

# Ron Chernow's *Grant*: An able and compelling new biography

By Andre Damon  
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Ron Chernow's new biography of Ulysses S. Grant is an account and analysis of the life of the Civil War general, two-time US president and memoirist.

Chernow's task in writing Grant's biography was complicated. Not only did his life span hairpin turns in American social and political history, but Grant was, and continues to be, one of the most unfairly calumniated individuals in American politics.

To make things more difficult, Grant was a unique personality: A general who hated the sight of blood, an abstemious alcoholic, an eloquent writer famous for his silence, a morally upright man who spent his last decades surrounded by corruption.

It is a testament to the success of Chernow's book that out of this mass of political, historical and personal complexities an integral picture of Grant and his age emerges. Chernow's biography serves as a complement to Grant's memoirs, helping to provide political and personal context to Grant's firsthand account of the Civil War.

Asked how he intended to write the biography of a man who has already written a very highly regarded autobiography, Chernow replied that he chose to "zero in on the silences." To anyone already familiar with Grant's career and writings, this approach is very engaging, adding a great deal of the human factor to Grant's sparse and stoical prose.

Chernow's research is meticulous, and his wealth of anecdotes and small details brings the characters of Grant's story to life. But he does not let the sweep of history get lost in minutia and keeps his narrative centered on broad historical themes.

The book reflects renewed historical interest in Grant following Ronald C. White's *American Ulysses* released last year, and preceding an annotated re-release of his memoirs by Harvard University.

Among the most striking features of Grant's life is that he seemed to be almost a different person at different times. Here was a man who had seen years of failure and despair in the period following the Mexican war, yet within a matter of years was elevated to a place in world history almost as indispensable to the success of the Union war effort as Abraham Lincoln himself.

During Grant's two terms as president, even as he struggled desperately to hold onto his principles, his name was sullied by the corruption that pervaded America's gilded age, with its railroad swindles, filthy financial frauds and despoiling and genocide against the Indians.

He was a man of his time, but not one who rose above it. When dominant sections of the American bourgeoisie lifted themselves to heroism in the Civil War, he was their greatest hero. When they plumbed the moral and political depths, he sank with them.

Born in Point Pleasant, Ohio, Grant was the son of a socially aspiring Methodist tanner and abolitionist who was able to secure a place for him at the US Military Academy at West Point, over the young man's objections. At West Point, Grant had a middling record, despite his proficiency in mathematics and extraordinary gifts at horsemanship.

Upon graduation, Grant married Julia Dent, a scion of St. Louis

slaveholders, who would be his lifelong companion.

Despite his desire to serve in the cavalry, Grant was assigned to an infantry regiment as quartermaster before the outbreak of the Mexican War, where he served with distinction.

In his memoirs, Grant recalled his opposition to the Mexican War. "For myself, I was bitterly opposed to the measure, and to this day regard the war which resulted as one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation." He later argued that it led to the expansion of slave-holding territory in the United States and was a direct cause of the Civil War.

"The Southern rebellion was largely the outgrowth of the Mexican War," he wrote. "Nations, like individuals, are punished for their transgressions. We got our punishment in the most sanguinary and expensive war of modern times."

After the conclusion of the Mexican War, Grant was stationed in the Pacific Northwest, where, isolated from his family and burdened by his meager army pay, he invested in several failed business ventures before resigning from the army in 1854.

His resignation marked the beginning of a low point in Grant's life. Although Grant excises his personal tribulations from his memoirs, Chernow's biography makes clear that Grant suffered from depression and alcoholism, both of which he succeeded in vanquishing in later years.

Over the next several years, Grant struggled as a farmer in Kentucky, Missouri and Illinois. He came to rely on assistance from his slave-owning father-in-law. The future president worked alongside his wife's slaves and hauled and hawked firewood on the St. Louis streets. While temperamentally adverse to slavery, Grant voted for Democrat James Buchanan in the 1856 election. However, he came to support Lincoln in the 1860 election, though he was unable to vote due to residency restrictions.

The outbreak of the war led to a head-spinning reversal in his fortunes, bringing out his latent talents. Grant, appointed to lead recruitment efforts in his town of Galena, Illinois, quickly raised and trained a company. He was promoted to brigadier general on the strength of his military experience, his competence and the support of his patron Elihu B. Washburne.

After opening up the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers to Union traffic through bold combined offensives in the battles of Ft. Henry and Ft. Donelson, Grant found himself uncharacteristically on the defensive when his command, consisting mostly of raw troops, was surprised by a Confederate attack in the Battle of Shiloh, fought April 6–7, 1862.

At the end of the first day of fighting, Grant's Army of Tennessee had lost ground and abandoned its camps and provisions. Despite what looked like a crushing defeat, and though he spent the night under an oak tree in the pouring rain, Grant maintained his mental clarity and indefatigable optimism.

Chernow writes:

Wrapped in his greatcoat, Grant returned to the haven of the nearby oak tree with its spreading canopy of branches. Sherman found him standing there, streaming with rain, hat pulled low over his face, collar upturned, holding a lantern and chewing a cigar. "Well, Grant, we've had the devil's own day, haven't we?" Sherman remarked. "Yes," replied Grant with a drag on his cigar. "Lick 'em tomorrow though." The statement expressed Grant's intestinal fortitude, which communicated itself to his officers. He had already told Sherman that when both sides seem defeated in battle, the first to assume the offensive would surely win.

Armed with this indomitable spirit, Grant and Sherman rallied the Union troops, greatly strengthened by overnight reinforcements, and secured a victory in the second day of fighting, though at horrendous cost. Chernow writes:

Everyone was stunned by the scale of carnage at Shiloh, which posted a new benchmark for mass slaughter... Men who survived it could never scrub its harrowing imagery from their memories. Americans found it hard to comprehend the dimensions of the losses, which were beyond any historical precedent. Of more than one hundred thousand soldiers who pitched into the fray, twenty-four thousand had been killed or wounded—a casualty count dwarfing that of the battle of Waterloo. Shiloh's casualties eclipsed the total of the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812 and the Mexican War combined.

After Shiloh, Grant secured a series of triumphs in the Western theater, culminating in the tactically masterful victories at Vicksburg, which gave the North control of the Mississippi River, and Chattanooga, which secured control of Tennessee.

Lincoln's issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation clarified the political aims of the war: it was to be henceforward explicitly a conflict to decide the fate of slavery in the United States. This political turning point set the stage for a re-shuffling of the army's command structure.

Grant's victory at Vicksburg, coming at approximately the same time as General Meade's victory at Gettysburg, marked a turning point in the Union war effort, which had heretofore been hamstrung by ineffective generalship, personified by the Democrat George B. McClellan.

Grant's extraordinary successes gave Lincoln the opportunity to place a political ally at the head of the Union army. Grant saw eye to eye with Lincoln on emancipation and the use of African-American troops to fight the South, and opposed any talk of an early peace.

So complete was their unanimity on fundamental political issues that when one interlocutor asked Lincoln about the chances of Grant running to oppose him on the Republican ticket, the latter replied, "He is fully committed to the policy of emancipation and employing Negro soldiers; and with this policy faithfully carried out, it will not make much difference who is president."

With the substantial leeway given to Grant by Lincoln, the newly appointed lieutenant general was able to assemble the team of military leaders who won the war, including the brilliant William Tecumseh Sherman and the cavalry officer Philip Sheridan, both of whom shared Grant's penchant for bold offensive operations.

The personnel shake-up allowed Grant to pursue, for the first time, an integrated strategy for the entire Northern war effort. While he and Meade pushed back and pinned down Robert E. Lee and his Army of the Potomac, Sherman and Sheridan were able to cut off vast swaths of Southern territory, destroying the logistical basis of Lee's army and

slowly strangling it, leading Lee's army to surrender on April 9, 1865.

While the Union victory seems, in hindsight, to be a strategic masterstroke, up close it looked like one great horrible slaughter. Grant was valued by Lincoln because he, unlike other generals, was willing to fight grueling offensive operations. He led a campaign of total war, including economic war against the civilian population of the South.

As Sherman and Sheridan ravaged Georgia and the Carolinas, requisitioning, burning and destroying anything of substantial economic value, Grant pushed Lee back, mile by mile, toward the Confederate capital of Richmond, at the cost of rivers of blood and piles of corpses.

But all of it was entirely justified. Lincoln, the politician who waged the deadliest war in American history, is warmly remembered as the president who freed the slaves, and valued as America's most humane leader.

The anti-democratic political movement that expressed itself in Southern secession did not surrender with Lee. Rather, it took a different form, manifesting itself in a wave of violence against the Republican Party and freed blacks. Among the most monstrous of these actions was the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln, but it also took the form of murderous rampages by the newly formed Ku Klux Klan, aimed at terrorizing and disenfranchising freed slaves.

The shocking extent of Klan violence in the post-Civil War period is rarely taught in schools. As Chernow writes, "Americans today know little about the terrorism that engulfed the South during Grant's presidency. It has been suppressed by a strange national amnesia. The Klan's ruthless reign is a dark, buried chapter in American history. The Civil War is far better known than its brutal aftermath."

Lincoln's assassination left Andrew Johnson in the White House, who quickly moved to conciliate the South by turning a blind eye to the lynching of freed slaves and Southern Republicans. This set the stage for his impeachment by the House of Representatives and the Senate's failure to convict him. The Republican Party, under Grant, won the presidency in 1868.

Grant pursued a muscular policy of defending freed blacks, including passage of the 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, granting blacks equal protection under the law and the right to vote, and the enforcement of these amendments by federal troops.

This policy won Grant the praise of his political ally, the abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who called him "the vigilant, firm, impartial, and wise protector of my race."

But even as Grant firmly pursued racial equality, support for his policy was being undermined by dramatic changes in American society. Propelled by the massive development of industry and a speculative boom that followed the war, inequality was soaring amid a mass of ill-gotten wealth in what Mark Twain christened the "Gilded Age."

As the railroads raced toward America's West Coast, together with the mining and heavy industry that accompanied them, the Republican Party became ever more directly the party of Wall Street and the railroads. Despite Grant's personal respect for and defense of the American Indians, US industry demanded their expulsion and extermination. Figures such as Sherman, whose troops sang "John Brown's Body" as they marched through the South freeing slaves during the Civil War, now argued openly for genocide against the Indians.

The working class, meanwhile, emerged onto the scene with a series of militant strikes. While Grant showed an admirable tenacity in the defense of black civil rights, and sought to pursue a policy of peace toward American Indians, he consistently took the side of business in regard to labor struggles. Commenting from abroad about the 1877 railroad strike, Grant wrote, "My judgment is that it should have been put down with a strong hand and so summarily as to prevent a like occurrence for a generation."

As the class struggle grew red hot, the great majority of the American bourgeoisie realized that, in their conflict with their mortal class enemy,

the democratic ideals, including racial equality which animated the Civil War, would have to go. It was the peculiarity of “Unconditional Surrender” Grant to have held on to the egalitarian ideals in relationship to slavery and the freed slaves—for which he had fought far longer than his contemporaries—and for this he was viciously denounced by them.

The general corruption of American society and government manifested itself repeatedly within Grant’s cabinet, a fact that was not helped by Grant’s relative political inexperience and his overly trusting character, leading to a succession of scandals. Grant’s Democratic and “Liberal Republican” opponents would use these corruption scandals to implicitly criticize what they thought was his unjustified concern with the murder of Southern blacks and Republicans by the KKK.

Allegations of corruption became a dog-whistle summons to attack Reconstruction, extrapolating on the lie that the Northern occupation of the South was aimed at enriching corrupt Yankee “carpetbaggers.” By the end of his second term in office, Grant was tormented by his inability to defend Southern blacks from violence, resulting from the fact that support for such a policy had simply evaporated within the Republican Party.

Chernow writes:

Grant’s personal tragedy was simultaneously an American tragedy. ... Grant reflected on the deep changes wrought in northern Republican circles. He predicted ... that the northern retreat from Reconstruction would lead to Democrats recapturing power in the South as well as “future mischief of a very serious nature. ... It requires no prophet to foresee that the national government will soon be at a great disadvantage and that the results of the war of the rebellion will have been in a large measure lost. ... I do not wish to create unnecessary alarm, nor to be looked upon as a prophet of evil, but it is impossible for me to close my eyes in the face of things that are as plain to me as the noonday sun.”

This wasn’t a minor statement: the victorious Union general of the Civil War was saying that terror tactics perpetrated by southern whites had nullified the outcome of the rebellion. All those hundreds of thousands dead, the millions maimed and wounded, the mourning of widows and orphans—all that suffering, all that tumult, on some level, had been for naught. Slavery had been abolished, but it had been replaced by a caste-ridden form of second-class citizenship for southern blacks, and that counted as a national shame.

He adds:

Once Reconstruction collapsed, it left southern blacks for eighty years at the mercy of Jim Crow segregation, lynchings, poll taxes, literacy tests, and other tactics designed to segregate them from whites and deny them the vote. Black sharecroppers would be degraded to the level of debt-ridden serfs, bound to their former plantation owners. After 1877, the black community in the South steadily lost ground until a rigid apartheid separated the races completely, a terrible state of affairs that would not be fixed until the rise of the civil rights movement after World War II.

At the same time, historians of the “lost cause” school engaged in apologias for the South’s conduct in the Civil War. They argued that the cause of the war was “states’ rights,” not slavery, built up Robert E. Lee to superhuman status and heaped scorn on Grant as a “drunken butcher.” These lies were embraced even in the North and remain a major influence in history textbooks to this day.

Following the end of his second term, Grant embarked upon a world tour that left him one of the most well traveled and cosmopolitan men of his generation. Upset in his hopes for a third term, Grant retreated to private life, where his entire fortune was swindled away by a Gilded Age Bernie Madoff named Ferdinand Ward, who traded on Grant’s prestige to set up a massive Ponzi scheme. That year, Grant developed throat cancer. Sherman, his friend, declared that “Wall Street killed him.”

And yet, on his death bed, Grant succeeded in writing a great piece of American prose in the form of his memoirs. His aim was to earn enough from their publication to support his beloved family.

Published by his friend Mark Twain, his memoirs were a massive literary and financial success. Twain ranked them with Julius Caesar’s commentaries, praising Grant’s “clarity of statement, directness, simplicity, unpretentiousness, manifest truthfulness,” and his “fairness and justice toward friend and foe alike.”

In his memoirs, Grant gave one of the clearest summations of the causes of the Civil War ever written, of which the following is only a sample:

The cause of the great War of the Rebellion against the United State will have to be attributed to slavery. For some years before the war began it was a trite saying among some politicians that “A state half slave and half free cannot exist.” All must become slave or all free, or the state will go down...

In the early days of the country, before we had railroads, telegraphs and steamboats—in a word, rapid transit of any sort—the States were each almost a separate nationality. At that time the subject of slavery caused but little or no disturbance to the public mind. But the country grew, rapid transit was established, and trade and commerce between the States got to be so much greater than before that the power of the National government became more felt and recognized and, therefore, had to be enlisted in the cause of this institution.

Upon Grant’s death, Frederick Douglass eulogized, “In him the Negro found a protector, the Indian a friend, a vanquished foe a brother, an imperiled nation a savior.”

The great tragedy of Grant’s life, as Chernow points out, is that he could not hold out alone against his age. It was during Grant’s post-war lifetime that the anti-democratic and reactionary character of the capitalist system and the bourgeois class, which had already made itself so plainly manifest throughout Europe in the crushing of the 1848 uprisings, made itself undeniably manifest in America.

Thenceforward, the cause of social progress in America would be associated with the struggle against capitalism and led by the working class.

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