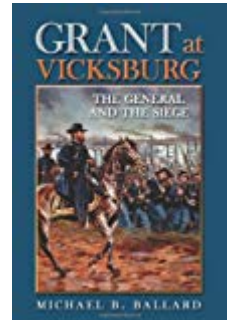


Michael B. Ballard. *Grant at Vicksburg: The General and the Siege*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013. 232 pp. \$32.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8093-3240-3.



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Published on H-CivWar (June, 2014)

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"The art of war is simple enough. Find out where your enemy is.... Strike him as hard as you can," bellowed a confident Ulysses S. Grant a full year prior to his now historic siege and victory at Vicksburg.[1] While already a seasoned commander with success at Shiloh, Grant still had much to learn about the intricacies of commanding a large army both on and off the field. Many of the characteristics that would come to define Grant as a general were still to be solidified. The crucible of combat that would shape Grant's ultimate impression of warfare would come in one of his and the Union's most important victories: the siege and capture of Vicksburg.

Michael Ballard's *Grant at Vicksburg: The General and the Siege* at first glance is a straightforward operational history of the siege operation conducted by General Grant and the Union army and navy around the crucial western city of Vicksburg. Upon closer examination this work's true purpose is the study of General Grant himself and his experiences during the siege. Ballard argues that Vicksburg supplied the necessary command

foundation that would serve Grant so well once he headed east to Virginia. Ballard divides Grant's lessons into two categories: those of military necessity and those of administrative ability.

Grant at Vicksburg unfolds chronologically. Failure of the initial assaults against Vicksburg presented Grant with an opportunity to manage an army that was both at rest and at war as they settled in for the long siege of the city. Finding a balance between his preferred aggression and the ultimately more important tactical and strategic efficiency would come through trial and tribulation for Grant. Ballard argues that the siege opportunity allowed Grant to learn a number of key lessons that would make him a more confident and effective commander later in the war. Grant had to learn the balance of keeping his men active while still defensively sound during the siege operations. Another phase of education came with Grant's constant preoccupation with other Confederate forces in the area, particularly the forces of General Johnston. Ballard argues that Grant's fear of a Confederate attack kept him from focus-

ing at key moments of the siege. Keeping the task in front of him as his primary concern was a lesson hard learned by Grant, but would serve him well later as he chased Robert E Lee through Virginia.

The second category of growth that Grant experienced at Vicksburg, argues Ballard, was in the realm of administrative ability. During the lengthy siege, Grant learned a great deal about managing a force, particularly the moment when to distribute the burden of command to those generals around him. Ballard makes a convincing argument that Grant at first attempted to take too much control over the forces in his army. Most specifically, Ballard points to Grant's ongoing mistrust in General McClelland after some hostile disagreements concerning the initial assaults on Vicksburg. Grant would learn from moments like this and, except for McClelland, learned to trust his other commanders. Both Grant's military and administrative lessons point to the ever-increasing importance of the Vicksburg campaign and siege in the larger context of the war. Growth made in these early moments by the Union's most powerful commander paid massive dividends by the war's end. Ballard's arguments are fairly straightforward and easy to agree with, a testament to his extensive research, linear narrative format, and the simplicity of his thesis.

The literature surrounding Vicksburg and the western theater of war has enjoyed a resurgence over the past few decades. A number of narrative histories exist, including a thorough volume crafted by Ballard himself, chronicling the Union assaults, Confederate defenses, naval bombardments, and other areas of the siege. Vicksburg has taken a place of central importance in any volume dealing with the western theater, the most noteworthy being Earl Hess's *The Civil War in the West*. Hess argues that the capitulation of Vicksburg signified the ultimate victory in the western theater, which he subsequently argues was the deciding factor in the entire war.[2] Ballard's most

recent volume adds a new layer to the scholarship on Vicksburg, the western theater, and Grant.

While Ballard's central arguments may not revolutionize the study of Grant or Vicksburg, he also takes on an existing staple of the Grant scholarship: the Yazoo River drinking incident. This event has lent credence to the prevailing notions of Grant's alcohol issues since it was first published in the 1950s.[3] Ballard comes to the defense of Grant with the infusion of new sources. Central to this new defense are the papers of Charles Dana, an emissary sent by the War Department to report on the campaigns. This new evidence, when analyzed properly against the orthodox versions of the story, allows Ballard to convincingly argue that Grant did not make the drunken fool of himself originally thought. This is one of the strongest and more unique contributions made by Ballard, and demonstrates the power of a volume with this particular focus.

Grant at Vicksburg is a thoroughly researched and well-written account that digs a little deeper than those before it. Topics like Vicksburg and Grant have been extensively written about and raise the question, do we really need another book about this? Ballard's work answers that query with an unequivocal yes. This volume brings the study of Vicksburg and Ulysses S. Grant together, creating a unique new narrative and demonstrating that Civil War scholarship will continue to offer new avenues of research for the foreseeable future.

Notes

[1]. Statement to John Hill Brinton, early 1862, as quoted in John Hill Brinton, *Personal Memoirs of John H. Brinton, Major and Surgeon U.S.V., 1861-1865* (New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1914), 239.

[2]. Earl J. Hess, *The Civil War in the West: Victory and Defeat from the Appalachians to the Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 319.

[3]. This incident was first discussed in Benjamin Thomas's *Three Years with Grant*. The Yazoo river incident saw Grant become quite intoxicated while on a river boat. Originally the story was that Grant rode a horse, attempted to give orders, and did a number of other inappropriate things while drunk. Sylvanus Cadwallader and Benjamin Platt Thomas, *Three Years with Grant* (New York: Knopf, 1955), 205.

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Citation: James Sandy. Review of Ballard, Michael B. *Grant at Vicksburg: The General and the Siege*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. June, 2014.

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