



2014-044

Jack Hurst, *Born to Battle: Grant and Forrest: Shiloh, Vicksburg, and Chattanooga*. New York: Basic Books, 2012. Pp. xxv, 486. ISBN 978-0-465-02018-8.

Review by Steven Dossman, Texas Christian University (s.n.dossman@tcu.edu).

In *Born to Battle*, historian and journalist Jack Hurst continues his work on Ulysses S. Grant and Nathan Bedford Forrest,¹ this time through a parallel examination of their roles in three major Civil War campaigns of 1862–63. He argues that

Grant and Forrest, opposites on the surface, were alike underneath. They also were night-and-day different from their commanders and peers. Each hailed from closer to his society's bottom than its top. Their lives had been steeped in the kind of daily desperation that is war's essence. Both had fought weather and fate in the fickle fields of agriculture. Each had struggled with his hands against long odds to feed and protect his family. Hard lives had forced them to capitalize to the fullest on scant resources and watch out for the main chance. Their resultant common credential for military generalship was humble, widely disdained, yet pivotal in the end. Call it calluses. (xxii)

Forrest, born in Tennessee in 1821, ascended from frontier poverty to become a self-made millionaire through various business ventures, including slave trading. Grant, the son of a tanner, was born in Ohio in 1822 and lacked the social status of many other northern commanders, including his close friend William T. Sherman. But Grant received a far better education than Forrest and graduated from the US Military Academy in 1843, after which he served with distinction in the Mexican War. Posted on the frontier, he acquired a reputation as an alcoholic that resulted in his resignation from the military in 1854. While Forrest prospered in the 1850s, Grant struggled and suffered severe financial troubles.

When the Civil War erupted in 1861, both men entered military service and swiftly earned reputations for aggressive and effective leadership. Forrest enlisted as a private in a cavalry unit, but was soon promoted to lieutenant colonel to raise a cavalry battalion, using his own funds to furnish needed equipment. Although he had had only six months of formal education and no military training, Forrest's natural instinct for war allowed him to outperform many aristocratic, West Point-trained officers. While his wealth gained him a place in the Confederacy's officer corps, the unrefined Forrest never truly won the acceptance of his fellow commanders.

Likewise, Grant returned from the disgrace of drunkenness to earn an appointment as the colonel of the 21st Illinois Infantry, a much lower rank than his record justified. Rising to brigadier general, he received permission in early 1862 to attack the vital Confederate fortifications at Forts Henry and Donelson on the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers. Grant easily captured the lightly defended Fort Henry and soon surrounded the Confederate garrison at Fort Donelson, which now contained Forrest's cavalry regiment. Refusing to surrender with the rest of the garrison, Forrest and his men fought valiantly to evacuate the fort and discovered an escape route through Union lines. He then led his command through the snow to Nashville, where he helped complete the evacuation of the Tennessee state capital and preserved a mountain of valuable supplies and equipment.

Grant's capture of Fort Donelson, the first significant Union victory of the war, brought him national fame and a promotion to major general. On 6 April 1862, Confederate General Albert Sidney Johnston surprised Grant's army near Shiloh Church in southwestern Tennessee. On the first day of fighting, Grant fought to save his army; Forrest and his men strove to destroy it. That night, Forrest attempted in vain to warn his superiors of the imminent arrival of thousands of Union soldiers from Maj. Gen. Don Carlos Buell's

1. See his *Nathan Bedford Forrest: A Biography* (NY: Knopf, 1993) and *Men of Fire: Grant, Forrest, and the Campaign That Decided the Civil War* (NY: Basic Books, 2007).

Army of the Ohio. On the second day of the battle, Grant's reinforced army counterattacked and forced the exhausted Confederates to withdraw. Forrest helped cover the retreat and fought a desperate rearguard action at the Battle of Fallen Timbers, where he received a serious wound when a Federal bullet lodged against his spine. While Forrest recovered, Grant endured severe criticism for the near-disaster at Shiloh and almost lost his command. Nevertheless, he remained in the field during the siege of Corinth, Mississippi.

In July 1862, Forrest led a raid into Middle Tennessee, capturing Murfreesboro and \$1 million worth of Union equipment and supplies. Forrest's raid, along with Col. John Hunt Morgan's simultaneous incursion into Kentucky, ended a Union advance on Chattanooga. That same month, Forrest received a much-deserved promotion to brigadier general, while Grant spent the summer and fall securing northern Mississippi from Confederate counteroffensives. In September and October, Grant oversaw Federal armies at the battles of Iuka and Corinth. The decisive Union triumph at Corinth enabled him to begin his first advance on the Confederate stronghold at Vicksburg, Mississippi. This came to a halt in December, when Forrest raided Grant's West Tennessee supply lines and Maj. Gen. Earl Van Dorn destroyed the Federal supply base at Holly Springs. In early 1863, Forrest and Van Dorn won the Battle of Thompson's Station, Tennessee, and, in April and May, Forrest captured the luckless Union force involved in the Streight Raid. While Forrest fought Federal raiders in Alabama and Georgia, Grant initiated his brilliant campaign against Vicksburg, which surrendered on 4 July 1863. Little known at the beginning of the war, Grant was now one of the Union's premier generals—"in two and half dogged years, the Ohio tanner's son had kicked Dixie's door down at Fort Donelson and captured one of its armies. He then took another in the masterful Vicksburg campaign that had opened the Mississippi River and cut the Confederate States of America in two" (406).

While Grant severed in the South at Vicksburg, Forrest served with the Army of Tennessee in the hard-fought Battle of Chickamauga, Georgia, in September 1863. Disgusted with General Braxton Bragg's lackluster leadership after the battle, Forrest demanded a transfer. Sent to northern Mississippi and promoted to major general, he defended his department for the rest of the war against numerous Federal forays, winning his most famous victory at the Battle of Brice's Cross Roads. Grant, ordered to take command of the surrounded Federal army in Chattanooga, swiftly saved the Union from serious disaster and routed Bragg's army at the Battle of Chattanooga in November 1863. While Forrest went west to serve in northern Mississippi, Grant came east to lead the Army of the Potomac against General Robert E. Lee and his celebrated Army of Northern Virginia. As Hurst writes, "No one knew it yet, but he had already beaten Lee when he came east to fight the vaunted Virginian in 1864. His western leadership had slashed the arteries of Lee's star-crossed nation" (xxv).

In his final chapter, Hurst notes that Grant's victory at Chattanooga "set the stage for the final phase: the destruction of every remaining railroad track, industry, and agricultural field that kept the South in the war. Victory's writing was finally on the wall, and it was signed 'US Grant, Major General Commanding'" (406). Grant's leadership won the war for the Union in 1865, while Forrest never had the opportunity to properly utilize his talents. He won incredible victories with limited resources and likely could have accomplished a great deal more had he been given better support and greater authority by the Confederate high command. Although Forrest ended the war as a lieutenant general, his final promotion came just months before the Confederacy's collapse in April 1865. Hurst draws the conclusion that "Forrest's treatment by his superiors suggests that a chief cause of the Confederacy's death was insistence on blue-blood leadership" (xxi).

Today most Civil War scholars believe the Confederacy lost the war in the theater west of the Appalachians.² Though Hurst's thesis will encourage debate, there is no doubt that the South's aristocratic, West Point-trained officers failed in the western theater. While upper-class generals like Leonidas Polk, Braxton Bragg, Joseph E. Johnston, and John Bell Hood led Confederate armies to disaster, commanders of humble

2. See, esp., Steven E. Woodworth, *Jefferson Davis and His Generals: The Failure of Confederate Command in the West* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 1990), and *This Great Struggle: America's Civil War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011).

origins like Forrest and Irish immigrant Patrick Cleburne spent much of the war in lower ranks than their abilities merited.

The more egalitarian North, led by a lower-class president who had famously split rails, recognized and used Grant's talents to win the war, while the aristocratic South overlooked and misused its plebeian commanders and lost. Historian Frank Lawrence Owsley once famously argued that the Confederacy "Died of States' Rights,"³ but in the end, as Jack Hurst makes so clear in *Born to Battle*, adherence to a strict social hierarchy proved as fatal to the infant southern nation as any philosophical debates over state sovereignty.

3. *State Rights in the Confederacy* (Chicago: U Chicago Pr, 1925).