"I Determined Never to Ask for Anything, and Never Have, Not Even a Colonelcy."
--Ulysses S. Grant, August 3, 1861, in a Letter to His Father

Like the great military man of the 20th century General Colin Powell, Grant did quite well without actually seeking higher ranks and loftier positions in the military. It seems that both men took note of the words of Thomas Jefferson: "Whenever a man has cast a longing eye on offices, a rottenness begins in his conduct."

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Upon the recommendation of Governor Yates of Illinois, Ulysses S. Grant entered the War as a colonel in June of 1861. He was 39 years old and was put in charge of the 21st Illinois Volunteer Infantry, a regiment known primarily for being "Governor Yates's Hellions." Grant quickly brought them under control and turned them into creditable soldiers. He led them on an expedition to a little village called Florida, Missouri in search Confederate Colonel Thomas Harris. When he found Harris's camp deserted, he realized that the enemy was just as afraid of his men as his were of Harris's, a lesson he never forgot throughout the war.

In August of 1861 Grant was promoted to brigadier general of volunteers upon the recommendation of Congressman Elihu Washburne of Galena. He learned of this from the newspapers. The appointment was retroactive to May 17, 1861.

On February 5, 1862 Grant captured Fort Henry on the Tennessee River. He pressed on to Fort Donelson on the Cumberland. On February 16th 1862 Simon Bolivar Buckner surrendered to Grant's
famous demand: "No terms except unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted." Grant's jealous superior, General Halleck, ignored this first major northern victory. President Lincoln, on the other hand, promoted Grant to major general of volunteers. He was not yet 40 years old.

Vicksburg surrendered on July 4, 1863 and once again the Mississippi "flowed unvexed to the sea." President Lincoln promoted Grant to major general in the regular Army. He was a few months past his 41st birthday.

Grant's men took Chattanooga on November 25, 1863 and on February 26, 1864 Congress resurrected the rank of lieutenant general, held previously only by George Washington. On March 9, 1863 Grant received his commission as lieutenant general from President Lincoln at the White House. Later Lincoln was heard to say, "I don't know General Grant's plans, and I don't want to know them. Thank God, I've got a general at last!"

The Civil War came to an end at Appomattox, Virginia, April 9, 1865, 13 days short of Grant's 43rd birthday. In July of 1866 Congress created the rank of General of the Army and awarded it him. He had gone from being a salesman in a leather store to the rank of four star general in 5 years. He held this rank until he was inaugurated as 18th President of the United States on March 4, 1869. Eventually, Generals Sherman and Sheridan also held this rank. On March 4, 1885, Congress placed Grant on the list of retired generals, an act which would provide him with a yearly income.

Grant was never awarded five stars. The rank of General of the Army was created in 1944 and the following great American military men were awarded five stars: George C. Marshall, Douglas MacArthur, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Henry H. Arnold, and Omar N. Bradley.

How do Grant's achievements and promotions compare to generals of the 20th century? Are the ranks the same today as they were in the 1860's? The ranks of colonel through lieutenant general are the same now as they were then. When Grant was promoted to General of the Army in 1866, that was the highest rank any military officer could achieve and was created exclusively for him. In 1799 Congress had created the rank of General of the Armies (plural) of the United States for George Washington, but he never received it. John J. Pershing was awarded this rank after leading American forces in Europe in World War I (1914-1918). General Pershing never wore more than 4 stars, however.

On December 14, 1944, Congress created the temporary grade of General of the Army and awarded that rank five stars. See the table above for the names of the five generals that have held that rank. Before 1944, an officer holding the equivalent of the five star rank would have worn
four stars. It’s safe to assume that if Grant had served after 1944, he would have been a five star general.

Generals William Westmoreland, Norman Schwartzkopf, and Colin Powell were four star generals and that rank is known simply as General.

This page was written by Marie Kelsey, using standard sources on Grant. See the Five Star Generals Page by the U.S. Army for information on that rank.