

# The History Channel's *Grant*

By Tom Mackaman  
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*“Labor disgraces no man; unfortunately, you occasionally find men disgrace labor.”* —Ulysses S. Grant, remarks to Birmingham workmen, England, 1877

Any honest effort to bring to a popular audience the life of Ulysses S. Grant, who led the Union army to victory in the Civil War and became the 18th American president, is welcome. It is all the more timely with the fascist ignoramus Donald Trump occupying the White House, and with the liberal “newspaper of record,” *The New York Times*, in its 1619 Project, promoting the old Jim Crow myth that whites and blacks are pitted in endless race struggle.

*Grant* has struck a nerve. Over 3 million households watched the History Channel series’ first episode when it aired on Memorial Day, the same day coronavirus pandemic deaths in the US hit 100,000. It was one of the largest-ever audiences for a historical documentary premiere. Millions more watched the second and final installments of the series, produced by actor Leonardo DiCaprio.

The film follows Grant from his youth in rural southwestern Ohio in the 1820s to his illness and death in 1885. Over four hours long in its three episodes, the program intersperses expert commentary—of varying quality and interest—with reenactments featuring the English actor Justin Salinger, who effectively portrays Grant’s legendary humility and directness. There are numerous battlefield scenes including, tediously, many with graphic violence.

The documentary sets itself the worthy goal of rehabilitating Grant’s reputation, following loosely the biography by Ron Chernow, who is listed as a co-producer. It takes aim at the myth, promoted for many decades in American school textbooks, that Grant was a “butcher” and an ineffective general who was far inferior to the southern commander, Robert E. Lee. It also acknowledges that Grant was motivated, in the Civil War and in the period of Reconstruction that followed, by his belief in the democratic ideal of human equality proclaimed by the American Revolution. This runs counter to the myth promoted by the 1619 Project that “black Americans fought back alone” and that the Lincoln government was populated by racists who viewed black people as “the obstacle to national unity.”

All of this is praiseworthy. Yet the documentary does not draw out the connections between Grant’s egalitarianism on the one hand and, on the other, both his effectiveness as a military commander during the war and the efforts to falsify and slander him after his death. These aspects of his legacy were not incidental. Grant’s detractors must contend with the fact that he will forever be associated with the violence, massive scale and

democratic impulse of the second American revolution.

The film effectively portrays Grant’s pre-Civil War career, remarkable only for how unremarkable it was. Grant’s father, Jesse Root Grant, was a merchant and owner of a tannery, just the sort of “middling type” that historian Gordon Wood finds had been pushed forward by the American Revolution. Indeed, that the young republic could lift up to the heights of power figures like Grant (b. 1822) and Lincoln (b. 1809)—each born in humble circumstances in a rapidly expanding society—testified to what Marx saw as “a new era of ascendancy for the middle class” created by 1776.

Grant’s very human character, manifest in his many failures, comes across in the documentary. Grant did not distinguish himself in officer training at West Point, where he wound up at the whim of his father, and where, due to a fortuitous transcription error in his enrollment, he took on the middle initial “S” and from it the nickname, “U.S. Grant.” He excelled at mathematics and horseback riding but accumulated demerits and graduated at the middle of his class. Grant failed to earn entry into the cavalry for the Mexican-American War, where, the documentary informs us, he first discovered his steel nerve in battle.

Grant was shipped off after the predatory war against Mexico—Grant later called it “one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation” — to a remote fort in the Pacific Northwest, where in boredom and purposelessness he turned to heavy drinking. After a few years he flopped out of the military and returned to his wife, Julia Dent, and their two children in Missouri. There he briefly gave it a go as a farmer, working the land alongside the single slave acquired from Julia’s father, whom he later freed at considerable personal expense. An effort in real estate also fizzled—the documentary notes that the kindhearted Grant found it difficult to collect rent—and at a certain point in the 1850s “the man who saved the Union” was reduced to hawking firewood on the streets of St. Louis. The eruption of the Civil War in April of 1861, finds Grant once again working in his father’s tannery, this time in Galena, Illinois.

Grant’s utter lack of distinction compared to his Confederate opposite number, Robert E. Lee, has jarred observers past and present, and is also noted by the documentary. Lee, a Virginian, embodied something close to an American gentry. Aristocratic in bearing and breeding, Lee’s station as a leader of men seemed foreordained, derived from his ownership of scores of slaves and his “natural” inherited superiority to the likes of Grant. (The documentary cites Lee’s confession that he would rather “die a thousand deaths” than surrender to Grant at Appomattox on April, 9, 1865, very nearly four years to the day after South Carolinians

had attacked Fort Sumter, triggering the Civil War.)

Decades later, after both men had died and the generation that had experienced the Civil War had passed, Lee's stature was elevated at Grant's expense. The documentary refers, in its third and final episode, to this feature of "the Lost Cause" myth, which in addition to its central argument that the Civil War was not really about slavery—a position shared by the 1619 Project—insisted that the chivalric South, and its great champion, Lee, had only been overcome by Grant's willingness to spill limitless Yankee blood.

Lee was a great general. But to a significant extent his success was achieved over Union generals who, much to the exasperation of Lincoln, refused to fight aggressively and who feared above all else what Grant's predecessor in command, Gen. George P. McClellan, called "servile insurrection." Lee repeatedly, in the parlance of the time, "whipped" Union armies under the likes of McClellan that were larger and better equipped. Before encountering Grant, Lee had tasted serious defeat only on the two occasions he invaded the North. The loss at Antietam on September 17, 1862 paved the way for Lincoln's issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation. Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania came to a catastrophic end on the first days of July, 1863.

When the smoke cleared in the farm fields near Gettysburg on Independence Day, 1863, far to the west Grant had accepted the capitulation of Vicksburg, the final Confederate stronghold on the Mississippi. The fall of Vicksburg was the culmination of a brilliant campaign waged by Grant that, the documentary's experts tell us, is still studied by officers in training. Grant had already delivered victories in Kentucky and Tennessee in the war's early months, including at Shiloh, and after Vicksburg he saved a beleaguered Union army trapped at Chattanooga.

Lincoln had found his man. The Great Emancipator admired Grant's elegantly factual battlefield dispatches and, most especially, his successes. On March 2, 1864, he elevated Grant to the rank of Lieutenant General, held previously only by George Washington, and command of the entire Union army. Now Grant orchestrated a war of grand strategy pursued on multiple fronts, including most bloodily, his own Overland Campaign against Lee in Virginia in 1864, which led to the total disintegration of the Confederacy in the spring of 1865.

Professors of military history and military strategy heap praise on Grant's tactical and strategic brilliance, which the Union commander summed up in the following terms: "The art of war is simple enough. Find out where your enemy is. Get at him as soon as you can. Strike him as hard as you can, and keep moving on." No doubt the technical aspects of battlefield command, operations, and strategy are common to many wars, and, in that sense, we are told that Grant was America's first "modern warrior." Grotesquely, the documentary features among these experts retired US General David Petraeus, who held high command in the unprovoked US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and bears responsibility for countless crimes of the occupations there and in Afghanistan.

Whatever the director's intentions in the inclusion of Petraeus, what is most striking about Grant is how different this man was from the representatives of today's American ruling class. Grant was intelligent, honest, sensitive and capable of seeing his own actions objectively. He was possessed of a clear mind that found

expression in his sharp prose. The documentary ends in discussion of Grant's autobiography, which, published by his friend Mark Twain shortly before the former president's death, lifted his family out of financial ruin. Twain rightly considered it a major achievement in American letters.

Above all else Grant was guided by deeply held democratic convictions, reflected in both his hostility to slavery and his capacity to command what was in essence a citizens' army—a connection the film misses. Though not an abolitionist, Grant opposed slavery. The film demonstrates that he recognized the value of slaves to the Union army and the meaning of the loss of their labor to the Confederacy. He agreed with Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, and worked closely with the president. A friendship born of mutual admiration developed, and when Lincoln was assassinated on April 14, 1865, days after the surrender at Appomattox, Grant was both bereft and guilt-ridden—he had turned down an invitation to join the president at Ford's Theater that evening.

As commander of the army and then as president (1869-1877) following Lincoln's dreadful successor, Andrew Johnson, Grant saw himself as carrying on Lincoln's policies. The film portrays Grant's efforts on behalf of the freed slaves after the Civil War, which included the ratification of the 15th amendment guaranteeing the right to vote, military occupation, and the suppression of the Ku Klux Klan, which had carried on a massive terror campaign against freed slaves and Republicans.

Here Grant is presented as fighting the current in a rising tide of indifference to racial equality in the country. Reconstruction ultimately failed not because of Grant's intentions, but because "the American people abandoned" it, Christy Coleman, CEO of the Civil War Museum tells viewers. In fact, the Civil War had given birth to a new society in the North and the West as well as the South. With it, new inequalities developed, especially in the brutal exploitation of the rapidly growing class of wage workers. By 1877, the year Grant left office and the year the American working class erupted in cities across the country in the Great Uprising, there was little interest left in ruling circles for the defense of the rights of the freed slaves.

The film advances the idea that Grant was mismatched to the presidency. Grant thought as much himself. He delegated much to trusted subordinates, as he had in the Civil War, but now found himself dragged into corruption scandals and financial dealings that after his term in office left him once again in poverty.

It might be better to say that it was not so much that Grant was ill-suited for the office of presidency, but that the presidency in the new capitalist world birthed by the Civil War was ill-suited for a man such as Grant.

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