

Crucible of Command: Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee--The War They Fought and the Peace They Forged

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Review

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Davis, William C. *Crucible of Command: Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee--The War they Fought and the Peace they Forged.* Da Capo Press, \$24.25
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Commonalities and Divergence in the Careers and Lives of Grant and Lee

In his new book, prolific Civil War historian William C. Davis undertakes the ambitious task of writing a dual biography of the conflict's two preeminent commanders, Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee. It is based virtually entirely on contemporary primary sources, an unusual authorial choice that probably contributes to the immense readability of its lively, uncluttered prose, though at times one might miss some of the context that later sources and historical interpretations (in which the author is undoubtedly well-versed) could have provided, if used judiciously.

Davis leads off the book with an interesting overview and comparison of the two future generals' somewhat patchily documented childhoods. He finds both to have been somewhat troubled by their relationships (or in Lee's case, lack of relationship) with their fathers. The disgraced, profligate former Revolutionary War hero "Light Horse Harry" Lee was a source of embarrassment to the son he barely knew, while Grant likely wished he knew his pragmatic, business-savvy, but extremely critical and demanding father a bit less well. Both grew up in fairly affluent circumstances and had solid educations prior to attending the Military Academy at West Point, though Lee's membership in the Chesapeake gentry gave him a social status that Grant's father's Midwestern business and political connections could not quite equal.

Grant and Lee both distinguished themselves in the Mexican War, where their varied and effective services gained them considerable praise as well as useful practical experience. Lee's however also gained him the patronage of the army's senior general, fellow Virginian Winfield Scott, who thereafter would see Lee as a protégé whose career prospects he would help advance as Lee rose into

the ranks of the prewar army's senior leadership. Grant resigned from the army as a captain in 1854. In an interestingly reasoned extended footnote, Davis rejects the longstanding tradition that Grant was allowed to resign in disgrace due to drunken neglect of duty while stationed on the frontier, noting the lack of contemporary evidence to support this story (p. 528-530). This may well be true, as it certainly was for many other officers, who were disappointed by the slow pace of promotion in the regular army and resigned to seek opportunities in the private sector. It must be said though that many of those other officers had better prospects as private citizens than did Grant, who after leaving the army struggled to support his family as a farmer and by clerking in his father's store. It also makes it a bit difficult to make sense of his rival Henry W. Halleck later gossiping in a letter to George B. McClellan that Grant early in the war had returned to "his former bad habits," suggesting the circumstances surrounding Grant's resignation were common knowledge in Old Army circles, though the author rejects this interpretation, in keeping with the book's generally extremely positive interpretations of the characters and careers of both men (p. 197).

Davis contends that both men were quite similar in their prewar political affiliations, with their support of the Whig Party grudgingly giving way to support for the Democrats after its demise in the 1850s. Their contrasting responses to the secession crisis revealed a fundamental difference of course, with Grant staunchly supporting the Union, and Lee, after a short period of indecision while Virginia's commitment to secession was somewhat in doubt, determining to resign from the army and support the Confederate cause. This despite the fact that he knew his decision would disappoint members of his own immediate family.

The author's account of the two commanders' Civil War service is predictably expert and compelling, and he nicely contrasts the quick rise to prominence and success of the previously obscure Grant to the far more highly lauded Lee's slightly bumpier ascension in the war's early months. Even for a large book of more than 600 pages, Davis takes on a massive task in recounting the eventful wartime careers of both leaders that led to their eventual rendezvous at Appomattox Court House in 1865, and major campaigns are typically dealt with fairly briefly, though well. Likewise their postwar careers, contrasting views on Reconstruction and other issues, and mutual desire for sectional reconciliation, are fleshed out briefly but interestingly. In sum, this is an ambitious and well-executed book by a distinguished Civil War historian, which although it covers extremely well-trodden historiographical ground, does so in a

somewhat fresh and distinctive way.

Michael T. Smith is an associate professor and head of the department of History at McNeese State University. He is the author of The Enemy Within: Fears of Corruption in the Civil War North (University of Virginia Press, 2011).