



2015-034

Michael B. Ballard, *Grant at Vicksburg: The General and the Siege*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 2013. Pp. xiii, 196. ISBN 978-0-8093-3240-3.

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The Vicksburg campaign, Ulysses S. Grant's masterpiece of the operational art, has long attracted the attention of Civil War scholars.¹ Drawing on his extensive knowledge of both the campaign and Grant, historian Michael Ballard² has now produced a slim volume concentrating on the operation's final phase, the forty-seven-day siege, which, surprisingly, has not previously received close examination. In a mostly chronological narrative, *Grant at Vicksburg* effectively explores the issues and events that challenged Grant during the seven weeks of siege warfare. Thematic chapters recount the Union commander's infamous and often embellished drinking binge on the Yazoo River, his management of racial conflict within his army, his handling of the prickly politician-general John McClernand, and his comparatively simple day-to-day supervision of the siege. These experiences, Ballard argues, "laid the foundation for the confident, competent commander who ultimately left the western theater to go east, assume command of all Union forces, and lead eastern Union forces to victory over Lee" (172).

Ballard begins with a brief overview of the initial operations that set the stage for what followed on the ridges and in the ravines surrounding Vicksburg. From December 1862 through early spring 1863, Grant orchestrated a number of expeditions designed to maneuver his army to the outskirts of Vicksburg. Each was unsuccessful. Only after coordinating a plan with his naval counterpart, R. Adm. David Dixon Porter, to charge the Union fleet past Vicksburg and then ferry the infantry across to the Mississippi's east bank was Grant able to land his three corps in striking distance of his objective. A march of deception and maneuver first to Jackson and then toward Vicksburg unbalanced his opponents and delivered the Union army to the gates of the city. Seeking to capitalize on his momentum and snatch a quick victory, Grant twice attempted to assault the Confederate earthworks, but to no avail. Believing further attacks would only increase Federal casualties, Grant ordered the commencement on 23 May of siege operations, being resigned to "out camp" the enemy.

Two weeks into the siege, Grant set out to reconnoiter the threat posed by Confederate forces operating northeast of Vicksburg. Departing on 6 June aboard USS *Diligence*, he sailed up the Yazoo River into one of the most controversial episodes of his military career—the alleged overnight bender that has waxed and waned in Civil War historiography for 150 years. Eyewitness reports suggest Grant had likely downed too many shots, but the story that informed earlier historical accounts came from Sylvanus Cadwallader, a newspaper reporter who claimed to have been aboard the ship. He later styled himself the "savior of Grant" on that night and of his reputation thereafter. Having conducted careful research in key individuals' correspondence, Ballard convincingly refutes Cadwallader's "lengthy, greatly embellished lie" (46), and takes to task historians such as Bruce Catton, Samuel Carter III, Shelby Foote, and William McFeely for unquestioningly accepting the reporter's "fairy tale" (62). The most credible evidence shows that while Grant likely had too much to drink, he was not the drunken buffoon of Cadwallader's fabrications.

In addition to struggling with personal demons, Grant had to deal with the racism prevalent within his own ranks and its detrimental effects on the war effort. Fully supporting the Lincoln administration's policy of accepting black soldiers into the Union army, Grant issued orders to organize black regiments and praised the gallantry of some of the blacks who fought at the Battle of Milliken's Bend (7 June 1863). Never-

1. Most notably Edwin C. Bearss, *The Campaign for Vicksburg*, 3 vols. (Dayton: Morningside, 1985-86), and, more recently, Ballard himself in his earlier book, *Vicksburg: The Campaign That Opened the Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2004).

2. Ballard was for many years an archivist at Mississippi State University and for a time the associate editor at the US Grant Presidential Library.

theless, Grant's black soldiers and civilian workers were often badly treated by his white soldiers. Though this angered him, Grant gave low priority to correcting the abuses because, Ballard writes, he "did not have time" and "had very limited means" to alter long-held racial beliefs (85). By declining to act more aggressively on this matter, Grant "stained his eventual success at Vicksburg" (70).

Another thorn in Grant's side before and during the siege was John McClernand, an Illinois politician-turned-general and aspiring presidential candidate. McClernand had served under Grant since the early days of the war, at Forts Henry and Donelson and the Battle of Shiloh. He had proven himself a competent if nettlesome military commander, and Grant trusted him enough to post him in the van during the Mississippi River crossing and on the critical left flank of the army during its advance on Jackson. But the men's conflicting personalities foreshadowed an eventual falling out.

The showdown came after two Union assaults in mid-May failed to take Vicksburg. McClernand issued a public letter praising his men's courage and determination, intimating that the army's other corps had not performed with equal élan. Not only did this outrage the other corps commanders, generals William T. Sherman and James B. McPherson, it violated a standing order prohibiting subordinate officers from making such public statements. Grant, who had previously received Washington's approval to remove McClernand if he deemed it necessary, relieved him of command on 18 June. Over the years, most historians have sided with Grant, citing McClernand's self-serving political motivations and irritating personality. While Ballard, too, supports Grant, he presents a balanced assessment of the awkward relationship, noting that both men "consistently resorted to hyperbole, neither willing to overlook their [sic] personal opinions for the good of the army." Most important, according to Ballard, the McClernand episode and other issues that threatened to distract Grant "never took his mind off siege operations" (105), his primary responsibility.

Ballard rightly praises Grant's management of the siege, detailing his use of all available resources to win one of the war's seminal victories. The proper placement of reinforcements continuously worried Grant, since he had to secure his supply base north of Vicksburg, lengthen and strengthen his siege lines, and keep a force near Jackson monitoring the activities of Confederate troops that could pose a threat to his rear. He oversaw the plotting and construction of approach trenches in preparation for another assault, unwilling to settle for simply starving out the Confederates. He also worked with Admiral Porter to ensure the continued close coordination of the land and naval forces, a partnership Grant rightly judged necessary for eventual success. Nor, Ballard writes, was Grant negligent of the men in his army:

[he] frequently rode behind his lines to check on progress. Several soldiers noted seeing the general riding, pausing, pointing, and talking with corps commanders and other officers.... Others noted his shabby appearance, which seemed to appeal to men in the ranks. Sometimes Grant worried his men when he rode by with members of his staff. They warned him that being on horseback exposed him to enemy fire. Grant would reassure them that he would not be shot, at one point stopping to ask a soldier to lift a campfire stick to light his cigar.... He wanted them to know he intended to be active and share their experiences, rather than hanging around his headquarters. (25)

The no nonsense, no ostentation, all business General Grant "led by being who he was; there were few pretensions about him. His style served him well" (171).

Grant at Vicksburg is a solid study of the Union commander and his experiences during his army's besiegement of Vicksburg. Ballard draws heavily on the appropriate primary sources and is sufficiently familiar with the secondary literature to challenge the views of other historians. He avoids hagiography, offering fair evaluations of Grant's successes and failures, both personal and professional. The Union's victor, Ballard nevertheless argues, "must emerge as the hero because, after all, he won" (xi-xii).

Ballard is, however, overly critical of the attention Grant paid to Gen. Joseph E. Johnston's Confederate troops, who spent much of the siege hovering in the vicinity of Jackson, threatening the Union army's rear while contemplating how to break Grant's grip on the city. Johnston, in Ballard's view, became an "obsession [that] clung to him tenaciously" and "cast a shadow over Grant's thinking" (165, 108). But Grant was simply responding prudently to intelligence gleaned by his scouts, cavalry, and officers, who rightly saw Johnston's force as the only possible threat to the campaign's eventual success. Indeed, Ballard himself

acknowledges that “Grant’s worries based on his assumption that Johnston would practice basic military strategic principles were justified” (171). How else should he have operated? But this is a matter of interpretation that historians can, and perhaps occasionally should, debate.

Grant at Vicksburg will not significantly change its readers’ understanding of the siege of Vicksburg, but it does provide a clear and concise account of Grant’s trials during the campaign, especially the drinking episode, racial turmoil in the Union army, and the McClernand affair. And while this campaign may not have “laid the foundation” of the commander who became general-in-chief, it certainly added form and refinement to the framework already in place. For Grant fans and Vicksburg buffs, *Grant at Vicksburg* is well worth a look.