

### General Ulysses S. Grant: The Soldier and the Man

William D. Bushnell

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Bushnell, William D. (2007) "General Ulysses S. Grant: The Soldier and the Man," *Civil War Book Review*.  
Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol9/iss1/11>

## Review

Bushnell, William D.

Winter 2007

**Longacre, Edward G.** *General Ulysses S. Grant: The Soldier and the Man.*  
DaCapo Press, \$26.00 cloth ISBN 030681269X

General Grant

His Public and Professional Life

For the general who don't scare worth a damn, Ulysses S. Grant's path from reluctant West Point cadet to commander of the Union Army in the Civil War was a rocky one, full of failure, disappointment, and personal struggle.

In good company with other Grant biographers like Brooks Simpson, Josiah Bunting, and John Mosier, Edward Longacre has produced a highly readable, entertaining, and thoughtful book about Grant's early years, his marriage, civilian life, and military career. However, he wisely stops there, leaving Grant's tumultuous presidency for other historians to examine.

*General Ulysses S. Grant: The Soldier and the Man* is just one of Longacre's many books about Civil War generals. He has written about John Buford, Joshua Chamberlain, Joseph Wheeler, Dorsey Pender, George Pickett, James Wilson, Benjamin Butler, and others, and has won the prestigious Douglas Southall Freeman History Award for his biography of Wade Hampton, *Gentleman and Soldier: A Biography of Wade Hampton III* (Rutledge Hill Press, 2003). Additionally, his book *The Cavalry at Gettysburg: A Tactical Study of Mounted Operations During the Civil War's Pivotal Campaign, June 9-July 14, 1863* (Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1986) won the Fletcher Pratt Award.

With such credentials, it is no surprise that Longacre writes like a master storyteller. This book is not mere history; it is a vividly colorful and thorough portrayal of a man who overcame numerous public and private challenges to become the soldier who won the Civil War for the Union.

Longacre tells of Grant's early years, not as a son of privilege as others contend, but rather as the son of an ordinary family. Grant did not like to do his chores or go to church. He was not a good student, and did not cuss or tell rude jokes. He did not dance and heartily disliked music. For all that, however, he liked horses and good whiskey. As Longacre indicates, Grant as a youth was not very serious about anything, but he matured later in the army to become focused and determined in his duty.

In 1839 Grant went to West Point as a cadet, but as Longacre points out, Grant did not want to go and fully expected to flunk out. A military life had no charm for me, Grant said, and I had not the faintest idea of staying in the army even if I should be graduated, which I do not expect. He was quiet, almost shy, but would fight if sufficiently provoked.

At West Point, Grant made friends with men he would later serve with in the Mexican War, and later still would fight alongside or against in the Civil War. Longacre relates Grant's experiences in the Mexican War where he was appalled by the casualties, lovesick for his wife, and where boredom and loneliness made him vulnerable to alcohol.

Longacre makes no excuses for Grant's fondness for whiskey, but he does explain the circumstances and weaknesses that made Grant a binge drinker. Of course, because Grant became successful later in his army career, critics and enemies made much of his drinking. Even historians sometimes ignore the thousands of other soldiers, including other generals, who also sought comfort in the bottle during the war.

The author explores Grant's financial setbacks and business failures when he was a civilian between the Mexican War and the outbreak of the Civil War. Grant had little luck in his financial dealings, but lacked a competent head for business and was often fleeced by partners and friends he mistakenly trusted. Grant, it seems, was a lousy civilian, but a great general.

Longacre relates Grant's Civil War service, first as a colonel of volunteers in an Illinois infantry regiment, through his early victories at Forts Henry and Donelson, the near disaster at Shiloh, the siege of Vicksburg, and the climactic and very bloody Overland Campaign against Robert E. Lee in Virginia. Grant may not have been a tactical genius, but he knew how to fight and he knew what it would take to win. Longacre correctly determines that Grant was more a

strategist than tactician, more often favoring the blunt instrument of frontal assault than the finesse of tactical maneuver. He points out that Grant believed the only way to defeat an enemy army was to find it and fight it.

As a general officer, Grant displayed initiative, foresight, and boldness. He was also the victim of slander, malicious persecution, and the petty backbiting and jealousy of military and political rivals. In fact, according to Longacre, the greatest threat to Grant's military career was not on the battlefield but in his boss's headquarters.

With dramatic flair, honest appraisal, and subtle humor, Longacre provides fascinating insight into Grant's character, moods, decisions, worries, and personal foibles. Best of all, however, he clearly identifies Grant's greatest strength: One quality, more than any other, which he had acquired at an early age, had brought him this far—a determination to forge ahead, once he had set a course, and never turn back, no matter how many swollen, angry rivers barred his path (267).

For more interesting reading—and an alternative fictionalized take on Grant, see *Grant: A Novel* by Max Byrd (Bantam, 2000), and *That Fateful Lightning: A Novel of Ulysses S. Grant* by Richard Parry (Ballantine, 2000).

*William D. Bushnell, a retired Marine Corps colonel, is a professional book reviewer with more than 1,350 reviews published in thirty magazines and newspapers, and is an instructor at the University of Southern Maine. He lives on an island on the coast of Maine.*