

The Union Forever: Lincoln, Grant, and the Civil War

Jean Edward Smith

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Smith, Jean Edward (2013) "The Union Forever: Lincoln, Grant, and the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.15.1.18

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol15/iss1/17>

Review

Smith, Jean Edward

Winter 2013

Simon, John Y. and LaFantasie, Glenn W. (ed.). *The Union Forever: Lincoln, Grant, and the Civil War*. University Press of Kentucky, \$40.00 ISBN 978-0-8131-3444-4

A Prominent Historian's Life's Work Investigating Three Giants

John Y. Simon was an exceptional scholar. As the founding editor of *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* in 1964, John presided over the project for forty years and thirty-one volumes, setting the gold standard for documentary history. The *Grant Papers* are clear, complete, and edited immaculately. They are essential for any serious student of the Civil War, and, thanks to John's fine editorial hand, extremely easy to use. Professor Simon's tragic death at the culmination of his life's work has deprived the nation of its finest documentary historian and archivist.

In *The Union Forever*, Professor Glenn LaFantasie of Western Kentucky University has brought together fifteen of John's finest essays. Seven deal with Lincoln, six with Grant, and two with Lincoln and Grant. Taken together, they provide the best and most concise distillation of the character of the two men who saved the Union. Simon's treatment of Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation ("Freeing Some and Leaving Others Alone") is a model of historical clarity; his essay on the relationship between Lincoln and General Henry W. Halleck ("Lincoln and 'Old Brains' Halleck") is priceless; and his reflection on Lincoln in the crisis year of 1864 ("Lincoln's Despair: The Crisis during the Summer of 1864") is must reading for those concerned with the president's troubles.

But it is in the six essays on Grant where John is at his best. In his fifteen-page article "From Galena to Appomattox" (pages 153-167), Simon synthesizes Grant's career with unparalleled precision. Having written about Grant myself, I can honestly say that I have never seen a better analysis.

Similarly, in "The Road to Appomattox" John's treatment of the 1864-65 campaign in northern Virginia is superb. "Grant represented the calm at the heart of the storm of battle, quietly and carefully thinking through the problem without losing perspective, and he never lost sight of the ultimate goal of restoration of peace. The road that would take the nation to the end of the war in the shortest time with the smallest loss of life led through the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, and Cold Harbor....If Grant's realism is not mistaken for callousness and his logic not mistaken for cruelty, then we can understand the commander who moved so relentlessly to Appomattox and, once there, began immediately a campaign for peace" (188).

As befits an honest scholar, Simon does not gloss over what may have been the darkest shadow on Grant's career, the infamous Orders No. 11 issued by Grant on December 17, 1862 expelling Jews from his department on the Mississippi ("That Obnoxious Order"). Washington intervened and Grant immediately revoked the decree. In 1868 he formally apologized. "I do not pretend to sustain the order....The order was issued and sent without any reflection and without thinking of the Jews as a sect or race....It never would have been issued if it had not been telegraphed the moment it was penned and without reflection" (177).

The two final essays on the complex relationship between Lincoln and Grant provide a perfect summation. Simon calls it "an effective partnership in a turmoil of clashing authority" (231)

Amid the confusion of war, Lincoln redefined the concept of commander in chief, Stanton transformed the concept of secretary of war, and Halleck created the concept of chief of staff. Charged with vast responsibilities, General in Chief Grant had to act vigorously within the military sphere, tread softly in the political sphere, and understand as well the politics of command. Under Lincoln's guidance, sometimes oblique, sometimes imperious, Grant succeeded.

The Grant papers are now housed at the new Grant Presidential Library at Mississippi State University under the able direction of John Simon's friend and colleague, John Marszalek. We are all poorer because of John's untimely death, but I am certain John would be proud of how his work has been continued. *The Union Forever* is a fitting tribute to a man we loved and cherished.

Jean Edward Smith is the author of Grant, FDR, and most recently of Eisenhower in War and Peace. He is a senior scholar in the history department at Columbia.