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The Training Ground: Grant, Lee, Sherman, and Davis in the Mexican War, 1846–1848

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and decisions that result in world-changing events.

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Dugard, Martin. *The Training Ground: Grant, Lee, Sherman, and Davis in the Mexican War, 1846–1848*. New York: Little, Brown, 2008. 446pp. \$29.99

The English novelist C. S. Forester once observed, concerning soldiers in war, that it was a “coincidence that when destiny had so much to do she should find tools of such high quality ready to hand.” This comment aptly describes the human story line woven throughout *The Training Ground*, Martin Dugard’s spirited and nearly blow-by-blow account of the major battles of the Mexican War. Dugard, author of *The Last Voyage of Columbus* (2005), has written a robust narrative of this conflict describing President James K. Polk’s ambition to expand the territory of the United States. Reaching beyond the formal history, Dugard uses the strong personalities, individual battlefield accomplishments, and close relationships among a small group of professional soldiers who actually fought the war to bring his story to life.

These soldiers, West Point graduates and well-drilled junior officers in a meager U.S. Army, were the human tools “ready to hand” in 1846. Ulysses S. Grant, Robert E. Lee, William Sherman, Jefferson Davis, Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson, and others with names remembered today were first exposed to the hardships and brutality of warfare in the conflict with Mexico. The experience gained in combat tactics, engineering, and logistics by this

“brotherhood” hardened its veterans and taught them to lead, lessons that would be evident during the much more horrific bloodshed that was to take place in the U.S. Civil War.

Dugard relates numerous stories of these young officers and their friendships: of Lee assisted by a young George McClellan and supported by Jackson’s mobile gun batteries; “Sam” Grant and Davis charging together into battle; “Pete” (actually James) Longstreet serving as best man at Grant’s postwar wedding; the calmness of Grant and his keen battlefield observation under fire; the savagery of Jackson’s energy; the frustration of Sherman while posted in California; and the courageous, almost supernatural, professionalism of Lee.

In the end, Mexico City and Mexico were conquered, and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed in July 1848, ended the war. Mexico lost vast portions of its northern states, including California, while the still-young United States nearly doubled in size.

The spare and honest Grant wrote of his experiences in Mexico, “I would like to see a truthful history written. Such a history will do full credit to the courage, endurance, and soldierly ability of the American citizen, no matter what section of the country he hailed from, or in what ranks he fought.” As Dugard’s brisk and engrossing story forecasts, the competence of this small brotherhood would be put to the fullest test during the long and bitter conflict between the states. This later war was fought with great determination and violence by the men whom destiny had trained on the same ground—the West Point veterans of the Mexican War.

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