

Grant Under Fire: An Exposé of Generalship & Character in the American Civil War

A groundbreaking book challenges Ulysses S. Grant's reputation as a military genius and reliable chronicler of America's bloodiest conflict.

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Was Ulysses S. Grant a brilliant and unparalleled general who *won* the American Civil War, a magnanimous and incorruptible man, and an honest and accurate chronicler of history? Or was he remarkably untruthful, careless, persistent, indolent, aggressive, unjust, biased, impetuous, and lucky?

A stringent and detailed examination of Grant's generalship and character in the war has long been necessary. Standard histories and biographies, founded on a lengthy succession of biased and erroneous writings, have much of it wrong. Many of these inaccuracies originated with the General himself, in his official reports, in his *Personal Memoirs*, and in his other writings. While Grant possessed many positive attributes and achieved valuable objectives, his reputation as a military mastermind with a virtuous character is hopelessly exaggerated. *Grant Under Fire: An Exposé of Generalship & Character in the American Civil War*, thoroughly establishes this.

Below are corrections to just a few of the commonly accepted narratives:

- Contrary to his later assertion in his *Personal Memoirs*, Grant *did* receive John Frémont's orders to occupy Paducah (if possible), before he departed Cairo.
- In a report revised years after the battle of Belmont—but falsified to look as if written just ten days later—Grant fabricated communications to cover up his insubordination in attacking. And he scapegoated Colonel Napoleon Buford, who had avoided the ensuing rout of the federal expedition by taking a separate route to the riverbank. Yet, Grant had written a day after the battle that,

“I can say with gratification that every Colonel without a single exception, set an example to their commands that inspired a confidence that will always insure victory when there is the slightest possibility of gaining one.”

- Grant drank—and got drunk—with the enemy on flag-of-truce boats after the battle.
- Despite commendations for honesty, Grant engaged in corrupt practices for the benefit of friends and family, which at least indirectly helped himself. Of some fraudulent practices at Cairo, an Assistant Secretary of War wrote about Grant and his quartermaster, “It appears strange that officers, having an eye to the interests of the Government, could in such a manner countenance, much less certify to, such injustice.”
- On February 15th, when Grant finally arrived on the battlefield at Fort Donelson after being absent all morning, he initially wanted to pull the troops back, according to Lew Wallace. This would have facilitated the enemy’s escape. John McClernand apparently advised a counterattack which Grant denied hearing. Both subordinates remarked how Grant wanted to withdraw from the positions gained in the subsequent counter-offensive. On the other flank, General Charles Smith waited for Grant to give direct orders before doing anything significant, yet Grant awarded him the honors over Wallace who insubordinately saved the day for the Union.
- When the Confederates surprised his almost completely unprepared army at Shiloh—which he denied to the end of his life—Grant did nothing to facilitate reinforcement by Don Carlos Buell’s force (pointing “Bull” Nelson’s division into the swamps without a guide doesn’t count) and he dispatched Lew Wallace to Sherman’s right (but had to backtrack as the lines had fallen back), but refused to admit it. Evidently, his only orders at the brigade or division level during the first day’s fight led to Benjamin Prentiss’ surrender. When he repeated his instructions for that officer to hold on, the enemy was outflanking the Hornets’ Nest position left and right. His *Memoirs*, instead, blamed Prentiss for being captured, while he kept changing his accusations in the scapegoating of Lew Wallace.
- Grant was often inebriated, although it is impossible to establish the extent to which his being so affected the war effort. While

Grant was on a binge up the Yazoo River, however, several regiments of raw Black soldiers at Milliken's Bend were fighting for their lives with their backs to the Mississippi, without artillery, and with only serendipitous reinforcement. Henry Halleck related how the General's riding accident outside of New Orleans—where observers witnessed Grant's intoxication—delayed his assumption of a larger command at a crucial time in the West. The General's defenders often transform these accounts into mere "rumors."

- Interspersed with periods of activity, Grant displayed a physical and mental laziness and confessed to a lifelong habit of indolence. He showed little interest in mapmaking, signals, engineering, and other facets of generalship. Many of the staff chosen by Grant early in the war were not only idlers, but were hard drinkers, as well.
- Extreme partiality may have been Ulysses' greatest character defect. His choice of officers and even the conduct of operations frequently hinged on personal feelings, as opposed to pertinent military factors. Favorites, such as William T. Sherman and Philip Sheridan, could do no wrong, as Grant raised them up to higher commands. Likewise, he held grudges against fellow officers for little or no good reason, refusing them opportunity, promotion, and justice (either in army courts of inquiry or in the courts of history).
- His cotton-speculating father, Jesse, is regularly accused of provoking Grant's General Orders No. 11, which banished all Jews, as a class, from his military department. But Ulysses' intention to discriminate against members of that religion had been repeatedly expressed. And he permitted his cotton-speculating friend and financial adviser, J. Russell Jones, to personally accompany him down the Mississippi.
- Colonel Robert Murphy was chosen to be the main scapegoat for the destruction of the Holly Spring's supply depot, but General Grant committed a series of mistakes which made it possible. (And Grant had saved Murphy after Rosecrans arrested him for abandoning military stores at Iuka.)
- Grant falsified the history of the Vicksburg campaign by claiming that he placed no faith in his various failed Delta schemes—which he impetuously initiated without proper preparations and with

- insufficient engineering resources—that his men were as healthy as could be expected, and that he always meant to pass the Vicksburg batteries. His contemporary writings disproved this.
- One of his most blatant untruths concerned the spectacular charge up Missionary Ridge at Chattanooga on November 25, 1863. Grant stole the credit from the soldiers and subordinate officers, maintaining that his orders intended them to ascend, when they actually put the men in dire jeopardy at the lower rifle-pits, sitting ducks for the Confederates. George H. Thomas delayed the attack for an hour (as more of his own and Hooker's men were closing in), yet he's turned into a passive-aggressive incompetent by Grant's defenders.
 - Denying that his blunder-filled Overland campaign was a catastrophe, Grant misrepresented the size of the two armies, their casualties, and the results. *Grant Under Fire* relates how: "Each of his four maneuvers (passing through the Wilderness into open country, reaching Spotsylvania first, crossing the North Anna, and flanking Lee around Cold Harbor) failed. Each of his three major engagements ended in defeat. The stalemating of Grant constituted a major Confederate victory, which was reflected in Lincoln's political woes, his potential electoral defeat, and the high price of gold."
 - After the ignominious debacle of the charge at Cold Harbor on June 3, 1864, Grant refused for days to send a flag of truce to rescue his wounded men. He thought that Meade could send a flag, but didn't want to do it himself. This repeated his failure to request a truce after the May 22nd assault on Vicksburg a year before. He then implicitly blamed Robert E. Lee for his own callousness. As to his regretting the attack at Cold Harbor, he thought about attacking again two days afterward.
 - Once the mine did not ignite when expected at the Battle of the Crater, Grant ordered the troops to charge right over the time-bomb. Here, as he did elsewhere, the General tried to keep Black troops to the rear and out of the fight.
 - Grant assisted Sheridan in the dismissal of corps commander Gouverneur Warren at the Battle of Five Forks, by preemptively providing authorization to sack Warren and then supplying incorrect information which made Warren look bad. As General-in-Chief and as President, he quashed Warren's repeated requests

for a court of inquiry. Once Grant left office, President Rutherford B. Hayes appointed a court of inquiry that basically sided with Warren.

- Although often portrayed as a principled individual, Grant helped to deprive many other officers—William Kountz, Lew Wallace, Robert Murphy, John McClernand, Jacob Lauman, Winfield Hancock, and Stephen Hurlbut—of their chances to gain justice through a court of inquiry.

Hundreds of other such examples are described in *Grant Under Fire: An Exposé of Generalship & Character in the American Civil War*.

Grant had few of the skills needed to organize and discipline an army. In battle after battle, he showed little tactical ability. Instructions were often meager, with little forethought or planning. The General repeatedly threw his soldiers into impetuous frontal assaults against fortifications. Except after crossing the Mississippi to march on Vicksburg, his operations displayed little of a much-publicized reputation for strategic genius. Neither did his expressed methods. These ranged from the simplistic (“find out where your enemy is, get at him as soon as you can, and strike him as hard as you can, and keep moving on”), the merely aggressive (“the only way to whip an army is to go out and fight it”), the unthinkingly aggressive (“When in doubt, fight”), and the ham-handed (“Oh! *I never manœuvre*”). Other officers and the soldiers fortunately made up for much of his strategic and tactical deficiencies. The faults of judgment, bias, and performance in the Civil War mirrored the multitude of errors in his two terms as President. Ulysses S. Grant, the man, didn’t change.