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Ulysses S. Grant and the Strategy of Camaraderie

John F. Marszalek

When historians study the military history of the Civil War, they quickly learn that relationships are an important factor in the war's direction. At Vicksburg, for example, John McClernand's interaction with Ulysses S. Grant played a negative role in the campaign. Braxton Bragg's personality and his animosity toward a variety of Confederate officers, and their dislike in return, exacerbated Confederate problems in the West. Conversely, the camaraderie that developed between Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman positively aided the Union war effort.

Grant and Sherman hardly knew each other when the Civil War began, and they did not see all that much of each other throughout the conflict. Yet they developed a close bond that helped shape the direction of the war. That bond was one of complete trust: "I know wherever I was that you thought of me, and if I got in a tight place you would come if alive," Sherman said in March 1864. Grant felt the same way.¹

These two men were an odd couple: Sherman tall, thin, and red headed; Grant, stumpy and dark. Grant was quiet and shy, able to write succinctly and clearly, but he found public speaking and most relationships with strangers painful. Conversely, Sherman was outgoing and exuberant, his correspondence a string of excited run-on sentences. He was very much at home behind the podium and pleased to have conversations with strangers. Should Grant walk into a modern room today, he would immediately, and as unobtrusively as possible, head for a corner. Sherman, on the other hand, would talk to everyone, shake hands, slap backs, tell stories, and revel in meeting so many new friends.

¹ William T. Sherman to Ulysses S. Grant, March 10, 1864, *War of the Rebellion, Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1880–1901), series 1, vol. 32, part 3, 49.

Despite their differences, however, they had similarities. Both generals were born in Ohio, although we usually associate Grant with Galena, Illinois. They both found their years at West Point tedious and tiresome, Sherman graduating in 1840 and Grant in 1843. They considered their service in the antebellum frontier U.S. Army boring. Each resigned his commission in 1854 to go into business, and both suffered one failure after another. They bumped into each other, by accident, in St. Louis one day in 1857. Sherman had just experienced his New York bank failure, while Grant had failed as a farmer. They spoke only briefly. Grant never mentioned the encounter, but Sherman later wrote that at the time he had surmised that “West Point and the regular army were not good schools for farmers [and] bankers.”²

In the early years of the war, both men served under Henry W. Halleck, and both thought he was the smartest military man they knew. Halleck saw potential in Sherman, though Sherman had difficulties with anxiety and depression in Kentucky and Missouri from late 1861 to early 1862. Conversely, although Grant had won victories at Forts Henry and Donelson and at Shiloh, Halleck thought little of Grant, considering him a sloppy officer who did not know how to prepare reports properly, a talent Halleck saw as the essence of a good officer. He also believed the unproven rumor that Grant was a drunkard and even passed the gossip along to the Federal Commanding General George B. McClellan.³

During the early campaigns, Sherman deferred to Grant despite the fact that he outranked him. He followed Grant’s lead and sent forward supplies and encouragement during the Forts Henry and Donelson campaigns in February 1862. Grant was impressed with Sherman’s bravery and leadership skills at Shiloh in April 1862, and repeatedly credited him with turning the tide of the battle there. Sherman had three horses shot from under him, suffered a painful shoulder wound from a minie ball that bounced off him after cutting through his hat and shoulder strap, and had buckshot bloody his hand. Despite these injuries, Sherman kept fighting and leading, and Grant saw that he did not have to tell him what to do in the battle; Sherman was already doing it.⁴

² John F. Marszalek, *Sherman, A Soldier’s Passion for Order* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 114. The paperback edition: (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007).

³ John F. Marszalek, *Commander of All Lincoln’s Army; A Life of Henry W. Halleck* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 118–119.

⁴ Marszalek, *Sherman*, 178.

Sherman was similarly impressed with Grant for not quitting. After the slaughter of Shiloh's first day, Sherman found Grant standing in the pouring rain under a tree that evening. Sherman considered suggesting a retreat, but something told him not to do it. Instead, he tentatively said, "Well, Grant, we've had the devil's own day, haven't we?" "Yes," Grant responded matter-of-factly, "Lick 'em tomorrow, though."⁵ The following morning, Grant drove the Federals forward. He was not defeated, even though it had looked like the Confederates were going to push the Federals into the Tennessee River that first day.

During the May 1862 Corinth campaign, Halleck took Grant's Army of the Tennessee from him, made him second in command to himself, and then completely ignored him during the campaign. Grant became so depressed that he began planning his exit from the army. It was Sherman who talked him out of leaving and, in the process, strengthened the bond between the two men.⁶ From this point on, their mutual affection and trust remained rock hard. No matter what happened, the two men knew that they had each other's support. Each believed in the other's trustworthiness. This was a situation that was extremely rare among Civil War generals on both sides. Most of the time, generals were jealous of each other rather than working in concert for the good of the war effort.

It was in Mississippi at Vicksburg that this Grant-Sherman closeness was tested. Grant tried a variety of ways to take the Gibraltar of the West, and each attempt failed. Then he came up with another plan. He decided to run David D. Porter's navy ships past the Vicksburg guns, march his army along the western side of the Mississippi River, meet up with the fleet, have Porter's naval vessels ferry his troops to the east bank below Grand Gulf, and conduct his campaign against Vicksburg from there.

It was far too risky, Sherman worriedly told Grant. He believed Grant should take the Union Army back to Memphis and re-start the Vicksburg campaign from there. Grant understood that Sherman made military sense, but politically any movement back to Memphis would look like a retreat, a failure. The northern populace would become discouraged, and this was dangerous, he believed. Grant said no to

⁵ *Ibid*, 180.

⁶ William T. Sherman, *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman*, 2 vols. (New York: New American Library, 1990), 1:275-76.

Sherman. Unconvinced, Sherman put his arguments on paper, in a letter to Grant. At the same time he promised his full support, no matter what Grant decided to do. Grant read Sherman's letter, put it into his pocket, and never mentioned it again.

Grant then completed one of the most daring campaigns in all of military history. Sherman's critique was proven wrong. Since Grant never brought up Sherman's letter, Sherman could simply have kept quiet, and no one would have known the better of his opposition. Instead Sherman told anyone who would listen, including a delegation consisting of the Illinois governor and other state politicians, that Grant had been right and he had been wrong about how to capture Vicksburg. "Grant is entitled to every bit of the credit for the campaign; I opposed it. I wrote him a letter about it," Sherman said.⁷

Grant marveled that despite his opposition, Sherman "could not have done more if the plan had been his own." He also recalled that Sherman had been willing to make an elaborate feint in the same area where Confederates had driven him off in his failed attempt at Chickasaw Bayou late December 1862. Grant knew that in the event of failure of the feint movement, Sherman's archenemies, the reporters, would make it look as though Sherman had been beaten and had to retreat again. Sherman had recently court martialed a reporter for sneaking on board one of his troop ships despite Sherman's exclusion orders to the contrary. Sherman clearly knew that he was setting himself up for more such press attacks, but he conducted the feint anyway and made no complaint because he wanted to help Grant in any way he could.⁸

The experience the two men had at Vicksburg was indeed a demonstration of their greatest contribution to the war: it was their belief in one another, their camaraderie. They provided each other with what they both needed: a person the other could trust implicitly. Their mutual respect allowed them to work out differences that might otherwise have split them apart and thus handicapped the Union war effort. Their camaraderie allowed them to focus on the enemy, knowing full well that they did not have to be concerned about treachery to their rear. As the war progressed, their implicit trust helped secure victories

⁷ Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles L. Webster, 1885), 1:542n, 542–43n.

⁸ *Ibid.*

at Meridian, Chattanooga, the march to the sea, through the Carolinas, and in Virginia.

At Chattanooga, for example, Grant built his battle plan around Sherman, and despite the fact that George H. Thomas deserved credit for the victory, Grant continued to praise Sherman. Their friendship was clearly the reason for Grant's attitude demonstrated by their reaction to one another when the Union generals met before the battle. Demonstrating their normally quiet personalities, Grant and Thomas said little to one another when Grant first arrived in Chattanooga. When Sherman arrived, however, the usually subdued Grant broke out into a wide grin. He pointed to a rocker and handed Sherman a cigar. "Take the seat of honor, Sherman," he said. Sherman wanted Grant to have that seat and said so. Grant answered with a smile, "I don't forget, Sherman, to give proper respect to age." "Well then," Sherman said with equal good humor, "If you put it on that ground, I *must* accept."⁹

The Grant-Sherman friendship was clearly the most important such tie of the war and one of the most important in all military history. It is hard to imagine Federal victory in the Civil War without Grant and Sherman. In truth, it could not have happened had this "odd couple" not developed such a strong respect and affection for one another in Tennessee and Mississippi. It was their camaraderie that ensured cooperation throughout the war and helped ensure the Union victory.

⁹Oliver O. Howard, "Chattanooga," *Atlanta Monthly* 38 (August 1876), 210–11.

