

### Look At Lincoln: Grant Restored

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## Feature Essay

Fall 2017

*Look at Lincoln: Grant Restored.*

**Grant** By Chernow, Ron **Publisher:**Penguin Press **Retail Price:** \$40.00  
**ISBN:159420487X** Grant Restored

When both academicians and the general public ache for leaders with a genuine path forward, this book appears at an apt time. Grant, as Ron Chernow beautifully narrates, is a kind of anti-hero who evolved by taking advantage of “the right to rise” – demonstrating that ordinary people sometimes perform extraordinarily.

Chernow’s volume, along with other recent biographies by Jean Edward Smith and Ronald White, Jr., go a long way in restoring Ulysses S. Grant’s luster and reputation. Ironically, until Grant’s death in 1885, he was more popular than his Commander-in-Chief, Abraham Lincoln, yet his reputation and legacy precipitately then fell for decades. Fortunately, these three biographies now restore the man and leader. For example, the C-SPAN survey of presidents earlier this year place Grant in the number 22 position (the middle of the pack) up from 33 in the 2000 poll.

In an effort at full disclosure, I was honored to have read the manuscript even before it became page proofs and came away with renewed appreciation for Grant’s character and leadership, not to mention his unique personal and political skills used to command armies and lead our nation during the difficult years of Reconstruction.

The author makes Grant relevant in a time when partisanship is rampant and denigrated. But this volume and Charles Calhoun’s new book on the Grant presidency, demonstrate that political ruthlessness can be used to advance America’s highest ideals.

Chernow clearly shows that Grant was in sync with Lincoln, especially in insuring freedom for all. President Grant sent his Attorney General to the South

with instructions for the United States attorneys to bring charges and indict those who were thwarting the Civil War amendments to the Constitution and the Civil Rights Act of 1866 which, in part, the amendments were intended to confirm and ratify.

This biography is chock-full of examples that demonstrate Grant's three essential qualities of leadership: courage, resiliency, and empathy. Winston Churchill said, "Courage is rightly esteemed ... the first of human qualities ... because it is the quality that guarantees all others." Unless Grant had possessed the courage to turn defeat into victory, as in the Battle of Shiloh, it remains uncertain whether the Civil War would have ended when it did with over 750,000 lives – North and South – lost. Nor, would there have been gains in reconciliation and confirmation of rights during Reconstruction if Grant had lacked courage. He possessed a confidence in his own judgment and an unyielding adherence to his own beliefs. As Chernow shows, Grant had an obsession with his own character, but in a self-effacing way. During the Civil War, he relentlessly questioned his duties as a general and, during his presidency, whether he was fulfilling his obligations to all Americans, white or black.

Grant recognized that it was his burden to act even in the face of great uncertainty and opposition, including those who sought his removal from command for binge drinking. Chernow states that Grant was an alcoholic, something that could be treated medically today, but reviled in Grant's time. But Grant, according to Chernow, was a functioning alcoholic who virtually shed the affliction by the time he took the presidential oath.

Grant faced thorny questions regarding the status of the freedman after the war. In addition, the North was riven by racism that ran the gamut from a rabid desire to eliminate freed slaves entirely from the continent to "merely" disgust at the idea of blacks and whites having anything like a shared common life in postwar America.

He also possessed the resiliency to see through to the end what he set out to do as General and President. The author demonstrates this was a quality that Grant possessed his entire life. It is clear that Grant was a resilient leader who was not deflected from his essential aims by politics, opposition, losses, or interim failure. He was able to adopt new tactics, regroup and reassess, as well as reevaluate the proper means to an end. While overly loyal in instances, Grant

understood that people were often animated more by venal self-interest than any larger consideration. For his entire presidency, Grant would govern a country that, in many ways, continued to be “a house divided.”

It is clear from this biography that Grant also possessed empathy. President Grant recognized that over 200,000 African Americans had enlisted and their service helped swing the war toward Northern victory. As Abraham Lincoln said to a friend, “If they stake their lives for us, they must be promoted by the strongest motive – even the promise of freedom. And the promise being made, must be kept.” Grant agreed with this and did his best to see it through. The failure of Reconstruction resulted not from Grant’s attempts at peace and reconciliation – the President had to deal with the South’s recalcitrance, his military, Congress, the courts, and an entire culture that would take more than a century to change. Grant recognized a shared humanity between himself and African Americans. Despite deep cultural differences, they both aspired to fundamentally the same things: earning through one’s labor, enjoying the fruits from that labor, controlling one’s own life, and believing in “the right to rise.” Ulysses S. Grant was an uncommonly good man.

Destined to be a classic biography, the author’s details of battles in which General Grant was involved are worthy of inclusion in any military history of the Civil War. Along with Grant’s alcoholism with which he had to cope throughout the war, Chernow’s description of this illness is masterful as is his comparison of General Grant and General Lee. What is intriguing are Chernow’s descriptions of every major character involved in Grant’s life – his much loved and loving wife Julia, his braggadocio father Jesse, Abraham Lincoln, Mary Lincoln, Benjamin Butler, Chief of Staff Henry Halleck, General George P. McClellan, General Ambrose Burnside and Grant’s particular friend, General William T. Sherman. Chernow’s insights are right on the mark in nearly every chapter. This biography confirms again Ron Chernow’s masterful talent.

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