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“I am Thinking Seriously of Going Home”: Mississippi’s Role in the Most Important Decision of Ulysses S. Grant’s Life

Timothy B. Smith

Mississippi is not normally considered the cradle of Ulysses S. Grant history or devotion, as exemplified by the utter surprise expressed when Grant’s official and personal papers, formerly housed in Illinois, were moved to Mississippi State University in the heart of Dixie. But in reality, the state played a significant role in the life of one of the United States’ most important leaders. It was in Mississippi, at Vicksburg, that Grant conducted perhaps the most significant military campaign in American history. Likewise, in perhaps a surprising twist to many, Grant even carried the state in the 1872 presidential election, although the curious pathways of Reconstruction politics had much to do with Grant’s victory. Nevertheless, Mississippi played a major role in making Grant who he was in life.¹

Less well known than Vicksburg or presidential elections was perhaps the most important professional decision Grant made in his lifetime, a decision he made in Mississippi itself. Grant faced a crucial crossroads in his personal and professional life in June 1862 when, in perhaps the lowest point of his military career during the Civil War, he contemplated going home. If he quit and went north, or even took an extended leave, chances were good he might never have another opportunity for such high rank and authority again. If Grant had left, perhaps even without resigning his commission, he might never have gotten another chance at glory or fame.

Grant came to a crisis point in early June 1862 when he faced the decision that could potentially make or break his entire career,

¹ “Grant and the Bulldogs: Union General’s Papers at Home at Mississippi State,” November 17, 2013, *Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal*.

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including all that we now know that came after it. Grant had certainly made important decisions before, including critical ones, such as resigning from the pre-war army, attacking Forts Henry and Donelson, and determining to remain and fight at Shiloh rather than withdraw, as almost all his officers were expecting and counseling. Grant would go on to make other major decisions in his life, such as the decision to forego an evening at Ford's Theatre with President Abraham Lincoln on April 14, 1865. Still, if there was one potential decision that could have largely changed the course of Grant's personal and professional career, it was this decision about his future, made in Mississippi of all places.²

* * *

William T. Sherman was astounded when he heard the news. Having just succeeded in helping capture Corinth, Mississippi, in the spring of 1862, Sherman was elated at the success of the Union's field armies in Mississippi. He had been a major player in that effort; although not seeing heavy action like that at Shiloh, his troops had fought several minor affairs at Russell's House and then later around a double log cabin nearer the Confederate lines. More importantly, Sherman had held the critical right flank of the huge army descending on Corinth, and he had held it well, often refusing the line to protect the flank against Confederate assault from the nearby Mobile and Ohio Railroad.³

The good work Sherman performed had lasting repercussions both for his cause and his own personal life. The Federal war machine had captured one of the most coveted locations certainly in the western Confederacy, one that top Union commander Major General Henry W. Halleck termed, along with Richmond, as "now the great strategical points of war, and our success at these points should be insured at all hazards." But the good was not just on the national level. Sherman had earlier been plagued by rumors of a shaky mental state, some even claiming he was crazy or insane. He inadvertently gave credence

² For some of Grant's decisions, see Timothy B. Smith, *"The Decision Was Always My Own": Ulysses S. Grant and the Vicksburg Campaign* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2018) and Timothy B. Smith, *Shiloh: Conquer or Perish* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014).

³ William T. Sherman, *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman. By Himself*, 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1875), 1:251-252, 255.

to those rumors when he gave up his command in Kentucky to take a rest. Yet Sherman was back by the spring of 1862, and although surprised beyond any shadow of doubt at Shiloh, he had turned out a solid performance thereafter, which he continued in the successful Corinth campaign. Now, Sherman was fully back, enjoying the victories and the acclaim that went with them.⁴

Not so happy was Sherman's new friend Ulysses S. Grant. Sherman had remained in the background while Grant had made a name for himself at Forts Henry and Donelson in February 1862. After that, however, matters had gone downhill for Grant, leading to his contemplation of quitting. He cannot be labeled a quitter per se, given the fact that he at times in his life faced difficult circumstances and overcame them, his education at West Point being one example. But in other activities, Grant was indeed a quitter, such as when he tired of army life on the frontier and began to drink heavily. Having all he could stand, Grant resigned and went home. There, he tried his hand at other jobs such as farming, only to see little success which led him to quit again. By the beginning of the Civil War, Grant had fallen to dependence on his family, working for his father in Galena, Illinois.⁵

While Halleck tried to talk Grant out of leaving, Sherman was not afraid to act more forcefully. A firm believer in the redemption of a tarnished career overnight, something he had experienced in his own life, Sherman went straight to Grant's headquarters when he heard the news from Halleck. He was determined to talk his friend out of resigning and going home.⁶

* * *

Dissatisfaction had been boiling up in Grant for months, and it largely stemmed from a mushrooming personal disturbance with his superior, Henry W. Halleck. "Old Brains" was a rather hard man

⁴ *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1891), Series 1, Volume 10, Part 1: 667. Hereafter cited as *OR*, with series, volume, and part number, if applicable, preceding page numbers.

⁵ John F. Marszalek, *Commander of All Lincoln's Armies: A Life of General Henry W. Halleck* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 118; Brooks D. Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph Over Adversity, 1822-1865* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 124. For Grant, see Ronald C. White, *American Ulysses: A Life of Ulysses S. Grant* (New York: Random House, 2016). For Grant's pre-war life, see Lloyd Lewis, *Captain Sam Grant* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1950).

⁶ Sherman, *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman*, 1:255.

to know and like, but Grant was not completely innocent either; he had had personal run-ins with other officers earlier in the war as well, including a nasty feud with Benjamin Prentiss over rank. But Halleck's ire had the potential of derailing Grant's entire career, and while some saw jealously and others Halleck's dissatisfaction with what Halleck considered Grant's sloppy performance, the sum of it was that Grant was under a growing cloud with his superior. In fact, Halleck had already seemingly made up his mind about Grant shortly after taking command of the Department of Missouri in the quiet fall of 1861. In the build-up to the advance along the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers in early 1862, Grant advised Halleck what to do and was rebuffed. Grant famously wrote years later of what he perceived then as Halleck's disdain. Concerning his request to travel to St. Louis to confer with Halleck, he later recalled, "I was received with so little cordiality that I perhaps stated the object of my visit with less clearness than I might have done, and I had not uttered many sentences before I was cut short as if my plan was preposterous. I returned to Cairo very much crestfallen." Halleck biographer John F. Marszalek surmised that "Halleck was, in fact, reacting not to Grant's plan, but to Grant himself."⁷

The relationship between the two men only worsened after Forts Henry and Donelson, when it seemed logical that Halleck would have reveled in his subordinate's victories. Rather, Halleck displayed disdain for Grant, especially when messages became fairly infrequent (through no fault of Grant's) and what messages that did arrive described large-scale thievery and disorder, something that the straight-laced Halleck could not abide. The relationship between the two men became so tense that Halleck chose to shelve Grant by keeping him in district command at Fort Henry while giving the actual tactical command to a much more professional officer (in Halleck's eyes) Charles F. Smith. Word reached Grant in early March like a thunderbolt: "you will place Maj. Gen. C. F. Smith in command of expedition, and remain yourself at Fort Henry." Halleck then openly twisted the knife he had stuck in

⁷ John F. Marszalek, David S. Nolen, and Louie P. Gallo, eds., *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant: The Complete Annotated Edition*; (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017), 202; Marszalek, *Commander of All Lincoln's Armies*, 116. For a wide ranging examination of the Grant/Halleck/Sherman relationship, see Carl R. Schenker, Jr., "The Grant-Halleck-Smith Affair" *North and South* 12, 1 (February 2010): 11-12 and "Ulysses in His Tent: Halleck, Grant, Sherman, and 'The Turning Point of the War'," *Civil War History* 56, 2 (June 2010): 175-221.

Grant's back, adding, "why do you not obey my orders to report strength and positions of your command?"⁸

A dumfounded Grant responded quickly: "I am not aware of ever having disobeyed any order from headquarters – certainly never intended such a thing." But he had no choice and in the next few days obediently sent Smith southward with what he no doubt perceived as his army. Over the next couple of difficult weeks, Halleck continued his barrage against Grant, even involving general-in-chief George B. McClellan and secretary of war Edwin M. Stanton in Washington. McClellan and Stanton gave Halleck permission to remove Grant if he thought it necessary. Halleck only criticized Grant again by mentioning to the Washington authorities unfounded rumors that Grant's alleged drinking had resurfaced. Halleck no doubt alerted Grant with grim satisfaction that "unless these things are immediately corrected I am directed to relieve you of the command." He even said that Grant's actions were "a matter of very serious complaint at Washington, so much so that I was advised to arrest you on your return."⁹

By the first week in March, Grant had gathered his thoughts and insisted tersely that he had reported daily to Halleck's chief of staff in Cairo. "It is no fault of mine if you have not received my letters," he declared. But orders were orders, and Grant later admitted, "I was virtually in arrest and without a command." It was during this time that he took a huge step in what was shaping up to be the most momentous decision of his life; he asked to be relieved from duty under Halleck. Grant did not resign or quit, but clearly saw that Halleck was not his guardian. He thus wrote on March 7, "I respectfully ask to be relieved from further duty in the department." It was the first thought in a long process that would lead to the brink of going home for good.¹⁰

Matters only became worse over the next few days as Halleck continued to scold, at one point writing that "I really felt ashamed to telegraph back to Washington time and again that I was unable to give the strength of your command." Added to that matter were reports of disorder and unruliness in Grant's command. Halleck added snappishly, "don't let such neglect occur again." Grant was incredulous, and over the next four days asked twice more to be relieved: "I renew

⁸ *OR*, 10,2:3, 17. For Forts Henry and Donelson, see Timothy B. Smith, *Grant Invades Tennessee: The 1862 Battles for Forts Henry and Donelson* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016).

⁹ *OR*, 10,2:4, 13, 15.

¹⁰ Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 226; *OR*, 10,2:15.

my application to be relieved from further duty” and “I again ask to be relieved from further duty until I can be placed right in the estimation of those higher in authority.”¹¹

Perhaps taken aback by Grant’s willingness to respond to him, Halleck soon backed down. Some argue that President Lincoln also became involved and forced Halleck to show evidence of Grant’s drinking and unfitness for command or reinstate him. Either way, Halleck soon took a much more conciliatory approach, dangling at first the chance that Grant would soon retake command from Smith of the expedition southward and then flatly telling him, after Grant’s terse request to be relieved, “you cannot be relieved from your command. . . . Instead of relieving you, I wish you as soon as your new army is in the field to assume the immediate command and lead it on to new victories.” A shocked Grant retook the command, joining the army in Savannah, Tennessee, on March 17, but he was shaken from the ordeal of the last two weeks. Grant wrote his new friend Sherman, now camped at Pittsburg Landing, that he had been “sick for the last two weeks, [but] begin to feel better at the thought of again being along with the troops.” Still, he did issue orders to improve “order and regularity about headquarters.”¹²

* * *

Matters remained civil for the next three weeks as the armies gathered, but the lightning bolt that was Shiloh again opened the rift between Halleck and Grant. Under a cloud already, Grant was never far away from Halleck’s orders, despite being more than 250 miles south of his superior. Halleck was convinced that Grant was sloppy and that he did not pay close enough attention to details, and Shiloh only confirmed that belief in his mind. Halleck had warned Grant to be watchful and entrenched, neither of which Grant did to Halleck’s satisfaction. Grant’s loss of more than thirteen thousand men at Shiloh only added an additional level to Halleck’s ire.¹³

Upset as he was, Halleck hurried southward to take control of what he considered to be an obviously out-of-control situation.

¹¹ *OR*, 10,2:15, 21-22, 30.

¹² *OR*, 10,2:27, 32, 36, 41, 43; John F. Marszalek, *Lincoln and the Military* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2014), 28.

¹³ For Shiloh, see Smith, *Shiloh*.

He arrived on April 11 and immediately skewered Grant for his losses and inattention to detail. Almost as soon as he arrived, he scolded Grant that “immediate and active measures must be taken to put your command in condition to resist another attack by the enemy. . . . Your army is not now in condition to resist an attack. It must be made so without delay.” On another occasion the two men sparred over Halleck’s insistence that Grant write a report on Shiloh. Grant “positively declined” because Halleck had all the subordinate reports sent directly to him and then on to Washington. Consequently, Grant never saw them. With his temper no doubt boiling over, Halleck later sent Grant a firm note that displayed his obvious wonder at Grant’s lack of military protocol and discipline: “the Major General Commanding desires that, you will again call the attention of your officers to the necessity of forwarding official communications through the proper military channel, to receive the remarks of intermediate commanders. Letters should relate to one matter only, and be properly folded and indorsed. Where the Regulations on this subject are not observed by officers, their communications to these Head Quarters will be returned.” Sherman, who was friend to both Halleck and Grant, believed that “it soon became manifest that his [Halleck’s] mind had been prejudiced by the rumors which had gone forth to the detriment of General Grant.”¹⁴

For his part, Grant seemed less concerned with Halleck’s arrival than one would think, at least on the surface. Halleck was, after all, his superior, and that superior had every right to command his forces in person. In fact, Grant wrote his wife Julia soon after Halleck’s arrival, “I however am no longer boss. Gen. Halleck is here and I am truly glad of it.” Later, Grant told Julia not to worry about the cloud he was under because of Shiloh, particularly from newspaper reporters who were not even at the battle. Significantly, Grant laid no blame on Halleck whom he described as “who I look upon as one of the greatest men of the age.”¹⁵

Despite Grant’s statements, Halleck returned to his former condescending approach. The major blow came on April 30 when Halleck rearranged his entire army command structure. In the

¹⁴ *OR*, 10,2:105-106; John Y. Simon, ed., *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), 5:49, hereafter cited as Simon, *PUSG*; Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 254;; Sherman, *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman*, 1:250.

¹⁵ Simon and Marszalek, *PUSG*, 5:72, 102.

intervening two weeks, Halleck had been constantly battling the weather and mud to get his army supplied, reinforced, and prepared to advance on Corinth. With that advance now ready to begin in late April/early May, Halleck dropped yet another lightning bolt on Grant on April 30 by removing him from any major army command and booting him up to an almost unimportant second in command position. Making matters worse, Grant's old Army of the Tennessee was split in two, part of it becoming a reserve. Even worse, the bulk of Grant's old army went to a junior officer, George H. Thomas. All the preparations Grant had made for another climactic campaign went for naught, and he was unceremoniously shelved.¹⁶

Officially, Grant simply issued orders the next day that he was taking his new position. Unofficially, he was livid, as were some of his officers. Sherman insisted that "General Grant was substantially left out, and was named 'second in command,' according to some French notion, with no clear, well-defined command or authority. . . . For more than a month he thus remained, without any apparent authority, frequently visiting me and others, and rarely complaining; but I could see that he felt deeply the indignity, if not insult, heaped upon him." Grant himself declared: "for myself I was little more than an observer," and used the word "embarrassing." He also labeled the Corinth operation "a siege from the start to close," and one wonders if he was making a play on words; that is exactly what was happening to Grant.¹⁷

Grant's unhappiness actually stemmed from two issues, which he conflated together. One was the press's continued assault on him because of Shiloh. Yet Grant stayed his hand, although not everyone had such self control. Grant was chagrined to learn that both his father and a staff officer had published defenses in the form of private letters. "Don't he know the best contradiction in the world is to pay no attention to them," Grant wrote Julia in reference to his father and the newspapers.¹⁸

¹⁶ *OR*, 10,2:144. For Corinth see Timothy B. Smith, *Corinth 1862: Siege, Battle, Occupation* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012) and Timothy B. Smith, "'A Siege From the Start': The Spring 1862 Campaign against Corinth, Mississippi," *Journal of Mississippi History* 66, no. 4 (2004): 403-424.

¹⁷ Sherman, *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman*, 1:250; Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 256.

¹⁸ *OR*, 10,2:154; Simon, *PUSG*, 5:110. For more on Grant after Shiloh, see Brooks D. Simpson, "After Shiloh: Grant, Sherman, and Survival" in Steven E. Woodworth, ed., *The Shiloh Campaign* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), 142-158.

Secondly, there was Grant's continuing diplomacy with Halleck. Grant had endured harsh treatment from Halleck but somehow, at least in his outward appearance, he maintained a healthy respect for the general despite another rebuff during the siege that was harsher than warranted. When Grant offered an idea, Halleck would not even listen to it: "I was silenced so quickly that I felt that possibly I had suggested an unmilitary movement." In fact, Grant told one of his staff, upon returning from his meeting with Halleck, that the commander had "pooh-poohed" his idea, "and left me to understand that he wanted no suggestions from me." More importantly, it was this demotion to second in command of the army that caused Grant to begin questioning Halleck, writing him boldly that "I have felt my position as anomylous [sic] and determined to have it corrected, in some way, so soon as the present impending crisis should be brought to a close." He added that "I felt that sensure [sic] was implied but did not wish to call up the matter in the face of the enemy." Continuing, he said that he was writing "now however as I believe it is generally understood through this army that my position differs but little from that of one in arrest." He reminded Halleck that even though officially still in command of the right wing and reserve, few orders came through him. Halleck preferred to send his orders directly to army commanders, or even to division heads.¹⁹

Grant still showed respect for Halleck, however, and added at least in his private letter to him that "I cannot, do not, believe that there is any disposition on the part of yourself to do me any injustice, but suspicions have been aroused that you may be acting under instructions, from higher authority, that I know nothing of." That brought the news media's role back into play, and Grant at least outwardly surmised that Washington officials had become involved, much like during his miserable few weeks after Fort Donelson. Unknown to Grant, all this controversy was in reality all of Halleck's making.²⁰

Grant was so bothered that he began to once more think of leaving the army in Mississippi. He wrote to Halleck on May 11, "I deem it due to myself to ask either full restoration to duty, according to my rank, or to be relieved entirely from further duty." Later in the same letter, he pressed even farther: "In conclusion then General I respectfully ask either to be relieved from duty entirely or to have my position so defined

¹⁹ Simon, *PUSG*, 5:114; Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 258; Albert D. Richardson, *A Personal History of Ulysses S. Grant* (Hartford, CT: American Publishing Company, 1868), 257.

²⁰ Simon, *PUSG*, 5:114; Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant*, 123.

that there can be no mistaking it.” On other fronts, Grant and his staff also worked for him to get a different command, such as that recently vacated on the Carolina coast. Halleck, as always, only lectured Grant in response, disingenuously assuring him that he was exactly where his rank required him to be. Moreover, Halleck amazingly added: “for the last three months I have done everything in my power to ward off the attacks which were made upon you. If you believe me your friend, you will not require explanation; if not, explanation on my part would be of little avail.”²¹

With little chance for restoration to duty and unwilling to leave during an active campaign, Grant settled into a muted role. Halleck often sent orders over his head, although some went through Grant’s headquarters. Still, Grant was miserable. John Pope remembered that Grant lived at his headquarters “in perfect solitude, except for the companionship of his personal staff and a few friends who sought him out in his seclusion. His mortification was excessive . . . He came a number of times to my camp, . . . and would spend nearly the whole day lying on a cot bed, silent and unhappy. I never felt more sorry for anyone.”²²

In such misery, Grant began to grow warmer toward the idea of going home even if Halleck would not relieve him. He first mentioned the prospect in a letter to Julia on May 4, just four days after his “promotion” to second in command. As the days turned into weeks in front of Corinth, he continued to ponder the thought, writing Julia on May 11 that “I am thinking seriously of going home, and to Washington, as soon as the present impending fight or footrace is decided.” He added, “I have been so shockingly abused that I sometimes think it almost time to defend myself.” Yet he did not fully disclose, even to his wife, his intense dissatisfaction, although hints appeared such as when he noted that the woods where his headquarters in the Mississippi countryside were located “would be a beautiful place for a Picnic but not so pleasant to make home at” and that “my duties are now much lighter than they have been heretofore. Gen. Halleck being present relieves me of great responsibility.” He made similar statements over the next several days in additional letters to Julia, but always with the

²¹ Simon, *PUSG*, 5:114-115; *OR*, 10,2:182-183; Bruce Catton, *Grant Moves South* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), 273.

²² Peter Cozzens, *General John Pope: A Life for the Nation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 69.

caveat that he was remaining until the present campaign was decided: "I want no leave whilst there are active operations but confess that a few weeks relaxation would be hailed with a degree of pleasure never experienced by me before."²³

* * *

The capture of Corinth ironically brought on the crisis. When the Confederates evacuated on May 30 and the Federals marched in, the anticlimactic victory was somewhat of a letdown. Sherman later wrote that "there was some rather foolish clamor for the first honors, but in fact there was no honor in the event." It certainly was a letdown for Grant, who had often talked of taking his leave when the operations ended. Now that they were done, in little glory for anyone involved, he was especially let down, describing his place as "a nominal command and yet no command," and he declared it was "unbearable." He was true to his word that he would leave and see if there were better opportunities elsewhere. He informed Julia the next day, "Corinth is now in our hands without much fighting . . . What the next move, or the part I am to take I do not know. But I shall apply to go home if there is not an early move and an important command assigned me." He added that "my rank is second in this Department and I shall expect the first separate command . . . If there is not to be an early move I will apply for a short leave and go home."²⁴

Grant evidently gave a short rein for that next move, and by three days later, having heard nothing from Halleck in terms of a command, he officially requested the leave and prepared to go north. He informed his guardian congressman Elihu Washburne, whom he had been keeping advised throughout these dreary times, as much on June 1 and actually started some of his staff moving the next day.²⁵

What exactly Grant had in mind is not known. On the surface, he requested and received thirty days' leave, but what he intended after that is speculation. Perhaps he would resign if no orders came for him to take command in the field; Sherman wrote him a few days later that "I hope you have sufficiently felt the force of what I say to

²³ Simon, *PUSG*, 5:111, 116, 118, 127, 130; *OR*, 10, 2:189, 205, 222, 228.

²⁴ Sherman, *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman*, 1:253; Simon, *PUSG*, 5:134; Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 262.

²⁵ Simon, *PUSG*, 5:137.

join in their [newspaper editors] just punishment before we resign our power and pass into the humble rank of citizens.” Or perhaps he would go to Washington, as he had mentioned before, to try to clear his name with the powers that be. But in reality, the decision may not have been his. Many notable figures in the war were sidelined, some permanently, by either voluntarily taking leave or being sent home from their active commands. Lew Wallace, John A. McClernand, Don Carlos Buell, and many others experienced as much. Either way, there was a strong possibility that Grant would never be called back to his position or to a high command, especially with Halleck as his superior and about to become general-in-chief. It was completely possible that if Grant went home, he would wind up chairing court martial trials and recruiting rather than leading in the field. Moreover, there was no guarantee that he would be allowed to remain in the army. Historian Bruce Catton, in fact, later surmised that such a furlough “under the circumstances, would practically amount to taking himself out of the army for good.”²⁶

Yet just as Grant was ready to depart, the next morning in fact, several factors intervened to stop him. One was William T. Sherman, who heard while at Halleck’s headquarters that Grant was leaving. He rushed over to see Grant. “Of course we all knew that he was chafing under the slights of his anomalous position, and I determined to see him on my way back,” Sherman later noted. He found Grant dejected and shuffling papers, tying them with red tape; everything was packed ready for the trip. Sherman asked Grant if it was true that he was leaving. Grant blurted out, “Sherman, you know. You know that I am in the way here. I have stood it as long as I can, and can endure it no longer.”²⁷

Fortunately for Grant and for the United States as a whole, Sherman got Grant to promise he would rethink the decision and not leave until he talked with Sherman again. It certainly helped Grant’s feelings knowing there was someone who still desired his presence with the army. In fact, he wrote Julia on June 9, evidently of Sherman’s council, but perhaps others as well: “privately I say to you that when I talked of going home and leaving my command here there was quite a

²⁶ Sherman, *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman*, 1:255; Simon, *PUSG*, 5:141; Bruce Catton, *U. S. Grant and the American Military Tradition* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1954), 91; Catton, *Grant Moves South*, 274.

²⁷ Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 262; Sherman, *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman*, 1:255.

feeling among the troops, at least so expressed by Gen. Officers below me, against my going.”²⁸

At the same time, it seemed that even Halleck realized the situation and that Grant was useful. In fact, Grant later wrote Congressman Washburne to disregard his earlier letter of June 1: “at the time . . . I had leave to go home . . . , but Gen. Halleck requested me to remain for a few days. Afterwards when I spoke of going he asked that I should remain a little longer if my business was not of pressing importance. As I really had no business, and had not asked leave on such grounds, I told him so and that if my services were required I would not go atal [sic].” Soon, Halleck had so many second thoughts about letting Grant go that he revamped his command structure once more, certainly in part to alleviate Grant’s concern and perhaps to get him to stay. “Necessity however changes my plans,” Grant wrote Julia that day, “or the public service does, and I must yeald [sic].” Grant also added significantly, “this settled my leave for the present, and for the war, so long as my services are required I do not wish to leave.”²⁹

Grant’s patience was officially rewarded on June 10, when Halleck revoked his earlier orders splitting the army into wings and making Grant second in command. Grant resumed command of the Army of the Tennessee and, better yet, was allowed to make his headquarters in Memphis, where he arrived on June 23, away from Halleck and in actual command of the area. Halleck had called off his ordered pursuit of the Confederates and begun to disperse his army left and right to garrison what Union forces had conquered. While Grant did not agree with the decision, it was fortunate for him because he regained his independent command. No longer was he under the thumb of a tyrannical commander who did not like him.³⁰

* * *

An appreciative Grant had a new lease on life, and he was grateful to those who had supported him, especially Sherman. He wrote a quick note informing his friend that he was indeed staying, to which Sherman joyously responded, “I have just received your note, and am rejoiced at your conclusion to remain. For yourself, you could not be quiet at

²⁸ Sherman, *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman*, 1:255; Simon, *PUSG*, 5:140-141.

²⁹ Simon, *PUSG*, 5:137, 145.

³⁰ *OR*, 10, 2:288; Simon, *PUSG*, 5:147.

home for a week, when armies were moving, and rest could not relieve your mind of the gnawing sensation that injustice has been done you.” That said, there was one awkward moment when Grant learned that Sherman had requested Grant’s escort for his own use once Grant had departed; Sherman assured Grant that “of course I only asked for your escort, when I believed you had resolved to leave us, and assure you that I rejoice to learn of your change of purpose.”³¹

The nation should have rejoiced as well. Grant’s talk of leaving in early June could have proven disastrous. There was no guarantee that Grant would have been brought back in the same position or even in a field command after just a thirty-day’s leave, and certainly outright resignation would have ended his military career. Accordingly, the decision to remain in and with the army in June 1862 became a watershed event in Grant’s life, even if he did not realize its full consequences at the time.

Grant obviously made many decisions during the war and during his life, but few had the altering level of significance as this one. If Grant had left the army or had even been shunted out of field command, there likely would have been no Vicksburg, Chattanooga, or Virginia Overland Campaign, at least not under Grant’s leadership. Certainly life would have been drastically altered for Grant himself, but it was also a watershed moment for the nation. While others could have stepped up and become Lincoln’s go-to guy for success, that person most certainly would not have been Grant. And it almost goes without saying that Grant’s post-war career would have been less as well. His political career was firmly based on his military exploits, and without them in the Civil War, had he gone home in June 1862, he most assuredly would not have been twice elected president of the United States.

It is unnerving to think how seemingly small decisions at the time, made sometimes in the heat of the moment or out of frustration, can actually turn into major life-changing events. So it was for Ulysses S. Grant when in perhaps the lowest point of his war career he seriously contemplated leaving the army. But he stayed. How ironic, however, that the Ohio-born Illinoisan who became president of the United States for two terms actually made the major decision of his life, to stay in the Federal army and continue fighting for the Union, while in the state of Mississippi.

³¹ Simon, *PUSG*, 5:140-141.