

Leadership

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Leadership Lessons from the American Civil War

History can offer us a deeper understanding of leadership and its social and political consequences on society. Military history in particular provides many inspiring examples of leaders.

What defines military leaders? Are they leaders because they deliver results or because they do their duty when called upon? Why do men follow them? Why do they inspire people?

One of mankind's bloodiest conflicts was the American Civil War of 1861 – 1865, with more than 1 million casualties. Three well-known individuals of that period were Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, and Robert E. Lee.

What made these great men leaders?

Was Abraham Lincoln a leader because he stood for that one principle of freedom for all, as expressed in his *Gettysburg Address*? Or was that US President a man of humble background who, when called upon to act under very difficult circumstances, had an opportunity to show his true genius?

The Northern Commander-in-Chief, and later 18th US President,

Ulysses Grant, was a humble, very intelligent man with an inflexible will and powerful mind in whom his soldiers and President Lincoln had the utmost confidence. When other generals would sit back, Grant took the initiative and set an example that others would follow.

The qualities that made these men great leaders in their time remain valid for the leader of today.

Grant said, "It is men who wait to be selected and not those who seek, from whom we may always expect the most efficient service." His philosophy was that if you did your duty, reward would follow. Grant had learned that the men who did what they had to do out of ambition could not be counted upon. They often turned out to be cowards on the battlefield—unprofessional and not respected by their soldiers. His book, *Personal Memoirs*, edited by Mark Twain, is highly recommended reading.

According to Fitzhugh Lee in his book, *General Lee*, "The Southern leader had no ambition except the consciousness of a duty faithfully performed." Wrestling with the difficulty of summarizing the many qualities of his famous uncle, Lee ends his book with these words: "The greatest gift a hero leaves his race is to have been a hero." General Robert E. Lee was an inspiration for his men and earned their devotion and respect.

What values did these three leaders share? They were humble and fulfilled their duty faithfully. They never made the same mistake twice—once is called "experience"—and they showed their worth and strong willpower under challenging circumstances.

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