

US Grant

Ulysses S. Grant: Personality and Paradox

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Abstract

Biographies of Ulysses Grant have had little to say about the influences on his personality or his need for risk taking. This paper examines his childhood and the roots of his personality, from an Adlerian and sensation seeking perspective.

Ulysses Simpson Grant is an enduring historical figure made famous during the Civil War. The common perception of Grant is the Union general who defeated Southern armies, accepting surrender from Robert E. Lee at Appomattox in 1865. Although this much is true, the entire story of who Grant was and the unpredictable path his life took is a fascinating study in the conflicts and contradictions of a common person, and how fate can propel ordinary people to very different lives than they anticipate.

There are many paradoxes and contradictions in the life of US Grant. For one thing, his name was Hiram Ulysses Grant, not Ulysses Simpson Grant. A clerk at West Point made an error in recording Grants name, but instead of calling attention to the error the man who would become famous for the aggression for which he led an army meekly accepted the mistake as his new name (Winik, 2001).

Grant did not particularly like the military. His father arranged for him to attend West point because Grant has so little direction and ambition that his father thought it was the only avenue to a decent living. In his letters, Grant revealed that he hated the discipline of military life, and spent most of his time at West Point putting in just enough effort to pass his required classes and spending most of his free time reading romance novels. At one point Congress was considering ending funding for west Point, a possibility that Grant longed for, according to his letters home (Winik 2001).

Although his father owned a tannery, Grant could not stand the sight of blood or tolerate cruelty to animals. From a very early age, he had a special relationship with animals, especially horses. At one point during the Civil War Grant witnessed a teamster beating a horse with the wooden butt of a horsewhip. Grant became so enraged he ordered the man tied to a tree with a sign

around his neck, “I beat my horse” next to the road that his entire army would pass (Longacre 2006, p. 223).

Although Grant enjoyed shooting there is only one recorded instance of him hunting, and none of him ever shooting an animal. The one record of his hunting experience recalls that he kept his shotgun at his side and watched a flock of turkeys, flushed by his comrades, run past him into the brush (Longacre 2006, p. 14). Grant also seemed to have difficulty-eating meat, insisting that steaks be well done to the point of charring to eliminate the possibility that any blood be detectable (Winik, 2001).

Although he viewed war as his profession, and knowingly ordered thousands of men to their deaths as he calmly whittled small twigs into wood shavings, he also retired to his tent or office and sobbed uncontrollably when couriers delivered reports of unusually high casualties (Winik, 2001, Longacre, 2006).

Where id all these contradictions come from? Who was US Grant? What events influenced him to become the person that was so conflicted and contradictory?

Two perspectives from the field of psychology best explain Grants complex personality. One is Adlerianism, a branch of social psychology focusing on early experiences and ones position in the family of origin to explain the formation of personality. Alfred Adler was a contemporary of Freud’s, but felt that the formation of personality was heavily influenced by an innate need to be a member of a group. The fundamental group is the family, so Adler emphasized the importance of birth order and family conditions in the development of personality (Christensen & Schramski, 1983).

Another contribution from psychology to the understanding of Grants personality is recent research on sensation seeking. Some people have a greater need for novelty and stimulation, owing to the way in which their brains process the neuro transmitters dopamine and serotonin. These chemicals regulate brain arousal, and because of individual differences in metabolizing them, some people have a higher need for physical and mental activity (Zuckerman & Kuhlman 2000).

These two factors – Grants early family experiences and his need for stimulation – seem to be the primary factors influencing the formation of his personality and the subsequent decisions he made that influenced the path f his life.

Hiram Ulysses Grant was born in 1822, the first of five children, to Jesse and Hannah Grant. Jesse Grant was a hardworking and prosperous man, motivated to wealth by his father who started adult life as a Revolutionary War officer and promising businessman, but met ruin instead as the result of alcoholism. Jesse Grant not only vowed a life of abstinence, but also of industry and prosperity. He was successful, beginning as a tanner’s assistant, eventually building his own tannery, and expanding into the construction and sawmill business, as well as local politics.



Figure 1. Hannah and Jesse Grant (Longacre 2006).

In an interesting quirk of history, Jesse Grant worked side by side with the son of a tannery owner named Owen Brown. Although Jesse strongly disapproved of slavery, Browns sons' strident opinions about the institution left little room for dissent, and the two did not get along. Forty years later, just before the Civil War Browns son, John, would lead fellow abolitionists on an assault on a military arsenal at Harpers Ferry intended to seize weapons and distribute them to escaped slaves who would then initiate an anti slavery rebellion. Robert E. Lee, then a Colonel in the United States Army, would lead the detachment of US Marines who captured John Brown. Jesse Grants son, Hiram, would accept Lees surrender of the Army of Virginia five years later, when he was known as Ulysses Simpson Grant (Longacre, 2006).

Although Jesse had little education, he was intellectually gifted. He had an interest in national politics and was knowledgeable of both current events and political philosophy. He wrote

political editorials for local newspapers and spoke on behalf of local political candidates as well as financing their political endeavors.

By all accounts, Jesse Grant was a loud man with a powerful personality and high opinion of himself. He frequently got into public arguments with his neighbors over all sorts of disagreements, and was a party in frequent lawsuits regarding slander and libel resulting from charges he made about the morals and behaviors of other businessmen.

Jesse was also a proud and doting father, frequently carrying his small son with him during business trips into nearby towns, as well as during his daily routine. He clearly had optimistic hopes for his son and did not hesitate to inform his neighbors that Hiram Ulysses was bound to be a great man because, well, his father was great.

Hannah Grant was in many ways the antitheses of her husband Jesse. She was very reserved, being so quiet that historians once debated whether she was mentally retarded. She revealed no emotions, ambitions, or expectations and seems to be as much of a mystery to her neighbors as to historians. Interactions with her children were limited to directions and scolding, and Grant later wrote that he could not remember his mother ever laugh or smile. She was not an attentive mother to any of her children, but was especially unconcerned with her first born, Hiram.

This lack of attention and concern began at birth. While most mothers are eager to welcome a first born into the world, Hannah Grant had little interest in her new baby. Weeks passed after the birth with no decision about a name, and apparently so little interaction with the baby that a wet nurse provided basic care. A family meeting addressed the problem and an aunt and grandmother chose the name Hiram Ulysses (Longacre, 2006).

Stories of her maternal indifference toward Hiram are easy to find. Neighbors recounted alerting Hannah to young Hiram exploring among a group of tethered horses, crawling around iron-shod hooves on hands and knees, narrowly missed by falling loads of manure and streams of urine.

Hannah explained to her alarmed neighbors that she was too busy to attend to Hiram, but she was sure his way with animals would protect him until she could tear herself away (Longacre, 2006).

Unlike his four siblings, Hiram was never baptized, included in church attendance, or made to do any household chores that did not involve horses. However, when horses were involved young Grant revealed a precocious ability. He could do anything, it seemed, if a horse were involved. At the age of eleven Grant was plowing fields, hauling firewood to the tannery, and conveying paying passengers to the nearest large town, a days drive away. His talent with horses became well known among neighbors who began to pay him to train and board horses before he was ten (Longacre, 2006).

In his memoirs, he related how he enjoyed a freedom and independence uncommon for children even in the 19th century. As a young boy he would take a horse to a swimming hole miles away, or visit his grandparents – a journey that took a full day to complete (Longacre, 2006). It seems that this was not solely a result of maternal neglect, although it was certainly present, as much as a testament to his natural talent with horses, early maturity and trustworthy nature. Both Hannah and Jesse seemed to believe that the boy could take care of himself.

Given the time and attention that Grant devoted to activities with horses, it should not come as a surprise that he formed few close friendships with other children his own age. Although he wrote many pages about horse related exploits in his memoirs, he mentioned his family only twice, and boyhood friends only slightly more often (Winik 2001).

As a teenager, Hiram continued to be a quiet, independent, and hardworking young man. Without structure, however, he showed little ambition. He was vague and undecided about his future, thinking he might become a trader on the Mississippi, a college teacher, or maybe a farmer. However, he showed little talent or aptitude for any of these vocations, and did nothing to prepare himself for any of them (Longacre 2006).

Although Grant would be remembered by history as a great military leader, he did not aspire to a military life, resisted his appointment to West Point, and made no secret of his distain for the army. Jesse, fearing that his lackadaisical and ambition-free son would be hopelessly adrift as an adult, secretly used his political connections to gain an appointment to West Point. Hiram was furious, engaging in an infrequent argument with his father who rarely forced him to do tings he found objectionable, but eventually resigned himself to a military education. Later he was to write that his vehement objections was based not on his distain of the military as much as it arose form a fear that he might fail the rigorous physical and academic challenges West Point holds (Longacre 2006 p. 16). As it turned out, he sailed through the challenge of West Point without really trying.

Something that stands out about Grant, however, is a subtle need for excitement. Even as a young boy, he longed for opportunities to cure horses of “distemper”. In the 1830’s it was believed that horses running a temperature would benefit from being heated, and the best way to heat a horse was with an extended gallop. Grant lived for the chance to gallop a horse for miles, reviling in the sound of the hooves on earth, the whistle of the wind and the pure visceral excitement of speed (Longacre 2006).

Another indication of Grants appreciation of excitement was his love of shooting. Although he was not interested in hunting, he loved the smoke noise and flame that muzzle loading firearms and black powder of the era provided. This affection for the excitement of shooting was first seen when Grant was an infant. Jesse placed a pistol in his son's hand, cocked the hammer and coached little Hiram to pull the trigger. Instead of being startled and crying at the sudden noise and eruption of smoke and flame, the child begged to fire the pistol again (Longacre 2006, p.8).

This need for stimulation is also displayed in Grants relationship with alcohol. Neither Jesse or Hannah drank at all, so young Grant was never exposed to alcohol at home. Jesse had sworn abstinence after witnessing the alcohol related ruin of his father, and made no secret of either his abstention or his motivation. However, at a very young age Grant would occasionally sneak into the basement of the community church, fill a jug with sacramental wine and enjoy its' effects in the nearby woods (Longacre 2006 p. 13). Alcohol would be a source of trouble for Grant for the rest of his life, although he would rarely drink. It seems that Grant drank only when he lacked structure of family life and at the same time was exposed to repetition and boredom. At these times, he would succumb to a bout of extreme drunkenness that might last several days to a week.

What does all of this say about Grants personality? How did Grants early experiences influence the way that he came to see the world, and ultimately help shape it?

Adlerian psychologists tell us that the position a child has in the family has a huge influence on the values and worldview the child develops. The experience of being the oldest child is very different from that of being the youngest child for example. Gender, parenting style, family

illness, and similar things all influence how the child grows to see the world (Christensen & Schramski, 1983).

First-born children, such as Grant, are typically the primary focus of first time parents. Developmental milestones are anticipated and celebrated, accomplishments are congratulated, and achievements are applauded. First-born children are the stars for the family, receiving attention, adulation, and praise. Until the next child is on the way.

First-born children are abruptly and unceremoniously unseated from their family throne as soon as parents become aware that another child will soon join the family. Parental attention shifts from the activities of the first-born to the anticipated arrival of the second. From the perspective of the first born this is a devastating development. Behaviors that had only recently guaranteed the unblinking attention of parents are now treated as an unwelcome intrusion into the life of the second born. A newfound ability or hard won skill no longer generates celebration and congratulation, but rather passing acknowledgement at most (Dreikurs & Soltz 1990).

The child quickly learns that accomplishments must be unusually noteworthy in order to gain the attention and praise of parents. The child learns that positive attention and involvement requires skills and behavior that are ever more sophisticated and complex. If the child is bright and industrious traits and skills such as foresight, planning and preparation are used more frequently, while extemporaneous play and impulsive behaviors become less frequent (Dreikurs & Soltz 1990).

An incident from Grants teenage years illustrates Grants ability to visualize a task, and create a plan to overcome a challenge. When he was in his early teens Grants father assigned him to a group of adult laborers who were felling trees and loading them into a wagon. When young

Grant returned with a wagon full of logs he reported that the adult laborers had departed after felling the trees. How then, Jesse asked, did the logs get loaded into the wagon without the workers to put them there? It was a simple matter, Hiram explained, to use the horse and choker cable to drag each log over a felled tree so that one end was on the ground while the other hung over the felled tree several feet in the air. The wagon was backed under the elevated end of the log, chocked in place and the horse and choker used to slide the log into the wagon (Longacre 2006).

According to Adlerian psychologists, (Dreikurs & Soltz 1990 p. 35), first-born children typically display some or all of the following traits:

- serious
- conscientious
- directive
- goal-oriented
- aggressive
- rule-conscious
- exacting
- conservative
- organized
- responsible
- jealous
- fearful
- high achieving
- competitive
- high self-esteem
- anxious

Even from the perspective of 150 years, we can see that many of these traits are obvious parts of Grants personality. From a very early age, he was a serious, conscientious, and responsible person. The fact that his parents would trust him to perform adult business tasks, such as ferrying passenger to nearby towns, is a convincing argument for these traits.

But what about the other traits listed? Why is Grant not remembered as someone who was aggressive, fearful, or jealous? Undoubtedly, other factors must have at work in shaping Grants personality.

Adlerians point out that birth order is not the only influence on a child. Dreikurs goes so far as to say that “encouragement is more important than any other aspect of child raising” (Dreikurs & Soltz 1990, p. 36).

As Dreikurs explains the child’s predicament:

To the young child, adults seem excessively large, extraordinarily efficient, and magically capable. The child's original courage alone keeps him from giving up entirely in the face of these impressions. What a wonderful thing a child's courage is! Were we to be placed in a similar situation of living among giants to whom nothing was impossible, could we acquit ourselves as well as our children do? Children respond to their various predicaments with a tremendous desire to gain skills and to overcome the deep sense of their own smallness and inadequacy. (Dreikurs & Soltz 1990, p. 36)

The historical record shows that few other influences in Grants childhood and adolescence that were as powerful as each of his parents were. Although there was frequent contact with grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins the extended family lived in other towns and were not influential or powerful forces in Grants life. His parents, Jesse and Hannah, would be the dominant forces that molded Grants character.

Jesse was described earlier as a man with a powerful personality who did not hesitate to impose his opinions on others. Hardworking, self-confident and industrious he gained a fair measure of financial success and social prominence in Southern Ohio. Although he was not violent or malicious, he wielded an amount of personal power and authority that must have been impressive and intimidating. If young Hiram were to follow in his fathers footsteps, he would have a challenging path indeed.

Hannah Grant seems to have little of what we might recognize as maternal instinct. Stoic, with a blank affect she seems to have spent her life repeating the routines of a 19th century wife and mother without emotion or animation. Longacre describes her as a mother who might have loved her children, but “doted on none, and never came close to coddling any of them”

(Longacre 2006 p. 10). When the children became ill – a common and often fatal occurrence in that time and place – she trusted in God, bed rest and castor oil.

How did these parental influences – a cold and distant mother, and loud and dominating father – affect Grants personality?

Adlerians might easily imagine that this parental combination would discourage Grant from recognizing his abilities and accomplishments and result in a reluctance to attempt challenging new skills because he would have little confidence in his abilities. For Adlerians, self-esteem and self-confidence are qualities that spring from parents who communicate to the child that they hold them in high esteem and are confident in their abilities. This creates in the child the courage to try new things, persevere in the face of failure and setbacks, and helps build a distinction between failing and being a failure (Dreikurs & Soltz 1990).

From what we know of Jess and Hannah Hiram Grant had none of these sentiments communicated to him. Hannah had little to say to her children unless she was vexed enough with their antics to scold or reprimand them. Jesse might have offered some degree of confidence in his sons' abilities, but after several years of exposure to Hannah's indifference it might not have been taken seriously. By the time young Grant heard any sort of praise from his father it would have been mitigated both by the previous influence of Hannah.

Praise from Jesse might have sounded hollow considering his powerful personality, reputation as being very critical of others, and his very impressive accomplishments. One might imagine that Jesse would have the same challenges in others believing his praise and compliments as Donald Trump has today. Although Trump can be urbane and "smooth", he has done a poor job of communicating the ability to be emotionally sincere. Jesse Grant might have had the same problem, particularly concerning his first-born son.

The combined influence of his parents may have given Grant the ability to excel at particular tasks, but simultaneously robbed him of the capacity to recognize his talents, and consequently created a lack of faith in his abilities. For example, although he graduated from West Point he never really tried to excel while there. Had he possessed the faith in his abilities that is so obvious to others he might have graduated first in his class, rather than in the lower third.

Another aspect of Grants personality was his need for stimulation. His use of alcohol, love of fast horses, and interest in shooting are all signs of a person with a penchant for sensation.

Biographies of Grant do not mention behaviors that indicate beyond question that he might have been a risk taker, but there are some interesting anecdotes that support the hypothesis.

Two incidents during the Mexican-American War in 1847 demonstrate the risk taking side of Grants personality. Grant was a Quartermaster during the war – that is, he was responsible for making sure troops had supplies. The Quartermaster service has a support role that does not normally involve direct participation in combat operations. Nevertheless, Grant was able to involve himself in combat in at least two occasions. Grant was not one to sit in the Quartermaster office, counting inventory. He must have been actively seeking out action and activities in order to find opportunities on two separate occasions to participate in combat operations. There were likely more, but on these two occasions he gained a degree of notoriety for heroic actions.

During the Battle of Monterrey Grant was able to insert himself closely enough to combat to learn a regiment of soldiers was isolated by the enemy and running out of ammunition. On his own initiative, he loaded his horse with ammunition and delivered the ammunition the isolated unit. The thing that makes this heroic action so notable is that the unit was surrounded in the

middle of the city of Monterrey. Grant galloped his horse at full speed through narrow streets, burdened with heavy lead balls and gunpowder that could be set aflame by a hot musket ball fired from houses only a few feet away on either side. To make the feat truly John Wayneske, Grant hung on the side of the horse, left foot in the stirrup and left hand on the saddle horn, shooting his revolver over the saddle with his right hand (Longacre 2006).

Grants other heroic feat occurred on the outskirts of Mexico City. A walled fort blocked passage into the city and had to be neutralized. Grant found an abandoned pack howitzer, and again on his own initiative gathered a group of soldiers separated from their unit, and managed to manhandle the cannon to the roof of a church. (A howitzer is a cannon that can fire a projectile on a very high arc; a pack howitzer is one small enough to be carried by a horse, mule or team of men.) Grant was able to assemble the weapon, send a spotter to the belfry of the church and lob a steady fire on the area inside the fort near the front gate. This kept the defenders away from the gate and unable to oppose American troops who managed to batter their way through the gate and enter the fort (Longacre 2006).

The only reason we know about these incidents is that they were motioned prominently in dispatches and unit histories. It is likely that Grant was inclined to sensation seeking, but direct evidence has been lost or was never recorded. However, some intriguing conditions and coincidences might lend support for the thesis that Grant was a sensation seeker.

Sensation seekers have a brain chemistry that demands action and activity. They become bored and restless in circumstances in which there is little to stimulate them. Interestingly they describe thrilling activities as simultaneously exciting and relaxing (Holmes, 1990). Satisfying

the need for stimulation after a period of boredom seems to “reset” their brain chemistry to normal, at least for a while (Napier, Findley & Self 2007).

In Grants case, it seems that his infrequent bouts of drunkenness coincided with boredom and inactivity. Seeking the stimulation of alcohol might have been a way for him to return his brain chemistry to normal during a particularly long period of boredom. Grant was forced to quit the Army when he was discovered drunk on duty while stationed in Astoria Oregon in 1854 (Longacre 2006). Astoria Oregon has one of longest average stretches of cloudiness and gloom in the world. For about eight months, beginning in October and ending in May clouds cover the sky from horizon to horizon and the sun is seen only rarely. Astoria enjoys only 38 days annually that are not overcast (Climatezone.com 2007).

According to historians Grants episodes of drunkenness correlate with the absence of his family (Longacre 2006, Winik, 2001). It is possible that the presence of Grants wife and children supplied for him an active role as a husband and parent that mitigated the effects of boredom. Simply having his family near might have supplied Grant with all the stimulation he needed to satisfy his need for sensation.

Another possible support for the argument that Grant was a sensation seeker is his consistent inability to hold an office job. He recalled his days as a yeoman farmer, lumberman, and cargo loader has the happiest of his life (Longacre 2006). His efforts as an insurance agent, shopkeeper, and real estate broker were stupendous failures because he simply could not abide the routine of office work. Grant was intellectually gifted but could not manage accounting or administrative duties. It seems that he was at his best in physical or intellectually vigorous activities.

This brief look at Ulysses Grants' early life from the perspective of Adlerian psychology and sensation seeking research reveals a man just as complex, but perhaps easier to understand than the one normally described in political histories. In this light, he becomes more human, and less mythical. Now that we know about his cold distant mother, and highly successful and strident father his sensitivities to defeated rebels and a broken nation makes more sense. We can understand why he overstepped limits to his power that Lincoln had placed, ignored civilian authority, and used his phenomenal popularity at the end of the war to engineer a peace that preserved Southern dignity, avoided a protracted guerilla war, and put the nation on a course towards healing. Until, of course, Lincoln was assassinated, Andrew Jackson became President and Reconstruction vigorously brought revenge to a broken South.

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