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William C. Davis, *Crucible of Command: Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee—The War They Fought, The Peace They Forged*. Boston: Da Capo Press, 2014. Pp. xxi, 629. ISBN 978-0-306-82245-2.

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In *Crucible of Command*, historian William Davis<sup>1</sup> explores the actions and interior lives of the Civil War's two most prominent generals. His approach is irregular in that he relies almost exclusively upon primary documents rather than the voluminous secondary literature on Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee. He maintains that a more authentic portrait of the two men emerges from their personal correspondence and the writings of their friends and associates. He has a point. His self-imposed parameters ensure an intimate portrayal of two notoriously reticent individuals. Davis writes in an engaging narrative style and has a knack for keen, succinct descriptions of battlefield tactics. These qualities make his newest book a good choice for both specialists and general readers.

Lee's childhood, Davis writes, was one of provincial anonymity until his departure for West Point, some 250 miles from his home in Alexandria. "He had never traveled farther from home than summer trips to Fauquier County or Stratford [in Westmoreland County].... It was an adventure unlike any he had known before. If he succeeded, he would leave the Academy as a man with an education and a budding career" (13). Davis observes that there is little we can say about the adolescent Lee other than that his father's heavy debts stained the family honor and that he took to heart his mother's lessons in the sacrosanctity of diligence and duty. We are left with "A host of shadows, and more questions than answers, but as Lee stepped out of the anonymity of childhood, more light gradually began slipping through" (13).

Despite the obscurity of Lee's boyhood, Davis sees more similarities than differences in the upbringings of his two protagonists. Grant, son of a prominent Whig merchant in Ohio, suffered embarrassments stemming from the conduct of his father. Jesse Grant, a man of prodigious ego, had the reputation of an inveterate boaster in the frontier town of Georgetown, Illinois. Worse yet, "Grant suffered the frequent humiliation of a father constantly trying to make his son an extension of his own ego.... The differences between [Grant and Lee] were largely cosmetic, growing far more from accident of birth than individual character or ability" (23). Grant's work duties enabled him to travel and thus experience the larger world. His relatively privileged upbringing also made him comfortable in a diverse group of acquaintances, while Lee remained reserved and formal in his interpersonal relationships from a very young age.

Davis favorably evaluates the service of the two men during the Mexican-American War (1846-48). Grant's performance at Palo Alto, Resaca de la Palma, and Monterey garnered him some notoriety in newspapers back home, setting him apart from his braggart father. Grant's conduct as a commissary officer "spoke well indeed for West Point" (73) and foreshadowed the pains he later took to keep the armies he commanded well-fed and supplied.

The Mexican war was a boon for Lee's career as well, because it brought him into personal contact with Gen. Winfield Scott. His intelligence and sound judgment impressed Scott and earned him reassignment to a line regiment from the engineering corps, where Lee could have hoped for little professional advancement beyond "an administrative position in Washington" (73).

The period between Mexico's capitulation and the outbreak of the Civil War brought neither Grant nor Lee a chance to shine, but their reactions to their stagnating prospects came to define them. Lee, encamped on the Brazos River, far from his wife and children, was "Disappointed professionally, disillusioned personally, uncertain of the present and anxious for the future[;] he felt sad, occasionally depressed, racked by

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1. Three-time winner of the Jefferson Davis Award for book-length studies in Confederate history.

feelings of failure” (102). Grant, having turned to trade outside St. Louis, fell into debt and failed to secure the position of county engineer because of his noncommittal stance on slavery. When his father suggested he assume a professorship at Washington University, Grant responded with characteristic tenacity: “I do not want to fly from one thing to another, nor would I, but I am compelled to make a living from the start for which I am willing to give all my time and all my energy” (102). While Lee resigned himself dutifully to the will of an omniscient God, Grant evinced buoyant optimism and determination.

The imminence of secession affected Grant and Lee in starkly different ways. Lee, torn between his professional allegiance to the United States and his ancestral loyalty to the Old Dominion, agonized over the impending conflict that secession portended. Grant, by contrast, looked forward to suppressing treason. In spring 1861,

Competing loyalties drove Lee, yet he always knew there was only one way for him to turn in the end. Even as he felt himself nearing the close of a career he regarded as largely unsuccessful, now he looked ahead to a service he dreaded but could not refuse, in a cause he deplored, and which he feared might only cap his professional failure with personal and regional ruin. He was not a happy man and had not been for some years. He saw nothing ahead but questions for himself and his people, all at risk of being answered disastrously. For his part, Grant knew the face of failure intimately, but was finally achieving at least a kind of basic security and domestic stability he had not known before. He may not have been prosperous, but he was happy. The crisis brought no tugs on his loyalties. From the moment of the firing on Fort Sumter he saw through all secondary matters, like family or party alliances, that there was only one question and only one answer, and his was the Union at any cost. (126–27)

Grant’s characteristic energy and resolution were apparent from his earliest days as a field commander. As a brigadier general at Ironton, Missouri, in August 1861, he moved decisively to counter Confederate Gen. William J. Hardee, whose five thousand rebels at Greenville, thirty-five miles south, might cut his supply lines to St. Louis. Twelve miles to Grant’s east lay another 1,500 rebel soldiers. “His response was telling. With no more experience at command in action than leading a few volunteers one afternoon in Mexico fifteen years earlier, Grant’s instinct was to strike first, even while higher-ranking new commanders like [Gen. George B.] McClellan and [Gen. John C.] Frémont saw nothing but reasons not to move” (133). Grant dispatched a regiment to confront the force to his east, while he moved south against Hardee. “He expected to be outnumbered but his perpetual optimism and a sense that delay favored the enemy propelled him. Here and hereafter, his instinct was to act quickly” (133). Grant never formulated plans to retreat, cared little for what the enemy was thinking, and always strove to advance at any cost.

Lee, from the very start of the war, had difficulty dealing with the political quarrels of the Confederate high command. As an adviser to President Jefferson Davis, he was called upon to adjudicate a dispute between generals John B. Floyd and Henry A. Wise. These former governors of Virginia, both ardent secessionists, possessed no military expertise whatever. When they began to argue over who outranked whom, Lee was sent to settle the dispute. This assignment did not suit his method of leadership: “Lee abhorred conflict and felt uncomfortable in confrontations with subordinates.... During his years in a profession riddled with egos, he had observed such clashes among others, but never as a participant” (145). Initially, Lee sought to curb internecine feuding with platitudes about selfless service and the paramount need for cooperation. He often dispatched a troublesome subordinate to a separate theater of the war rather than confront him directly with his shortcomings. Though the Union was by no means immune to squabbling among political generals, Lee’s aristocratic temperament ill suited him to manage disputes within the Confederate general staff.

Whatever remnants of Lee’s allegiance to the Union remained after his decision to resign from the US Army and assume command of Virginia’s forces dissipated as soon as Northern soldiers invaded the Old Dominion’s soil. By Christmas 1861, “Lee’s comments on the United States hosted [sic] not just anger ... but vestiges of distaste, even detestation, and a burgeoning sense that Yankees were of a lesser order” (165–66). Of Union attempts to blockade Charleston harbor, Lee remarked that “no civilized nation within my knowledge has ever carried on war as the United States government has against us” (166). His animosity

hardened as the war dragged on, chiefly because of the personal toll the war took on his property and family. Union troops occupied his Arlington plantation, now the United States' most renowned national cemetery. His son was kidnapped and an uncle accosted and beaten by Yankee soldiers. Such events fostered in Lee a deep sense of Southern nationality that persisted until his death. When the Federals asked permission to collect their dead after his victory at Chancellorsville, Lee declared (perhaps prompted by the death of Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson on 10 May 1863), that he "did not want a single Yankee to remain on our soil *dead or alive*" (314).

Determined to quash the common perception that Grant was an incorrigible alcoholic, Davis attributes rumors of his drunkenness before, during, and after his capture of Forts Henry and Donelson to William J. Kountz, a "stubborn, interfering, and querulous" bureaucrat sent by then General-in-Chief Henry Halleck to oversee river transportation in Grant's department. Kountz "was ... a serial slanderer and libeler, and would be taken to court by at least one victim of his intemperate tongue" (177). Because Halleck wanted the credit for the accomplishments of Grant and Adm. Andrew H. Foote at Forts Henry and Donelson, he was quite prepared to accept Kountz's allegations. Davis believes that exaggerated tales of Grant's alcoholism stemmed from envy of his meteoric rise through the ranks: "Virtually all references to Grant drinking during his old army days emerged only after 1862 and his rise to celebrity" (197).

Before Grant assumed command in the eastern theater of the war, Lee had been lucky in the Union generals he had to face. Davis sees Lee's speed of movement against the lethargic McClellan in June 1862 as decisive in his repulse of the Union's Peninsular Campaign, which came within four miles of the Confederate capital of Richmond. Three months later, "A competent general ought to have defeated [Lee at Antietam, but] ... McClellan squandered everything, moving slowly after discovering Lee's plans" (244), which a subordinate had misplaced and Union scouts subsequently recovered before the battle. The supremely self-confident Lee stood his ground the day after Antietam, hoping in vain to elicit an assault by McClellan. He then fell back across the Potomac, postponing the surrender of his army for two and a half years.

Of interest, too, is Lee's liberation of the slaves he had inherited as part of his family's estate. On 29 December 1862, he drew up a list of the 201 slaves deeded to him by his father-in-law's will and then took it to a justice of the peace in Fredericksburg, where he had routed Union Gen. Ambrose Burnside two weeks earlier, and drafted manumission papers. He then commissioned agents to distribute those papers to his now emancipated slaves. This was very much in keeping with his punctiliousness as an executor of the will, which stipulated that the slaves be freed five years after Lee's father-in-law died, or after his debts had been retired. On his own initiative, Lee instructed his deputies to find employment for the freed slaves. He himself began paying \$8.20 a month to a servant who had accompanied him from his Arlington home.

Lee's liberation of the slaves under his charge is noteworthy in two ways. First, Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, which took effect 1 January 1863, pertained only to slaves in states "currently in rebellion against the authority of the United States." Lincoln relied upon his powers as commander in chief to free those slaves as an act of military necessity. At this time, Arlington was occupied by Union troops. Therefore, Lee freed his slaves before Lincoln could. Secondly, as Davis's readers will learn, his dutiful attention to his father-in-law's wishes is not just a figment of Lost Cause mythology. Lee self-consciously defended the institution of slavery and claimed that Southern independence alone could "save our families from pollution and our social system from destruction" (281). He was also capable of disparaging the intelligence of the Catholics he met in Mexico. That rankles. But he was consistent in performing his duty, as he saw it.

As a field commander, "Lee could, like Grant and most great captains—and many bad ones—compartmentalize his thinking and suppress the horror of losses in order to deal with the day ahead" (348). In *Patriotic Gore*,<sup>2</sup> Edmund Wilson writes of Grant's reluctance to view the carnage of battlefields. Lincoln, too, was tormented by the thought of sending Union soldiers in their tens of thousands to their deaths. For Lee, this problem became particularly acute after his Gettysburg campaign, his last thrust into Union territory. The conflict became less professional and more personal the longer it went on. "The relative objectivity of

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2. Subtitle: *Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1962).

1861," writes Davis, "was gone now," and Lee began referring to Northerners as "those people" (348). Davis particularly stresses the ossification of Lee's enmity toward the North: if he had agonized over divergent claims on his allegiance at the outset of the war, he was painfully aware of where he wished to stand at its conclusion.

Davis sees Grant and Lee as representative of their sections of the country. Grant was the "new man" of whom Tocqueville spoke, who, through his own enterprise, determination, and optimism, forged a name for himself on America's frontier. His time in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois gave him a continental view of the United States—"For him, the nation had always been a nation, not a confederation" (394). Lee, on the other hand, was of the revolutionary, colonial generation. His political and social horizons were curtailed by the Appalachian Mountains. Loyalty to the Old Dominion and family honor outweighed all other considerations. Though uncomfortable with the moral stain of slavery, Lee yet saw it as the best social relation between whites and blacks. Davis limns this contrast as his book climaxes in Grant's appointment as General-in-Chief of Union forces (replacing Halleck). As the foremost partisans of their respective sides, Grant and Lee became their symbolic embodiments.

Davis credits Lee for his warm relations with Jefferson Davis. By keeping his chief executive abreast of his movements and deferring to his opinion in conference, Lee won the esteem and affection of a man known for his meddling and arrogance. His concern to maintain Davis's support is apparent in a message he sent after his initial thrust into Maryland, which ended at Antietam. "When you do not hear from me, you may feel sure that I do not think it necessary to trouble you." Such frankness forestalled any problematic presidential visits to Lee's forces.

No general and chief executive ever worked better together, and the credit belonged primarily to Lee, who never forgot the position of the military in a democracy, and who "read" the man in charge with unerring precision.... If at times Lee's demeanor seemed flattering, verging even on the sycophantic, it was never for self-advancement, but done knowing that Lee's weapons were stronger with the president behind them, rather than in front. (414, 446)

After the war, Lee became the symbol of the South's political and social situation and the enduring icon of Lost Cause mythology. Defeated, embittered, and convinced the Union had won only because of its overwhelming advantages of manpower and material, not the righteousness of its cause, Lee counseled fealty to the reunited nation and committed himself to his own brand of reconstruction.<sup>3</sup> As president of Washington University (present-day Washington and Lee University), Lee expanded the school's curriculum and encouraged an influx of money from wealthy donors. His dedication to the students under his charge echoed his treatment of West Point cadets during his time as superintendent of the Academy (1852–55). Grant became involved in the political morass of the Andrew Johnson administration and Radical Republican Reconstruction. Publicly, both Grant and Lee espoused policies of renewal and peaceful coexistence. Their rare postwar encounters were cordial, and each man expressed abiding respect for the other's military prowess and character, though their status as living symbols of their causes sometimes colored their words and actions.

William Davis's engaging and instructive dual biography is a welcome addition to the popular literature (of a high order) on the US Civil War and its two preeminent commanders.

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3. For a compelling argument that Lee may have hindered rather than facilitated the process of national reconciliation, see Elizabeth Varon, *Appomattox: Victory, Defeat, and Freedom at the End of the Civil War* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2013).