

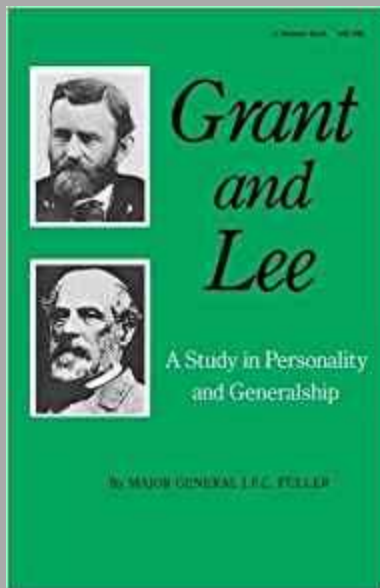
## Book Review

### *Grant & Lee: A Study in Personality and Generalship*

#### *2nd Edition*

by Major General J.F.C. Fuller

Indiana University Press (1957)



Beginning almost immediately by the end of hostilities dozens, if not hundreds, of books have examined, and often compared, the records of Civil War generals. These books have been published in a wide variety of perspectives and formats, sometimes even trying to compare almost all the major commanders on both sides. And frequently biographies of individual generals offer comparisons of the subject's counterpart, usually to argue that the subject of the biography was a better commander than was his adversary.

Without much doubt Robert E. Lee has been the most popular subject of these publications. Because he died five years after the Civil War, and because he was engaged in the challenge of his new assignment as President of Washington College (later Washington & Lee), he had had little time, or inclination, to write his Civil War memoirs. He succinctly responded to inquiries from former subordinates but for the most part the numerous publications that followed came from the pens, and some might even say the imaginations, of others.

Lee, together with Stonewall Jackson, and White Confederate women, portrayed as paragons of virtue and selflessness, became central figures in the writings that helped create the Myth of the Lost Cause. In particular Lee was elevated to a Christ figure, "the Priest of the people." Lee became the incarceration of the Lost Cause, viewed by some religious leaders as belonging on the same heights as Moses, David, and George Washington. By the end of the century several organizations enshrined the Lost Cause as a kind of public religion thereby

distorting any objective understanding of Lee's generalship. Some more recent historians complain that the distorted Lost Cause mythology has made it difficult to fully and objectively analyze Lee's merits as a commander.

On the other hand Ulysses S. "Sam" Grant has seldom received the attention, and certainly not the adulation, typically accorded to Lee. There might be several reasons for this lack of attention, especially for someone who was the commander of the winning side and who soon thereafter became a two term president of the re-united states. One reason is that Northerners were inclined to move on after the Civil War, not having to deal with the trauma of ruined economies and the upheaval of social and cultural status; conversely many Southerners were obsessed with trying to explain why the Rebellion had not succeeded. Another reason might be the somewhat shy, unassuming Grant simply was not a charismatic, compelling personality. Additionally Grant's post-war record was a mixed bag, tending to distract from his Civil War accomplishments.

Finally Grant was often portrayed as Lee's foil. It was important to the Myth to explain why Lee had to surrender to Grant, a supposedly an inferior general. Lee and Grant met face-to-face in battle only over the eleven month period after Grant was brought east and ending with Lee's surrender at Appomattox. In his farewell to his troops Lee bitterly complained in an address that was widely spread throughout the South that his army had been defeated only by the enemy's "overwhelming numbers," failing to concede that Northern armies, and their commanders, were possibly the equal of, if not superior to, Southern forces.

Grant's Overland Campaign – including the major battles of The Wilderness, Spotsylvania, North Anna River, and Cold Harbor –had been a bloody affair with both sides taking unprecedented numbers of casualties, 55,000 or 37 percent of those engaged for the Union versus 32,000 or 32 percent for the Confederates. Even Northern newspapers complained about Grant's hammering tactics in 1864. Thus it was easy to argue that Grant prevailed over the brilliant Lee only because Grant ruthlessly used attrition to overcome the noble cause of the rebellion.

J.F.C. "Boney" Fuller (1878-1966) took what was then a fresh, impartial look at the debate about the quality of leadership between the two major commanders. Fuller was a British staff officer and commander in WW I who

helped plan tank attacks and other operations. He had a plan for a fully mechanized offensive against the Germans but his plan was never adopted. After his retirement he continued to advocate mechanized strategies and tactics that were largely ignored by his own government but were largely adopted by the Germans prior to WW II. Fuller was the author of 45 books, most of which focused upon a wide range of military subjects.

Fuller's *Grant & Lee*, originally published in 1932, was intended to examine the influence of personality upon generalship and was not supposed to be a history of the Civil War. In his preface Fuller claims he had accepted the conventional point of view that Grant was a butcher and Lee was one of the greatest generals the world has ever seen. He admitted that his first study of American generals was that of Stonewall Jackson but that upon studying further histories he began to question Jackson's sanity. Next his studies made him realize that Grant was nothing like he had been led to believe. Finally he claims that he discovered that in several respects Lee was one of the most incapable generals-in-chief in history. Suggestion his newfound respect for Grant, Fuller subsequently published a book, titled *The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant*.

What then were the bases for Fuller's reversals of opinion? After a brief sketch of the two "causes" of the war, which may or may not be recognizable to many American readers, Fuller describes the respective personalities of his subjects. The personalities of both generals are generously described but the author begins to build his case that Grant based his command decisions upon realistic strategic objectives that incorporated the entire theater. On the other hand, Lee, according to Fuller, was obsessed with the notion that the war would be won by invasions that would intimidate the North while gaining favor with the European powers. Fuller also maintains that Lee's vision of the war was limited to the defense of Virginia.

Fuller traces the respective war records, especially prior to Grant's assumption in 1864 of command of all Northern armies. Although the author said his book was not supposed to be history of the Civil War, and although his description of battles lack detail, nevertheless he does provide an adequate outline of the progress of the war. However, again some of his statements can be challenged; for instance he gives Grant much more credit for the Union victories at

Iuka and Corinth than would students of Rosecrans, the Union commander on the scene of those hard fought battles.

Obviously these commanders fought in separate theaters under different conditions thereby making comparisons difficult, although sometimes interesting. Almost from the start Lee was in charge of substantial armies while Grant was working his way up chains of command, sometimes in awkward circumstances. Fuller credits Grant with always having strategic objectives throughout his campaigns, always with a view to the next objective, but criticizes Lee for embarking upon campaigns, specifically the invasions of Maryland and Pennsylvania, with limited military benefits but high risks. In Fuller's view not only were Lee's incursions strategically weak but Lee's tactic of dividing his army against numerically superior forces led to strategic blunders.

The comparisons become more focused once Grant comes east to assume command of all Union armies, especially since Grant also attached himself to Lee's primary opponent, the Federal Army of the Potomac. Fuller praises Grant for quickly formulating a national strategy for defeating the Southern forces while Lee continued to focus his efforts upon the defense of Virginia, specifically Richmond and Petersburg. Fuller does not overlook or excuse Grant's defeat at Cold Harbor but Fuller has high praise for Grant's actions after Cold Harbor when Grant used deception and maneuver to gain access the James River that set the stage for the siege of Petersburg, and by extension of Richmond, eventually leading to the pursuit to Appomattox.

To argue against the notion that Grant was a mere butcher Fuller includes charts of various attrition rates showing that Grant's attrition rates were not only lower than average but were notably lower than Lee's. Whether these are entirely persuasive to Lee's partisans is a matter to be left to the reader of Fuller's book but at the very least they are an attempt to add some objectivity to passionate, lengthy arguments.

It is impossible to submit that one book, and one book alone, can settle the long running dispute to the debate about which was the better commander; certainly Lee's partisans cannot be satisfied with Fuller's criticism of Lee's strategic short comings. And perhaps other historians who have studied Grant's

accomplishments will feel a little uncomfortable with the praise lavished upon Grant's generalship. But at the very least Fuller's book is a relevant, learned point of view to be appreciated by any Civil War student and as well military historians of any sort.

###