

Heroes and villains: historical analysis



Heroes, Villains or Both?

– Austin Rappel

What I found most interesting in this week's readings was the "myths" behind the men; specifically Ulysses S. Grant, general in chief of the United States Army, William T. Sherman, general in The United States Army and Abraham Lincoln, president of the United States. Grant was considered a drunk, "Whatever happened, the story of his drinking became a staple of gossip in the old army." (McPherson, pg. 114) Sherman was considered crazy; "But Sherman could never entirely escape the reputation of madness" (McPherson, pg 114) Lincoln was considered passive: "a basic trait of character evident throughout Lincoln's life: the essential passivity of his nature." (McPherson, pg. 206) I think it is important to determine if these things were true or if there is enough evidence to ever know for sure the "mindset" or character of the men that are known to us as the men that defined and ultimately were the victors of the Civil War.

Grant quickly rose through the ranks during the Civil War; "command of a brigade, a division, an army (Army of Tennessee), an army group, an all of the armies of the United States." (McPherson, pg 110) These accomplishments are a big contrast to what one could consider could be accomplished by a drunkard. Brooks Simpson, a biographer concluded, "Although Grant sometimes took a drink during the war, and may on occasion have taken two, his colleagues who knew him best and were in the best position to observe him were unanimous in their testimony that he was rarely if ever drunk." (McPherson, pg. 114) Grant was also given the

reputation as a “ butcher” – when the general most deserving of the title was Robert E. Lee. (McPherson, pg 113)

Sherman is best known for his March to the Sea; a march of over 700 miles, in which psychological warfare was used in order to stop the war. As stated in McPherson, “ The terror that his soldiers provoked among Southern whites “ was a power,” he wrote, “ and I intended to utilize it to humble their pride, to follow them to their inmost recesses, and to make them fear and dread us... We cannot change the hearts and minds of those people of the South, but we can make war so terrible” and “ make them so sick of war that generations would pass away before they would again appeal to it.””(McPherson, pg. 124) As stated in the article by Matt Carr, “ *General Sherman’s March to the Sea*” , Sherman’s plan was to attack the infrastructure of the south and therefore end the war; “ After more than three years of violent and seemingly endless conflict, Sherman had decided to take the conflict beyond the battlefield and subject Georgia to a level of devastation that would make its population realise that ‘ war and ruin are synonymous terms’.” (pg. 30) It’s hard to imagine that these strategies were those of a “ crazy” man.

Lincoln, the 16th president of the United States and the author of many documents most notably the “ Emancipation Proclamation” was seen at least by one biographer, David Herbert Donald, to be passive. However, as stated in McPherson, “ at the very outset of his presidency Lincoln demonstrated traits that were the opposite of what Donald calls “ his essentially passive personality.”” (McPherson, pg. 207) It’s hard to believe that the man that set into motion the Civil War and wrote one of our most historical documents has <https://assignbuster.com/heroes-and-villains-historical-analysis/>

a passive personality. Maybe the passivity noted by some is more a compassion than anything else. As stated in, “*Lincoln ‘s Legacy, Lincoln Lives Through His Words*” by Gail Fineberg, “ Lincoln’s first draft of the Emancipation Proclamation, which he presented to his cabinet on July 22, 1862. “ Nobody liked it” Sellers said. Lincoln came back to his cabinet with a second draft in September, and admonished members to comment not on substance but on his style.” (pg 38) The quote goes without saying to the mindset of a determined man more so to the mindset of a passive man.

Although it may never be known the actual character of Grant, Sherman or Lincoln, it will be left up to the readers and historians perceptions of whether are not these men were heroes, villains or maybe a little of both during and after the Civil War. It goes without saying that these men, however viewed, will always be remembered for the mark they left on the Civil War and wars to come.