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Book Review: Ulysses S. Grant, Misunderstood President

By Matt A. Mayer

Every now and again I find myself reading a book that proves to be timely. On this occasion, that book, *Grant*, is Ron Chernow's biography of 18th president and Civil War hero Ulysses S. Grant. Although the book runs to nearly 1,000 pages, Chernow's organization allows him to dive deeply into each aspect of Grant's life without covering minutiae that would lose most readers. Many historians have praised Grant the General, but dismissed Grant the President. Chernow shows why that approach is a mistake.

Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden's recent gaffe in which he stated that any black person who votes for Donald Trump isn't really black should ignite the broader debate about the Republican party's rich history in improving the lives of African Americans. Of course, President Abraham Lincoln gets enormous credit for the Emancipation Proclamation and committing the North to the cause of ending slavery, but Chernow reminds us how critical Grant's role was in that story. Specifically, Grant not only backed Lincoln's position during the Civil War, but also fought aggressively as president to protect African Americans from violence, break the Ku Klux Klan and ultimately do what he could to give African Americans political equality.

Additionally, Grant, like Donald Trump, wasn't a career politician or committed Republican, so was viewed by the political class as 'uniquely stupid'. Nonetheless, his most ardent critics had to concede that 'We do not know why the president is successful, we only know that he succeeds'. Chernow's treatment of Grant is even-handed, showing both his failures when it came to trusting people and his successes in getting results.

Finally, Grant shared another trait with Trump that ultimately made him successful. As Confederate general Robert E. Lee noted about Grant near the climax of the war, 'Grant is not retreating; he is not a retreating man.' Despite failing miserably in his private life, Grant's ability to win during wars spanned both his service in the Mexican-American War and the Civil War. This record largely was due to his refusal to retreat married with his penchant to attack — he clearly believed being on offense won battles and wars. Trump possesses a similar mentality as seen in his constant use of Twitter and his relentless clashes with the mainstream media. While some people are troubled by these tactics, Trump's ardent supporters love what he does. Like Grant, he fights to win.

I believe Chernow's [book](#) will force historians to reevaluate Grant's presidency. I hope it also spurs more Americans to pick

up this book to learn about one of the most fascinating presidents in American history. I can only imagine what a biography about Trump will look like 150 years after his presidency.

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