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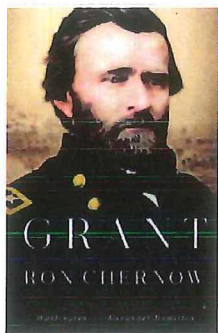


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### Grant

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*GRANT*. By Ron Chernow. New York, NY: Penguin Group USA, 2017. ISBN: 978-1594204876, 1,104 pp

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For biographies of iconic American figures, Ron Chernow enjoys a stellar and permanent literary legacy. *Washington: A Life*, for instance, earned him the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for biography, and *Alexander Hamilton* inspired a Broadway musical sensation. In *Grant*, Chernow now adds to his credits an extensive, meticulously researched, powerful biography of Ulysses S. Grant. Chernow delivers renewed respect for Grant as one of America's greatest warrior-generals, but he also resuscitates Grant's relatively low standing as a two-term president whose administration presided over a series of financial scandals.

In *Grant*, Chernow examines a wartime leader with few historical peers and a generation that spanned perhaps the most critical crossroads in U.S. history. But for Grant's military leadership and heroics in the Civil War, America's trajectory from the 1860s to the present day almost certainly would have taken a dramatically different course. Early personal and professional failures, especially his drinking sprees, seemingly cut short his military career with his resignation from the Army in 1854. His lackluster business experience thereafter depressed and frustrated him. Thus, America's bloodiest war ever saved him from obscurity, as he presided militarily at the end of the Civil War over the only conflict in history pitting Americans

against each other.

When war erupted with the Confederate seizure of Fort Sumter, off the coast of Charleston, SC, in April 1861, Grant eagerly returned to service and jumped to the rank of colonel. His unlikely meteoric military rise from there, ultimately to Commanding General of the U.S. Army, his emergence as the savior of the Union cause, and then his eight presidential years during Reconstruction outline a spellbinding saga that, if it were fiction, would challenge credulity.

Cashiered from the Army, Grant bounced from job to job between 1854 and 1861, earning barely enough income to support his family. He saw before him the dismal prospect of a civilian career of a nobody headed nowhere. Years earlier, he graduated as a middling student from the United States' Military Academy, 21st of the 39 in the Class of 1843. Small in stature, his one area of excellence at West Point was horsemanship, a skill that he later exploited in battle after battle. Introduced to combat in 1846 in the Mexican War, Grant's physical courage and calm demeanor came naturally. He excelled at war, and he and those who observed him knew it. But peacetime was not to his liking. Distant posts bored him with routine drudgery. Away from wife, Julia, his post-Mexico California assignment in 1848 undid him as he fell into a notorious drinking habit, a failing that plagued him often in years to come.

With his 1861 reactivation to duty, Grant returned to his element—war. His mettle in the Mexican War shaped his warrior ethos, and that quality matured further in the Civil War as he advanced in rank and responsibility. Cool under fire, calm and deliberate, with uncanny tactical instincts, he paid scant attention to enemy bullets whistling past him. Grant constantly exposed himself to danger, always anxious to directly observe and control the main action. While Grant's aides feared for his safety in combat and tried to coax him to rear areas, the troops worshipped him for his insistence on leading them at the crux of the fight.

The war started badly for President Abraham Lincoln and the Union. Even before Lincoln took office, seven states seceded to establish the Confederacy. After Fort Sumter, the rebels rolled up more victories (Bull Run, Chancellorsville, Ball's Bluff, Chickamauga, Fredericksburg, and dozens more). Hesitant, senior northern generals (including MGs George B. McClellan and Henry W. Halleck) languished, procrastinated, or otherwise failed to deliver on the battlefield. Lincoln fell into despondence and frustration. His quips about his generals reflected both his humor and anguish; early on, he tagged McClellan with having a case of the "slows."

Grant's victories in the Western Theater (prominently Shiloh, 6 to 7 April 1862; Vicksburg, 18 May to 4 July 1862; and Chattanooga, November 1863) influenced Lincoln to select him to lead the Union Army in March 1864. This bold Lincoln-esque choice, and Grant's battlefield acumen and presence of mind, arguably rescued the president from an electoral loss in November 1864. Had Lincoln lost, America would have faced a compromised, ignominious, and negotiated end to the Civil War, perhaps with a separate Confederate nation and no end to slavery for years. Lincoln spurned his advisors' grumblings about Grant's lackluster results and appallingly heavy casualties in the spring of 1864 ("the butcher," they called him). Whether Grant prevailed or not, Lincoln had said while the Battle of Shiloh was still undecided in 1862, "He fights." That conviction cemented Lincoln's high regard for Grant. For the duration, therefore, Grant was his general.

In painstaking yet riveting detail, Chernow masterfully recounts Grant's warfighting genius with contemporaneous quotations from him and other participants. Fortitude, stamina, physical courage, and steadfast leadership personified Grant. From his early combat days, he exhibited a rare ability to "see" the battlefield in a way characteristic of great warrior-generals. Distinct from self-promoters like McClellan, Grant's style of command exuded humility.

His personal bravery and unassuming demeanor were obvious for all to see, and his troops' loyalty to him became legendary, despite the mind-numbing carnage. Both sides took horrific casualties in Grant's battles, but the attrition was strategically more devastating to the South, which lacked replacements. By the end of the war, the two sides endured more than 650,000 deaths. After Lincoln's re-election and Grant's forces at Petersburg, along with those of MGs William Tecumseh Sherman running through the South and Phil Sheridan cleansing the Shenandoahs, GEN Robert E. Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox on 9 April 1865. Five days later, John Wilkes Booth assassinated Lincoln at Ford's Theatre in Washington, DC. Fortunately for Grant and Julia, they declined the President's invitation to join him as his guests.

Perhaps even more than Lincoln, Grant's leadership determined the war's outcome. First applied to him at the Battle of Fort Donelson, 12 to 16 February 1862, his sobriquet "Unconditional Surrender" became an enduring rallying cry. For today's military leaders, *Grant* teaches soldierly lessons about the individual perseverance of a commander. Grant's mind was always ahead of the action and beyond the ken of other generals, North and South. His insight into opponents was deep, as he knew personally many of the Confederate generals from West Point and the Mexican War. As Chernow demonstrates through gripping reports of violence and suspense, these traits repeatedly turned the tide of close-fought battles to the favor of Grant-led units over remarkably resilient and courageous rebel forces.

In the Union hierarchy, in addition to Grant, Sherman and Sheridan emerge as aggressive and competent combat leaders. Sherman's devastation of the South remains as controversial as it was effective in delivering decisive blows to the heart of Dixie. After the war, both Sherman and Sheridan remained active duty stalwarts, and both continued their lasting relationships with Grant as their commander in chief, although Sherman's affection for Grant wavered back and forth over time.

Although Grant is the constant centerpiece of the action, his and Lincoln's relationships with other high-ranking Union generals fuel much of the story. It was a small power circle that drove the Civil War on the Union side. They all knew each other, and many vied for leadership and praise, often in ways that were petty and self-aggrandizing. Grant, however, mostly eschewed such bickering. At the same time, Grant's inner demons often plagued him. Were it not for his long-time aide, Brevet MG John Rawlins' constant vigilance and influence over Grant, along with his wife, Julia's presence, sometimes even near combat, Grant's susceptibility to alcohol and depression would have been a threat to his stability.

Dozens of generals and hundreds of other officers on the two sides were West Point graduates, long acquainted with each other. Lee, for example, one of the many West Pointers, turned down the opportunity to lead the Union Army and instead served with Confederate forces from start to finish, becoming General-in-Chief in January 1865. The Confederacy arguably had more competent warrior-generals than the North, but it had fewer resources. The participants acknowledged the North's considerable strategic advantages, including a much larger population from which to draw soldiers and better access to basic supplies, including arms, equipment, clothing, and food.

*Grant* is essential reading for a wide swath of interests: the Civil War, military leadership and prowess, Lincoln as commander in chief, slavery and race in mid-19th century America, Reconstruction, and political intrigue that rivals current events in the early 21st century. The core of the book, though, is Grant as the man in the arena. At the highest levels of leadership, his triumphs over adversity in war and peace place him in good company with George Washington. Chernow's bravura telling qualifies *Grant* for the accolade of yet another Chernow masterpiece.



When Grant left office in 1879 after his second term as president, his mark on history was not yet over. He traveled abroad for over two years with Julia, becoming a kind of unofficial American ambassador to the world, attaining an international stature unprecedented in American history. When he returned home, he emerged as the favorite for the 1880 presidential election, which would have been his third term. But he unexpectedly lost the nomination to James A. Garfield, who won the presidency only to be assassinated six months after taking office.

A heavy, life-long cigar smoker, Grant's final days plagued him with throat cancer, which finally killed him on 23 July 1885. Yet he persevered to write and finish his classic memoir. His motive was to ensure Julia's solvency, but the result was more: an autobiography for the ages, and Chernow draws heavily from it.

Chernow's gift for marshalling details into a fast-paced historical narrative is put on display here. Bursting with insights and serial vignettes of historical significance, *Grant* is a 1,000-page ride well worth the trip. Chernow's long and deep portrait of Grant makes poignant reading, not only for a full understanding of Grant but also for a comprehensive picture of how the Civil War developed and ended. The war's aftermath descended during Reconstruction and beyond into further national division—mostly North versus South—that teetered on the edge of national, political, and economic collapse. By the 1880s, many lamented that the Nation's deadliest war had come to naught or even that the South, having lost the war, prevailed in the aftermath.

As they must, overriding issues of slavery and race proliferate throughout *Grant*. Julia grew up with slaves in her household. Her family supported the institution with vigor, as did she. Indeed, Julia happily brought slaves into the early Grant home, although he and his family were firmly opposed to human bondage. This sort of split epitomized family discord before, during, and after the war, even within the Lincoln family. Mary Todd Lincoln had four brothers who served in the Confederate army, two of whom were killed in action. Over time, Grant became ever more the abolitionist (Julia conceded the issue), and his philosophical growth drove both his attitude as a general and his devotion to Lincoln. For Grant, the war became one of conscience that the North had to win. Later, as a presidential voice for the full freedom and equality of 4,000,000 freed slaves, he led the adoption of the 15th Amendment to ban abridgments of voting rights "on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

In contemporary presidential assessments, Washington and Lincoln nearly always rank in the top tier, often as the top two. See, for example, the C-Span Presidential Historian Survey (2017), where Lincoln stood first and Washington second. In the survey, Grant stood only 22nd, up one position from 2009 and up 11 positions from 2000. Like Washington and Andrew Jackson before him, Grant went from general to two terms as president. Unlike them (or, later, unlike Eisenhower who was by then constitutionally limited to two terms), Grant expected to be nominated for and win a third term, after Rutherford B. Hayes left office.

Chernow seeks to revitalize Grant's low historical presidential esteem, a reputation garnered almost entirely from his two terms that saw widespread corruption, none attributed to Grant himself but to many others around him. The author's admiration for his subject is both frequent and fervent. Even when Grant seems inexplicably immune to common sense perceptions and insensitive to obvious facts about self-dealing and dishonest colleagues or friends, Chernow gives wide, perhaps too much, latitude for Grant's naïve faith in his fellow man.

Flaws do crop up in Chernow's mostly magnificent, multi-dimensional portrait of Grant. They are few but worthy of mention. Often, the author gratuitously praises Grant and erects "defenses" of what may be seen as his fallibilities, such as his drinking and his undeserved trust of corrupt colleagues. In addition, Chernow crafts innumerable interjections reflecting his own obvious and understandable revulsion to slavery and racial inequality. He deploys the terms "racist" and "racism" frequently but not because those words were written or uttered during the war or Reconstruction. They were not. They reflect out-of-context redundancies of what the words and deeds of the actors in *Grant* already convey with power and poignancy. Detailed historical depictions and verbatim quotations of participants are more than sufficient for any reader to absorb the reality of that era's racial degradation.

For the interested reader and for military and political professionals alike, *Grant* will immeasurably grow their understanding of the Civil War, as well as their respect for Grant as both general and president. Chernow's talent in presenting such a complete, intriguing, and persuasive picture of one of America's greatest figures makes *Grant* an enduring and treasured resource.



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