

Men of Fire: Grant, Forrest, and the Campaign That Decided the Civil War

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Review

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Hurst, Jack *Men of Fire: Grant, Forrest, and the Campaign That Decided the Civil War*. Basic Books, \$27.95 hardcover ISBN 9780465031849

Two Generals, Two Causes

Jack Hurst's book *Men of Fire* is a book that exists in two levels. On one hand, it provides a comprehensive history of the campaign against Forts Henry and Donelson and the role that Ulysses Grant and Nathan Bedford Forrest played in this important early clash of the Civil War. On the other hand, the book also portends the future of the conflict, revealing the elements of Grant and Forrest's personalities that would shape their roles in the rest of the war. The dual nature of the narrative is what makes this book so interesting. Hurst weaves a complex tale, alternatively describing the process of the campaign to open the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers while using events in the process to illustrate how the two the campaign thrust its two leading figures into roles that determined the direction of the war.

Hurst demonstrates that Grant and Forrest had some common characteristics, manifested in their own unique way. Hurst depicts Grant and Forrest as the product of their personal versions of determination. Grant overcame the limitations of his checkered past, and he succeeded through methodical determination. Grant was the first Union general to understand the value of strategic maneuver and the application of cold efficient technology to achieve his aims. Forrest, a self-made man in a rigid class system, embodied the emotionalism of warfare and the passions that conflict stirred. This translated in a willingness to engage in independent action when the military situation demanded it.

Both generals also relied upon their own determination to overcome the limitations of their respective command systems. Neither man was particular popular with their superiors in the early stages of the war, and Hurst makes allusions to the what might have been if close-minded commanders had either

fully turned loose or fully reigned in their active subordinates. In Grant's case, the hindrance is General Henry W. Halleck, who Hurst portrays as cautious, haughty, and dismissive of his subordinate. Grant overcame Halleck through sheer ability and by establishing a pattern of decisive action that Halleck could not, or would not, contain. Later, Grant had to contend with General Don Carlos Buell's jealousy over Grant's promotion to Major General. For Forrest, it was Generals John Floyd and Gideon Pillow, who lacked Forrest's will to defend Fort Donelson. The frustrating experience of serving under these two officers helped to foster Forrest's preference for acting as an independent command for the rest of the war.

Determination also was evident in how both Grant and Forrest conducted themselves in battle, especially in the struggle for Fort Donelson. Grant committed himself to the assault, but the outcome was not as certain as often depicted. Grant dealt with subordinates of questionable value, had to coordinate with the Navy's fleet of gunboats, constantly kept Halleck informed of his actions, suffered through deplorable weather, and confronted a daunting defensive position. On top of that, he had to deal with Nathan Bedford Forrest. Determination also got Forrest through the battle. Forrest confronted the restraints of defending a fixed position, the shifting command structure that limited his natural abilities, and a foe with superior numbers and firepower. On top of that, Forrest faced an implacable adversary determined to achieve unconditional surrender.

Thoroughly researched, *Men of Fire* is an outstanding history of this important early campaign, and Hurst's descriptions of movement and combat are both complete and compelling. If any part of the book merits negative criticism, it is the idea presented in the book's subtitle that this campaign decided the Civil War. The first impulse upon reading the subtitle is to presume that Hurst is claiming that the Union victories at Forts Henry and Donelson were the true turning points of the war. But that is not Hurst's claim. Instead, the theme of the book is the role that Forts Henry and Donelson played in thrusting Grant and Forrest into the limelight and establishing the patterns for their later successes.

Even cognizant of this theme, a reader might not be convinced, based upon Hurst's reliance upon perfect hindsight. Less than two months after Fort Donelson, Grant nearly suffered a crushing defeat at Shiloh, and for some time his future in the army remained in doubt. President Abraham Lincoln retained Grant in command, but Lincoln could have easily sent Grant home. Forrest also

survived the war, although in 1862 that was not a guaranteed thing. Considering Forrest's aggressive nature, there were plenty of chances for him to die during the war, but fortune seemed to smile upon the Tennessean. This criticism, however, should not deter anyone from reading a book that contains brilliant writing, excellent analysis, and a complex relationship between contemporary and future events in the Civil War.

Steven J. Ramold is an Assistant Professor of American History at Eastern Michigan University. He received a Ph.D. from the University of Nebraska, and is the author of Slaves, Sailors, Citizens: African Americans in the Union Navy. Ramold is currently working on a book on criminal justice and discipline in the Union Army.