COMMONLIT

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Siege of Vicksburg: A Tale of Two Generals

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After the election of Abraham Lincoln, the American Civil War broke out (1861-1865). The country divided into the Confederacy, which consisted of eleven Southern states, and the remaining Northern states, called the Union. The Siege of Vicksburg was the final battle in the Vicksburg Campaign of the Civil War, a series of battles in which the Union fought to take control of a fortress city held by the Confederates. In this text, Mike Kubic, a former correspondent of Newsweek magazine, discusses the lives and strategies of the opposing generals of this battle.

As you read, take note of the similarities and differences that exist between the two generals discussed.

[1] Charles Dickens' famous opening lines of *A Tale of Two Cities* — "it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness" — could have as well been written about the greatest American tragedy that started less than two years after the book was published: the 1861-65 American Civil War. By far the bloodiest conflict in U.S. history, it put to rest the shameful institution of slavery, but it cost almost one million lives.

"First at Vicksburg" by Unknown is in the public domain.

The longest and one of the most bitterly fought campaigns of the war was over the control of Vicksburg, a small town in Mississippi that was of major strategic importance for both the Union and the Confederacy.

The town, about 210 miles north of the Gulf of Mexico, was perched atop steep hills overlooking a 180-degree bend in the Mississippi River. It was heavily defended by Southern infantry,[1] navy, and artillery,[2] and was so well-protected by high bluffs[3] and difficult terrain that it was called "the Gibraltar[4] of the West."

This nearly impregnable[5] position made Vicksburg a major trump in the South's

weak hand.

[5] Economically, it was a bottleneck that stopped the Northern shipments of food and other products from reaching New Orleans, and from there the lucrative[6] markets in Europe. While Northern commerce suffered, Southern ships with tobacco and cotton could sail to Britain and France and return with desperately needed weapons and ammunition.

And militarily, Vicksburg was a robust[7] bulwark[8] against any attempt to separate the Confederacy from the slave states in the West. As President Abraham Lincoln recognized already in 1861, Vicksburg was "the key" to the Union's victory: "We can take all the northern ports of the Confederacy," he said, "and they can defy us from Vicksburg."

In one of the unintended ironies that happen in wars, the Union's seizure and the Confederacy's defense of Vicksburg were entrusted to two generals that had seemed to be fated to fight side by side, only to join the opposite sides of the conflict.

The two men were the Union's Ulysses S. Grant and the Confederacy's John C. Pemberton.

Grant was born in 1822 in the river town of Point Pleasant, Ohio. As a child he was shy and an indifferent student but his father, a tannery[9] operator, managed to get him a West Point[10] appointment.

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1. soldiers marching or fighting on foot
2. large-caliber weapons used in warfare on land
3. steep cliffs or banks
4. a British crown colony consisting of a fortress and seaport located near the tip of Spain
5. **Impregnable** ***(adjective)*** unable to be captured or broken into
6. **Lucrative** ***(adjective)*** producing a great deal of profit
7. **Robust** ***(adjective)*** strong and healthy
8. a defensive wall
9. A "tannery" is where animal hides are tanned, or prepared in the process of making leather.
10. a U.S. military academy

[10] According to Winston Groom's book *Vicksburg*, 1863, Grant excelled at the Academy only in heavy drinking and horseback riding; graduated with average grades; and "was a most unmilitary-looking officer." Taciturn,[11] unpretentious, and only 5 feet 8 inches tall, Grant "often dressed in a plain blue suit and a felt hat" without any gold braid and epaulettes[12] to mark his rank.

Pemberton was born in 1814 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to a wealthy Quaker[13] family, and in some ways was just the opposite of the Ohioan. Pemberton was educated in the best private schools; grew up to be six feet tall, slender, handsome, and a good talker; and, in the opinion of many women, a charmer. After a year at the University of Pennsylvania, his mother arranged for him to get a West Point appointment from none other than President Andrew Jackson.

But at the Academy, Pemberton did no better than Grant, who graduated six years later than the Philadelphian. Like the Ohioan, Pemberton was a mediocre student who learned to like whiskey so well he was almost expelled in his senior year. And as young lieutenants, both Pemberton and Grant followed similar paths for a time.

They both married daughters of wealthy Southerners. They both fought with distinction in the Mexican-American War[14] and were promoted in the field. Grant was so impressed by Pemberton's conduct in the Army that he admiringly wrote in his memoirs, "[a] more conscientious, honorable man never lived."

But after the campaign in Mexico, their careers split. The well-connected Philadelphian won more promotions in the Seminole wars[15] in Florida while Grant, despite his reputation as a fierce warrior, was assigned to a humdrum post in California. Bored and disgruntled, he drank so much that he was given a choice of

11. **Taciturn** ***(adjective)*** reserved or uncommunicative in speech; saying little
12. ornamental shoulder pieces, typically found on higher-ranked military uniforms
13. A "Quaker" refers to a member of the Religious Society of Friends, a Christian movement committed to peaceful principles.
14. The Mexican-American War was an armed conflict between the United States and the United Mexican States following the U.S. annexation of Texas, lasting from 1846-1848.
15. The Seminole Wars were three conflicts in Florida between the U.S. Army and the various groups of Native Americans and African Americans who settled in Florida in the early 18th century.

resigning or being court-martialed.[16] He left the Army in 1854 and spent the next five years trying — with little success — to make a living as a farmer, a rent collector, and finally a clerk in his father's store.

[15] It was only the Southern artillery's barrage[17] on Fort Sumter[18] on April 12, 1861 that put the two men back on the same career path — but this time, they took the opposite directions.

Grant wrote a letter to the Department of War offering to return in service.

Pemberton hesitated for a week. Then he resigned his commission and joined, as a lieutenant colonel, the Confederate Army in Virginia.

Once again, the Union's top brass[19] failed to acknowledge Grant's exceptional talent as a soldier. It ignored his repeated offers to volunteer for almost a year before putting him in charge of an Illinois regiment that badly lacked discipline and training.

But when he accomplished the task with remarkable speed and success — and after the Union had suffered an embarrassing defeat in the Battle of the Bull Run[20] — the Ohioan was given three more regiments to train and promoted to brigadier general.[21]

[20] It was the same rank that Pemberton, who had found a supporter in the Confederate President Jefferson Davis, achieved after just two months in the Confederate Army. Soon afterwards, his and Grant's careers were brought together by the Confederacy's success in blocking Northern ships from sailing down the Mississippi.

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16. when someone from the armed services is accused of offenses against military law and must appear before a judicial court
17. concentrated artillery bombardment over an area
18. The Battle of Fort Sumter was the battle that officially began the American Civil War.
19. "Top brass" refers to the highest leader, specifically in the military.
20. considered one of the first main battles of the American Civil War
21. a rank of officer above colonel and below major general

In November 1861, the Union's commanding general, Henry Halleck, put Grant in charge of the Army of Tennessee with headquarters in Cairo, Illinois, and ordered him to clear the river of Confederate strong points including, above all, Vicksburg. And in October 1862, Pemberton was made the commander of the Confederate Army of Mississippi and sent to Jackson, Mississippi, with orders to keep Vicksburg in Confederate hands.

What followed was a campaign that pitted Grant's genius as a military strategist and combat commander against Pemberton's organizational skills and the awesome fighting morale and bravery of his Southern troops.

The Campaign and Siege

Grant, with more than 60,000 troops, first invaded south Kentucky to prevent it from joining the Confederacy, and then removed several Confederate posts north of Vicksburg. To bypass the formidable defenses around the superbly fortified[22] town, he first tried to dig a canal that would have made an attack on the town possible without braving the Confederate guns. That plan failed when the canal could not be made deep enough to change the flow of the river.

Next, Grant tried to sail specially built Navy boats past the Southern defenses and land troops downstream of the town. That gambit[23] also failed in a Confederate barrage that destroyed the Northern fleet. Finally, Grant marched his troops around Vicksburg, crossed the river farther south, and conducted a brilliant campaign that is still studied at military academies.

[25] Turning north, he overran three Confederate strongholds, and on May 16, 1863, he reached the Champion Hill farm, the main obstacle before Vicksburg. Two days later, he laid a siege to the town that lasted 45 days and sealed the South's defeat in the Civil War.

Grant's encirclement of the Southern defenses presented Pemberton with a dilemma. His orders from Jefferson Davis were to "hold Vicksburg, if necessary,

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22. **Fortify** ***(verb)*** to strengthen a place with defensive works so as to protect it against attack
23. **Gambit** ***(noun)*** a maneuver by which one seeks to gain an advantage

house by house." But Confederate General Albert S. Johnston, his immediate superior, sent Pemberton an urgent order to "evacuate Vicksburg if it's not too late" or else, "ultimately surrender… [I]nstead of losing both troops and a place, we must, if possible, save the troops."

It is not clear whether Pemberton had a real chance to break out of the encirclement, but his decision was to withdraw his men into the fortifications surrounding Vicksburg and fight rather than run.

And so the combat continued. Grant's artillery, about two hundred guns strong, fired regularly at the Confederate positions in and around the town. The heavy, day-and-night bombardment forced the Rebel troops to live in their trenches and the 4,500 Vicksburg residents to move into deep caves in the surrounding hills.

The federal infantry from time to time tried to storm the Confederate parapets[24] only to be thrown back by the dug-in Southerners and, in one instance, suffering 3,000 casualties — five times more than the Rebels. But while in time Grant's army was running low on food, the besieged troops and the town folk were increasingly starving.

[30] On June 28, Pemberton received a persuasive letter from a Confederate soldier who said he was speaking for many of his comrades and complained about the lack of food. "If you can't feed us," he wrote, "then you had better surrender us." The next day, Pemberton consulted with his senior officers and decided to accept the soldier's advice.

At 3 p.m. on July 3, dressed in his best new uniform, he rode out to meet Grant to negotiate conditions for ending the siege. When Grant insisted on "unconditional surrender," Pemberton stiffly replied, "I can assure you, sir, you will bury many more of your men before you will enter Vicksburg."

According to Groom's book, "the two of them then moved into the shade of a large oak tree, with Grant chewing on an unlit cigar and Pemberton munching on a straw," and Grant agreed to offer Pemberton a compromise by 10 p.m.

Grant's proposal, described in a letter, was generous: Pemberton's nearly 30,000

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24. protective walls or earth defenses along the top of a trench

troops would be paroled and allowed to leave Vicksburg without their weapons, and their officers could keep their swords and horses. Pemberton's letter of capitulations[25] reached Grant after midnight, and the next morning — a day after the Confederate defeat at Gettysburg — the Rebels in Vicksburg hoisted white flags.

Grant's victory did not come easy. His losses were 17,210 killed, wounded, and missing soldiers, almost 4,000 more than Pemberton's. But he won the praise of President Lincoln as "a general that fights," was put in command of all Union armies, and in 1868 was elected (and in 1872 reelected) the 18th President of the United States.

[35] An additional distinction was the phenomenal success of his memoirs, which sold $450,000 — $1 million in today's money — worth of copies. Grant died a wealthy man in New York in 1885.

Pemberton resigned from the Confederate Army, lost his U.S. citizenship, and moved to Virginia where his mother had bought him a small farm. Vilified as a traitor in both South and North, he died in 1881 in Philadelphia.

25. "Capitulation" is the action of surrendering or ceasing to resist an opponent or demand.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which TWO statements identify the central ideas of the text?
    A. Despite being raised differently, the two generals has similar successes and struggles during their military careers.
    B. John C. Pemberton did not have to work as hard for his position as general due to his family's wealth and prestige.
    C. Ulysses S. Grant was an unmotivated general and succeed in the Siege of Vicksburg by pure luck.
    D. Ulysses S. Grant believed that John C. Pemberton was the better soldier despite his victory in the Siege of Vicksburg.
    E. Ulysses S. Grant's triumph at Vicksburg was a turning point in his career, which ultimately led to him becoming a U.S. President, a successful author, and a wealthy man.
    F. John C. Pemberton's surrender to the Union was considered a weakness and he lived out the rest of his life looked down upon by the North and the South.

2. PART B: Which TWO quotes from the text best support the answers to Part A?

    A. "Pemberton was educated in the best private schools; grew up to be six feet tall, slender, handsome and a good talker; and, in the opinion of many women, a charmer." (Paragraph 11)

    B. "But at the Academy, Pemberton did no better than Grant, who graduated six years later than the Philadelphian. Like the Ohioan, Pemberton was a mediocre student who learned to like whiskey so well he was almost expelled in his senior year." (Paragraph 12)

    C. "Grant was so impressed by Pemberton's conduct in the Army that he admiringly wrote in his memoirs, '[a] more conscientious, honorable man never lived.'" (Paragraph 13)

    D. "Grant's victory did not come easy. His losses were 17,210 killed, wounded, and missing soldiers, almost 4,000 more than Pemberton's." (Paragraph 34)

    E. "But he won the praise of President Lincoln as 'a general that fights,' was put in command of all Union armies, and in 1868 was elected (and in 1872 reelected) the 18th President of the United States." (Paragraph 34)

    F. "Vilified as a traitor in both South and North, he died in 1881 in Philadelphia." (Paragraph 36)

3. PART A: What does "unconditional surrender" mean in paragraph 31?

    A. When no guarantees are given to a surrendering party

    B. When basic rights are assured to the surrendering party

    C. When the surrendering party sets the terms for their surrender

    D. When a surrender is achieved through inhumane means

4. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
    A. "'you will bury many more of your men before you will enter Vicksburg'" (Paragraph 31)
    B. "Pemberton's nearly 30,000 troops would be paroled and allowed to leave Vicksburg without their weapons" (Paragraph 33)
    C. "Pemberton's letter of capitulations reached Grant after midnight, and the next morning — a day after the Confederate defeat at Gettysburg" (Paragraph 33)
    D. "Grant's victory did not come easy. His losses were 17,210 killed, wounded and missing soldiers, almost 4,000 more than Pemberton's." (Paragraph 34)

5. PART A: Why was the Siege of Vicksburg an important battle in the American Civil War?
    A. Vicksburg had a large civilian population that was at risk due to the war.
    B. If acquired, Vicksburg would act as a protective wall for the North.
    C. Vicksburg was the location of a prestigious military academy.
    D. The position of Vicksburg allowed the South to control the movement of goods.

6. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
    A. "The town, about 210 miles north of the Gulf of Mexico, was perched atop steep hills overlooking a 180-degree bend in the Mississippi River." (Paragraph 3)
    B. "This nearly impregnable position made Vicksburg a major trump in the South's weak hand." (Paragraph 4)
    C. "Economically, it was a bottleneck that stopped the Northern shipments of food and other products from reaching New Orleans" (Paragraph 5)
    D. "And militarily, Vicksburg was a robust bulwark against any attempt to separate the Confederacy from the slave states in the West." (Paragraph 6)

7. How does the author's description of Ulysses S. Grant evolve throughout the text?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Why is it important to the text and the representation of the American Civil War that two generals who should have been fighting side by side became opponents?

2. President Lincoln described Ulysses S. Grant as "a general that fights," however, his losses were 17,210 soldiers, 4,000 more than the opposing side (Paragraph 34). What are the costs of war and when do they cease to justify the end results?

3. In the context of the text, how are we changed by war? How did the Siege of Vicksburg contribute to the outcome of the American Civil War? What was gained and what was lost? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

4. In the context of the text, why do people succeed? How did Ulysses S. Grant achieve success in the Siege of Vicksburg? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.