

NATHAN BEDFORD FORREST (1821-1877)



"Git Thar Fustest with the Mostest"¹

When asked to name the greatest soldier of the war, Robert E. Lee replied, "A man I have never seen, sir. His name is Forrest."² Nathan Bedford Forrest was certainly an extraordinary man, a Herculean hero of the American wilderness who has blotted his copy-book amongst the politically correct because of allegations stemming from his capture of Fort Pillow and his part in the original Ku Klux Klan. But there is more to the story than that.

During the war, Forrest killed thirty men in hand-to-hand combat, had twenty-nine horses shot from beneath him, and proved himself a very "wizard of the saddle." William Tecumseh Sherman said, "Forrest is the devil.... I will order them [two of his officers] to make up a force and go out to follow Forrest to the death, if it costs ten thousand lives and breaks

Guess What?

- ❖ Even before the war, Forrest had been in a frontier-style gunfight
- ❖ Forrest, though a slave trader, freed his own slaves
- ❖ Though allegedly a commander of the Ku Klux Klan, he wanted more free blacks—and Chinese—in the South

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

the Treasury. *There will never be peace in Tennessee until Forrest is dead!*^{“3}

To the Federals he might have been the “that devil Forrest,” as Sherman called him in a 6 November 1864 message to Grant, but to Confederates in Tennessee and Mississippi, he was a hero, the very embodiment of all the virtues of the Southern frontiersman: fearless, enterprising, honor-bound, unstoppable. Confederate General Richard Taylor (President Zachary Taylor’s son) said of Forrest that “I doubt if any commander since the days of lion-hearted Richard has killed as many enemies with his own hand as Forrest,”^{“4} who was not only a strong-right arm in battle but an intuitive genius of a general.

The gunfighter

Forrest was born the son of a blacksmith in Bedford County, Tennessee. The family hunted and farmed for its food, and made their own clothes. Forrest had little formal schooling (less than a year, and his headmaster remembered him as being more interested in wrestling than reading). But he had plenty of good sense, worked hard for his family (especially after his father died), and killed varmints (including, like a young Hercules, beating a snake to death and hunting down a panther that had attacked his mother).

When it was rumored that Mexico would invade Texas, Forrest went off to fight. Unfortunately, there was no fighting to be had, so he worked his way back home, and set out to make his own fortune. That took him to Hernando, Mississippi, where an uncle had invited him to join his business, which included buying and selling horses and cattle.

On 10 March 1845, in a scene out of the old West, or the frontier South, four men—a planter named Matlock, two Matlock brothers, and an overseer—came to settle a dispute with Forrest’s uncle. Forrest saw their ill intent and intervened. He had no interest in the quarrel, he told them,

except to even the odds: four against one wasn't fair. One of the brothers drew on Forrest, missing him, but his uncle was struck and killed. Bedford fired back with his two-shot pocket pistol, each shot striking one of the Matlocks, leaving them wounded in the mud. Out of ammunition, he accepted a Barlow knife from a bystander, slashed the last Matlock into submission, and watched the overseer flee.

Though wounded himself by a pistol ball, Forrest was no easy man to take down. Six-foot-two, broad-shouldered, muscular, his dark wavy hair combed back from his unwavering iridescent blue eyes, he was, as John Allan Wyeth, who rode with him, remembered, "born a leader of men, not a follower of man."⁵

In that, too, he was a Southerner, for civilization in the old South was based on honor; and honor meant that Forrest was punctilious about dressing immaculately, about treating women with deference, and making sure that folks minded their manners (or paid the price). It meant that he worked hard, aiming not only to make money, but to earn a reputation as a respectable man. When he became a millionaire (largely through slave-trading), it was as a means to become a landed gentleman and leader—not to pursue the life of a sybarite.

He was soft spoken, except when angry. Then his face would flare and his tone would menace. He had a furious, animal temper, and could swear a blue-streak, but abhorred obscene language and never used it himself. Nor would he tolerate dirty stories. He didn't drink, saying "My staff does all my drinking,"⁶ and didn't smoke. His amusements were horse-racing and gambling. He refused to tolerate disorder, to the point where if his headquarters wasn't swept he'd do it himself. When it came to romance, he was a buckskin knight. He might not have read *Ivanhoe*, the most influential book in the Old South after the Bible, but chivalry was ingrained in him.

He met the woman who would be his wife when she and her mother were in a wagon stuck in a mud hole. Bedford rode up and rescued the

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

women, carrying them across the mud, and then pushing the wheel free. Two men on horseback sat by watching. Bedford, in the words of Andrew Nelson Lytle, “told them they were ungallant and unfit to be in the presence of ladies, that if they didn’t ride away immediately, he would give them the worst whipping of their lives.”⁷ They took his word for it and skedaddled. After returning the ladies to their wagon, he asked permission to call on the younger, Miss Mary Montgomery. Permission granted, he turned up the next day, found the same two ungallants in the parlor, scattered them like hares, and told Miss Mary he wanted to marry her. Her father Cowan Montgomery, a Presbyterian minister, disapproved. “Why, Bedford, I couldn’t consent. You cuss and gamble and Mary is a Christian girl.” Forrest replied, “I know it, and that’s just why I want her.”⁸ In a battle of wills, Forrest was not the sort who would ever relent; Cowan did.

The slave trader

Forrest’s growing business interests led him to Memphis and slave-trading, at which he grew so adept that he became one of the leading slave dealers of the Middle South. To read about the slave trade of the 1850s is to enter a world where brokers advertise that they have “constantly at hand the best selected assortment of Field Hands, House Servants & Mechanics, at their Negro Mart.” The firm welcomes customers to “examine their stock before purchasing elsewhere” and volunteers to sell slaves on commission, promising that they will always acquire “the highest market price . . . for good stock.”⁹

It sounds a bit like something out of the casbah. But it should also remind us of something else: slavery was an accepted commercial transaction in the South. One inspected a prospective slave the way one inspected a horse one was hankering on buying (or perhaps today a car). The slave dealer—or the slave’s previous owner—had a large financial

stake in ensuring that the slave was strong, healthy, and unmarked by a whip or beating. Slaves were expensive, and a slave who bore scars not only reflected badly on the previous owner (the way a mistreated horse might) but was no more attractive to purchase than a car full of dings and dents and whose warning lights flash on the dashboard: either the slave was of bad character or the owner was—and planters prided themselves on their honor as much as any Southerner did.

As an aspiring planter, Forrest strove to be an impeccably honest and well-meaning slave trader. There is, of course, no getting around the fact that he was buying and selling human beings, and working to make a profit. But within that sadly confined moral circle, he acted as well as he could. According to his biographer Andrew Nelson Lytle, “He never separated a family, and he always did his best to find and buy the husband and wife, when either one was missing. He treated his slaves so well that he was burdened with appeals from them to be bought [by him].”¹⁰

If cynics doubt the honesty of this portrayal, they should read Forrest’s advertisements, which take a similarly paternalistic line, promising that “cleanliness, neatness and comfort” were “strictly observed and enforced” in his slave mart. Moreover, “Persons wishing to dispose of a servant may rest assured that, if left with us, a good home will be

Not like Wal-Mart

In the Old South slave marts were open, unlike today where slavery, except in some Islamic countries (or de facto, in Communist countries) is underground, and confined mostly to Africa and the Indian subcontinent. Nevertheless, slave traders had the social status of used car salesmen. Though many defenses—political, social, cultural, and theological—were made of slavery, any redeeming quality that could, in the antebellum South, be attached to slavery, could only be attached to a feudalistic, *noblesse oblige* relationship of a gentleman planter to his slaves. No honor could be attached to the slave trader, and certainly no honor could be attached to the equivalent of a Simon Legree (who was, in any event, an irreligious Yankee).

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

secured.”¹¹ It was this paternalism that allowed Southerners to tell themselves that while heartless Yankee capitalists treated their workers with callous inhumanity, Southerners treated their black “property” as real people, people to be clothed, fed, housed, and found “a good home,” and that could never be cast away into the streets.

By the time of Lincoln’s election, Forrest’s business interests—from real estate to his slave mart—had made him a millionaire. He was now what he had aspired to be, a planter and a respected member of the community. Since the day he had faced down the Matlock brothers, he had always been marked as a leader. In Hernando, Mississippi, he was a constable, in Memphis an alderman. In every position of authority he held, he was rigorously honest, and an enemy of corruption and cowardice. In one incident in Memphis, he single-handedly rescued a man from a lynch mob’s noose, fighting through the crowd to put the untried man in jail. When the mob surged around the jail threatening to break in, Forrest strode out, a six shooter in each hand, a big knife tucked visibly in his belt, and said matter of factly: “If you come by ones, or by tens, or by hundreds, I’ll kill any man who tries to get in this jail.” That put paid to the mob’s ardor.¹²

When war came, Forrest, as a wealthy man, had much to lose and opposed secession. He, like most men in the upper South and many in the lower South, hoped for a regional compromise. But it is characteristic of the man that when Tennessee seceded, he followed his native state and enlisted as a private (as did his youngest brother and fifteen-year-old son) in Captain Josiah White’s Tennessee Mounted Rifles.

Confederate cavalryman

But Forrest was not long for the enlisted ranks. Local notables petitioned the governor and soon Forrest was a lieutenant colonel charged with raising his own regiment of mounted rangers. Troopers were asked to bring their own horses, equipment, and arms (shotguns and pistols pre-

ferred), but for those without he bought 500 Colt navy pistols, 100 saddles, and other cavalry impedimenta, which he cleverly smuggled (along with recruits) out of officially neutral Kentucky and past the noses Federal forces.

His first major engagement was at Sacramento, Kentucky. His men, riding through the town of Rumsey on the way to Sacramento, were cheered by the Kentucky belles who urged the men forward. Among them, according to Forrest's report, was "a beautiful young lady, smiling, with untied



Not an Illiterate Hick

Forrest once said that "I never see a pen but what I think of a snake."^{*} Nevertheless his lack of formal education did not handicap him as an officer. He was literate—as a businessman, he had to be, and he was an avid reader of newspapers—and though, as one of his officers remembered, he "was indisposed to the use of the pen himself, he had clear and exact ideas of what he had written, and few were more exacting in requiring a precise statement of the ideas furnished."[†] Left to his own devices he was a bad speller but he had an instinctive feel for grammar and would correct ungrammatical draft reports and say of an awkward sentence, "That won't do, it hasn't the right pitch."[‡] As a commander, he was pitch perfect. Or as one of his troopers recalled, Forrest's later commission as a general "was signed not only by Mr. Jefferson Davis, but by the Almighty as well!"[¶]

* John Allan Wyeth, *That Devil Forrest: A Life of General Nathan Bedford Forrest* (Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 554.

† Quoted in Jack Hurst, *Nathan Bedford Forrest: A Biography* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 76.

‡ Wyeth, 555.

¶ Quoted in Brian Steel Wills, *A Battle from the Start* (HarperCollins, 1992), 1.

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

tresses floating in the breeze, on horseback, [who] met the column just before our advance guard came up with the rear of the enemy, infusing nerve into my arm and kindling knightly chivalry within my heart.”¹³ More than kindling knightly chivalry within his heart, she told Forrest what she knew of the Federal dispositions at Sacramento.

Forrest’s men raced to the attack of the enemy, engaging first in skirmish fire, and then, with flankers on the left and right, a head-on charge that broke the Federals, sending them reeling through the town. One trooper reported that at the outset of the battle, “there were at least fifty shots fired” at Forrest “in five minutes” and that Forrest, in turn, must have “killed 9 of the enemy.”¹⁴ Forrest led the charge after the retreating Federals, and fighting with pistol and saber brought down at least two more Federals and disabled another officer in blue who became his prisoner.

In action, he was a berserker, or in the words of Major David C. Kelley, this was “the first time I had seen the Colonel in the face of the enemy, and, when he rode up to me in the thick of the action, I could scarcely believe him to be the man I had known for several months.” Forrest’s face was flushed red so that “it bore a striking resemblance to a painted Indian warrior’s, and his eyes, usually mild in their expression, were blazing with the intense glare of a panther’s springing upon its prey. In fact, he looked as little like the Forrest of our mess-table as the storm of December resembles the quiet of June.”¹⁵

“I am going out of this place or bust hell wide open”

His troopers’ next assignment was at Fort Donelson where Forrest immediately distinguished himself by picking off a Federal sniper. But the bigger problem was the tightening Federal grip around the besieged fort, which fronted the Cumberland River. The first plan agreed to by Confederate generals Gideon Pillow, John B. Floyd, and Simon B. Buckner was to force a passage through the Union right. In fierce fighting, in

which two horses were killed beneath him, one by an artillery shell, Forrest and his men blazed a trail that would have allowed the Confederate army to escape to Nashville, but General Pillow recalled the Confederates to their original lines.

That night the generals resolved to surrender the fort. Forrest, disgusted, told the generals that the men had a lot more fight left in them and won their permission to bring out his own command if he could. Forrest told his men, "Boys, these people are talking about surrendering, and I am going out of this place or bust hell wide open." He told one soldier who decided to remain behind with his comrades, "All right; I admire your loyalty, but damn your judgment!"¹⁶ Most of his command shared his judgment and rode out into the frosty night, and into freedom, on 16 February 1862.

Forrest and his men saw duty at Shiloh, where Forrest was disconcerted to hear that his son had gone missing, only to find the fifteen-year-old trooper shepherding Union prisoners. When Beauregard decided to retreat, Forrest was assigned to the rear guard, where he battled William Tecumseh Sherman at Fallen Timbers. In an engagement of typical Bedfordian fury, the fiery Tennessean charged the Federals, broke through their ranks—and suddenly found himself cut off and surrounded by blue-coats yelling "Kill him! Kill him!" One of the Federals planted a rifle barrel in his side and pulled the trigger, shooting a ball of lead near Forrest's spine. But Forrest merely grimaced, hurled a bluecoat up behind him as a shield, and spurred and shot his way through the Federals, dropping the bullet-ridden Yankee once he was safe. Forrest's right leg was numb, and the doctors, probing bloodily, couldn't find the ball in the small of his back.

He was given two month's leave to recover. He only allowed himself three weeks, and spent that time advertising for new recruits with this winning tagline: "Come on, boys, if you want a heap of fun and to kill some Yankees."¹⁷ As it was, Forrest took command of a new unit of cavalry

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

made up of Georgians and Texans, which he led on raids into Tennessee, where they learned his tactics of charge—"Mix with 'em, boys!"—and bluff.

After shocking a Federal position by his sudden appearance or with a brief, bold attack, he would demand its unconditional surrender. Failing that, he threatened, he could not be held accountable for the conse-

quences, given that his men's blood was up. While the Federals considered his demand, Forrest would make a show of his riders and artillery—the same riders and artillery repeatedly pulling in and trotting out, but fooling the Federals into thinking they were ever expanding numbers of grey cavalrymen and rebel cannon.

He performed this theme of fierce charges and gambler's bluff with variations throughout the entire war, and it was crucial to his success because his troops were usually ill-equipped. To gain an adequate supply of guns and ammunition his men had to take them

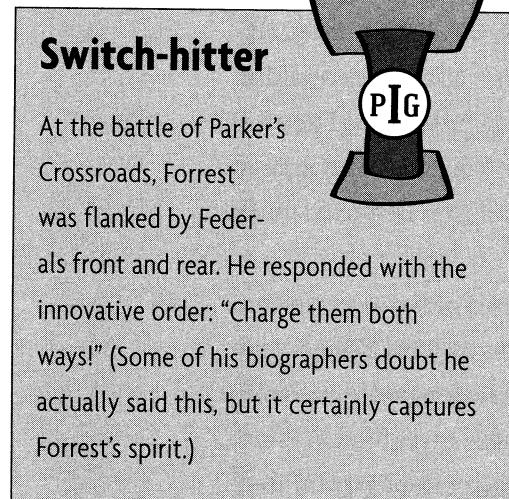
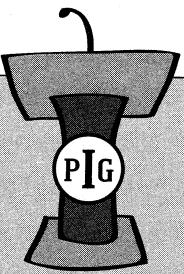
from the Federals. Surrendering Federal officers became the inadvertent quartermasters of Forrest's "critter company."

"Ah, Colonel, all is fair in love and war"

Though an accomplished raider, Forrest was also a brigadier general (as of late July 1862). But Confederate General Braxton Bragg tended to think that raiding and recruiting were Forrest's forte, and so rather than incorporate him into a regular body of cavalry, Bragg repeatedly chose to take Forrest's troopers for the army, and send Forrest out to raise more men and engage in more raids. Forrest didn't mind the call to action, but he did come to resent Bragg's limitation of his role.

Switch-hitter

At the battle of Parker's Crossroads, Forrest was flanked by Federals front and rear. He responded with the innovative order: "Charge them both ways!" (Some of his biographers doubt he actually said this, but it certainly captures Forrest's spirit.)



That Forrest was aggressive cannot be doubted, but he was also a realist and advocated against an attack on the Federal position at Dover, near Fort Donelson, in February 1863, though he was ordered to do so by General Joseph Wheeler, a Georgia-born West Pointer and cavalry officer. The attack itself was a failure—in part because of Forrest's aggression leading him to charge the Federals when he thought they were retreating; they weren't. Forrest's horse, as was common, was blown from beneath his legs, though Forrest, as ever, survived. His temper, however, didn't. After the battle he told Wheeler, "I mean no disrespect to you; you know my feelings of personal friendship for you; you can have my sword if you demand it; but there is one thing I do want you to put into your report to General Bragg—tell him that I will be in my coffin before I will fight again under your command."¹⁸ Wheeler reassured him of his esteem, the moment passed, and Forrest would serve under Wheeler again.

In April 1863, Forrest's men, usually the chased (after their raids), became the chasers, pursuing a unit of Federal raiders under the command of Colonel Abel D. Streight who charged across northern Alabama. Forrest kept his men at Streight's heels, but at one point it looked like the Federal colonel had bested Forrest, escaping over Black Creek and burning the bridge behind them. As at Sacramento, however, help came from the fairer sex. A young girl at a nearby farmhouse called out to Forrest and told him she knew another crossing. He pulled her up behind him on the saddle (reassuring her mother that he'd bring her back safe) and had her guide him to the ford, where his men crossed to continue their harassment of the Federals. Forrest left the girl (named Emma Sansom) a note—an official commendation of her service.

When Forrest finally called upon the Federal commander to surrender his exhausted troops, his men employed the old Forrest bluff strategy, moving around artillery pieces until Streight said: "Name of God! How many guns have you got? There's fifteen I've counted already!" Forrest replied, "I reckon that's all that has kept up." After a little more bluff and

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Forrest's Note to Emma Sansom

Hed Quaters in Sadle

May 2, 1863

My highest Regardes to miss Emma
Sansom for her Gallant conduct while
my posse was skirmishing with the
Federals across Black Creek near
Gadsden Alabama

N. B. Forrest

Brig Genl
Comding N. Ala—

The actual handwritten note is reproduced
by Captain Eric William Sheppard, O.B.E.
(M. Div.), M.C., Royal Tanks Corps, in *Bed-*
ford Forrest: The Confederacy's Greatest
Cavalryman (Morningside, 1992), 110-111.

Handwritten, in haste, and with no staff
officers to make a corrected copy, one sup-
poses that Emma Sansom didn't mind.

threat, Straight tossed in his hand—1,466 blue-coated soldiers. When he saw that Forrest had only 400 to 600 men, he protested, to Forrest's laughing rebuke: "Ah, Colonel, all is fair in love and war."¹⁹

"No damned man shall kill me and live"

Forrest was feared and hated by Northern commanders, but his fame also gained him respect. Once, seeing a white flag over a Union fortification, he rode up, only to be told by a chivalrous Federal officer, "General Forrest! This isn't a flag of truce. It's a signal flag. Go back, sir, go back!"²⁰ Forrest saluted and galloped back to his lines.

He was less fortunate in a misunderstanding with one of his own officers, Lieutenant A. W. Gould, whom Forrest had rashly and wrongly accused of cowardice, and ordered transferred to another unit. Gould met with Forrest at the Masonic hall (commandeered by the quartermaster) in Columbia, Tennessee, to personally protest the order. Forrest took it personally, too. When Forrest

refused to reconsider, Gould allegedly pulled a gun on Forrest. The gun misfired, wounding Forrest, who struck back with a pen knife (which he used as folks today use dental floss), slamming it into Gould's ribs while he simultaneously deflected Gould's gun hand upwards.

Gould fled and was taken in by two doctors who tried to stanch the bleeding; Forrest was assisted by another doctor who told him that the gunshot in his side might be fatal. Forrest pushed him aside and stumbled out into the street swearing “No damned man shall kill me and live.”²¹ One man tried to stop him, saying Gould was mortally wounded. That didn’t matter. Having picked up a revolver, Forrest burst in on Gould and his doctors. Gould had life enough still in him, to make a break for it, running down an alley before collapsing in a pile of weeds. Forrest strode over to him, rolled him over with his boot, and, seemingly satisfied, stalked off.

Forrest’s wound was, miraculously, not fatal as the ball hit no vital organs. Gould was not so lucky, and now that the mortal balances had shifted in Forrest’s favor, Forrest was filled with remorse. He told his doctors to go away, “It’s nothing but a damn little pistol ball; leave it alone!” And he demanded that Gould be given every consideration of treatment, which Forrest would pay for. Gould died, but not before he and Forrest were reconciled, according to some accounts.²²

Forrest versus Bragg

Within a fortnight Forrest was back in action, covering the retreat of Bragg’s army and being barracked by a woman as he sped through her town: “You great big cowardly rascal; why don’t you fight like a man, instead of running like a cur? I wish old Forrest was here. He’d make you fight.”²³

Forrest fought again, and was wounded again, at Chickamauga, with another ball lodged near his spine. But while he broke his rule of abstention and accepted a swig of whiskey for the pain, he stayed in action at the battle—indeed he stayed in the battle more than the commanding general Braxton Bragg did. With the Federals in retreat, Forrest sent a dispatch

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

through General Leonidas Polk for Bragg, laying out what he saw of the Federal evacuation and offering the admonition, "I think we ought to press forward as rapidly as possible." He followed this up with another dispatch, urging haste because "every hour is worth 10,000 men." His reports were seconded by a Confederate soldier who had escaped the Federals and was sent to Bragg to relay information on the Union retreat. The skeptical Bragg asked the trooper if he knew what a retreat looked like. "I ought to General, I've been with you during your entire campaign." Forrest likewise grumbled about Bragg: "What does he fight battles for?"²⁴

Bragg's advance on the Federals was not only, in Forrest's view, lackluster at best, but he redoubled the crime by sending an order to Forrest—now fighting off Union cavalry—that his command was being transferred



Bedford Forrest on Leadership

If Forrest could be an outspoken subordinate, he was equally tough with the enlisted men, once physically smashing one of his scouts into a tree because he had brought back a rumor of Federal troops rather than seeing them for himself; once hurling a reluctant trooper into icy water; and once catching a fleeing conscript soldier and thrashing him with a splintered branch, telling him to "go back to the front and fight; you might as well be killed there as here, for if you ever run away again you'll not get off so easy."^{*} Likewise, any officer who claimed he shouldn't have to engage in physical labor (which Forrest always readily did) could suddenly find the general's saber under his nose along with threat, "I'll officer you!"*

* Quoted in Brian Steel Wills, *A Battle from the Start* (HarperCollins, 1992), 161.

to Wheeler. This set the stage for the greatest verbal showdown of Forrest's career. He spurred into Bragg's camp, burst into his tent, and let fly with a speech of damnation that ended with these words:

I have stood your meanness as long as I intend to. You have played the part of a damned scoundrel, and are a coward, and if you were any part of a man I would slap your face jaws and force you to resent it.

You may as well not issue any more orders to me, for I will not obey them. And as I hold you personally responsible for any further indignities you try to inflict on me.

You have threatened to arrest me for not obeying your orders promptly. I dare you to do it, and I say to you that if you ever again try to interfere with me or cross my path, it will be at the peril of your life.²⁵

Bragg decided to grant Forrest a transfer.

Controversy at Fort Pillow

In early 1864, Forrest's youngest brother was killed in action—and Forrest, to avenge his death, personally charged the enemy in such fierce hand-to-hand fighting that his own men thought he was engaged in suicidal combat. By March 1864, Forrest was seeking to avenge more than his brother, he was seeking redress for outrages against pro-Confederate Tennesseans at the hands of Union troops or pro-Union militia. The alleged crimes included murder (one such being an officer of Forrest's command who was captured while looking for deserters, and then, allegedly, tortured, killed, and mutilated), detention without charge, and extortion (bilking Southern townsmen out of thousands of dollars to spare their towns being burnt). Forrest sent a note of protest to the Union commander at Memphis and a dispatch to Confederate General Leonidas

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

Polk. But he also prepared for action. In April 1864 he fought the most controversial battle of his career, at Fort Pillow, Tennessee.

Forrest hoped to capture the fort in order to supply his men; he did not expect much resistance. The Federal force defending the fort was made up of black troops (mostly freed slaves) and pro-Union Tennesseans. Forrest thought little of them as soldiers, and thought of the latter as traitors and the sort of renegades who abused their pro-Confederate neighbors. His approach against the fort was well-conducted, seizing forward buildings and surrounding the fort which, however, backed onto the Mississippi River, where the Federals had a gunboat.

Forrest's men outnumbered the Fort's defenders (not including the gunboat) by about three to one. As per his usual procedure, he tried to convince the bluecoats to surrender and threatened that if they did not he could not be responsible for the fate of the Federal command. But the Yankees refused—apparently doubting that they were really dealing with the fearsome Forrest—and the defenders behind their parapet even goaded the attackers to come and get them. Forrest was willing to oblige. Forrest set his Missourians, Mississippians, and Tennesseans the contest of seeing who could breach the Federal lines first. Forrest, uncharacteristically, did not lead the charge himself. He had already had one horse shot beneath him that day (two more would follow) and it appears he might have been nursing a sore hip.

The Confederates swarmed through the fort's outer defenses (a ditch and parapet followed by earthworks) and then charged into the fort. The resulting melee, with Confederates firing into the Federals at point-blank range degenerated into a massacre as bluecoats fled to the river in vain hope of joining the gunboat, which Confederate fire kept driven back. In the frenzy and chaos of the blood-dimmed tide, bluecoats threw down their guns and were cut down after them. Men attempting to surrender were shown no quarter. But what happened was no organized atrocity, though Federal propaganda later tried to make it so, especially playing

the race card, accusing the Confederates of murdering the black troops who suffered disproportionate casualties. (Fifty-eight of the 262 black defenders were made prisoners, as were 168 of the 295 whites.)

But any disinterested view of the battle and sober assessment of the evidence leads one to an opposite conclusion. Though he had no love for “Damn Nigger Regiments” and “Damn Tennessee Yankees,” Forrest and his officers tried to rein in their men as quickly as they could, once they realized that what had started as a battle had degenerated into a rampage.²⁶ That Forrest had hoped to take the fort without bloodshed was obvious from his demand for its surrender. That men on the sharp-end (rather than the propaganda end) of battle understood the Fort Pillow “massacre” for what it was can be demonstrated by the fact that Sherman, who investigated the incident, declined to seek retaliation, though he had been authorized to do so by Grant, if the facts justified it.



Bluff and Bluster

Forrest once scouted his way through a Union camp. When a Federal sentry challenged him, Forrest chastised the trooper so thoroughly for insulting his commanding officer that the Yankee made his apologies and let Forrest pass.

Fighting to the end

On 10 June 1864, Forrest fought his greatest independent pitched battle, ambushing Federal forces under Union General Samuel D. Sturgis at the Battle of Brice’s Crossroads, and sending Sturgis’s much larger force—8,500 Federals to 3,500 Confederates—in harried retreat, with Sturgis pleading, “For God’s sake, if Mr. Forrest will let me alone, I will let him alone.”²⁷ Forrest not only defeated the Federals but relieved them of 16 pieces of artillery, 176 wagons, and a huge amount of ammunition and arms. Sherman was appalled at Sturgis’s defeat but noted that “Forrest is the devil, and I think he has got some of our troops under cower. . . . I will

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

order them [two Federal officers] to make up a force and go out to follow Forrest to the death, if it costs ten thousand lives and breaks the Treasury. *There will never be peace in Tennessee until Forrest is dead!*²⁸

Unfortunately for the Confederacy, Forrest was not sent to harry Sherman's rear in Tennessee and Georgia; he was kept in the sideshow war of Mississippi, where he remained audacious even as his years of hard campaigning were starting to take their toll on his health. He was shot again, this time in the foot, at the Battle of Harrisburg, near Tupelo, Mississippi—a bloody repulse for the Confederates, and one that shattered Forrest's command, but not badly enough for Sherman's liking, because despite rumors to the contrary, Forrest survived. His presence, riding back from the hospital, reinvigorated the Confederate cavalry.

Indeed, this seemed to be Forrest's role in the last year of the war: to reinvigorate Confederate morale with daring raids, such as he made into Memphis in August 1864, while the country's borders withered under the torches of the advancing Federals. General Richard Taylor more or less gave him this duty, telling Forrest to do what he would, and report only to him. Forrest, operating now in Alabama, captured the Federal garrison (1,900 men) at Athens in September 1864, destroyed the heavily guarded trestle at Sulphur Springs, and caused such trouble that Sherman had 30,000 men converging on the Confederate commander to "press Forrest to death." But Sherman confessed that Forrest's "cavalry will cover one hundred miles in less time than ours will ten."²⁹

Forrest followed up his Alabama-Tennessee raids with a long-held plan to harass the Federals' river-borne supplies. His men captured Federal supply boats and turned them into impromptu gunboats for Forrest's new-styled "Hoss Marines." They shelled Federal transports on the river and obliterated supply dumps. At Johnsonville, Tennessee, on the Tennessee River, they inflicted millions of dollars worth of damage on Federal stores on 3 November 1864. He did this, while Federal intelligence reports had him roaming about up North, in disguise, preparing, accord-

ing to a Union provost-marshall, to “seize telegraph and rail at Chicago, release prisoners there, arm them, sack the city, shoot down all Federal soldiers, and urge concert of action with Southern sympathizers.”³⁰ Forrest had no plans of fomenting an insurrection in Chicago. His plans were closer to home, as he wistfully remarked to his artillery officer John Morton, “John, if they’d give you enough guns and me enough men, we could whip old Sherman off the face of the earth!”³¹

Instead, Forrest was recalled to join in the bloody futility of John Bell Hood’s invasion of Tennessee in which the Confederate army of the West smashed itself to pieces, and then retreated, covered by Forrest, through bloodied ice and snow. Forrest finished the war as a lieutenant general, and to the end, he continued to fight the enemy hand-to-hand. In battle at Bogler’s Creek, he was attacked and pursued by Federal cavalrymen whom he held off and parried with his revolver, while battered by saber blows.

When it came time to surrender, he declined thoughts to lead his men to Mexico (though he entertained the idea later, after the war, as a possible mercenary adventure) or to go farther west and continue the struggle. He knew the game was up, though defeat was as bitter for him as for any who wore the rebel grey. In early May 1865, about a month after Lee’s surrender, he told a die-hard politician, “Any man who is in favor of a further prosecution of this war is a fit subject for a lunatic asylum, and ought to be sent there immediately.”³²

He also did something that his detractors might not expect. Before the war was over, he freed his slaves. In later congressional testimony, Forrest said that at the beginning of the war he called his slaves together and

A Laconic Confederate

Woman: “General,
why is it the hair on your head is gray
and your beard is black?”

Forrest: “I don’t know, ma’am, unless
it’s because I work my head more’n I do
my jaws.”

Quoted in Andrew Nelson Lytle, *Bedford Forrest and His Critter Company* (J. S. Sanders & Company, 1992), 329.

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

told them that if they stuck with him to the end of the war, he would set them free. He was as good as his word.

Reconstruction's foe

By his own confession, the war had "pretty well wrecked him." He felt "completely used up—shot to pieces, crippled up."³³ His finances were equally shattered. He relinquished some of his land, which he could no longer afford, and set about trying to farm some of the rest and return his saw mill to operation. He employed newly free blacks—at higher than standard wages, according to the Freedman's Bureau—and brought into partnership several Union officers. The gentlemen in blue got a rude welcome when the general's surviving war horse, King Philip, always

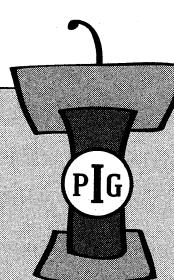
Forrest's Farewell Address to His Troops

Like Lee, Forrest advocated a path of conciliation. His final words to his soldiers included these admonitions:

Civil war such as you have just passed through naturally engenders feelings of animosity, hatred, and revenge. It is our duty to divest ourselves of all such feelings and so far as in our power to do so, cultivate friendly feelings towards those with whom we have so long contested....

I have never on the field of battle sent you where I was unwilling to go myself, nor would I now advise you to a course which I felt myself unwilling to pursue. You have been good soldiers, you can be good citizens. Obey the laws, preserve your honour, and the Government to which you have surrendered can afford to be, and will be, magnanimous.

N. B. FORREST,
Lieutenant-General.



You can find the entire farewell address in Captain Eric William Sheppard, *Bedford Forrest: The Confederacy's Greatest Cavalryman* (Morningside, 1992), 280–2.

enraged at the sight of blue uniforms, tried to attack them. One of the Union officers remarked it was no wonder that Forrest had built up a reputation as the very devil of a general, “Your negroes fight for you, and your horses fight for you.”³⁴

Still, Forrest faced the prospect of being tried for treason (he was indicted but never brought to trial) and for murder. The murder trial did happen, and Forrest was found innocent on the grounds of self-defense. He had intervened when he heard a black field hand named Thomas Edwards assaulting his wife. Edwards was notorious as a wife beater and for having a foul temper. Forrest burst into Edwards’s cabin and told him his days as a wife-beater were over. Edwards swore and said that no one would stop him from thrashing his wife. Edwards grasped a knife. Forrest whacked him with a broom handle—and when that only incited Edwards to attack, the general reached for an axe and struck Edwards dead.

According to one Union officer working for the Freedman’s Bureau, Forrest exhibited a dangerous leniency with his freedmen that encouraged affairs like that of Thomas Edwards. It was one thing, and a just thing, to treat the freedmen well—which he said, Forrest did to an unparalleled degree—but it was quite another to make liberal loans to the freedmen and allow them to buy and carry arms. And indeed, while Forrest waited for the authorities to arrive after his fight with Edwards, a group of armed freedmen had apparently surrounded Forrest’s house, though no further incidents of violence occurred.

Violence, however, was endemic in the tensions of Reconstruction, with disgruntled Confederate soldiers feeling stripped of their rights, freedmen heady with their new freedom, and Federal troops sitting in occupation on the South, executing the laws passed by the Radical Republicans who controlled the U. S. Congress.

Forrest tried to live by the advice he had given his troops—to obey the law. He applied for a pardon from President Johnson, and put his energies

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

to work at a variety of business interests hoping one of them would bring his family financial security. He also apparently joined the newly formed Ku Klux Klan to, in his own mind, return order to the South.

The Klansman

What Forrest did within the Klan is ambiguous if for no other reason than that he denied having been a member of it or having anything more than a general knowledge of it, though he is often considered to have been elected its first commander in chief, or "Grand Wizard." By his own testimony he was not a member, but was "in sympathy" with the Klan and would have cooperated with them in a stand-off against Reconstruction radicals.

Forrest openly thought of the Klan as a defender of Southern rights against the depredations of the Radical Republicans. He publicly discounted reports of its crimes as mostly untrue. He believed that it was led by former Confederate officers who were honorable and disciplined, whose purpose was not the spread of anarchy or insurgency, but the preservation of order and peace. If Longstreet believed in accommodating the new order by being a Republican, Forrest, characteristically, called for peace and obedience, *unless* the Radical Republican authorities were to press things too far. If, Forrest told a reporter, the governor of Tennessee ordered out the militia against the people of the state and committed "outrages," it would be the equivalent of a declaration of war; and if the governor declared war against the people of Tennessee, he would fight against him. It is in this light that Forrest viewed the Ku Klux Klan.

The view that the Radical Republicans did not have the interests of the South, or the Constitution, at heart, was widespread among former Confederates. The Radical Republicans, they believed, were using their power in Congress to grind the faces of former Confederates in the mud, denying them their political and civil rights and setting up newly freed

blacks as chattel voters to enforce the Republicans' will. So sober a figure as Robert E. Lee, who like Forrest had made the case for submission and obedience, told a U.S. senator: "a policy which will continue the prostration of one-half the country, [and] alienate the affections of its inhabitants from the Government... appears to me so manifestly injudicious that I do not see how those responsible can tolerate it."³⁵ Tolerating insults was not Forrest's strong suit.

Forrest said that he would defend the people of Tennessee against any radical depredations, but he wanted to make it clear: "I have no powder to burn killing negroes. I intend to kill the radicals [Radical Republicans]....I have told them that they were trying to create a disturbance and then slip out and leave the consequences to fall upon the negro; but they can't do it."

In Forrest's mind and public professions, the Klan was not an anti-black organization—except in its origins, which were, it was said, to defend white women and children from hungry, armed, newly freed blacks looking for food on Southern farms—it was an anti-Radical Republican organization. Though the Klan was notorious for plying its trading of frightening, intimidating, and threatening freedmen, when not whipping and lynching them, Forrest maintained that such terrorism was not its purpose. It was organized to protect Southerners from pro-Reconstruction groups who were "killing and murdering our people." He confessed, "There were some foolish young men who put masks on their faces and rode over the countryside frightening negroes; but orders have been issued to stop that, and it has ceased."³⁶

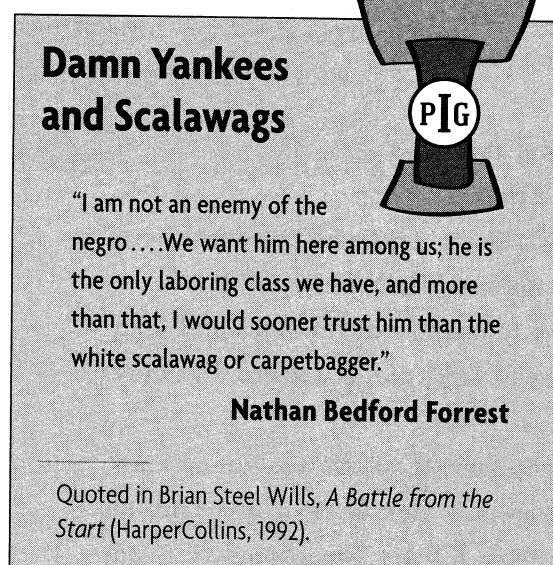
Neglecting Its History

Forrest told a reporter that the Ku Klux Klan was originally "a protective, political, military organization," and one "sworn to recognize the Government of the United States". It was now "a political organization, giving its support, of course, to the democratic party"—something the Democratic Party scarcely ever mentions these days.

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

Whether or not Forrest led the Ku Klux Klan, its "General Order" dated 17 July 1867, said much the same: "We are not the enemy of the blacks, as long as they behave themselves, make no threats upon us, and do not attack or interfere with us." It also denied that the Klan had authorized any of the acts of unprovoked violence that had been carried out in its name; and in fact repudiated these as "wrong! wrong! wrong!" The Klan, it pronounced, "is prohibited from doing these things, and they are requested to prohibit others from doing them, and to protect all good,

peaceful, well disposed and law abiding men, whether white or black."³⁷ When the Klan could no longer be controlled as a force for order, or according to some views, once Forrest thought he could no longer control it, it was dissolved as a unified organization in 1869. Forrest himself testified that he had helped dismantle it. And it is certainly true that he was later a public opponent of white vigilantism and a proponent of racial amity.



Forrest actually wanted more blacks to come to the South (in one cockamamie scheme, he thought perhaps the United States could ransom the prisoners of African chiefs and bring them to the South as free laborers). He also testified on behalf of importing Chinese coolies. When it was protested that black laborers would disapprove, he countered that the railroad project he was promoting had support both in financial subscriptions and in a stockholders' vote among black Southerners (and he had the numbers to prove it).

Forrest died in 1877. Only two years before he had declared himself a Christian and became a member of the Presbyterian church. He had always supported Christianity in principle and shown an interest in it and believed in its moral teachings, but it was only at the end of his life, when he was pretty well used up, that the gambler locked up his cards and the man of violent temper and words tried to keep both shackled. He confessed he felt the better for it, and as he said, “I have seen too much of violence, and I want to close my days at peace with all the world, as I am now at peace with my Maker.”³⁸ And so he did.

1. *What is the primary purpose of the study?*

2. *What is the study's hypothesis or research question?*

3. *What is the study's design and methodology?*

4. *What are the study's key findings or results?*

5. *What are the study's conclusions and implications?*

6. *What are the study's limitations and future directions?*

7. *What are the study's overall strengths and contributions?*

ULYSSES S. GRANT (1822-1885)



"I propose to fight it out on this line if it takes all summer."¹

My family is American, and has been for generations, in all its branches, direct and collateral."² So begin Ulysses S. Grant's memoirs, and from that beginning, one already gets a good impression of the man, a man who is a prototypical American type: direct, unassuming, sturdy, independent, and practical. There is no preening on aristocratic European origins. No pretense of somehow being related to Richard the Lionhearted. No Southern sense of medieval chivalry and feudalism transported to the landed estates of the cotton kingdom. Grant was an American; and he, more than anyone else, prevented there being two Americas. It was his implacable will, his stubborn devotion to the cause, his unceasing determination to fight, no matter what the cost, to ultimate victory—and his magnanimity in

Guess What?

- ❖ Grant (and Lincoln) thought the Mexican War was morally wrong, but had no qualms waging a far bloodier war to deny the South its independence
- ❖ Grant's wife owned slaves
- ❖ Grant rated Joseph E. Johnston higher than Robert E. Lee, though Johnston never inflicted the casualties on Grant that Lee did

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

that victory—that ensured the cause of the Union. Before the war, he was an unlikely hero. But his heroism is a very American story—an Horatio Alger story in Union blue. No less a man than William Tecumseh Sherman thought so: “Each epoch creates its own agents, and General Grant more nearly than any other man impersonated the American character of 1861–5. He will stand, therefore, as the typical hero of the Great Civil War.”³

A horse-loving boy

He was born Hiram Ulysses Grant in Ohio, a son of a tanner and farmer. While his father tanned hides, his son preferred them on living beasts, on horses, and he became an adept horseman. He hated the stench and blood of the tannery—so much so that in later life his meat had to be blackened free of blood.

Avoiding the tannery, he preferred working on his father’s farm, applying himself to practical, solitary tasks, and leading the plough horses. By the age of fourteen, he was running a livery business, driving horse-drawn wagons and carriages for families needing a ride out of town. Getting out of town, and away from the tannery, was a constant desire of his boyhood. In fact, like many boys, he seemed happiest wandering alone outdoors, daydreaming under the sun, lost in his own thoughts (which were not entirely unproductive: he taught himself algebra).

His father, perhaps recognizing that Ulysses would not a tanner be, ensured him a good education and won him a nomination to West Point. For a man like Grant’s father, successful, self-taught, and with interests in social standing and politics (he was a Whig and opposed slavery), the military academy offered his son a heady combination: prestige, a fine education, a career, and had the added benefit of being free. In his memoirs, Grant records his father’s announcement:

"Ulysses, I believe you are going to receive the appointment." "What appointment?" I inquired. "To West Point; I have applied for it." "But I won't go," I said. He said he thought I would, *and I thought so too, if he did*. I really had no objection to going to West Point, except that I had a very exalted idea of the acquirements necessary to get through. I did not believe I possessed them, and could not bear the idea of failing.⁴

Grant, then, was not a rebellious teenager in the usual sense. He was honest, modest, quiet, and self-contained, and if his humility made him fearful of West Point, there was one more immediate and important gift the military academy gave him: it was his ticket out of Georgetown, Ohio. "I had always a great desire to travel. I was already the best traveled boy in Georgetown, except for the sons of one man, John Walker, who had emigrated to Texas with his family, and immigrated back as soon as he could get the means to do so."⁵

West Point gave him another gift: his adult name. Gone, because his nominating congressman had made a mistake, was Hiram. Ulysses (the name he had always used) became his official Christian name, and Simpson (his mother's maiden name) was suddenly inserted as his middle name. Characteristically, it was an error Grant never bothered to correct—too shy, and perhaps too pleased at the practical improvement, to do so. It also won him a new nickname—"Sam" from his new initials U. S., "Uncle Sam" Grant.

He felt no military calling and by his own account was not a studious cadet. He enjoyed mathematics, but otherwise preferred reading novels from the school's library rather than studying. "I read all of Bulwer's [Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novels] then published, [James Fenimore] Cooper's, [Captain] Marryat's, [Sir Walter] Scott's, Washington Irving's works... and many others." He even hoped that the military academy

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

might be abolished while he was a student (such a motion was being debated before Congress). Nevertheless, he was a quick study and managed to graduate in the middle of his class (and was also known as West Point's best horseman) in 1843. His shyness, or what his friend and fellow West Pointer James Longstreet called Grant's "girlish modesty,"⁶ is the reason for Grant's famous indifference to military dress. Initially, like most young officers, he was eager to display his new uniform. But when a ragged young boy and a dissipated stable hand mocked his appearance, Grant confesses, he gained "a distaste for military uniform that I never recovered from."⁷

He was sent to Jefferson Barracks, St. Louis, as a lieutenant of infantry where one of his fellow lieutenants (and fellow West Pointers) was Richard S. Ewell, his senior, who, as he states, "later acquired considerable reputation as a Confederate general during the rebellion. He was a man much esteemed, and deservedly so, in the old army, and proved himself a gallant and efficient officer in two wars—both in my estimation unholy."⁸

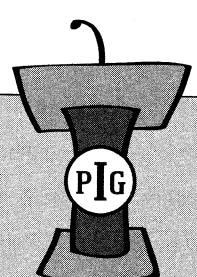
Those two "unholy" wars were the Mexican War and the War for Southern Independence—indeed the two were related. "The occupation,

What Price Empire?

Grant's View of the Mexican War

"It is to the credit of the American nation, however, that after conquering Mexico, and while practically holding the country in our possession, so that we could have retained the whole of it, or made any terms we chose, we paid a round sum for the additional territory taken; more than it was worth, or was likely to be, to Mexico. To us it was an empire of incalculable value; but it might have been obtained by other means."

Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs* (The Modern Library, 1999), 24.



separation, and annexation of Texas,” which set the stage for the Mexican War, was, in Grant’s view, “a conspiracy to acquire territory out of which slave states might be formed for the American Union.” Moreover, the “Southern rebellion was largely the outgrowth of the Mexican war. Nations, like individuals are punished for their transgressions. We got our punishment in the most sanguinary and expensive war in modern times.”⁹

It is telling, of course, that Grant thought Southern independence was an “unholy” cause, but its suppression a righteous one—just punishment for the sin of acquiring America’s Western empire. Grant nevertheless participated in the “unholy” war against Mexico because “Experience proves that the man who obstructs a war in which his nation is engaged, no matter whether right or wrong, occupies no enviable place in life or history.”¹⁰

At war in Mexico

Grant served under “Old Rough and Ready,” General Zachary Taylor, and got his first taste of combat on 8 May 1846 at Palo Alto. As “a young second-lieutenant who had never heard a hostile gun before,” Grant remembered, “I felt sorry that I had enlisted.”¹¹ Nevertheless, he acquitted himself well, and no one ever accused Grant of quivering under fire—precisely the opposite; he showed no emotion at all.

Grant learned more than the blunt task of soldiering through cannon balls and bullets; he learned generalship. Taylor shared Grant’s disdain for the pomp, refinery, and spit and polish of military etiquette, but, as Grant saw, he knew how to get things done. Among other things, “General Taylor was not an officer to trouble the administration much with his demands, but was inclined to do the best he could with the means given him.” If he thought a directive was impossible to achieve he would say so. “If the judgment [of the authorities] was against him he would have

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

gone on and done the best he could with the means at hand without parading his grievance before the public. No soldier could face either danger or responsibility more calmly than he.” What Grant admired in Taylor were the very traits that shone through Grant himself in the Civil War.

Grant’s coolness under fire was manifest from the start. “There is no great sport in having bullets flying about one in every direction but I find they have less horror when among them than when in anticipation,” he wrote. He had seen violent death, decapitation from a cannon ball, and an officer horribly maimed with his lower jaw torn off. Yet he could still say, “War seems much less horrible to persons engaged in it than to those who read of battles.”¹² Grant knew that fear comes from the imagination; courage comes from a relentless focus on the duty at hand—even in a hail of musketry and cannon.

In August 1846, Grant was assigned as quartermaster to the Fourth Infantry—a vast job, but one he didn’t want; not because of the pressure of its responsibilities but because it took him out of the firing line. “I respectfully protest against being assigned to a duty which removes me from sharing in the dangers and honors of service with my company at the front...” His protest was rejected on the grounds that it was his meritorious conduct and skill that merited him this promotion. Grant was not appeased, venting his frustration by writing on the back of the rejection he had received from Lieutenant Colonel John Garland: “I should be permitted to resign the position of Quartermaster and Commissary.... I *must* and *will* accompany my regiment in battle.”¹³

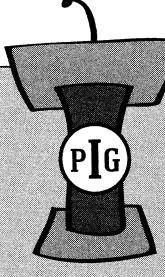
Grant, however, did his duty. General Zachary Taylor needed an energetic young officer to keep his army supplied on its march through Mexico. In “Sam” Grant, he had found his man. Grant had a logistician’s mind. He was methodical, but quick in acquiring and sifting information, and he was diligent. He was also creative: when former Congressman Thomas L. Hamer joined his staff (serendipitously he was the congressman who had appointed Grant to West Point), Grant used the terrain they

rode past to pose tactical problems for Hamer, war-gaming their way through the Mexican countryside.

At the battle of Monterrey (21–23 September 1846) Grant capitalized on his Indian way with horses. As regimental quartermaster he should have had no role in the action, but, “My curiosity got the better of my judgment, and I mounted a horse and rode to the front to see what was going on. I had been there but a short time when an order to charge was given, and lacking the moral courage to return to camp—where I had been ordered to stay—I charged with the regiment.... I was, I believe, the only person in the 4th infantry in the charge who was on horseback.”¹⁴ The charge was fruitless and costly, with one-third of the men going down as casualties. But though he was mounted, and therefore an easy target, Grant emerged without a scratch. This was only the beginning. Once engaged in battle in the city Grant volunteered to ride through the streets of Monterrey, through enemy fire, to reach the division commander and acquire more ammunition for his hard-pressed brigade. He rode like a circus rider, flipping his body to the horse’s side away from the enemy, then throwing himself full in the saddle and dashing to safety.

After Monterrey the American thrust against Mexico shifted from Zachary Taylor to “Old Fuss and Fathers” General Winfield Scott, a military genius who plotted a course from Vera Cruz to Mexico City, following the path of Cortez. On the march and in battle, Grant did as he did at Monterrey, performing his quartermaster duties, but joining the action whenever he could. As ever, he was stalwart, brave, and enterprising—including, during the fight for Mexico City, talking his way into a church,

Champing at the Bit



“You could not keep Grant out of a battle.”

James Longstreet on Ulysses S. Grant in the Mexican War

Quoted in Geoffrey Perret, *Ulysses S. Grant: Soldier and President* (Random House, 1997), 67.

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

identifying its belfry as a perfect site from which to strike, rushing off in search of howitzer, finding one, disassembling it, bringing it up to the church belfry, and then reassembling it there to pound the enemy.

Peace but not prosperity

With the war won, Grant's thoughts turned from battle to the only thought that continually interrupted his concentration on his duty: marriage to his sweetheart Julia Dent. It was a mixed marriage. Grant the Ohioan, whose family had abolitionist sentiments, had conjoined himself to a family of Missouri slave owners. The fathers-in-law of the happy couple despised each other.

Nevertheless, the Grant-Dent marriage was a success. Grant relished time with his family, and military assignments that separated him from his wife and their children (of whom there would be four) left him depressed. The peacetime army, with its long, unpredictable postings in remote locations, low pay, and inevitable boredom (Grant went from combat to clerical work) was distasteful to the brave, young West Pointer who had never considered the military his career. The best thing about a West Point education—besides its being free—was that it set one up for remunerative employment as an engineer or a business manager after one's obligatory service.

Grant stayed in the army for six years after the Mexican War. They were years of frustration—tedious work punctuated by loneliness—that took him to Detroit, New York, a perilous passage through cholera-ridden Panama, the Oregon Territory, and California. He filled the unforgiving minutes with drinking, moonlighting business ventures (which failed), and reading (Grant was an unusually well-read man who never advertised the fact). When he resigned his commission, he found he could not even afford his passage home to Missouri. In New York, a brother West Pointer and a Southerner (most of Grant's friends in the army were Southerners), Simon Bolivar Buckner, loaned him the money he needed.

Grant turned down a position in his father's leather goods shop in order to become a farmer on sixty acres that had been given Grant by his wife's father, "Colonel" Frederick Dent, a colonel of the Southern honorific type. Farming suited Grant, and his enterprising nature—necessary given the depressed agricultural market of the time—kept him busy with other businesses as well, among them, supervising slaves on the Dent plantation. He also built a house for his family. He called it Hardscrabble.

As the country slid into an economic depression, Grant's circumstances became increasingly precarious; he floundered trying to find work that would keep him solvent. At one point, in an incident that



Ulysses S. Grant: Slave Owner and Abolitionist

Grant only ever owned one slave, whom he set free shortly after he acquired him (which probably cost him, at a time when he was hard-up for cash, a good \$1,000 to \$1,500), but his wife owned four, and his father-in-law was an outspoken proponent of "the peculiar institution." When Grant needed workers, he preferred hiring black freeman to slaves, and was notorious for paying them more than the going rate. He was also notorious among his neighbors for his soft-heartedness, one of them saying that Grant was "tyrannized over by the Negroes given to his wife."^{*} Though wedded to a slave-owning family, Grant never budged from his own belief that slavery was wrong. He would not tolerate cruelty to slaves, once stopping a neighbor from whipping a slave. Interestingly, Grant's father had been a business partner of John Brown's father, and Grant himself knew Taylor Blow, the owner of Dred Scott.

* Quoted in Geoffrey Perret, *Ulysses S. Grant: Soldier and President* (Random House, 1997), 57.

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

could have come straight from an O. Henry short story, he pawned his watch to buy Christmas presents. In 1860, Grant's father again offered him a position in his leather goods store, and this time, in desperation, Grant accepted. He moved his family to Galena, Illinois.

He was again a clerk, a job that hadn't suited him in the army and that suited him no better in peacetime. But if his duties did not engage him, the newspapers did, and so did political talk in the shop. He felt the country dividing, the fault lines separating. He said, "It made my blood run cold to hear friends of mine, Southern men . . . discuss dissolution of the Union as though it were a tariff bill."¹⁵

In 1856, he had voted for the Democrat James Buchanan over the Republican John C. Frémont, because, as he said, "I knew Frémont," but also because, though opposed to slavery, he saw Buchanan as a moderate candidate who could keep the country together. He could not vote in the election of 1860, because he had not been resident long enough in Illinois, but if he could have voted, he would have cast a ballot for the Democrat Stephen Douglas, perhaps on the same grounds. While Grant's brother celebrated Lincoln's victory, Grant himself, having seen war, was gloomy, telling one reveling Republican, "The South will fight." Later, when another doubted the Southern states' willingness to secede, arguing that "There's a great deal of bluster about Southerners, but I don't think there's much fight in them," Grant demurred. "There *is* a good deal of bluster; that's a product of their education; but once they get at it they will make a strong fight. You are a great deal like them in one respect—each side underestimates the other and over-estimates itself,"¹⁶ which was right enough.

Return to the colors

When the South seceded, Grant's course was clear. He wrote his father, "We are now in the midst of trying times when every one must be for or against his country. . . . Having been educated for such an emergency, at

the expense of the Government, I feel that it has upon me superior claims, such claims as no ordinary motives of self-interest can surmount.”¹⁷ His father had given him financial security. But the country was at war, and Grant took up the responsibility of drilling volunteer troops, then working for the governor as mustering officer (though still a civilian), while waiting for an appropriate commission, which the governor finally handed him, making Grant a colonel of Illinois volunteers.

Grant was not an imposing figure. In fact, he took care not to appear as one, disdaining bluster, pomp, and hard language. (He believed he had never sworn in his life.) But without raising his voice he carried a certitude about him. If Grant gave an order—and his orders were always very clear—he expected it to be done quickly and well. His quiet authority was such that even such an undisciplined mob as the Twenty-first Regiment of Illinois Volunteers felt it would be wrong and foolish not to obey.

Grant’s volunteers (Grant was, ironically, put under the command of John C. Frémont) were sent to subdue rebels in Missouri. It was here that Grant had an epiphany about the nature of combat. His men were moving against a Confederate unit commanded by Colonel Thomas Harris. As they approached the site of Harris’s camp,

... my heart kept getting higher and higher until it felt to me as though it was in my throat. I would have given anything then to have been back in Illinois, but I had not the moral courage to halt and consider what to do; I kept right on.... The place where Harris had been encamped a few days before was still there and the marks of a recent encampment were plainly visible, but the troops were gone. My heart resumed its place. It occurred to me at once that Harris had been as much afraid of me as I had been of him. This was a view of the question I had never taken before; but it was one I never forgot afterwards.

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

From that event to the close of the war, I never experienced trepidation upon confronting an enemy....¹⁸

Grant was promoted to brigadier general. When Confederate forces invaded neutral Kentucky, Grant moved swiftly, proclaiming that he was acting in Kentucky's defense, taking the city of Paducah. Grant once said, "The only way to whip an army is to go straight out and fight it."¹⁹ That was his *modus operandi*, inhibited only when he had cautious or conspiring superiors working against him. There was something else too. Grant confessed in his memoirs that "One of my superstitions had always been when I started to go anywhere, or to do anything, not to turn back, or stop until the thing intended was accomplished."²⁰ That superstition—or tenacity—was put at the service of the Union with devastating effect.

On 5 November 1861, Grant moved with boats and troops to Belmont, Missouri, on the Mississippi River, where in a short, sharp battle, he scattered a Confederate detachment—only to find the Confederates reforming to cut him off from his transports. The boys in blue—whose victory celebrations had been premature—had a sweaty time of it, but Grant reminded them: "We cut our way in and we can cut our way out,"²¹ and so they did. If Grant was still learning generalship, he displayed all the right moral virtues: mounted on his horse he was the last man up the gang plank to safety. He was also lucky. "When I first went on deck I entered the captain's room...and threw myself on a sofa. I did not keep that position a moment, but rose to go out on deck....I had scarcely left when a musket ball entered the room, struck the head of the sofa"—right where his head had been.²²

States like Kentucky, Missouri, and Union-occupied Tennessee confronted the army with what to do with runaway slaves and what position to take with slave-owning families (some of which were pro-Confederate and others pro-Union). Grant confessed, "My inclination is to whip the rebellion into submission, preserving all constitutional rights [including

the right to slavery]. If it cannot be whipped in any other way than through a war against slavery, let it come to that legitimately.” John C. Frémont had tried to abolish slavery in Missouri and had been rebuked, indeed relieved of his command, by the president.

In the West, the eventually settled policy was to leave slave-owning Union families alone, but to enforce penalties on slave-owning Confederate families. For instance, in southeast Missouri, where Grant said, “there is not a sufficiency of Union sentiment left in this portion of the state to save Sodom,”²³ pro-Southern households could be subject to additional taxes (in order, it was said, to support pro-Union refugees). In Memphis, a very pro-Confederate city, Grant appropriated the grand house of one Confederate sympathizer for his own use and that of his family and sent



Drinking with the Enemy

Before and after the Battle of Belmont, Grant met with Confederate General Leonidas Polk, known as “The Fighting Bishop,” because he was also an Episcopalian bishop. When Grant referred to Belmont as a “skirmish,” Polk blurted out: “Skirmish! Hell and damnation! I’d like to know what he calls a *battle*.” (Episcopalian bishops were made of sterner stuff in those days.)

At one meeting, Polk raised a toast to George Washington. As Grant brought the tumbler to his lips, Polk added, “...the first rebel.”

At their next meeting, Grant proposed the toast, “Equal rights to all.” As Polk raised his glass, Grant added, “White and black.”*

* Quoted in Brooks Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph Over Adversity, 1822-1865* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 105.

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

the owner to a Federal prison. As for fugitive slaves, the army was entitled to employ them rather than return them to their masters.

"Unconditional Surrender" Grant

Before Belmont, Grant had said, "What I want is to advance."²⁴ That desire was constant. But equally constant were the impediments put in his way, chiefly by Henry "Old Brains" Halleck who had replaced Frémont as regional commander. General George McClellan memorably said of Halleck: "Of all the men whom I have encountered in high position, Halleck was the most hopelessly stupid. It was more difficult to get an idea through his head than can be conceived by anyone who never made the attempt. I do not think he ever had a correct military idea from beginning to end."²⁵ Halleck was a jealous, short-sighted, bureaucrat of a general, and as long as he was under Halleck's command Grant suffered (and had to endure constant rumors about his drinking) until President Lincoln promoted Grant above his restrainers.

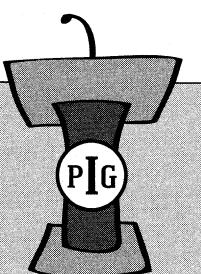
Grant's next desired target was Fort Henry on the Tennessee River, followed by Fort Donelson on the Cumberland. Halleck restrained him at first, but Flag Officer Andrew Foote of the United States Navy came to

Grant on the Butcher's Bill

At the Battle of Fort Donelson, the scene of the wounded and dead so moved Grant that he spontaneously muttered lines from Robert Burns:

*Man's inhumanity to man
Makes countless thousands mourn.*

The lines are from the poem "Man Was Made to Mourn."



Grant's aid, saying that with Grant operating by land and Foote by river, they could capture the forts. Halleck's permission in hand, Fort Henry was quickly subdued. Fort Donelson was more challenging, because it had been reinforced. But Donelson not only fell, it fell in such a way as to gain Grant national fame.

Left holding the fort after generals Gideon Pillow and John Floyd had abandoned it, was General Grant's old friend and benefactor General Simon Bolivar Buckner. Buckner sent a message to Grant to negotiate a surrender. Grant wrote back, saying, "No terms except an unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted. I propose to move immediately upon your works."

Buckner, clearly taken aback, confessed that he had no choice but "to accept the ungenerous and unchivalrous terms you propose."²⁶ Ungenerous and unchivalrous, they might have been, but for folks up North they made U. S. Grant "Unconditional Surrender" Grant.

Grant's success (he had even, without orders, helped force the surrender of Nashville) put him further afoul of Halleck who tried to get him dismissed. General George B. McClellan, for a short while yet the commander of all Union forces, told Halleck that if he had to arrest Grant for the good of the service than so be it. But when Lincoln stripped McClellan of his title of general in chief and Grant himself threatened to resign over Halleck's incessant complaints, "Old Brains" Halleck had enough political grey matter to realize that he needed to give Grant some rein. Grant's men went back on the move, gathering at Pittsburgh Landing on the Tennessee River.

Grant was an aggressive commander and strong on strategy, but like a chess player so consumed with his plan to force a checkmate in four moves, he neglected to think about what his opponent would do. After Grant's initial thrust at Belmont, his men had been surrounded. At Fort Donelson, the Confederates almost forced a breakout. Now, at Pittsburgh Landing, three miles from Shiloh Church, Grant plotted his attack on Corinth. He did not suspect that the Confederates might attack him.

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

The Battle of Shiloh began badly, the Federals driven back in scenes of carnage more horrendous than ever before witnessed on this continent. At the end of the first day's fighting, Grant sat beneath a tree, rain soddening his uniform and dripping from his hat (he'd decided that he'd rather rest here than among the wounded). He smoked a cigar and nursed a badly bruised ankle, injured when his horse had slipped and fallen. Sherman came up to him, wondering if they should retreat, and said, "Well, Grant, we've had the devil's own day, haven't we?" Grant replied: "Yes. Lick 'em tomorrow, though."²⁷ Grant's determination—as well as a massive infusion of Federal reinforcements and the tentative generalship of Confederate commander P. G. T. Beauregard—ensured the Federals' success.

Though Grant could claim a victory at Shiloh, in popular opinion it was an almost unbearable one. More than 13,000 boys in blue had been killed, wounded, or gone missing in a single battle. The shock was so profound, and some of the newspaper reports so misleading and slanted against Grant, that the hero of Fort Donelson was made to look an insensible brute, and his reputed falls from sobriety became a matter of public debate.

Grant's enemies, including Halleck, sprang. Halleck reorganized the armies of the Department of the Mississippi and left Grant without a command, kicking him into an office as Halleck's purported deputy, without any substantial duties. Grant, however, had a more important friend than Halleck, namely the president of the United States. When President Lincoln was told he must sack General Grant in order to appease public outrage over the losses at Shiloh, Lincoln was adamant, "I can't spare this man. *He fights.*"²⁸ Lincoln's solution was to promote Halleck to general in chief. Grant became commander of the Army of the Tennessee, and immediately set his sites on capturing Vicksburg.

Vicksburg was the Gibraltar of the Confederacy. Take that, and the Mississippi River, from New Orleans to Chicago, would be in Federal hands,

a major tributary of Confederate supplies and men would be shut off, and Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas, would be severed from the rest of the Confederate States of America by a curtain of Union blue. It took two campaigns to seize Vicksburg. But while the first petered out in the dank winter of 1862–1863, the second brought Grant not only plaudits, but, following on Lee's defeat at Gettysburg seemed to augur the end of the Confederacy. Grant certainly thought so. In his memoirs, he wrote, "The fate of the Confederacy was sealed when Vicksburg fell"²⁹ on 4 July 1863.

Grant's qualities as a commander, no matter what the rumors against him, were now unmistakable to all but the most benighted. In October 1863, he was promoted to command the Military Division of the Mississippi, a stretch of territory extending from the Mississippi River to the Appalachian Mountains. In his new role he broke the Confederate siege of Chattanooga on 25 November 1863, and then sent Sherman to break Longstreet's siege of Knoxville, which Longstreet abandoned on 4 December 1863. Grant—still an unassuming man of quiet, disinterested devotion to duty—reached a pinnacle of military recognition when he was promoted to Lieutenant General on 2 March 1864. No man since George Washington had held that rank. The promotion was great, but also meant coming to Washington and the sort of political and diplomatic flummery that Grant despised.

The road to Appomattox

Less than a fortnight after his appointment, Grant was back in the field, traveling with George Meade, commander of the Army of the Potomac. The final great pincer movement of the war—a war that would last another year—now began, with Sherman handling one end, Grant the other, and Phil Sheridan driving a dagger down the middle. Sherman's blue-coats torched their way through Georgia and the Carolinas. Phil Sheridan burned out the breadbasket of the Confederacy in the Shenandoah

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

Valley. Federal troops were also active in southeastern Virginia and along the Gulf Coast. Everywhere the Confederacy was under assault. But the focal point was with Grant and Meade and the great slugging campaign against Lee. It was yet another on to Richmond campaign, but this time directed by a man who never turned back once he set himself a goal, and whose grim resolution would not be swayed by masses of casualties. Many in the North called him a "butcher," but Lincoln stuck by his butcher; he trusted he would serve up victory.

The campaign was one of the Federals swinging left hooks at the Confederates, then pivoting left toward Richmond, trying to find an opening to land a knockout punch on the Southern capital. Lee, however, proved a masterful counterpuncher, deflecting Union blows and so punishing the Federal forces that a lesser man (or a man with fewer moral and material resources) than Grant might have broken down in defeat.

As commander of all Union forces, Grant had half a million men under his command, and traveled with an Army of the Potomac that was itself 120,000 men strong (more than twice the strength of Lee). There was no swift Union victory to be found in the Battle of the Wilderness on 5 and 6 May 1864, only 18,000 Federal casualties; or at Spotsylvania Court House, from 8 May to 21 May 1864, only another 18,000 Federal losses; or at North Anna River, from 23 May to 26 May 1864 or at Cold Harbor from 31 May to 3 June 1864, though nearly another 13,000 more dead, wounded, and missing were added in combined totals from those two battles. In short, in one month, Grant and Meade had lost nearly 50,000 men to Lee's army that numbered barely 60,000. It was in light of this that Grant said at Spotsylvania Court House, "I propose to fight it out on this line if it takes all summer." Some of his men were less impressed, with one officer writing of the failed Union assault on Cold Harbor that it was "not war but murder."³⁰

Grant, though undaunted in his pursuit of victory, confessed that he had erred in his frontal attack on the Confederate positions at Cold Harbor, telling his staff, after more than 7,000 men had fallen, "I regret this

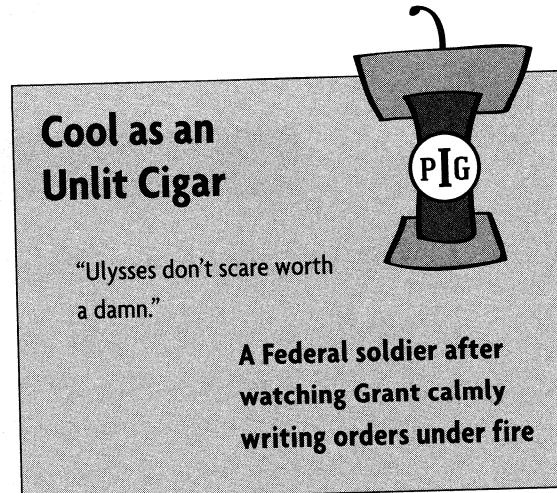
Ulysses S. Grant (1822–1885)

assault more than any I have ever ordered. I regarded it as a stern necessity, and believed that it would bring compensating results; but no advantages have been gained sufficient to justify the heavy losses suffered.” Meade wrote to his wife that “I think Grant had his eyes opened [after Cold Harbor], and is willing to admit that Virginia and Lee’s army is not Tennessee and Bragg’s army.”³¹

Grant, in the words of Major General J. F. C. Fuller, who wrote two book-length studies of him, was “one of those rare and strange men who are fortified by disaster instead of being depressed.”³² Perhaps so; it is certainly the case that he remained immovable from his objective. He showed little emotion to his subordinates, remained apparently indifferent to danger, and continued issuing orders that showed a clear and unruffled mind. He refused to give Lee the almost mythic quality that Lee’s own men and many Federal commanders did. Lee was a commander of quality, Grant would acknowledge that, but he was not invincible. Grant said, “I never ranked Lee as high as some others in the army.... I never had as much anxiety in my front as when Joe Johnston was in front.”³³ Given Lee’s and Johnston’s respective records, this comparison rather beggars belief, and one can’t help but wonder whether Grant was in some ways defensive about the status given to Lee both during and after the war.

Still, it was Grant’s refusal to acknowledge the possibility of defeat that kept him going. The thing—victory—simply must be done, and he had the resources to ensure that ultimately it would be done. Lee remained in front of him, so Grant would continue to attack him. He did so now by investing Petersburg.

The siege of Petersburg lasted ten months, but the outcome was inevitable. Lee was finally forced to abandon Petersburg, and with it



The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

Richmond, in a desperate attempt to join forces with Joseph E. Johnston in North Carolina. Grant made this reunion—a quixotic hope in any event—impossible. The drama of the war climaxed at Appomattox Court House, where Grant, in his mud-spattered uniform accepted the surrender of the immaculately dressed aristocrat from Virginia. As Grant said, “In my rough traveling suit, the uniform of a private with the straps of a lieutenant-general, I must have contrasted very strangely with a man so



The Infamous Jew Order

In December 1862, Grant issued his soon to be notorious General Order No. 11, which stated that “The Jews, as a class, violating every regulation of trade established by the Treasury Department, and also Department [of the Tennessee] orders are hereby expelled from the Department [of the Tennessee].” Jews who did not leave could be, and were, arrested.

Now as pogroms go, this was relatively mild, and the order was quickly rescinded after it reached Washington and caused a flutter of protests. It would be wrong, however, to conclude that Grant was an anti-Semite (something he always denied) save in this regard: Grant loathed greed, he loathed people who put commerce before country, he loathed in fact people like his father who were always looking for a sharp angle to make a buck, and it does seem that he attributed these qualities not only to his Christian father, but to Jews in general. Perhaps not all Jews, but his prejudices here are in direct contrast to his sympathy for blacks and Indians.

Still it might be worth comparing Grant’s “Jew order” with the fact that Judah P. Benjamin, a Jew, served in the Confederate cabinet (the first Jewish cabinet member in North America). Benjamin and David Yulee, the first two Jewish U. S. senators—representing Louisiana and Florida—were both Confederates.

* The order is quoted in Brooks Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph over Adversity, 1822–1865* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 164.

handsomely dressed, six feet high and of faultless form. But it was not a matter that I thought of until afterwards.”³⁴

Grant was fully aware of the poignancy of the moment. While he had rejoiced at the knowledge that Lee was meeting with him to surrender, now, face to face with the noble Confederate general, Grant felt “sad and depressed. I felt like anything rather than rejoicing at the downfall of a foe who had fought so long and valiantly, and had suffered so much for a cause, though that cause was, I believe, one of the worst for which a people ever fought, and one for which there was the least excuse.”³⁵

Their meeting, however, was cordial. Lee, correct and polite, Grant so happy to reminiscence about the old army that he claimed he almost forgot the subject of their meeting. Lee made sure he didn’t. Grant called for a pen and paper and then wrote out his terms. In his memoirs he remembered that “When I put pen to the paper I did not know the first word that I should make use of in writing the terms. I only knew what was in my mind, and I wished to express it clearly, so that there would be no mistaking it.”³⁶ There was no mistaking it, or Grant’s generosity, which Lee held so highly that he refused to hear a harsh word said against Grant thereafter. Indeed, according to one source, Lee said, “I have carefully searched the military records of both ancient and modern history, and have never found Grant’s superior as a general.” But this sounds so little like Lee in style and temper as to be dismissed as apocryphal, though it is still quoted approvingly by some of Grant’s admirers.³⁷

From lieutenant general to commander in chief

If Grant was an unlikely lieutenant general of the United States Army, he was an even less likely president of the United States. But so it came to pass, and not once but twice: Grant, elected in 1868, became the first president since another fighting general, Andrew Jackson, to serve two full terms as president.

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

Grant said, "I am a Republican because I am an American, and because I believe the first duty of an American—the paramount duty—is to save the results of the war, and save our credit."³⁸ His priorities were clear: ensure the newly won rights of black Americans, destroy the Ku Klux Klan, and, as far as it could be done while achieving his first two objectives, conciliate the South. He also intended to govern frugally.

Grant is generally regarded lowly as a president, largely because his administration was rife with corruption (though he himself was honest; his downfall was his trusting nature) and because the country endured an economic depression under his watch. But scandals are the stuff of little minds, and economic cycles are not always malleable to politics. The more important truth is that Grant succeeded in upholding the legacy of the Union victory.

In foreign policy, his record was mixed. He kept the United States out of a war with Spain over Cuba (that, of course, would come later) and he achieved the Washington Treaty with Great Britain, which settled damages on the British for their role in building Confederate raiders (chiefly the *CSS Alabama*). Where he failed—as in his attempt to annex Santo Domingo, which its

president had offered to the United States—he still was undoubtedly in the right. He saw the island as a potential refuge for black Americans and

The Perils of a Military Education

Grant once remarked "Some of our generals failed because they worked out everything by rule. They knew what Frederick [the Great] did at what one place, what Napoleon at another. They were always thinking about what Napoleon would do. Unfortunately for their plans, the rebels would be thinking of something else."

Grant's point was not to deprecate military knowledge—even as a civilian he eagerly read dispatches of European wars and plotted strategy on a map—only "slavish" adherence to rules that neglected practical facts.

* Quoted in William S. McFeely, *Ulysses S. Grant: An Album* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 79.

as a strategic asset for the Republic. But his congressional nemesis, the Radical Republican Charles Sumner of Massachusetts (the one whom South Carolina Congressman Preston Brooks had tried to beat some sense into before the war), scuppered the attempt.

In domestic policy, it was during Grant's administration that Congress created the Department of Justice (largely to prosecute Klansmen), Reconstruction officially ended, all the former Confederate states were allowed to elect members to Congress, and restrictions on former Confederates holding public office were quietly dropped. Grant looked forward to the day when the black man was treated "as a citizen and a voter, as he is and must remain, and soon parties will be divided not on the color line [blacks voting Republican, and white southerners voting Democrat], but on principle."³⁹

When Grant left the White House he took a celebrated tour of the world. That might have been the pleasurable part of retirement. Far less so was his being swindled out of all his money by Ferdinand Ward who had formed an investment partnership with Grant's son Ulysses Jr., and in which Grant had sunk his savings. He was diagnosed at the same time with throat cancer. Bankrupt, he sat down to write his memoirs, hoping to provide for his family. He finished the manuscript just days before he died, penning an American classic. It was Grant's final victory.

