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# CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

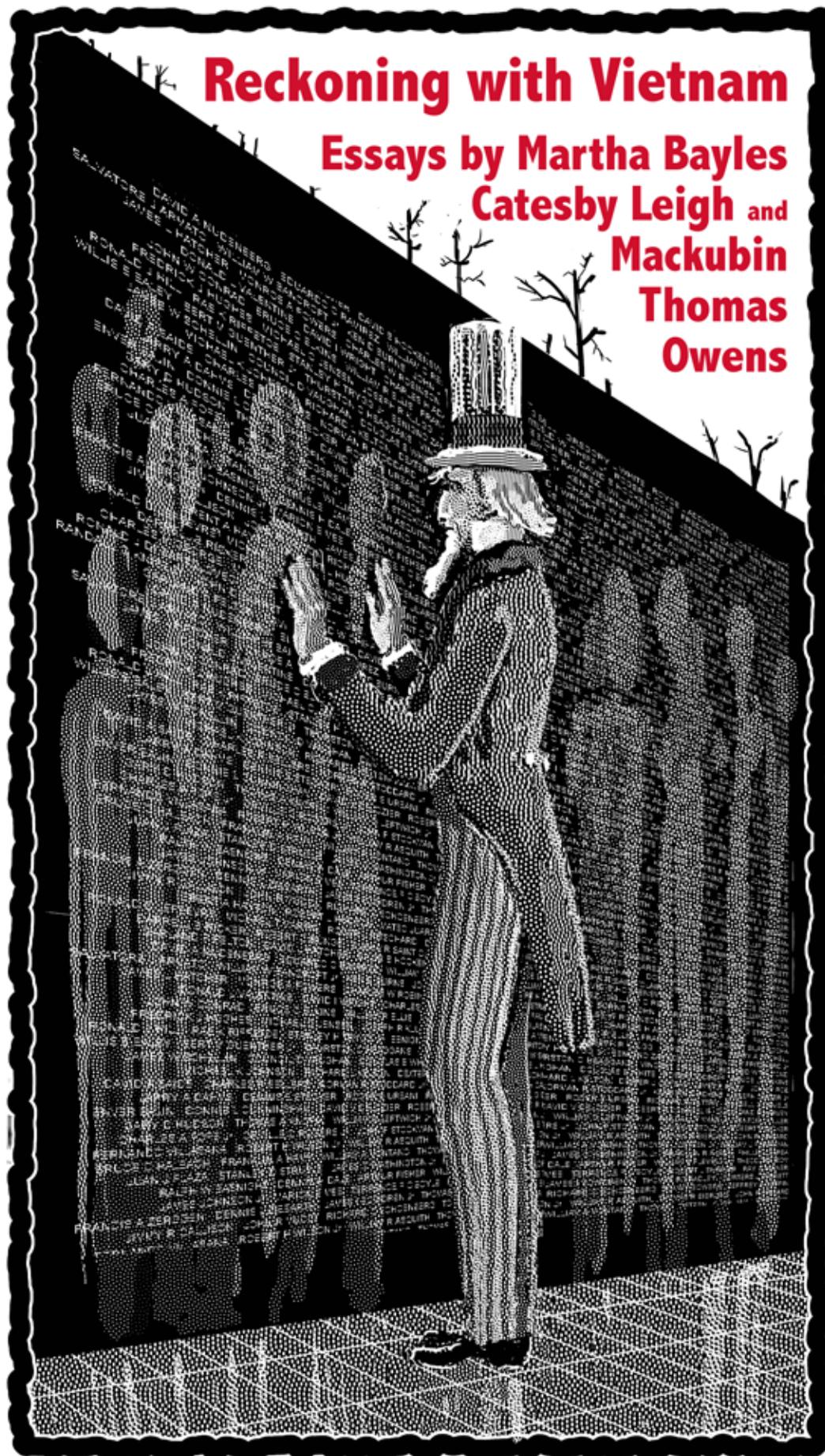
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Cartoon by Thomas Nast, engraving from the cover of Harper's Weekly, c. 1874

Book Review by Michael Burlingame

## REHABILITATING GRANT

*American Ulysses: A Life of Ulysses S. Grant*, by Ronald C. White.  
Random House, 864 pages, \$35 (cloth), \$20 (paper)

*Grant*, by Ron Chernow.  
Penguin Press, 1,104 pages, \$40

*The Complete Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant: The Complete Annotated Edition*, edited by John F. Marszalek.  
Belknap Press, 816 pages, \$39.95

ULYSSES S. GRANT LONG OCCUPIED one of the lowest rungs on the ladder of presidential reputation. As Grant's second term drew to a close in 1877 the *Nation's* influential editor, E.L. Godkin, described the president as "an ignorant soldier, coarse in his taste and blunt in his perceptions, fond of money and material enjoyment and of low company," whose administration was "deplorable, coarse and venal." Henry Adams quipped that Grant's first two initials stood for "uniquely stupid" and observed, in *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918), "That, two thousand years after Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, a man like Grant should be called...the highest product of the most advanced evolution, made evolution ludicrous. The progress of evolution from President Washington to President Grant, was alone evidence enough to upset Darwin." Historian William McFeely, whose *Grant: A Biography* won a Pulitzer Prize in 1982, dismissed his subject as a man who

had no organic, artistic, or intellectual specialness. He did have limited but by no means inconsequential talents to apply to whatever truly engaged his attention. The only problem was that until he was nearly forty, no job he liked had come his way—and so he became a general and president because he could find nothing better to do.

Since McFeely's book appeared, the historiographical tide has been turning. Works by Brooks D. Simpson, Richard N. Current, Jean Edward Smith, Josiah Bunting III, Geoffrey Perret, and Joan Waugh portray Grant far more positively than had McFeely. Two recent full-scale biographies give Grant his full due, both as a general and as president. *American Ulysses: A Life of Ulysses S. Grant*, is a solid, workmanlike effort by Ronald C. White, professor emeritus of American religious his-

tory at San Francisco Theological Seminary; *Grant* is a detailed, vivid, sophisticated life by Ron Chernow, the justly acclaimed biographer of Alexander Hamilton, George Washington, and John D. Rockefeller, as well as the chronicler of the J.P. Morgan banking house.

CHERNOW DESCRIBES GRANT AS "A SENSITIVE, complex, and misunderstood man with a shrewd mind, a wry wit, a rich fund of anecdotes, wide knowledge, and penetrating insights." As a general Grant was no "butcher" or "plodding, dim-witted commander who enjoyed superior manpower and materiel and whose crude idea of strategy was to launch large, brutal assaults upon the enemy." If he "never shrank from sending masses of soldiers into bloody battles, it had nothing to do with a heartless disregard for human life and everything to do with bringing the war to a speedy conclusion." Chernow approvingly quotes military historian John Keegan, who deemed Grant "the towering military genius of the Civil War" and "the greatest general of the war, one who would have excelled at any time in any army." As president, Grant was neither "a rube in Washington, way out of his league" nor "an inept executive presiding over a scandal-ridden administration" but rather "an adept politician" whose most noteworthy achievement was "safeguarding the civil rights of African Americans." Indeed, Chernow states that "Grant deserves an honored place in American history, second only to Lincoln, for what he did for the freed slaves." Similarly, White regards Grant as "an exceptional person and leader" who "combined modesty and magnanimity" and possessed "moral courage."

Chernow examines Grant's childhood in depth, sensitively analyzing his psychological makeup. Jesse Grant, Ulysses's adoring, vain, overbearing father, was "a self-assertive windbag and congenital striver," a "self-important busybody" who "committed the common error of willful fathers who try to stimulate

their sons and overpower them instead." As a result, Ulysses "developed a deeply entrenched modesty" and a profound distaste for boasting and egotism. Recounting one of the most discreditable episodes of Grant's military career, Chernow offers a psychological explanation of the general's infamous order (which President Lincoln promptly overruled) expelling all Jews from his large military department. According to Chernow, Grant promulgated that order "in a fit of Oedipal rage against his father," who, along with some Jewish merchants, had sought to obtain cotton-trading permits. Hardly a bigot, Grant regretted his action; during his presidency he tried to atone for the order.

GRANT'S PIOUS, FRUGAL, STRAITLACED, and reserved mother, Hannah, was so "emotionally arid" that her son "was starved for outright maternal affection." His failure to receive it left him "emotionally blocked," "prone to depression," "hypersensitive" to criticism, and hungry for emotional nourishment, which he sought from friends, many of whom betrayed his trust. Though Grant himself was honest, his cronies were often not. During his presidency, his private secretary, Orville E. Babcock, and some cabinet members (including the secretaries of war and the interior) caused national scandals. Their scandals became the main thing people remember about Grant's eight years in the White House. He could have related to President Warren G. Harding, who in 1923 reportedly told a journalist:

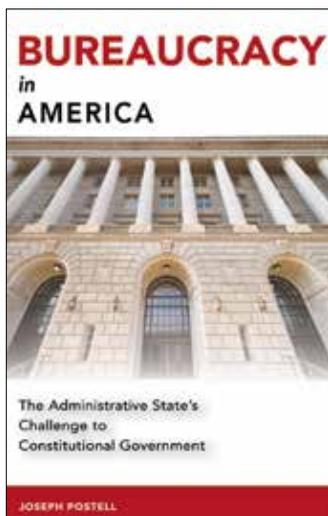
I have no trouble with my enemies. I can take care of my enemies all right. But my damn friends...my God-damned friends, they're the ones who keep me walking the floor nights!

Grant's craving for emotional nutrition was satisfied not only by (often untrust-

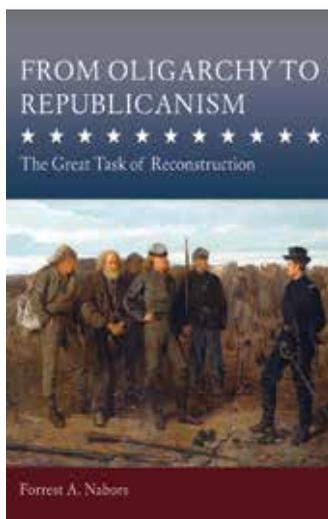


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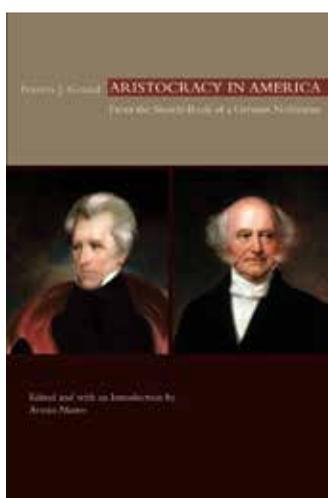
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worthy) friends but also by the woman he married, Julia Dent, who provided what Chernow calls “the deep bond craved by bashful men who need the unconditional devotion of one loving, loyal woman.” Their marriage was a happy one.

**I**N ADDITION TO THE SCANDALS, GRANT’S drinking has marred his reputation. Chernow calls Grant “an alcoholic with an astonishingly consistent pattern of drinking,” a “solitary binge drinker who would not touch a drop of alcohol, then succumb at three- or four-month intervals, usually on the road.” When drunk, he “underwent a radical personality change and could not stop himself once he started to imbibe.” For Grant, drinking was “a forbidden impulse against which he struggled for most of his life.” Though it “almost never interfered with his official duties,” at 32 he was forced out of the army because of his “alcohol problem.”

After this involuntary resignation in 1854, Grant spent years as a quasi-failure, reduced to peddling wood on the streets of St. Louis and clerking in his father’s leather goods store. His lack of success in civilian life, according to Chernow, “implanted in him a high level of motivation” and an “indomitable will” to overcome failure. Along with his “glandular optimism,” Grant’s willpower helped make him a successful military commander—but not one without flaws. “Intent on his own offensive strategy,” Chernow concludes, “he often failed to anticipate countermoves from opposing generals, leaving him vulnerable to dramatic surprises.” No lapse was more striking than his decision not to have his troops fortify their position at Shiloh, rendering them open to a nearly disastrous Confederate attack on the first day of that epic 1862 battle. Later, his “unquenchable fighting spirit” sometimes led to poor decisions, like his ill-fated assault at Cold Harbor in 1864. But overall, Lincoln was correct when he remarked, “It is the dogged pertinacity of Grant that wins.”

Lincoln also appreciated Grant’s grasp of overall strategy. Like the president, Grant understood that in order to prevail, the Union had to apply pressure on all fronts simultaneously. Lincoln had long urged his commanders to adopt such a coordinated, full-court press policy, but only when Grant took control of all Union armies in 1864 was the approach implemented. Chernow compares Grant favorably to Robert E. Lee, who was brilliant as a tactician but not as a strategist.

By the time Grant reached the presidency in 1869 he had, with the help of aide John Rawlins, “managed to attain mastery over alcohol,” an achievement Chernow deems “a

feat as impressive as any of his wartime victories.” Rawlins also curbed his boss’s tendency to make impulsive, politically inept decisions. After Rawlins’s death—soon after Grant’s inauguration—the president had no aide to help him avoid blunders.

**T**HOUGH CHERNOW MAINTAINS THAT President Grant deserves high marks for championing black civil rights, this praise needs tempering. To be sure, Grant helped secure the 15th Amendment’s ratification guaranteeing black voting rights, as well as passage of strong legislation enforcing that amendment. He also appointed an attorney general, Amos Akerman, who relentlessly enforced those laws and thus dismembered the Ku Klux Klan in 1871-72. But if Grant were truly a paladin of racial justice it is hard to understand why he fired Akerman soon after his suppression of the Klan, or why he lent himself to President Andrew Johnson’s scheme to discredit Carl Schurz’s extensive 1865 report on the widespread persecution of African Americans and the determination of whites to maintain a system of quasi-slavery in the South. Johnson sought to undermine Schurz’s report by dispatching Grant on a brief tour of the South, which the general described in what Chernow calls “a remarkably naïve, anodyne report” that contrasted sharply with Schurz’s. And why would Grant feud with leading political abolitionists like Charles Sumner, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and James Ashley, a principal leader in the fight to pass the constitutional amendment abolishing slavery, or so readily abandon the cause of black civil rights during his second term, or support a move to expel black cadets from West Point?

The quarrel with Sumner over Grant’s misguided attempt to annex Santo Domingo (modern-day Dominican Republic) in 1870—a diplomatic *démarche* from which his assistant, the corrupt Orville Babcock, stood to profit—badly split the Republican Party, pitting spoilsmen against civil service reformers. Personal pique at the often exasperating Sumner led a spiteful Grant to dismiss some of the senator’s friends from important positions, to wage a hopeless battle for ratification of the annexation treaty, and to condone Sumner’s removal from his committee chairmanship. By driving Sumner and many other Radical Republicans into opposition Grant imperiled the whole enterprise of Reconstruction. Reformers seeking to eliminate the spoils system rightly suspected that corruption underlay the Santo Domingo annexation movement. They broke with Grant and founded the Liberal

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Republican Party in 1872. Though Grant easily defeated the insurgents, the split between reformers and spoilsmen persisted, badly undermining the Reconstruction-era attempt to guarantee African Americans' civil and political rights.

Scandal dominated Grant's second term. The most prominent one involved a "whiskey ring" of distillers who bribed government agents to reduce their taxes. Babcock, whom Grant long defended in spite of compelling evidence of guilt, was deeply involved. The president's blindness to the flaws of such friends, and his paranoid tendency to ascribe unworthy motives to critics like Sumner, crippled his presidency. He took criticism personally, wallowed in self-pity, and retaliated against critics in a manner petty and spiteful, harming both his reputation and his ability to achieve noble ends, including justice for Native Americans and African Americans.

**C**HERNOW'S CONCLUSION THAT GRANT "got the big issues right during his presidency, even if he bungled many of the small ones" is perhaps too generous; dividing the Republican Party over side issues like Santo Domingo, retaliating against honorable critics, overlooking corruption among his friends and appointees, and waffling on civil rights were not "small things." And yet Chernow is no apologist. He acknowledges Grant's flaws and makes them understandable by examining not only his subject's psyche but his times, placing Grant in proper historical perspective. Tellingly, he observes that "the main cause of the corruption under his aegis was the postwar expansion of the federal government with its myriad opportunities for graft. Although Grant took the first halting steps toward civil service reform, he should have championed the movement

more vigorously and freed himself from the onus of patronage."

Chernow's prose is sparkling; his sketches of people important in Grant's life (like William T. Sherman, Henry W. Halleck, and John Rawlins) are pithy and incisive; his description of battles is thrilling (though more maps are needed); and the narrative flows gracefully, with novelistic details, striking turns of phrase, and vivid images. The prose is marred only by occasional clichés like "fell on his sword," "stacked the deck," "had a field day," and "pulled no punches."

Chernow's one thousand-page book contains only a few historical errors: Grant's victories in late November 1863 followed and did not cause Republican electoral triumphs early that month; Confederate general Braxton Bragg lost, not won, battles at Perryville and Stones River; John C. Frémont's emancipation order was not limited to "rebel slaves who took up arms for the Union"; Lincoln did not manage Richard Yates's campaign for governor of Illinois in 1854; Lincoln admired Grant but did not say "I can't spare this man. He fights."

Chernow's research in primary and secondary sources is admirably broad and deep, though he tends to rely on the latter when the former are readily available. Like other Grant biographers he uses Grant's famous memoirs, which he points out are not always accurate and omit many important aspects of the story. (The new version of the memoirs from Harvard University's Belknap Press, edited by John Marszalek, is most welcome, for it is far more comprehensively annotated than earlier additions. Alas, it contains no maps, which is a shame, for much of the text describes hard-to-follow military movements.) In sum, Chernow's *Grant* is a masterful, highly readable, and worthy companion to his earlier biographies.

**W**HITE'S BIOGRAPHY IS NOT AS WELL written, insightful, or detailed as Chernow's (it is 300 pages shorter), but White, a graduate of the Princeton Theological Seminary, sheds a brighter light on "Grant's religious odyssey." He emphasizes that Grant was "a son of Methodism," heavily influenced by his devout mother, who "taught Ulysses an ethic of self-effacing Christian love," and by John Heyl Vincent, his pastor during his brief residence in Galena, Illinois. Grant's "piety was practical"; he contributed funds to foreign missionaries "because he supported their efforts not only to preach the gospel, but to teach agriculture." Regarding "the future of Indians, he told his Presbyterian friend George Stuart, 'I do not believe our creator ever placed different races of men on this earth with the view of having the stronger exert all his energies in exterminating the weaker.'" Grant's religious sensibility helped shape his "reimagined Indian policy," which replaced corrupt Indian agents with Christian missionaries, established reservations, deemphasized military action, and promoted assimilation. White quotes Frederick Douglass's conclusion that to Grant "more than any other man the Negro owes his enfranchisement and the Indian a humane policy."

The admirable biographies by Ron Chernow and Ronald White go far to consolidate the long, slow process of rehabilitating U.S. Grant and should help elevate him in the eyes of presidential scholars. Grant was a great general and at least an average president. His reputation should be enhanced when Brooks Simpson releases the long-awaited concluding volume of his Grant biography.

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