

**American Civil War Round Table  
NSW Chapter**

**Grant – The uncaring drunken butcher?**

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**John Cook**

This paper has been prepared as the basis for a presentation to the New South Wales Chapter of the American Civil War Round Table of Australia and will be given at one of its regular meetings in 2002.

The paper seeks to examine the life of General Ulysses S Grant including bringing together of a number of contemporary views of Grant by some of his Union and Confederate brothers-in-arms and the print media of the day. Within this framework, the controversial issues of his alleged drunkenness and the “butcher” label that has plagued him for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century are examined critically in the light of available evidence. On the basis of this total pool of evidence, readers may then wish to consider if the profile of Grant’s character that is subsequently presented stands as an accurate portrayal of this “titan” of the Civil War.

In preparing this paper, particular reference has been made to the Internet website, ‘*The Ulysses S Grant Home Page*’, and to Grant’s own memoirs, ‘*Personal Memoirs of U S Grant*’. These resources, together with the recent biography of Grant by Brooks Simpson, *Ulysses S Grant: Triumph Over Adversity, 1822-1865*, and Fuller’s 1957 book, *Grant and Lee – A Study in Personality and Leadership*, have served well in developing a character profile of this complex man. It is because of the complexities and the elusiveness and contradictions in his persona that Mark Twain said of him “...Grant is worth knowing”.

I would want to thank the people who offered critical comment on the earlier drafts of this paper. G G (Sam) Weller, historian and good friend showed me where there were weaknesses in my argument and provided some valuable suggestions to address these problems in the paper. Paul Spencer from South Australia challenged my assertions and conclusions and forced me to look closely again at the available evidence and check my data. The constructive criticisms and editorial suggestions by Ms Connie Boone of Wisconsin, required me to examine my writing more critically than I might have otherwise and I believe a better paper has resulted. She provided me, also, with access to some primary sources that were most relevant to the theme of the paper. I will be always deeply grateful for the wise counsel and her generosity in sharing her knowledge and understanding of matters Civil War.

In his last days, Grant expressed the hope that he “...would like to see a truthful history written”. It is hoped that this presentation might contribute to such a history.

*John Cook*

## Introduction

History has treated favourably the vanquished Confederate leader General Robert E Lee whilst the Civil War victor, Lieutenant General Ulysses S Grant, has not fared so well. For over a century after his death in 1885, Grant has been variously portrayed as a pedestrian commander who did not care for his troops, a man of slovenly demeanour, a drunkard and a butcher. He has been portrayed in over 50 movies and television dramas mainly as a rough, crude man, a drunkard and someone devoid of dignity and common sense. Such assessments are grossly inaccurate and in contrast to the common view of Grant immediately after the War and around the time of his death in 1885.

In this paper, a brief survey of Grant's life is presented together with the views of Grant by some of his contemporaries, both Union and Confederate, that provide a sharp contrast to the later evaluations of him. The controversial issues of Grant's drinking and the casualty rates his forces incurred that gave rise to his "butcher" tag are then examined and, on the basis of the total pool of evidence, an alternative profile of this leading Civil War general and later President is presented.

## Grant's Early Life

It is important to outline briefly the major events in Grant's life prior to the Civil War. These played an important role in establishing Grant's fascinating but often misunderstood personality and are essential to a proper understanding of many facets of his character. Furthermore, these events throw some light on the behaviour that gave rise to the stereotype of his being a drunk and the impact that that this stereotype was to have on his reputation during the War and in later times.

Grant was born on April 27, 1822 in Point Pleasant, Ohio and named Hiram Ulysses Grant. When entering West Point on May 29, 1839 and reporting to the adjutant's office Grant discovered he had been enrolled as 'Ulysses S Grant'<sup>1 2</sup>. Thus, an error resulting from a simple lapse in memory<sup>3</sup> gave the world the name of one of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century's most famous battlefield commanders!<sup>4</sup>

For the next four years Grant studied at West Point graduating on July 1, 1843, 21<sup>st</sup> in his class and commissioned a Brevet Second Lieutenant. He was posted to the Fourth Infantry Regiment at

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<sup>1</sup> There has been some controversy as to the 'S' in his name. It has been asserted that his middle name was 'Simpson', presumably derived from his mother's maiden name (see footnote # 3, below) This is not true and Grant himself admitted the 'S' in his name stood for nothing.

<sup>2</sup> The recent Grant biography by Brooks D Simpson, *Ulysses S Grant: Triumph over Adversity, 1822-1865*, contains an interesting anecdote on how the name 'Hiram Ulysses Grant' (initials HUG) was considered inappropriate for a prospective West Point cadet (see page 11)

<sup>3</sup> This error probably had its origin with the Congressman, the Hon Thomas D Hamer, who nominated Grant to present for examination for admission to West Point on the last day of his term as a congressman. It has been suggested that in hurriedly preparing the nomination, Hamer, a family friend who had only heard of Grant referred to at home as 'Ulysses' or 'Lys' used 'Ulysses' as the first name. He assumed 'Simpson' was the second name being a common practice of that time to give the first born son the maiden name of his mother. This was then submitted and was the name that the adjutant had on his appointment schedule.

<sup>4</sup> It also provided the basis for the nickname '**U**conditional **S**urrender Grant' as a result of his ultimatum to General Buckner at Fort Donelson in February 1862. It provided, also, the opportunity whilst at West Point for him to be given nicknames like '**U**nited **S**tates' Grant and '**U**ncle **S**am' Grant. The nickname 'Sam' was to stick to him throughout his life.

Jefferson Barracks, St Louis. It was at Jefferson Barracks, In early 1844, that Grant met his future wife and soul mate, Julia Dent. Grant often visited 'White Haven', the farm of the parents of Fred Dent, a West Point room-mate. When, in February 1844, Fred's sister, Julia, returned home from St Louis, Grant was said to remark:

*"...After that I do not know but my visits became more frequent; they certainly did become more enjoyable"<sup>5</sup>*

In mid-1844, Grant's regiment was ordered to the western border of Louisiana where it was to act as part of the Army of Observation pending the annexation of Texas in 1845 and later the Army of Occupation when they moved to Corpus Christi. It was from here, in May 1845, that Grant secured 20 days leave to travel to St Louis where he sought and gained the approval of the Dents for Julia's hand in marriage, thus formalising the agreement made privately between the couple a year earlier.

Service with the Fourth Infantry saw Grant, in 1846-1848, fighting in the Mexican War first under General Zachary Taylor and then, from January 1847, with General Winfield Scott. During this time, Grant was promoted substantive First Lieutenant as of September 16, 1847 and Brevet Captain from September 13.

During the Mexican War, Grant was involved in a number of major battles. In the Battle of Monterrey (September 21, 1846), where he was assigned as regimental quartermaster and expected to remain at the rear, Grant, without orders, rode to the frontline and charged with his regiment. After this, he replaced the regimental adjutant. In March 1847, however, Grant found himself posted back as Quartermaster and this time the appointment was permanent.

His performance in the assault on Molino del Rey (September 8, 1847) was recognised with the reward of Brevet Lieutenant. During the assault on San Cosme Garita, outside Mexico City, Grant ordered a howitzer to be placed in the church belfry where it could bring more effective fire to bear on the enemy. General Worth, who had observed these actions, sent a staff officer, Lieutenant Pemberton<sup>6</sup> to Grant to commend him for his initiative.

With the ratification of the peace treaty and an end to hostilities, Grant's regiment was relocated to Pascagoula, Mississippi, for the summer of 1848. Once the regiment was settled, Grant sought and was granted four months leave. On August 22, 1848, after four years of courtship, he married Julia Dent. This marriage was an extremely happy one with each finding emotional fulfilment with the other. Their rich and close relationship provided for Grant a source of great comfort from the frustration and boredom associated with peacetime military service and from the subsequent business failures he suffered following his resignation from the army in 1854.

On returning from his honeymoon Grant was posted to Sackett's Harbor, New York on Lake Ontario and then in the spring of 1849 to Detroit and then back to Sackett's Harbor for a year. In both the Sackett's Harbor and Detroit postings his family was with him and despite the tedium of peacetime army service, he was extremely happy with his personal life. It was during this time that his first child, Fred, was born (May 30, 1850).

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<sup>5</sup> Grant U S, *Personal Memoirs of U S Grant*: New York, Penguin Books edition, 1999, p 22.

<sup>6</sup> Later, Lieutenant General Pemberton who commanded the Confederate defences of Vicksburg in 1863 and surrendered to Grant on July 4.

After nearly four years in these postings he was sent to San Francisco in mid-1852 as Regimental Quartermaster and subsequently, on promotion to substantive Captain, to command a company that was stationed at Humboldt Bay. On moving to the posting in California, his family remained in Missouri, staying with Grant's parents until their second child was born after which Julia and the two children returned to her parents' farm 'White Haven'. This separation from his wife and sons, one of whom he had never seen, played havoc with Grant and he began to drink to excess. His letters to Julia over this period still survive and show clearly his immense loneliness and feelings of emotional abandonment. It is during this period of separation from his family that the stories of Grant the drunkard have their origin.

In August 1854, Grant returned to Missouri and his family after resigning from the army where he worked a 60-acre farm near St Louis owned by his wife. Grant built a log home for his family, near the 'White Haven' family home and named it 'Hardscrabble'. The combination of personal illness and plummeting farm prices made the farm an unprofitable venture.

In the autumn of 1858, after an extended illness, Grant sold his stock, crops and farm equipment and gave up farming. He entered into partnership with Julia's cousin, Harry Boggs, in a small real estate agency business in St Louis. It was during the time in St Louis that Grant applied unsuccessfully for the position of county engineer "...an office of respectability and emolument that would have been very acceptable"<sup>7</sup>.

The business was not profitable enough to sustain the two partners. Grant was not cut out to be a businessman and had considerable difficulty in collecting rents when a tenant was experiencing financial hardship. In May 1860, Grant withdrew from the partnership and moved to Galena, Illinois where he took up a position as clerk in his father's leather goods store on an annual salary of \$800. Grant remained here until his Civil War service began in 1861.

## **Grant's Civil War Service**

It is not possible in a paper like this to detail all of Grant's Civil War service. What is now presented is a sampling of his service during the years 1861 – 1865. This sampling is chosen to encompass the major campaigns and battles in which Grant was involved and seeks to be sufficiently representative of his service to provide an accurate profile of him as a military commander.

The early months of the War saw Grant very much on the sidelines. His offers to serve were shunned. From the end of April 1861 Grant was appointed on a short-term basis as the mustering officer for the regiments<sup>8</sup> that the Illinois State Legislature had authorised for service. In mid-June he accepted the offer by Illinois State Governor Richard Yates to command the Seventh District Regiment, the 21<sup>st</sup> Illinois Volunteers. This regiment was known as "Yates's Hellions" and was an unruly mob that had driven their previous commander into retirement.

It was whilst commanding this regiment that Grant claimed he learnt a valuable lesson that was to be integral to his generalship during the War. Grant was ordered to move against Confederate Colonel Thomas Harris, "...who was said to be encamped at the little town of Florida (Missouri) some twenty-five miles south..." of Grant's force on the Salt River. On arriving at the enemy encampment Grant

found it had been evacuated and it immediately occurred to him that Harris would have been as much afraid of him as Grant was afraid of Harris. In Grant's words:

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<sup>7</sup> U S Grant, *op cit*, p 111.

<sup>8</sup> The initial quota of regiments from Illinois was set at six but the number of volunteers far exceeded these requirements and the State Legislature authorised the raising of ten additional regiments of volunteers for service in the War thus avoiding the embarrassment of who to accept. (see *ibid.*, p122)

*“This was a view of the question that I had never taken before; but it was one I never forgot afterwards. From that event to the close of the war, I never experienced trepidation upon confronting the enemy ... I never forgot that he had as much reason to fear my forces as I had his. The lesson was valuable.”<sup>9</sup>*

On July 31, 1861, Lincoln appointed Grant a Brigadier General of Volunteers on the recommendation of a caucus of Illinois Congressmen. When confirmed by the Senate, the commission was backdated to May 17, providing Grant valuable seniority. At the end of August 1861, Grant was given command of all troops in southeast Missouri with headquarters initially located at Cape Girardeau. He then established his headquarters at Cairo, Illinois and following Confederate General Leonidas Polk’s violation of the self-proclaimed neutrality of Kentucky by his occupation of Columbus (September 3), moved quickly to occupy Paducah, thus preventing the Confederates consolidating a defensive line in Kentucky.

Grant’s first major engagement was fought at Belmont, Missouri, on November 7, 1861 when he led his troops across the Mississippi River from Columbus, Kentucky, in a diversionary operation to prevent the reinforcement of Confederate General Sterling Price. Grant’s force overran the Confederate position but the Confederates counterattacked with a superior force. The Union force was able to reach its transport craft and retreat across the river with Grant, himself, only narrowly escaping death or capture.

Grant’s rise to national prominence came in February 1862 with his sweeping victory and capture of Fort Donelson. In January 1862, Grant had sought and gained approval<sup>10</sup> to discontinue the use of his forces for defensive and diversionary operations and begin an offensive campaign on the Tennessee River. Grant immediately planned a combined navy and army operation that resulted in Fort Henry being captured on February 6 and Fort Donelson taken on February 16. Fort Henry was essentially a naval victory, but the better defended Fort Donelson forced the Federal gunboats to withdraw and the victory had to be won by the army. Early on the morning of February 15, the Confederates sought to break out of their defensive position to retreat south to the safety of Nashville. Then surprisingly, they were ordered back to their former positions at Fort Donelson. The Confederate commanders, Floyd and Pillow<sup>11</sup>, handed over command to Simon Buckner who was then required to arrange the surrender of the Confederate force. Buckner composed a note to Grant asking for the terms of capitulation. Grant’s reply was terse and to the point:

*“No terms except unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted. I propose to move immediately on your works”*

Buckner’s reaction to this was shock and disbelief. He did not quite know what Grant meant by “...unconditional surrender”. The term was a new one and he was loath to think of its implications of the term.<sup>12</sup> Later in the day, Grant rode up to Buckner’s headquarters at the Dover Hotel and, despite

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<sup>9</sup> Grant U S, *op cit*, p 132

<sup>10</sup> Although Grant was eager to advance on Fort Henry, Halleck hesitated, probably with some justification, as there was the potential for Albert Sidney Johnston to surround and defeat Grant’s forces if the Confederate commander took the battle to Grant. It was only when Halleck heard on January 29 that Beauregard was coming west with 15 regiments to reinforce the forts, a rumour that proved to be false, that he approved Grant’s proposal to seize Fort Henry.

<sup>11</sup> Floyd and Pillow then escaped, as did the Confederate cavalry commander who led his troops out of the fort rather than surrender. This cavalry commander was the famous Nathan Bedford Forrest.

<sup>12</sup> “Unconditional Surrender” Grant became a new nickname for U S Grant following his use of the term in his note to Simon Buckner.

the brusque tone of his earlier note, was in Buckner's words "...very kind and civil and polite". Indeed, a small insight into Grant's character is seen when, at the conclusion of this meeting, Grant followed Buckner outside and said<sup>13</sup>:

*"Buckner, you are I know separated from your people and perhaps you need funds; my purse is at your disposal"*

With the capture of Fort Donelson, the South was forced to give up southern Kentucky and much of middle and western Tennessee and the entire picture of the "War in the West" had changed. Grant had seized the initiative and, despite some temporary setbacks, was never to lose it. The deep wedge driven into the South by the Union victory at Fort Donelson would eventually split the Confederacy. The battles of Shiloh, Corinth and Memphis were soon to come and 18 months later, the capture of Vicksburg. The South was to pay for this disaster at Dover with three more years of bitter fighting, and the ultimate price was total defeat.

Grant's capture of Fort Donelson was the first major Union victory of the War and touched off joyous celebrations in the North. Grant became a national hero overnight with Lincoln signing the papers for his promotion to Major General of Volunteers on February 17. This recognition and the popularity it brought with it resulted in expressions of jealousy from less able but cleverly ambitious Union officers and politicians who perceived Grant as a threat to their careers. Henry Halleck, Grant's immediate superior at the time of the Fort Donelson campaign, sent the following message to McClellan in Washington:

*"Make Buell, Grant and Pope major generals of volunteers and give me command of the west. I ask this in return for Forts Henry and Donelson"*

It appears that this "armchair general" was seeking to capitalise on the achievements of his able subordinate and by bracketing Grant with the others sought to diminish Grant's contribution to the victory. Halleck's actions certainly did not fool Lincoln who, in the following months, was to provide much needed support to Grant. It did not stop Halleck, who continued his scheming by spreading rumours that Grant had "...resumed his former bad habits", a less than subtle reference to Grant's pre-War drinking problems.

Grant's next major military engagement was the Battle of Shiloh (or Pittsburgh Landing) which was fought over two days (April 6-7, 1862). Although he denies that his Union forces were surprised on the morning of the first day of the battle by the Confederate attack, there is substantial evidence to suggest they were unprepared for the attack when it came. It was Grant's sheer determination<sup>14</sup> that was to blunt the Confederate thrusts and ensured the Union forces held the field on the second day. Grant was accused of negligence and even being drunk during the battle at Shiloh, but it was Lincoln's support that ensured the survival of his career.

The heavy casualties at Shiloh continued to haunt Grant. Halleck reorganised his Department of the Mississippi, appointed Grant as his Deputy Commander and promptly ignored him. It was not until the

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<sup>13</sup> Grant, no doubt, remembered the assistance Buckner rendered him when he was in financial difficulty on his return from his service in California in 1854.

<sup>14</sup> helped, of course, by the timely arrival of Buell's Army of the Ohio on the evening of April 6.

latter part of 1862, when Halleck was sent to Washington to replace McClellan, that Grant was to command all Union forces in the Mississippi Valley. The winter of 1862-63 was characterised by inaction and unproductive action for Grant<sup>15</sup> and on the personal level he was vilified by the Northern press in terms such as:

*“Our noble army ... is being wasted by the foolish, drunken, stupid Grant ... There is not among the whole list of retired major generals a man who is not Grant’s superior”*

- Cincinnati Commercial, February 1863

Whilst such criticism was silenced after the Vicksburg campaign, it was to rise again later in the War with the Overland Campaign when the new Union strategy resulted in a significant increase in the Federal casualty levels. In modern times, also, the criticism became “fact” with Grant being a convenient subject of systematic denigration by those advocating the “Lost Cause” mythology.

The Vicksburg Campaign culminating in the surrender of the city on July 4, 1863, was Grant’s supreme achievement as a military commander and still considered one of the greatest military campaigns in history. The strategic significance of this victory at Vicksburg, the day after the Union victory at Gettysburg, was much greater than that of the Eastern Theatre battle. It gave the Federals control of the Mississippi River thus closing the South’s most important waterway and had the effect of splitting the Confederacy on a north-south axis.

The promotion of Grant to the rank of Lieutenant General (March 9, 1864) and his appointment as General-in-Chief of all Union Armies brought with it a significant change to the strategy for conducting the War. Grant’s concept was a simple and direct one – a coordinated and concerted effort by all Federal armies in the field<sup>16</sup>. Grant believed that steady and constant pressure would prevent the Confederates from resting and regrouping as they had in the past and would eventually bring victory. Grant’s order to Meade characterised this new Union strategy:

*“Wherever Lee goes, there you will go also”*

Another classic example of this new strategy occurred after the inconclusive Battle of the Wilderness where the Federal forces had their “noses bloodied”. After a defeat in battle the Army of the Potomac had always retreated to “lick their wounds”. When the order came to march the men found they were to march south to Spotsylvania instead of retreating north as they had done in the past. It is said that cheers went up when this news reached the ranks.

Although the War would continue for another year, Lincoln had found, in Grant, a commander with both the vision of how a Union victory could be achieved and the will to pursue this victory.

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<sup>15</sup> And defeat for the Union forces in the Eastern Theatre.

<sup>16</sup> For the two major armies under Grant’s command, this strategy proved very effective. The Army of the Potomac under command of Meade and with Sheridan commanding its cavalry “bottled up” Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia and within six weeks had Richmond under siege. In a similar manner, the drive through Georgia by Sherman’s “army group” threatened the strategic city of Atlanta. Despite these successes, lesser tasks given to smaller commands, mainly under politically appointed generals, led to Union defeats and waste of resources.

It was in the Battle of the Wilderness (May 5-7, 1864) that Grant first faced the great Confederate commander, Robert E Lee in battle. Although the result of this battle was inconclusive, the Union forces had twice as many casualties as the Confederates, but it was these battles in this summer of 1864 that bled the South dry of its much needed manpower.

Following the Wilderness battle both armies raced south along parallel road systems towards Spotsylvania and here from May 7 –10, the battle raged with heavy casualties on both sides but with an inconclusive result. Lee is able to thwart Grant twice in five days but Grant's response to Halleck in Washington is:

*"I propose to fight it out on this line if it takes all summer"*

In the Battle of Cold Harbor on June 3, in a frontal assault Grant loses 7000 men in an hour while the Confederates lost 1500 men. This is Grant's greatest mistake as a military commander and one that he freely admits:

*"I have always regretted that the last assault at Cold Harbor was ever made ... no advantage was gained to compensate for the heavy loss we sustained"*<sup>17</sup>

After these battles in May/June 1864 Grant received his 'butcher' tag. Considerable rage was expressed throughout the North at the level of casualties and Grant was accused of having no overall plan to win the War. There were at least two people who did not agree with this: one was, of course, Grant; the other was Lee! It should be noted that the larger casualty rates were a direct consequence of Grant's change in strategy to the primary aim of destroying Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, something the previous Union commanders had not fully appreciated.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the impact of the higher casualty rates was much more damaging for the Confederates who could not obtain replacements and thus, largely contributed to their inevitable defeat.

Lincoln's 1864 presidential victory was helped by the success of the Union armies, particularly in the Western Theatre of Operations with Sherman's Atlanta Campaign against Johnston and then Hood. In the Eastern Theatre, Lee's Army of Northern Virginia was involved in a war of attrition at Petersburg and Richmond. Their defeat became more and more inevitable as their manpower and materiel resources became progressively weaker. In April 1865 Lee's surrender to Grant at Appomattox Courthouse finally brought the War to a close.

Grant's terms of surrender were laid down by Lincoln within generous parameters<sup>19</sup>. The troops were to be paroled and officers allowed keep their horses, side arms and baggage. Grant also allowed enlisted men that owned horses or mules to keep them "...for the spring planting" and provided rations for 25,000 Confederates, as requested by Lee. These were gestures for which Lee expressed his

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<sup>17</sup> Grant U S, *op cit*, p 477.

<sup>18</sup> In this regard, contrast the time and effort McClellan spent in trying to capture Richmond and other key cities. Grant, on the other hand, thought so little about the Confederate capital that, even after its capture he never bothered to go there.

<sup>19</sup> Essentially, these parameters were restoration of national authority; no receding on the slavery issue and a final end to the War, viz., no armistice. Furthermore, in a letter to Grant over Secretary of War Stanton's signature, Lincoln limited the options available to Grant to matters concerning the capitulation of the Army of Northern Virginia.

appreciation and which set a mood for reconciliation and peace, a mood which would change five days later with Lincoln's assassination.

Grant's dealings with Lee at the surrender and his determination not to humiliate his vanquished foe provide further insight into the decency and considerate and sensitive nature of the War's most successful general. Much has been said of Lee surrendering his sword, but Grant puts the record straight in his memoirs:

*"The much talked of surrendering of Lee's sword and my handing it back ... it is the purest romance"<sup>20</sup>*

Lee was not required to participate publicly in the official surrender ceremony on April 12, the responsibility falling to a subordinate officer General John B Gordon. Earlier, when news of the surrender reached Union lines, soldiers started to fire a 100-gun salute to celebrate the victory. Grant had it stopped. His views were clear:

*"The Confederates were now our prisoners, and we did not want to exalt over their downfall" ... The war is over...the Rebels are again our countrymen, and the best sign of rejoicing is to abstain from all demonstrations in the field."<sup>21</sup>*

## After the War

It is not intended, in this paper, to provide a comprehensive study of Grant's post-War life. Rather, it is proposed to provide a number of "snapshots" of him in the period after the War that will provide further insight to his persona.

Grant was a man who held 'honour' above all else. This trait was clearly demonstrated when President Andrew Johnson and Secretary of War, Edwin M Stanton, sought to have Lee arrested after the War. Grant immediately intervened by calling on Stanton and demanding that the terms of Appomattox not be violated. Grant threatened to resign from the army and publicly state his reasons. With Grant's immense popularity, both the President and the Secretary knew to proceed would mean political suicide. The crisis was averted and there was never again any talk of arresting Lee. Grant's actions in this were appreciated by one of his former adversaries, General John Brown Gordon, CSA. Gordon wrote:

*"There can be no doubt that Andrew Johnson, the infatuated zealot who came to the Presidency on the ill-fated martyrdom of Abraham Lincoln, would have followed his threat to "make treason odious" by an order for the arrest and imprisonment of Lee and other Confederate leaders but for the stern mandate of Grant that, in spite of Johnson's vindictive purposes, the Southern soldier who held a parole should be protected to the last extremity."<sup>22</sup>*

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<sup>20</sup> Grant U S, *op cit*, p 605.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, p 608 and the 'Ulysses S Grant' website <http://www.mscomm.com/~ulysses/page2.html>, p 2.

<sup>22</sup> Gordon J B, *Reminiscences of the Civil War*: New York, C Scibner's Sons, 1904, p 456-57.

Not only did Lee have much to thank Grant for in this intervention on his behalf but the nation also. One can but wonder what might have been the reaction in the South had its favourite son been arrested and imprisoned.

In July 1866, Congress approved the establishment of a new rank – General of the Armies of the United States. Grant was appointed to this rank on July 25. In the autumn of that year President Johnson, a man jealous of the hugely popular Grant, sought to get him out of the public eye by sending him to Mexico. Grant simply refused the assignment!

Grant was nominated for President by the Republican Party's National Convention in 1868. Although nominated Grant did not actively campaign for the Presidency but due to his enormous popularity, was elected and served two terms from March 4, 1869 to March 4, 1877.

In early 1869, before he assumed the Presidency, Grant again provided support for Lee and the cause of reunification albeit in an indirect covert way. Members of Congress had suggested that the rotunda of the Capital should include a large painting that depicted Lee surrendering to Grant at Appomattox. When told of this proposal by some Congressmen, Grant surprised them with his response:

*"No gentlemen, it won't do. No power on earth will make me agree to your proposal. I will not humiliate General Lee or our Southern friends in depicting their humiliation and then celebrating the event in the nation's capital"<sup>23</sup>*

The President-Elect's firm response ended discussion on the proposed painting.

Grant's presidency and, in particular, his second term from 1873 –1877, was characterised by a number of corruption scandals. Although he was not involved personally in this corruption, they reveal a degree of naivety and a trusting nature that demonstrated Grant's unsuitability for the rough world of national politics.

This trusting nature continued throughout Grant's last years. In May 1884, the brokerage firm of Grant and Ward failed leaving Grant and his family destitute. Later that year Grant was diagnosed with throat cancer and he became increasingly debilitated.

In a race against time Grant began to write his memoirs<sup>24</sup> in order to provide for his family. Once his illness was made public, his routine was under the constant and watchful eye of the media and the public. Crowds gathered outside his home and the New York papers followed with a front-page summary every day. Many came to visit him including Simon Bolivar Buckner, his Confederate foe at Fort Donelson and his wife, close friend and military partner, General William T Sherman and Mark Twain, author and publisher of Grant's memoirs. Four days before his death on July 23, 1885, Grant handed over his finished manuscript to his publisher. The memoirs were immediately hailed as a classic and compared with Caesar's Commentaries. It will eventually earn Julia and the children a staggering \$450 000 and is the only Civil War memoirs never to go out of print.

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted from the 'Ulysses S Grant' website <http://www.mscomm.com/~ulysses/page125.html>

<sup>24</sup> Following his commissioning by the *Century* to write three articles on the War for \$3000, Grant was inclined to accept an offer from this publisher for the standard 10% royalty to write his memoirs. His friend, Mark Twain, angry at a perceived exploitation by publishers, had formed his own publishing company and persuaded Grant to sign with his company to write the memoirs for 70% of the net income by subscription. Grant's acceptance of this offer was one of the few wise financial decisions Grant ever made!

## Grant and His Contemporaries

Presented below, are various assessments of Grant written by some of his Civil War contemporaries<sup>25</sup>. These are drawn from both Union and Confederate sources and provides a remarkably consistent profile of him as a man and as a warrior. In addition, some extracts are presented from a book written after Grant's death in 1885 that contain the obituaries published by newspapers around the country.

*"He's the quietest little fellow you ever saw. He makes the least fuss of any man you ever knew. I believe he has been in this room a minute or so before I knew he was here. Grant is the first general I have had. You know how it's been with the rest. As soon as I put a man in command of the army, they all wanted me to be the general. Now it isn't so with Grant. He hasn't told me what his plans are. I don't know and I don't want to know. I'm glad to find a man who can go ahead without me. He doesn't ask impossibilities of me, and he's the first general I've had that didn't"*

: Abraham Lincoln, 1864.

*"General Grant's truly great qualities - his innate modesty, his freedom from every trace of vain-glory or ostentation, his magnanimity in victory, his genuine sympathy for brave and sensitive foeman, and his inflexible resolve to protect paroled Confederates against any assault ... will give him a place in history no less renowned and more to be envied than any other man"*

: General John B Gordon, CSA.

*"Grant was necessary to bring the War to a close...his positive qualities, his power to wield force to the bitter end, much entitle him to rank high as a commanding general. His concentration of energies, inflexible purpose, imperturbable long-suffering, his masterly reticence, ignoring either advice or criticism, his magnanimity in all relations, but more than all his infinite trust in the final triumph of his cause, set him apart and alone above all others. With these attributes we could not call him less than great"*

: Major General Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, USA.

*"It will be a thousand years before Grant's character is fully appreciated. Grant is the greatest soldier of our time if not all time...he fixes in his mind what is the true objective and abandons all the minor ones. He dismisses all possibility of defeat. He believes in himself and victory. If his plans go wrong he is never disconcerted but promptly devises a new one and is sure to win in the end. Grant more nearly impersonated the American character of 1861-65 than any other living man. Therefore he will stand as the typical hero of the great Civil War in America."*

: General William Tecumsah Sherman, USA

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<sup>25</sup> These quotes have been taken from the comprehensive profile of Grant on the 'Ulysses S Grant Home Page' website accessed through <http://www.mscomm.com/~ulysses/page61.html>

*“He guided every subordinate with a fund of common sense and superiority of intellect, which left the impression so distinct as to exhibit his great personality. When his military history is analyzed after the lapse of years, it will show, even more clearly than now, he was the steadfast center (sic) about and on which everything else turned.”*

: General Philip Sheridan, USA.

*“There was one Federal general whose name lends luster (sic) to the American soldier and to the American citizen, who is respected and revered by every fair indeed man, who understood the prowess of the Southern soldier, and who removed from the South the sting of defeat by the magic touch of his magnanimity in dealing with the vanquished. Grant was the genius of the war on the Federal side. He never made war on defenseless (sic) women and old men. He crushed the Confederacy with superior numbers, but paroled and trusted the Confederate. He knew that if he put the Southern soldier on his honor (sic) he would make a good citizen and that if the leaders were imprisoned, the Southern people would become a nation of bushwhackers. By that act he bound to him with hooks of steel the Southern hearts, which his magnanimity won at Appomattox.”*

: James Dinkins, Army of Northern Virginia.

How can these tributes be for the man so long denigrated with the stereotype of being slovenly and without dignity or common sense? Are they not of a remarkable and exceptional military leader who had both the vision and will to pursue and achieve victory?

Further insights into Grant’s reputation may be seen from the obituaries published significantly, throughout the South following Grant’s death in July 1885.<sup>26</sup>

#### **The Morning News, Savannah, Georgia:**

The news of Gen. Grant's death will be read with profound sorrow in this country and with deep regret throughout the civilized world. Gen. Grant was a great soldier... His magnanimity at the Appomattox surrender showed that he was as generous as he was brave.

#### **The Register Mobile, Alabama:**

He is gone. The grave closes over a brave soldier, a man whose impulses, had they been properly directed, would have made him the foremost man of his times. The South unites with the North in paying tribute to his memory. He saved the Union. For this triumph – and time has shown it to be a triumph for the South as well as the North – he is entitled to and will receive the grateful tribute of the millions who in the course of time will crowd this continent with a hundred Imperial States and spread to the world the blessing of republican freedom.

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<sup>26</sup> I am indebted to Ms Connie Boone from Wisconsin for providing me with the text of these obituaries. They are taken from an old book “*Grant and His Travels*” by L T Remlap, 1885, (pages 707-709).

**The Dispatch, Richmond, Virginia:**

He is not only one of the immortals, but he is one of them by right. He was an Agamemnon – a “King of Men.”

**The News and Courier, Charleston, South Carolina:**

The North had no thought save of the man of Appomattox and the South had no thought save of him who told the worn and ragged Confederate soldiers of Lee's army that they must take their horses home with them ...There is peace throughout the land – peace in the North and peace in the South. The country is one again in heart, and thought and hope...In this time of peace there is naught but regard and regret for him for whom strife and disquiet are no more.

**The Commercial, Louisville, Kentucky:**

The greatest soldier since the day of Napoleon is dead.

**The Picayune, New Orleans:**

Brethren of the North and South let us join mournful hands together around that newly opened grave

**The Chronicle, New Orleans:**

A united country mourns an honored son. His private virtues were equal to his patriotism and military genius.

**The Evening Tribune Galveston, Texas:**

Those of the gray who had fought against him are earnest in their sorrow that a gallant soldier has gone to his long resting-place.

It is interesting to note that even allowing for the hyperbole of late 19<sup>th</sup> Century journalism, there is an essence of admiration for the man and a desire for reunification shines through. Not one called him a butcher, fool or a drunk. Rather, he was referred to as a genius, a great soldier, magnanimous, a King of men. These newspapers could have remained silent or simply published a death notice but they didn't. One can but wonder as to when the change in Grant's reputation took place and how much it had to do with Grant and how much it had to do with those peddling the “Lost Cause” myth. Throughout Grant's years from the end of his Presidency until his death in 1885, he was the most popular man in America. Wherever he went and what ever he did were reported in the nation's papers and crowds met him with cheers. During his final illness, the nation waited and watched his daily activities on the front page of the New York newspapers

## Grant's Drinking

The notion that Grant was a heavy drinker and variously described as a drunkard or an alcoholic has been a commonly held view and supported by some American historians. Grant's biographers have written at length on this much disputed and controversial issue and, in recent times, various Internet websites<sup>27</sup> relating to Grant have devoted considerable space to the issue. In this paper, a view is developed regarding Grant's drinking that is based on what is known and generally accepted about this issue and the effects that Grant's drinking habits had on his performance as a battlefield commander.

Grant's experience with liquor may be summarised in the following terms:

- In the pre-War period, there is strong evidence to suggest that Grant drank to excess. His drinking habit was established whilst in Mexico;
- There is evidence that in the period 1852-1854 when he was stationed at a remote Californian outpost, separated from his wife and family, he turned to the bottle for solace. The stories of his excessive drinking habits during this period would haunt him for the rest of his life;
- During this period when he drank too much, his drinking hurt no one but impinged somewhat on his work performance and may well have provided an opportunity for his commanding officer to force him out of the army under threat of court martial;
- He was affected by small quantities of alcohol and became drunk very quickly – one drink was said to cause him to be unsteady and slur his speech;
- He was relatively “dry” during the period 1854-1861 and some authors suggest that he only craved the bottle when his wife was not with him;
- During the War, he had his Chief of Staff, John Rawlins, watching over him and it has been suggested that “...it was not only impractical, but impossible for Grant to go on a bender with Rawlins about camp”. (There are claims, however, that this influence of Rawlins is overestimated)
- There are a few documented occasions, however, when he was drunk during the War but it is claimed that his drinking never interfered with his duty, viz., the occasions when he drank were at times when action had been suspended. In the aftermath of his Vicksburg triumph, he went on a huge bender that was kept out of the newspapers by the patriotic self-restraint of a reporter from the *Chicago Times* who put him to bed, dead drunk, and didn't report the story;
- Sherman asserted that Grant could sleep off his hangovers in less than an hour - probably because a small amount of alcohol only was needed to get him drunk;
- After the War he had long periods of abstinence and at other times enjoyed the occasional drink. The only time it is known for certain that Grant was drunk was during the “Ride ‘Round the Circle” with President Johnson in 1866 when again, he was separated from Julia. A coincidence?

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<sup>27</sup> In this regard, the following Internet websites <http://www.mscomm.com/~ulysses/page47.html> and <http://www.mscomm.com/~ulysses/page48.html> provide a comprehensive discussion of Grant's drinking, including an extensive set of observations of his drinking habits from his contemporaries.

On the basis of available evidence, it may be concluded that although Grant enjoyed a drink and, at times, had a craving for the bottle and drank to excess, he did not have a dependency on it. He was not, therefore, an 'alcoholic' in terms of the modern definition of the condition. More importantly, there is no evidence to substantiate any claim that his performance as a commander during the Civil War was affected by his drinking. It is this fact alone that should be borne in mind in putting the issue of Grant's drinking in proper perspective.

## Grant the Butcher?

The label of 'butcher' that Grant received had its origins at Shiloh (April 1862) and reached its zenith during the Overland Campaign (May 1864) and culminating a month later at Cold Harbor. The Union casualties at the Battle of Shiloh were horrendous, but so were the Confederate losses. The Confederates could less afford to lose their troops as they had more difficulty in replacing their casualties because of their smaller manpower resource. During the Overland Campaign – the Battles of the Wilderness and Spotsylvania - and subsequently at Cold Harbor, the level of Union casualties was significantly higher than previously, but this might be expected because the Federals were the attacking force against an enemy behind solid field defences. As noted previously, Grant always regretted the last assault at Cold Harbor since there was nothing gained for the huge loss of lives.

J F C Fuller, in one of his books<sup>28</sup>, has undertaken an interesting analysis where he has calculated the casualty rates that Grant had over the period of the War and, where the data are available, compared these figures with similar statistics for Lee. This analysis provides some "hard evidence" on which to judge the validity of the claim of Grant being a 'butcher'. The following tables are taken from Fuller's analysis<sup>29</sup> and provide the Federal and Confederate casualty rates for battles:

- Grant was involved in 1862 and 1863 (Table 1);
- Lee was involved in during the same period (Table 2); and
- Grant and Lee faced each other in 1864 and 1865 (Table 3).

**Table 1: Grant's Battles – 1862-1863**

| <b>Battle</b>   | <b>Date</b>          | <b>Federal Losses (per 100)</b> | <b>Confederate Losses (per 100)</b> |
|-----------------|----------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Fort Donelson   | February 12-16, 1862 | 9.6                             | 9.5                                 |
| Shiloh          | April 6-7, 1862      | 16.2                            | 24.1                                |
| Corinth         | October 3-4, 1862    | 10.4                            | 11.2                                |
| Champion's Hill | May 16, 1863         | 7.6                             | 10.9                                |
| Vicksburg       | May 22, 1863         | 6.7                             | ***                                 |
| Chattanooga     | November 23-25       | 9.7                             | 5.5                                 |

(\*\*\* denotes that there are no accurate figures available)

<sup>28</sup> Fuller J F C, *Grant and Lee – A Study in Personality and Generalship*: Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1957, (Midland Book Edition, 1982).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p 273- 274.

**Table 2: Lee's Battles – 1862-1863**

| <b>Battle</b>              | <b>Date</b>            | <b>Federal Losses (per 100)</b> | <b>Confederate Losses (per 100)</b> |
|----------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Mechanicsville             | June 26, 1862          | 1.6                             | 9.1                                 |
| Gaines Mill                | June 27, 1862          | 11.7                            | 15.3                                |
| Peach Orchard/Malvern Hill | June 29 - July 1, 1862 | 6.0                             | 9.9                                 |
| Seven Days' Battle         | June 25 - July 1, 1862 | 10.7                            | 20.7                                |
| Manassas & Chantilly       | Aug 27 - Sept 2, 1862  | 13.2                            | 18.7                                |
| South Mountain             | September 14, 1862     | 6.8                             | 10.5                                |
| Antietam                   | September 16-17, 1862  | 15.5                            | 22.6                                |
| Fredricksburg              | December 13, 1862      | 10.3                            | 6.4                                 |
| Chancellorsville           | May 1 - 4, 1863        | 11.4                            | 18.7                                |
| Gettysburg                 | July 1 - 3, 1863       | 20.0                            | 30.1                                |

**Table 3: Grant – Lee, 1864-1865**

| <b>Battle</b>             | <b>Date</b>              | <b>Grant</b> | <b>Lee</b> |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|--------------|------------|
| Wilderness & Spotsylvania | May 5-12, 1864           | 29.6         | ---        |
| Cold Harbor               | June 1-3, 1864           | 11.1         | ---        |
| The Mine                  | July 30, 1864            | 13.8         | ---        |
| Deep Bottom               | August 14-19, 1864       | 7.8          | ---        |
| Weldon R. R.              | August 18-21, 1864       | 6.4          | 8.1        |
| Boydton Plank Road        | October 27-28, 1864      | 2.8          | ---        |
| Hatcher's Run             | February 5-7, 1865       | 3.9          | ---        |
| Appomattox Campaign       | March 25 - April 5, 1865 | 8.0          | ---        |

Whilst there are some limitations to what is able to be drawn from Fuller's data mainly because there are no accurate figures of Lee's losses for 1864 – 1865, some quite enlightening facts emerge with respect to Grant. The information that may be gleaned from these tables is:

- From Tables 1 and 2, it is noted that, on average, Federal casualty rates were less than the Confederate casualty rates during the 1862-1863 period;
- This feature is true not only for Grant's and Lee's battles but for the whole range of battles with the average Federal and Confederate casualty rates were 11.1% and 12.3% respectively<sup>30</sup>;
- From Tables 1 and 2, also, it can be seen that, for 1862-63, the casualty rate sustained in battles involving Grant was, on average, significantly less than the average casualty rate in Lee's battles (10.0% for Grant compared with 16.2% for Lee);
- Furthermore, Grant's average casualty rate was below the Federal average;
- In 1864-65, the campaign where Grant's forces sustained the highest casualty rate was in the Wilderness/Spotsylvania battles and not at Cold Harbor. It was this earlier campaign that had the highest casualty rate for Grant, (29.6%) and was quite unlike the level of casualties incurred in all of his other battles;
- Notwithstanding the "aberrant" rate in the Wilderness/Spotsylvania battles, Grant's casualty rate for 1864-65 was, on average, similar to his 1862-63 rate at 10.4%;
- Indeed, if the Wilderness/Spotsylvania figure is omitted from the calculation, Grant's average casualty rate for 1864-65 drops to 7.7%;
- With the exception of Fredericksburg, even in the battles won by the Confederates, their casualty rate was greater than that of the Federals.

Although by modern day standards these casualty rates are unacceptably high, it can be seen from Fuller's data that Grant's casualties were not abnormally high when judged in relation to the standards of his day. The label 'butcher' that Grant has been given, therefore, is considered to be undeserved<sup>31</sup> and can be just as equally applied to Lee.

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p 274.

<sup>31</sup> Alternatively, if one wishes to persevere with today's standards as the benchmark for judging the Civil War commanders, the same criterion must be applied to Lee.

## When and Why?

It has been suggested in this paper that the changes to Grant's reputation had their origins in the "Lost Cause" mythology. Evidence to support such an assertion is necessarily indirect and circumstantial but nonetheless persuasive. There is no "smoking gun" as there was when Early et al "did their job" on Longstreet and yet the effects were as devastating as they were outrageous.

Although Grant had his share of enemies during his military and political careers, it was not until after his death that the systematic denigration of his character became evident. Indeed, the actions taken to present him in the derogatory manner in which he has been portrayed appears to be more a 20<sup>th</sup> Century phenomenon rather than from the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century when both friend and foe from the Civil War were still alive. It appears that later generations of devotees of the "Lost Cause" felt that to perpetuate the myth they needed not only to venerate Lee, but also to denigrate his worthy adversary. What a shame that in their eyes there isn't a place of honour for both these "titans" of the Civil War.

Thus, we have Shelby Foote, writing in the 1950s, describing Grant after his stunning victory at Fort Donelson as:

"...a former alcoholic captain"<sup>32</sup>

In the third volume of his narrative Foote is particularly critical of Grant during the Wilderness Campaign<sup>33</sup> where he presents in full detail the "Grant the Butcher" line and sinks to a new low in literary name-calling by referring to Grant as a "...three starred creature".

In Shelby Foote's three-volume narrative there is a lack of detailed referencing of primary sources with the publisher euphemistically noting that the trilogy is "...innocent of notes and formal bibliography". The sources, on which he does rely, offer little more than the accounts in existing books<sup>34</sup> and this perpetuates any errors that are in these books. In a recent interview Foote suggested that:

"...you don't need to go back (to primary sources) ... they have all been gone over"<sup>35</sup>

These quotes from Foote's books are presented, therefore, as typical of the books of the early and mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century where the "Lost Cause" myth was accepted as mainstream historical fact. It may be concluded, therefore, that whilst the systematic denigration of Grant has an ideological basis, the evidential foundations are, at the very least, questionable.

The answer to the question of why Grant was the object of these attacks is not just because he was the Civil War victor. Grant was different to other generals, both North and South, in that he lacked accepted traits that seemed to be basic to a general officer's personality. Let's not be fooled that Grant didn't have any faults – he did and they were with him until the end of his days but, as noted below, there were aspects of his personality that set him apart from the other senior officers of his time. It is because he was successful in battle that set him as a person who, in the eyes of the "keepers of the

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<sup>32</sup> Foote S, *The Civil War – A Narrative Vol 1, Fort Sumter to Perryville*: New York, Random House, 1958. p 316.

<sup>33</sup> As an aside, it is interesting to note that with respect to the Wilderness Campaign, Foote appears not to appreciate the overall strategic victory for the Federal armies. Grant, despite taking huge casualties, was able to prevent Lee reinforcing the Confederate forces in the West, thus enabling Atlanta to fall to Sherman, with a consequent impact that this had on the result of the 1864 Presidential election.

<sup>34</sup> Foote estimates that around 330 books were accessed.

<sup>35</sup> C.Span 2, *In Depth: Shelby Foote*: BookTV Feature, September 2, 2001, accessed through the website <http://www.booktv.org>

Lost Cause”, needed to be brought down and because he was different in many aspects of his persona these differences could be used to achieve their ends. These features were cleverly exaggerated or given a negative connotation assuring the inevitable downward slide of Grant’s reputation. Truly, today’s political “spin doctors” could learn much from these “keepers of the Lost Cause”!

## **What Was Grant Like?**

Based on the available evidence, Grant was certainly not the rough, crude man, without talent and who was continually drunk and without feeling for his troops. Indeed, in many respects he was the antithesis of this stereotype.

A thorough examination of the contemporaneous records suggests that Grant was a complex person. On the one hand he was a quiet, reserved person with a degree of shyness in some social situations. He was a family man who loved his wife and needed the emotional security their relationship gave him. He shunned any display of ostentatiousness and sartorial elegance did not take priority over comfort and utility. On the other hand, he was a commander with a steely resolve and a singleness of purpose, whose vision of victory and will to pursue this victory were to underpin the Union success in the War.

As a businessman and farmer he was less than successful and his terms as President were rocked by corruption scandals. In this, he tended to trust people too much and some let him down badly. There is no doubt Grant was emotionally ill0equipped for the subtle mendacity and trickery of politics.

He was not an intellectual in the “bookish” sense but was highly intelligent and his writings demonstrate he had finely tuned skills in communication. His written military orders were clear, precise and left his subordinates in no doubt as to his requirements. His letters, particularly those to his wife, are masterpieces of composition revealing a man of considerable sensitivity. His memoirs are one of the classic works of literature providing not only an insight into 19<sup>th</sup> Century American history but into the character and personality of a man who had a key role in shaping that history.

It is worth noting that the task of writing these memoirs was undertaken in the last months of Grant’s life. It was his heroic attempt to provide for his family following the failure of a brokerage firm that bankrupted him and his family. Writing in a state of weakness and continual pain, Grant was successful in his final project – he produced a book that was to become a widely read classic and he was able to provide financially for his family. Surely, this last act shows the character of this truly great man.

Brooks Simpson, in his recent biography of Grant, has suggested:

*“There are no simple answers to the riddles of his character and personality, no single threads to hold everything together...if parts of his character and personality are praiseworthy, one must also concede that he was far from flawless. In short, he was human”<sup>36</sup>*

It is because he was such a complex person and that there are no simple answers or single threads to hold everything together that makes Grant such a fascinating person, warranting serious study. In Mark Twain’s words:

***“Grant is worth knowing”***

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<sup>36</sup> Simpson Brooks D, *Ulysses S Grant: Triumph Over Adversity, 1822-1865*: New York, Houghton Mifflin Co., 2000, p xvii, xviii.

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