before the call, he had spoken with Duane Bucket, the project

manager for Morrison-Knudsen and Kiewit, the contractors on the job. They devised a plan to excavate a channel at the base of the dam to collect the seepage and protect the dam and powerhouse. But despite the plan and his reassurances, Robison must have had his doubts, because before getting off the phone, he asked, "Do you think we should alert downstream residents?"

The two weighed the decision but ultimately decided the situation was not imminent, and Stivers added, "We don't want to cause a panic."[6]

Robison hung up and returned to monitor the dam. By 10 a.m., the leak was no longer in the abutment, adjacent to the dam, but in the dam itself near the same elevation, 150 feet up from the base. Not only was it in the dam, but it was turbid and much larger at almost 7,000 gallons per minute. The material that made up the dam itself was washing downstream. To limit the loss of material, two Morrison-Knudsen bulldozers crept down the front of the dam and began to push rock into what was quickly becoming a large hole in the dam's face. By 10:30 a.m., the situation Robison thought he could control was clearly out of hand. He raced back to the phone in the on-site construction office at 10:45 a.m. and called the sheriff's offices in both Madison and Fremont Counties. It was during these calls that Robison said, "There is a possibility the dam might go, but it will go slowly."[7] Based on this evaluation, no immediate action was initiated to warn downstream residents.

It was now 11 a.m., and things had deteriorated quickly. The hole in the downstream face of the dam was growing rapidly, and the bulldozers were making no more progress than children throwing pebbles into a lake. Robison quickly shifted his focus from the downstream hole to what was occurring upstream. Those on-site noted that a whirlpool, about six feet in diameter, had formed upstream of the dam. Like a giant bathtub whose plug had been pulled, water was being sucked out. It was time for action. Robison called the sheriffs again, ordering a complete evacuation of the downstream areas.

Dumping rock on the downstream face was not working. They shifted tactics and began dumping rock on the upstream side to see if it would get sucked into the increasing void and slow the loss of water and material. Two bulldozers were sent to work, pushing material toward the whirlpool on the upstream side. Jay Calderwood, the operator of one of the bulldozers, sprang into action with all the urgency the situation demanded.

Sitting on a 100,000-pound machine atop the dam that was vanishing before their eyes, he said, "This is it. I can't do a bit of good at what I'm doing. But I'll go out fighting. I'll not be a coward."[8]

Minutes after beginning work on the upstream side, the two operators on the downstream side felt the ground below them give way. Luckily, they didn't wait. *Time Magazine* published a photo in their June 21, 1976, issue showing the workers fleeing the equipment as the dozers fell helplessly into the void.[9] The massive earthmovers disappeared and washed downstream. Heroic intervention was not going to save this dam. Jay Calderwood and the other operator on the upstream dozers were soon instructed to stop work and drive to safety. There was nothing to do now but watch in horror and pray for those downstream.

It was around 11:15 a.m., fifteen minutes after receiving Robison's call, when Deputy Sheriff Rhinehart began his drive through the streets, urging all to evacuate on a loudspeaker in the small town of Teton, Idaho. With a population of under 500, it didn't take long to get the word out. David Benson lived in Teton, but he wasn't home; Daryl Griggs had picked him up for their fishing trip that morning. They took their gear and headed down to the river, leaving approximately fifteen minutes before the sheriff came through town.

While everyone was evacuating their small town, the boys were well on their way to a perfect day of fishing. After half an hour of no success on the bank, they decided to wade upstream until they found a point where the river split with an island in the middle. It looked like an ideal place to catch a few fish, so they stopped. It was then that a small plane flown by Lewis Hart, who had gone out to warn anyone in the canyon, flew by at a low elevation. "Hey David, is that someone you know?" Daryl asked. "Because they keep waving at us."[10] Neither could see for sure, but they waved back to be polite.

Their eyes quickly shifted from the sky to the ground as the water began to rise. "It's the new dam! Those fools must have made a mistake and are releasing too much water," Daryl guessed.

The water was rising fast, climbing six feet and almost completely covering the island. David joked with his friend, "I guess we'll have to swim out of here."

Daryl turned to look upstream and saw a thirty-foot wall of water heading directly for them. "David, look! Quick, jump!" he yelled and quickly followed

his own advice. He wanted to turn to see if David had followed him, but movement of any kind was no longer within his control. The water whipped him back and forth as dirt, rocks, and full-grown trees were tossed around as helplessly as he was. Time and time again, he fought to the surface only to be pulled back into the violent rush. "Every time I went down, I didn't plan on ever coming back up." Eventually it was a tree that helped him stay on the surface. "There were thousands of logs, so I grabbed onto one of them." Looking over the landscape, he saw the water tearing down everything in its path. Bleating filled the air as cattle fled for their lives before helplessly drowning under the flow. The home of his good friend, Keith Tucker, was ripped apart along with other neighbors' homes. It was hard to do anything besides gape in awe as the little valley, his home, his entire life, was torn to shreds. But he had other problems.

The log that he grabbed onto now threatened to destroy what it had saved as it began pushing him under. He struggled to stay above the flow as other logs gathered. With the force of two colliding cars, the log crashed into another, pinning Daryl in place. The logs were jammed, and Daryl was powerless to escape. As more logs stacked up, the water's force against the growing pile increased, pressing against Daryl's ribs, the last structural defense for his vital organs. He could feel the individual ribs begin to crack and break. Breathing was impossible. He could not create enough force to get any air into his lungs, one of which was now punctured. Death seemed seconds away when, finally, the log jam broke, the pressure released, and the desperately needed oxygen reentered his system. Another quarter mile downstream, a pile of debris surrounding Daryl washed into the base of a semi-submerged cottonwood tree. In excruciating pain and with little remaining strength, he crawled up into a fork in the tree and passed out.

Four and a half hours passed before he came to. Looking over a flooded wasteland, he began to call for help. With a collapsed lung and five broken ribs, yelling was limited and painful. The bank was only thirty feet away from the tree, but Daryl knew he wouldn't make it alive if he tried to swim. The sun was setting. If no one heard him, the tree would become his coffin. But someone did hear. Craig Hawes had a boat. He made his way to the cottonwood and rescued Daryl. Several helicopter rides later, he arrived in an Idaho Falls hospital, where he would stay for the next ten days.[11]

The following day, friends and family came to visit, bringing news that the dam had failed.

"What happened to David?" Daryl asked.

No one wanted to answer.