Ulysses S. Grant: The Myth of His Drinking

Famous people frequently go down in history fixed in people's minds as one dimensional caricatures consisting of a handful of traits or qualities. Frozen in time and the public's imagination, these stereotypes are nearly impossible to dislodge from our nation's collective consciousness. Robert E. Lee and his fine manners and gallant bearing; President Abraham Lincoln and his kindly, but homely appearance and his love of crude humor; William Tecumseh Sherman, the devil himself, who destroyed the South in his infamous March to the Sea; and Ulysses S. Grant, "butcher," cigar smoker and alcoholic. Like most myths, these are easy stories to tell and allow the teller to encapsulate a person's life in a few sentences. Little or no concern is given to the core and the essence of these people who, by their greatness, changed the course of American history. Grant, like the others named, was a real person with human strengths and weaknesses. He made an incalculable contribution to the fate of the American Union and deserves better than to be described and remembered in such a limited context as "a person who consumed too much alcohol."

The following material is presented so that readers may gain some insight as to what several first-hand accounts have revealed about Grant and the drinking issue. Hopefully these quotes will help to replace in your mind the old stereotypical Grant with the real Grant, a man who had his weaknesses, who struggled against them and for the most part overcame them. On the whole, Grant was a decent, honorable man who has been the victim of rumor mongers and writers who irresponsibly perpetuate the myth that all Grant did was drink. Had Grant truly been either a drunk or an alcoholic, he would have been replaced early in the war; General Halleck, his superior, certainly looked for excuses to depose him. But Lincoln hung on. "I can't spare this man, he fights." And, in the end, Lincoln was proved right.

Our advice to you, the reader of snippets about Grant's life; the reader of full length biographies; the viewer who sees Grant portrayed in the media as a drunk; the conversationalist who can never think of anything else to say about Grant except, "Grant drank a lot, didn't he?" : BE SKEPTICAL. Do not jump to quick and easy conclusions about U. S. Grant and alcohol. There are no easy answers. We know Grant occasionally drank alcohol. We know a little had a dramatic effect on him. We know he would have been mortified if it were reported to his beloved Julia that he was seen drunk by other men. Depending upon their prejudices, Grant biographers emphasize or downplay the alcohol dilemma. Keep in mind that writers are clever folk. They know how to paint the
picture they want the reader to absorb, the impression they wish to make. A single sentence, a turn of a phrase, a few carefully placed value-laden words in a biography can turn Grant from a teetotaler to an occasional drinker to an alcoholic.

Many of the drinking stories come from battlefield politics. Jealous Northern generals who could find no other way to discredit this brilliant man who was delivering battlefield victories to President Lincoln, spread malicious rumors about Grant being drunk on the job. There were stories, there were innuendoes, there were suppositions. But, in truth, there are NO RELIABLE witnesses of any drunkenness on the part of Grant during the Civil War.

What follows are quotes from sources of Grant biographical material. Some are by Grant scholars and biographers, some are by people who actually knew Grant. We hope to give the reader, in one location, a variety of opinions and observations about Grant and alcohol, and, where material is too complex to be delivered here in its entirety, a bibliographical reference will be made, leading the reader to the source.

To set the scene, here is what William McFeely, Pulitzer Prize winning author of *Grant, a Biography* has to say on Grant's resignation from the Army while on the west coast in 1854: "It was not, that is to say, on the record that the young officer was a drunk, but word to that effect was abroad in the gossipy ranks of the army. These stories were more insidious and hard to combat than even a negative official record. They haunted Grant into the Civil War-and into history." ¹

In his book *The Trial of U.S. Grant*, Charles Ellington illuminates Grant's controversial West coast years. He asserts "Captain Grant was not an alcoholic. If he were an alcoholic he would have a problem in drinking any time, even in a moderate way. And there is plenty of evidence that Grant did drink-moderately, for the rest of his life. Furthermore, as somebody who had that reputation, everybody kept their eye on Grant. It was impossible for him to take a drink without somebody watching out of the corner of his eye to notice that he did not have another drink. Every time he turned over his wine glass, as a signal for declining wine, somebody seems to have taken note of it. It was almost a no-win situation." ²

Mixing speculation with fact, Ellington further asserts: "Grant drank, sometimes to excess, but he was not a problem drinker. His physical build made it impossible for him to drink much, yet he had sometimes desired alcohol to relieve his loneliness [during the West coast years]. Grant did spend time in
Eureka [California] saloons, but that is not evidence of heavy drinking. Here is where community leaders met, talked about a wide variety of subjects, and expressed the civilized conviviality of that isolated place. ... That Grant and his fellow officers drank off-duty seems to be undisputed. That Grant was drunk on duty has not been proven. ... The only valid conclusion that can be drawn about Grant's drinking is that he drank-like most soldiers of his time. But he was not a drunkard. Grant did not consume large quantities of liquor because his body did not require much to achieve the inevitable results. Some of Grant's contemporaries recorded that he went on 'sprees,' but none accused him of failing in his duty because he was under the influence." 3 For an extensive series of quotes about Grant's supposed drinking habits by those with firsthand knowledge, see chapter 6: "Resignation: 'Accepted as Tendered,' Jefferson Davis," in the Ellington book.

Further comments concerning Grant's duty on the West coast, the most difficult years of his life, come from his good friend from the West Point days, Rufus Ingalls, relates the following regarding the drinking stories: "Captain Grant, finding himself in dreary surroundings, without his family, and with but little to occupy his attention, fell into dissipated habits, and was found, one day, too much under the influence of liquor to properly perform his duties. For this offense Colonel Buchanan demanded that he should resign, or stand trial. Grant's friends at the time urged him to stand trial, and were confident of his acquittal; but, actuated by a noble spirit, he said he would not for all the world have his wife know that he had been tried on such a charge. He therefore resigned his commission, and returned to civilian life." 4

In 1860 Grant and his family moved from St. Louis to Galena, Illinois. What follows is an observation from one who watched Grant when he lived there. Captain John Shaw states, "I cannot say that I had any special personal acquaintance with General Grant ... I had part of a small office on Main St., exactly opposite the old Grant leather store...] ...It is generally understood that Captain Grant had been a regular Army officer, who had become somewhat broken down in health and reduced in fortune; and his misfortunes were quite commonly attributed in some degree to supposed habits of dissipation, to which the temptations of Army life had subjected him and which he had resigned to escape. But during all his residence in Galena his habits in this respect were, to all appearances, most exemplary, and I have never heard it hinted that while he lived there that there was the slightest lapse from perfect sobriety." 5

The son of the Galenean jeweler L. M. Lebron reported Grant's habits this way: "Oh, you know lots of men that, after supper, will come downtown, sit around some store front and visit awhile. Maybe before going home they'll take a drink,
maybe not. That's all Grant's drinking ever amounted to, and anyone who knew him in Galena will tell you the same thing. I never saw him drunk nor did anyone else with whom I've talked. His circle of friends was not large at the time and we are in agreement on that matter."  

Later, during the Civil War, the tales of the unfortunate west coast years and their effect endlessly haunted Grant as the gossip mongers repeated the so-called "well known stories" of his drinking. Thankfully, Grant had many friends and acquaintances who spoke to the contrary of the vicious tales.

An officer on Grant's staff [unnamed] had this to say: "I think I know as much about the real character of the great soldier as any man living today, for I saw him under many circumstances, and at the closest personal range—in the privacy of his own camp life, when "off duty," as well as in the storm of battle ... I have again and again gone into the general's quarters at the dead of night to deliver a message and found him smoking and thinking about his own vast plans of military operations... In his habits I never saw one sign of dissipation, and if Grant ever tasted liquor of any kind during the war, it was not in my presence, and I had the best position possible for observing his habits."  

John Rawlins, Grant's Chief of Staff, had this to say. "When I came to Cairo, General Grant was as he is today, a strictly total abstinence man, and I have been informed by those who knew him well, that such has been his habit for the last five or six years. [He drank a little with guests], but no man can say that at any time since I have been with him has he drunk liquor enough to in the slightest unfit him for business, or make it manifest in his words or actions."  

Rumors were rampant after the Battles of Forts Donelson and Henry and the Battle of Shiloh. "After the latter battle it was charged that General Grant was at his Savannah (Tennessee) headquarters, drunk, and so did not reach the battlefield until too late to prevent heavy losses the first day. The evidence submitted would, however, tend to refute these charges. Colonel S. D. Webster of General Grant's staff denied this report in a letter to Col. J. S. Stewart. He said: 'I breakfasted with General Grant. I went on board the boat, and rode with him to the field about half-past eight in the morning. I was with him all day. I lay down with him on a small parcel of hay which the quartermaster put down to keep us out of the mud, in the rear of the artillery line to the left. He was perfectly sober and self-possessed during the day and the entire battle. No one claimed he was drunk.' "  

Around the time of the victories at Forts Donelson and Henry, Dr. John H. Brinton, surgeon and Grant's medical director, had this conversation with
Lieutenant-Colonel James Birdseye McPherson. McPherson told Dr. Brinton that he had been ordered to Grant's command to obtain some information. "All sorts of reports are prevalent at St. Louis (the headquarters of General Halleck, Grant's superior officer), as to General Grant's habits. It is said that he is drinking terribly, and in every way is inefficient. I am fond of him, and want to do him justice." Dr. Brinton replied that the reports were unfounded. "I knew they were false, and assured him that to my knowledge there was no liquor on the Staff, that the contents of my pocket flask was the whole supply and that I had been cautioned by General Grant as to its disposal, being positively forbidden to give any to any of the staff, except in medical urgency. I explained to McPherson that there were men near the General who disliked him and were jealous of him; yet, knowing this, and their attempts at detraction, he still moved on, undisturbed." 10

"Mrs. Walter Gresham, in her life of Walter Q. Gresham said: 'As to the charge that General Grant had been drinking for ten days prior to April 5 (Shiloh), my husband always maintained this was not true. Mornings and all hours of the night he reported to General Grant, from March 20 to the Sunday morning they were startled by the firing at Pittsburg Landing, and never during that time were there any traces of strong drink on or about General Grant.' " 11

John Murray Forbes received a letter from William Cullen Bryant (American author) dated Oct. 16th, 1862, who refers to the old stories of Grant's taste for alcohol. "...I have friends who profess to be acquainted with him, and who declare that he is now a temperate man and that it is a cruel wrong to speak of him otherwise. I have in my drawer a batch of written testimonials to that effect. He reformed when he got out, or was put out, of the Army, and went into it again with a solemn promise of abstinence. One of my acquaintances had made it his special business to inquire concerning his habits, of the officers who have recently served with him or under him. None of them have seen him drink, or seen him drunk. Their general testimony is that he is a man remarkably insensible to danger, active and adventurous..." 12

"General Grant and General Schofield were in St. Louis together and were, for several days and nights much in each others company. General Schofield told of a banquet given there to General Grant. He said: "I was seated at his right. He did not even touch one of the many glasses of wine placed by the side of his plate. At length I ventured to remark that he had not tasted his wine. He replied, 'I dare not touch it. Sometimes I can drink freely without any unpleasant effect; at others I cannot take a single glass of light wine.' " 13
General Eaton was sent by President Lincoln to take charge of work with the freedmen in the West. At La Grange he met General Grant. As rumor charged Grant with intemperance, he watched for signs but saw none. While at Memphis General Eaton attended a banquet with General Grant and sat near enough to see that he touched no wine. General Eaton added that he had never seen wine at Grant's headquarters and Rawlins had all whiskey sent to the hospitals." 14

"After the surrender of Vicksburg, Admiral Porter said Grant came on his ship. 'Wine was served but Grant took none, only a cigar, and let me say here that this was his habit during all the time he commanded before Vicksburg, though the same detractors who made false representations of him in military matters, misrepresented him also in the matter above alluded to.' " 15

Mary Livermore, official with the Sanitary Commission, led a delegation down to Milliken's Bend [Vicksburg campaign] to see for themselves if Grant was the butcher, the hard drinker, and the blundering man the rumors alleged. "In the first five minutes, we learned by some sort of spiritual telegraphy, that reticence, patience, and persistence were the dominant traits of General Grant ... [he was a] quiet, repressed, reluctant, undemonstrative man ... We instinctively put ourselves on 'short rations' of talk with him. Neither was General Grant a drunkard, that was immediately apparent to us. This conviction gave us such joy that ... we looked each other in the face ... and breathed more freely... The clear eye, clean skin, firm flesh and steady nerves of General Grant gave the lie to the universal calumnies then current concerning his intemperate habits." 16

One disgruntled officer used the rumor-mill to discredit Grant. "In July of 1864, General Grant found it necessary to remove General William F. Smith from his command. Not ten days after this removal General Smith wrote to Senator Foote stating that Generals Grant and Butler called on him the last of June and that General Grant said: 'That drink of whiskey I took has done me some good,' and then asked for some more. General Smith said he knew that Grant was pledged to drink nothing intoxicating, but he gave it to him when he asked. He soon showed the effects, and when he left Smith remarked to his aide: 'General Grant has gone away drunk: General Butler has seen it and will never fail to use the weapon.' General Butler denied this in its entirety, and furthermore stated that he never saw General Grant drink a glass of spirituous liquor, had only seen him drink a glass of wine at the dinner table.' " 17

Much has been made of an incident that took place during the Civil War that involved Grant taking a steamer to Satartia from his headquarters at Vicksburg. Presumably, he took this opportunity to overindulge. This story first came to public light in 1955, when the manuscript of the war time adventures of Sylvanus
Cadwallader, a journalist for the Chicago Times, was published. Historians, some of whom had seen the manuscript before it was published, fell for its assertions. Thus, it was 20th century authors who did major damage to Grant's reputation, not the biographers of the era closer to Grant's own time. Bruce Catton, however, was not among the historians buying the story, rather concluding that Cadwallader's story was "but one more in the dreary Grant-was-drunk garland of myths."  

For a complete account of this incident and a masterful unraveling of the tale, see Brooks Simpson's introduction to the Bison Books of edition of *Three Years With Grant* by Sylvanus Cadwallader, published in 1996. (Reprint of the original 1955 edition). See also an article available online at the Wisconsin Historical Society's website. Parks, Gordon. (1956, Fall). Three years with Grant as recalled by war correspondent Sylvanus Cadwallader, an Appraisal. *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 40(1), 50-56. Finally, the following article addresses the same incident: Murphy, Brian. (2005, Jan.). Ulysses S. Grant's Yazoo Bender. *America's Civil War*, 17(6), 30-36.

James L. Crane, whose reminiscences of his years with Grant as Chaplain of the Twenty-first Illinois, reports this of Grant's reputation for imbibing: "Right here I would notice the report that once obtained some circulation, that Grant was a lover of ardent spirits ... and that he indulged too freely in their use. Of this report I would say that I was with him for the most part of three months, in all sorts of weather, marches, and exposure; we ate at the same table, often slept in the same tent, and sat around the same campfire; and I never knew him to allow ardent spirits in the regiment, nor did I ever know him even to taste them in any form."

Albert D. Richardson, Grant biographer and correspondent for the New York Tribune, was with Grant's army much of the time as the campaigning went on down the Mississippi. He summed up his observations: "On a very few occasions after re-entering the service the General was perceptibly under the influence of liquor-solely from his extreme susceptibility to it; for ordinarily he did not touch it; and during the entire conflict he probably consumed less than any other officer who tasted it at all. He was never under its sway to the direct or indirect detriment of the service a single moment. And his development was as unique in this as in any other respect. He exhibited the remarkable spectacle of a man in middle life steadily gaining in self control till a propensity once too strong was absolutely mastered."

These charges of drunkenness were put forward repeatedly during the first two years of the war. As late as the preparations for the battle of Chattanooga, General David Hunter, sent out by Secretary Stanton to inspect and report, felt it proper to include something of Grant's habits: "I was received by General Grant
with the greatest kindness. He gave me his bed, shared with me his room, gave me to ride his favorite horse, read to me his dispatches received and sent, accompanied on my reviews, and I accompanied him on all his excursions. In fact I saw him almost every moment of the three weeks I spent in Chattanooga. He is a hard worker, writes his own dispatches and orders, and does his own thinking. He is modest, quiet, never swears and seldom drinks, as he only took two drinks while I was with him."

What did Grant himself think of all the accusations brought against him concerning his supposed propensity for drinking? He was deeply wounded, but strictly forbade anyone to defend him. His treatment by the press after the Battle of Shiloh caused him great anguish. He finally wrote to Representative E. B. Washburn, his original and strongest supporter, on May 14, 1862:

"To say that I have not been distressed at these attacks upon me would be false, for I have a father, mother, wife and children who read them and are distressed by them; and I necessarily share with them in it. Then, too, all subject to my orders read these charges and it is calculated to weaken my ability to render efficient service in our present cause. One thing I will assure you of, however-I cannot be driven from rendering the best service within my ability to suppress the present rebellion, and, when it is over, retiring to the same quiet it, the rebellion, found me enjoying."

To his father, Jesse, who had the inclination to write to the newspapers and defend his son, Grant wrote: "You must not expect me to write in my own defense, nor to permit it from anyone about me. I know that the feeling of the troops under my command is favorable to me, and so long as I continue to do my duty faithfully it will remain so. I require no defenders."

Here then is a humble and modest man who had but one goal, that of saving the Union. And he accomplished this goal! The debt owned him by this country can never be repaid, except by everlasting honor and respect. That respect can be bestowed by eliminating the "drinking comments" from conversation about Ulysses S. Grant and by eradicating that image from the American consciousness. Grant deserves nothing less.

Footnotes

3 Ellington, p. 177-178.
5 Shaw, John M. "The Life and Services of General John A. Rawlins, in *Glimpses of the Nation's Struggle, Third*


