

The Personal Memoirs Of Ulysses S. Grant: The Complete Annotated Edition

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Review

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Grant, Ulysses S. and Marszalek, John F.. *The Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant: The Complete Annotated Edition.* Belknap Press, \$39.95 ISBN 9780674976290

A Valuable Addition: The Annotated Edition of U.S. Grant's Memoirs

In July 1861, Colonel Ulysses S. Grant “received orders to move against Colonel Thomas Harris, who was said to be encamped at the little town of Florida” where Harris was collecting rebel volunteers from among the local Missourians. Grant’s response to the prospect of an engagement against Colonel Harris is instructive. Grant confessed, “While preparations for the move were going on I felt quite comfortable; but when we got on the road...I was anything but easy.” Marching through ominously empty countryside, Grant grew anxious. “As we approached the brow of the hill from which it was expected we could see Harris\’ camp, and possibly find his men ready formed to meet us, my heart kept getting higher and higher until it felt to me as though it was in my throat.” He confessed, “I would have given anything then to have been back in Illinois, but I had not the moral courage to halt and consider what to do; I kept right on.” (174)

It is hard to believe that Grant’s courage was ever in question, since “I kept right on” was a phrase so characteristic of Grant’s life that it could have been his epitaph. As it turned out, Harris and his soldiers were gone when the Federals arrived, and, wrote Grant, “My heart resumed its place.” But whether he was advancing on Harris; straining to find a way into Vicksburg; pushing the Army of the Potomac onto the road south after the inconclusive battle in the Wilderness; or completing his memoirs, Grant’s persistence once he started down a road was one of the key attributes that led Lincoln to him after so many disappointing commanders were tried and found wanting.

Grant recognized this aspect of his character and admitted that “One of my superstitions had always been when I started to go any where, or to do anything, not to turn back, or stop until the thing intended was accomplished. I have

frequently started to go to places where I had never been and to which I did not know the way, depending upon making inquiries on the road, and if I got past the place without knowing it, instead of turning back, I would go on until a road was found turning in the right direction, take that, and come in by the other side.” (30) What his wife, Julia Dent Grant, thought of this trait aside, Grant’s memoir is an impressive bit of evidence that this attribute shaped his actions to his very last days on earth. Faced with financial disaster and determined to improve his family’s fortunes despite being confronted by an enemy he could not defeat, Grant kept right on.

Thankfully, Professor John F. Marszalek, the executive director and managing editor of the U. S. Grant Presidential Library at Mississippi State University, has displayed a similar dedication in completing this new and extensively annotated edition of Grant’s *Memoirs*. A prolific author and the W. L. Giles Distinguished Professor of History Emeritus, Marszalek, with David S. Nolen and Louie P. Gallo, has produced a worthy capstone to compliment the now completed thirty-two volume *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* and the recent opening of the Ulysses S. Grant Presidential Library at Mississippi State University in Starkville, MS.

This edition comes at a time when there appears to be considerable interest in U. S. Grant. In the last two years, Ron Chernow’s 2017 biography, *Grant*, has joined Ronald C. White’s *American Ulysses: A Life of Ulysses S. Grant* (2016). Both of these works join the large collection of older biographies like Lloyd Lewis’s and Bruce Catton’s three-volume series on Grant (*Captain Sam Grant* (1950), *Grant Moves South* (1960), and *Grant Takes Command* (1968) and William McFeely’s *Grant: A Biography* (1982), to mention only a handful.

Marszalek, et. al., have done a thorough job in annotating Grant’s text. They provide a biographic note to nearly every individual mentioned by Grant, and also identify many geographic locations more completely. They also correct dates and casualty figures and similar items where that is necessary. One very convenient feature in this edition is its use of footnotes instead of endnotes. No doubt publishers preferred endnotes in the past as a way to simplify the process of printing, something modern software has hopefully eliminated, but readers prefer the convenience of footnotes to being forced to search in the back of the book for the reference or annotation. Additionally, the references in this edition to Grant’s collected papers (*PUSG*) provide the reader with everything needed to interface smoothly with the Ulysses S. Grant Presidential Library’s online digital

version, a welcome feature for readers who read the book with a computer nearby.

One objection the reader might have with this edition is the editorial decision to eliminate the maps. As the editors note, “Because the original maps...are not clear and thus not helpful to the reader, the editors do not include them in the text.” (xxviii) That is unfortunate, since the most valuable addition to any history of military campaigning after good clear prose is a good map. If the original maps were unclear—and they can confuse because of the level of detail they contain—perhaps simplified maps could have been substituted. Alternatively, where maps were removed from the text, the editors might have inserted a footnote to direct the reader to related maps in the collected papers. These are available online, and it would seem to be no more difficult to add this information in a note than the other references to Grant’s papers. Maps must be a necessary part of a text like this.

Marszalek like other historians remarks on Grant’s modesty, writing that “What made the *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant* particularly appealing to readers was Grant’s humility about himself and his infrequent criticism of others.” (xxii) Certainly, Grant’s humility contrasts agreeably with Maj. Gen. George McClellan’s arrogance, but modesty was not the source of Grant’s success on the battlefield. There, it was his tenacity and his willingness and ability to fight with cold-blooded effectiveness that distinguished him. These are not qualities emphasized in the Memoirs, but the perceptive reader will keep them in mind. They are, after all, the qualities Lincoln sought out and eventually found in Grant.

In January 1863, Lincoln wrote to Maj. Gen. Joe Hooker, that “I have heard...of your recently saying that both the Army and the Government needed a Dictator.” Noting that “Only those generals who gain successes, can set up dictators,” Lincoln continued, “What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship.” In contrast, Grant—a modest killer—gave Lincoln the victories without the fear of dictatorship. Readers of this well-constructed and highly recommended edition of Grant’s Memoirs will not fail to appreciate the man’s modesty, but they should also keep in mind that under that modesty lay a cold-blooded willingness to keep right on.

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Memoir of America in Post–World War I Germany, *by Maj. Gen. Johnson Hagood.*