



CIVIL WAR

LINCOLN and GRANT

The Westerners Who
Won the Civil War

EDWARD H.
BONEKEMPER III



LINCOLN
and
GRANT



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GRANT

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EDWARD H.
BONEKEMPER III



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DEDICATION



This book is dedicated to President Abraham Lincoln and Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant who played major roles in shaping a unified and freedom-loving nation.

It is not the least of “the crowning mercies” of these days that our political and military chiefs are men upon whose simple, earnest, unselfish devotion to their country no taint of suspicion was ever breathed; and our children will be forever grateful that our national salvation was achieved by the people under two such leaders as ABRAHAM LINCOLN and ULYSSES S. GRANT.

Harpers Weekly, April 22, 1865

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INTRODUCTION



In the course of writing two earlier books, *A Victor, Not a Butcher: The Overlooked Military Genius of Ulysses S. Grant* and *Grant and Lee: Victorious American and Vanquished Virginian*, I discovered the increasingly close working relationship between President Abraham Lincoln and General Ulysses S. Grant as the Union moved toward victory in the Civil War. Astounded to discover that there has been no book-length treatment exclusively about their significant relationship, I decided to examine their backgrounds, experiences, and wartime interactions in order to demonstrate how these two men, working together, won the Civil War.

This book is the result. It is not intended to be a thorough biography of either man but rather a sufficient study of their lives and Civil War activities to understand and appreciate their extraordinary individual and collaborative achievements. It examines Lincoln and Grant's similarities and differences, and describes how their relationship grew into one of the most significant in American history. It terminates with Lincoln's death on April 15, 1865.¹

The relationship of the president as commander-in-chief with his generals in uniform had been and remains a critical issue in American government. In doing little more than designating the president as commander-in-chief and giving Congress the power to declare war, the U.S. Constitution does not provide any real guidance on the issue of waging war. The War of 1812 lacked national military organization or coordination on the part of the United States. The Mexican-American War saw President James K. Polk first appoint Zachary Taylor as his leading general to keep Winfield Scott out of the limelight and then replace Taylor with Scott after Taylor's military successes—all primarily for political reasons.

Therefore, Lincoln was treading in essentially uncharted territory as he undertook a gigantic war and experimented with civilian-military relations. As will be seen, Lincoln's relationship with general-in-chief Winfield Scott, George B. McClellan and Henry Halleck were less than satisfactory. Between the terms of the latter two, Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton even tried running the war without a designated general-in-chief. It was only with the elevation of Grant to that position in March 1864 and with the quickly developing cooperation between Lincoln and Grant that an effective civilian-military relationship became a reality. Their development of a civilian-controlled, militarily effective relationship, with virtually no precedent upon which to build, was astounding and provided a model for future American wars.²

Lincoln and Grant's positive relationship was enhanced by many similarities in their personalities and life experiences. Both were born in modest circumstances west of the Appalachian Mountains, what was regarded in the early nineteenth century as the American frontier. They were men of the river—born near the Ohio River, they understood the uses and value of the nation's inland river systems. They were humble, self-effacing individuals who worked their ways from the bottom to the top of American society. Both battled internal demons but stubbornly pursued the critical goals of

their lives. They overcame numerous obstacles and eventually prevailed as two of America's greatest leaders at a time when the nation needed them most.

Parallel experiences in their personal lives included: marriages into slave-owning families, distracting interferences in their lives from other relatives (Lincoln's wife and Grant's father and father-in-law), their self-taught mastery of the English language, and their different but effective interpersonal skills.

They also shared some personality traits. James M. McPherson described Grant: "shy with strangers, uncomfortable in the limelight, notoriously taciturn, Grant earned a reputation as 'the American Sphinx.' Yet wherever he went, things got done—quietly, efficiently, quickly, with no wasted motion. In crisis situations during combat, Grant remained calm. He did not panic. He persevered and never accepted defeat even when he appeared to be beaten."³ Although Lincoln was more introspective than shy, much of this description could be applied to him as well; he faced his own forms of combat.

Significantly, some of Lincoln's positive attributes contrasted with, and complemented, those of Grant. For example, Lincoln was a political genius⁴ while Grant had military acumen.⁵ Unlike the Confederacy's President Jefferson Davis, Lincoln did not insist on micromanaging the war. In fact, Lincoln delegated more and more military authority to Grant as the general earned the president's confidence. For his part, Grant yielded to Lincoln's political expertise on most significant issues, including the movement toward emancipation and the use of black soldiers. Grant also deferred to Lincoln on most major military strategic issues—a demonstration that Lincoln indeed was the senior partner in their successful partnership.

Grant and Lincoln were men of the new American West, an area far removed in miles and miles from the original thirteen colonies of the Eastern Seaboard. Today's Midwest was the West of antebellum America.⁶ Lincoln was born in Kentucky, moved to Indiana, and established his permanent home in Illinois. Grant was born in Ohio, married and lived in Missouri, and moved to Illinois. Although Lincoln was a long-term resident of Illinois, Grant had arrived there less than a year before the Civil War erupted—in just enough time to benefit from his Illinois political connections.

Grant's most effective congressional political supporter was Congressman Elihu B. Washburne, of Galena, Illinois, neighbor and the senior Republican in the U.S. House of Representatives. He had been a friend and political associate of Lincoln since the 1840s. Washburne was a loyal supporter of both Lincoln and Grant throughout the war. Most significantly, the congressman had earned Lincoln's trust and used that relationship to protect Grant against vicious attacks from reporters, jealous military competitors, and others seeking to advance their own interests.

Their shared Illinois and Midwestern heritage enhanced Lincoln and Grant's relationship. One astute analyst commented, "A man of the border state, Lincoln could see all sides, could feel the Civil War and all of its issues founded on race and place in his very bones."⁷ Lincoln's 1862 annual report to Congress provided insights into his view of the adverse impact of Southern secession on the Upper West, which he described as the "great interior region, bounded east by the Alleghanies [*sic*], north by the British dominions, west by the Rocky mountains, and south by the line along which the culture of corn and cotton meets. . . ."⁸

After discussing that area's great potential for population growth and agricultural production, Lincoln explained the effect of secession: "As part of one nation, its people now find, and may forever find, their way to Europe by New York, to South America and Africa by New Orleans, and to Asia by San Francisco. But separate our common country into two nations, as designed by the present rebellion

and every man of this great interior region is thereby cut off from some one or more of these outlets not perhaps, by a physical barrier, but by embarrassing and onerous trade regulations. . . . The outlets, east, west, and south, are indispensable to the well-being of the people inhabiting, and inhabit, this vast interior region.”⁹

The vital importance of the Mississippi River to the Midwest was a clear implication of Lincoln’s words. In mid-1863, Union army chaplain John Eaton related Lincoln’s mid-war interest in the Mississippi: “He was eager for details of Vicksburg, and his references to the Mississippi River proved that his memories of it had stayed by him, filling his mind with the significance of the commercial influence of the great waterway, and of its effect not only upon the country at large, but particularly upon the Negro population, which, now that the Mississippi was open from the source to its mouth, would swarm to the river as a channel of escape into the North.”¹⁰ Clearly, Grant’s successful 1862–63 efforts to gain Union control over the Mississippi, Tennessee and Cumberland rivers reflected a Westerner’s geographic awareness that meshed perfectly with Lincoln’s conception of the significance of those rivers to the nation as a whole.

Grant’s increasing value to Lincoln and Lincoln’s support and protection of Grant during the Civil War are reflected in two widely reported apocryphal tales. There are many reports that Lincoln, when confronted with rumors and false accounts of Grant’s heavy drinking and drunkenness, stated that he wanted to know what whiskey Grant consumed so that he could provide a barrel to each of his generals. In response to recommendations that Grant be removed from command (particularly after the bloody April 1862 Battle of Shiloh), Lincoln is reputed to have said, “I cannot spare this man; he fights.” The reason these unverified stories have received such credence is that they appear to reflect Lincoln’s actual attitude toward Grant.¹¹

McPherson described Lincoln’s primary leadership role: “As president and leader of his party as well as commander in chief, Lincoln was principally responsible for shaping and defining policy. From first to last that policy was preservation of the United States as one nation, indivisible, and as a republic based on majority rule. . . . At all levels of policy, strategy, and operations . . . Lincoln was hands-on commander in chief who persisted through a terrible ordeal of defeats and disappointments to final triumph—and tragedy—at the end.”¹²

The late Russell F. Weigley, one of America’s foremost military historians, proclaimed Grant’s uniqueness as a military commander in his willingness to perform under civilian (i.e., Lincoln’s) control: “A straightforward man with few pretensions of any kind, Grant certainly did not claim to be a military scholar. His genius for command was a product mainly of clear-eyed native intelligence and even of common sense, not primarily of more specialized professional attainments. He was, therefore, glad to communicate with his civilian superiors with candor and without condescension. But Grant was almost *sui generis*.”¹³

Not only was Grant willing to work with Lincoln, but the president also was willing to concede much—though not all—military decision-making to Grant when he became general-in-chief. Lincoln had tried that approach unsuccessfully with Major General George B. McClellan. After McClellan’s defeat at Antietam, Lincoln effectively was his own general-in-chief both before he appointed Major General Henry W. Halleck to that position in July 1862 and later when it became clear that Halleck was unwilling and unable to assume the responsibilities of that position. By the time Grant was named general-in-chief in March 1864, Lincoln and Grant both believed “that only the utter military defeat of the Confederacy would suffice to reunite the nation.” Their shared non-conciliatory approach and Lincoln’s confidence in Grant’s military judgment enabled the president to reduce, but not eliminate

his military activity. Lincoln stayed involved as commander-in-chief while Grant effectively performed his role as general-in-chief.¹⁴

The most significant factor that bound together Lincoln and Grant was their shared belief in the necessity to proactively use appropriate and aggressive force to carry the North's burden of winning the Civil War. Daniel Sutherland concluded that General John Pope's harsh mid-1862 anti-Confederate pronouncements (blessed by Lincoln and Secretary of War Stanton) and concurrent Union confiscation laws cleared the way for Grant's aggressive "total war" campaigns of 1864–65. He stated "Grant benefitted [*sic*] enormously from the fact that a precedent for waging total war had already been set, the legal machinery erected, and the philosophy accepted. Lincoln knew what had to be done and ultimately, in the persons of Grant and Sherman, he had the right men to do the job."¹⁵ Although "total war" overstates the hard war practiced by Grant and Sherman, since they did not deliberately kill civilians, Sutherland's point about precedents is valid.

Well before 1864, however, Grant had demonstrated his propensity for aggressively pursuing and taking enemy armies out of action. He had captured enemy armies at Fort Donelson in 1862 (14,000 captured) and Vicksburg in 1863 (almost 30,000 captured). Grant's aggressiveness had paid dividends by repelling a major Confederate attack and saving his army at Shiloh (April 1862) and dealing a crushing blow to Confederate forces at Chattanooga (November 1863).

Beginning with his September 22, 1862, Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, the president increasingly encouraged utilization of blacks as a vital part of the Union war effort. He pushed for their use in the Union army (about 180,000 served) and navy (about 20,000) and wreaked havoc on the South as blacks abandoned plantations to seek freedom with the advancing Union armies. Unlike George McClellan (who fiercely opposed emancipation) and William T. Sherman (who never outgrew his racism), Grant fully supported Lincoln's emancipation and black soldier policies.

After Lincoln had brought Grant to the East as general-in-chief and before the 1864 Overland Campaign, the president summarized his reaction to Grant in a conversation with his Third Secretary William O. Stoddard: "Well, I hardly know what to think of him, altogether, I never saw him, myself till he came here to take the command. He's the quietest little fellow you ever saw. . . . The only evidence you have that he's in any place is that he makes things git! Wherever he is, things move!"¹⁶

Working in tandem with the president, Grant certainly would "make things git" on a sustained basis for the first time in the Eastern Theater. His unrelenting 1864–65 moves against Lee's army, exactly what Lincoln wanted him to do, almost won the war in two months and did win it in less than a year. Just as significantly, Grant, with Lincoln's blessing, entrusted Sherman with adequate troops and discretion to threaten and capture Atlanta, a significant victory that virtually ensured Lincoln's reelection, and then to march through Georgia in late 1864 and the Carolinas in early 1865—movements that destroyed Confederate morale, caused thousands of Rebel soldiers to desert, and ensured the doom of Robert E. Lee's vaunted Army of Northern Virginia.

In summary, Grant and Lincoln shared a frontier American heritage, as well as common sense and dogged determination. This book describes how each man developed those and other key traits during their childhoods, early lives, the Mexican War (at home and abroad), and their rough-and-tumble economic and political trials of the 1850s. The bulk of this book, however, describes most of their separate, and then later coordinated, activities of Lincoln and Grant during the Civil War. The exciting successes and dismaying failures in the military and political arenas brought them closer together and ultimately evolved into the critical partnership that won the Civil War.

Throughout this chronological study, you should be alert to some underlying themes that are full

summarized in my final chapter. One thread tying these two men together was their critical similar personality traits (specifically humility, decisiveness, clarity of communication, moral courage and perseverance). Beyond those shared characteristics, Lincoln and Grant developed an increasing mutual respect for each other, which then grew into an unshakeable loyalty to each other. Ultimately, the common traits, respect, and loyalty made them victorious.

They developed a working relationship in which each was comfortable with his and the other's role. The critical areas governed by this relationship were national policy, military strategy, military operations and tactics, and military personnel decision-making. As described in some detail in the final chapter, I conclude that:

- As to national policies, Lincoln made the decisions, and Grant accommodated and implemented them.
- As to military strategy, although Lincoln and Grant usually agreed on it, Lincoln was in charge and Grant understood that fact and accepted it.
- As to military tactics, the president generally left Grant free to conduct military operations with tactics of his own choosing.
- As to the murkier area of military operations, particularly in the East, Lincoln did intervene on several occasions, and Grant generally deferred to the president's suggestions and responded to his concerns.
- As to military personnel decisions concerning manpower in the field, their relations were marked by cooperation regarding manpower numbers, recruiting and using black soldiers, and prisoner-of-war exchange policies.
- As to military personnel decisions regarding the appointment and retention of general officers, Grant recognized and deferred to the president's political needs while using face-saving organizational changes to accomplish his military goals, and they successfully cooperated on issues relating to promotion, retention and assignment of generals.

In conclusion, these two Westerners employed their critical shared traits and mutual trust to form an effective partnership that resulted in relentless pursuit and destruction of the enemy, effectively used black soldiers, and ultimately proved decisive in the Civil War. Their successful working relationship reached its peak when Lincoln as commander-in-chief and Grant as general-in-chief brought the war to a successful conclusion within little more than a year after Grant assumed his new position.

MEN OF THE WEST



Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant were men of America's new West—the trans-Appalachia. They also were men of the river—the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. With the shared roots in frontier poverty, Lincoln and Grant were ordinary Americans who became great Americans.

Steven Woodworth could have been describing Lincoln when he wrote of Grant's “matter-of-fact steadiness,” “hard-driving aggressiveness,” and “quiet, can-do attitude.” Likewise, his conclusion was equally valid for both men: “Nor is it any coincidence that Grant's qualities tended to be those of the up-and-coming region of the country, one day to be called the Midwest, [where people] had approached the challenges of carving farms out of the wilderness.”¹ Sharing those traits and similar origins, Lincoln and Grant both came of age in what was then America's frontier region—where diligence and humility trumped pedigree and pretentiousness.

LINCOLN'S FORMATIVE YEARS

Lincoln was born in Hardin, Kentucky, on February 12, 1809. His parents were the barely literate farmer-carpenter Thomas Lincoln and the illiterate Nancy Hanks Lincoln, both of whom came from rural western Virginia. Because of land title problems and competition from large plantations with slave labor, Thomas moved the family to southern Indiana in 1816. By helping his father clear the land and start a new farm, young Abe grew into a muscular youth who excelled at wrestling.²

When young Lincoln was only nine, milk sickness killed his mother.³ After a year of living in squalid conditions, the family morale and living conditions vastly improved when Thomas briefly returned to Kentucky and married Sarah Bush Johnston, a widow with household goods and a pleasant disposition. She immediately came with him to Indiana, created a comfortable home environment and developed a close and loving relationship with Abe. She arranged for his schooling at various informal schools in the area—a total of less than one year of formal education.⁴

Lincoln's initial taste of education whetted his appetite for more, and he embarked on a life-long program of self-education. Among the early books he read were Samuel Kirkham's *English Grammar*, *Aesop's Fables*, *Webster's Spelling Book*, *The Life of Henry Clay*, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Parson Mason Weems's *Life of George Washington*, and William Scott's *Lessons of Elocution*. This last tome stimulated Abe to practice public speaking by mimicking sermons and giving political talks to other children.⁵

Perhaps the one trait, other than being a hard worker, that he received from his father was the ability to tell “humorous stories with a rustic, frontier flavor. Abe’s skill and confidence in telling these stories in a public forum owed something to his father’s convivial and witty nature.”⁶ While Lincoln had a loving relationship with his stepmother, young Abraham had a strained and often hostile relationship with his father. Barely literate himself, Thomas Lincoln did not encourage Abe’s quest for knowledge and sometimes beat him for putting his reading ahead of his chores. He even threw away young Abe’s books and announced that, “if Abe don’t fool away all his time on his books, he may never make something yet.”⁷

Desiring a broader exposure to the world than his father’s small farm, Lincoln spent more and more time in activities elsewhere. He engaged in “house raisings, corn shuckings, timber logging, hog killings, and firewood cuttings for passing steamboats on the Ohio River.” The river system provided an eye-opening experience for the nineteen-year-old Lincoln. He traveled with the storekeeper’s son down the Ohio and the Mississippi all the way to New Orleans on a flatboat loaded with goods for sale. That trip probably exposed him to the customs of slavery along the river, as well as to the slave market of New Orleans, where thousands of slaves were sold every month. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Lincoln was well-traveled and visited another region—the South—several times.⁸

That first river journey and a later trip to New Orleans definitely revealed to Lincoln the critical importance of the rivers as lifelines of commerce and communication in the infant republic. This realization would be critical to his future national policies and military strategy.

In 1830, Abe helped his parents move the family 200 miles to the fertile plains of south-central Illinois. After helping to clear and fence the land, the twenty-one-year-old Lincoln was free to seek his own fortunes. After having given his labor and wages to his father until he had reached the age of majority, Abraham in 1831 made a clean break from his father and his indolent, ignorant, and backward way of life: “Growing up in the crude and isolated society of frontier agriculture, he escaped from it by force of will. His pioneering experience remained ever visible in the Lincolnian style. . . .”

His temporary hiring by businessman Denton Offutt led to Lincoln’s second eye-opening exposure to a world outside his own. In April and May 1831, Offutt, Lincoln and two others took a flatboat of goods down the Sangamon, Illinois and Mississippi rivers all the way (again) to New Orleans. There Lincoln observed and experienced the interaction of a myriad of people and languages. He also had another opportunity to see slavery in action. In disgust, he turned away from the manhandling of a female slave at a slave auction.¹⁰

After that trip, Offutt hired Lincoln as a clerk in his New Salem, Illinois store. Lincoln quickly proved to be a successful clerk and enjoyed spending his free time reading Shakespeare and numerous other literary and historical authors. His local popularity rose so quickly that he was drafted as a temporary clerk of elections and then elected captain of the local militia company that assembled in 1832 to oppose the Fox and Sac Indians under Chief Black Hawk. As a soldier, he saw the results of a few massacres but did not engage in any fighting. In 1832 he ran unsuccessfully for the state legislature, but in 1834 he ran again and, after intensive English grammar tutoring, was elected to his first political position.

From 1833 to 1836, he also was the postmaster of New Salem, Illinois. There he met and lost the first love of his life, Ann Rutledge, whose death sent Lincoln into deep and almost suicidal depression.

During his early years of independence, as summarized by Jay Winik, “He had his run of bad luck. He set up a store, which failed, then set up as a postmaster, but was unable to make a living at that

When a circuit court issued a judgment against him for overdue notes, the sheriff attached his personal possessions, even his horse.” When Lincoln’s business partner William Berry died in 1835, the grocery business went broke and thousands of dollars of debt remained. Lincoln not only paid off his share of the debts but Berry’s as well. Lincoln spent fifteen years paying off those debts.¹¹ In addition to his roles as storekeeper and postmaster, he worked hard to become a skilled and respected surveyor who often resolved property disputes.

Young Lincoln found his calling in law and politics. While serving as postmaster, he studied law books and began learning the art of politics as a Whig state legislator from 1834 to 1842. Early in his legislative career, he successfully maneuvered to get the Illinois state capital moved to Springfield. He had obtained passage of a requirement that the capital city being selected provide \$50,000 for state public buildings—a provision that eliminated several smaller towns from the competition. When the final one-third payment came due after the Panic of 1837 and resulting economic downturn, Stephen Douglas proposed that Springfield find a way to repudiate the debt. Lincoln, however, found that approach dishonorable (“We have the benefit. Let us stand to our obligation as men,” he said), and he and other Springfield leaders paid the debt with borrowed money they subsequently repaid.¹²

As a loyal Whig, Lincoln admired Henry Clay and fought in the legislature for public funding for internal improvements, such as railroads and canals. He became a leader of the Whigs in the legislature and remained an Illinois party leader for them until the party disintegrated in the mid-1850s. William Harris stressed that “Lincoln’s western Whig Background enabled him to understand the political, constitutional, and racial realities in the border states”¹³—an understanding that proved valuable during the Civil War.

Disappointed that his various occupations were not resulting in substantial income and stimulation, to do so by Indian war acquaintance John Todd Stuart, Lincoln immersed himself in legal treatises and successfully applied for admission to the bar in late 1836. The next year the young lawyer moved to Springfield, where he became Stuart’s junior partner. His subsequent legal partners were Stephen T. Logan and William H. Herndon. Between 1837 and 1861 he personally handled about 5,600 cases, about 194 of them being civil rather than criminal.¹⁴

GRANT’S FORMATIVE YEARS

Grant was born as Hiram Ulysses Grant in the Ohio River town of Point Pleasant, in Clermont County, Ohio, on April 27, 1822. He was the eldest of six children. Young “Ulysses” or “Ulyss” loved working with horses but detested his father’s tannery. By the age of nine or ten, he was earning money breaking horses and driving passengers all over Ohio. In his memoirs, Grant described his childhood as a pleasant one: “I did not like to work; but I did as much of it, while young, as grown men can be hired to do in these days, and attended school at the same time. I had as many privileges as any boy in the village, and probably more than most of them.”¹⁵

His father, however, was a loud, argumentative and litigious bully who excoriated Ulysses for his total failure as a horse-trader. Unknown to Ulysses, his father arranged for his appointment to West Point through their local congressman, Thomas Hamer, who submitted Grant’s name as Ulysses (Simpson being his mother’s maiden name) Grant. Although Grant signed some Academy documents as “Ulysses Hiram Grant,” he signed his eight-year enlistment oath as “U. S. Grant” and was on his way to being known to history as Ulysses S. (or U. S.) Grant. William T. Sherman, a cadet three years ahead of Grant, saw his name appearing on a list of new cadets as “U. S. Grant.” He and other cadets

came up with the names “United States” and “Uncle Sam” to fit the initials and then finally settled on the moniker “Sam,” which became Grant’s nickname for life.¹⁶

At West Point from 1839 to 1843, Grant made many lifelong friends, including James Longstreet, who later commanded the First Corps in Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia, and Rufus Ingalls, who would serve as Quartermaster of the Army of the Potomac. He knew all of the cadets in the classes that graduated between 1840 and 1846; those classes included over fifty men who were generals in the Civil War.¹⁷ Grant’s great horse riding, middling grades, and below-average conduct marks resulted in his graduating twenty-first in his 1843 class of 39.¹⁸ Perhaps the highlight of his West Point year was his graduation ceremony, during which he rode a large, unmanageable horse and jumped a bit higher than a man’s head. Grant was the only cadet who could ride that horse well, and their jump astounded the crowd at the ceremony.¹⁹

During his post-graduation leave of absence in Ohio, Grant twice was mocked about his new military uniform, and the incidents, in Grant’s own words, “gave me a distaste for military uniforms that I never recovered from.” As a result of that experience and the influence of a casually dressed Mexican War mentor, Major General Zachary Taylor, Grant infrequently wore a sword unless ordered to do so, and during the Civil War was notorious for his rumpled, informal, and plain uniforms.²⁰ He generally wore a private’s blouse with his indicia of rank stitched on the shoulders.

As a junior officer, Grant was assigned to Jefferson Barracks outside St. Louis. He visited the nearby home of an Academy roommate, Frederick T. Dent, and met Dent’s slaveholder father, Frederick F. Dent, and young Dent’s sister, Julia Boggs Dent. Ulysses courted and became engaged to Julia before the Mexican War intervened. Her father, however, gave only lukewarm approval to the match.²¹ Grant would have to prove to Frederick Dent, and to himself, that he was a man with great potential.

SHARED EARLY EXPERIENCES OF LINCOLN AND GRANT

On the threshold of the Mexican-American War (1846–48),²² Grant was a young and untested military officer, and Lincoln was a successful lawyer and state politician unknown and unproven on the national political scene. They shared common origins and experiences.

Lincoln and Grant were both born in modest circumstances and remained in them for decades. They lived in the rural Ohio River Valley, where Southern and Northern views on social and political issues alternately blended and clashed. Thus, unlike most in the North, South, and East, they were exposed to more than one set of standards and viewpoints.

Both had benefited from loving mothers and experienced uncaring, if not quite hostile, fathers. Neither had much formal education—until Grant went to West Point. From their earliest days, both were hardworking but made little financial headway. Their lives were not easy.

THE MEXICAN WAR: A MILITARY AND POLITICAL TRAINING GROUND



The Mexican War provided both Lincoln and Grant with their first exposure to the complexities of war. When the fighting ended, Grant was a twenty-six-year-old captain who had been decorated for his bravery; Lincoln was a thirty-eight-year-old freshman congressman. While Grant heroically fought in the war and at least retroactively criticized it, Lincoln's involvement with the war was political. As a new congressman just after the fighting ceased, he faced the difficult task—common in American history—of criticizing the origin of the war without faulting or undermining the troops or appearing unpatriotic. By different paths, both men developed a solid skepticism about the war's purposes combined with support for America's military actions and its soldiers. Grant's military experience and personal contacts would prove invaluable during the Civil War. Lincoln's political experience was less useful and threatened his political future.

LINCOLN'S MEXICAN WAR POLITICAL EXPERIENCES

The most controversial political issue of 1844 was the annexation of Texas, which Democrat President-elect James K. Polk convinced President John Tyler to push through in December 1844. In October 1845 comments to a friend, Lincoln supported the Whig Party indifference to national expansion, said the Texas annexation probably would not affect slavery, and added a telling note of caution: "It is possibly true, to some extent, that with annexation, some slaves may be sent to Texas and continued in slavery, that otherwise might have been liberated. To whatever extent this may be true, I think annexation an evil." He added that free states should not interfere with slavery in slave states, but explained: "I hold it to be equally clear, that we should never knowingly lend ourselves directly or indirectly, to prevent that slavery from dying a natural death. . . ." By 1845, therefore, Lincoln was opposed to the expansion of slavery but believed it was prudent to await a more propitious moment to accomplish anything in regard to its demise.¹

By 1846 Polk had provoked a war with Mexico in order to expand the nation—and the area available for expansion of slavery. When war broke out and patriotic rallies were held across the country, a reluctant Lincoln was called upon to speak. He unenthusiastically said that since he was not going to war, he would not tell others to do so but rather told them to do what they thought their duty called for.² Thus, Lincoln was not an early opponent of the Mexican War and did not make it an issue in his successful congressional election campaign in 1846, when fighting was ongoing in Mexico.

In August 1846 Lincoln was elected to Congress to represent Springfield and its environs. With crossover support from many Democrats, he won impressively: 6,340 votes to 4,829, over his major opponent, Methodist preacher Peter Cartwright—with 56 percent of the total vote. His friend Joshua Speed claimed he gave Lincoln \$200 raised by fellow Whigs for his campaign expenses and that Lincoln gave it all back except for seventy-five cents. A former governor commented that the large majority was “the finest compliment personally and the highest political endorsement any man could expect.”³

Under the strange practice of the day, his term did not begin for another sixteen months—December 1847. While many Whigs began to criticize the Mexican War as Polk’s war of conquest, frustrated Lincoln remained silent for fear of the usual criticisms about lack of patriotism and failure to support the troops that usually result from anti-war opinions. While in Kentucky in November 1847 on his way to Washington, Lincoln heard Henry Clay, his idol of many years, criticize the origins of the war as he launched his 1848 presidential bid. Lincoln, however, saw that Clay was fading and joined many other Whigs in support of the successful candidacy of General Zachary Taylor, one of the military heroes of the Mexican War.⁴

Lincoln, his wife Mary, and two young sons arrived in Washington in late 1847 and took up residence in a boarding house used by both Whigs and Democrats. Lincoln became the great conciliator when political discussions boiled over. Representative James Pollock of Pennsylvania said that Lincoln “never failed to . . . restore harmony and smiles, when the peace of our little community was threatened by too earnest or heated controversy on some of the exciting questions of the hour.” Slavery and the treatment of slaves in Washington were some of the acrimonious issues that divided the congressmen. After four months, Mary tired of the boarding-house lifestyle and moved temporarily with the boys to her family home in Lexington, Kentucky.⁵

In December 1847, as a Whig representative in Congress, Lincoln criticized Polk’s justification for the war. Polk had argued that Mexico had started the war by invading the U.S. and “shedding American blood on American Soil.” In his first month in Washington, Lincoln introduced his famous “spot” resolutions demanding to be shown the spot on American soil where fighting had first occurred. He argued that the blood shed was that of American soldiers invading a disputed area to which Mexico had a legitimate claim and in which the residents had no allegiance to the U.S. The next month Lincoln further criticized Polk for “the sheerest deception” as to the war’s origin and for the open-ended approach to the war’s termination (apparently to maximize U.S. territorial gains).⁶

Lincoln’s votes reflected his criticism of Polk and the origins of the war. He voted against a resolution calling the war just and necessary. In January 1848, he provided a crucial vote in supporting the Ashmun Amendment, which declared the Mexican War “unnecessarily and unconstitutionally begun by the President” and was passed 82 to 81.⁷

Lincoln’s criticisms of the manner in which Polk had provoked the war raised immediate concern among Lincoln’s political allies, including his law partner William Herndon. In fact, his alleged “unpatriotic” comments and votes provided grist for Illinois Democrats to use in the 1848 congressional elections against Lincoln’s would-be Whig successor (who lost), against Lincoln himself throughout the 1850s (including the Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858),⁸ and even in the 1860 presidential campaign.

In 1848 Lincoln abandoned his long-time support for Henry Clay and instead worked for the nomination of Zachary Taylor as the most electable Whig candidate for president. After Taylor’s nomination, Lincoln actively campaigned for him and gained Eastern exposure with speeches

Maryland, Massachusetts, and Washington, D.C. After Taylor's election, Lincoln was offered but declined the governorship of the Oregon Territory. Honoring an informal agreement with other Whigs to serve only a single term in Congress, Lincoln did not seek reelection. He returned to Springfield in March 1849 after his single congressional term. In fact, "After fifteen years in politics, Lincoln enjoyed no one's endorsement, held no worthwhile political office, and had discovered that the drudgery of work in Congress was 'exceedingly tasteless to me.'" He decided to return to the law and seek advancement elsewhere.⁹

GRANT'S MEXICAN WAR EXPERIENCES

Meanwhile the Mexican War provided West Point graduate Ulysses Grant with the opportunity to gain military experience and possibly fame. It was the highlight of Grant's pre-Civil War career. Grant went to the war early (he even was pre-positioned in Louisiana in expectation of war) and fought in two theaters of that war under two very different commanding officers. He remained in Mexico until the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in February 1848.

After proposing to Julia Dent in 1844, Grant left almost immediately for Louisiana and four years of separation because of the growing dispute and ultimate war with Mexico.¹⁰ Pre-positioned in Louisiana for Polk's preemptive war of aggression, Grant later wrote in his memoirs that he had no romantic illusions about the nature of his country's conduct that led to the annexation of Texas and war with Mexico:

For myself, I was bitterly opposed to the [annexation of Texas], and to this day regard the war, which resulted, as one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation. . . . Even if the annexation itself could be justified, the manner in which the subsequent war was forced upon Mexico cannot. The fact is, annexationists wanted more territory than they could possibly lay any claim to. . . . The Southern rebellion was largely the outgrowth of the Mexican war. Nations, like individuals, are punished for their transgressions. We got our punishment in the most sanguinary and expensive war of modern times.¹¹

Even at the time, then, Grant was skeptical of his nation's motives. He commented, "We were sent to provoke a fight, but it was essential that Mexico commence it." He noted with dismay that many of his peers longed to fight in order to win glory and promotion. On May 6, 1844, he wrote to Julia, "The officers are all collected in little parties discussing affairs of the nation. . . . Some of them expect and seem to contemplate with a great deal of pleasure some difficulty where they may be able to gain laurels and advance a little in rank." While others were glad to head south for a fight with the Mexicans, Grant viewed such a fight quite differently—as a necessary pre-condition to returning to Julia.¹²

On his way to the war, Lieutenant Grant and his Fourth Infantry regiment took a boat down the Mississippi to New Orleans. As part of the Regular Army, Grant stayed in the Jackson Barracks—quarters more comfortable than those of the volunteer militiamen, who camped on the fields where Andrew Jackson had defeated the British in 1815.¹³

During that war, Grant served under both Winfield Scott ("Old Fuss and Feathers") and Zachary Taylor ("Old Rough-and-Ready"). He clearly preferred Taylor. Grady McWhiney and Perry Jamieson

concluded that Grant and Taylor shared several characteristics: opposition to plundering, willingness to work with available resources, informality of uniform, attention to detail on the battlefield, reticence in conversation, ability to quickly compose clear and concise written orders, and calmness in the face of danger and responsibility.¹⁴ Grant retrospectively praised the quality of Taylor's army: "more efficient army for its number and armament, I do not believe ever fought a battle than the one commanded by General Taylor in his first two engagements on Mexican—or Texan soil."¹⁵

Perhaps in part because of a famous incident in which Grant rode a wild horse for three hours and thereby tamed it—though probably more because of his ability with horses and mules—Grant was selected as regimental quartermaster and commissary officer. Grant unsuccessfully protested the appointment because he feared it would remove him from combat. However, the military logistical experience (procuring and organizing such essentials as transportation, tents, uniforms, saddles and supplies) proved invaluable: "During the Civil War Grant's armies might occasionally have straggled, discipline might sometimes have been lax, but food and ammunition trains were always expertly handled. [Grant's victories] depended in no small measure on his skill as a quartermaster."¹⁶ The skills Grant learned as a Mexican War quartermaster may have enhanced his willingness and ability to efficiently use railroads and rivers for supply and maneuver in the Civil War.

Grant's 1846 service with Taylor's high-quality army gave Grant an opportunity to perform well in battles at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, and even heroically, as the Americans captured Monterrey. After the first two battles, he wrote to Julia, "There is no great sport in having bullets flying about one in every direction but I find they have less horror when among them than when in anticipation."¹⁷ In the latter battle, he volunteered to ride through the city streets under enemy fire to carry a message requesting a resupply of ammunition.¹⁸

In his memoirs, Grant described his admiration for Zachary Taylor in words that may just as well have applied to Grant himself:¹⁹

General Taylor was not an officer to trouble the administration much with his demands, but was inclined to do the best he could with the means given him. He felt his responsibility as going no further. If he had thought that he was sent to perform an impossibility with the means given him, he would probably have informed the authorities of his opinion and left them to determine what should be done. If the judgment was against him he would have gone on and done the best he could with the means at hand without parading his grievance before the public. No soldier could face either danger or responsibility more calmly than he. These are qualities more rarely found than genius or physical courage. General Taylor never made any great show or parade, either of uniform or retinue. In dress he was possibly too plain . . . but he was known to every soldier in his army, and was respected by all.²⁰

Brian John Murphy concluded that the no-nonsense leadership style of the "direct, aggressive, methodical, and unflappable" Taylor deeply impressed the young Grant.²¹

Because President Polk feared that Taylor would capitalize on his battlefield victories to win the presidency as a Whig candidate in 1848, Polk decided to spread out the laurels and shifted most of Taylor's force, including Grant's regiment, to another Whig general, Major General Scott.²² Early in 1847, therefore, Grant's Fourth Infantry Regiment joined Scott's famous campaign from Vera Cruz on the coast, to Mexico City. After Vera Cruz surrendered, Grant fought in the major campaign battles of Cerro Gordo, Churubusco, Molino del Rey, Chapultepec, and Mexico City. Just outside Mexico

City, Grant outflanked causeway-blocking Mexican artillery with a small detachment, hauled disassembled mountain howitzer to the top of a church, enfiladed the Mexican position, and there opened the way into the city.²³ His heroism, about which he wrote nothing in his correspondence with Julia, earned him two brevet (temporary) promotions.

His duty in Texas and the Mexican War compelled the previously sheltered Grant to live outdoors for a couple of years, a way of life that Grant believed saved his life and restored his health. His extensive correspondence with Julia between 1845 and 1847 is filled with almost desperate pleas that her father approve their marriage. Finally, in the midst of the Mexico City campaign, Grant learned that Julia's father had given his consent. After Mexico City surrendered, Grant did a great deal of sightseeing in Mexico in 1847 and 1848 while attempting to get permission to return to Julia.²⁴

During periods of boredom in Mexico when there were lulls in the fighting, Grant and many of his peers engaged in drinking. Grant himself wrote, "Soldiers are a class of people who will drink and gamble let them be where they may, and they can always find houses to visit for these purposes."²⁵

An incident occurred during the Fourth Infantry's return to the United States that created a black mark on Grant's military record. Someone stole \$1,000 in quartermaster's funds from the trunk of a friend of Grant's, and Grant, as quartermaster, was held accountable. Although a board of inquiry convened at his request cleared Grant, he was still legally required to reimburse the government for the loss—a requirement that would prove difficult to meet. Grant would spend the next several years trying to get that debt invalidated.²⁶

What military lessons did Grant learn from his experiences in the Mexican War? From both Taylor and Scott, he learned that aggressiveness on the offensive could lead to victory. This was a useful lesson for Grant, whose side in the Civil War would have the same offensive strategic burden as the United States had in the Mexican War. According to Jean Edward Smith, Grant "saw how time and again Taylor and Scott moved against a numerically superior foe occupying a fortified position, and how important it was to maintain the momentum of the attack."²⁷ Particularly from Taylor, he learned that speed and maneuver were real assets. From both, he learned the value of being cunning and deceptive about planned offensives.

From Scott's abandoning his supply line midway through his march on Mexico City, Grant learned that an army could live off the countryside—a lesson that he applied during his 1863 Vicksburg Campaign.²⁸ Grant also learned that death was a normal occurrence among soldiers at war. Of the 78,718 American soldiers engaged in the Mexican War, 13,283 (16.8 percent) perished—10.4 percent from disease alone.²⁹ This was the highest death percentage of any war the United States Army has fought (including the Civil War and both World Wars). Grant's personal experience with death was quite real; only four of the twenty-one officers originally assigned to his regiment survived the war.³⁰

Overall, the Mexican War proved to be an invaluable experience for the young and impressionable Grant. His observation of his fellow officers and his participation in the logistics and fighting components of war would serve him well in the Civil War.

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