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## History and Myths Around the Battle of Shiloh

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Trey Lowenthal

HIST 48100 Senior Seminar in History

On April 6th and 7th, 1862, the deadliest battle in American history up to that time was waged, with a staggering total of twenty three thousand dead, wounded, and missing.<sup>1</sup> Though as guns fell silent on the evening of the 7th, another battle began, the battle for the narrative. It was a battle for the truth of what happened, and it is one that is still waged to this day. Unlike the physical confrontation that took place in 1862, the lines of battle and allegiance are not so easily defined. It is a patchwork of veterans, generals, newspapers, and historians. Some wrote to preserve their image or to tarnish that of others, while others wrote about their perspective as honestly as they knew how. As the years dragged on after the war, even shortly after the battle's conclusion, it became clear to many that there is an air of misunderstanding surrounding it. Ulysses S. Grant, then commander of Union forces at the battle, stated that it, "has been perhaps less understood, or, to state the case more accurately, more persistently misunderstood, than any other engagement between National and Confederate troops during the entire rebellion."<sup>2</sup> Accounts from other Generals share this same sentiment, and so do those in contemporary newspapers. All sorts of misinformed myths and malfeasances formed about the battle, and this fractured narrative still persists. These myths will be examined from their formation in the battle's immediate wake, up to the publishing of the *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*. All the while asking the question, what role did Ulysses S. Grant play, through action or inaction, in the battle being remembered the way it is? The overall conclusion is that there was a tremendous difference in how veterans reported and reflected on the battle versus the news media. For the first step in this process, the historiography must be acknowledged.

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy B. Smith, *Battle of Shiloh: Shattering Myths*, American Battlefield Trust.

<sup>2</sup> Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*. Penguin Books, (1885): 199.

The historiography around the life and leadership of Ulysses S. Grant is as follows: In the mid 20th Century, Lloyd Lewis and Bruce Catton published a sizable biography of Grant which recorded his life up to the end of the Civil War. William S. McFeely and Geoffrey Perret followed suit with a similar work all the while John Y Simon was chronicling Grant's Papers, a thirty plus volume of everything Grant ever wrote. It is important to note that at this time, the perception of Grant as a butcher, a drunkard and an abject failure of a president is widespread.<sup>3</sup> However, by the 1990s, a new scholar redefined the field and challenged the Lost Cause narrative about Grant. Brooks D. Simpson's books have had a big impact, both his 1991 and 2000 works.<sup>4</sup> Coinciding with this, the rehabilitation of Grant's reputation began in earnest in the 2000s, and by the late 2010s it is safe to say that he has been redeemed in the eyes of the scholarship. Right now Joan Waugh and Brooks D. Simpson are some of the most prominent scholars in US Grant Historiography. The current understanding is that Grant was a great General, not a drunk or a butcher, and a president whose political failures were matched by many successes.<sup>5</sup> Grant's life, leadership, and personality have all been thoroughly analyzed by scholars from a multitude of perspectives. So extensive are the works on Grant that Brooks D. Simpson noted in 2018 that there seems to be little new ground to be broken regarding General Grant.<sup>6</sup>

The Scholarship on the Battle of Shiloh begins with D. W. Reed, Civil War veteran who fought at Shiloh at the Hornet's Nest, who later became the first park historian at the Shiloh National Military Park in the early 1900s.<sup>7</sup> Edward Cunningham, James Lee McDonough, Wiley Sword, and Larry Daniel wrote volumes on it into the late 1900s, following up on D. W. Reed's

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<sup>3</sup> Adam-Max Tuchinsky, *The Journal of Southern History* 77, no. 3 (2011): 714.

<sup>4</sup> Brooks D. Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph over Adversity, 1822-1865*, Zenith Press, (2000): XVII.

<sup>5</sup> Brooks D. Simpson, and Ronald C. White, *Journal of the Civil War Era* 8, no. 2 (2018): 339.

<sup>6</sup> Brooks D. Simpson, and Ronald C. White, *Journal of the Civil War Era* 8, no. 2 (2018): 339.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Wagenhoffer, *On Point* 21, no. 1 (2015): 52.

works. Timothy B. Smith is chief author on Battle of Shiloh currently, and he has written extensively about it. Smith, as well as others, have written about the military history of the battle, the terrain, its legacy, and the many myths that surround it.<sup>8</sup> However, there has been little written regarding a narrative timeline of the myths these authors have spent so much time debunking. That is what this paper will offer, a glimpse into the origin and spread of these myths as well as how contemporary veterans and newspapers reacted to them. Though, before talking about the falsehoods, the real story of Shiloh must be heard first.

It is early April 1862, Union forces in the western theater have achieved great victories in the battles of Fort Henry and Fort Donelson, and now they have arrived at Pittsburg Landing on the Tennessee River. From here, their commander, Major General Ulysses S. Grant intended to march south to lay siege to Corinth, Mississippi.<sup>9</sup> Grant's force totaled in the tens of thousands, and they set up camp a few miles downstream from the landing. The April rains made it an uncomfortable affair, both for the Union encampments, and the thousands of Confederate soldiers marching northward, preparing for an all out assault on the Union position. The Confederates were led by Albert Sidney Johnston, a daring rebel officer who would not sit idly by as Union forces massed to his north. The action began on the morning of April 6, a Sunday, when the Confederate army was discovered by a Union cavalry patrol, alerting Grant's command that there was an attack imminent. This attack was not anticipated by Grant or his staff. Commanders across the Union front hastily ordered battle lines to be drawn as the first attack waves swarmed ahead. Some commands held out longer than others but all were eventually forced to fall back, trading space for time as the onslaught continued. In many places, retreat was disorderly, leading to large groups of

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew Wagenhoffer, *On Point* 21, no. 1 (2015): 52.

<sup>9</sup> Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*. Penguin Books, (1885): 177.

stragglers roaming about behind the lines. Something attributed to the freshness of Grant's troops, most of whom had never seen combat before.<sup>10</sup> Fighting was most intense for the troops under the command of General Prentiss and W.H.L Wallace, who found themselves nearly surrounded after other sections of the front fell back. For a few hours they held off repeated assaults at what is now known as The Hornet's Nest. This delay bought crucial time for other union lines to refit and reorganize defenses, but it came at great cost. Prentiss and his command were forced to surrender in the afternoon, and W.H.L. Wallace was mortally wounded while leading his troops in a desperate breakout. Also mortally wounded was Johnston, who succumbed to a gunshot wound in the evening of the 6th. P. G. T. Beauregard took over after the death of his commander, and the battle still hung in the balance as the assault was renewed across the front, but the losses on the Confederate side were mounting and as afternoon gave way to evening, the new Union lines continued to hold. By the time the sun had set on the battlefield, both sides retired to their camps, with firm conviction that the next day would bring about the battle's conclusion.<sup>11</sup>

All while the battle raged, Grant knew that reinforcements, or "reënforcements" as it was called back then, were on the way. Divisions under Don Carlos Buell arrived in force the night of the 6th, as did divisions of Lew Wallace. All through the night, the Union forces strengthened, unlike the Confederate forces who were continually harassed from the river by Union gunboats *Tyler* and *Lexington*. The dark and stormy night afforded rest to no one, not even General Grant, but still he pressed on, determined to drive the enemy from the field tomorrow morning. For Grant, the battle in his mind was already won, and all that was left was to realize his vision.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 185.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Wagenhoffer, *On Point* 21, no. 1 (2015): 52.

It should be important to note that the Confederates were also sure of victory come morning, they had pushed back the yankees all day, and they expected them to fold completely after renewing the assault.<sup>12</sup> They were not aware of the Union reinforcements, though they soon would be. Monday morning saw the Union attack across the entire front, with the Confederates being forced to fall back slowly, and then quickly from the previous day's conquest. By the evening, after hours and hours of hard fighting, the rebels were driven from the field and sent hightailing back to Corinth. The Union leadership decided not to pursue immediately, owing to the exhaustion of both days of fighting, and the sorry state of the swamped out roads.<sup>13</sup> In all, the Confederate forces were defeated, but at a terrible cost. Up to that time, it was the most devastating battle in American history, though that sobering milestone would be surpassed time and time again before the war's end. This battle was a sign of terrible things to come, but at the time this incredible loss of life was without precedent.

The Union public reaction to the Battle of Shiloh began with the awe of the carnage. The blame game began as soon as accounts of the battle reached the front pages of major newspapers. They asked how could the proud Union army be surprised by such a numerous rebel force and nearly destroyed? The blame was laid in many places, but the officers in charge of the battle were the prime scapegoats, including Ulysses S. Grant. It is important to note that the same Union newspapers, which gave glowing praise to Grant after his victories at Fort Henry and Fort Donelson, quickly turned against him after Shiloh.<sup>14</sup> Such an about-face is surprising, but it reflects how severe the battle truly was.

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Wexler, *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 114, no. 1 (2016): 97.

<sup>13</sup> Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*. Penguin Books, (1885): 191

<sup>14</sup> Julia Dent Grant, edited by John Y. Simon, *The Personal Memoirs of Julia Dent Grant*, Carbondale, Ill, South Illinois University Press, (1975): 99.

The narrative of Grant's failure was established shortly after the battle's end, and one of the most prominent figures in this was Ohio journalist Whitelaw Reid, who very quickly wrote a 15000 word report of the battle and had it published on April 14, 1862 for the Cincinnati Gazette.<sup>15</sup> Barely over a week after the battle's end, one of its most grave myths would be introduced, as modern historians note, "Reid implied (incorrectly) that the Confederates had achieved such surprise on April 6 that Union soldiers had been bayoneted in their tents. Though Grant presumably did not see Reid's article immediately, he was worried about the press by this time, writing to his wife on April 15, "I will come in again for heaps of abuse [in the newspapers] from persons who were not here."<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that Reid was not, in fact, anywhere near the battle during its entire duration.<sup>17</sup> The notion that Union soldiers were so woefully unprepared for an attack that they were massacred in their sleep is downright scandalous, but it was one that the war-weary general public was ready to believe. This surprise and its exaggeration would prove to be the most contentious aspect of the battle, and its most grievous embellishments would be echoed time and time again by other news media. The length of the publication, plus the incredible haste with which it was made, meant that it was many peoples' first impression of the battle. Because of this, it established the surprise myth in the public consciousness, and proved highly influential to other newspapers.<sup>18</sup>

Another notable early report comes from Ohio Lieutenant Governor Benjamin Stanton. He visited the battlefield in the days immediately following the battle and published a seering opinion piece on the April 19, 1862 edition of the Cadiz Democratic Sentinel. His high position makes his

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<sup>15</sup> Timothy B. Smith, *Battle of Shiloh: Shattering Myths*, American Battlefield Trust.

<sup>16</sup> Carl R. Schenker, Jr. "Ulysses in his tent: Halleck, Grant, Sherman, and 'the turning point of the war'," *Civil War History* 56, no. 2 (2010).

<sup>17</sup> Timothy B. Smith, *Battle of Shiloh: Shattering Myths*, American Battlefield Trust.

<sup>18</sup> Timothy B. Smith, *Battle of Shiloh: Shattering Myths*, American Battlefield Trust.

draconian criticisms even more remarkable, as he states that Ohio troops in the battle were so poorly deployed that “our lines were so carelessly and negligently guarded that the enemy were absolutely on us in our very tents before the officers in command were aware of their approach.”<sup>19</sup> Like all good lies, there is a kernel of truth in that the Union forces were operationally and strategically surprised. This means that the Union commanders had ceded the initiative to the enemy and caused the northern troops to be on the backfoot for the entirety of the first day of battle. However, it is in the tactical level that the lie lies, as Stanton states that the enemy had come upon Union soldiers in their tents, a complete and total ambush by the Confederate forces. This is not true. Stanton’s criticisms do not stop here, however, as he continued to decry the “blundering stupidity and negligence” of Grant and his subordinates, eventually concluding that, “There is an intense feeling of indignation against Generals Grant and Prentiss, and the general feeling amongst the most intelligent men with whom I have conversed, is that they ought to be court martialed and shot.”<sup>20</sup> Simply put, the Lieutenant Governor of Ohio, an elected official, was calling for the execution of a general officer in the armed forces, without an official investigation or any actual legal proceedings being made against him. This article is a hit-piece, plain and simple, and its message is greatly amplified by the status of its writer. This, coupled with its quick publication, less than two weeks after the battle’s conclusion, meant that these two articles helped set a misinformed standard for how the battle would be reported on, catapulting these myths to the front pages of newspapers across America in the coming weeks. The first shot of the war for the narrative had been fired.

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<sup>19</sup> *Cadiz Democratic Sentinel*, Cadiz, Ohio, April 19, 1862.

<sup>20</sup> *Cadiz Democratic Sentinel*, Cadiz, Ohio, April 19, 1862.



Similar sentiments are found in the NYC Sunday Dispatch from April 20, 1862. Noting first that Grant, “fails--lamentably so—when he attempts to pen a report of what he has done, or contemplates doing.”<sup>21</sup> Grant did not write a full length account of the battle in its immediate aftermath, save for a short telegram to General Halleck, and thus his detailed word on the battle was not available to the press. This meant that the accounts of others and, in some cases, pure speculation filled in the gaps. It is also in this article that one of the most grave myths about Shiloh is repeated, namely the claim that Union troops were completely and utterly surprised by the enemy. The article even goes on to state, “that the rebels surprised the troops in their encampments, coming upon them so rapidly and in such overwhelming force that many were killed while in the act of cooking for or while sleeping in their tents.”<sup>22</sup> The article continues to admonish Grant, accusing him of negligence and more or less concluding that the Union won the day in spite of him, “It was, perhaps, the consciousness of this neglect that embarrassed General Grant when he penned the meager account he has given to the world of the greatest and bloodiest, and we may say the least decisive battle that has ever been fought on this continent.”<sup>23</sup> Other newspapers argue a similar viewpoint. The New York Herald, April 22, concurs, and boldly titled its article on the matter as, “How Near it Came to be a Defeat.” It reiterates the surprise myth, although with a bit more detail, “That the attack on Sunday Morning was sudden and unexpected may be known from the fact that on the field, after the battle, one of Prentiss’ men was found dead by a bayonet wound in his back, with a comb in his head, as if he had been killed while in the act of combing his hair before taking his morning meal.”<sup>24</sup> The circumstances of one man’s death is not the most compelling evidence to show the surprise of the entire army, the cherry-picking on display is

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<sup>21</sup> *Sunday Dispatch*, April 20, 1862, New York, New York.

<sup>22</sup> *Sunday Dispatch*, April 20, 1862, New York, New York.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *New York Herald*, April 22, 1862, New York, New York.

egregious. Though, as accounts of Grant's supposed failure continued to be published, such selective displays of evidence would continue. Another New York Herald Article from April 22 hands out generous praise as well, with good words being spoken about Buell, Sherman, Nelson, Crittenden, and the two Union gunboats on the Tennessee River. It also points out that Grant is, "the best abused man in the country."<sup>25</sup> Even this early after the battle, the meta-narrative of newspapers turning against Grant had become widespread.

As reporting intensified about the battle, more first-hand accounts and official statements became available to the press, one of which was Grant's telegram to General Halleck, published in the April 24 edition of the Gallipolis Journal. Though it would also be published in numerous other papers. Although brief, only a few pages in length, it does highlight Grant's perspective, and the image he presented to his superiors, and by extension, the country at large. He began by laying out the two sides, "one contending for the maintenance of the best Government ever devised, the other for its destruction. It is pleasant to record the success of the army contending for the former principle."<sup>26</sup> Grant spells out the symbolic "why we fight" first, perhaps to justify the enormity of the sacrifice that was made because of it. He does not shy away from the battle's scale or fatality, mentioning that a battle like this had never before been fought on American soil. Interestingly, he makes no mention of being surprised by the enemy, only saying that his pickets were driven in the morning of the 6th and the battle commenced from there.<sup>27</sup> His actual account of the battle only takes up half the report, with the other half being spent lavishing praise on his subordinates, including his regimental commanders, orderlies, medical staff, and the gunboats *Tyler* and *Lexington*. These sections of praise show Grant's leadership, as he acknowledged the tireless and

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<sup>25</sup> *New York Herald*, April 22, 1862, New York, New York.

<sup>26</sup> *Gallipolis Journal*, April 24, 1862, Gallipolis, Ohio.

<sup>27</sup> *Gallipolis Journal*, April 24, 1862, Gallipolis, Ohio.

courageous performance of all those under him. His most glowing commendation, however, is for General Sherman, since he “displayed great judgment and skill in the management of his men. Although severely wounded in the hand the first day, his place was never vacant.”<sup>28</sup> This praise meant a lot to General Sherman.<sup>29</sup> and would help cement the trust and respect that helped both men as the war continued. Though Grant said a lot with comparatively few words, the lack of detail in this report left many questions unanswered. Plus, with increased newspaper reporting about the battle, the public was increasingly concerned with the surprise of the Union Army and Grant’s Generalship. Defenses of which are not found in this piece. For years, this brief telegram would be the only official retelling Grant made about the battle, allowing lies and misinformation to continue to fester.

Newspapers critical of Grant were quick to call out the supposed inaccuracies of other newspapers. The Emporia News of Emporia, Kansas, on April 26 admonished Grant with all the same claims mentioned previously, namely the surprise myth, but it also spends a great deal of time rebuking the New York Herald. The Emporia News states that the Herald insults the intelligence of the American people due to their Confederate sympathy, deriding them as, “pro-slavery, half way Union papers.”<sup>30</sup> This comes as an important reminder, that even amidst the general consensus of General Grant’s lack of generalship, none of these papers have the exact same perspective, and differences between flare up often. This discord is one of the things that allowed so many of the myths and misperceptions of the battle to form and take center stage, but it also meant that there would always be challengers to the current narrative. While the mudslinging of Grant continued

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<sup>28</sup> *Gallipolis Journal*, April 24, 1862, Gallipolis, Ohio.

<sup>29</sup> William T. Sherman, edited by M. A. DeWolfe Howe, *Home Letters of General Sherman*, New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, (1909): 221.

<sup>30</sup> *The Highland Weekly News*, May 15, 1862, Hillsborough, Ohio.

in newspapers around the country, praise began to form around another figure present at the battle, General Don Carlos Buell. The *Highland Weekly News*, from Hillsborough, Ohio, May 15, exemplifies this perfectly. Since Grant was perceived as foolish and not in control of the situation, it was up to Buell to save the day, “Gen. Buell arrived the night of Sunday—planned the successful attack of Monday, and was the master spirit of the day.”<sup>31</sup> Buell, thanks in no small part to his own reports and writings, was positioned as the savior of Shiloh, and had it not been for his timely arrival, Pittsburg landing would have fallen to the rebels.<sup>32</sup> Praise is also levied for other generals who acted in spite of Grant’s perceived incompetence, such as General Nelson.

From this point, summer 1862, in the narrative towards Shiloh, a few points of contention regarding the battle have been established as fact. Namely that Union forces were completely surprised, leading to many supposedly being bayoneted in their tents. Furthermore, the reputation of those dictating the battle was irrevocably changed. It raised the profile of Buell, Sherman, and Nelson due to their valiant conduct and commanding throughout. Though Grant’s profile was greatly tarnished, with many calling for him to be removed from his command or worse. He was portrayed as being negligent and lacking awareness in letting a tremendous Confederate force attack him without warning. Thus letting his command take horrible losses and lose much ground all throughout the 6th. It was Grant’s conduct on that day, and in the days preceding it, that are the subject of most of the criticism. The counterattack and victory on the 7th, though at this point more attributed to Buell, was a point where praise of Grant did sometimes shine through. With this in mind, and with Grant being the “best abused man in the country,” it is important to ask why he did not publicly defend himself from these accusations?

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<sup>31</sup> *The Highland Weekly News*, May 15, 1862, Hillsborough, Ohio

<sup>32</sup> *The Highland Weekly News*, May 15, 1862, Hillsborough, Ohio

He does offer up an explanation in his memoirs, published over twenty years after the battle, “Although I was in command all the troops engaged at Shiloh I was not permitted to see one of the reports of General Buell or his subordinates in that battle, until they were published by the War Department long after the event. For this reason I never made a full official report of this engagement.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, because he was unable to corroborate with the reports of other officers, he opted not to clarify his account of the greatest blood-letting in the nation’s history up to that point. Through this inaction, the vacuum of credible information increased, and misinformation was quick to fill in the gaps. Still, even in absence of an official report, there were many opportunities for Grant to clear up his reputation in the press, though he never took them. Regarding this, it may be fair to say that Grant’s personality played a role. Brooks D. Simpson has iterated that Grant was concise above all else, and while this established great clarity in his military orders, it also means he did not elaborate on things he did not deem it necessary to. Because of this he was an enigma to his colleagues.<sup>34</sup> General Sherman lamented that Grant was enigmatic and hard to get a read on, and that in the wake of the battle he, “as usual maintained an imperturbable silence.”<sup>35</sup> It is from instances like these that Grant would gain the nickname, “Sphinx,” for his lack of commentary. He continued to remain silent to the press as spring of 1862 turned to summer. After all, he still had a war to win.

Perhaps one of the reasons Grant decided not to defend himself publicly was because General William Tecumseh Sherman did it for him. Sherman tried to keep his opinions out of the public eye at first, but a letter to his wife from April 24, 1862 shows that he was already very

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<sup>33</sup> Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*. Penguin Books, (1885): 199-200.

<sup>34</sup> Brooks D. Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph over Adversity, 1822-1865*, Zenith Press, (2000): XVII.

<sup>35</sup> William T. Sherman, *Sherman: The Memoirs of General W.T. Sherman*, Washington D.C, Library of America, (1990): 267.

critical of the news coverage of the battle. He says the outrage over Grant's performance was manufactured by spinsters and that the notion of Union men being bayoneted in their tents was a bald-faced fabrication.<sup>36</sup> He concludes his rant by saying that the editors and politicians were the cause of the war.<sup>37</sup> Strong words, but they were ones he intended to keep out of the press for the time being, but once he became aware of Ohio Lt Gov Stanton's reporting on the matter, it drove him over the edge. His letter to Stanton, sent June 10, was on the front page of the July 2, 1862 edition of the *Cadiz Democratic Sentinel*. It is a fiery retort of Stanton's story, with Sherman opening his article by stating that Stanton is a liar and a slanderer. It is again important to reiterate the status of both individuals involved in this drama, as a General Officer in the armed forces is admonishing an elected official in a very public manner, and this shows just how vitriolic the drama around what really happened at the Battle of Shiloh had become. Sherman spends much of the letter debunking the surprise myth in detail, by first stating that it is, "the most wicked falsehood that was ever attempted to be thrust upon a people sad and heart sore at the terrible but necessary casualties of war."<sup>38</sup> This is relevant, as the grieving masses, due to their anguish over losing loved ones, were more susceptible to misinformation and deception. Something amplified by Shiloh being the deadliest battle in American history up to that time. Sherman states personally that he knew that the enemy was to his front in the days leading up to the attack, but that the actions of enemy cavalry and the rugged terrain meant that he could not ascertain their strength or intention.<sup>39</sup> On the tactical level, Sherman says that total surprise was not achieved thanks to Union

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<sup>36</sup> William T. Sherman, edited by M. A. DeWolfe Howe, *Home Letters of General Sherman*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, (1909): 224.

<sup>37</sup> William T. Sherman, edited by M. A. DeWolfe Howe, *Home Letters of General Sherman*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, (1909): 225.

<sup>38</sup> *Cadiz Democratic Sentinel*, Cadiz, Ohio, July 2, 1862.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

pickets, who fought a delaying action long enough for the rest of the troops to form a more organized defense. Modern historical evidence corroborates this.<sup>40</sup>

Sherman's response to the accusations against Grant is even more passionate, stating that, "Grant, just fresh from the victory of Donelson, more rich in fruits than was Saratoga, Yorktown, or any other one fought on this continent, is yet held up to the people of Ohio, his native state, as one who, in the opinion of the intelligent coward, is worthy to be shot;"<sup>41</sup> Sherman makes an important point here, in that the news bandwagon that was so cheerful for Grant's successes completely turned on him after his controversial victory at Shiloh, reflecting that the narrative of the war and those who dictated it were easily swayed. It is also interesting that Sherman believes that the victory at Fort Donelson was the greatest in American history so far, even above those won by George Washington. All of this goes to show that, when Sherman talks about Grant, it's personal. The famous professional partnership of Grant and Sherman first began to blossom at Shiloh, and in their immediate writings after the battle both had glowing praise for each other.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps Sherman, seeing Grant unwilling to publicly defend himself, took matters into his own hands to protect the reputation of his commander and his friend. Sherman also spends a great deal of time defending the actions of Prentiss, saying that his last stand in the Hornet's Nest helped secure the other sections of the front line long enough to mount a more effective defense. Sherman tears into Stanton for his criticism of Prentiss, as he was captured in the battle and was thus unable to defend himself in writing. Sherman's final counter-accusation is that Stanton's lies are as treasonous as they are divulged from reality, stating that, "If your paper could have had its intended

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<sup>40</sup> Charles Wexler's Review of Timothy B. Smith's *Shiloh: Conquer or Perish*, 2015: 97.

<sup>41</sup> *Cadiz Democratic Sentinel*, Cadiz, Ohio, July 2, 1862.

<sup>42</sup> William T. Sherman, edited by M. A. DeWolfe Howe, *Home Letters of General Sherman*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, (1909): 224

effect of destroying the confidence of the executive, the army and the people in their generals, it would have produced absolute and utter disorganization.”<sup>43</sup> This letter would be the start of a long and angry correspondence between Sherman and Stanton. Though Sherman alone could not stop the spread of misinformation, and as 1862 wore on, the narrative still teetered on the edges of both slander and fantasy.

Accounts from other veterans also challenged the media narrative. Frank Posegate, a lieutenant in the 48th Ohio Regiment vented in a letter he wrote on May 25th, 1862. The letter was later picked up and published in the June 12 issue of *Highland Weekly News*. Posegate opens up, rather poignantly, “It is, perhaps, rather late to make any allusion to the battle of Shiloh, as all the events in regard thereto have been worn thread-bare.”<sup>44</sup> By the time this letter was published, it had been two months since the battle’s end, and much of the country had begun to move on. While still a tremendous and horrific event, more recent events overtook Shiloh in the media spotlight. He also mentioned how his perception of how the war should be fought changed after the carnage at Shiloh. He witnessed the zealous resolve of Confederate soldiers firsthand and because of that he said that there is no silent majority of pro-Union sentiment in the south. Instead, he says that southerners of all stripes have committed themselves fully to preserving slavery or dying in the attempt. Thus, the only option to win the war is to “whale ‘em like the d---l [presumably “devil”] and treat them well afterwards.”<sup>45</sup> The media narrative around the Battle of Shiloh began to solidify as reporting about it began to decrease. Still, Posegate had some bones to pick with how some had portrayed the battle. He decries an unnamed Chicago newspaper as a “tissue of bare-faced assertions. In it the grossest injustice was done to some of the “bravest of the brave”, while in more

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<sup>43</sup> *Cadiz Democratic Sentinel*, Cadiz, Ohio, July 2, 1862.

<sup>44</sup> *Highland Weekly News*, Hillsborough, Ohio, June 12, 1862.

<sup>45</sup> *Highland Weekly News*, Hillsborough, Ohio, June 12, 1862.



than one instance regiments and individuals who really acted the part of cowards, were highly extolled [sic] for their noble and unflinching bravery.”<sup>46</sup> These accusations of media bias are similar to that of General Sherman, in that he claims that the media, with a complete disregard of the facts, were elevating the profiles of some who fought at the expense of others. In addition to the notion that news media was heightening division in the country at a time where it was already torn asunder. Interestingly, the lieutenant from Ohio who was so critical of a Chicago newspaper also lavishes praise for the Cincinnati Times for their reporting of the battle.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps Posegate harbored some bias towards his home state.

The state-based bias is far less ambiguous for *The Daily Gate City* of Keokuk, Iowa. Their July 10, 1862 issue is a prime example of this. It lavishes praise bordering on hagiography for the Iowa infantry engaged in the battle. Even going so far as to say, “the young State of Iowa has done the most brilliant fighting of the war,” in addition to claiming that Iowan soldiers exhibited “Spartan discipline” and “Roman fortitude.”<sup>48</sup> Glowing praise, indeed, and it goes to exemplify what Lt Posegate talked about in his testimony. This is a very clear example of one newspaper “looking out for their own” by glorifying local troops at the expense of others. The criticism of nearly everyone else begins by stating that the fighting on the 6th was a disaster, continuing that, “I need not here repeat the details of the Shiloh conflict---how culpably Grant was surprised---how he seemed to be infatuated with the notion...how shabbily Gen W. T. Sherman behaved---how, in short, so far as generalship was concerned, all went wrong,”<sup>49</sup> The article later goes on to praise Buell for saving the day with his reinforcements but jingoistically reiterating that it was “Iowa

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> *The Daily Gate City*, Keokuk, Iowa. July 10, 1862.

<sup>49</sup> *The Daily Gate City*, Keokuk, Iowa. July 10, 1862.

valor” that fought off the Confederates long enough for Buell to arrive.<sup>50</sup> None of these myths are new, but the deferring of the details highlights how initial reporting had mostly passed. Instead most of the media coverage was on its aftermath and on reactions to other reports and individual testimonies. Drama between governors and generals makes for great news reading, but even that began to become less and less common as time passed after the battle’s end. Slowly but surely, the deadliest battle in American history so far was becoming old news.

This trend continued as the summer of ‘62 gave way to autumn. News about Shiloh was increasingly sparse, save for when the captured General Prentiss returned to the Union in a prisoner swap. He was then able to give his account of the battle and his captivity, in which he praises those who fought alongside him and bought time for the rest of the Union line. “We had determined to hold our position; we determined to sustain our government; we determined there to save the army of Gen. Grant. I think we did it. My officers think we did it. I care not what others may think.”<sup>51</sup> That last line is important, as it shows that Prentiss was clued in on the battle’s controversy, even given his unique position after it ended. Perhaps he too saw the slander directed at him and Grant in Stanton’s essay. His perspective also reflects how Union attitudes towards the war were shifting, namely towards a harsher prosecution of the war and that abolition must be its aim. He says that secessionists spit upon the Constitution and that they will accept no compromise for their peaceful re-admittance to the Union. He concludes by saying the abolition is the only way to preserve the union, even if it means freeing every enslaved person in the south.<sup>52</sup> What Prentiss is saying here shows how the war, in the public’s eye, was shifting from simply a war for the preservation of the Union, to a war to end slavery. Prentiss bridges the two thoughts by stating that the only way to

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<sup>50</sup> *The Daily Gate City*, Keokuk, Iowa. July 10, 1862.

<sup>51</sup> *Grant County Herald*, Lancaster, Wisconsin, October 28, 1862.

<sup>52</sup> *Grant County Herald*, Lancaster, Wisconsin, October 28, 1862.

save the Union is with abolition. The Battle of Shiloh was an important milestone on this transformation, as it showed how determined southerners were to preserve slavery, no matter the human cost. In addition to being a sign of how bloody later battles would be. For many, it was a realization that the enemy would not give in under any condition and so instead they had to be forced to surrender unconditionally. Thankfully for the Union, Ulysses S. Grant was just the man for the job. In December of 1862, he put the controversies of Shiloh behind him as he embarked on a campaign to capture the southern city of Vicksburg. As 1863 dawned, Shiloh remained in the rear-view mirror as even greater battles loomed on the horizon. Its reflection was still marred by myths and misunderstanding.

While the reporting on Shiloh remained sparse and static, even in the midst of the battle's one year anniversary, Grant's reputation was in the midst of a big upswing. The press was enamored with his skillful conduct of the Vicksburg campaign, with one newspaper stating on May 25, 1863, "that the people had begun to read with incredulity the sanguine statements of newspaper correspondents, that Grant, having set about the job of taking Vicksburg, would accomplish it sooner. We had all admired his persistence, his indefatigableness, his energy, and the tenacity with which he kept up the work."<sup>53</sup> This goes to show that, in the eyes of the press, Grant was well on his way to redeeming himself after Shiloh. A week later on June 5, *The Weekly Pioneer and Democrat* published a brief biography of the general's military career thus far. It is interesting to note that even the newspaper acknowledges that they do not know his story with full certainty, punctuated by instances of them prefacing facts with "about," "we think," or "we believe."<sup>54</sup> Grant was never huge on the spotlight, and he had yet to write his account of his

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<sup>53</sup> *The Daily Green Mountain Freeman*, Montpelier, Vermont, May 25, 1863.

<sup>54</sup> *The Weekly Pioneer and Democrat*, Saint Paul, Minnesota, June 05, 1863.

experiences, so it makes sense that the paper would not know everything about him. Still, the article is very favorable towards him, commending his previous victories. It also criticizes the narrative around Shiloh, with it stating, “it was alleged that he had been surprised, and would certainly have been beaten, had General Buell not arrived in time. This, however, was soon silenced by an order from Gen. Halleck, tendering his thanks to Gen. Grant for the great ability which he had displayed in that memorable battle.”<sup>55</sup> Not only does this article reference the prevalent myths of the day, it also entails how Grant’s performance had come to be seen in a new light as his battlefield fortune improved. The article also praises his character, saying that he is always calm and collected even in the most intense of circumstances, and that he possesses “the firmness of a mountain.”<sup>56</sup> This section on his personality also highlights how his reputation revived itself. The public were fascinated by his stoic demeanor and unyielding resolve, and those attributes helped him take the city of Vicksburg after a lengthy siege. Through his actions on the battlefield rather than in writing, he had rebounded not only his reputation as a commander, but also the memory of his performance in past battles. Since the newspapers, many of which were so critical of Grant after Shiloh, were less willing to criticize him now that he was becoming one of the nation’s most celebrated individuals. A night and day contrast. Grant’s actions spoke louder than words, and as more and more victories piled up for “Unconditional Surrender” Grant, the praise for him in the newspapers only increased. While it did retroactively help his reputation somewhat in regard to Shiloh, the many myths surrounding the battle continued to persist as the war dragged on, gaining less and less coverage as Shiloh subducted further into the past. All the while the rehabilitated Grant was on the front page of newspapers across the nation.

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<sup>55</sup> *The Weekly Pioneer and Democrat*, Saint Paul, Minnesota, June 05, 1863.

<sup>56</sup> *The Weekly Pioneer and Democrat*, Saint Paul, Minnesota, June 05, 1863.

Shiloh's fade into obscurity continued into fall 1863, where it was scant mentioned in papers save for it being listed in the Chronology of Grant's great victories. Article long biographies of Grant also became more common as his popularity increased, of which Shiloh is often mentioned. On this, the March 31st edition of the Belmont Chronicle notes, "The taking of Forts Henry and Donaldson [sic] are well remembered and understood. The battle of Shiloh, as I think, is not concretely understood. Grant never had any reporters in his army or on his staff...but the reputation the Generals concerned in it have with the public, gives a true history of it. Grant (we use his own words) says, "to save the field on Sunday, cost me the greatest effort of my life."<sup>57</sup> Everything in that statement had been reported on before, but now it was being filtered through a media landscape that was far more positive towards General Grant. The tone towards him remained glowing in the spring of 1864 where he was promoted to Lieutenant General, the first since George Washington, and also the commander of all Union armies. One newspaper reported that his promotion, "is unparalleled in history for one of his age, and even for one of any age. He has been in over thirty battles, and *lost no one*...success seems to be natural for him."<sup>58</sup> Grant's reputation had been rehabilitated almost completely, and now even his most controversial battles were being forgotten or forgiven, though his greatest challenge was yet to come. In the summer of 1864, he would fight a long and brutal series of battles known as the Overland Campaign against Robert E. Lee's Army.

In the midst of this, there did appear to be some change underway regarding the reflections on Shiloh. This is shown in a short biography of General Sherman, who was also becoming quite famous, written for the August 24, 1864 edition of *The Weekly Pioneer and Democrat*. It talks at

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<sup>57</sup> *Belmont Chronicle*, St. Clairsville, Ohio, March 31, 1864.

<sup>58</sup> *The Highland Weekly News*, Hillsborough, Ohio April 14, 1864.

length about his controversial ideas of total war but also a great deal about his conduct at Shiloh, “of all the men I ever saw he is the most untiring, vigilant, and patient. No man that ever lived could surpass him. His enemies say that he was surprised at Shiloh. I tell you no. He was not surprised nor whipped, for he fights by the week.”<sup>59</sup> This goes to show that the praise for the combatants at Shiloh helped to alter the perception of the myth surrounding the battle. So much so that the newspaper refutes the surprise myth, something which was still the normative view at the time. The article continues, relaying Grant’s praise towards Sherman, saying that, “To his individual efforts I am indebted for the success of that battle.”<sup>60</sup> All this going to show that the renewed battlefield success of Grant and Sherman also helped dispel the controversies surrounding their performance at the Battle of Shiloh. This reflection was also aided by the sobering fact that battles that rivaled Shiloh’s intensity were happening consistently. As such, Shiloh and other battles were often compared to show the sheer carnage of the Civil War. One newspaper reported, regarding the battle of Pleasant Hill, “Men who were at Shiloh and other battles, say that the volleys at Pleasant Hill were the heaviest they ever heard.”<sup>61</sup> Battles at this scale or carnage were no longer unprecedented, a humbling truth of modern war. Still, Shiloh was no longer at the forefront of the war reporting, now relegated to a metric for comparison, and just another chapter in the careers of the Civil War’s greatest generals. This trend of seldom reporting would continue for the remainder of the war. Though a few instances still stand out. The January 6, 1865 edition of *The Weekly Pioneer and Democrat* includes a letter written by General Sherman about Shiloh. It begins with him stating that the news have been publishing errors, “which Gen. Grant may not deem of sufficient importance to correct.”<sup>62</sup> Sherman was intimately familiar with Grant’s silent

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<sup>59</sup> *The Weekly Pioneer and Democrat*, Saint Paul, Minnesota, August 26, 1864.

<sup>60</sup> *The Weekly Pioneer and Democrat*, Saint Paul, Minnesota, August 26, 1864.

<sup>61</sup> *Muscatine Weekly Journal*, Muscatine, Iowa, May 20, 1864.

<sup>62</sup> *The Weekly Pioneer and Democrat*, Saint Paul, Minnesota, January 06, 1865.

stoicism, to where he often refused to defend himself in writing. Much like with Ohio Lieutenant Governor Stanton's slanderous opinion-piece on the battle, Sherman positioned himself as Grant's defender. Sherman laments at how Buell is portrayed as the sole savior of the battle after its "disastrous" first day. He says the truth of the matter is that Buell greatly aided in the victory, "his arrival made that certain which was before uncertain."<sup>63</sup> Though, Sherman says, Buell hogging all the praise detracts from the bravery of those who fought tooth and nail on the first day to buy time for Buell to arrive. Sherman concludes this point by saying that there are always people who shamelessly try to covet the glory of victory, at least implying that Buell is one of them.<sup>64</sup> If Grant, at this point in his life, was not willing to be vocal about the drama of the war, Sherman definitely was.

By 1865, the war was drawing to a close. The Confederate States of America entered into a state of utter collapse, culminating in the surrender of Robert E. Lee to General Grant in early April, with The remaining Confederate armies following suit shortly thereafter. The deadliest war in American history came to a close, and those on the side of union had finally prevailed, thanks in no small part to Ulysses S. Grant. Though even as the guns fell silent, the tumult of division still presided over the nation. It is here that Shiloh fully transferred from current events to history, though its memory was still plagued with falsehoods and forgeries. It is also here that its memory began to be colored by full-length books and memoirs about those who were there. General Sherman published his in 1875, and he leveraged a decade of hindsight in his reflection on the battle. In a wise, but also lazy decision, he offered up his official after-action report for his

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<sup>63</sup> *The Weekly Pioneer and Democrat*, Saint Paul, Minnesota, January 06, 1865.

<sup>64</sup> *The Weekly Pioneer and Democrat*, Saint Paul, Minnesota, January 06, 1865.

summary of the battle.<sup>65</sup> In this report, he acknowledges the inexperience of many of the troops on the Union side, inexperience which caused them to quickly retreat when faced with the colossal Confederate attack. However, he does not admonish them for it, instead saying that come nightfall on the 6th, morale was high and they were ready to win.<sup>66</sup> An important distinction, as the breaking of federal troops on the first day was one of the mistakes that detractors attributed solely to Grant. Speaking of detractors, Sherman had his to say about the overall memory of the battle, “Probably no single battle of the war gave rise to such wild and damaging reports.”<sup>67</sup> In particular he decried the surprise myth and claims that the published opinions by Nelson and Buell were responsible for these myths, at least in part because of the tall-tales of shell shocked stragglers. It is important to remember that Buell was not present for almost the entirety of the battle’s opening day, and thus his recollection was colored by others, including the stragglers.<sup>68</sup> Sherman also admonishes medical personnel brought in after the battle for contributing to the myths as well. Sherman continued to criticize Buell for how he tried to position himself as the savior of the battle, reflecting that this strained the professional relationship between the two.<sup>69</sup> However, while Sherman tries to maintain a semblance of professionalism when criticizing Buell, his prose turns to rage when he brings up Ohio Lieutenant Governor Stanton. Sherman was furious with Stanton’s hit-piece on Grant, and seeing as the general “maintained an imperturbable silence,” Sherman wrote his fiery retort.<sup>70</sup> With the benefit of hindsight, he claims he won the war of correspondence between him and Stanton, claiming that the latter was disgraced as a result. Leave it to Sherman to hold a grudge.

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<sup>65</sup> William T, Sherman *Sherman: The Memoirs of General W.T. Sherman*, Washington D.C, Library of America, (1990): 250.

<sup>66</sup> William T, Sherman, *Sherman: The Memoirs of General W.T. Sherman*, Washington D.C, Library of America, (1990): 259.

<sup>67</sup> William T, Sherman, *Sherman: The Memoirs of General W.T. Sherman*, Washington D.C, Library of America, (1990): 265.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 265.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 266-267.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 267.



In the thirteen years since the end of the battle, much of its memory was still tainted by lies and misinformation, something acknowledged by those who wrote about it. Sherman offers up the same perspective as many of the other veterans, stating that the Union was not completely surprised by the enemy, but that the news media took the myth and ran with it. A general distrust of the media is a common thread among the testimony of veterans, claiming that they reported without knowing the facts and without the care to verify the truth of what they were publishing. Sherman was very vocal about this since, even into the 1870s, Grant still refused to write about his experiences. The 1880s would change that however, as he found himself in financial ruin after falling victim to a ponzi scheme. Desperate for funds, he accepted *Century Magazine's* offer for him to write about the great battles he commanded. Shiloh was the first of the bunch, and his writing here would spark the genesis of Grant's personal memoirs.

Functionally, the *Century Magazine* article and the Shiloh Chapter of the memoirs are nearly identical, save for the rearranging of some paragraphs and the usage of the phrase "so-called" in front of Confederate.<sup>71</sup> However, the memoir places the battle within a larger context, amplifying its message. *Century Magazine*, while well-read, did not compare to the monumental commercial success of Grant's memoir. This is important, as much of the country would become aware and many swayed by Grant's deeply personal account of that bloody battle. His silence finally broken, Grant's private truth was made public. Like Sherman's it started with a synopsis of the battle, admitting from the get go that he did not anticipate the Confederate attack. Specifically, he did not expect them to seize the initiative as they had only been on the defensive up to that point.<sup>72</sup> It was true that on the operational and strategic level, the Union were surprised, as Grant

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<sup>71</sup> Ulysses S. Grant, "The Battle of Shiloh," *Century Magazine*, Vol 29, (May 1884): 593.

<sup>72</sup> Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*. Penguin Books, (1885): 178-179.

concedes. However, it is important to remember that the majority of the erroneous myths claim that the surprise was on the tactical level as well, hence the false accusation that Union soldiers were killed sleeping in their tents. Therefore, Grant admitting that he did not expect the attack does not vindicate the lies espoused in the press.

Grant's account of the battle is vivid in detail and prose, and it shows much of the character that made Grant the successful general he was. Though the most profound reflections are in his analysis of the battle. He talked about the officers under his command. He praised Buell's professionalism but laments how the two drifted apart over the years since a media scandal unrelated to Shiloh drove a wedge between them.<sup>73</sup> Buell was always quick to go to the press with his drama, another thing that caused Sherman and Buell to not like each other. Grant's most passionate critique of the narrative comes in a rant on people speculating how the battle would have gone if Johnston had not been killed, "and that if he had not fallen the army under me would have been annihilated or captured. Ifs defeated the Confederates at Shiloh. There is little doubt that we would have been disgracefully beaten if all the shells and bullets fired by us had passed harmlessly over the enemy and if all of theirs had taken effect."<sup>74</sup> This level of sass is uncharacteristic of Grant's writing, which is usually carefully composed prose backed by detail and military vernacular. Because of this, one can infer his passion on this subject, as if he is sick and tired of people talking about how he almost failed. This is reinforced a few sentences later when he states, "There was, in fact, no hour during the day when I doubted the eventual defeat of the enemy."<sup>75</sup> Grant was known for his dogged determination and resolve, so it makes sense as to why he would be so miffed at repeated jabs claiming that his victory was only a hair's breadth

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<sup>73</sup> Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*. Penguin Books, (1885): 193.

<sup>74</sup> Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*. Penguin Books, (1885): 195-196.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*: 195-196.

from total defeat. He decried most accounts of the battle for much the same reasons, and he says that the only ones who got it right are Sherman, Prentiss, and one of Grant's staff officers, Adam Badeau.<sup>76</sup>

Grant continued on, reflecting on the harsh cost of the battle, which he claims was the most severe ever fought in the western theater of the war.<sup>77</sup> He remembered that, from that terrible cost, a realization dawned on him. Like many in the north, he thought that once decisive victories started to be won over the Confederates, then the rebellion would dissolve. At Shiloh, where the rebels showed they were willing to go on the offensive and sacrifice themselves in droves, "I gave up all idea of saving the Union except by complete conquest."<sup>78</sup> He said that from that moment forward, he knew he would have to prosecute the war more harshly, and he would accept nothing less than the unconditional surrender of the rebellion. This was an important moment in the character of Grant and how he would conduct himself for the remainder of the war. It also goes to show why Shiloh became a pivotal, if misunderstood, event of the Civil War. People searched for meaning amid the unprecedented carnage, and where truth was missing in action, lies took their place. Claims were floated about incompetent Union generals and soldiers bayoneted in their tents. All eyes were on those who fought, so many used their position to tarnish or defend the reputation of others. All the while Grant, even amidst the libel of the press, watched silently, refusing to speak out for himself. He worked to redeem himself on the battlefield, and in doing so garnered national fame which partially rehabilitated his conduct at Shiloh. His silence was only broken by circumstances outside of his control, but once he did speak the public listened. Buoyed by two

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 199.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 191.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 191.

decades of hindsight, his memoirs dealt a great blow to the myths and misinformation that plagued the battle's memory. Though in the end, he was only one part of the tapestry of historical narrative, one caught in the tension between how veterans and how the news media viewed the battle. It was this tension that caused the narrative to evolve the way it did, and why Ulysses S. Grant was such an important part, as the memory of Shiloh was tied to him. Starting from the battle itself and the decisions he made, to the controversy emerging in its aftermath, to its rehabilitation alongside Grant's victories, and finally laid to rest in his memoirs. A fitting end, as Grant died of cancer just a few days after he finished writing his memoirs. His legacy seemingly secure, he was content to let his memory fade into history.

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