

DMA Book Group – Grant by Ron Chernow

Notes and Impressions

1. Massive work, very well researched, supported by detailed contemporary writings: journals, diaries, letters, military and executive orders, newspapers. As a revisionist historian's patent effort to restore Grant's standing as one of the greatest U.S. leaders of the 19th century, the book's credibility is bolstered by the fact that Chernow and his staff did the tedious work to extract these details and string them together into a compelling 960-page narrative.
2. The book encompassed a broad swath of the nation's history – the Mexican War, the Civil War, Reconstruction, Redemption, political patronage, rampant corruption and the excesses of the Gilded Age. Grant was in many ways at the center of all these critical developments.
3. Grant's gifts were enormous as were his flaws and the author seemed comfortable in building a character study of the man that fully recognized both.

Military

- He proved a middling student at West Point though was an extraordinary horseman. He had superb organizational skills. He seemed to have an innate feel for the battleground: an uncanny ability to assess the mental and tactical weaknesses in his military opponent coupled with the will to move his troops swiftly to take advantage of those weaknesses – he was very good on offense; not so good at assessing how his opponent might respond. He was a thinking general and always tried to divine what his opponent might be thinking. His mindset was always to advance and never retreat unless necessary.
- During the height of battle and at crucial times in military conflict, he rarely became flustered. The ability to remain unusually calm under pressure, to think clearly, and to act decisively separated him from others and gave tremendous comfort to his fellow troops. He was not reluctant to give orders and dispatched many.
- He had a good feel for who was a good general and who wasn't, acted forthrightly to dismiss or reassign generals whom he considered not up to the task and came to rely on a small cadre of military leaders who supported his overall military drive. Sherman and Sheridan stood above others.

- His greatest strength was that he had a feel for the overall military theater and he thought strategically about how to achieve victory, combining related military directives in a comprehensive plan for winning the war.
- His victory over the Army of Northern Virginia, led by Lee, was his crowning achievement and the peace deal reached at Appomattox – the magnanimous terms of surrender – “there is but one condition I insist upon, namely: that the men and officers surrendered shall be disqualified for taking up arms again, against the Government of the United States ...” This conciliatory tone would provide a framework for restoring the Union.

Business

- As a businessman, Grant was not competent. He was incapable of running a successful business and was regularly fleeced by business associates and people that he thought were his friends.
- He hated his father’s tannery business, never earned much money in trade or other commercial endeavors and, as a young adult, used to wander the streets of St. Louis looking for work.
- He trusted people to a fault, was guileless, and never seemed to learn to be cynical about the behavior of others. The debacle involving his business partnership with Ferdinand Ward and James Fish proved to be his nadir. The financial transactions carried out by that firm were a 19th century version of the Bernie Madoff ponzi scheme, and when the enterprise collapsed, Grant and his family were rendered penniless.

Politics

- He purported to be reluctant to accept his nomination for President but was eager to assume and take advantage of the powers of the office.
- The ways of Washington were much different from the dynamics of the battlefield and it took him a long time to adapt. He chose his initial cabinet without consulting others and while some were competent, many were not. His manner of leadership of the military did not easily transfer to the political realm.
- Reconstruction proved to be an ugly challenging period, where he was forced to use U.S. government troops across the South to maintain order and to assure the voting and other rights and liberties afforded to blacks under the

Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution and civil rights legislation.

- While attempting to support government and civil service reforms, he was somewhat powerless to stem the tide of patronage, cronyism and corruption that permeated federal and state government and politics in this era. While he may not have been directly involved in the many scandals, he had many close friends who were and his reputation was continually tarnished by these associations.

Personal and Family

- As a man, Grant was an honest, decent, unassuming Midwesterner who arose to greatness. He dearly loved his wife and his children and navigated through difficult relationships with his in-laws, the Dents, who were very much on the side of the South both during and after the War.
- He seemed comfortable with people in all stations of life, was a great story teller in personal, private settings, but during most of his career kept his speeches and other public remarks to a minimum.
- He strongly supported civil rights for blacks and his views about the treatment of the blacks evolved during the Civil War as he grew closer to Lincoln and dealt with the practicalities in the field – arming and training them to fight, encouraging them to take on jobs, to manage the land and to learn to read and write.
- His administration of Reconstruction during his two terms as President reflected in his increasingly progressive views on race relations and civil rights, views that were acknowledged not only by blacks but also native Americans.
- Grant was very likely was an alcoholic; he fought against the disease for most of his adult life. To meet this challenge, he was strongly supported by his wife, Julia, and his wartime chief of staff John Rawlins.
- His two-and-a-half-year world tour, and his development of relationships with other world leaders, expanded his horizons and overall sophistication in matters of global affairs, increased in confidence in public speaking and solidified his reputation as an important world figure of the 19th century.

- His painful and enduring battle with cancer and his relentless drive to complete his personal memoir, with the able advice and encouragement of Mark Twain, was the compelling final chapter of his life.

Some Issues for Discussion

- What are your views about Grant's overall leadership of the military? Do you think he was ultimately successful because of his military prowess or simply because the Union had more men and more arms?
- Do you think Grant was a good President? What were his strengths and weaknesses? In general, do you think military leaders make good presidents?
- What are your thoughts on Reconstruction? Was there a better way to "bind up the nation's wounds"? What are your thoughts about the ultimate failure of Reconstruction (including the dwindling support of the Republican Party) and the onset of the long Jim Crow era?
- If Lincoln had not been assassinated, do you think that the post-Civil War period might have been less acrimonious and divisive, or was the deep and enduring societal and political divide inevitable?
- In some ways, do you think the Civil War, which cost so many lives and destroyed major parts of the country, was, in the end, a failure in terms of the goals sought to be achieved?
- Do you think Chernow's biography is fair and accurate in presenting the life of Grant in a way that seeks to restore him to a noble position among the nation's elite political leaders?
- What other thoughts do you have about the book? How does it compare with Chernow's other biographies of Washington and Hamilton?

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U.S. Constitution Amendments Thirteen, Fourteen & Fifteen

Thirteenth Amendment

Section 1.

Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

Section 2.

Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

Fourteenth Amendment

Section 1.

All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside. No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

Section 2.

Representatives shall be apportioned among the several states according to their respective numbers, counting the whole number of persons in each state, excluding Indians not taxed. But when the right to vote at any election for the choice of electors for President and Vice President of the United States, Representatives in Congress, the executive and judicial officers of a state, or the members of the legislature thereof, is denied to any of the male inhabitants of such state, being twenty-one years of age, and citizens of the United States, or in any way abridged, except for participation in rebellion, or other crime, the basis of representation therein shall be reduced in the proportion which the number of such male citizens shall bear to the whole number of male citizens twenty-one years of age in such state.

Section 3.

No person shall be a Senator or Representative in Congress, or elector of President and Vice President, or hold any office, civil or military, under the United States, or under any state, who, having previously taken an oath, as a member of Congress, or as an officer of the United States,

or as a member of any state legislature, or as an executive or judicial officer of any state, to support the Constitution of the United States, shall have engaged in insurrection or rebellion against the same, or given aid or comfort to the enemies thereof. But Congress may by a vote of two-thirds of each House, remove such disability.

Section 4.

The validity of the public debt of the United States, authorized by law, including debts incurred for payment of pensions and bounties for services in suppressing insurrection or rebellion, shall not be questioned. But neither the United States nor any state shall assume or pay any debt or obligation incurred in aid of insurrection or rebellion against the United States, or any claim for the loss or emancipation of any slave; but all such debts, obligations and claims shall be held illegal and void.

Section 5.

The Congress shall have power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article.

Fifteenth Amendment

Section 1.

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.

Section 2.

The Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.
