



2013-063

Harry S. Laver, *A General Who Will Fight: The Leadership of Ulysses S. Grant*. Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2013. Pp. viii, 195. ISBN 978-0-8131-1845.

Review by Terence Parker, Salisbury, United Kingdom (topromans@aol.com).

Ulysses S. Grant was a controversial military commander and president. *A General Who Will Fight* analyzes his military leadership rather than his campaigns to reveal “how [he] developed and exercised analytical determination.” Harry Laver¹ (Southeastern Louisiana Univ.) believes that leadership “is a complex human endeavor, denying easy analysis or simple understanding, and for that very reason, concentrating on a single factor can bring greater comprehension of the whole” (8). Some may dispute this last statement, but most will agree that determination was Grant’s greatest strength.

By examining his analytical skill and steadfast determination, Laver shows how Grant often succeeded, and occasionally failed, as he rose through the ranks of the Union army. In 1864, Congressman Elihu Washburne noted that Grant “had fought more battles, and won more victories than any man living”; yet one of the general’s men said “the private soldiers feel as free to greet him as they would to address one of their neighbors upon meeting him at home.”² Grant’s lack of interest in his public persona allowed his enemies to create one for him, usually characterized by brutality and alcoholism. Laver examines both accusations in detail, acquitting Grant of cruelty (36, 126) and placing his doubtful sobriety in context (17). He notes that

Grant was not born the embodiment of perseverance, nor did he begin his military career armed with unshakeable resolve, thereby refuting the idea that great leaders are born, not made, or that leadership skills are innate and cannot be improved upon.³ Instead Grant developed a will to succeed by applying the advice of mentors and the hard lessons of experience.... Not until the Civil War and his first significant engagement as a commanding officer did he show evidence that maybe there was something more to this unimposing figure than modest ability and a reputation for drink. (9)

Grant’s father sent him to West Point because he “showed little promise as a businessman”; Grant later wrote “A military life had no charms for me, and I had not the faintest idea of staying in the army even if I should be graduated, which I did not expect” (12).⁴

In the classroom, he easily conquered math, barely survived two years of French, and voraciously consumed the works of James Fenimore Cooper, Sir Walter Scott, and Washington Irving, among others. Excelling at horsemanship, he held the academy high jump record for more than a quarter century. During his third term, he suffered demotion from cadet sergeant to private when he failed to embrace the responsibilities of rank, further confirming the reputation he had established for mediocrity.... Nevertheless, he graduated, placing twenty-first out of thirty-nine graduates in 1843, having shown little of the ability, dash, and military bearing of the Lees, Beauregards, and Johnstons who had recently preceded him. Assigned to the U.S. Army’s Fourth Infantry Regiment, itself an indicator of his undistinguished record, as top graduates became engineering or

1. Laver is the author of *Citizens More Than Soldiers: The Kentucky Militia and Society in the Early Republic* (Lincoln: U Nebraska Pr, 2007) and co-editor of *The Art of Command: Military Leadership from George Washington to Colin Powell* (Lexington: U Pr of Kentucky, 2008).

2. Harry J. Maihafer, *General and the Journalists: Ulysses S. Grant, Horace Greeley, and Charles Dana* (Washington: Brassey’s, 1998) 146 (caption).

3. Psychologist J.A.C. Brown defines leadership as “that form of dominance which is based on a compelling personality, the acceptance of the group, or special knowledge in a given situation”—*The Social Psychology of Industry: Human Relations in the Factory* (NY: Penguin, 1954) 221. Grant, when so moved, certainly displayed a compelling personality, and his successes in battle, during both the Mexican and Civil Wars, together with his open, honest, self-effacing manner endeared him to his subordinates.

4. Congress was considering abolishing the Military Academic when Grant arrived there in 1839; he would have eagerly accepted honorable discharge, but Congress changed its mind.

artillery officers, the brevet second lieutenant set out on what should have been an extraordinarily unremarkable military career. (12–13)

Laver ascribes Grant's rise from unpromising cadet to commander in chief of the Union army to three factors: competent mentors, combat experience, and analytical determination. Another thing that favored him was the ineptitude of his timorous, often intellectual, fellow officers. Grant recalled that, after suggesting an aggressive plan during one of his first battles, "I had not uttered many sentences before I was cut short as if my plan was preposterous. 'Old Brains' [Gen. Henry] Halleck then outlined a campaign that better fit his methodical—some might say plodding—temperament, a demonstration in the direction of Nashville: 'Make a great fuss about moving *all* your forces.... Having accomplished this, you will retire slowly to your former positions, but, if possible keep up the idea of a general advance. Be careful however to avoid a battle. We are not ready for that.'" Laver comments, "Make a fuss, retreat, avoid battle; one can only imagine Grant's frustration, a sentiment not unlike that which was beginning to take hold of President Lincoln back in Washington" (29). Fortunately for president and Union, Grant was soon able to operate more independently in command of the Army of the Tennessee. He won several victories and captured Fort Donelson, where he famously offered "No terms except unconditional and immediate surrender" (32). As Abraham Lincoln signed Grant's promotion to major general on 17 February 1862, he remarked to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, "If Southerners think that man for man they are better than our Illinois men, or Western men generally, they will discover themselves in a grievous mistake" (33). "Unconditional Surrender" Grant was making a name for himself with the people who mattered by winning battles.

Shortly afterwards, Grant confirmed his determination to destroy the Confederates: "I want to push on as rapidly as possible to save hard fighting. These terrible battles are a very good thing to read about for persons who lose no friends but I am decidedly in favor of having as little of it as possible. The way to avoid it is to push forward as vigorously as possible" (36). Rather than praise his overachieving subordinate, Halleck, moved by Grant's alleged insubordination and unfounded rumors of his fondness for the bottle, transferred Grant's command to the ailing Gen. Charles F. Smith on 4 March 1862. Poor communications and the skullduggery of a southern sympathizer probably prompted Halleck's overreaction. Grant was dumbfounded, but loyally assisted Smith as best he could until, thanks to Lincoln, he regained his command on 14 March. "Grant had survived his first engagement in army politics, and future battles in that sphere would test his determination as much as the Confederates" (38).

Halleck's ill-advised action failed to dent Grant's reputation: "At least eleven officers, including [Gen.] John McClernand, the most senior and least likely to offer professional compliments, voiced their support in a common letter, telling Grant, 'Under your lead the flag of the Union has been carried further toward the seaboard than by any other hands. You have slain more of the enemy, taken more prisoners and trophies, lost more men in battle [!] and regained more territory to the union than any other leader'" (38–39). Other like-minded supporters gave him a sword in appreciation of his success and his abilities as a commander.

In April 1862, Union forces suffered terrible casualties at the Battle of Shiloh. Even Gen. William T. Sherman, Grant's friend and most revered subordinate, was daunted. But Grant was implacable: "We'll lick 'em tomorrow!" (44). On 7 April,

Grant's battle-worn soldiers and Buell's fresh reinforcements hit the exhausted southerners hard, but the Rebels did not give way easily. Brutal fighting raged again through the Hornets' Nest and Duncan Field and around Water Oaks Pond, with charge met by counter charge. By midafternoon [*sic*], P.G.T. Beauregard's Confederates had held firm longer than even the most sanguine might have hoped, but in truth they were finished. Grant, sensing that the southerners "were ready to break and only wanted a little encouragement from us to go quickly," pulled into line whatever men he could gather and led them forward himself, "with loud cheers and with a run." (44–45)

Beauregard realized he was beaten and ordered a withdrawal. Nevertheless, Shiloh exposed the downside of Grant's single-minded aggression. In his haste to pursue the Confederates and impose his will upon them, he had failed to foresee their actions, which, at times, seriously threatened his own men (45). As Grant him-

self readily admitted, he had learned a hard lesson. But Halleck characterized Grant's army as "undisciplined and very much disorganized, the officers being utterly incapable of maintaining order." He even criticized Grant's paperwork: "Letters should relate to one matter only, and be properly folded and indorsed.... [Errant] communications to this Head Quarters will be returned" (47-48). Finally, on 30 April, again believing rumors of Grant's drinking, Halleck made him his second-in-command, with no direct authority over troops, and gave Gen. George H. Thomas command of the Army of the Tennessee. Grant threatened to resign his commission, but was dissuaded by Sherman, who had himself been the target of rumors of mental instability. Fate intervened: on 10 June, Halleck was promoted and summoned to Washington. Grant regained command of the Army of the Tennessee and Gen. William S. Rosecrans's Army of the Mississippi, albeit at a distance (49).

By October 1862, Rosecrans was worn out and bogged down near Chattanooga; Washington dispatched Grant to assume control of the situation with the power to remove any command obstacles (87). While dismissive of plodding, methodical Halleck, Grant appreciated the value of methodical generals. Even after relieving Rosecrans, "who had lost his fighting spirit," Grant adopted his proposal for an amphibious assault on Chattanooga (90), and the plan was successfully executed by two determined officers: Gen. George H. Thomas and Adm. David D. Porter.

The effect on the men was like the raising of Lazarus, Admiral Porter recalled, as "every man now felt he was no longer to remain on the defensive, but was supplied and equipped for a forward movement against his foe...." With the Chattanooga campaign, Grant disproved his long-time critics, who had always presumed he was a bumbler and a drunkard, a man carried for so long by luck that surely the next promotion would expose his incompetence. From July to December 1863, he demonstrated the operational and tactical skills necessary to win at the modern-day level of army group commander. Directly related, he continued to exercise analytical determination and instill in his subordinates a commitment to victory. (90, 99)

Another subordinate, Col. L.B. Eaton, wrote "You have no conception of the change in the army when Grant came. He opened up the cracker line and got a steamer through. We began to see things move. We felt that everything came from a plan. He came into the army quietly, no splendor, no airs, no staff. He used to go about alone. He began the campaign the moment he reached the field" (100).

On 26 February 1864, both houses of Congress passed a bill reviving the rank of lieutenant general, last held by George Washington.⁵ Three days later, President Lincoln nominated Grant for the post and the Senate confirmed him on 2 March. He replaced Halleck as general in chief and received his commission from Lincoln at the White House on 9 March. Characteristically, Grant later declined a dinner invitation so he could return to the front. Lincoln afterward reflected that Grant was

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.... You know how it's been with all the rest. As soon as I put a man in command of the army, he'd come to me with a plan of campaign and about as much as say, "Now, I don't believe I can do it, but if you say so, I'll try it on," and so put the responsibility of success or failure on me. They all wanted me to be the general. It isn't so with Grant. He hasn't told me what his plans are. I don't want to know. I am glad to find a man who can go ahead without me. (107-8)

Despite the president's confidence in Grant, there were naysayers. Col. C.S. Wright, a prewar acquaintance, "found it difficult to think of him as 'a great man,' given his reputation of 'mediocrity of mind' and 'his insatiable love of whisky' [Grant] reviewed his troops in a slouchy, unobservant way, with his coat unbuttoned and setting anything but an example of military bearing to the troops..., but some saw in this diminutive 'little fellow' something more than a shabby soldier who enjoyed an extraordinary run of good luck" (110). The doubters would quickly experience Grant's determination, some with discomfort. He scolded one brigadier, worried about a possible Confederate attack, "I am heartily tired ... of hearing about what [Gen. Robert E.] Lee is going to do. Some of you always seem to think he is suddenly going to turn a double som-

5. Winfield Scott was given a brevet promotion to the rank in 1855 by an act of Congress.

ersault, and land in our rear and on both flanks at the same time. Go back to your command, and try to think what we are going to do ourselves, instead of what Lee is going to do" (117–18).

As Grant pressed Lee relentlessly, his men realized there would be no turning back: "Our spirits rose,' recalled one soldier. 'We marched free. The men began to sing.' Another soldier observed, '[Grant] looks as if he will stay with 'em till somebody cries enough.'" The veteran soldier Elisha Hunt Rhodes agreed: "If we were under any other General except Grant I should expect a retreat, but Grant is not that kind of soldier, and we feel we can trust him" (119). In May 1864, Grant's grim pursuit of Lee faltered on the earthworks protecting Richmond, as seven thousand casualties accumulated in the first ten minutes of an attack. Grant wrote: "I regret this assault more than any one I have ordered. I regarded it as a stern necessity, and believed it would bring compensating results; but, as it has proved, no advantages have been gained sufficient to justify the heavy losses suffered" (126). When he continued to pressure Lee, a soldier wrote: "There is no fallback with U.S. Grant,' and, following Grant's example, there was little fallback in the ranks. Even the dour [Gen. George G.] Meade had taken on some of Grant's steely resolve, writing 'There is a determination on all sides to fight it out, and have an end put to the war'" (127).

On Palm Sunday, 9 April 1865, Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox, effectively ending the Civil War, although sporadic fighting continued until 18 April. Lincoln was assassinated on 14 April; by declining to accompany him to Ford's theater on the fateful evening, Grant escaped a similar fate. He went on to serve two terms as president himself (1869–77) and his forthright leadership style continued to provoke controversy.

Almost every page of *A General Who Will Fight* contains revealing quotations and noteworthy information.⁶ In this well-written, sympathetic but balanced assessment of Grant's extraordinary military achievement, Harry Laver has successfully illuminated the ever-strengthening "analytical determination" that fuelled Grant's meteoric rise. The book will interest both military and civilian readers.

6. The book is equipped with endnotes (167–85) and a short, serviceable bibliography (187–89).