



Grant

By Ron Chernow

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Reviewed by Arthur I. Cyr

Best-selling author Ron Chernow is an extremely influential biographer, for good reasons. Previous substantial studies of the lives and careers of George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and John D. Rockefeller, as well as histories of banking, have earned widespread praise. His signature strengths include an engaging, at times gripping prose style, accompanied by extensive detailed research.

Chernow's biography of Ulysses S. Grant maintains a high standard. The author brings to life the personality and career of the general who commanded all Union armies during the last year of our Civil War and the less gifted civilian leader who twice won the White House. One question regarding Grant, as with George Washington, is whether one more biography really makes sense, given the large number of books and articles written about him. Regarding Chernow's work, the answer is clearly yes, reflecting the author's reconfirmation of this leader's military skill, personal integrity, and varied accomplishments.

Grant provides a particularly dramatic case of a life that combined exceptional difficulty and frustration with extraordinary ability and accomplishments. After graduating from West Point with a commission in the Infantry and serving with distinction in the Mexican War, he abruptly resigned from the Army. Long separation from his beloved family while on assignment in California and Oregon led to excessive drinking plus financial problems. Chernow assembles persuasive evidence that a vindictive, martinet commanding officer targeted Grant. Failures in business followed. Later, tenure as President of the United States was marked with scandals created by other members of his administration. In between, Grant proved an exceptionally able and successful Army commander during the Civil War, with a series of impressive military victories in the Western theater of operations. Overall command of United States armies in the field followed.

Much popular culture has painted Confederate General Robert E. Lee as superior to Grant in field command. This perspective rationalizes Union victory as the consequence of enormous advantages in men and materiel. The "Lost Cause" school of pro-Southern historians emerged soon after the war and grew influential in the 20th century. Chernow effectively destroys this analysis. Grant possessed a remarkable eye for map and terrain analysis, a genius for military organization, and unrelenting determination. Chernow marshals extensive evidence of Grant's extraordinary capacities to organize logistics and inspire men to disciplined unity. At the outset of the Civil War, he did this remarkably quickly, starting with an untrained volunteer Illinois company.

The long successful siege of Vicksburg, the last Confederate stronghold on the Mississippi River, represents a masterpiece of campaign planning and execution that has been widely studied since. Grant orchestrated a series

of aggressive, fast-moving expeditions that systematically isolated Vicksburg, while suffering fewer casualties than did the enemy. He was persistent, imaginative, and daring in eventually running ships past extensive Confederate artillery batteries. Grant's critics called him a "butcher," indifferent to casualties, but that was not reality. His operations achieved the surrender of three still functional armies in the field, at Fort Donelson, Vicksburg, and Appomattox. Chernow provides extensive examples of Grant's actions and outlook that portray a decidedly sensitive man, moved by the suffering of wounded on both sides, who often intervened directly to help. This complemented his modesty, in manner as well as dress, in contrast to the often-flamboyant senior officers of that era. Ultimately, the democratic style of this uncommon man won affection as well as respect from the troops.

Grant was a strategist, whereas Lee was most skillful in handling the single battlefield. The final year of the war saw Grant, with President Abraham Lincoln's full support, orchestrating a comprehensive sustained national offensive, coordinated between the Eastern and Western theaters, which brought victory. America's relatively democratic culture permitted Grant to step into command early in the war and move up. In this context, the vast expansion of forces required to meet the unprecedented demands of the Civil War opened tremendous opportunities for a man of Grant's remarkable talents, who had suffered earlier reversals.

Grant faced frustration in the White House but with some successes. He was an excellent judge of military talent but proved naive in politics and victimized relatively easily. A strong sense of loyalty, a vital asset in the comradeship of combat, led him to continue supporting corrupt political appointees. Yet he also protected the rights of newly freed African Americans and effectively fought the Ku Klux Klan. Party political pressures led him to relent late in his administration, something he said afterward was a terrible mistake. The author develops this dimension, complementing his discussion of the Civil War years and adding to our understanding of Grant.

Ron Chernow contributes important fresh perspectives on Ulysses Grant, a complicated as well as extremely talented leader, in a book geared to a general audience. His work is a worthy complement to Grant's own important memoirs.

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