



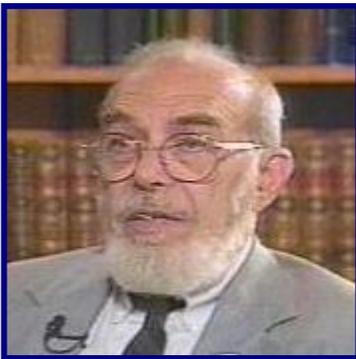
# FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

## FOOTNOTES

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## THE GREATEST CAPTAIN OF HIS AGE: REMEMBERING GENERAL WINFIELD SCOTT

By Allan Peskin



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Of all the Great Captains we are examining in this conference, Winfield Scott is probably the least known to the general public. Years ago, when I told people I was writing a biography of President Garfield, a common reaction was "Why?" Later, when I was writing a biography of Winfield Scott, they asked: "Who?"

That was a sad comedown for the reputation of a man who, during his lifetime, was often referred to as "The Greatest Captain of His Age," and of whom the Duke of Wellington reportedly said: "Scott is the greatest living soldier."

From this, two questions arise: Did Scott deserve the towering reputation he enjoyed during his lifetime? and Why did that reputation fade in later years among the general public.

First, as to his rise. By present-day standards Scott's dazzling military career seems highly improbable. He never attended a military school, never even belonged to a militia company, nor was he raised in a military family. But, as a landless, slaveless, fatherless Virginian with aspirations for gentility, he had to make his own way in the world, which meant some sort of profession, since going into trade was deemed *declassé*. Initially he chose the law but found that drawing up wills and deeds was unsuited to his restless, action-loving nature.

In 1807 a fresh opportunity presented itself. In the wake of the Chesapeake-Leopard affair, President Jefferson called for volunteer military companies to patrol the coast and enforce the Embargo. On an impulse, the twenty-one-year-old law student put away his books, bought a horse, borrowed a uniform and first tasted what would become his life's work.

Though these ad hoc companies were disbanded once the emergency passed, Scott was hooked. As he later put it: "The young soldier had heard the bugles and the drum. It was the music that awoke ambition."

By present day standards, this ambition might seem an impossible dream. Scott had none of the credentials which our society demands of a would-be professional. But nineteenth-century careers had a different trajectory than ours.

The United States was then a nation of amateurs: few attorneys attended law school, most read law books on their own, did odd jobs for local lawyers, kept their eyes open and learned by experience. Likewise, neither physicians nor teachers required a state certificate to practice their profession. My earlier biographical subject, James A. Garfield, was at one time or another a professor, a college president, a minister of the gospel, an attorney (who practiced before the U.S. Supreme Court) a general in the Union army and a congressman. His formal training for these varied professions consisted mainly of studying Greek and Latin, but for a bright, hard-working young man that, apparently, was enough. Likewise, Scott was intelligent, tall, self-assured and could read French, assets which, given a little luck, could be parlayed into a military career.

But a military career required an active military establishment, which the infant United States did not possess, nor did it particularly desire. In 1807, the regular army consisted of less than 3,000 men commanded by about 150 officers. The ranks of the enlisted men were largely filled by immigrants, misfits and drunkards. Many of the officers were superannuated veterans of the Revolutionary War, locked into their commands by the iron law of seniority.

This weakness was no accident. Americans feared that a strong standing army could, as in Europe, be turned against the liberties of the people. In times of emergencies, we preferred to rely on patriotic volunteers or on militiamen, that is, part-time soldiers, drawn like the iconic Minutemen from civilian life and eager to return to it once the emergency was over.

Such a tiny army could scarcely accommodate Scott's outsized ambitions, so he reluctantly returned to the law. But the very next year, in response to increased tension with Great Britain, President Jefferson doubled the size of the regular army. Scott jumped at this opportunity and it is indicative of the casual, almost slapdash procedures of the old army that, instead of applying for a commission through channels, Scott went straight to the president, with an influential politician in tow, to plead his case. And it is further revealing that Jefferson did not draw upon the military academy he had recently formed but instead rewarded this untested neophyte with a captain's bars.

Assigned to duty in Louisiana, Scott soon had reason to regret his career choice. He found himself in an encampment seething with feuds, festering with resentments, backbiting and intrigue, commanded by antiquated, corrupt, self-serving incompetents, most notably General James Wilkinson. Bored and disillusioned, the young captain attempted to resign but was instead suspended from duty for a year for some indiscrete remarks he had made about his commanding officer.

Despite this inauspicious beginning, Scott did not completely give up on a military career. Instead, he tried a new tack. While sitting out his suspension back home in Virginia, he used his enforced leisure to devour books on military history, theory and procedure. Had he attended West Point, he would have learned very little of this, since the Academy at that time was primarily an engineering college (though it did teach drawing and ballroom dancing).

From these studies came his ambition to conduct warfare in the Napoleonic manner: "to conduct sieges and command in open fields, serried lines and columns."

Sooner than he could have expected, such an opportunity presented itself. Only a few months after his punitive suspension was lifted, war with Great Britain was declared. Much to his surprise, the young captain discovered he had been bumped two grades to Lt. Colonel and ordered to raise a regiment of volunteers and proceed with them to the Niagara frontier. There he would spend the next two years in futile attempts to wrest this peninsula from British control. In the process he would be wounded, taken prisoner and would command in three major battles.

The first was at Queenston Heights, just across the river from Lewiston, New York. At first the battle went well, until British and Indian reinforcements arrived to tip the scales. American reinforcements were available across the river, but the New York militia refused to cross into Canada on the grounds that they had enlisted to defend New York state, not to invade another country. Scott could barely contain his contempt for those "vermin who . . . no sooner found themselves in sight of the enemy then they discovered that the militia of the United States could not be constitutionally marched into a foreign country!" From this dated his lifelong aversion to amateur citizen-soldiers and a concomitant attachment to the professional soldiers of the regular army – the "rascally regulars," as he called them with affection.

Although the battle of Queenston Heights was an American defeat, Scott himself emerged as something of a hero. Unlike other commanders who had abjectly surrendered or had avoided combat altogether, Scott had displayed bravery, initiative and a fighting spirit.

In early 1814, the War Department cleaned house, putting the aged generals of defeat on the shelf and promoting a cadre of younger officers, Scott among them. Three years earlier he had been a disgraced captain serving out his suspension, now he was a brigadier general. In 1812 the average age of an American general had been sixty. Now, suddenly it was reduced to thirty-six, and Scott, only twenty-seven years old, was the youngest of them all.

Alexis de Tocqueville observed that war “breaks down rules and makes outstanding men come forward. Officers, whose minds and bodies have grown old in peacetime are eliminated, retire or die. In their place a multitude of young men, already toughened by war, press forward with ambitious hopes aflame.” He could have been describing the career of Winfield Scott, both at its beginning and, sadly, at its end.

For his first command he was given the “Left Division,” a mixed group of about 3,500 regulars, veterans and raw recruits, these would be the material out of which he hoped to forge his vision of what an army should be. At Flint Hill, outside Buffalo, he established a training camp not, as he claimed, the first such camp, but by far the most rigorous. For two months the men were drilled ten hours a day, seven days a week. After breakfast, corporals drilled their squads; before lunch, captains drilled entire companies; and in the afternoon the whole brigade was put through its paces by Scott himself. No detail was overlooked, including the proper way to bake bread, the location of latrines and the frequency of bathing. Discipline was maintained through professional pride rather than fear. The brutal punishments, so common in all armies, were kept to a minimum, but officers who struck enlisted men were suspended from duty.

Scott’s efforts were complicated by the strange fact that the U.S. army had no standard drill or tactical manuals, which could make for fatal confusion when different units fought side by side. He patched together a system of drill based on French models, which he used as a stopgap but which he vowed to improve after the war if he should be spared.

After two months of this regimen, Scott was confident that his “handsome little army” was ready to be tested. He was not disappointed. On July 5, 1814, while advancing up the Niagara Peninsula, he stumbled across a well-positioned British army outside of the village of Chippewa. In the brief 90 minutes of fighting that followed, Scott’s hastily trained amateurs stood as firm against British volleys as if they were on the parade ground. In the face of their determination, it was the famed “thin red line” of British veterans of the Napoleonic Wars that broke and ran for safety.

Three weeks later, Scott caught up with them at Lundy’s Lane, near Niagara Falls. Both sides claimed victory in this bloody encounter, with the Americans winning tactical honors while the British maintained their strategic control of the Niagara Peninsula.

From the standpoint of morale, however, the Americans were the clear winners. At this stage in this dispiriting war, even a hollow victory was something to cheer about. And Scott, now a Major General (the army’s highest rank since the retirement of Lt. Gen. Washington), found himself America’s number one military hero, a distinction he would have to surrender within a few months to Andrew Jackson.

To make matters worse, Jackson’s smashing victory near New Orleans over the cream of British regulars was accomplished with a ragtag assemblage of frontier militiamen, free Blacks and Gulf pirates, rather than the highly trained regulars of Scott’s ideal army. As Scott realized, to his dismay, “Jackson and the Western militia seem likely to throw all other generals and the regular troops into the background.”

This foreshadowed the half-century split between competing visions of the role of the American military. On the one side were such presidents as Jefferson, Jackson and Polk and various frontier-schooled generals, such as Edmund Pendleton Gaines, who considered a standing army as an expensive luxury, as likely to be turned against the people’s liberties as against its enemies. They advocated a bare-boned regular army which could be augmented in time of crisis by militiamen and patriotic volunteers. “Pluck” and common sense, they maintained, were more important than so-called military “science” derived from Frenchified books. As Gaines insisted: “The brave people

of the West need no other preparation than what their own strong arms, good rifles, and sound hearts will at the moment furnish.”

To counter this outdated Minuteman tradition, Scott set to work creating the basis for a trained professional army. His chief weapon between wars was the pen. He wrote drill instructions, tactical manuals for each branch of the service and, his magnum opus, the General Regulations for the Army (or Scott's Institutes, as he preferred to call it). In this handbook he codified and systematized all army procedures from baking bread to winning battles, with instructions along the way as to how to clean uniforms, pack knapsacks and conduct court martials. A modern business historian has called the book "the first comprehensive management manual published in the United States," and it has even been claimed that the operating manual for the Baltimore and Ohio railroad was patterned after it.

Despite these later accolades, many of Scott's fellow officers, whose experience was largely gained in fighting Indians, scoffed at such impractical “scientific” notions, which they dismissed as unsuitable to American conditions. Courage and energy, they insisted, were far more important than book learning.

They had a point. Later, in the 1830's, when Scott was put in command of the war against the Seminole Indians in Florida, he devised an elaborate scheme to trap the Indians in a double envelopment similar to that employed by Hannibal at Cannae. It failed, of course. The swamps of Florida were not the plains of Tuscany and the Seminoles easily slipped out of Scott's clumsy trap. Back in Washington, Andrew Jackson, now President, and himself a seasoned Indian fighter grumbled: “It is the first time that a scientific combined military movement has been attempted against Indians, and I hope ... it will be the last.”

But Scott's critics were locked into the past. The era of Indian fighting was drawing to a close; more and more the American military would be required to fight that European style warfare which Scott had made his life study. His great opportunity came with the war with Mexico. Although Scott did not approve of the war (nor, for that matter, did Grant) this war was his chance to put into practice the study of a lifetime

He almost missed it. Although by this time he had risen to Commanding General of the Army and seemed the logical choice to lead it into Mexico, President Polk was reluctant to assign him to the command. He doubted whether the sixty-year-old general was sufficiently vigorous for such a campaign and feared that he was too “scientific and visionary in his ways.” Scott, like Zachary Taylor, was a Whig and the Democrat Polk was all too aware of how Andrew Jackson and William Henry Harrison had ridden their military success into the White House.

On further reflection, Polk considered that Scott, if successful, might neutralize Taylor's growing popularity and perhaps divide the Whigs. Furthermore, as a wily advisor suggested, Polk could allow Scot to win the war and then find some excuse to “take the wind out of his sails.”

The unwary general set sail full of gratitude for the President's professions of confidence. His strategic plan was simple and direct: land at Vera Cruz and head straight for Mexico City, following the path blazed by Cortez three centuries earlier. (Could he have been influenced by Prescott's Conquest of Mexico which had been recently published?)

The strategy might be simple but its execution was full of perils. Two mountain ranges lay between the coast and the capital, and the 280-mile National Highway was defended by a Mexican army far from contemptible. Considerably larger than Scott's force, its officers had been schooled in their country's endemic civil wars and some had even used Scott's manuals to train their soldiers, who were largely peasants accustomed to obeying orders and enduring hardships. They were fighting on home ground, with all its advantages in supply and familiarity. I won't burden this group with a battle-by-battle narrative of Scott's epic march. But it should be pointed out that in order to succeed Scott had to win every battle; losing even one would have proved fatal.

His tactics were straight out of the textbooks he himself had written: scout the terrain carefully; preserve the initiative by compelling the enemy to respond to his moves; maintain the elements of deception and surprise; and avoid frontal attacks in favor of turning movements. Above all, he had to keep his eye on the main goal and not be distracted by secondary targets, however tempting.

Yet he was not always a slave to the book (even if he did write it). At one point he found himself deep in Mexican territory unable to spare the men to guard his supply line and lines of retreat. This was his nightmare scenario which freshman plebes at the Academy were taught to avoid. Scott simply threw away the book and continued his march, living off the country.

President Polk was appalled at this “great military error” and a greater authority, the aged Duke of Wellington, declared: “Scott is lost,” but his audacity was not lost on junior officers, such as Lee, Grant and Sherman, who, decades later, would model their own campaigns on that of Scott's.

It was an impressive model to follow: in six months he marched almost 300 miles, fought seven major battles against larger armies that were entrenched in positions of their own choosing. The Duke of Wellington was reported to have said that for this campaign “unsurpassed in military annals,” Scott had proven himself “the greatest living soldier.” Scott himself gave full credit to that bastion of military professionalism, West Point. “I will say to my dying bed that but for the Military Academy I never could have entered the basin of Mexico.”

President Polk disagreed. He claimed that the gallant American soldiers could have won the war “if there was not an officer among them.” Within a few months the vindictive president managed to contrive an excuse to strip Scott from his command and recall him to Washington, far from his scene of triumph. Scott, of course, would continue as Commanding General of the Army and would retain that position through the first year of the Civil War. By that time, he was 75 years old and unable to mount a horse without the aid of a stepladder. Yet he was still competent enough to supervise the raising of the immense army which the secession crisis required.

What to do with that army was a question to which he gave considerable thought, based on his experience over the past half century. The Anaconda Plan he devised (although he never used that name) was designed to end the war with a minimum of fighting, for he was convinced that the secession impulse was actually weak but that an invasion of the South, with bloody battles, would only inflame Southern nationalism and lead to a long and possibly disastrous war. Consequently, he proposed cutting the Confederacy off from the world by blockading its coasts and by seizing the Mississippi and Ohio rivers. Thus isolated, the South would stew in its own juice, while time would allow for sober second thoughts to prevail.

This strategy of masterly inactivity overestimated the patience of the North and underestimated the determination of the South. With Northern newspapers and politicians screaming “On to Richmond,” the temptation to strike a military blow against the Rebels proved irresistible and that, as Scott had predicted, unleashed a long and bloody war.

It was not the sort of war his experience had prepared him to direct, and before the year was over he was eased out of command, leaving the war to be fought by the younger officers he himself had trained. His half-century military career was over.

And with that, his memory began to fade from the public consciousness. The hero of two wars, the conqueror of Mexico who professionalized our army, is remembered, if at all, by the derisive nickname: “Old Fuss and Feathers.”

The late historian, T. Harry Williams suggested a reason for this neglect. He divided American military heroes into two categories: The Macs and the Ikes. The Ikes, such as Zachary Taylor, U.S. Grant and, of course, Dwight Eisenhower, embodied democratic values in their behavior. Taylor dispensed with uniforms and medals and would stroll through camp, often unrecognized, and chat with his men. Grant, famously, dressed in a private's uniform, with his general's stars pinned to his shoulder straps

The Macs: George McClellan, Douglas MacArthur and Scott, demanded all the perks and deference due to their exalted rank. Scott, according to Grant, “always wore all the uniform prescribed or allowed by law,” and, like McClellan, made sure the soldiers were lined up to cheer him as he rode by. Americans may respect the Macs, but they love the Ikes.

And, it must be admitted, Scott was not particularly loveable. Vain, contentious and quarrelsome, he engaged in bitter feuds with fellow officers, politicians, Secretaries of War and Presidents throughout his career. Proud, pompous, petulant and pedantic, he held himself aloof, even to his friends, History is often unjust, and it seems a

shame that Scott's personal quirks and foibles should have obscured the memory of his many accomplishments.

Even those accomplishments seem less significant with the passing years. Americans revere those heroes who fought for a noble cause: Washington for liberty and independence; Grant for Freedom and Union; Eisenhower to save civilization from a new barbarism. But to fight for Texas? It doesn't seem to rise to quite the same exalted level. And Scott's earlier service in the War of 1812 sounds no trumpets either, since to the public mind its causes seem enigmatic and its results inconclusive. Not even the current bicentennial commemoration seems to arouse much interest or enthusiasm.

It seems a shame, though, that Scott's reputation has been reduced to a derogatory nickname.

Old Fuss and Feathers deserves better.

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