

Richard Gilder Distinguished Lecture

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The American Army subsists as a community of time; the bonds that unite its generations are profound, and in no community of American enterprise are the heirs of preceding generations more constant in their scrutiny of the labors and character of their forebearers. Our own culture's interest in war, and soldiers at war remains focused on three conflicts: the war on terrorism, of course, today's war as it is prosecuted on several fronts, one in Afghanistan, and another, much controverted, in Iraq. In history, the Civil War and the Second

World War; and for the generation of Army leaders and their civilian superiors and colleagues of the Second World War, the American Civil War was a constant presence. Citizens born in the last twenty years of the Nineteenth Century were children of Civil War fathers and pupils of teachers who had fought at Gettysburg and Chattanooga. President Roosevelt invoked the memory of Ulysses Grant's victory at Fort Donelson, in 1862, when he avowed the Allied determination to enforce an Unconditional Surrender upon the Axis: U. S. Grant: Unconditional Surrender – remember that the Confederate general who surrendered to Grant was the father, not the grandfather, of the most senior American soldier killed in World War II: Simon Bolivar Buckler, Jr., a lieutenant general killed at the end of the battle of Okinawa in June 1945. And when

Henry Stimson, Secretary of War to President Roosevelt, argued for the appointment of George Marshall as Supreme Commander of the great Allied force that would invade northwest Europe in 1944, he talked specifically about U. S. Grant, and Grant's remorseless campaign in Virginia, in 1864. For the generation of Roosevelt and Marshall, the American Civil War was far closer in time and influence than Vietnam is for us today.

As for our subject, U. S. Grant himself – there is an important doctoral dissertation waiting to be written, and I will furnish the title for any brilliant new Bachelor of Arts in history who aspires to a career as an academic historian: “The Historiography of Ulysses S. Grant.” That is, the history of Grant's reputation, as prepared, shaped, influenced by

scholarship and evaluation since his death in July 1885. Its oscillations and changeability more purely reflect the dusty cliché that each generation must rewrite history to conform to its own prejudices and preoccupations and, in diminishing measure, the discoveries of new evidence. Put bluntly and simply, how did the most admired and most popular American of his time, within the compass of fifty years, sink to the raw caricature of insensate military butcher, drunkard, impresario of political and financial scandal: a soldier who had grown in the Duke of Burgundy's terrible words, "as soldiers will, that nothing do but meditate on blood."

I am not going to rehearse the process this afternoon – rather in these few minutes try to describe this man to you. Grant the soldier not Grant the politician, to account for his

undoubted military aptitudes (Americans grow queasy when they hear the phrase military “genius”) and describe also, his legacy as a soldier.

He was a skinny little man: at age 42 he weighed about 135, and was five feet six and a half. He toddled when he walked – a distinctly unmellifluous and unathletic motion. On horseback he was transformed, in physical aspect at least: he was the best horseman in the Army – more than twenty years after leaving West Point, his records for jumping still stood. His big horse Cincinnati was 17 ½ hands: and a man or woman who rides easily and successfully we know is a person who is fearless physically, is strongly intuitive in judgement, is happily coordinated. Like his protege Sheridan, he was a brilliant small rider on a big horse. As to the fearlessness, Grant neither

sought danger nor avoided it. He was indifferent to it. “Ulysses don’t scare worth a damn,” a soldier noted – an artillery shell had exploded nearby. He himself however wrote often about his moral courage, fearing he would not measure up to the kind of courage huge responsibility in wartime imposes on a commander. And he rarely talked outside his close circle of staff and aides. The perspicuity of his mind he communicated in the things he wrote: military orders on campaign, a few letters, and the unexampled *Memoirs*. ()

William McFeeley wrote that Grant’s drunkenness is as fixed and accepted a myth in the American firmament as that the pilgrims ate turkey at the first Thanksgiving. That will not change. There is enough of truth inside the myth, to borrow a phrase of Howard Moss, to allow a comment. Grant had a low

capacity; he rarely drank after the start of the Civil War; he got his reputation in the tight small Army officer corps in the 1850s, and got it by going on apparently quite spectacular, though rare, benders. But there is no documented example of General Grant's being the worse for wear, during his campaigns, as a consequence of his drinking. Incidentally, Grant the writer falters when he writes something official. It is outside the limits of this lecture, but Grant's inaugurals, though serviceable, are monuments to a diligent political neophyte's labored efforts to produce something that sounds appropriate.

I know of no important political or military leader in the American pantheon who is more obviously and distinctly the product of the way he was raised, the nature of his youth, the circumstances in which he grew, than Ulysses Grant, and I need

to consider that boyhood with you for a moment. It is early April, your daughter has been waitlisted at Brown and denied at Williams, and she, and you, are bereft, unconsolable. Mr. Lehrman will forgive my quoting the Great Emancipator: how can I beguile you from a loss so overwhelming. Well, consider Grant. He was an eldest child, born in southwestern Ohio only a few years after Ohio attained statehood: the West of 1822. His father ran a tannery, was a Babbitt-like braggart in the little town of Georgetown, desperately ambitious for his first-born, whom he always called My Ulysses – the boys friends called him “useless.” He was a quiet inward child, both embarrassed by his father and afraid of him. He was slow to learn to talk, incorrigibly shy in company, without distinction in anything other than his early affinity for horses. Stories too tedious to

repeat are adduced to show his essential dullness. He was quiet, a watcher. He got into the habit, very early, of doing everything on his own, to completion, his way. He records early in the *Memoirs* an idiosyncrasy: he used to run a kind of taxi service – this is at the age of 12 or 13 – around southwestern Ohio, delivering people and sometimes parcels for a small fee. He could not bear to turn back, if he had made a wrong turn or followed a faulty direction. He therefore kept going in the direction he was headed, however long it took, until he would attain his destination by, sometimes, impossibly long arcs of travel. Tenacity of purpose. Self-reliance. Watchfulness, continuous study of terrain, comfortableness in being alone, silent musing, thinking things through, physical hardihood, determination to master some skill. His father got him an

appointment to West Point, which he did not want, and his earnest hope was that the Academy would fold before his matriculation: West Point in those days was tiny, less than 300 students, but it had developed a national cachet already – not so much as a crucible for training soldiers as a school in which to study engineering, surveying, the practical arts required, literally, to subdue and master a continent.

His four years at West Point were marked by the distinctions only the very discerning would notice; he was unengaged by the curriculum, bored by much of the required study, indifferent to military rigamarole.

In the compass of a few minutes I can but sketch what seem to me to be important influences, in youth, in college, in early manhood, in the life of Ulysses Grant. Like the heroine of

George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch*, he lived a buried, unknown, undistinguished life, up to the age of thirty-nine; emphatically thereafter, however, his life and career were to move into the wider realms of fame and great public responsibility. At the Military Academy, at West Point, he knew most members of a seven-years cohort: as a member of the class of 1843, who had begun his cadetship in 1839, he was the familiar of, or knew useful things about, seven classes – but seven classes in a tiny school: 300 at most, perhaps forty-five in a class. This is to say, that an extraordinary number of prominent Civil War general officers were West Point cadets, many of them friends, during Grant's tenure. Among the closest were Sherman, Longstreet, Simon Bolivar Buckner. The academic curriculum bored him – it comprised, mainly, mathematics and French. He

devoted himself to reading, with a voracity that surprises us – everything in the library he could find, by writers like James Fenimore Cooper, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Sir Walter Scott; and he studied art under a famous painter of the day, a member, of course, of the Hudson River School, Robert Walter Weir. We cannot account for the appearance of an ability we call “literary,” but attend to this excerpt from a letter Grant wrote a cousin. He was then 17, a West Point plebe: “... is decidedly the most beautiful place that I have ever seen ... From the window I can see the Hudson ... if I look in another way I can see Fort Putnam frowning far above; a stern monument to a sterner age which seems placed there ... to bid us remember the suffering (forebearers) and ... their examples.” (Papers I, 5, 22 September 1839) A lucid pen.

He despised military rigamarole and was graduated a cadet private – having excelled especially in riding and horsemanship.

Grant was assigned almost immediately to an infantry regiment in St. Louis, and within three years was serving, in battle, in Zachary Taylor's Army in Mexico, in a war he regarded as the most unjust in our history – and it was also the most sanguinary, in terms of percentages of Americans killed and wounded. A quartermaster officer, Grant continuously sought places in the line of battle. Here again was the chance to watch and to study leadership and the character of his own contemporaries: Zachary Taylor at once became what a later age would call a role model. Here also was an experience like Washington's and George Marshall's: service at close quarters with ordinary Americans who were not military professionals

but who were young civilians who had joined up for reasons having nothing to do with military ambition or a desire to make a career of soldiering. Leading such citizens imposes very different _____ on those appointed to positions of command.

This of course would not change until 1973, when the country adopted an all-volunteer policy. It is a long way from Ulysses Grant to Neil Simon, but the play *Biloxi Blues*, like the novel *Catch-22*, are profound, is

But three years removed from his graduation from West Point, Grant found himself fighting in the war in Mexico, a war he called “the most unjust in our national history,” and a war which led, as he believed, direct to a successor war even more terrible, its officers on each side men who had been friends and

colleagues and brother officers in Mexico. Just as the generation of MacArthur, Stilwell, and Marshall would fight under John Pershing in France, as senior officers of company grade, majors and colonels – learning their profession but also learning each other, and in ways useful in the successor war – so too did the generation of Longstreet, Jackson, Meade, and Grant – have imprinted in their memories a plain sense of what it is to lead American citizens on campaign and in battle – citizens who are not military professionals, and a plain sense, also, of the habits, the tendencies, the metier ... of each other. Indeed Longstreet, a member of Grant's wedding and a dear friend after the Civil War, once wrote a letter from an encampment in Louisiana: we have no books or newspapers here, he said: thus we study each other. Grant served with quiet distinction in

Mexico: he was a supply officer, a logistician – but always sought combat. He was remembered as brave, steady, reliable: like the commander who, to fit him with one of our own uglier _____, became a role model: Zachary Taylor – a future President, a soldier in the tradition of men like Henry Knox, Creighton Abrams, and Grant himself: utterly functional, indifferent to appearance and punctilious, bent on engaging closely with the enemy and moving on.

Grant left the Army in 1854, after several years' service on the West Coast – what we would today call unaccompanied service: an Army captain could scarcely afford to bring his family to California and maintain it comfortably. It was here that this reputation for drinking was established, a reputation quickly diffused among officers of the tiny pre-Civil War

army, among them the priggish George McClellan, who may have seen Grant the worse for wear. He was in truth what we would call a binge drinker, and with no capacity for drink: it must have fed this commanding officer's bleak opinion of him, and Grant, now a civilian, rejoined his family in Missouri. For seven years he shuffled through an unengaging and unproductive series of jobs -- farmer, bill collector, country engineer, reduced at one point to pawning his watch. In 1860, miserable at the prospect of doing what he now believed he must do, he asked his father for a job, and was obliged by Jesse Grant -- who sent him to help run a dry goods/leather store in Galena, Illinois. The Civil War found him here. Again, though his own situation is singular, it is remarkable how many of the successful cohort of Civil War generals had left the Army

between West Point and the War. Obligated service was only indifferently enforced; a few stalwarts apart – Lee, Albert Sidney Johnson, Meade – very few of the names familiar to us had made the Army his career. This is to say, they lived among the kinds of men they would have to lead, to command, in war. In 1880, as in 2008, America is a nation profoundly unmilitary. Just as Winston Churchill’s physician, Charles Moran – an amateur sociologist like Alistair Cooke – observed. “The American soldier” – wonderful cliché – “does not like to be told what to do.” Grant was a master of leading rather than commanding, civilian-soldiers “who do not like to be told what to do”

When word of the firing on Fort Sumter reached Galena the town assembled, decided to organize a volunteer company:

knowing that Grant had been to West Point, he was asked to preside over a meeting of citizens, and to accompany the band to Springfield. Here, however, unlike every other ex-officer so circumstanced, he did not seek out preferment or appointment to command. Exactly like George Marshall, a servitor of an ethos of earning appointments rather than asking for them, he did nothing – only continuing to work, as a civilian, in mustering in various companies from around the state. One day someone said to the Governor, Richard Yates, the only way to get Grant to do something is to appoint him – to tell him. Grant became Colonel of a volunteer regiment. (The Logan incident).

Grant's taciturnity was proverbial, and "when he did speak, it was as if he had forced himself by sheer effort of will into manufacturing a few stereotyped sentences to tide over the

trackless wilderness of social life.” (APF). A lovely writer of a native American prose, Grant hated to talk. Incidentally he faltered also as a prose writer when he had to prepare something for an “occasion,” like an inaugural.

Early regimental command in Missouri, early tactical victories in the great Mississippi riverine theater, and finally, Fort Donelson:

When Lincoln brought Ulysses Grant to Washington, in March, 1864, he did so in the educated hope that Grant, as General-in-Chief, would not only infuse into the Army the steady, mastering confidence that had distinguished his successes in the West, in the campaigns which had culminated in the victories of Vicksburg and Chattanooga, but also that he would deploy the grand strategic vision that would unite and

coordinate the efforts of all the principal Union forces now in the field. After Shiloh, in April, 1862, Grant had become convinced that single battles of the Napoleonic type, one or two day engagements in which a losing force would retreat, and which might prompt a surrender – that such isolated battles could not induce surrender. As he told Sherman, who succeeded him in command in the West, we must get into the enemy's vitals, destroy his capacity to make and sustain war, to – in Sherman's quiet phrase – make George howl; to make it impossible for a crow to fly over the Shenandoah Valley without carrying his own provender. So if Grant was to be remembered for his tenacity, his stolid imperturbability – what the British call phlegm – demonstrated in his final campaign in Virginia against Lee – it was as a grand strategist that he must

determine how to win the war.

Grant would have some 530,000 men at his disposal – curiously, almost the same size as the Army in 2008. (530,000 for a nation of 23 millions; 540,000 for a nation of 304 millions). Meade’s Army of the Potomac, almost 120,000 strong, would attack straight South, its only mission to engage and destroy Lee’s Army, which would, of course, interpose itself between the Rapidan River, sixty miles southwest of Richmond, and the capitol. Grant, who detested Washington, would maintain a general headquarters near Meade’s – making Meade, in effect, a commanding officer with his own superior looking over his shoulder.

Four other armies would be set in motion at the same time: Sherman’s force, moving on Atlanta from Tennessee, engaging

Joe Johnston's Army, and with the mission of destroying that force, capturing Atlanta, and then striking out across Georgia, destroying anything which could be useful to the enemy.

Nathaniel Banks' smaller force would attack towards Mobile;

Benjamin Butler, from Fort Monroe in Virginia, towards

Petersburg (the rail hub twenty miles South of Richmond);

finally a small force, ten thousand strong, under Franz Siegel,

would move up, ie South, the Shenandoah Valley, with the

mission of denying the Valley's rich harvests and resources to

Lee's army. They would capture the town of Staunton and

destroy the railroads linking the Shenandoah with Richmond.

Those not skinning, said Mr. Lincoln, could hold a leg: Grant

and Meade were the principal skimmers, assisted by Sherman; the

others were to hold legs. Continuous pressure was to be applied

everywhere, and at once: precisely as Eisenhower and Bradley insisted in western Europe, in 1944-1945: resisting Montgomery's (and Churchill's) desire to assemble a single overwhelming Anglo-American army on an axis of advance aimed directly at Berlin. A final point: In May 1864 the war was going badly for the Union, and there was a presidential election six months ahead. Remember that the South's strategy, like that of the North Vietnamese in 1965, did not require an outright defeat of their enemy: it demanded only that the enemy's will to continue sustaining costs, in lives and treasure, be broken.

The war would be ended, more or less, some eleven months later, at Appomattox, and since then popular attention has always been drawn to the terrible drama of Grant vs. Lee, to the

slaughter of the Virginia campaign and its hideous florescence of death: The Wilderness, Spotsylvania, the North Anna, Cold Harbor – not war but murder, it has been called. Those who denigrate, those who dismiss Grant's success in this Virginia campaign always stress the advantage of overwhelming Union resources, in men, in material, in logistics, in artillery. He could be prodigal with such resources it is said because all could be replaced. His head-on, slogging tactics, were uninspired, crude: given such advantages, anyone could have won such a campaign. It was only a matter of time ...

There is a striking picture of him in a characteristic _____.

Early in the war, in April, 1862, he is mounted, he has just debarked from a river steamer on the Tennessee, hurrying to the sound of the guns. The writer is John Keegan, and a

Confederate soldier supplies a detail: “In the early light of a spring morning during the presidency of Abraham Lincoln, a small man on a large horse was galloping through the dense woodland beside the Tennessee River that led inland from its western shore. The brim of a battered slough hat nearly met the whiskers of his tight, determined, bearded face” – the face, the soldier added “as expressionless as a pine board.” A setting quite usual for him – less so, perhaps, than his usual place during battles in the campaign in Virginia: sitting on a camp stool, whittling, literally, receiving intelligence and information from aides, saying almost nothing, allowing in Corelli Brnatt’s phrase “only neutral factors of calculation into his mind.” Only rarely did Grant ever disclose exasperation or impatience: again, however, an example to the contrary is illuminating. The

enemy commander is rumored to be leading an attack which threatens part of the Union line. A Union staff officer, breathless with excitement, rides into the clearing to announce an impending move on the part of General Lee. “I am heartily tired of hearing about General Lee, and about what he is going to do. You think he will turn double somersaults and capture our army singlehanded ... go back to your own command. Start to think about what you are going to do.” A more famous incident – our sources the reminiscences both of Grant and Sherman: it is midnight in a rainstorm after the terrible first day of the most tragic of all Civil War battles: Shiloh. Grant, unable to bear the suffering of the soldiers he finds in a tiny cabin being used as a field hospital, takes cover under a tree. Sherman finds him – and Sherman, looking for him, is minded

to counsel withdrawal; in the two days' fighting some 23,000 soldiers will have been killed or wounded, most of them boys from the upper Midwest or the mid-South: Indiana, Wisconsin, Alabama, Tennessee. Almost none have been a fire-fight, in battle. They have been elected "colonels," let us say, your state farm agent or your friend from the Kiwanis Club. There was something, some thing, about Grant, however, that deflected Sherman's half-formed intention: He said simply, "we've had the devil's own time of it, haven't we, Grant? So we have, is the answer lick 'em tomorrow, though." What we are describing is a quality of character that makes its way into the soul of an Army, faith, confidence, assurance – of the kind we connect, for example, with Wellington, or, much later, with Marshall. As for Lee, for whom Grant had sincere respect, the

southern commander had kindled in Union hearts a kind of terrified admiration not unlike that felt by the British Eighth Army fighting Rommel. Grant did not share it. Lee was a wise and inspirational commander. That was all.

Lee knew, and told Jefferson Davis that if his army were driven into defensive positions around the capitol and the railhead immediately to its South, Petersburg, that its end would be inevitable. There could be no serious reenforcement from other Confederate armies, all of them by now engaged by Union forces or far too meager in their resources to threaten the Union's grip on the capitol and Petersburg. Those not skinning can hold a leg, Mr. Lincoln wrote. When the Confederate line gave way, at the end of March, 1865, and the final pursuit began

– Grant now certain that victory was close – “Let the thing be pressed,” the President telegraphed – he began to sketch an end game in his mind: a victor who had himself spent perhaps the better part of a life as an underdog, often a loser, a familiar with the tragedies and burdens of other men. It is sometimes written that he played his role to perfection. It was no role The story is familiar: the exchange of letters – I will quote one in a moment – the magical disappearance of a terrible migraine, the meeting at the McClean House – Lee immaculately handsome and beautifully turned out, Grant looking like “a fly on the side of a beef” – diffident and respectful but certain of what he must do. Much later he wrote in his Personal Memoirs that although he had expected to feel joy, he found himself strangely depressed by the fall of a gallant foe, who had fought so long, so gallantly

for a cause in which he believed deeply – but which (a typical Grant sentence) “I believe is the most _____ for which man has ever fought.” The two men undertook the most important conversation between two men in our national history. When Grant wrote the terms of the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia, he tells us, he put pen to paper with no idea of what he would write – but the terms were perfectly lucid, clear, and comprehensive. Lee was both relieved and moved at what he read. They met the next day, April 10th, briefly; and saw each other again only one more time, in the White House during Grant’s first term as President.

This unpretentious man, suited by nature to guide and lead an Army in the largest war of our national history – the butcher’s bill was about 690,000 killed – in a nation of 32

millions – is the quintessential American soldier. Supremely capable of executing a policy formed by the government and President to whom he owes allegiance, yet with no consuming pleasure, no gratification of ambition, no parade, exaltation, just necessary function. In the last years of his life, after the two terms of his presidency and his famous trip around the world – 27 months of it – he would occasionally visit West Point. There he was carefully watched by a man who thought him the greatest of all American soldiers: John Pershing. Thirty-five years later Pershing asked Colonel George Marshall to be his aide de camp.