Soldier of Destiny: Slavery, Secession, and the Redemption of Ulysses S. Grant

Joshua Waddell
University of Georgia, joshua.waddell@uga.edu

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

Recommended Citation
DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.26.2.06
Available at: https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol26/iss2/6
Review

Spring 2024

Waddell, Josh


In 1854, U.S. Army Captain Ulysses S. Grant underwent a demoralizing stretch in his military career. Following his service in the Mexican American War, the Army transferred Grant to the isolated Fort Humboldt in northern California. Separated from his wife, Julia, and their two children, Grant suffered intense bouts of loneliness and occasionally turned to alcohol for reprieve. Grant’s drinking eventually bled into his work, and his superior officer forced his resignation after Grant arrived at a pay meeting hungover. He returned home in shame, and many, including his father Jesse, had lost faith in him. Few would have expected that, a mere ten years later, Grant would save the Union from political schism and become the first Lieutenant General of the U.S. Army since George Washington. For John Reeves, the decade between Grant’s resignation in 1854 and his accession to Lieutenant General in 1864 constituted the most critical juncture in Grant’s life, but scholars have not given these years adequate focus. Reeves’s book follows Grant’s life during this time and documents his family ties to both North and South, his multiple attempts to find a new career in antebellum civilian life, and his eventual reentry and redemption in the Union Army.

Despite Reeves’s focus on Grant’s “redemption,” the book does not champion a hagiographic account of his life. Indeed, Reeves’s best analysis comes when he explores Grant’s many flaws. For example, Reeves’s book examines Grant’s ambivalent attitude toward slavery. Following his resignation in 1854, Grant rejected an offer from his father to work in the tanning
business and instead embarked on a career in farming. During this time, Ulysses lived with his father-in-law, Frederick Dent (known as “Colonel Dent”), who owned thirty enslaved people on his plantation in St. Louis, Missouri. Dent allowed Grant to use his enslaved laborers to work a portion of the plantation and launch his son-in-law’s farming career. Though Grant never owned slaves himself, he had few reservations about utilizing the enslaved laborers on Dent’s plantation. Reeves points out, however, that Grant did not live the luxurious life of a plantation owner in Missouri; he maintained his work ethic by working alongside enslaved laborers to plant crops and haul timber.

Though Grant used Dent’s slaves to make ends meet, his career as a farmer ended with the Panic of 1857, as the depression sent the Dent estate into financial ruin. Desperate for work, Grant finally joined his father in his leather goods business in Galena, Illinois. While this seemed a natural and preferable arrangement, Ulysses and his father had a strained relationship. Jesse Grant resented his son for marrying the daughter of a plantation owner as he detested slavery and forcefully believed in the virtues of free labor. Likewise, Jesse thought that Ulysses’ college education at West Point had made him lazy and unfit for the competitive business world. On the eve of the Civil War, Ulysses appeared an unremarkable man—a simple salesclerk burdened by accusations of alcoholism and an inability to create a comfortable living for his family.

The outbreak of the Civil War allowed Ulysses to re-enter the Army with a commission as a Colonel. While Grant saw consistent battlefield success in the Western theater, his difficulty with alcohol continued to plague him. Historians have often debated the extent of Grant’s alcoholism, and the discussion is mired in uncertainty as most of the accusations regarding Grant’s problematic behavior originated from political foes and jealous military colleagues. However, Reeves argues that there are too many accounts attesting to Grant’s alcohol
consumption for them to all be false. Grant did not drink consistently, but he occasionally went on “sprees,” where he had trouble stopping once he started. Even Grant’s allies commented on his issues with alcohol. John Rawlins, a teetotaling lawyer on Grant’s staff, publicly pledged to keep the general from overindulging in his vice and occasionally wrote about Grant’s failures to maintain that standard. On the debate of Grant’s alcohol consumption, Reeves takes a moderate position. While Reeves acknowledges that rumors of Grant as the “drunken butcher” exaggerated his alcohol use, he does not, like some Grant biographers, minimize or deny the overwhelming evidence that Grant occasionally overindulged.

Despite Ulysses’ occasional failings, Reeves displays Grant’s admirable qualities, including his steadfast dedication to the Union despite his ties to the South. Based on Grant’s proximity to slaveholding in the antebellum era, he easily could have joined the many Union generals who held southern sympathies and refused to bring a hard war on the Confederacy. Despite his familial connections and ambivalence toward slavery, Grant showed no clemency toward secessionists. Shortly after the war began, Grant paid a visit to his secessionist father-in-law Colonel Dent, and they talked about national politics deep into the night. Dent tried to convince Grant to join the Confederates, implying that Ulysses would be promoted from Colonel to Brigadier General if he switched his allegiance. However, Grant refused to contemplate treason against the United States. The two remained on decent terms until the fall of Fort Henry and Fort Donelson in the Spring of 1862 when Dent reportedly said that he would hear no more “talk … about this Federal son-in-law of mine” (p. 145). Despite family and career pressures, Grant never entertained taking up arms against the U.S. Army.

Reeves follows Grant’s military campaigns from his early confrontations at Belmont in 1862 to his accession to Lieutenant General following the Battle of Chattanooga in 1864. Despite
Grant’s rapid climb through the ranks, he had many detractors during his career. For instance, Henry W. Halleck, the Union general-in-chief, consistently spread rumors in Washington about Grant’s drinking and lack of organization. However, Lincoln saw through the gossip and focused instead on Grant’s impressive military achievements. Grant won monumental battles at Belmont, Fort Henry, Fort Donelson, Shiloh, Vicksburg, and Chattanooga. After splitting the Confederacy in two with his victory at Vicksburg and repelling the Confederate counterattack at Chattanooga, Lincoln promoted Ulysses S. Grant to Lieutenant General, giving him control of all Union forces. Reeves ends his book with this promotion—Grant had completed his redemption from a disgraced former Army Captain to the foremost officer in the Union Army.

Reeves’s book provides a well-written and accessible approach to this crucial decade in Grant’s life. The work focuses on many intriguing yet understudied aspects of Grant’s life, including his family relationships and antebellum career in Missouri. Few Grant biographers contend with Grant’s problematic relationship with slavery to the extent that Reeves does. Reeves’s book likewise succeeds as an accessible and concise approach to this crucial decade in Grant’s life. With the book’s text coming to 244 pages, it is a much more succinct option than other Grant biographies, such as Ron Chernow’s 1,100-page behemoth.

Though Reeves superbly navigates this section of Grant’s life, 1864 seems an odd place to end the book. Though Grant’s promotion to Lieutenant General may have served as a personal redemption, he likely did not feel this moment was the culmination of his military career, as he still faced the grueling Overland Campaign of 1864 where the war’s conclusion hung in the balance. Readers should look to other options if they are interested in Grant’s military campaigns after Chattanooga or his post-war career. *Soldier of Destiny* may also have benefited from a brief introduction that explains the book’s focus. As it stands, Reeves only explains the goals of the
work in his acknowledgments at the end of the book. Despite these minor reservations, readers interested in Grant’s family relationships, views on slavery, and Civil War career would do well to read Reeves’s intelligent book.