

Vicksburg: Grant's Campaign That Broke the Confederacy

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Review

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In the “Acknowledgements” for *Vicksburg: Grant's Campaign That Broke the Confederacy*, Donald L. Miller states that when he started doing research for the book in 1997, he went to Vicksburg and started exploring “by car, on foot, and in a rented power boat the broken terrain and serpentine waterways that” General Ulysses S. Grant “had to surmount to take the town.” (503) He did that to gain an awareness that empowered him to produce a history of the campaign that had a “palpable feel for the physical setting in which the characters” interacted, and in which “the story unfolds.” (503)

Donald L. Miller is to be congratulated for not only achieving his goal but for relating his findings with the skills of a master storyteller. As was his intention, his recounting of the campaign to conquer the Citadel on the Mississippi is told with a deeply rooted familiarity with the facts, the land, the climate, and the great Mississippi River that double underscores the diligent dedication which structured and directed the author's investigative process.

For certain, the ultimate focus of the work is the grisly struggle to seize the town of Vicksburg. In a larger sense, though, Miller places the campaign within the overarching challenges, successes, setbacks, and multiple miseries that characterized the Western Theater of the Civil War. All of those elements keep the drama tense and heightened, serving to move the story along at a vigorous but not breakneck pace. Of course, the bulk of the drama was provided by the various participants, Union and Confederate, whose decisions and behaviors ranged from being brilliant, noble, and inspiring to bizarre, petty, and infamous.

The unflinchingly honest pre-Civil War examination of, for example, Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman makes their eventual exploits even more impressive since they were accomplished by such deeply flawed, painfully ordinary men.

Grant's pre-war difficulties were so acute that, in addition to the humiliation of several times having to accept the largesse of his father-in-law (so he could take care of his family), the future hero of the West and General-in-Chief of the Union Army once earned the disdain of neighbors for paying too much for "a mulatto slave" whom he then "worked without sufficient 'severity'". (20) The ongoing professional and fiscal crises that loomed over Grant like a menacing shadow quickly changed when civil conflict descended upon the nation. Miller sums up the reversal of fortunes by asserting that "Ulysses Grant was made by the war." (23) Life in Galena, Illinois "did not save him; the war did." (23)

Likewise, William Tecumseh Sherman's dismal pre-Civil War life offered *no* hint of possible great deeds being performed by him in the future. Beset by psychological and emotional problems, including a sense of being "deeply insecure, despite his bravura demeanor," (65) Sherman had "failed in every business venture he tried: banking, real estate, law, streetcars and briefly—like Grant—farming." (66) His attitude about African Americans was rigidly in line with the vile assumptions most antebellum Americans held about blacks. As far as Sherman was concerned "[Southern] Negroes . . . must . . . be slaves" because nothing could be done to improve the condition of blacks. African Americans had to be "subject to the white man, or . . . amalgamate or be destroyed." (67)

Miller is no less thorough when discussing the strengths and foibles of lesser lights like West Point educated Confederate General Earl Van Dorn who, along with his "near perfect physique" was "strikingly handsome and gracious in social company." (136). The married Van Dorn's strengths were offset by his being a "brazen womanizer, a 'ballroom beau . . . a thing of paint, perfume, and feathers" who nevertheless had been a "reckless fighter with an outstanding record for bravery in the Mexican American War." (136)

Such is the skill of the author's descriptive power that the anguish of Pennsylvania-born Confederate General John Clifford Pemberton vibrates from the pages as details are shared about his rejecting his birth-family in Philadelphia in order to stay with his Virginia-born wife in the Confederacy. Pemberton's northern birth repeatedly proved a source of suspicion as more than one southerner questioned his "loyalty to the Confederate cause." (192) Doubts about Pemberton resulted in his being transferred to

the Western Theater where, as the eventual senior Confederate commander at Vicksburg, he'd confront the implacable will of Ulysses S. Grant.

The sweeping nature of Miller's writing establishes in robust fashion that the war in the west was its own epic struggle tethered to affairs in the east mainly by the Lincoln government's desperation for positive battlefield reports. The capture of Forts Henry and Donelson (February 6 – 13, 1862), victory at Shiloh (April 6, 1862), and seizing New Orleans (April 29, 1862) were certainly welcome developments, especially given the dismal results of General George B. McClellan's eastern Peninsular Campaign.

Miller's treks through the countryside where the campaign for Vicksburg (and the Western Theater in general) occurred is on display throughout the narrative, exemplified by the way the author uses the landscape and its various characteristics to explain their own peculiar influences. During operations in Louisiana, fetid, pestilential swamps produced a "bumper crop" (156) of malarial mosquitoes, infecting Federal soldiers to the point where they died "in appalling numbers." (156) The hazards of climate, terrain, and insects that struck down soldiers with maladies like "swamp fever, ague, dengue, dysentery, and general debility" (156) were parts of a larger battle against diseases that made the "Civil War . . . the greatest biological crisis of the nineteenth century." (310)

That crisis was exacerbated by the generally filthy hygienic habits of soldiers which provides some compelling (and stomach-turning) insights into the era's culture regarding such matters. Writing in a such a way as to convey the magnitude of frustration felt by Civil War healers, Miller asserts that Union "Army surgeons fought a . . . losing battle to impress upon men the importance of personal hygiene and field sanitation, of separating toilet facilities from the food and water supplies and having soldiers refrain from relieving themselves outside their tents." (311)

Miller also gives significant space to examining the impact of the western war upon civilian populations as the relational dynamics between chattels and owners were reshuffled because of slavery's loosening grip. The arrival of Union armies confirmed the hopes of thousands of slaves who immediately shed lifetimes of conditioned subservience and made their way toward their liberators. On numerous occasions, they were rebuffed due to the contempt of northern soldiers and officers for African Americans. Miller holds back nothing in exposing the dizzying racism of northerners, illustrating the lethal

dilemma confronting blacks who fled slavery's violence only to be subjected to abuse by the enemies of their "owners".

Undaunted, African Americans surged toward Union lines in ever increasing numbers. Their desperation, dreadful appearance, and overall pathetic humanity was too much for some to ignore and attitudes slowly changed. For example, General Lorenzo Thomas who'd been sent to investigate concerns about Grant's approach to emancipation (especially in the aftermath of the Emancipation Proclamation) confided to a friend that "unlike abolitionists . . . he did not have 'nigger on the brain.'" (323)

A visit to a freedmen's camp in Cairo, Illinois revealed (to Thomas) the truth of their "deplorable living conditions." (323) He subsequently dedicated himself to teaching freedmen skills that would "transfer the burden of their support from the government to themselves." (323) Such humanitarian concerns and gestures were yet another part of the complex machinery being managed by Ulysses S. Grant who found "it nearly impossible to direct the largest campaign of the war while simultaneously managing the social revolution his army had unleashed . . . when soldiers, on their own" had begun "freeing and inviting behind their lines tens of thousands of runaway slaves." (324) Many of those soldiers were motivated by self-interest.

By the summer of 1863, Grant and his Federals had been slogging through Mississippi River country for months, and it was grimly apparent that the war was not ending soon. Looting, plundering, and violence became more commonplace as soldiers directed their enraged frustrations toward civilians who they blamed for supporting a war that had taken so many of them so far from home. And since the (January 1, 1863) Emancipation Proclamation had made slavery's abolition a chief aim of the Union government, increasing numbers of white soldiers thought it only fair that African Americans put their own lives at risk for *their* liberty. Speaking from a standpoint of unvarnished self-interest, one northern soldier (named Cyrus Boyd) grouched that there were "some fools in our Army who think" it's "a disgrace to allow a colored man . . . to help us fight against his rebellious Master" but if "any American will stand between me and a rebel bullet he is welcome to the honor and the bullet too." (336)

Another testament to the author's writing prowess is reflected in the manner by which the much studied and discussed Vicksburg campaign is presented with freshness

and a nuanced progression toward a triumphant climax. Miller underscores his very credible work by bringing an equal level of rigorous scrutiny and criticism to all the various entities. The awe so easily inspired by Grant's and Sherman's achievements is not allowed to obscure their blunders and the tragedy of the men who lost their lives because of them. There's discernible excitement in relating the details of how those in the Union's western armies and those commanding Union ironclads and gunboats learned, often through trial-and-error, the most effective ways to coordinate mutually supportive riverine and land assaults that steadily diminished Confederate power.

Impressively, the author shows the vast depth and breadth of his knowledge regarding the complexities of warfare, especially the modern war that was being unleashed by Grant and Sherman and their naval counterparts. Noting that, in the aftermath of the North's conquering Vicksburg, the duplicitous, mildly competent Henry W. Halleck compared Grant's "boldness of plan, rapidity of execution, and brilliancy of results" with the strategic victory of Napoleon in taking the Bavarian city of Ulm in 1805. Halleck's effusive praise was shared by many but not Sherman who "worshiped Grant but never considered him a genius." (479).

Miller asserts that the folly of labeling any single person a "genius" in warfare runs the risk of leading to "a form of 'armchair idolatry' that ignores the role of the structural underpinnings of victory: factories, railroads, steamships, ordnance, and logistics, along with that elusive quality called luck." (479) Fortunately, there's more latitude to render positive assessments of rigorously researched historical narratives that are well-written and include the best elements of a captivating novel. In *Vicksburg: Grant's Campaign That Broke the Confederacy*, Donald L. Miller achieves all those objectives...and luck was not a factor.

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