



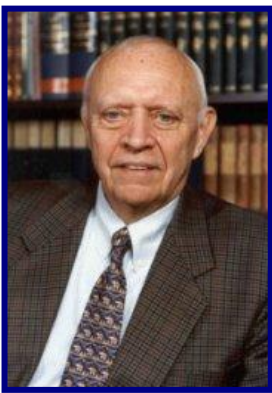
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FOOTNOTES

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“LET US HAVE PEACE”: REMEMBERING GENERAL ULYSSES S. GRANT

By Jean Edward Smith



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This essay is based on a lecture for FPRI's Butcher History Institute conference on “Great Captains in American History,” the eighth weekend-long program for high school teachers on American military history hosted and cosponsored by the First Division Museum at Cantigny in Wheaton, Illinois (a division of the McCormick Foundation) on April 20-21, 2013. The conference was supported by grants from the Butcher Family Foundation, the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, and the Stuart Family Foundation.

It is a pleasure to speak at the conference on “The Great Captains in American History,” and to talk about General Grant. Let me begin, however, by offering a word of caution. War is a terrible thing, and it should not be romanticized. One cannot talk about great military commanders out of context. This is not the Super Bowl, or the World Series, or an NCAA basketball tournament. This is about military conflict, and it is always a great tragedy for everyone involved.

I notice that you will also be looking at Eisenhower. Having written about both, let me suggest there are many parallels. They were both professional soldiers, were educated at West Point, commanded victorious armies in wars of unprecedented magnitude, were elected and reelected president with overwhelming majorities, and left office at the height of their popularity.

They also suffered significant erosions in their reputations in the years following, and are now experiencing a renewed appreciation. In Grant's case, his fall from grace traces to the return of white supremacy after Reconstruction. “Grant was the last of the radicals,” Frederick Douglass once said, and he genuinely believed in equality for African-Americans. So long as Grant was president, the United States Army remained in the South and the rights of former slaves were protected. But for the next three generations that view of racial equality was rejected. We lived in a world of segregation and “separate but equal,” and Grant suffered accordingly.

Grant's generalship was also disparaged, and Robert E. Lee became the hero for lost cause historians. The fact that Lee never won a battle after Grant came East in early 1864 is rarely mentioned.

With Eisenhower it was much the same. Ike made everything he did look easy. After he made peace in Korea in 1953, not one American soldier died in combat for the next eight years. Eisenhower twice resisted calls from the members of the National Security Council and the joint chiefs to use nuclear weapons, once to relieve the French

garrison at Dien Bien Phu and once to defend Formosa. And when Britain, France, and Israel invaded Egypt to seize the Suez Canal in 1956, Eisenhower forced them to withdraw.

The point of this is that both Grant and Eisenhower had seen war at its most extreme, and both were determined to prevent it from recurring. In Grant's case, the war involved the total destruction of the Confederate army. After Grant left the presidency he undertook a two-year world tour. Everywhere he went he was given a royal welcome and received by heads of state and adoring crowds. He spent two weeks in Berlin and got along famously with Chancellor Bismarck. One afternoon over coffee Bismarck commiserated with Grant about the Civil War—brother against brother—and regretted that it was so long.

Grant corrected him. It had to be long, he told Bismarck, and the South had to be totally defeated; otherwise the United States could never have ended slavery.

There is a parallel with Eisenhower. Many military historians argue that after the fall of Paris in the summer of 1944 the Allies could have driven straight to Berlin with a single thrust and the Germans could not have stopped them. That the broad-front strategy that Ike followed added another six or eight months to the war. That of course is hindsight, but conceding that it may be correct, let me suggest that the additional eight months of the war—with all of the destruction and loss of life it entailed—made it absolutely clear to the Germans that the Nazis had lost the war. Like Grant's total victory in the Civil War that eradicated slavery, Ike's victory in World War II made it possible for a new Germany to join the family of nations with absolutely no longing or nostalgia for Hitler or the Nazi past.

Both Grant and Ike hated war. Much to the consternation of Sherman and Sheridan, Grant made peace with the Indians on the Great Plains, resolved long-standing differences with Great Britain, and twice rejected demands for war with Spain over Cuba. In Ike's case, he totally dismissed the idea of limited war, which he thought was a contradiction in terms. Under Ike, the United States would not go to war unless national survival—not national security—was at stake, and if it did so it would be with nuclear weapons. Under Eisenhower, that kept the peace for eight years.

You may be interested in why scholars write books about particular people. In my own case, it has to do with family heritage. My ancestors settled in Mississippi in the 1820s, and have remained there. I first encountered General Grant when I was about 10 or 11 years old. My father took me and some of my Chickasaw County cousins to see the battlefield at Shiloh. We walked all over the battlefield, and like young boys are wont to do began to talk about how the South could have won if Albert Sidney Johnston had done this, or if Beauregard had done that. My father listened to us for a while and then said, "You boys better hush-up. General Grant was in command of the Union Army that day, and General Grant never lost a battle. And we should all be damn glad that he didn't."

My father said that knowing that his grandfather, my great-grandfather, had been killed at Shiloh fighting for the Confederates, but he impressed on me that the survival of the Union was far more important than our personal loss—and I have been hooked on Grant from that day on. (Eisenhower also never lost a battle—although Kasserine Pass, Salerno, and the Battle of the Bulge were near-run things. But then so was Shiloh!)

When we look back at the life of General Grant, it seems clear that he, more than any figure except Lincoln, was responsible for saving the Union. The Civil War was not a war between the states, much less between sovereign nations, but a rebellion. And President Lincoln, under his authority to "take care that the laws be faithfully executed," was simply suppressing the rebellion against national authority in the Southern states—which remained part of the Union.

Looking at the war itself, no two men better personified the cause for which they fought than Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee. Lee, charismatically handsome, son of Light Horse Harry Lee and Ann Carter of Tidewater, exemplified the romantic virtues of the South's slaveholding aristocracy. Grant, the son of an Ohio tanner, indistinguishable in a crowd even in uniform, personified the egalitarian values of a modernizing, democratic society. Both men were superb general officers who had the complete loyalty of the armies they commanded. Lee's military career had been exemplary. Grant's past was spotty. He knew failure and hard times, and what it meant to live at the bottom of the economic ladder.

Lee stood for a way of life that was ending; Grant for the new era of industrial democracy that was beginning. Lee

represented America's past; Grant, its future.

Grant is the most unlikely of military heroes—a great general who disliked West Point and rejected the peacetime Army. “If I could have escaped West Point without bringing myself into disgrace at home, I would have done so,” Grant wrote in his memoirs. “A military life had no charms for me, and I had not the faintest idea of staying in the Army even if I should be graduated, which I did not expect.” Grant finished in the middle of his class (21/39), spent much of his time reading fiction, and learned serious painting in the studio of Robert Walter Weir, a prominent artist of the time who taught drawing at the Academy. Grant also excelled at horsemanship and set a record for jumping at West Point that held for the next 25 years.

If Grant had his way, he would have become a professor of mathematics, but that did not happen. His first duty station was with the 4th Infantry at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, and it was there that he met his wife Julia. Then came the Mexican War. Grant served first under General Zachary Taylor, “Old Rough and Ready,” whom Grant admired and on whom he later patterned himself, and then under General Winfield Scott, “Old Fuss and Feathers,” from whom Grant also learned a great deal. Most of Grant's time in the war was spent as the quartermaster for the 4th Infantry, and he learned from Scott that an army could live off the land. Scott broke away from his base at Vera Cruz to capture Mexico City; Grant did the same when he cut his ties to his supply base in Memphis, moved south of Vicksburg, crossed the Mississippi, and attacked the city from the east—living off the land as Scott had done.

Grant loved Mexico and developed an abiding affection for the Mexican people. He thought the American cause was unjust and in his writings repeatedly condemned war as the most unsavory activity of mankind. After the war Grant served in a series of frontier postings with the 4th Infantry, first as Sackets Harbor on Lake Ontario, then at Fort Humboldt on the Pacific coast. It was at Fort Humboldt that Grant grew morose, longed for his wife and children (who were back east), and began to drink heavily. One day he was found inebriated at pay call, and his commanding officer, Colonel Robert Buchanan, gave him the option of standing a court martial or resigning. Grant resigned instantly, not wanting his wife or family to know of the incident. That was April 11, 1854.

(I might add a footnote, that when Grant came east as general in chief in 1864, Buchanan was commanding the brigade of regulars in the Army of the Potomac. Grant promoted him to major general and later made him military governor of Louisiana.)

The next seven years were difficult for Grant. He tried and failed first as a farmer, then a real estate salesman, rent collector, and businessman. Poverty stared him in the face. In December 1857 he pawned his gold watch to provide Christmas presents for his family. Later he was reduced to peddling firewood on a St. Louis street corner wearing his old Army overcoat.

When Beauregard fired on Fort Sumter in April 1861, Grant, who was 38 years old, was working as a clerk in an Illinois leader goods store run by his two younger brothers. He immediately volunteered, but was denied a place in the regular army. He was commissioned a colonel in the Illinois militia by the governor, and led his newly formed regiment into Missouri to attack Confederate forces assembling there.

“My sensations as we approached what I supposed would be a field of battle were anything but agreeable,” Grant wrote. “I had been in all the engagements of the Mexican War...but not in command...As we approached the brow of the hill from which it was expected we would see the enemy...my heart kept getting higher and higher until it felt as though it was in my throat. I would have given anything to be back in Illinois, but I had not the moral courage to halt and consider what to do. When we reached a point from which the valley below was in full view I halted. The place where the Confederates had been encamped was still there but the troops were gone. It occurred to me at once that Colonel Harris [the Confederate commander] had been as much afraid of me as I had been of him. This view of the question I had never taken before, but it was one I never forgot afterwards.”

Thanks to Congressman Elihu Washburne, who represented Grant's home district, Grant was promoted to brigadier general and given command of Union forces on the upper Mississippi. He moved south and in February 1862 captured Fort Donelson. This was the first significant Union victory in the war, and Grant was promoted to major general. Grant demanded unconditional surrender at Donelson, and set a pattern that continued. Two months later Grant was surprised one Sunday morning at Shiloh by Albert Sidney Johnston, but held the line and counterattacked the next day and won the battle—the bloodiest of the war at that point.

After the battle, a group of congressmen called on Lincoln and asked that Grant be relieved because they had heard he was drinking. Lincoln was amused at the congressmen. At one point he asked them to find out what brand Grant was drinking because he would like to send a case to his other generals. And actually Grant was not drinking at the time.

In an interesting contrast, General Lee was given two bottles of whiskey by an old friend at the beginning of the war to use for medicinal purposes. When Lee surrendered at Appomattox, the two bottles were still in his chest unopened.

It took Grant another year to capture Vicksburg and open the Mississippi to shipping—splitting the Confederacy in two. As I mentioned, Grant cut himself off from his base in Memphis, crossed the river below Vicksburg, and attacked the city from the east. Grant undertook this on his own initiative, and did not report what he was doing or ask permission. Throughout the war, Grant made sweeping decisions on his own authority and was always prepared to be relieved if he was wrong.

Vicksburg again was unconditional surrender, and this time Grant paroled the Confederate soldiers rather than making prisoners of them. Grant hated vindictiveness. He had known his own humiliation before the war and would not inflict it upon others.

After Vicksburg came Chattanooga, and Grant for the first time commanded troops from three armies: the Army of the Tennessee, the Army of the Cumberland, and Hooker's corps from the Army of the Potomac.

In February 1864, Grant was promoted to lieutenant general by act of Congress—the first to hold that rank since George Washington—and ordered to Washington to take command of all Union armies as general in chief. When Grant arrived he made three decisions that were unexpected. First, he would command all Union armies from the field, not from a desk in Washington. The telegraph permitted that, and Grant said he would make his headquarters with the Army of the Potomac. Second, he retained General Henry Halleck as chief of staff in the War Department. “Old Brains,” as he was called, would handle the paperwork and the politics. Third, he retained General Meade in command of the Army of the Potomac (Meade thought he would be relieved), and made Sherman commander of the Army of the Tennessee. But Grant, as general in chief, went to the field, and on May 4, 1864 crossed the Rapidan River in Virginia with Meade's army to attack Lee.

And actually it was Lee who attacked him almost immediately in the Wilderness. The fighting was some of the heaviest of the war, and after three days Grant gave another order, this time to move south. This is one of the most famous incidents in the war—previous commanders had always moved back following Lee's attacks—and was the beginning of the end for the Confederacy.

Grant's campaign in northern Virginia is one of the classics of modern war. Grant was not interested in capturing territory or occupying Richmond but in destroying the Confederate army. “Lee's army will be your objective point,” he told Meade. “Where Lee goes there you will go also.” Spotsylvania, the North Anna, and Cold Harbor followed in quick succession. After the terrible bloodletting at Cold Harbor, Grant broke off again, crossed the James River unknown to Lee and moved against Petersburg below Richmond. It was another daring maneuver similar to his crossing the Mississippi below Vicksburg.

The campaign in northern Virginia was costly. Grant lost 53,000 men, and his casualty ratio was 5:3—he lost five men for every three that Lee lost. But Grant could replenish his losses and Lee could not. The continued pressure that Grant imposed gave the Confederates no respite, and shortages of food and fodder and the loss of equipment were taking their toll. At Grant's orders Sheridan laid waste to the Shenandoah valley, burning crops in the field, as did Sherman on his march to the sea and then into South Carolina.

In all of this Grant represented the calm at the center of the storm of battle. He accepted the reality of war, and recognized that victory could not be achieved without fighting. And he never lost sight of the ultimate goal of the restoration of peace. The shorter road to that led through the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, and Cold Harbor. Said differently, Grant wanted to end the war as quickly as possible, and that meant grinding Lee down through continuous assault.

At Appomattox Grant took the surrender of a Confederate army for the third and final time. Once again the terms were unconditional surrender. Grant wrote out the terms in long hand. As at Vicksburg, the men were paroled and sent home. This time they were allowed to keep their horses for the spring plowing. Acting on his own authority as general in chief, Grant concluded with a sentence that took a massive step toward bringing the nation together. The officers and men who turned in their weapons and returned home were “not to be disturbed by United States authority so long as they observe their paroles and the laws in force where they reside.” With these words Grant pardoned the Army of Northern Virginia and undercut the vengeance festering in Union circles to hang the Confederate leaders for treason.

In the bitter days of reprisal following Lincoln’s assassination, it was Grant’s word alone that stood between Lee and the gallows. And if General Lee could not be hung, no one could be. In short, Grant was ruthless in battle because he wanted to end the war as soon as possible. And when he did so, he was magnanimous and caring for those defeated.

We have not discussed Grant’s presidency, which like Eisenhower’s is now being reevaluated. I was instructed to talk about General Grant, and I have tried to stick to that. Grant left a distinct military legacy. He changed the way we look at war. The idea that war was a rational exercise in maneuver was rejected, and we began to concentrate our efforts on destroying the enemy army. Grant ignored cities, and rail junctions, and supply points, and cared little about occupying enemy territory. But he was relentless in his pursuit of the enemy army, and he was absolutely determined to destroy it. Both Grant and Eisenhower recognized that war was a terrible thing, and after victory both were determined to prevent it from happening again.

I could talk endlessly about Grant. But “endless” is a word a speaker should never use. So let me conclude with a word about Grant’s death.

Grant’s funeral in 1885 was a testament to national unity. Major General Winfield Scott Hancock, accompanied by former Confederate generals John B. Gordon and Fitzhugh Lee, led a parade of 60,000 men up Broadway to Riverside Park. One-and-a-half million spectators lined the route as veterans of the Stonewall Brigade marched alongside the Grand Army of the Republic. At Grant’s request, the pallbearers included an equal number of Southern and Union generals. Sherman and Sheridan marched with Joseph E. Johnston and Simon Bolivar Buckner. They were followed by President Cleveland, ex-presidents Hayes and Arthur, the Cabinet, and the justices of the Supreme Court. Grant’s tomb was not complete, but his words would soon be emblazoned over the portal facing south: “Let us have peace.”

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