

Personal Memoirs

Ulysses S. Grant

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The **Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant** provide an outstanding first person view of the US Civil War from a man who rose from obscurity, and repeated economic failure, to become an active participant, commander of men in battle, successful campaigner and later the victorious supreme commanding officer in military command of all Union, or nationalist, armies. The Memoirs are written in a direct and straight forward language. They are a pleasure to read and are replete with insightful commentary on the Mexican War of 1846-1848 and the US Civil War of 1861-1865. Grant commits the lion's share of writing to his US Civil War; here Grant's writing is invaluable to a student of American History. The work is monumental in subject matter and length. To write a bare description of the important campaigns Grant commanded, never mind participated in, are far beyond the scope of this paper. The work really is superb. Any serious student of the Civil War really must take the time to read the work. Much of the campaign descriptions in McPherson's **Battle Cry Freedom** seem directly taken from Grant's military orders and his recollections of key battles and the figures commanding the men in the field. Grant's actual written orders, letters and reports are a true pleasure to read. Grant's personality shines through the work from the first pages on his childhood through the desperate race towards Five Forks and Appomattox. Grant's likes and dislikes are as clear and straightforward as Grant's writing style. It is the personality of Grant and the personalities of those who he interact with create much of the *flavor* of the text.

Phil Sheridan and most especially William T. Sherman are upheld by Grant throughout the Memoirs as noble upright champions of the nationalist, or Union, cause. Grant returns repeatedly to praising Sherman's generalship, honor and vigorous prosecution of the Union cause. In many ways Sherman seems less a subordinate and more a valued comrade and partner. Grant has a personal dislike, or more accurately a low opinion of the generalship, of some of his contemporaries; this is apparent throughout the work. It is when the Memoirs move away from Grant's description of the many campaigns he participated, a rare occurrence as the military campaigns of the Civil War really are

the central matter of the work, in and often led and move into Grant's interpretations and opinions of his peers that some of the most personally revealing, informative, and amusing passages are developed. Grant had great personal likes and dislikes among his fellow officers and they tell much about Grant's character.

The text is over 640 pages in length; the digital work is over 12780 Kindle locations in length. The Memoirs were, and often still are, divided into two separate works; the first covering Grant's family and childhood through the capture of Vicksburg on the Mississippi. The work spends precious few pages on young Grant's childhood and provides a few pages on his non-military life. The second volume picks up immediately following the events in and around Vicksburg and chronicles Grant's rise to supreme command of Union Armies during the Civil War and the eventual triumph at Appomattox over the Army of Northern Virginia, the final surrender the rebel armies, the cessation of hostilities, the assassination of Lincoln and a short final warning by Grant to the nation he fought so long to preserve.

Grant so few chapters to his life prior to his military career that his childhood takes on an almost idyllic quality. He recalls a childhood that was generally happy, full of youthful pleasures, and seemingly unmarred by strife or serious controversy.

"there was never any scolding or punishing by my parents; no objection to rational enjoyments, such as fishing, going to the creek a mile away to swim in summer, taking a horse and visiting my grandparents in the adjoining county, fifteen miles off, skating on the ice in winter, or taking a horse and sleigh when there was snow on the ground."¹

He early on developed a deep affection for horses, and was an accomplished rider at a very young age.² Grant spends very little time in the Memoirs on his youth, adolescence, and experience at West Point. Amusingly he actually didn't have a great interest an appointment to West Point but his father most emphatically did. Here is Grant's recollection of the first time the subject came up between the two Grants. "'Ulysses, I believe you are going to receive the appointment.' 'What appointment?' I

¹ Grant, Kindle loc. 202-9

² Grant, Kindle loc. 215-25

inquired. 'To West Point; I have applied for it.' 'But I won't go,' I said. He said he thought I would, AND I THOUGHT SO TOO, IF HE DID."³

Contradiction seemed in many ways to define the life experiences of young Ulysses. Initially young Grant did not have a great interest in West Point or a career as an army officer. "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."⁴ Grant's experiences and personal actions during the war with Mexico contrast dramatically with his statements against remaining in the regular army as a career. Grant the wartime soldier is a strong contrast to Grant the peacetime garrison soldier. Grant was no apologist of the war with Mexico.

"I was bitterly opposed to the measure, and to this day regard the war, which resulted, as one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation. It was an instance of a republic following the bad example of European monarchies, in not considering justice in their desire to acquire additional territory."⁵

Grant's philosophical distaste, for the Mexican war, contrasts with the effect of his own participation in the conflict. "I have often thought that my life was saved, and my health restored, by exposure, enforced by an administrative act, and a war, both of which I disapproved."⁶

Grant's notions of bravery and courage are interesting and informative. Grant was initially assigned as the regimental quartermaster officer for his assigned unit. His original posting kept him to the rear of the fighting but Grant managed to move his way toward the sound of gunfire.

"My curiosity got the better of my judgment, and I mounted a horse and rode to the front to see what was going on. I had been there but a short time when an order to charge was given, and lacking the moral courage to return to camp—where I had been ordered to stay—I charged with the regiment...About one-third of the men engaged in the charge were killed or wounded in the space of a few minutes."⁷

³ Grant, Kindle loc. 253-60

⁴ Grant, Kindle loc. 311-17

⁵ Grant, Kindle loc. 467-74

⁶ Grant, Kindle loc. 509-16

⁷ Grant, Kindle loc. 1022-28

Grant's opinion regarding his own moral courage makes an interesting contrast with his feelings regarding dueling.

"I do not believe I ever would have the courage to fight a duel. If any many should wrong me to the extent of my being willing to kill him, I would not be willing to give him the choice of weapons with which it should be done, and of the time, place and distance separating us, when I executed him. If I should do another such a wrong as to justify him in killing me, I would make any reasonable atonement within my power, if convinced of the wrong done. I place my opposition to dueling on higher grounds than here stated. No doubt a majority of the duels fought have been for want of moral courage on the part of those engaged to decline."⁸

Grant writes at length about the generalship of Scott and Taylor during the War with Mexico and it is from both that Grant learns much of his command style, and later, place in history. On one hand he favorably contrasts Taylor with Scott. Taylor was rougher hewn, "Taylor never wore a uniform, but dressed himself entirely for comfort. He moved about the field in which he was operating to see through his own eyes the situation. Often he would be without staff officers..."⁹ Here is Grant on Taylor again, "Taylor was not a conversationalist, but on paper he could put his meaning so plainly that there could be no mistaking it."¹⁰ Grant clearly modeled his generalship on Taylor. However Grant learned, and practiced much, this is clear throughout the entirety of the Memoirs, of Scott's understanding that "Orders were prepared with great care and evidently with the view that they should be a history of what followed."¹¹

Grant shows a great faith in Sherman throughout the work without a hint of recrimination, jealousy or concern for position. Sherman, according to Grant, responded in kind. When Grant was hurt an unable to command at Vicksburg Sherman stepped to support Grant. "Sherman declined to assume command because, he said, it would confuse the records; but he let all the orders be made in

⁸ Grant, Kindle loc. 528-34

⁹ Grant, Kindle loc. 1277-84

¹⁰ Grant, Kindle loc. 1288-92

¹¹ Grant, Kindle loc. 1284-91

my name and was glad to render any assistance he could.”¹² Grant similarly is consistently supportive and actively praises Sheridan throughout the work. “To Sheridan’s prompt movement the Army of the Cumberland, and the nation, are indebted for the bulk of the capture of prisoners, artillery, and small-arms that day. Except for his prompt pursuit, so much in this way would not have been accomplished.”¹³ Grant’s successes in the Civil War owed much to the successes of the generalship of Sherman and to only a slightly less degree the generalship of Sheridan. It is fair to say that Sheridan came to be, in the Eastern theatre of war a replacement for Sherman, who Grant had left in command of the Western theatre. Grant relied heavily, almost exclusively, on Sherman in his (Grant’s) western campaigns. Sheridan comes to command Grant’s cavalry in the East, decisively drives Confederate forces out of the Shenandoah Valley, and personally commands the forces that finally turn Lee’s flank and lead to the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia.

Grant had a very high opinion of President Lincoln, and a fairly low opinion of Secretary Stanton. “Mr. Lincoln was not timid, and he was willing to trust his generals in making and executing their plans. The Secretary was very timid, and it was impossible for him to avoid interfering with the armies covering the capital when it was sought to defend it by an offensive movement against the enemy guarding the Confederate Capital. He could see our weaknesses, but he could not see that the enemy was in danger. The enemy would not have been in danger if Mr. Stanton had been in the field.”¹⁴

Grant as a general constantly focused on acting against the enemy and forcing him to react. Much of the success of his campaigns can be attributed to aggressive engagements upon the enemy. He approves of Generals, such as Sheridan and Sherman that promptly engaged and forced the enemy into a general engagement.

The Memoirs actively trace the slow and relentless growing military maturity of Grant and the Nationalist Armies throughout the Civil War. By the final chapters the vast preponderance of the armies under Grant’s command is apparent and he is in deadly earnest to use them to their fullest power

¹² Grant, Kindle loc. 5593-99

¹³ Grant, Kindle loc. 6254-60

¹⁴ Grant, Kindle loc. 10549-55

against the Rebels. The armies under the command of Lee and Johnston are pitifully overmatched by the juggernaut Grant commanded. The armies of the Union marched from the North, from the South, held the roads closed to the West and even more forces were being assembled to be brought to bear. Grant's forces successfully turning the flank of Lee's Army and preventing an escape by Lee's army, as an army, did much to end the war. Grant's humility and grace at the surrender were both obvious signs of individual nobility and of wise and astute peacemaking.

Grant hoped for an appointment to the position as a mathematics instructor at West Point. He thought a permanent job as a math teacher would be the pinnacle of his army career.¹⁵ Grant was wrong, "...but circumstances always did shape my course different from my plans."¹⁶ Fortunately Grant was wrong, much as he was wrong about attending West Point itself. Some historians have concluded that Grant was prone to distancing himself from failure. There is little of that in the Memoirs. Most notably here is Grant on the debacle outside of Cold Harbor. "I have always regretted that the last assault at Cold Harbor was ever made. I might say the same thing of the assault of the 22nd of May, 1863, at Vicksburg. At Cold Harbor no advantage whatever was gained to compensate for the heavy loss we sustained."¹⁷ Perhaps some historians might see Grant excusing himself from responsibility for the senseless deaths in the brutal frontal assaults made on the fortified positions at Cold Harbor. Others might read honest regret and an assumption of responsibility.

¹⁵ Grant, Kindle loc. 328-30

¹⁶ Grant, Kindle loc. 331-33

¹⁷ Grant, Kindle loc. 8014-21