7 Reasons Ulysses S. Grant Was One of America's Most Brilliant Military Leaders

In March 1864, Ulysses S. Grant went to Washington, D.C., to receive his commission from Abraham Lincoln as lieutenant general in command of all the Union armies. After several years of frustration with a parade of unsuitable commanders, the president had finally found the man who would defeat Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia and thus effectively end the Civil War. The choice was surprising to many who had known Grant in former days. Ten years before, in April 1854, Captain Grant had submitted his resignation under a cloud.

In one of history's unexpected developments, the military profession Grant "had always disliked," in the words of his biographer Bruce Catton, ultimately "turned out to be the calling made for him." How did an ambivalent soldier who had been away from the army for several years—and who had drifted during that interval from one civilian occupation to another in search of elusive success—end up leading a vast force to victory and saving the Union?

Grant's predecessors in command of the Union Army were far more accomplished in military art and science. Winfield Scott, whose experience dated back to the War of 1812, had led the army since 1841. George B. McClellan, who replaced the aging Scott early in the Civil War, was an able administrator who organized the Army of the Potomac. In the 1850s, McClellan had studied the Crimean War at first hand as a member of an official delegation of American observers. Henry W. Halleck, the author of Elements of Military Art & Science, was regarded as a master theoretician.

Yet McClellan and Halleck both proved reluctant to take decisive action in the field. After the Battle of Shiloh, it took the latter almost a month to advance 20 miles south to attack the vital Confederate railroad junction at Corinth, Mississippi. Lincoln grew so frustrated with McClellan's inaction that he responded to the general's October 1862 request for more horses with an exasperated telegram: "I

have just read your despatch about sore tongued and fatiegued [sic] horses. Will you pardon me for asking what the horses of your army have done since the battle of Antietam that fatigue anything?"

By contrast, Grant had never been an enthusiastic student of military art and science. Even his fiercely loyal lieutenant William T. Sherman doubted Grant's "knowledge of grand strategy, and of books of science and history." He told his friend precisely that in a March 1864 letter, in which he also concluded that Grant's triumph owed in large measure to his fundamental "common-sense" and to his "chief characteristic," an unshakeable "faith" in victory. That faith was justified by a serendipitous combination of qualities that enabled Grant to become one of the most extraordinary military leaders in American history.

Grant didn't go in much for doctrine, but he brought a relentlessly aggressive approach to warfare. He always favored activity and forward movement to standing still. Even in victory, he would be frustrated by subordinates' failure to pursue the retreating enemy.

In his memoirs, he records an incident that reveals his philosophy. In 1863, Union General William Rosecrans refused an order to advance to meet an enemy force while Grant was laying siege to Vicksburg, the key to controlling the Mississippi River, because Rosecrans claimed that doing so would violate the "military maxim 'not to fight two decisive battles at the same time.'" Grant was singularly unimpressed: "If true," he observes, "the maxim was not applicable in this case. It would be bad to be defeated in two decisive battles fought the same day, but it would not be bad to win them."

When, in the summer of 1864, Grant informed the cautious Halleck, back in Washington, of his refusal to disengage Lee and withdraw troops to quell draft resistance in the North, Lincoln responded in language that encapsulated Grant's tenacious approach: "I have seen your despatch expressing your unwillingness to break your hold where you are. Neither am I willing. Hold on with a bull-dog gripe [sic], and chew & choke, as much as possible."

He was fearless.

Sherman told his fellow officer James Harrison Wilson, “I am a damned sight smarter man than Grant; I know a great deal more about war, military history, strategy, and grand tactics than he does; I know more about organization, supply, and administration and about everything else than he does; but I’ll tell you where he beats me and where he beats the world. He don’t care a damn for what the enemy does out of his sight, but it scares me like hell!”

Grant’s refusal to be paralyzed by imagining what the enemy was doing owed to an epiphany early in the war when he was leading a regiment for the first time, in pursuit of Confederate Colonel Thomas Harris in Missouri. “As we approached the brow of the hill from which it was expected we could see Harris’ camp, and possibly find his men ready formed to meet us, my heart kept getting higher and higher until it felt to me as though it was in my throat,” Grant recalls in his memoirs. But when he had the good fortune to find the camp abandoned, Grant’s “heart resumed its place.” He learned the vital lesson that his adversary “had been as much afraid of me as I had been of him... From that event to the close of the war, I never experienced trepidation upon confronting an enemy, though I always felt more or less anxiety.”

He brushed off setbacks.

In April 1862, during the bloody two-day Battle of Shiloh, Grant did not share his colleagues’ bleak view. Sherman was demoralized by the first day’s fighting, while Don Carlos Buell, who arrived with reinforcements in the midst of the battle, advised retreat. Grant refused: “The distant rear of an army engaged in battle is not the best place from which to judge correctly what is going on in front,” he asserts in his memoirs. By the next day, he continues, “we had now become the attacking party. The enemy was driven back all day, as we had been the day before, until finally he beat a precipitate retreat.” In May 1864, after fighting to a costly stalemate in his first battle with Robert E. Lee, at the Wilderness, in Virginia, Grant surprised and delighted the Union Army of the Potomac by not retreating, as they had done so many times before under different commanders. “Most of us

thought…that the next day we should recross the river," a captain in a Massachusetts regiment remembered, "but when the order came, 'By the left flank, march!' we found that Grant was not made that way, and we must continue the fight." Sherman likewise celebrated Grant's decision: "When Grant cried 'Forward!' after the battle of the Wilderness, I said: 'This is the grandest act of his life; now I feel that the rebellion will be crushed.' I wrote him, saying it was a bold order to give, and...it showed the mettle of which he was made."

He believed in success—but didn't romanticize the means to achieving it.

What Sherman called Grant's "simple faith in success" proved infectious. His confidence and determination made others believe in themselves as well: "when you have completed your best preparations, you go into battle without hesitation...no doubts, no reserve," Sherman wrote to Grant. "I tell you that it was this that made us act with confidence. I knew wherever I was that you thought of me, and if I got in a tight place you would come—if alive."

But Grant was no mystic, nor was he reckless. His confidence was rooted in an unswerving sense of purpose, an unflappable nature, an ability to delegate responsibility as opposed to micromanaging, and knowledge gained by cool and careful observation over the years. In the Mexican War, he studied two commanders in action: Winfield Scott and Zachary Taylor, whose nicknames—"Old Fuss and Feathers" and "Old Rough and Ready"—encapsulate their antithetical styles. From Taylor, who always "put his meaning so plainly there could be no mistaking it," Grant learned the importance of clear and direct communication.

It was in Mexico, while serving as regimental quartermaster and involving himself in as many battles as he could, that Grant had learned the decidedly unromantic aspects of war: the ingenuity required to feed and supply an army, the hazards of poor camp sanitation, the value of different kinds of expertise and the unequivocal brutality of combat. In the last year of the Civil War, as casualties mounted and the horrors of trench warfare accumulated in the Battles of Cold Harbor and

Petersburg, Grant remained fixed in his purpose to destroy Lee's army.

He synthesized information quickly.

In addition to being a gifted writer, Grant was an expert listener—"at his best," one staff officer suggested, in "sudden emergencies." Faced with a new situation, as he was on arriving in the besieged city of Chattanooga in late 1863, Grant sat "as silent as the sphinx" while officers delivered their reports, according to an eyewitness. Then, after firing "whole volleys of questions," he proceeded to write out a series of dispatches. The biographer William McFeely explains the significance of this episode: Grant's "orders and telegrams...demonstrated a grasp of the whole of the Western Theater of the war. From the disjointed reports he had been given, he put together a coherent picture of the terrain of an area new to him, and of the vast confused array of men who contended for it."

He had a gift for seeing the 'lay of the land.'

Grant's memory for terrain was photographic. One staff officer observed that after one hard look at a map, "he could follow its features without referring to it again. Besides, he possessed an almost intuitive knowledge of topography, and never became confused as to the points of the compass." This gift was complemented by superb horsemanship, which allowed Grant to see for himself as much of the battlefield as possible.

In the Eastern Theater, which he studied for only eight weeks, Grant revealed a thorough grasp of the strategic situation. He decided to leave executive command of the Army of the Potomac to George G. Meade in order to give himself time to manage an extensive area of operations stretching from New England to New Mexico, from Minnesota to Mississippi. "Wherever Lee goes," he ordered Meade, "there you will go also." Keeping Lee's army engaged, Grant unleashed Philip Sheridan's cavalry on the Shenandoah Valley, the breadbasket of the Confederacy, and freed Sherman to march through the South destroying railroads, supplies—and morale.

He never lost sight of the bigger picture.

Yet none of this would have been possible had Grant not also comprehended the war's larger political context and harmonized his efforts on the battlefield with the aims of the Lincoln administration. As the latter enlarged from preservation of the Union to the freeing of enslaved persons in the Confederacy with the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, Grant's policies and vision likewise evolved. His way of prosecuting the war and securing the peace revealed a sure understanding of the war's political stakes—and of the fact that the South's best hope of victory was to sap the political will of the North by prolonging the war.

For Grant, who as a young man had fought in the Mexican War, a conflict in which he did not believe, the Civil War was a war of principle. At the conclusion of his memoirs, he sums it up with his customary lucidity when he describes the Confederate cause as "one of the worst for which a people ever fought, and one for which there was the least excuse."