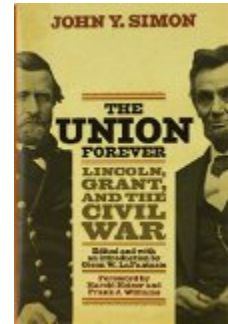


John Y. Simon. *The Union Forever: Lincoln, Grant, and the Civil War*. Edited by Glenn W. LaFantasie. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012. xiii + 311 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-3444-4.

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Published on H-CivWar (April, 2014)

Commissioned by Bonnie Laughlin-Schultz



## The Union Forever

Lucky is the one who can live a life as productive and influential as that of John Y. Simon. In the introduction to *The Union Forever* Glenn LaFantasie provides a wonderful biography of an engaging scholar, intellectual, and teacher. Born in 1933 in Highland Park, Illinois, Simon as a young boy stocked books in Chicago's famous Abraham Lincoln Book Shop in Chicago; in his line of work he met historian Bruce Catton and the actress Nancy Davis, before she married a fellow actor named Ronald Reagan. The stock boy went on to six decades of teaching, research, editing, and writing about the Civil War. Simon's numerous awards and prizes provide ample testimony to a distinguished career as both an academic and a public voice for Civil War studies. A "gentleman and a scholar," in LaFantasie's summation, Simon had only one vice, a lifelong smoking habit which his friends could never persuade him to abandon.

In 1962, Simon began the monumental task of editing the papers of Ulysses S. Grant. The project spanned four decades and eventually encompassed over three dozen volumes. For a man who looked entirely inconspicuous and shunned the spectacular, Grant possessed the skills of superb writer. Fittingly, so did his advocate Simon, who wrote "clearly, concisely, and engagingly" (p. 13). Like Lincoln, Simon possessed a sharp wit and knew how to tell a good story; like Grant, Simon "showed an iron determination to get the job done" (p. 14). To Simon's persistence and meticulousness we owe the published editions of Grant's papers, which continue to provide a

considerable treasure trove for scholars of nineteenth-century America. "In no small measure," writes LaFantasie, "the reassessment that has led to Grant's resurrection as a highly regarded historical figure is due to Simon's own herculean efforts to make Grant's papers accessible to a broad audience of specialists and Civil War enthusiasts" (p. 11).

*The Union Forever* contains fifteen essays by Simon, organized into seven essays on Lincoln, six on Grant, and two on the relationship between these two towering figures of American history. Taken as a whole, the essays show the faults, weaknesses, and wartime mistakes of both men. And yet, both men ultimately succeeded in their respective tasks; Grant provided the steady military leadership that led to the capture of Richmond and surrender of Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, while Lincoln demonstrated the diplomatic tact, management skills, and moral vision that made possible an American nation reborn and shorn of the cancer of slavery. Taken together, these two men held together the Union's war effort under the most trying of circumstances.

Take for example, Simon's analysis of Grant and Lincoln's deft handling of the border state of Kentucky in mid-1861. Lincoln, it was said, would have liked to have God on his side in the Civil War, but he had to have Kentucky. The careful maneuvering of Grant and Lincoln in 1861 helped ensure that all-vital Kentucky would

stay in the Union camp by the end of the year. Yet Simon also notes the bungling machinations and overreaching ambitions of the Confederate leaders Leonidas Polk and Gideon Pillow, operating in that theater. Simon even manages to insert a gem of a line that artfully sums up his assessment of Pillow, who “had insisted in May that the occupation of Columbus was essential to the defense of his native Tennessee.” Wrote Simon, “Wiser heads prevailed—almost any head was wiser than Pillow’s—but Pillow persisted in his determination to invade” (p. 199).

In regard to Fort Sumter, Simon provides an illuminating analysis of the high-stakes game of chicken between Lincoln and Jefferson Davis in those tense spring days of 1861. As Simon saw it, Lincoln outsmarted Davis: “Lincoln’s refusal to negotiate with or even acknowledge the existence of the Confederate government enraged Davis into reacting emotionally rather than rationally to news of the federal fleet approaching Fort Sumter” (p. 56). Yet Simon may have overreached in suggesting that attacking Fort Sumter constituted “a fatal blow foreshadowing Confederate defeat” (p. 60). True, the Confederate leadership’s decision to fire on an undermanned federal fort that posed little military threat “transformed a potential war of Northern aggression into a war for Union that diminished Confederate capacity to secure Southern independence” (p. 60). To arrive at Appomattox the North had to sustain the will to wage war through four difficult years of military reversals and horrendous casualties; in the heady days after Fort Sumter’s capture, such iron-will resolution to restore the Union had yet to prove its staying power.

Simon’s essays add another voice to the scholarly chorus who proclaim Lincoln as the most astute and capable wartime president in American history. Americans, at least those in favor of emancipation and the indivisibility of the Union, may thank their lucky stars that at such a critical juncture in the Republic’s life, a leader of highest caliber helmed the ship of state. Not surprisingly, the judgment of history, and of Simon, has not proven equally kind or generous to Jefferson Davis. In the decades before the election of 1860 Davis had acquired a long list of superb achievements—West Point graduate, combat officer in the Mexican War, secretary of war, representative and senator from Mississippi, plantation owner, distinguished member of the South’s slave-owning aristocracy—that made Lincoln’s modest antebellum profile appear as wholly insufficient qualification for holding the highest office in the land. Simon paints a picture of Lincoln as a quick learner and a keen judge of character. Though surrounded by distinguished politi-

cians and ambitious generals, Lincoln learned to be his own master. “Lincoln,” wrote Simon, “kept him [Henry Wager Halleck] in the War Department because Halleck’s own lack of assertiveness allowed the president to dominate Union military policy” (p. 11). Hence, Lincoln took a far more active role in Union military policy than tradition and historical memory would have us believe.

Simon’s lucid and learned essays shed light on a few lesser known episodes, such as Grant’s notorious General Orders No. 11 expelling Jews from the Mississippi theater of operations and Lincoln’s relationship with his father and his father’s family. In regard to young Lincoln’s relationship with Ann Rutledge, Simon expertly sorts out the facts from the speculation, hearsay, innuendo, and fog of historical memory. The wives of Grant and Lincoln come under Simon’s careful scrutiny. Julia Dent, the privileged daughter of a rich Missouri slaveowner, remained loyal to her husband before and during the war over slavery. Mary Lincoln comes off rather unfavorably. Petty, difficult, and rude, she did not get along well with the wives of Grant and other Union generals. Indeed, Mary so offended Julia that the Grants declined the Lincolns’ invitation to attend Ford’s Theatre on that fateful night.

Despite Lincoln’s fears that Grant might seek the presidency in 1864, he and Grant ultimately forged a successful relationship, a not insignificant factor in the North’s eventual victory. A man of humble, but respectable middle-class background, Ulysses S. Grant had married into a Missouri slaveholding family, had owned slaves, and voted Democrat before the war. However, when the guns fired on Fort Sumter, Grant remained loyal to the Union; like Lincoln, he endeavored tirelessly for its restoration. Both men understood that crushing the rebellion required the defeat of its principle armies in the field, and indeed, the destruction of the Confederacy’s military capacity to resist. What about the reputation of Grant the Butcher, who sent tens of thousands of Union soldiers into the slaughter pen during the Overland Campaign in 1864? Writes Simon, “Grant accepted the reality” that the “road that would take the nation to the end of the war in the shortest time with the smallest lost of life led through the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, and Cold Harbor.” “The alternative to what has been mislabeled a strategy of annihilation,” argues Simon, “was a prolongation of killing” (p. 188).

The war made possible Grant’s rise to power, influence, and lasting fame. Though a graduate of West Point, the momentous year 1860 found him working as a clerk

in his father's tannery in Galena, Illinois. Four years later, he ascended to the rank of general in chief of the Union armies, and four years after that he won the first of his two terms in the White House. The last American president to own a slave, he proved instrumental in slavery's destruction. Grant did not desire the presidency, yet served two terms, marked by corruption and scandal in his own administration and die-hard intransigence from white Southerners intent on restoring white supremacy. Yet, Simon dispels the notion of Grant's indifference to both political corruption and the plight of Southern blacks; Grant supported Reconstruction laws upholding the civil rights of blacks, helped secure the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, and pushed for reform in the civil service and Indian affairs (p. 118).

He endeared himself to the American people; his death in 1885 brought out "massive displays of civic grief" (p. 111). His *Memoirs*, published after his death, stands

as a classic of fine American writing, characterized by "candor, scrupulous fairness, and grace of expression" (p. 120). Perhaps because he shunned military glory and personal aggrandizement, Grant wrote one of the few honest war memoirs ever penned.

Generations of scholars to come will owe much to the diligence and intelligence of Simon, who had made understandable and accessible complex, larger-than-life historical actors like Lincoln and Grant, not to mention the epic drama of the American Civil War era. Simon writes that "the Grant honored by millions of his countrymen in 1885 was a man dimly understood.... Like Lincoln, he remains on the historical horizon, always in view but never clearly visible" (p. 121). But not so to Simon, whose lifelong research, editing, writing, and teaching made it possible for us to perceive Grant and Lincoln in ways both nuanced and meaningful.

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**Citation:** L. Bao Bui. Review of Simon, John Y., *The Union Forever: Lincoln, Grant, and the Civil War*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. April, 2014.

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