

America's Hardscrabble General: Ulysses S. Grant, From Farm Boy to Shiloh

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Recommended Citation

Mannion, Richard G. (2023) "America's Hardscrabble General: Ulysses S. Grant, From Farm Boy to Shiloh," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.25.2.10

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol25/iss2/10>

Review

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Spring 2023

Hearst, Jack. *America's Hardscrabble General: Ulysses S. Grant, From Farm Boy to Shiloh.* Southern Illinois University Press, 2022. PAPERBACK. \$26.50 ISBN 9780809338795 pp. 228.

Nothing ever came easy to Ulysses S. Grant. From a childhood dominated by an irascible, overbearing father and an equally reticent mother, experiencing all the horrors and devastation of war at the ripe young age of twenty-four, to the humiliation in front of an increasingly conscious and critical public eye as he desperately tried to support his family, a humbled Grant understood the meaning of true deprivation. Throughout much of his adult life, disappointment and hardship were Grant's constant companions.

Yet rather than let these circumstances defeat him, Grant endured these hardships, learned valuable life lessons from them and, combined with his formative background, used these lessons to his advantage to become the greatest and most successful battle commander in American military history. So argues Jack Hurst in his compelling and highly engaging *America's Hardscrabble General, Ulysses S. Grant: From Farm Boy to Shiloh.*

Norman Rockwell himself could not have painted a childhood more quintessentially American: a formative, lower-middle-class upbringing he shared with a majority of the young nation's population, spent "continually staring between plow handles and over wagon tongues at the hindquarters of horses" (10). Grant experienced a rugged yeoman's farm life where work wasn't over until the job was done, a lesson he would use to great advantage throughout his life. Elitism was a foreign concept to the Grant household, a condition, which, according to Hurst, would serve Grant well in years to come as it allowed him to understand and identify with the ranks of men who would serve under him.

At the insistence and efforts of his father Jesse, a reluctant and apprehensive seventeen-year-old Grant, at a whopping 5' 2", 117 pounds, would enter the United States Military Academy. His four years at West Point would be marked by little distinction save his brilliant self-taught horsemanship, which would earn him universal recognition as the premier horseman

at the Academy. Three years after graduation at the tender age of twenty-four Grant would then be off to battle in Mexico in America's first war on foreign soil.

Typical of the experience of most green soldiers, Grant's service in the Mexican War was a defining experience from whence observations and lessons learned under fire would serve Grant well during the Civil War. Further, lessons in logistics gleaned from his role as quartermaster would be used to great effect less than twenty years later. More so, Grant would learn from his first commanding officer, Zachary Taylor, the importance of maintaining a calm and imperturbable demeanor during battle all while adopting many of the same affectations and lack of pretense that characterized Taylor. During the war, Grant lived up to his own lofty expectations. "The Mexican War had tested his courage and found it bottomless ... It is where Grant would acquire most of the strictly military knowledge needed of a general that could be gained without actually holding the rank" (86).

Grant would marry Julia Dent upon his return from Mexico, and, after four blissful years back in the states, Grant found himself stationed in the isolation of remote outposts on the West Coast. As a result of his exodus westward, Grant experienced the "beginning of what may have been (his) most miserable year on earth" (95). He desperately missed his young wife and growing family who remained home near St. Louis and would embark on a series of off-duty ventures to provide financial support for his young and growing family. No venture was beneath Grant. Having attempted to sell potatoes, ice, chickens, hogs, and wood, he would try anything to support his family. Fortunately, for the long run, he would fail at these ventures while his loneliness and sense of isolation started to become a problem. He wrote to his wife Julia on numerous occasions suggesting he might leave the military to come home. It was only the "the frightening specter of 'poverty'" that kept him from resigning, however that decision would be taken out of his hands (99). Allegations of drinking, a condition that Hurst suggests was evident in the early stages of the Mexican War, would force Grant's hand to resign his commission.

Now, at what had to be the absolute nadir of his life, Grant found himself out of work, out of money, and out of hope. He would find himself in a flophouse, disguised as hotel, in San Francisco with not even enough money to take him home. Only the generosity of a friend in the Army would take him back to his beloved wife and children, one of whom he had never seen before. Yet as bad and as challenging as things had been on the West Coast, it would be the

hardship of “the next seven years in a wilderness of the soul that was likely the greatest trial that predated his generalship” (101).

Hard times enveloped Grant in the mid-late 1850s as he would find himself “poorly qualified for private life” (100). Grant would seek out and attempt a series of business opportunities to provide for his family, yet as in Oregon and California, he would fail at them all. Forced to swallow his pride, Grant and his family moved to Galena, Illinois, in spring, 1860, where he would find employment as a clerk in his father’s family-owned leather goods shop. Bad habits do not die as easily as Grant hoped, for a fellow shop keeper found Grant to be “a very poor businessman”(110). One year later, however, everything changed for the tannery clerk. With war fever now percolating throughout the divided nation, Grant found himself the most conspicuous man in town. “What did Grant’s seven years in his post resignation wilderness of public disappointment, embarrassment, and penurious struggle have to do with the extra-ordinary generalship that followed,” Hurst asks. Without Grant’s knowing it at the time, “Looking at his Civil War performance, one is tempted to answer: almost everything,” asserts Hurst (121).

Embracing the notion that it was the “duty of every one who had been educated at the Government expense” to serve the nation that educated him, Grant left no stone unturned in his efforts to secure a position in the same military he left seven years earlier (112). He would embark on a convoluted, laborious mission—including a fruitless visit to General George McClellan—and eventually land an appointment as colonel of an Illinois volunteer regiment. Hurst describes the arrival of a disheveled, shabbily dressed Grant, looking more like the southern end of a north-bound mule than a nattily dressed regimental commander, much to the apparent amusement of many of his men. Less than three years later, this clumsily dressed relative unknown would lead the largest army in the history of the Republic on a southward trek in the wilderness of Virginia that would be regarded as the turning point in the Civil War. Eleven months later, this same man would accept his opponent’s official surrender at Appomattox Courthouse.

Following his early victories at Belmont, and Forts Henry and Donelson, Grant would be introduced on the national stage as “Unconditional Surrender Grant” and be embraced as an American hero, especially compared with the lackluster performance and torpid pace of the Army of The Potomac under the martinet George McClellan. The newly won notoriety would

earn not just public adulation in the North but promotion as fellow Illinoisian and kindred spirit President Abraham Lincoln signed an order promoting Grant to major general.

Yet this same notoriety almost caused the end of this stint in the military as well. Driven by jealousies from peers who sought advancement and promotion, his superiors would accuse him of returning to his former bad habits regarding the bottle. Weeks later, after being surprised at Shiloh, the whispers of malfeasance would turn into a crescendo of criticism from the same sources. Too many casualties, too little preparation, Grant must have been drunk again, so the chorus went. Yet with the support and advice of William Tecumseh Sherman, and a firm determination to push forward as was his nature, Grant would survive this barrage as well, “doggedly braving the post-Shiloh calumny and innuendo and, thanks to Sherman’s intervention ... Grant was now ready to proceed to his greatest campaigns: Vicksburg, Chattanooga and the titanic Virginia struggle with Lee”(188).

Ulysses S. Grant did not win the Civil War through only superior numbers and material, a circumstance inherited by a litany of earlier Union generals. Nor did he win the war merely by hurling “his men into battle like giant hunks of fresh meat.”¹ Rather, Grant won the war because of lessons learned from a formative youth and eye-opening foray into combat as well as the skills he honed throughout the early stages of the war. A shrewd observer with a penchant for problem solving, Grant learned to employ tactics that worked, abandon those that did not, and press his advantage of superior manpower by relentless pursuit of the enemy to the point of exhaustion. With malice towards none, Grant subsequently offered generous terms of surrender in hopes of fostering a peaceful national reconciliation at war’s end.

Notable New England elite Henry Adams wrote that Grant was “inarticulate” and that he “should have lived in a cave and worn skins.”² As others of similar ilk who would be responsible for the severe diminishment of Grant’s reputation up through the mid-twentieth Century, one must ask, was this the studied conclusion of an objective “historian” who thoroughly researched and studied Grant? Or are such declarations simply the musings of a pretentious, jealous class-conscious Boston Brahmin who could not understand nor countenance the fact that a mere commoner, a product sprung from the loins of the great mass of unwashed Americans, could and would become? As Hurst wisely asserts, “Ulysses S. Grant turned out to be one of the few giants

¹ Jay Winik, *April, 1865: The Month that Saved America*, (2001), 173.

² Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography*, (1918), 266.

of American history who fully deserved the popularity and fame heaped upon him in his time. He not only saved the Union but also went on to try to make it a better one” (189). Amen.

Jack Hurst is a historian and former journalist who has written for a number of newspapers including the *Chicago Tribune*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and the *Nashville Tennessean*. His books include *Nathan Bedford Forrest: A Biography*, *Men of Fire: Grant, Forrest and the Campaign that Decided the Civil War*, and *Born to Battle: Grant and Forrest – Shiloh, Vicksburg, and Chattanooga*. Hurst is also the creator of the blog *Civil War & Civil Rights*.

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