

Book Review

Grant

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“I can’t spare this man. He fights”. [211] This may have been an apocryphal comment by Lincoln about Ulysses S. Grant in response to an army visitor who denounced him as bloodthirsty, reckless of human life, and unfit to lead troops. Also probably apocryphal is Lincoln recommending that his passive generals be supplied with Grant’s favorite alcoholic beverages, when Grant was criticized for drunkenness. In Ron Chernow’s massive biography of the great Civil War general and 18th US President, there is much about his character and actions that was contradictory. He was passive in social settings, yet strongly aggressive in military action, scrupulously honest yet surrounded in his life by scoundrels that he trusted implicitly, accused of racism but a strong defender of the freed slaves by his statements and actions as President, a man of a few words but a great raconteur when in the mood, a pithy writer of orders yet able to churn out thousands of words daily in his Civil War biography as he suffered from his mouth cancer and lay dying. He led the Union against the Confederacy, yet his wife Julia, from a strongly confederate family, kept slaves almost to the end of the Civil War.

There has never been a question about his stature as a Civil War general. Recent biographies of Grant have led to a revision of his standing as a person and as a President. These include Jean Edward Smith’s 2001 study which raised estimations of Grant’s effectiveness as President. Also reflecting his strength as President was *American Ulysses*, a recent biography by Ronald C. White. Parenthetically, in one survey of presidential historians ranking US Presidents, Grant was listed as 33rd in 2000 but moved up to 22nd in 2017- right behind John Quincy Adams. It should be noted that Grant was the only President serving two full consecutive terms between Andrew Jackson and Woodrow Wilson.

Chernow had already published biographies of Washington and Hamilton and now moved into the middle of the nineteenth century.

A portrait of Grant as a child would not have predicted the heights he attained. Born in 1822 in Southwestern Ohio and raised by a pious Methodist mother, Hannah, and a scheming father, Jesse. Several characteristics of the town in which he grew up included strong pro-slavery and anti-slavery people [8] and Grant later commented that many would have voted for Jefferson Davis rather than Lincoln. A biographer of Grant late in the nineteenth century noted that the town was so abusive of alcohol that to be temperate in that vicinity meant intoxication only two or three times a year. [10] Hiram Ulysses, his Christian names, was quiet and given to depression. Teased by other boys about his name, he discarded Hiram. The middle initial S was

added by the congressmen recommending him for a commission at West Point. Thus, we have US Grant, a patronymic and later indicative of Unconditional Surrender, his *modus operandi*, and wouldn't it have been embarrassing, if unlike, HST, FDR, and LBJ, he might have been remembered by the initials HUG?

Grant's father, Jesse, worked in a tannery run by Owen Brown, the father of THE John Brown, whom Jesse considered a fanatic and extremist although admitting his courage and purity.[5] Ulysses's character was closer to that of his mother who had a tendency to trust people and was even tempered. His father Jesse was a blusterer which later led to many conflicts with his son.

If you look at a \$50 bill, you will see the beefy face of President Grant. In fact, the young Grant was thin, only 117 lb and 5'2" when he entered West Point and, having eventually reached his full height of 5'8", was only about 140 lbs. during his active years in the military.

The contrast between the plebe Ulysses and the West Point commandant General Winfield Scott was remarkable. [20] Scott was in full dress with medal and braids, all 6'5" of him when he reviewed the plebes. Grant characteristically shunned fancy military dress, perhaps influenced by another general during Grant's activities in the Mexican War, Zachary Taylor, who frequently roamed alone on the battlefield and shunned military dress. When Secretary of War Stanton met Grant for the first time, he mistook Grant's medical director for him and pumped the medical Director's hand; Grant looked too ordinary and wasn't prepossessing [307]. At Appomattox, Grant appeared in a slouched hat, unbuttoned common soldier's blouse, sword hand in his pocket in contrast to Lee's spotless gray uniform, dress sword, buckskin gauntlets and high boots [506].

Ulysses was introduced to alcohol during a cholera epidemic when he was 11, his father having obtained a sweet blackberry cordial that presumably had medicinal qualities. Ulysses and his friends later frequently imbibed large quantities when his parents were off to church [11].

Working in his father's tannery, the young Grant was exposed to its blood and slime. Despite his(false) military reputation of being bloodthirsty, he could never eat meat unless it was free of blood or its juice.[15] Although even tempered, Grant had another peculiar characteristic that would aid him in his later military career: he seemed to revel in loud noise and at the age of two, took it in stride when Jesse dared a neighbor to fire a pistol near him [10]. He also became a great horseman, breaking in wild horses and riding without saddle or stirrups.[13]

At West Point, he was most proficient of his peers in horsemanship according to James

Longstreet, his classmate and a later foe, who also found him to have an uncanny ability to visualize chaotic fighting [24]. There must have been something to his character that, though subtle, stood out because another classmate predicted before graduation that if a great emergency would arise in the country, Ulysses would be the man to meet it [28].

At West Point, another classmate was Fred Dent who recommended that Grant meet his sister Julia in St. Louis [30]. The Dents had a large farm with slaves outside of St. Louis. Julia was a voracious reader who was well educated and wished to marry a soldier [31]. Colonel Frederick Dent, her father, was a reactionary wedded to the Southern ethics of slavery [34].

The Mexican War gave Grant familiarity with the behavior under fire of future generals on both the Union and Confederate side, detailed knowledge which he drew on later [50]. At Grant's wedding to Julia, James Longstreet was his best man and two groomsmen were later to surrender to Grant at Appomattox [62].

After the Mexican War Grant was assigned as a quartermaster and transferred to Oregon territory away from Julia. During his time in Oregon in the early 1850's, he entered several business ventures and characteristically lost money. For example, he and three other officers leased 100 acres to plant vegetables. Floods wrecked the crop and when the partners bought up chickens to ship to San Francisco, they perished en route. They sent packed ice to San Francisco which was selling for exorbitant prices there. The sailing vessel was detained by winds and the ice melted.[79]

While stationed in Oregon, Grant went on sprees of drinking, offending superior officer George McClellan who showed little patience with slipshod performance [81]. Reprimanded for drinking, he was forced to resign from the Army [85]. He was now in San Francisco and his appearance was seedy and he was out of money [88]. He had previously provided a loan to a fellow officer who then went into the banking business but vanished before Grant could get his money back [89]. He got back to St. Louis and Julia's family estate and tried farming on the property. His father in law, Colonel Dent, who owned the property, would not provide tools, seed and horses for him and he had to implore his father for the funds [93]. He became seemingly indolent and apathetic and was seen selling cords of wood in St. Louis street corners [94]. However, Julia, romanticizing whatever suffering she and her husband endured, announced one night to her family that she had dreamed that Grant would be President [95]. Grant developed a stoop working in the fields [102].

Jesse Grant despaired of Ulysses' failures in farming. Grant auctioned off his farming equipment and in the autumn of 1858 paced the streets of St. Louis looking for work [103]. Finally, Colonel Dent got him a position in St. Louis working with a relative in real estate but Grant lacked administrative skills and kept untidy records [104]. He lived in a bare room in the house of his partner and walked 12 miles every weekend to be with his family[104].Meanwhile, he was reading newspapers in his office analyzing battles in Italy and studying maps to determine mistakes in tactics. The real estate business collapsed. In the summer of 1859, Grant was looking for another job. Bedraggled and shabbily dressed, he finally acceded to his father's request to participate in the family business in Galena, Illinois in April 1860 where his brother Simpson was running a leather goods store but dying of tuberculosis and his other brother, Orvil, was erratic [109]. Despite the connection of Grant to Galena in many minds, he spent less than a year there and only went back later while he ran for President and for a few celebrations of his success as a General and President. While working in the family store there, he took little responsibility puffing on a clay pipe and refusing to function as a sales clerk, hardly knowing the price of merchandise [115].

It was only after South Carolina seceded late in 1860 that Grant developed a sense of purpose and when Jefferson Davis was inaugurated as President of the Confederacy angrily exclaimed that Davis and the whole gang ought to be hung [122]. He also dropped his stoop shoulder way of walking, improving his posture [124].

When volunteers were called for the Union in Galena, Grant presided over raising the first company [126]. Grant was fortunate in have several relationships with people assisted him in pursuing his career. One of them was Elihu Washburne, the Republican Congressman from Galena, who had served longer than any other House Republican [129]. Through Washburne, who had a close relationship with Lincoln, he got Grant an interview with the Governor of Illinois, who initially was unimpressed with Grant's shabby appearance, but he was assigned as a mustering officer [130]. Grant even went to Cincinnati to see George McClellan who snubbed him [136]. Finally appointed as a Colonel of a regiment in Mattoon, Illinois, Grant did a noteworthy job of organizing the regiment. Grant was a disciplinarian, having alcoholic soldiers lashed to baggage wagons or tree trunks until they sobered up [140]. In August 1861, Grant was made a Brigadier General thanks to Washburne's amicable relations with Lincoln [142].

Washburne later withstood intense pressure, working to prevent Grant's removal when

rumors of Grant's drinking and heavy Union losses after battles in Tennessee and Mississippi, such as at Shiloh, led some politicians to claim that Grant should be court martialed or shot [209]. That was when Lincoln indicated that he could not spare Grant.

Grant remained short of cash. He was assigned to Charles Fremont, commanding the area around Jefferson City, Missouri. A major who had known Grant during Mexican War days and worked on Fremont's staff highly recommended Grant to preside over the district of SE Missouri, although Fremont thought that Grant was of "unassuming character, not given to self-elation, but with dogged persistence and of iron will"[145]

A major decision for Grant was naming John Rawlins as chief of staff. Rawlins has been with him in Galena and made an impassioned speech at the meeting for volunteers that impressed Grant [148]. Rawlins became Grant's right hand man during the Civil War not the least of which was keeping Grant from alcohol by draconian rules [150]. Rawlins' vigilance in saving Grant from drink was an open secret in Washington [337]

There were many instances of Grant falling off the wagon, however, especially when he was away from Rawlins, but never during battles.

Another close associate, Adam Badeau, became Grant's secretary and authorized historian of Grant's military campaigns. Orville Babcock was also on his staff and later Grant continued to support Babcock when he was indicted for his part in the Whiskey Ring [806]. Many of Grant's close associates whom he trusted later tried to get the best of him.

Reaching Paducah, with many Confederate flags although Kentucky did not secede, Grant proclaimed that the army was there to defend them, leaving strict instructions to occupying soldiers not to plunder and respect the rights of citizens [155] Grant never behaved vindictively toward Southern people protecting local citizens from rough handling of soldiers. [222]

Chernow provided short portrayals of Grant associates; General Halleck was "pudgy, odd looking, uncouth, who picked his teeth walking the halls of the Willard Hotel in Washington, white bilious eye and huge mouth. Uniform white at the seams and seedy at the buttonholes".

"Sherman was lanky, hard bitten, restless, jittery, smoked, nervous energy, sarcastic, quoting liberally from Shakespeare and Dickens" [192]. Sherman, a close associate and friend of Grant thought him "a strange character, nothing like him portrayed by Plutarch" [193].

Halleck, like other grant superiors, connived to have Grant replaced, although Grant developed the confidence and self-reliance to operate on his own if necessary [174]. In many

instances he attacked against the orders of his superior generals,

Leading the Union forces in the Mississippi Valley, Grant would use harsh terms of unconditional surrender. He refused to return slaves captured at rebel forts, using them as contraband [184]. When Congress passed several laws declaring slaves free of their masters and allowing free blacks to serve in militias at reduced wages, Washburne coached Grant on how to advance in the military by adhering to these policies [223]. Grant leased Jefferson Davis' plantation in Mississippi below Vicksburg to freedmen in order to create a model showcase of their industry [282].

Capturing Fort Donaldson in Tennessee bestowed instant fame on Grant as the first certified war hero for the Union. [185]. At the time, Grant had been primarily a pipe smoker but news that Grant was holding a cigar given him by one of his officers led to his being flooded with boxes of cigars. From then on, he smoked up to 20 cigars a day, with eventual effects on his health [185].

I will not dwell on Grant's exploits in the Civil War. Although Chernow sketches his exploits in battle, for Civil War buffs who wish to have a comprehensive illustration with maps of these battles, I would recommend James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom*. Grant's victory at Vicksburg was considered by Lincoln "one of the most brilliant in the world" [271]. It also played against the legend of Grant as a heedless, conscienceless butcher- Fewer than 10,000 Unionists were casualties [290]. However, Grant's Wilderness battle led to 17,000 Union casualties, although Lincoln realized that Grant had "the grit of a bulldog" [385,384].

Lincoln had great respect for Grant but opined that "he was the quietest fellow he ever saw: He had been in a room for several minutes before he knew he was there. However, wherever he was, things moved" [353]. Unfortunately, Julia Grant and Mary Lincoln did not get along, so when Lincoln invited the Grants to Ford's theater for that fateful night, Julia sent a letter to Grant listing reasons for leaving Washington that afternoon to visit the rest of the family,. Grant had also been marked for assassination [523].

Many speculators in the south from Northern areas were Jews and Grant zeroed in on Jewish traders as the source of troubles and wanted to banish all Jews from as violating trade as a class. Lincoln rescinded these orders and the Jewish press vehemently denounced Grant [233,235]. Grant later disavowed his wartime orders as thoughtless and misguided [620]

After many victories, Grant was moved by Washburne to resurrect the grade of Lt. General,

only previously accorded to Washington and Winfield Scott, which was accorded to him.

After Andrew Johnson became President, Congress consulted closely with Grant on the Reconstruction Acts [585]. Grant had unprecedented power over the South and took his cues from Congress, not Johnson [586]. At the time of Johnson's impeachment, Grant supported Secretary of War Stanton in opposition to Johnson and ran the War Department when Johnson had temporarily removed Stanton.

As President, Grant had a cabinet lacking ideological cohesion. Aside from Hamilton Fish, his Secretary of State, many of his appointments were party hacks [636] or previously army officers [637]. He was too credulous with loyalists. On the other hand, he made extraordinary strides in naming Jews, blacks, and Native Americans to federal Positions and welcomed blacks to the White House [641]

During his Presidency he had to handle such issues as possible Cuban annexation, and other Caribbean issues, Indian settlements in the West and the efforts of Jay Gould and Jim Fisk to corner the gold market. Not the least of his accomplishments was settling the Confederate *Alabama* ship affair which almost led to War with Great Britain [721]. He named Frederick Douglass to a commission investigating relations with Santo Domingo [716]. For a time Grant supported Gould's efforts, the same trusting rube who had been hoodwinked by business sharpers before the war [678]. He was swamped with letters from Southern blacks and white republicans about the outrages, and created the Justice Department to champion civil liberties [703]. Under his Presidency, the 15th amendment was promulgated allowing blacks to vote, and reconstruction acts supporting prosecution of KKK and others who violated civil liberties. [707] Grant had the misfortune of presiding over America in the corrupt Gilded Age of syndicates known as rings [729]. Examples were the Credit Mobilier scandal, the Whiskey ring, and in 1871 the revelations of the Tweed ring. He had to deal with the economic Panic of 1873, the after effects of which lasted for five years [776], and the worst depression until the 1930's [778]. Although Grant made a push for civil service reform in his annual message to congress [731], he established close friendships with shady businessmen and politicians such as Roscoe Conkling of New York, a foe of Civil Service reform [734].

After his Presidency, Grant took a grand tour of the world which lasted almost four years. Here we have some of the superlatives which Chertow provides: In April 1877, while in Cincinnati he was toasted as a figure second only to George Washington [861]. In Philadelphia,

he received an ovation some said was the greatest ovation Philadelphia had ever extended [862]. Even Sherman stated that "if Washington's name is allied with the nation's birth, Grant's is with its preservation" [862]. During Grant's travels, the *Times* of London considered him closely behind Washington as the president who would occupy the largest place in American history [865]. The Greeks illuminated the Parthenon in his honor.

. Back in the States, he got a tremendous reception in Chicago [886], where he met Mark Twain, who noted a deafening storm of welcome from the Army of the Tennessee reunion [887].

Chertow, in his rondo fashion, frequently notes how Grant inverted wine glasses during his receptions.[888]. Chernow posited that he may have been the most popular American at the time [890].

Despite Grant's popularity, all these superlatives, and his attempts at a third term, James A. Garfield was nominated on the Republican ticket and elected in 1880.

Because of Grant's close relations with businessmen, a group of Wall Street admirers created a \$250,000 Presidential retiring fund [912] and other rich donors gave Grant \$100,000 for a brownstone off Fifth Avenue which he and Julia occupied late in 1881. Unfortunately, he entered into a partnership with young financiers James Fish and Ferdinand Ward with his son Jesse and they were swindled out of most of their assets [915]. Grant was destitute but saved by William Vanderbilt who agreed to take possession of Grant's brownstone and let him continue to live in it [921].

Early in 1884, he began to have difficulty swallowing and he was found to have a cancer in the back of his mouth. At the time he began to write his Civil War memoirs, financially assisted by Mark Twain, who was a co-publisher of a book company. Hardly being able to swallow and in great pain, he wrote thousands of words a day and Twain thought that his prose was lean and unique [947]. He finished his memoir weeks before his death, at which time his weight had dropped from 200 lbs. to 90 lbs. President McKinley presided in 1897 over Grant's entombment in his final resting place in New York in the greatest mausoleum of any president, in fact the largest in North America. [958] For a time it evolved into New York's number one destination, according to Chertow [958]. It is now rarely visited and before a 1990's restoration was used as a bathroom and shelter by the homeless, the use of explosives to blow the beaks off the Tomb's granite angels, and for animal sacrifice.

Over the entrance are the words "Let us have peace" taken from Grant's letter accepting his

nomination for President in 1868.

[] Page numbers of book that were sources for text.