

Cory Eno

Book Review

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Smith, Jean Edward. Grant. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2002.

Author's Purpose: Jean Edward Smith has established himself as a one of American history's foremost biographers. He has taken on men from John Marshall to FDR, and done so from ranging perspectives. Smith has a broad scope of life experiences, from military service to political science. This enabled Smith to take a fresh look at a man who modern Americans are largely forgetting. True, many could tell you that U.S. Grant was a general, and many more could tell you he was a president. Most, however, are gradually losing sight of his greatness. Smith is unabashedly favorable toward his muse in Grant, and leaves the reader with a reassessment of Grant's life, career, and presidency. Such has been the pattern in recent scholarship of Grant, as the image a of drunken, corruptible, gilded age president beings to rub away. Smith portrays a curiously enigmatic man, who seems as simple as he is great. This is the underestimated warrior, statesmen, and protector of civil liberties that Smith seeks to redefine. As recent as William S. McFeely's Grant: A Biography (1981), the subject is treated with sympathy rather than admiration. Smith's work may prove a turning point in Grant's popular reputation. Only time will tell if that effort proves successful.

Chronological and Topical Scope: Grant leads readers through each step of Grant's life from his Ohio birth in 1822 to his massive funeral in 1885. The book is structured neatly through each

stage in his journey, including dedicated chapters to the Mexican War, his resignation, his foreign policy, his Indian policy, and his swan song world tour post-presidency. Readers are able to connect with Grant on a variety of levels – from a boy disenchanted with his limited prospects in life, seeking solace in his equestrian hobby, to subordinate following orders faithfully if begrudgingly. Smith is able to capture Grant the man, as well as Grant the general and president. He does it without an overkill of psychoanalysis, which is all too often the story in biographies as of late.

Sources: Jean Edward Smith draws heavily on primary sources, letting the history do the talking. And, not unexpectedly, he derives a great deal of text from Grant's own personal memoirs. Smith himself has written a forward to those published memoirs, so he is well versed in Grant the diarist. His bibliography spans thirty-eight pages and his notes seventy-seven. In addition to citation, Smith makes frequent use of anecdotal footnotes. They very often contribute to an enhanced sense of American society, politics, culture, or custom.

Author's Thesis and Main Points: Smith labors to give the reader continuity in Grant's story. His underlying thesis seems to be that the simple honest boy from Point Pleasant, Ohio never loses his greatest virtues. To be certain, much is attributed to Ulysses S. Grant's life experiences in forging the president, but Smith shows above all else a steady hand on the wheel through a variety of stormy seas. In short, Smith's book is vindication for the long fall Grant's reputation took since his death in 1885. One could call it post-revisionary. The first item Smith seeks to settle is the question of Grant's sobriety. Smith sees Grant's resignation from the army after the Mexican War as a result of melancholy. He paints a man that is despondent over separation

from his wife and children and takes to drinking. By several accounts, including Rufus Ingalls (p. 87), Grant was “actuated by noble spirit,” and would not “have his wife know” that he was being tried for reporting under the influence. So, he “therefore resigned his commission and returned to civil life.” It appears that Grant, not unlike some we may know, could not hold his liquor. His problem was not that he drank too much, but that he could not tolerate the stuff. According to several sources compiled by Smith, Grant was not known to drink again.

From an early point Grant was a man of responsibility. He expressed displeasure with his lot at times, but always carried out the task laid before him. This is shown by his role in his father’s tannery (which he gladly moved on from) and his resentful march through long years at West Point. Smith shows a Grant vastly disenchanted with the Mexican War, but somehow invigorated by fighting it. In his role as quartermaster (which he at first protested) he finds a structure and sense of duty that helps carry him through. It is also in the war that he takes note of the splendid generalship of “Old Rough and Ready” Zachary Taylor. Smith makes a convincing case for Taylor as Grant’s most influential role model. The terms of surrender under Taylor show remarkable similarity in their magnanimity to Grant’s terms at Appomattox. His “muddy boots” style and reputation for calmness in “danger or responsibility” give evidence. Perhaps Grant’s assessment of Taylor’s verbiage is most telling. “He knew how to express what he wanted to say in the fewest well-chosen words, and would not sacrifice meaning to the construction of high sounding sentences.” This view and its manifestation in Grant serve to aide Smith process of continuity, for the honest, simple Grant. It is from notable success as an army man that Grant walks back into civilian life. From failed business ventures to selling firewood on street corners in St. Louis, Grant never quit on his family. He suffered the heartbreaking

humility of taking loans from former comrades and from his father, with dwindling hope of success. He eventually moved back home and worked for his father, utilizing his skills as quartermaster in organizing the elder Grant's family business. As he began to make some money and get back on his feet, Grant paid back every penny meticulously. The years between military stints for Grant were among the toughest one could expect, but he persevered with relentless ambition and humble duty.

The second area of vindication Smith seeks out is the question of Grant's generalship. For decades, Grant has been criticized as an inferior general to Lee. It is Smith's intention to rectify this notion. In short, Smith contends that Grant was quick and decisive in battle, and this was his greatest strength. His words are apt. "The art of war is simple enough. Find out where your enemy is. Get at him as soon as you can. Strike him as hard as you can, and keep moving on." At Donelson, Vicksburg, and Shiloh this quality is stressed through Smith's telling. It is perhaps Lincoln's words that weigh most heavily. In a letter to Grant after Vicksburg (which Smith chooses to end a chapter on the battle) Lincoln concludes, "I now wish to make the personal acknowledgment that you were right, and I was wrong" (p.257). It is precisely the unassuming nature of Grant – lacking pomp, lacking pretention – which Lincoln admires. "The great thing about Grant is his perfect coolness and persistency of purpose... he is not easily excited... and he has the grit of a bulldog" (p. 294). This is the cool, calm, collected Grant once again.

Lastly, Smith sets out to set the presidential record straight. This is his most daunting task, as he must continue transforming Grant's reputation from a hapless purveyor of party patronage to a champion of civil rights, a conflicted president who sympathized with the plight of Native

Americans, and a steady healing hand of reconstruction. Smith shares in Grant's view that his failures had "been errors of judgment, not of intent." Smith sets up Grant's peacemaking through foreshadowing several events. From his admiration of Taylor's treatment of the enemy, to his own terms at Donelson and later Appomattox (a whole chapter is dedicated to Grant and Lee) the reader is immersed in Grant's forgiving and rational nature. He truly sees a bigger picture, and it is that vision that sets him apart from so many of his era – not unlike Lincoln. Grant fought tirelessly for the freedman, pushing arguably the most longstanding and effective civil rights legislation in history, including the Fifteenth Amendment and the Second Enforcement Act (targeting the KKK). His use of the military in suppressing racial violence and disenfranchisement was not peerless, but clearly executed for a higher purpose than party politics. In addition, President Grant worked toward a "peace policy" in the West, in cooperation with so-called "humanitarian generals." He believed in a policy of "honesty, justice, and eventual assimilation" (p. 532). Here, as elsewhere, it was failure of judgment that stymied Grant. History is no stranger to the fate of Plains Indians, and Grant does not escape her watchful eye. Grant's appointees did little to represent the man who believed "the friend in my adversity I shall always cherish most. I can better trust those who helped to relieve the gloom of my dark hours than those who are so ready to enjoy with me the sunshine of my prosperity." What he failed to realize was that some of his friends were both. His intense loyalty to those who showed him benevolence was an indirect cause of the scandals that riddled his administration. Clearly, though, it was Grant who called upon his countrymen, "Let us have peace." It was his steady hand through domestic turmoil and international unrest (and both in the case of Cuba), that led this country in a tumultuous reconstruction.

Smith's final chapter, entitled *Taps*, is a testament to Grant's enduring legacy. It tells of a man travelling the globe, fascinating leaders from Disraeli to Bismarck. It tells of a man, persistently finishing his memoirs to salvage a family fortune, though throat cancer weakened him daily. After all, he said, "Everyone has his superstitions. One of mine has always been when I started to go anywhere, accomplished." It is also what invokes a mystery of his transforming identity with the American public. The largest funeral in America at the time, his fellow citizens streamed to pay final respects. Over time, and increasingly cynical public, particularly in the last thirty years, has lumped him in with the towering hacks of the gilded age. Smith sees this as unfair. Grant was much more, and he was more than even he expected. Smith completes his tome with a letter written by Grant to a final visitor.

"It seems that a man's destiny in this world is quite as much a mystery as it is in the next. I never thought of acquiring rank in the profession I was educated for; yet it came two grades higher prefixed to the rank of General officer for me. I certainly never had either ambition or taste for political life; yet I was twice elected President of the United States. If anyone had suggested the idea of my becoming an author, as frequently as they did, I was not sure whether they were making sport of me or not. I have now written a book which is in the hands of the manufacturers. I ask you to keep these notes very private lest I become an authority on the treatment of diseases. I have already too many trades to be proficient at any."

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