

General U.S. Grant was the country's greatest military leader

By Curtis Jerry Smothers



The most inspirational military leader America ever had died in 1885 at age 63 from throat cancer caused by a lifelong cigar-smoking habit. He was Ulysses S. Grant, perhaps the most popular military leader of his age and the general whose dogged and inspirational leadership kept our country from splitting into a regional confederation of squabbling states.

Early military career was a flop

A failure at just about everything including soldiering, before the Civil War U.S. Grant would not have been selected as the most likely to succeed. After a mediocre record at West Point, wartime service as a provisioning officer during the U.S. invasion of Mexico in 1848, and later having been sent to an isolated northern California outpost, Grant left the army ignominiously after being found drunk on duty.

Rescued from obscurity

At the beginning of the Civil War, Grant worked with his father and brother in the father's store in Galena, Illinois, as a clerk when he was rescued from anonymity by the Governor of Illinois, who gave Grant a commission as a brigadier general.

Winning ways in the west

Grant was unique among leaders during the early years of the Civil War. He actually won battles, while at the same time recognizing that the struggle would be long and costly.

His victories in the west at Fort Donelson, Shiloh, and Vicksburg were bright spots in an otherwise dismal record of Union defeats or stalemate in the east. At Vicksburg, Grant succeeded in gaining Union control of the Mississippi and separating Texas from the Confederacy. It was those victories that prompted President Lincoln to summon Grant and take command of the Union armies.

Knew the struggle would be long and hard

Grant's best leadership quality was his consistent realistic assessment of what was required to save the Union from breakup: the defeat of the Confederate army. From the outset, Grant (and his trusted subordinate William Tecumseh Sherman) knew that time, manpower, and the industrial capacity of the North would eventually defeat the South. He was the first Union general to employ a coordinated strategy against southern armies.

A two-pronged strategy for victory

Grant sent Sherman and his tough band of Westerners south through Georgia and east to the seaport of Savannah, while at the same time closing on Lee's Army of Virginia. This coordinated strategy stretched the South's resources to the final breaking point. In the end, the South had nothing left to fight with.

A new kind of leader in the east

Grant's Army of the Potomac also learned quickly that they had a new kind of leader. Marching south through the Virginia Wilderness, Grant was jumped by Lee and quickly discovered that he was facing a formidable enemy.

After enormous losses and having been fought to a standstill, Grant moved away from the Wilderness engagement, but in a direction not normally experienced by Union troops under previous generals: Rather than limping back to Washington, D.C., he headed south.

Lee was worn down and surrounded

After a series of bloody campaigns ending with the siege and collapse of Confederate defenses near Richmond, the Union Army surrounded and cornered the remnants of Lee's fleeing army at Appomattox, where Lee surrendered.

Lee's surrender was at the cost of more Union casualties under Grant's generalship than there were soldiers in the entire Confederate Army. Grant knew what the costs of victory were and accepted the responsibility, even in the face of being called a "butcher" by the Northern press.

It was in victory that Grant displayed his finest traits as a leader. President Lincoln's guidance to Grant as the war was ending was to "let em up easy." Lincoln knew, and Grant agreed, that the key to stanching our nation's four-year bloodletting was to allow southerners to quickly return to the Union with full citizenship.

Generous Union terms

Grant set the example with his generous surrender terms to Lee and the gallant Confederate army. Grant treated the defeated south with gentility and respect and probably avoided a protracted guerrilla war that would probably have extended the conflict indefinitely.

Grants's Memoirs

Years later after two not-very-distinguished terms as President, knowing that he was dying, Grant fought his last battle with time and illness. Having lost his considerable wealth in a fraudulent investment scheme and facing financial ruin, Grant wrote his wartime memoirs.

With the backing of his publisher, Samuel Clemens, Grant wrote one of the bestselling books ever to have been published in the United States, "The Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant."

Grant's style is best represented in one touchingly modest passage in the last paragraphs of this remarkable work:

"The universally kind feeling expressed for me at a time when it is supposed that each day would prove my last, seemed to me the beginning of the answer to Let us have peace."

He concludes his work by expressing his own view of his leading role in the conflict and hopes for healing:

"[T]he war between the States was a very bloody and very costly war. One side or the other had to yield principles they deemed dearer than life before it could be brought to an end. I commanded the whole of the mighty host engaged on the victorious side. I was, no matter whether deservedly so or not, a representative of that side of the controversy. It is a significant and gratifying fact that Confederates should have joined heartily in this spontaneous move [to wish me well]. I hope the good feeling inaugurated may continue to the end."

General U.S. Grant's end came peacefully in the presence of his family at home on July 23, 1886, at 8:06 a.m. Our country still had a ways to go to heal the sectional and racial divisions

that were the legacy of the Civil War, but it was this plain-spoken former store clerk whose pointed the way.