

REVIEW BY BRIAN HANLEY

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*Ulysses S. Grant*

by Josiah Bunting III

New York: Henry Holt, 2004

**R**EADERS OF THIS JOURNAL will want to get hold of this book. For starters, *Ulysses S. Grant*, written by former Superintendent of VMI Lieutenant General Josiah Bunting, is unscholarly in the most endearing sense of that term. Too many biographies and histories nowadays are swollen beyond all reason: stuffed with digressive passages on humdrum topics, contrived dialogue, gossipy anecdotes, not to mention a multitude of footnotes and a clutch of appendices—the cumbersome logistical tail of academic projects—that do nothing but perpetuate the silly idea that humane letters must imitate the sciences in their reliance on accumulated data and in their quest for ground-breaking discoveries. Bunting’s first work of biography—he’s authored four novels of lasting value—is a most welcome departure from what one normally finds among recently published books of this kind. In fact, “Classical” aptly describes Bunting’s biographical account insofar as it brings to mind Plutarch’s *Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans* and Tacitus’s biography of his father-in-law, the Roman commander and statesman, Agricola.

Bunting offers a clearly written and wholly reliable summary of Grant’s life and its intersection with contemporaneous circumstance. But what makes this book a treasure is Bunting’s exposition of Grant’s character. Bunting’s manner of proceeding is thus: each of the volume’s fourteen chapters surveys a period in Grant’s life—childhood, West Point, the Civil War years, his two terms as President, his return to private life and death from cancer at the age of sixty-one—animated by telling observations on Grant’s moral and intellectual constitution.

It is not too much to argue that the quality in Grant which Lincoln most admired, and for which he was most constantly appreciative, was already visible in the boy of ten or twelve: that of not asking for help or advice, not freighting problems with imagined difficulties, but just doing them. Forty years on, when General George B. McClellan was demanding and pleading for more soldiers, Grant was asking simply, when do I start? 'What I want is to advance.'

What many of Grant's contemporaries interpreted as dull-wittedness was in fact an expression of stalwart self-reliance, forbearance, and singularity of purpose: in other words, the habits of mind and character that make for successful command and statesmanship.

Bunting deserves praise not only for rehabilitating Grant's historical standing but also for delivering an eloquent rebuke to the manner in which modern culture determines reputation and, collaterally, for illustrating the proper ends of biography. As Bunting points out, even though we acknowledge Grant as the victorious commander of the Union Army the terms that dominate the popular image of him are all pejorative: Grant the frowzy, cigar-chomping lout; a general indifferent to the slaughter his decisions invariably brought forth; the superintendent of a procession of governmental scandals; a boozier. Bunting does not shy from discussing Grant's frailties, particularly during his presidential years, but he is careful not to exaggerate matters. Take, for instance, the "Black Friday" episode, September 1869. A pair of wealthy swindlers, Jay Gould and Jim Fisk, tried to manipulate the price of gold by influencing an unwitting Grant through his brother-in-law, the result being a collapse in the stock market and the ruin of many traders. Grant eventually did what was needed to put things right, but as Bunting points out, "Grant's handling of his administration's first domestic crisis was laggard and uncertain." In this and in the other scandals that afflicted his administration Grant was certainly not guilty of anything beyond naiveté; on the other hand he deserves no credit for astuteness, either.

All due allowances being made for the influence of the 'times,' of the pervasive corruption of government at all levels and both parties, and for the absence of any proof that Grant was personally culpable in any of these episodes, there remains an unavoidable impression of a certain moral obtuseness in Grant: a solipsism.

Bunting's unflinching treatment of Grant's failings gives his appreciative commentary all the more authority.

Bunting argues that historians have under-valued Grant's achievements during the harshest years of "Reconstruction"—a period beset by political challenges that rivaled those faced by Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt. Grant "represented in his firmness, dignity, disinterestedness, and independence those qualities most important to citizens in extended periods of national confusion and stress."

One might describe Bunting's portrayal of Grant as ultimately celebratory but perhaps a better characterization is undistorted and thus faithful to the proper ends of biography. In Grant we find an embodiment of the traditional and distinctively American strain of gentlemanliness that is scarcely to be found today: well-mannered but never priggish, kind but not patronizing, a man possessed of a fine mind and an aesthetic sensibility who sympathized with, but never attempted to flatter, common men. At heart a man of high principle and refined humanity, Grant faced the world with impassivity—he did not give public expression to his emotions, nor was there any trace of self-serving calculation in the way he discharged his professional obligations. Grant's actions and thought, as expressed in his letters and memoirs, were marked by a perceptive and vigorous devotion to the public good. Military professionals in particular will find him worthy of emulation.

There is an old saying that if you wish to understand a man, ignore what people say about him and instead read what he has written. The saying may be true—in Grant's case the volume to get hold of is *Ulysses S. Grant: Memoirs & Selected Letters* (New York: *Library of America*, 1990). But anyone who appreciates finely written biography and who seeks to profit by an incisive discussion of Grant's character should read Josiah Bunting's most recent book.