



Ulysses S. Grant: The Unlikely Hero

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One of the first two volumes in Harper's *Eminent Lives* series, Korda brings his acclaimed storytelling talents to the life of Ulysses S. Grant – a man who managed to end the Civil War on a note of grace, serve two terms as president, write one of the most successful military memoirs in American literature, and is today remembered as a brilliant general but a failed president.

Ulysses S. Grant was the first officer since George Washington to become a four-star general in the United States Army, and the only president between Andrew Jackson and Woodrow Wilson to serve eight consecutive years in the White House. In this succinct and vivid biography, Michael Korda considers Grant's character and reconciles the conflicting evaluations of his leadership abilities.

Grant's life played out as a true Horatio Alger story. Despite his humble background as the son of a tanner in Ohio, his lack of early success in the army, and assorted failed business ventures, his unwavering determination propelled him through the ranks of military leadership and into the presidency. But while the general's tenacity and steadfastness contributed to his success on the battlefield, it both aided and crippled his effectiveness in the White House.

Assessing Grant both within the context of his time and in contrast to more recent American leaders, Korda casts a benevolent eye on Grant's presidency while at the same time conceding his weaknesses. He suggests that though the general's second term ended in financial and political scandals, the fact remains that for eight years Grant exerted a calming influence on a country that had only just emerged from a horrendous civil war. Ulysses S. Grant is an even-handed and stirring portrait of a man who guided America through a pivotal juncture in its history.

Ulysses S. Grant: The Unlikely Hero Details

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From Reader Review Ulysses S. Grant: The Unlikely Hero for online ebook

Alan says

This book is a good concise biography of Ulysses Grant, which makes clear and significant connections between Grant's boyhood and experiences as a young man with his famous exploits as a soldier, a general and a president.

As a young man Grant attended West Point academy and after graduation he was sent to Fort Vancouver, where he was lonely and started drinking. He was promoted to Captain on the same day he quit the army, and returned to Galena, Illinois. He tried farming but failed then was a clerk at his father's shop until he was chosen to lead a Galena regiment of volunteers. In his first battle Grant led his troops over a hill and discovered the enemy had run away. He followed this with the daring and quick capture of Fort Henry and Fort Donelson using gunboats. He demanded "unconditional surrender" of the forts, earning him a nickname.

Korda provides concise but good descriptions of Grant's experiences and decision-making in the Vicksburg campaign, the battle in the Wilderness, the siege of Petersburg, and the Confederate surrender at Appomattox. Toward the end of the book Korda explains how Grant earned the reputation in the 19th century as a giant of the age and how that reputation was shattered in the 20th century when Grant's style and accomplishments were judged by historians with different standards.

Darwin8u says

"...any politician contemplating the use of force should read Grant before doing so."

- Michael Korda

This is my third in the James Atlas (general editor) and HarperCollins' *Eminent Lives* series dealing with American presidents. I liked Korda's book better than Johnson's biography of George Washington, but not as well as Hitchens' biography of Thomas Jefferson. I read this mainly as a preamble to reading the Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant.

I'm going to pause here for a second and just push a question out into the universe. Why, when James Atlas was putting together this series, did he pick three public intellectuals who were born in Great Britain and educated at Oxford to write about Washington (Paul Johnson), Jefferson (Christopher Hitchens, and Grant (Michael Korda)? I wonder if he was aiming for some outsider view of the American Presidency? And, just as I write that, I also acknowledge that Christopher Hitchens during the last couple decades of his life was definitely just as much an insider (he became an American citizen and knew our politics and problems as much as any American public intellectual) as an outsider. It just seems too coincidental to be an accident, but I can't discover any big rational for it. Perhaps, it was just that James Atlas was shrewd enough to use writers he knew as an editor at the New York Times and as an editor and publisher at HarpersCollins. Perhaps, it was just the Brits who were more interested in this project. I'm not sure.

Anyway, this micro-biography of Grant was smoothly superficial while still engaging the reader. It was too short to give much detail or depth into the most interesting aspects of Grant's life (the Mexican War, the Civil War, his presidency, scandals, the writing of his memoirs, etc), but was long enough to make an

argument about why Grant is currently under appreciated as an American. After Lincoln, Grant is probably the one man most responsible for ending the Civil War. He also understood the realities of modern, total war generations before the rest of the world would catch up. He was a man with evident weaknesses, but also a man who would never give up, never retreat. He was constantly on the move and had the ability to recognize and adapt to the changing landscape either on the battlefield or his own life. In many ways Grant symbolizes both the greatest aspects of the American myth (anyone can, under the right circumstances, rise to greatness) and the limits too of talent and energy. Grant constantly needed to be surrounded by family and friends who could protect and defend him, or he would sink into drink and despair.

I love too the whole idea of how his memoirs came to be (see Samuel Clemens). I love how Grant was financially and morally restored with his words and by his illness. His memoir seems a fitting epilogue to America's greatest General, the man who isn't buried in Grant's Tomb.

Vic says

Excellent read of talented man at the right place at the right time with the boldness to make it happen.

Steve says

A good, short biography. A section near the end where the author compares Grant and other Civil War generals with their World War II counterparts is interesting.

Al Young says

There are quite a few Grant biographies available. Ron Chernow's is likely to be the most pre-eminent, but William McFeely's *Grant: A Biography* and Ronald White's *American Ulysses* are also rather well-known among many others and the man wrote a memoir his self, so there's plenty of places to go.

I have rather enjoyed the idea of the *Eminent Lives* series. Its conceit is that it's not intended for those who want to pick up a 700-page tome, and already have some knowledge of the subject. Indeed, one of the books I remember most from childhood was about Grant (and probably not coincidentally, a trip to Galena, Illinois). The series also pairs the famous historic figure with a popular contemporary author, in this case the British-born Korda who has a military background.

This is a very quick read, but I like Korda's takes and light style. Korda covers at a very superficial level (which is intended) and looks mostly at his military deeds.

Of this I found interesting

-Grant was really not cut out to be a farmer or a businessman or much of anything else, really, but was a born General and naturally became one of the best to ever be on the battlefield. It's a bit of an oddshot that he even ended up where he did, but by serendipity, he saved the Union.

-Korda knows the Robert E Lee is an American icon. The distinguished white haired general in his sharp buttoned up jacket is still a cult of personality (read some recent headlines) while our image of Grant is

dumpy and plain. Most will think of the picture of Grant, plain, dumpy, tired and leaning on a tree.

-Grant was a brilliant strategist and sometimes that strategy was just to have more men. Grant wasn't flashy. He's wasn't particularly unsympathetic, but he also knew he needed a battle or attrition and that meant he was going to have large casualties. At the end of the day, Lee was a great general, but Grant was the better one.

-Korda does not spend a lot of time on the Presidency, but he offers reasons for Grant's scandals which have plagued his image. Grant was naive and trusting, and made bad decisions as a President and as a post-White House resident because of that trust.

-Korda ends the book with a fantastic metaphor of Grant as his generation's Eisenhower. Neither were flashy in style or militaristic action, but knew that slow and steady smart moves and an obedience to the President were what won wars. Like Ike, he was surrounded by men with bigger ambitions, but led them well. Korda compares WW2 to the Civil War generals of both sides where the union and the confederates had generals with particular strengths and weaknesses. Korda has his Patton (Stonewall Jackson), MacArthur (the ambitious and vain McLellan), Harold Alexander (the dogged Meade) and Omar Bradley (Longstreet). Interestingly, the generals of WW2 Germany had studied Grant.

-Like Truman 80 years later, Grant did not know how to adjust back to civilian life. He wasn't rich like the early Virginians or the Roosevelts and Hoover of later days. He went around the world and was treated as a celebrity and hero. He hoped (in vain) the GOP would re-nominate him for a third term. He ended up being encouraged by Mark Twain to write his memoir.

You may know a lot of this, but Korda is a great storyteller and it feels fresh. He adds enough insight to make it really enjoyable.

I would recommend this for those interested in a book about Grant that can be read in minimal sittings. I would be likely to pick up Korda's longer books on Lee and Eisenhower, and I certainly could see myself going back to the Eminent Lives series.

Jason says

This was a very short biography, but very readable and enjoyable. I have not read any other biographies of Grant yet and this one was a great place to start. I think that Korda did a nice job of piecing together parts of Grant's life to give us a nice picture of who he was, what he was driven by and to a small extent, how things ended up as they did in Grant's life. And while the asides to current times or the comparisons so other presidents don't add to the story of Grant, they do make it more comprehensible to a non-history buff reader.

Anthony Cimitile says

What made me pick this book, was that, I read a similar book like this, but it was about George Washington. When I saw this book, I wanted to read it because I had enjoyed reading the George Washington book which gave me more insight into the presidents life before and after his presidency. That is also what I had learned once I had finished reading the book on Ulysses S. Grant. I learned more about this mans life. From when he went into wars, and when he left the presidents seat.

One thing that I had enjoyed in this book, besides all of the information I found out about Grant, was that

recently(recent as in when the book was published), Beyonce Knowles wanted to do a music video in front of Grants Monument at Riverside Park. I enjoyed this specific event because Beyonce was this stupid to try and criticise the memory of Grant by having half naked women dancing on his monument. I enjoyed this mainly because people didn't let Beyonce do this to Grants monument. I don't see why she would even think about doing this to one of our presidents, this just seems really rude to me. I'm just glad that people had stopped her. This event also was the one that I disliked. By her actually trying to do this act.

What surprised me, was that during the war, the people with who he was working with, had betrayed him in the end. What I mean by betray, is that he ended up fighting against these men while he was president. This really was the only thing that surprised me in this book, except for one other thing. Which is finding out that in the end, that Grant wasn't doing so well after his presidency, until h wrote some articles in the news paper, which ended up helping him as well. I didn't know that piece of information prior to this book, and I thought it was a little moving, in some way, when I read it.

I don't believe that anything could have been better or changed in this book, because I thought that this book was a good read. With the authors attention to detail, which I liked because I learned a lot more about Grant than I had before hand.

For next time, I would like to find another book, like the George Washington book, and the Grant book, which I had finished. Because they are good reads which give excellent attention to detail about our presidents's lives. Before and after their reign as president.

Joe Stack says

I think this is an evenhanded biography of Grant. In less than 200 pages the reader gets a clear and concise portrait of Grant. The brevity of the biography shows that one does not need a lengthy bio filled with details to get an understanding of the person that includes both strengths and weaknesses. The author is sympathetic, as was this reader, so my praise of this biography may be biased. Nonetheless, I enjoyed the succinctness and appreciated this summary of Grant's life. If you don't know too much about Grant, this bio is a good place to start, and this is a good refresher on Grant if you've read other bios but have forgotten much (as was the case with this reader). Grant is frequently rated as a failed President, but this bio presents a perspective that Grant as President may not be quite the failure as he is thought to be.

Steph (loves water) says

Outstanding. Four and 1/2 stars. Loved this little book on my favorite Civil War general, and yes, my second favorite President...the last U.S. president not bought and paid for by Big Business.

Jim says

A very slight biography of former General of the Army and President of the United States, Ulysses S. Grant. Although its purpose is not to provide an in depth look at Grant, this work barely succeeds in its mission of providing a basic overview of its subject. While some sections are more readable than others the overall impression is one of a competent though unspectacular college thesis paper.

Falsely derided as a butcher and a drunk after the failure of reconstruction, Grant's reputation has undergone a long overdue rehabilitation in recent years, and to its credit, this book does make an attempt at continuing that trend. Other than that however, with so many better Grant biographies to choose from, I don't really see any purpose for this book. It really provides little more than you would get from Grant's Wikipedia entry, with some significant flaws.

There are a number of well worn and tiresome ways in which some historians will try and illuminate their subjects. Sadly, this book seems to make use of most of them, although I was happy to see the author didn't, despite Grant's well known attachment to horses, describe him as the "best horseman of his age." I really hate that one! However he did include pointless and often insulting descriptions of several of the women he includes in his narrative, as well as wild assumptions about the character and mood of people based on a single still life photograph.

The trend of including long-winded opinions on the relative attractiveness of historical figures (usually female), is one I particularly disdain. Unless it has a tangible and verifiable bearing on that person's place in history or in how others related to them, I do not see the point. In this case the author goes to great pains to describe Grant's wife, Julia Dent Grant, in insulting and sexist terms. Curiously I cannot recall a single instance where the author included such extensive descriptions of Grant or other males included in the narrative. Oh, and as if that wasn't enough, he also includes a little dollop of racial stereotyping as well! Consider the following:

"Julia was, to put it kindly, "plain," as even her nearest and dearest in the Dent family were obliged to admit. Indeed, "plain" seems like a generous description of Julia Dent. A photograph of her taken as a young woman...reveals a bumpy nose, a strong chin, and what appears to be a pronounced squint in one eye, or perhaps, as [William] McFeely suggests, strabismus, a weakening of the eye muscles combined with a squint (some people unkindly described her as walleyed), hair pulled back unflatteringly tight, and a compact, dumpy figure. The fashions of the times apparently do nothing to help her, and her expression in the photograph is severe, impatient, and unwelcoming. Although she was to come to think of herself as a Southern belle, as kind of a border state Scarlett O'Hara, Julia was by far the plainest member of the Dent family, and even the colored servants (slaves, of course) seem to have told her so."

Yes, Mr. Korda, we get it, you think she is ugly...so ugly in fact even "the coloreds" think so. I have to say of the literally hundreds of biographies I have read this has got to be the most insulting passage I have ever seen. I really am at a loss as to why the author thought it was important to include it.

In addition to the above, in several places, the author makes unwarranted assumptions about the demeanor, mood and even the character of people based on a single black and white photograph. This is another trend I really despise. I see no evidence that such concrete assertions about a person can be gleaned from a single image in this way. Consider again:

"He [Grant] looks careworn and miserably unhappy, as he surely was, and perhaps [was] in need of a stiff drink"

Now this description was applied to possibly the most famous photograph of Grant. He is at his City Point, Virginia headquarters, leaning rather jauntily against a tree in front of one of his headquarters tents. At this point in the war Grant is at the peak of his power, in complete charge of a war machine unprecedented up to that time in American history. Most observers, if they ascribe any demeanor to him at all, note the confidence in Grant's face and the pose he chose to be photographed in. There is no evidence that I know of that backs up the author's description of Grant's demeanor in this photograph. It's just a lazy way of ascribing a description to a person without having to do any corroborating research.

Finally, the author makes some assertions about Grant's career that are just not correct. In particular he completely misrepresents Grant's record on civil rights. The author correctly notes that Grant refused to send troops into Mississippi in 1875 to protect blacks against an increase in violent intimidation. As perhaps the foremost historian on the Reconstruction era, Michael Foner, notes however, this "reflected the broader Northern retreat from Reconstruction and its ideal of racial equality." Korda, misleadingly uses this one incident to represent the entirety of Grants policy towards freedmen. In fact, Grant strenuously and often heroically tried to protect blacks from the violence perpetrated against them by the Ku Klux Klan, and he worked to make sure they were free to exercise rights guaranteed to them by the Constitution. That this ultimately failed is not due to lack of effort on Grant's part.

The motto emblazoned on Grant's tomb in New York City says simply "Let Us Have Peace." In a far superior biography of Grant, author H.W. Brands correctly notes that this reflected not only Grant's desire for a reunification of the country, but also his desire for the complete application of the war's main aims, a restoration of the union and the full emancipation of the slaves.

Korda's work reflects none of this. Given this and the other flaws noted above, I cannot recommend this book. There are many better Grant biographies to choose from.

Win says

A quick, breezy read of one of those well-known names who's famous-but-not-famous nowadays.

With such a short bio that isn't terribly exhaustively researched, it's hard for an average reader like me to know if his conclusions hold water. He makes some wide-ranging comparisons to Napoleon, Churchill and Eisenhower which are interesting.

Awfully sympathetic to the subject, which isn't altogether bad considering most people can only tell you two things about Grant beyond the war: (a) he was a drunk (b) his presidency was a cesspool of scandal. Korda delves past those elements a bit, highlights little-known incidents (Santo Domingo, averting war with Britain in the 1870s) in a readable way.

I was also struck, as always, by how everything old is new again: in politics, social attitudes, rhetoric and the rest.

Certainly not a serious scholarly work, but a fun way to spend a couple of hours if you're into the lesser-trod corners of American history.

Marky says

Ulysses S. Grant wasn't the ordinary military general. In fact, no one would've guessed that Grant would become one of the best generals in United States history. His massive military knowledge helped unite the Union and the Confederacy through the civil war. As Grant grew up, he was a shy individual. But although shy, he was always serious with a lack of sense of humor. His military career was shaped at the West Point academy.

In my opinion, if we had a general like Ulysses S. Grant commanding America's foreign policy today, our wars would be won a lot faster. The reason I make this inference is because of his military doctrine. His military doctrine included always being on the go and pushing the enemy back, and never stopping. You see, if we had generals like Grant, we would be winning wars yearly. I do agree that politics are involved in too many wars today, and that is why they cannot be won.

Mary Youtz says

Learning to appreciate Ulysses S. Grant

The first chapter of this book is an extraordinary introduction to the life of Grant. Then the rest of the book did not disappoint, often interesting and sometimes entertaining. The book, like Grant, is memorable and a fair and insightful look at Ulysses S. Grant.

Mara says

National hero though he may be, it turns out it wasn't all that easy being Ulysses S. Grant. Michael Korda's brief biography captures the ups and downs of Grant the man, the general and the president in enjoyable and pithy prose.

Young Ulysses was quite the animal lover. He had a knack for "horse whispering," and disliked meat-refusing to eat it unless charred beyond recognition. The problem was, Papa Grant was a *tanner*, meaning the crux of the family trade involved the bloody process of skinning and handling the hide of the farm animals of which Ulysses was so fond. (Perhaps this contributed to his father's nicknaming him "Useless").

However, Grant's horsemanship would prove useful in his military endeavors. Frankly, I give him points for losing his usually calm temper when he came upon a Union soldier beating a horse about the head.

Like a lot of presidents, it seems, Grant's name as we now know it metamorphosed from its original form (Hiram Ulysses Grant). When you show up to West Point, it turns out that having the initials "H.U.G." is not ideal, so Grant was happy enough to go along with a registrar's error that had his first name listed as Ulysses and his second initial as "S" for his mother's maiden name, Simpson.

Korda doesn't mince words when it comes to describing Grant's bride, Julia, who held an appeal that only Ulysses seemed to be able to see. Some might chalk it up to his tendency to hit the sauce, but he confided in

her throughout his travails at war and was happiest when in her company, so to each his own.

Speaking of war time travails, in addition to having presidential runners sent to make sure Grant wasn't too lost in the cups, and, an increasingly disgruntled army to lead, Grant struck another bit of bad luck en route to Vicksburg. While aboard ship on the Mississippi, someone tossed Grant's false teeth overboard. Grant's dental woes would, ultimately, be his downfall, as his 20-cigar a day smoking habit led to a painful protracted death by oral cancer.

Grant was a complex man full of flaws, and thrust into office without any political or financial know-how. He definitely had his less than admirable moments (*Hey, you know who we should probably blame all this plundering on? The Jews!*), but they by no means outweighed his more memorable heroic features. I definitely plan on picking up a more in-depth bio, if not his own memoirs, to learn more about our 18th pres, and would also happily read more of Korda's work.

Mike W says

Like the other volumes in the Eminent Lives series I've read, this is a very good and concise biography. It depicts Grant as a man generally ignored all his life, or dismissed as a failure, before the Civil War. He did poorly at Westpoint, got into trouble over a missing sum of money, and, in despair, resigned from the army to become a farmer. And, despite his hard work, Grant did poorly as a farmer too.

The outbreak of the Civil War revived his career, and he attracted the attention of President Lincoln as a commander with toughness and resolve who would take the fight to the enemy, unlike General McLellan, for example, whose idling and hesitation exasperated the President.

Grant suffered an embarrassment at Shiloh, though, allowing himself to be taken by surprise, and, though he won the battle, he was widely ridiculed for his error. But he redeemed himself with a masterful victory over Confederate forces at Vicksburg. And, in the end, he beat the Confederacy into submission. Although he considered the confederate secession treasonous, he treated General Lee with respect, as Lee finally surrendered at the Appomattox courthouse in 1865.

Grant was hugely popular again, as Korda explains, and he was swept into the White House. But as a President he had a mixed record at best. While Korda emphasizes Grant's success and judiciousness in international affairs, he concedes that Grant did not understand economics well, so that he had little idea how to respond when the economy sank into a depression. Moreover, Grant allowed corruption to flourish in his administration, though Korda points out that this was hardly abnormal in 19th century America.

After failing to win a third term, Grant tried unsuccessfully to become a financier. He was duped into lending his good name to a phony investment scheme that lured many in, including civil war vets, and bankrupted them.

To salvage his finances, Grant wrote an account of his experience in the Civil War, first in popular articles, and then as a full length memoir, which Korda praises for its clear, powerful style and its honest recounting of events. Grant wrote the book himself, and got help from his friend Mark Twain in publishing and marketing it. As he finished his memoirs, though, Grant suffered badly from oral cancer, most likely the result of his constant cigar smoking.

Grant is most often remembered now as a drunk, and as a man whose Presidency was rife with corruption. He is often compared unfavorably with Lee, whom many believe he beat through brute force rather than skill.

But Korda reminds us that Grant was much more than this. he was an excellent General, who avoided the extremes of Custer's recklessness and McClellan's excessive caution. And for all his flaws, Grant deserves to be remembered as, along with Lincoln, one of the men who saved the Union.

In sum, this is a great introduction to US Grant, but the reader should be warned that it begins rather oddly, with a lament about Beyonce's supposedly lascivious concert at Grant's tomb in Manhattan. One might be tempted to discard it in the first couple of pages as the work of a cantankerous old crank, but that would be a mistake. This book is well-written and its account of Grant's persistence in spite of all his failures is an inspiration.
