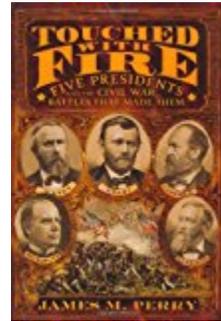


James M. Perry. *Touched with Fire: Five Presidents and the Civil War Battles That Made Them*. New York: Public Affairs, 2003. xvi + 335 pp. \$16.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-58648-290-9; \$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58648-114-8.

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The Greatest Generation of the Nineteenth Century

James Perry's book, *Touched with Fire*, is a look at five Civil War veterans who forged their legacies in battle and ultimately ascended to the presidency of the United States. Through defining combat moments in the careers of Union soldiers Ulysses Grant, Rutherford Hayes, James Garfield, Benjamin Harrison and William McKinley, Perry attempts to show how their reputations were created and how wartime heroics catapulted them into national politics—and, in time, to the White House. What he achieves is a straightforward narrative of events, often in his subject's own words, that provides insight into the greatest generation of the nineteenth century.

Drawing largely on personal accounts written by the future presidents and others, Perry focuses on specific moments in the lives of these men when the characteristics of leadership, innovation, and determination opened the door of destiny. Rather than reciting each man's entire military career, the author carefully selects defining moments when their combat reputations and political futures became intertwined.

Perry brings a reporter's clarity and tempo to the narrative from his long career in journalism covering politics for the *National Observer* and the *Wall Street Journal*. He also is the author of five previous books, most recently *A Bohemian Brigade* (2001), about the reporters who covered the Civil War. In *Touched with Fire* he focuses on these nineteenth-century newsmakers at the crossroads of their military/political careers.

Ulysses S. Grant is the only one of the five who could

be described as a professional soldier. Having graduated from West Point in 1843, Grant served in the Mexican War before retreating to a series of unsuccessful pursuits as a civilian. When the Civil War broke out, Grant returned to service with the Union army, leading the 21st Illinois. After a less-than-stellar combat debut at Belmont, Missouri, Grant achieved his first taste of greatness when he captured Fort Donaldson in Tennessee in early 1862. His demand for an "unconditional surrender" propelled him onto the national scene where "thenceforth the name Ulysses S. Grant was a household word" (p. 56).

Perry gives much more attention to future president James A. Garfield's military career. Garfield, a volunteer from Ohio, is the only other figure to have commanded an army. He viewed military service primarily as a step toward a political career. Garfield helped raise the 42nd Ohio Volunteers and served under General Don Carlos Buell winning the Battle of Middle Creek, Kentucky in 1862. Garfield later served as chief of staff to General William S. Rosecrans and the Army of the Cumberland. Although an able officer, Garfield was frustrated by Rosecrans' tepid generalship and concerned about his own political fortunes. When his commanding officer did finally choose to engage General Braxton Bragg's Confederate forces at Chickamauga, it nearly ended in disaster. Upon receipt of faulty intelligence, Rosecrans ordered one division to abandon its position to reinforce what he believed was a gaping hole in the Union line. This created a gap at the same time that General James Longstreet ordered a frontal assault. Rosecrans and Garfield could

do little else but flee for safety as Union troops retreated around them. When Garfield realized that the battle had shifted to the Union right under the command of General George H. Thomas, Garfield raced to his assistance. The retreat from Chickamauga created another bad situation, as the Army of Cumberland was nearly surrounded at Chattanooga until reinforcements and supplies from Washington arrived, allowing them to fight their way out. Throughout his service in Tennessee, Garfield successfully managed his military responsibilities and political luster. He had played a major role in pushing a reluctant Rosecrans to move against Bragg, and had been one of the principle architects of the Tullahoma strategy that chased Bragg out of central Tennessee. All the while, he maintained an active correspondence with Washington insiders that contributed to the downfall of his superior, Rosecrans, revealing the schemes of a political operative serving both his country and himself.

Chapters 7 through 9 intertwine the military careers of future presidents Rutherford B. Hayes and William McKinley, who both served in the 23rd Ohio Volunteers. Commissioned as a major, Hayes was ultimately brevetted major general and won both the respect of his superiors and the confidence of his men. At the same time, McKinley entered service as a private, but his diligence and attention to detail earned him an early promotion to commissary sergeant and the recognition of the regimental commander, Hayes. The author chronicles the exploits of the Ohio 23rd, first in West Virginia, and then in the eastern theater battles of 1862 before their return to the west in 1863. Hayes distinguished himself in a gallant charge against Fox's Gap in the Battle of South Mountain (September 14, 1862), where he was wounded but his leadership helped Union forces carry the day. Days later, McKinley won praise for his conspicuous courage at Antietam when he drove a commissary wagon through shot and shell to bring food and coffee to the men on the front line. McKinley was promoted to second lieutenant upon recommendation from Hayes. In the summer of 1863, the 23rd Ohio Volunteers returned to action in western Virginia under General George Crook. Hayes played a major role in capturing General John Hunt Morgan and his guerilla raiders. In 1864, the 23rd battled Confederate forces at Cloyd's Mountain and campaigned with General Philip Sheridan's Army of the Shenandoah at Opequon Creek and Cedar Creek. During his service with the 23rd, Hayes experienced physical hardship, danger, mental strain, and had proved a worthy commander.

McKinley's record in western Virginia was equally notable, earning him rank of brevetted major.

Perry's fifth future president, Benjamin Harrison, began his military career as colonel of Company A of the 70th Indiana Volunteer Infantry. Though not an imposing figure, Harrison overcame training and discipline issues with his men and anti-war Democrats back home to capture the respect of his troops and rise to the rank of brigadier general during the course of the war. Most notably, Harrison commanded the 1st Brigade in General William T. Sherman's final drive on Atlanta and halted a Confederate attack at Peach Tree Creek.

Representing nearly two million veterans of their generation, the political futures of these five men were inextricably tied to their military careers. "Political ambition and a good war record took all of these men a very long way," Perry claims (p. xv). In the final chapter, the author explains how "the boys in blue" organized veterans to support Republican presidential nominations and usher them into the White House in seven of nine post-war elections. Perry deems these men "touched with fire" through the hardship and baptism of war. Yet the implication that their service ordained them for higher office is a leap that is difficult to make, even by the end of Perry's well-crafted narrative. In the end, the military careers of these individuals, laudable as they were, may have only contributed to a political ambition that later resulted in their ascension to the White House. Furthermore, a good war record is necessary to carry the respect of veterans at the polls, but there is not enough evidence in Perry's conclusion to support the claim that in all seven Republican victories "the boys in blue—the Civil War veterans, one-and-a-half million of them—played a key role because they could never forgive the Democratic Party for opposing Lincoln's war policies" (p. 280).

James Perry's book, *Touched with Fire*, is a lively account of five future presidents tested by battle during the Civil War. While easily appealing to a broad market, the book lacks notations to assist the reader in evaluating its sources or make it useful for further study. A bibliography is included to indicate its scholarship, but is insufficient to move the work beyond its popular appeal in the literature of the Civil War. Despite these shortcomings, Perry does provide some insight into the greatest generation of the nineteenth century through defining moments when their combat reputations and political futures became intertwined.

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