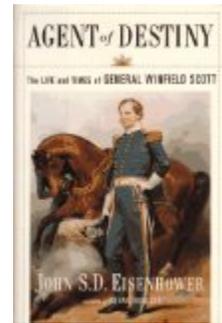


H-Net Reviews

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John S. D. Eisenhower. *Agent of Destiny: The Life and Times of General Winfield Scott*. New York and London: The Free Press, 1997. xiv + 464 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-684-84451-0.

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Old Fuss and Feathers

Winfield Scott entered the U.S. Army in 1808 as a captain of artillery and spent most of the next fifty-three years on active duty. Scott's long and notable career, as John Eisenhower relates in this book, encompassed the War of 1812, the Seminole Wars, the Mexican War, and the early phases of the Civil War. It is difficult to imagine another American soldier, with the possible exception of Douglas MacArthur, who had such a long and colorful career.

Scott's career was almost stillborn, however. He was dissatisfied with his first assignment, under General James Wilkinson near New Orleans, and submitted his resignation from the army in 1809. When war with England began to appear more and more likely, Scott had second thoughts and asked for reinstatement. Secretary of War William Eustis complied with his request, but then sent him right back to his original unit where his outspoken criticism of General Wilkinson earned him a court-martial. Finding him guilty of unofficer-like conduct, the court ordered Captain Scott suspended for twelve months.

Captain Scott was reinstated in 1811, in time for our second war with England beginning the following year. The major theater of operations for most of the war was along the border with Canada, and American land forces there had a spotty record at best. Scott's conduct, however, was one of the bright spots in an otherwise disappointing series of campaigns. His personal bravery under fire was an inspiration to his men, and his dedication to the benefits of training soon bore fruit at Chippewa and

at Lundy's Lane. By the end of the war, Winfield Scott wore the star of a brigadier general.

During the 1820s, Scott completed work on a set of general regulations for administering the army and also compiled a drill manual for the troops which, with periodic updating, remained in use until the eve of the Civil War. He also continued feuding with other high-ranking military leaders, including Andrew Jackson and Edmund Gaines.

The early 1830s saw an outbreak of Indian troubles on the northwestern frontier. Scott led a contingent of troops against Black Hawk and his band, but cholera struck the soldiers before they reached the seat of war. By the time the disease had subsided enough for Scott to continue, the short war was over. With the onset of the Second Seminole War in late 1835, however, Scott again faced armed combat. American troops were not very successful against Osceola's warriors, and this lack of success gave General Scott an opportunity to lash out at fellow officers. His intemperate language led to a court of inquiry in which his old nemesis General Edmund Gaines placed General Scott on the same level as Benedict Arnold.

Upon the death the general-in-chief of the army, in 1841, General Scott unabashedly put himself forward to fill the void. "I take it for granted," he wrote to the secretary of war, "that my name will be sent, in a day or two, to fill the vacancy [resulting from] the death of Major-General Macomb" (p. 208). His assumption proved correct, and for the next twenty years Winfield Scott would

be the nation's highest ranking soldier.

War with Mexico saw Scott take active command of one of the major armies that the United States put into the field. Following the steps of Hernando Cortez several centuries earlier, Scott put his force ashore near Veracruz and led it in a successful march on the enemy capital, bringing the war to an end within six months. Americans seem to like to reward military leaders with high political office, and Winfield Scott was more than ready to accept such rewards. Unfortunately, it was General Zachary Taylor who rode his own military reputation into the White House immediately following the Mexican War. Scott willingly ran for that office in 1852 as the dying Whig Party's last such candidate, but was defeated by Franklin Pierce who had led volunteer troops in the late war.

The secession of some of the Southern slave states from the Union in early 1861 found General Scott almost seventy-five years old. He was bothered by various health problems and was no longer in any shape to take to the field. After contributing some thoughts on the Union's potential grand strategy, Winfield Scott left the actual military leadership to younger men. The old general left active service in November 1861 and died almost five years later. He had been a major player in much of the development of the nation in the first half of the nineteenth century, and Mr. Eisenhower's characterization of him as an "Agent of Destiny" seems fitting. In fact, a more appropriate title might be *Agent of Manifest Destiny*.

In reading this life of an American general, I was struck by what, to me, were the striking similarities between this soldier's life and that of one who came along a century later—Douglas MacArthur. Each reached flag rank at a relatively young age and maintained a strong influence on American military affairs for a long time. Each was foiled in his attempt to secure the presidency. Each left the army in the midst of a war. Each had a monumental ego.

It has been a long time since a full-blown biography of Winfield Scott has been published, and John Eisenhower does a fine job of bringing him alive. Eisenhower, as fits his pattern, consulted a vast array of published sources in preparing this book but virtually no unpublished works. I cannot help but wonder what information there might be in untapped manuscript sources that would have enhanced the story told here. Surely there are diaries or collections of letters left behind by Scott's contemporaries that might shine new light on the character of the man himself. Perhaps there are unpublished letters between Scott and his wife that would yield interesting insights.

This book also contains a fair number of factual errors of varying degrees of importance. For example, Eisenhower tells us that the British government rescinded the despised Orders in Council on the very day in 1812 that the United States declared war on England, when in fact the British decision was announced two days earlier (p. 25). Several other dates, such as the fall of the Alamo, are incorrectly given (p. 154). Lake of the Woods, Minnesota appears in Michigan (p. 214). General Scott, rather than Navy Lieutenant George M. Totten, receives credit for having designed the surfboats used to get the troops ashore at Veracruz in 1847 (pp. 234, 239). Gideon Pillow appears, incorrectly, as President James K. Polk's former law partner (pp. 254, 316). Henry Clay, rather than Stephen Douglas, is credited with breaking the Compromise of 1850 up into its component parts to win passage in the Congress (p. 323).

In spite of these, and other lapses, I would still commend this book to college history professors looking for something to bolster their textbooks in courses such as U.S. Military History, Representative Military Leaders, or the U.S. to 1865/1877.

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