
William C. Davis. *Crucible of Command: Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee—The War They Fought, The Peace They Forged*. Da Capo Press: New York, 2015.

Book Review

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It is easy to be glib about icons because with so much information out there already established, many seldom dig deeper. However much of what passes for assumed knowledge is not that. William C. Davis's new work, *Crucible of Command: Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee—The War They Fought, the Peace They Forged* will surprise even the most ardent Grant and Lee fans. The popular view is that these two American military legends are polar opposites. Yet a cursory examination will show they have much more in common than most credit. Both graduated from West Point. Both were outstanding horsemen, though Grant was superior. Both had hard economic times—including Grant's hardscrabble life and working as a clerk, but Lee's family finances from his father onward were fluid. Both fought in the Mexican-American War, and though Lee distinguished himself more, Grant was cited for coolness and bravery under fire. The real difference that runs implicit through Davis's book is where they came from and how it shaped and defined them. Lee was from an old "monied" and titled Tidewater family that even though they had fallen on hard times had lineage. Grant in contrast represented the new, muscular American West, where a man could rise above his family's station in life.

JFC Fuller's original study of these two men is exemplary. Fuller's work is perhaps the greater of the two works in pure military terms, yet Fuller missed points by not understanding the American character. Fuller theoretically understood Grant the general who became the Total War advocate—but not fully. What sets Davis's effort apart is that Davis understands the underpinning of the unique American experience that forged these men. Davis provides a truly comparative biography. Grant—the ever optimistic pragmatic thinker who looked for solutions, is summed up in this quote, "Stop worrying what Bobby Lee is going to do to you and start making him worry what *you* are going to do to *him!*" If something does not work, try again in a different fashion. Lee was cooler, perhaps more melancholy. The most telling aspect is Grant—Grant had friends—and his

subordinates would call him “Sam.” Never once did it seem that Lee had friends. There was simply a gap, be it social or something else, between Lee and everyone else. Yet Lee inspired and served as the glue that held the Army of Northern Virginia together through its slow offensive decline and starvation. One of the aspects that will prove surprising to almost any reader is the knowledge that Lee had a volatile temper. Those soldiers fought less for the Confederate States of America, than the family and the patriarch, Robert E. Lee. However, even this is tempered as Davis shows that Lee, though revered, was perhaps unloved by his staff. The use of snippets from Grant’s letters show a degree of warmth that is missing from Lee’s writings.

Davis brings a lot to this work. He is the author of many books on the American Civil War, as well as the retired Virginia Tech Director of Programs for the Virginia Center for Civil War Studies. The book is so well written it is easy to forget its deep roots in good scholarship and superb analysis. Despite its size and scholarship, it is a deceptively and surprisingly quick read. If a reader were to select only one book on these two men, this is the one. Works of this nature can grind into a tedious affair, but Davis's light hand keeps readers entertained—and learning—through the entire book.