

Ulysses S. Grant

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Review

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Bunting III, Josiah *Ulysses S. Grant*. Times Books, \$20.00 hardcover ISBN 805069496

Brief biography

An introduction to new Grant scholarship

If you haven't noticed, a new wave of scholarship has been challenging much of what previous generations concluded about Ulysses S. Grant. Maligned for years as a butcher of a general or an inept president, historians have been coming to grips with the realization that neither image is accurate. For why Grant was maligned, one can look to the agendas of those who for years wrote the history--and to sheer repetition by their literary descendants, who may or may not have pondered the premises of the platitudes they inherited.

Facts can be stubborn things--often, though not always, even more so than emotions. It is difficult to persist in doubting the greatness of a general who succeeded where no fewer than six previous commanders failed, conquering a Napoleonic stretch of territory without ever experiencing a Waterloo. The 20th century taught that, in such places as Vietnam and Afghanistan, victory is far from inevitable for the side that has superior numbers, and Grant's strategy has become a model for too many military leaders, through recent times, to be dismissed. It is also difficult to continue disparaging a presidency as a low point of statesmanship when it stood alone for nearly nine decades in promoting a regime of equality that the nation came to rediscover during the Civil Rights Movement. Explore the rare, typically out of print writing on how potential war with Great Britain or Spain was averted during the 1870's, or American Indians put on the road to citizenship, and you may be struck that such significant events, which are among the many achievements of the Grant administration, would remain so obscure in the national memory.

The old habit of dismissing Grant has been dying, if dying hard. Most still will dismiss him as they were taught to in their grammar or high school days while his reassessment remains something of a scholarly secret, probably because a figure far removed from the passions of today does not evoke much visibility. Against this backdrop, however, comes a series of short biographies of American presidents edited by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. The author of the volume dedicated to Grant is Josiah Bunting III, an author and former Superintendent of the Virginia Military Institute who brings as much insight to Grant's political career as to his generalship.

Bunting is well aware of the elitism, condescension, and lack of objectivity afflicting assessments of Grant by scholars who were biased by the prejudices of their own times--including most perniciously the seeming compulsion to become apologists for the abandonment of Southern blacks after Grant's Reconstruction policy was repudiated. Moreover, Grant did not display the intellectual curiosity, culture, and self-doubt that so many scholars demand before they identify with their subjects, but this does not in fact reflect a weak mental endowment. Bunting challenges the notion that Grant overcame mediocre intellectual gifts to rise to the top, as his unimpressive West Point class rank (21st of 39) suggests, and notes Grant's adept mind and talent for writing from an early age. After West Point came distinguished service in the Mexican War and depressing years in the peacetime army and later as a civilian before the Civil War--discussed in a brief chapter wryly entitled *Peace is Hell*.

Then came the war. Bunting overlooks neither the horrors of battle nor Grant's ability: the most capable general of the war succeeded because he could deal with such chaos, could respond to the slaughter, the hideous costs, in ways that approached a certain kind of calm objectivity; that is to say, by an intelligent, fast (but unhurried) consideration of all the factors that bore on whatever situation was presented to him. This description of Grant's ability is reiterated in various forms throughout the narrative, which takes us quickly through his victories at Fort Donelson, Shiloh, Vicksburg, and Chattanooga, before discussing the Virginia campaigns against General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Misinterpretations of the latter campaigns are the root of Grant's reputation as a butcher, but Bunting disputes the notion that Union casualties were excessive or unnecessary.

Bunting's rejection of the old myths continues in full force through Grant's presidency, which gets more attention than his generalship. Grant's cabinet as a

whole proved to be an able one, somewhat above the average; as president he was bequeathed heavier and less tractable burdens than all but two presidents; he was the central force in the achievement of civil rights for blacks, the most stalwart and reliable among all American presidents for the next eighty years; and the best known scandal of the Grant era [the Credit Mobilier] had nothing to do with Ulysses Grant. On the issue of corruption, historians for years have blurred literary impressions (usually under the less exacting term scandal) with the more meager facts of actual corruption that a president could avert or correct. The author conducts limited analysis of the latter issue in criticizing Grant for a certain solipsism--was this really distinguishable from other presidents?--but this does not affect his conclusion that the Grant presidency, so far from being one of the nation's worst, may yet be seen among its best.

Since this is meant to be a short biography, Bunting is brief in recounting the dramatic story of Grant's race against death to complete his universally acclaimed *Personal Memoirs*, but skillful from the opening chapters in examining his subject's literary style as a teenager, as a general writing orders, and as a president attempting bold strides in his time before taking on his ultimate literary challenge.

Bunting's book is a delight in that the author writes cogently and colors his narrative with just enough historical analogies (classical and modern) to display his breadth of knowledge without ostentation. Even when debatable (e.g., his comparison of Reconstruction to Vietnam), the analogies can be intriguing. Most remarkable about this book is not that the author's conclusions are new, but that the book affirms a radical divergence from the traditional consensus that, especially with respect to Grant's presidency, is of fairly recent vintage. It would have been unthinkable for a short biography like this to appear 40 or 50 years ago, when existing presidential polls ranked Grant second to rockbottom Warren G. Harding among the presidents. Today, a laudatory view of the president as well as the general has become common enough that a book like Bunting's evokes little controversy--even though writings that encounter Grant in passing, as opposed to dedicated studies of him, are still prone to recount the old myths. Hopefully, those who study Grant more casually will now consider alternatives to these myths. If you do not have time for a lengthier account of Grant's entire life and career, this is the biography to read.

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