

**AGENT OF DESTINY:
THE LIFE AND TIMES OF GENERAL WINFIELD SCOTT¹**

REVIEWED BY MAJOR E. A. HARPER²

General Winfield Scott is widely remembered as Old Fuss and Feathers, a worn out general who, at the beginning of the Civil War, was so obese and decrepit that he could not even mount his horse.³ John S. D. Eisenhower laments this memory and seeks to change it in *Agent of Destiny: The Life and Times of General Winfield Scott*. Eisenhower portrays Scott as a gallant, courageous, and vain man; a master of military art and science but a naïve and fumbling politician. The painting that graces the dust jacket of the book is telling in the author's view of his subject. He starts his book with an emphatic sentence: "He was an astonishing man, one of the most astonishing in American history."⁴ Eisenhower's goal in writing *Agent of Destiny* is clearly to rehabilitate Scott's reputation in the modern American mind. He meets that goal admirably, though a lack of documentation calls into question the work's scholarly value. A second, though by no means secondary, effect comes from telling Scott's story. Eisenhower also tells the story of the youth of the United States of America. *Agent of Destiny* is valuable to the military officer as a study in successful military leadership, and in the evolution of the U.S. Armed Forces and the nation itself.

Eisenhower breaks no new ground with this work, but rather retells Scott's story with a fresh, positive spin. Unfortunately, his documentation is scant and inconsistent. He relies heavily on secondary sources, especially two biographies of Scott⁵ and histories of the army and the nation. He also draws heavily from the general's own memoirs.⁶ Eisenhower

1. JOHN S.D. EISENHOWER, *AGENT OF DESTINY: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF GENERAL WINFIELD SCOTT* (1997).

2. United States Marine Corps. Written while assigned as a student, 48th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's School, United States Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

3. One of several photographs of Scott, along with pictures and portraits of his contemporaries, included in the book bears the caption: "Winfield Scott in 1861. This image, showing Scott in his old age, is unfortunately the one that has most frequently characterized him in the public mind." EISENHOWER, *supra* note 1, at 243.

4. *Id.* at xiii.

5. CHARLES ELLIOT WINSLOW, *WINFIELD SCOTT, THE SOLDIER AND THE MAN* (1937); EDWARD D. MANSFIELD, *THE LIFE AND TIMES OF GENERAL WINFIELD SCOTT* (1852).

attributes opinions and judgments to the historical figures that march through the story, usually without the slightest documentation as to authenticity. When he does cite to an authoritative, primary source, it is too often through one of the secondary sources. For instance, notes 3, 6, and 7, in chapter seven cite original letters from participants in the event in question, but only through the secondary sources of Elliot's biography and Henry Adams's history⁷. Notes 1, 4, 8, and 9, of that same chapter are informational footnotes, rather than source citations, and even these offer unproved facts.

Elsewhere, Eisenhower gives casualty statistics for many battles, but rarely cites their sources.⁸ In criticizing the conduct of one of Scott's rivals, General Edmund Gaines, during the Second Seminole War, Eisenhower asserts that the garrison Gaines commanded was relieved when the Seminole enemy treated for peace, "despite their later bravado."⁹ Eisenhower uses this episode to attack his subject's antagonist, yet offers no authority for the assertion. This habit leaves the reader concerned with the authenticity of the facts from which Eisenhower's often insightful conclusions are drawn. Eisenhower's haphazard documentation and heavy reliance on secondary sources call into question the credibility of his work. That said, this review is of the General Scott whom Eisenhower creates, a skilled and popular commander who played a pivotal role in the development of America.

The shortcomings in authority aside, *Agent of Destiny* is a well-written, enlightening, and entertaining book. Eisenhower tells his story with flair. He is skilled at concisely explaining historical events and succinctly placing them in perspective. Eisenhower relates the battles and campaigns—military, political, and social—with an obvious knowledge of the subject. He translates the action into a clear picture for the reader; there is enough detail for depth, but not so much as to wallow in a quagmire of minutiae. Eisenhower provides useful, often unique, maps and sketches.

6. WINFIELD SCOTT, LIEUTENANT GENERAL, LLD, MEMOIRS (1864). Of course, Scott's memoirs are a primary source, but they must be viewed skeptically, as they were written at the end of his life, with his memory fading and a tendency towards aggrandizement.

7. Henry Adams, *History of the United States during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison* (1890).

8. For example, on page 94, in describing the results of the Battle of Lundy's Lane, at which Scott was wounded and became a hero and nationally prominent figure, he puts the number of British killed, wounded, and missing at 876 and American losses at 861. No sources for these statistics are given.

9. EISENHOWER, *supra* note 1, at 156.

The illustration of the growth of America during Scott's military service is particularly creative and insightful.¹⁰ However, as with almost any work of history, more maps would have been helpful, especially in the portion regarding the Mexican-American War.

If America was born on 4 July 1776, its infancy lasted until the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Puberty took place from 1803-1865 and the Civil War, adolescence from 1865 until 1914 and World War I, when America came of age as a young adult. The United States reached full maturity in 1945, following World War II, and enjoys its greatest strength at present. More than any single person, Scott was responsible for shepherding the young state through its formative, pubescent years. He served on active duty under fourteen presidents, thirteen as a general officer.¹¹ He was a hero in one war, a conqueror in another, and an elder statesman in his last. The very title of the book illustrates that Scott was instrumental in the growth and maturation of America. Eisenhower equates the presidents, collectively, to the architect of the nation, while Scott served as the builder, the one who carried out the master plans.¹²

One of the key threads of the book's nation building theme is the development of the Army as a professional force and as a cradle of political leaders. As America matured, so did its armed forces. An examination of Scott's life illustrates his own growth and that of the military and the nation.

Scott was perhaps the nation's first regular, professional soldier. As such, he disdained the militia forces that were then so prevalent in national defense. Ironically, his first military service was with the Virginia militia, when he joined, but was never mustered into, a troop of cavalry from Petersburg in 1807. Scott served as a corporal, leading a small detachment of men and eventually making prisoners of a group of British sailors illegally ashore at Lynnhaven Bay. He was soon ordered home, and he left the troop of which he had never been an official part.¹³ Such was the embryonic nature of the armed forces at that time, an ambitious young man could lead a detachment against the enemy without ever really joining up!

10. *Id.* at 7.

11. *Id.* at 14.

12. *Id.* at 13.

13. *Id.* at 8.

Due to hostilities with Great Britain, which would eventually ripen into the War of 1812, the Army's authorized strength grew significantly in 1808. Among the first to seek a commission was Winfield Scott. The way in which he went about it is truly telling of the infant state of both the Army and the country. Scott sought an interview with President Thomas Jefferson himself, requesting an appointment in the 2d Light Artillery Regiment, as a captain, no less. He received his commission and proceeded to make rank at a meteoric pace. At the outbreak of hostilities in 1812, Scott was a lieutenant colonel, commanding a good portion of the 2d Light Artillery on the Canadian frontier of Western New York. He achieved this despite near dismissal from the service for insubordination the year before. In March 1814, Scott was promoted to brigadier general and commanded at the Battles of Chippewa and Lundy's Lane.

Following the war, Scott was one of only three general officers selected to remain on the list of regular officers, and he was charged with the Eastern Command. In the space of seven years, he had risen from company grade officer to the third (or second, it was always a point of contention for the vainglorious general) ranking officer in the entire Army. Scott's exploits supported rapid advancement. It was the chaotic state of the Army that supplied the opportunity. There were so few capable military leaders that Scott could become a hero and be promoted in rank at an extraordinary rate. The "Old Guard" of officer-veterans of the Revolutionary War was no longer up to the effort. Young Turks like Scott eventually replaced them. Scott found himself on the other end of that cycle in 1861, when he was pushed aside by younger, more able officers.

The distinction of regular soldier was important. Regulars were trained professionals, while volunteer militiamen usually had only rudimentary drill and tactics training. Regulars could be counted on to stand in formation in the face of the often-murderous musket fire of the day. By contrast, though often brave individuals, the militia units were not so reliable during a battle. When Scott's troops faced British regulars at the Battle of Chippewa, they were mistaken for militia by the British commander. When he realized his mistake, the Englishman is said to have exclaimed: "Those are regulars, by God!"¹⁴ Scott's troops defeated the British, in one of the few victorious engagements of the war.

For the rest of his career, Scott would command a core of regular soldiers augmented by volunteers. In the Black Hawk and Seminole Wars of

14. *Id.* at 84.

the 1830s, militia swelled the austere regular forces. Many of these volunteers would go on to fame and fortune,¹⁵ but until then they were just militia to the regulars. Scott had to abandon a campaign in the Second Seminole War because the term of enlistment of his volunteers was up, and they preferred to return home to their families and farms rather than continue to slog through the swamps of Florida.

Scott's crowning military achievement could easily have never occurred, because of the nature of his largely militia army. On 13 May 1847, the one-year term of service for seven regiments of militia expired. These seven regiments comprised over half of Scott's force, which had just taken Veracruz, Mexico and was half way to Mexico City, and the Halls of Montezuma. Scott was forced to send these men home to Tennessee, Illinois, Georgia, and Alabama. He was left with only 7000 troops, in the middle of the country with which he was at war. Scott was eventually reinforced and took Mexico City, ending the Mexican-American War. The very fact that a conquering army could melt away on the verge of ultimate victory illustrates that this country, while capable of foreign campaigning, still had an immature military system.

The Mexican-American War was Scott's defining moment, but a vast array of the men who served under him, both as regulars and militia, would go on to even greater fame. Zachary Taylor and Franklin Pierce both served as Scott's subordinate commanders, and later were elected President of the United States. James Buchanan was Secretary of State and would also later hold the nation's highest office. Of course, many of the great generals of the Civil War served under Scott, and even on his staff, including Ulysses S. Grant (another eventual president), Robert E. Lee, George Meade, Joe Johnston, and P.G.T. Beauregard. Scott commanded, mentored, crossed paths, and occasionally crossed swords, with an extraordinary number of the nation's political and military elite.

One of Scott's final important decisions regarding the militia seemed innocuous enough, but had immense consequences. He was determined to use the regular forces to their utmost abilities at the outbreak of the Civil War. As General in Chief, he ordered all regular soldiers and officers to be concentrated in regular units, and denied permission to transfer to the state militia forces being raised. Commands and high rank were much easier to obtain in the new units, and the regular officers were eager to take advan-

15. Among the militia in the Black Hawk War was a young captain of the Illinois Mounted Volunteers named Abraham Lincoln. EISENHOWER, *supra* note 1, at 417 n.2.

tage. Scott's order had the unfortunate effect of stagnating the regular officers and placing less experienced soldiers in positions of high command. Rather than take command of a regiment or brigade of a state militia, a captain who had been in the service for many years was forced to remain as a company commander in the quiescent regular units. Ironically, Scott's well-intentioned order closed the window of opportunity through which he had rushed forty-five years earlier. It also bequeathed to the Union Army the command structure that proved so ineffective during the first part of the Civil War.

The need to raise so many new units showed that America still lacked a truly capable professional military force. However, that so many regular officers were frustrated with remaining in their units is evidence that, though not yet a major power, the United States was developing into one. From the birth of the nation to its adolescence, Scott led the military from a fledgling force in 1812 to an expeditionary power in Mexico to the brink of a true military machine during the Civil War.

Eisenhower's portrait of Scott is one of unparalleled military success, a brilliant and courageous officer who cared deeply for his men. It is also one of a pompous and vain general with political ambitions but lacking the skill and savvy to bring them to fruition. Eisenhower examines both sides of Scott's personality with an even hand. However, in his zeal to rehabilitate Scott, Eisenhower gives short treatment to Scott's part in failures and dwells on his successes.

An excellent example of Eisenhower's heavy pro-Scott bias lies in his treatment of Scott's command of the mission to remove the Cherokee nation from its homeland in the Southeast to the Oklahoma Territory. The entire ordeal is dealt with in a ten-page chapter, entitled *Along the Trail of Tears, A Sympathetic Scott Fails to Alleviate the Pain of the Cherokee as they Head West*.¹⁶ This speaks volumes as to Eisenhower's slant on Scott's role. Eisenhower takes pains to point out Scott's instructions ordering decent and humane treatment, including that "collection points were to be provided with shade, water, and security."¹⁷ He then blames the misery of the expatriated Indians on the excesses of the militia policing the movement. Scott exercised ultimate control over the operation, so he bears responsibility for its infamy. There is no little irony in the fact that while

16. *Id.* at 184.

17. *Id.* at 190.

Scott is not well remembered for his tremendous successes, neither is he remembered for his notorious failures.

Perhaps the most useful aspect of *Agent of Destiny* is Eisenhower's discussion of Scott as a superb soldier and leader. Courageous in battle, Scott led from the front during the War of 1812. His courage was not limited to facing enemy fire. When an outbreak of cholera struck his men during the Blackhawk War in 1831, Scott personally visited and cared for every one of his sick men daily, risking infection himself. Eisenhower states, in richly deserved, glowing admiration, "[I]f Scott had never accomplished another thing, he could be remembered for his conduct at this time. Combating a hidden force that could strike a man down without warning and subject him to excruciating death, Scott never wavered in seeing to the welfare of his men."¹⁸ Similarly, when the term of service ended for his militia in Mexico in 1847, he not only released them, but he expedited their departure so as to avoid the *vermito* (a tropical illness) season at Veracruz.

Courageous and caring, Scott also possessed the third attribute of a great military leader—boldness. Extremely well versed in military art and science, he was also an innovator. He was one of the first American officers to understand and employ the relatively new concept of light, or flying, artillery. Perhaps Scott's boldest stroke was to move inland from Veracruz through Jalapa and Puebla to Mexico City in 1847, without securing his supply line to the sea. In an era where travel was difficult and logistical support critical, secure lines to ensure ready resupply were considered essential. It was the rare general, such as Napoleon, who ventured beyond his lines of communication. Scott's daring gambit enabled him to advance on his ultimate objective in ample strength, despite his limited manpower resources. Ulysses S. Grant, a company commander in Scott's army, later used a similar strategy in his Vicksburg Campaign during the Civil War.¹⁹ Ultimately, of course, Scott was vindicated through conquest of Mexico City and victory in the Mexican-American War. He thereby refuted the aging Duke of Wellington, who had exclaimed: "Scott is lost. He has been carried away by success! He cannot take the city and he cannot fall back on his bases."²⁰

Eisenhower also recognizes the less flattering side of Scott's character. He explores in depth the general's greatest liabilities, his vanity and

18. *Id.* at 128.

19. RUSSELL F. WIEGLEY, *THE AMERICAN WAY OF WAR* 140 (1973).

20. EISENHOWER, *supra* note 1, at 261.

his carelessness in expressing himself. Scott always wore full dress uniform and fastidiously stood on the ceremony of rank. He challenged and was challenged to several duels over supposed insults to his pride and honor. At the outset of the Mexican-American War, Scott committed a blunder that exemplifies these two weaknesses. He addressed a letter to Secretary of War William Marcy regarding command of American forces on the Texas frontier. He complained that he, as the senior officer, should have command rather than the hero of several recent battles, and eventual president, Zachary Taylor. Marcy and President James K. Polk published the letter. Not only was Scott's vanity chided, his choice of words was derided. He began his letter, "As I sit down to a hasty plate of soup."²¹

While Scott was respected and admired as a soldier and a gentleman, he was never embraced by the public as a political figure. Perhaps it was his lack of guile, his opinionated manner, or his peacock air. When the Whig party nominated Scott as its candidate for president, a prominent Whig expressed concern. He conceded Scott's superiority as a soldier over other former military men who had become president, but he worried that Scott lacked "those attributes and qualities which make the people love him as they loved Harrison, Taylor, and Jackson."²²

Agent of Destiny achieves Eisenhower's goal of reminding the world that there is more to General Winfield Scott than his decrepit condition in 1861. But perhaps, in the end, it is exactly that memory which most accurately and most completely describes Scott. America's first professional officer remained loyal to the Union he had so long served, despite vicious attacks in his native Virginia.²³ He designed and advocated a militarily sound strategic concept, the Anaconda Plan,²⁴ that ultimately proved successful, but which was not politically feasible or acceptable at the time. Scott's long years of service and campaigning, along with the cares of command, had taken its toll. He suffered from several maladies contracted in Mexico, as well as from wounds received on the Canadian Frontier. General Winfield Scott was a gallant warrior, serving well past his prime, because nobody else could do the job.

21. *Id.* at 225.

22. *Id.* at 327.

23. Scott was burned in effigy by students at the University of Virginia and citizens in several cities in the Old Dominion. EISENHOWER, *supra* note 1, at 391.

24. The Anaconda Plan called for a Union blockade of the Confederacy. It relied on patience to bring to bear the overwhelming superiority in population and industrial base enjoyed by the Union. Neither the people nor the politicians of the North were willing to wait that long for victory. *See generally* WEIGLEY, *supra* note 19.

There are valuable lessons to be learned from Eisenhower's fresh look at this astonishing man. *Agent of Destiny* is a case study in immensely successful military leadership and abundant political failure. It is also the story of growth, of Scott and of the nation. The United States and its army toddled, walked, and then ran towards adolescence, suffering growing pains along the way. General Winfield Scott, with all his abilities and liabilities, was there for every step.

*Another star has faded, we will miss its brilliant glow
For the veteran Scott has ceased to be a soldier here below.
And the country which he honored, now feels a heart-felt woe,
As we toast his name in reverence, at Benny Haven's. Oh!*

-- A traditional West Point song²⁵

25. EISENHOWER, *supra* note 1, at vii.