

# A Quintessentially American Enigma

by Susan Welsh

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## **Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph over Adversity, 1822-1865**

by Brooks D. Simpson

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The poet Walt Whitman, a close observer of the American Civil War, wrote of Gen. Ulysses S. Grant: “In all Homer and Shakespeare there is no fortune or personality really more picturesque or rapidly changing, more full of heroism, pathos, contrast.”

Gen. William T. Sherman, who knew Grant better than almost anyone else, admitted: “To me he is a mystery, and I believe he is a mystery to himself.”

For the past 135 years, Grant has intrigued and puzzled his biographers. From this first volume of Brooks Simpson’s planned two-volume biography, I conclude that Grant remains something of “a mystery” to Simpson as well. The author has done a vast amount of archival research, but the non-specialist reader will find it hard to discern idea-content and drama in the mass of detail presented. While much interesting material is covered, the dull, academic mode of presentation pales alongside the work of such biographers as Horace Porter<sup>1</sup> and Geoffrey Perret.<sup>2</sup> And, in several instances where Simpson does put forward an interpretation differing from that of eyewitnesses or previous scholars, he fails to provide enough evidence to clinch his case.

Simpson focusses attention on what he sees as the Grant enigma: how someone whose early life was so ordinary, unassuming, even a failure, could have risen to become such a great general. I don’t see much of a puzzle there. Just as the shock of Pearl Harbor transformed a generation of Americans from down-and-out victims of the Depression into a formida-

ble fighting force, so did the Civil War effect a similar transformation. When the very fate of one’s nation is at stake, it is not so unusual in history, for greatness to emerge out of what might have seemed, to the superficial observer, to be mediocrity, only a short time before. Simpson’s view of this matter is of a piece with his depiction of Grant’s alleged struggle for what a yuppie would call “career advancement,” during the early phases of the war. The author seems unable to conceive that Grant was *not* motivated by personal ambition. His goal was to defeat the enemy and save the nation, and, as time went on, he became more and more convinced that his own leadership role was indispensable. As he put it simply, in December 1864: “I know how much there is dependent on me and will prove equal to the task. I believe determination can do a great deal to sustain one and I have that quality certainly to its fullest extent.”<sup>3</sup>

I see two enigmas, or paradoxes, which the biographer of Grant must address: first, what was it that allowed Grant to succeed, where others failed; and second, why is his two-term Presidency so widely considered to be one of the worst in American history — though his outstanding service as a general is disputed by none? Since this first volume of Simpson’s biography deals only with Grant’s career up to the end of the war, I will address only the first matter here, and hope that the second volume sheds light on the question of Grant’s Presidency.

Simpson sums up Grant’s unique role: “No other Union general had done so much; it was a good question whether anyone else could have.”<sup>4</sup> I would put it even more emphatically: If U.S. Grant had not assumed command of all the Union armies, under the Presidency of Abraham Lincoln, the United States would not have won the war. The British plan to split the nation in two would have succeeded.<sup>5</sup>

## **‘An Extraordinary Character’**

Simpson quotes various people’s thoughts on what made for Grant’s success:

**Abraham Lincoln:** “The great thing about Grant, I take it, is his perfect coolness and persistency of purpose. I judge he is not easily excited,— which is a great element in an officer,— and he has the *grit* of a bull-dog! Once let him get his ‘teeth’ *in*, and nothing can shake him off.” (p. 462)

**Gen. John M. Schofield:** The “most extraordinary quality” of Grant’s “extraordinary character . . . was its extreme simplicity — so extreme that many have entirely overlooked it in their search for some deeply hidden secret to account for so great a character, unmindful that simplicity is one of the most prominent attributes of greatness.” (p. 460)

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1. *Campaigning with Grant* (New York: Konecky & Konecky, 1992; reprint of 1897 edition).

2. *Ulysses S. Grant: Soldier and President* (New York: Random House, 1997).

3. Simpson, p. 399.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 455.

5. See Anton Chaitkin, *Treason in America: From Aaron Burr to Averell Harriman* (Washington: Executive Intelligence Review, 1999).



U.S. Grant: "It is difficult to know what constitutes a great general."

**Gen. William T. Sherman:** "He does not know as much about books and strict military art and science as some others, but he possesses the last quality of great generalship; he knows, he *divines*, when the supreme hour has come in a campaign or battle, and always boldly seizes it." (p. 460)

"I am a damned sight smarter man than Grant; I know a great deal more about war, military history, strategy, and grand tactics than he does; I know more about organization, supply, and administration and about everything else than he does; but I'll tell you where he beats me and where he beats the world. He don't care a damn for what the enemy does out of his sight, but it scares me like hell!" (p. 462)

And, writing to Grant, when his friend was elevated to lieutenant general in 1864: "My only points of doubt were as to your knowledge of grand strategy, of books of science and history; but I confess your common-sense seems to have supplied all this." (p. 459)

**U.S. Grant:** "It is difficult to know what constitutes a great general." (p. 458)

Each of these comments has its own interest, but none really explains Grant.

Why did he have "the grit of a bull dog," where other brave—or merely stubborn—men, such as Gen. Joe Hooker or Gen. Winfield S. Hancock, did not rise to the level of greatness required by the times? "Grit" is not a genetic characteristic, but a quality of mind and character forged over a lifetime of experience, and especially the experience of war.

In itself, it is not enough to make a great general. The general must also be able to devise winning strategy and tactics, and to inspire those serving under him to carry them out.

Simplicity? Common sense? What do these qualities mean, for a commanding general? Probably more fatal idiocies have been committed in the name of "common sense" than anything else in history. What others perceived as Grant's simplicity and common sense, masked deeper qualities of mind and spirit.

Where did Grant's remarkable strength of character come from, then? When regular readers of *EIR* think of the idea of "military genius," they might conjure up the image of Lazare Carnot, Gaspard Monge, Gerhard Scharnhorst, or Alfred von Schlieffen. Grant was certainly not cast in the mold of these great Europeans. He was not what you would call a cultured man. While he did fairly well at West Point (his best subject was math), he was by no means a mathematical genius like Carnot and Monge. He apparently despised music, to the point that it brought on migraine headaches (whether this reflected the quality of musicianship in the army, or some quirk of his character, I can't say). Classical drama? Whereas Lincoln's love of Shakespeare was a source of inspiration for his leadership, no one has ever claimed such a thing for Grant. (Early in his military career, stationed with the 4th Infantry in Corpus Christi, the short and slender Grant was cast in the role of Desdemona in a production of *Othello*. But the officer playing the lead role found it difficult to act with convincing passion with Grant as his lady love, and sent to New Orleans for a professional actress. Ulysses decided to grow a beard, instead.)<sup>6</sup>

Theodore Lyman, a Harvard-trained Brahmin who served on Gen. George Meade's staff, observed that Grant's prose, "though very terse and well expressed, is filled with horrible spelling." Yet Grant "has such an easy and straightforward way that you almost think that he must be right and you wrong, in these little matters of elegance." "He is an odd combination; there is one good thing, at any rate—he is the concentration of all that is American." (p. 336)

"The concentration of all that is American." That rings true; but we need to look deeper.

### 'Auftragstaktik'

Let's see what Grant himself had to say. Simpson quotes him (noting that the general was not as ignorant of military history as some have claimed): "I don't underrate the value of military knowledge, but if men make war in slavish obedience of rules, they will fail." The conditions of warmaking in Europe and America differed greatly, he said. While generals "were working out problems of an ideal character, problems that would have looked well on a blackboard, practical facts were neglected. To that extent I consider remembrances of

6. Perret, *op cit.*, p. 49.

old campaigns a disadvantage. Even Napoleon showed that, for my impression is that his first success came because he made war in his own way, and not in imitation of others. War is progressive, because all the instruments and elements of war are progressive.” The Battle of Vicksburg taught Grant “that there are no fixed laws of war which are not subject to the conditions of the country, the climate, and the habits of the people.” Realizing that “every war I knew anything about had made laws for itself,” Grant also observed: “The art of war is simple enough. Find out where your enemy is. Get at him as soon as you can. Strike at him as hard as you can and as often as you can, and keep moving on.” (p. 458)

While that may sound “American,” reminding one perhaps of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, the fact is that every genius thinks this way—military or otherwise, and regardless of nationality. It is the conception that Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr. has described with the German military term *Auftragstaktik*, roughly translated as “mission orientation.” In a discussion with *EIR* staff on Jan. 24, 1998, LaRouche explained it this way: “You’re willing to change, you’re constantly changing military tactics. You have to change as the situation changes. Not changing is deadly. Sticking to a party line, in a military situation, *can be suicidal*. You have to be alert, you have to be flexible. But you have to know what your mission is, what you’re trying to do, what your purpose is, what you must accomplish, what you must not fail to accomplish. But you have to be flexible, in terms of sound principle, on how you respond to a changing situation. And that’s what *Auftragstaktik*, is, in tactical practice.”

Grant’s wartime leadership provides many examples of this. One particularly vivid image of his military genius, is that portrayed by historian Fletcher Pratt, describing the aftermath of the Battle of the Wilderness in Virginia (May 1864). This was the first battle waged by the Union army after Grant moved East to become General-in-Chief in March 1864. He made his headquarters in the field, with the Army of the Potomac, which remained under the command of Gen. George Meade, while Grant directed all the theaters of war. But even while Meade remained officially in charge, it was Grant who planned and carried out the Army’s campaign in Virginia from that time forward, overruling the volatile and sometimes discombobulated Meade when absolutely necessary.

The Army of the Potomac had experienced many bitter defeats at the hands of “Bobby Lee,” and had suffered from a revolving door of inadequate or outright incompetent generals. There was much bitterness on the part of Meade’s army toward the Western armies, which, under Grant’s command, had taken Vicksburg, and were marching on to further victories. “The army has been turned and twisted over again,” grumbled one veteran, “and now we will see how quick the Army of the Potomac will kill the reputation of ‘Unconditional Surrender’ ” (the nickname given to “U.S.” Grant).

The Battle of the Wilderness was a particularly brutal one, with 17,000 Union casualties—more than double the

Confederate losses. The underbrush was so thick that artillery could not move through it; the brush caught fire, and wounded men died in the flames, between the lines, where nobody could reach them.

Pratt tells what happened next:

“At Chancellorsville House there is a three-corner. The road to the left led back across the Rappahannock, back to the Potomac, out of that grim wood to fortifications, comfort and safety; that on the right led past the rebel front, deeper than ever into the perilous and uncertain Wilderness. As the defeated troops came slogging down to the turn, the dispirited soldiers saw dimly a man in an old blue coat sitting horseback at the cross-roads with a cigar in his mouth. He silently motioned the guides of each regiment down the right-hand road. Grant.

“They stared a moment—and then the slanting lines of steel took the road to terror and death, upborne on an uncontrollable wave of cheering. ‘That night the men were happy.’

“They could never be beaten now.”<sup>7</sup>

Capt. Charles F. Adams, Jr., the commander of the headquarters cavalry escort, recorded an incisive description of Grant, and the transformation that the Army of the Potomac underwent because of his leadership: “Grant is certainly a very extraordinary man. He does not look it and might pass well enough for a dumpy little subaltern, very fond of smoking. . . . [However, no] intelligent person could watch him, even from such a distance as mine, without concluding that he is a remarkable man. He handles those around him so quietly and well, he so evidently has the faculty of disposing of work and managing men, he is cool and quiet, almost stolid and as if stupid, and in a crisis he is one against whom all around . . . would instinctively lean. . . . Hammered and pounded as this Army has been; worked, marched, fought and reduced as it is, it is in better spirits and better fighting trim today than it was in the first day’s fight in the Wilderness. Strange as it seems to me, it is, I believe, yet the fact, that this Army is now just on its second wind, and is more formidable than it ever was before.”<sup>8</sup>

## Problems in the Officer Corps

For *Auftragstaktik* to be carried out effectively, it is not enough for the commanding general to think in the way LaRouche describes; flexibility, creativity, and the ability to improvise as the situation requires must infuse the officer corps as well. In this respect, Grant faced a formidable problem. Of all the other Union generals, only Sherman could really function from the standpoint of *Auftragspolitik* on a

7. Fletcher Pratt, *A Short History of the Civil War: Ordeal by Fire* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1997; first published by Harrison Smith and Robert Haas, Inc., 1935). Whenever I get confused by reading academic treatises on the Civil War, I go back to Pratt, to figure out what actually happened.

8. Simpson, *op cit.*, pp. 319-320.

FIGURE 1  
**The Civil War, 1861-65**



consistent basis. And Grant never bothered to “keep tabs” on him, for this reason. Not so, the other commanders, as Simpson documents convincingly.

A useful feature of the book, is its discussion of the problems confronted by Grant in dealing with subordinate (or sometimes, insubordinate) generals, particularly those of the Army of the Potomac. That Army was a viper’s nest of intrigue, paranoia, and mutual recrimination among the generals. When Grant arrived, they sullenly turned on the unknown man from the West. Grant handled the situation with remarkable skill. As the quartermaster of the Army of the Potomac observed, Grant, when a cadet at West Point, had been particularly skilled at breaking in new horses, and was assigned this as a regular job. “He succeeded in this, not by punishing the animal he had taken in hand, but by patience and tact, and his skill in making the creature know what he wanted to have it do.” He treated the Army of the Potomac the same way.<sup>9</sup>

But even Grant’s tact and diplomacy could not fully solve the problem, and, as Simpson shows, time and again the sub-

ordinate generals would fail to live up to the tasks demanded of them. (In this respect, the book is a good antidote to the tendency toward hero-worship that sometimes manifests itself when one studies the Civil War, or any war. Heroes, there certainly were. But these men also had failings, which, without Lincoln and Grant, would have cost the Union its victory.)

Thus, **Gouverneur Warren**, whose perspicacity and courage saved Little Round Top and hence the Battle of Gettysburg, in 1863, was the same whose stalling and ego-driven insubordination wrecked or endangered several later operations, and who fumed to Grant, when ordered to cooperate with Gen. John Sedgwick: “You . . . can give your orders and I will obey them; or you can put Sedgwick in command and he can give the orders and I will obey them; or you can put me in command and I will give the orders . . . but I’ll be God damned if I’ll *cooperate* with General Sedgwick or anybody else.”<sup>10</sup>

Or, **William F. (“Baldy”) Smith**, whose ingenious plan

9. *Ibid.*, p. 286.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 304.

to open up the “cracker line” saved the Union troops from starvation and defeat at Chattanooga in 1863, was the same who, with Gettysburg hero Winfield S. Hancock, botched Grant’s plan for an assault on Petersburg, by dragging their feet until Lee had time to reinforce the weakly defended city. This spoiled the effect of Grant’s fantastic sweep south of Lee’s forces, south of the James River—a creative strategic move which, had it succeeded, could have ended the war then and there. And this was the same Smith whose continual carping against other generals, and against Grant personally, finally forced Grant to remove him from command.

Or, **William T. Sherman**, who was the best Union general after Grant, whose March to the Sea in Georgia was one of the greatest operations of the war, but who allowed his personal preoccupations (rage, impulsiveness, racism, etc.) to create political problems—especially after Lincoln’s assassination—which were utterly unnecessary.

Or, **George H. Thomas**, the “Rock of Chickamauga,” a Virginian who stayed loyal to the Union, but whose highly methodical nature tried the patience of other generals, and led him to delay his assault on Confederate Gen. John B. Hood in Tennessee (December 1864) to the point that Grant very nearly removed him from command. Thomas’s delay was vindicated by his eventual success against Hood, but does that mean he was right and Grant was wrong? How could Grant know whether to rely on Thomas’s judgment, as the man on the scene, or to conclude that yet another vital military action was about to end in failure?<sup>11</sup>

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11. Grant’s relationship with Thomas is an example of how Simpson goes against the interpretation of an eyewitness—in this case, Grant’s aide Horace Porter—without providing sufficient information to disprove Porter’s version. Simpson makes much of the alleged conflict between the two men, starting from Grant’s arrival at Thomas’s headquarters in Chattanooga in October 1863, after having been appointed commander of all the western armies. Grant, who had been injured recently in a riding accident, rode through rain and wind to reach Chattanooga, suffering another fall on his injured leg, and arriving at headquarters wet, dirty, and in pain. “Thomas received his new commander rather coolly,” Simpson writes, displayed “rude behavior,” and did nothing to secure dry clothes for his visitor. Only after being reprimanded by a staff member, according to Simpson, did Thomas offer Grant dry clothes. Grant declined the offer. (pp. 228-229)

Compare this to Porter’s version, which reports the same facts, but with a different interpretation: “General Thomas’s mind had been so intent upon receiving the commander, and arranging for a conference of officers, that he had entirely overlooked his guest’s travel-stained condition; but as soon as his attention was called to it, all of his old-time Virginia hospitality was aroused, and he at once begged his newly arrived chief to step into a bedroom and change his clothes. His urgings, however, were in vain. The general thanked him politely, but positively declined to make any additions to his personal comfort, except to light a fresh cigar. . . . The extent of his indulgence in personal comfort in the field did not seem to be much greater than that of bluff old Marshal Suvaroff, who, when he wished to give himself over to an excess of luxury, used to go so far as to take off one spur before going to bed.” (p. 4)

Charles A. Dana, Assistant Secretary of War, present at Thomas’s headquarters, cabled back to the War Department: “Grant arrived last night, wet, dirty, and well.”

It would seem that Simpson overlooks the possibility that, in that sen-

Lincoln was fully aware of how indispensable Grant was. In August 1864, Grant sought to put Gen. Philip Sheridan in command of the Sixth Corps, and direct him “to put himself south of the enemy and follow him to the death. Wherever the enemy goes let our troops go also.” There was some waffling over this in Washington, and finally Lincoln himself intervened, with a directive to Grant that reflected the President’s exasperation with the rest of the military command: “Please look over the dispatches you may have received from here, ever since you made that order, and discover if you can, that there is any idea in the head of any one here, of ‘putting our army *South* of the enemy’ or of following him to the *death* in any direction. I repeat to you it will neither be done nor attempted unless you watch it every day, and hour, and force it.”<sup>12</sup>

Yet, Grant could not be everywhere at once. He had to delegate authority, and he did so. He had to get the generals to work together, and if they wouldn’t, then his global strategy for all the theaters of war had to function, so that if one part of it failed, the whole would nevertheless succeed. And, all this under the relentless political pressure of the 1864 Presidential election: If Lincoln were not returned to office, the war could not be won; and if Grant’s armies did not achieve battlefield victories *fast*, Lincoln would surely be defeated.

## The Political and Economic Dimension of War

This brings us closer to understanding what made Grant succeed, where others failed.

He was the only general who, like Abraham Lincoln, had a global perspective, thinking about all the theaters of war, rather than just that in which he personally was located. Even Sherman, with all his brilliance, did not do that.

Even more broadly, Grant, like Lincoln, grasped the essential concept of the *political-military flank*. For example, he understood the military, as well as moral, importance of one of Lincoln’s most important flanking moves against the Confederacy, the Emancipation Proclamation (as some other generals did not). Grant enthusiastically supported the recruitment of freed slaves to the Union army, and supported the Proclamation also because it would strengthen the *mission* of

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tence, the most important part was the verb. Grant was no Baby Boomer. He was arriving at a time of urgent crisis in the Chattanooga campaign, in which the Union soldiers were cut off from their supply lines and would starve to death if they could not break out of the Confederate siege on the city. Whether or not he was wet, was not of great interest to him. Indeed, throughout the war, Grant’s indifference to his personal comfort, as well as his personal safety, became legendary. Simpson himself quotes an observer, later on in the war, describing what happened after the explosion of a Union ordnance boat at the landing at City Point, as a result of Confederate sabotage: “The only man who, at the first shock, ran *towards* the scene of terror was Lieutenant-General Grant, which shows his kind of character very well.” (p. 370)

12. Simpson, *op cit.*, p. 368.

Americans fighting for the principle of the Declaration of Independence, that all men are created equal. When the Confederates took the barbaric action of deliberately placing black Union prisoners of war in the line of Union artillery fire, Grant halted all prisoner exchanges—as agonizing as that was for the Union soldiers languishing in Confederate prisons. He was not going to allow any soldier under his command to be treated as less than human.

The close relationship between Lincoln and Grant was vital for the successful conclusion of the war, although Lincoln is treated as more or less a bystander in Simpson's book, and the author, when he writes about Lincoln at all, mainly accuses him of "meddling" in the affairs of the military. This is a grievous error, near the heart of the author's failure to crack his subject's "enigma"—or to understand how the war was won.

As indicated above, Grant was fully aware of the importance of Lincoln's re-election, and pressed on all fronts against the Confederacy, notably in the unrelenting series of battles against Robert E. Lee which, in 50 days of continuous marching and dying during May-June 1864, led to losses of 60-70,000 Union soldiers (more than the number of U.S. soldiers who died during the entire Vietnam War), and which caused the Union press to denounce Grant as a "butcher," insensitive to the loss of human life. Just in the nick of time, Sherman's capture of Atlanta (Sept. 2) and Sheridan's victory in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley (Oct. 19) changed the mood of the nation, providing Lincoln with a decisive Election Day victory.<sup>13</sup>

Like Lincoln and also Sherman, Grant grasped the *physical economy* of warfare. In this, his experience as a quartermaster during the Mexican War stood him in good stead. On the one hand, he took meticulous care about the logistical requirements to sustain an army advancing through enemy territory, while also knowing when "normal" requirements should be suspended, in the interest of seizing the initiative—such as when his army cut itself loose from its supply depots, and was "living off the land" during the Vicksburg campaign, and when Sherman did the same thing in his March to the Sea. Even more important strategically, Grant, Lincoln, and Sherman all knew the importance of destroying the *economic base* that sustained the enemy. This they did, with devastating effect.

Most profoundly, Grant's understanding of the physical economy of warfare is what makes him appear a "concentration of all that is American." He, like Lincoln, was a thoroughgoing republican, believing in the American System of political economy, as against the British free-trade system. At the core of this republican conception, is the belief that all men were created equal, in the image of God. The aristocratic,

13. See Susan Welsh, "How Lincoln Defeated 'Vox Populi' and Saved the Nation," *EIR*, July 28, 2000.

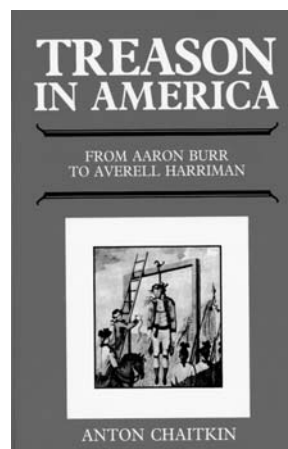
oligarchical mind-set that characterized the governments of Europe, was utterly alien to his way of thinking. In an aristocratic officer corps, each man is concerned with his personal "honor," with cutting a fine figure, with the glory and trappings of war, while expecting the lower echelons to carry out their assigned function as cannon fodder, while doing obeisance to the feudal lord who commands them. This was the character of the Confederate army, and the Confederacy as a society; it existed in the Union officer corps as well, to a much lesser degree. But Grant usually wore a private's blouse, and the only way you could tell his rank was from the three stars on his sleeve. On more than one occasion, he was mistaken for an enlisted man.

Horace Porter depicts Grant's republican relationship to his troops: He "sought to cultivate the individuality of the soldier instead of making him merely an unthinking part of a compact machine."<sup>14</sup> It was this, more than anything, which created a fighting force that Robert E. Lee could not comprehend, and his generals, valiant though they were, could not defeat. And it was this common understanding that created the moral and strategic bond between Grant and Lincoln, which no other general could match.

14. Porter, *op cit.*, p. 513.

## Treason in America

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