

This Day in History... July 23, 1885

Death of Ulysses S. Grant

Civil War general and 18th US president, Ulysses S. Grant died on July 23, 1885.

Hiram Ulysses Grant was born on April 27, 1822, in Point Pleasant, Ohio. He was a small, sensitive, and quiet child, which earned him ridicule in school by children who confused his silence for stupidity, nicknaming him "Useless."

From an early age, Grant displayed a high level of skill in horsemanship, and he was known throughout town for his talent at handling unruly horses. In 1839, Grant's father heard of a vacancy at West Point. He asked Congressman Thomas L. Hamer to appoint his son to fill the spot. Grant was hesitant at first, but grew excited at the chance to travel and receive a better education.

Having limited education beforehand, Grant struggled at West Point, although he did well in math and drawing. Where he excelled was with horses. He amazed his classmates and teachers with his riding abilities, earning a reputation as a fearless and expert horseman. He also set an equestrian high jump record that was not broken for almost 25 years. Knowing his skill with horses, many expected he would join the cavalry, but his poor grades placed him 21st in a class of 39. Because of this, he was made a regimental quartermaster in the infantry, managing equipment and supplies.

Upon graduating from West Point in 1843, Grant was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the 4th Infantry Regiment south of St. Louis, Missouri. Grant received two citations for his bravery at Molino del Rey and Chapultepec during the Mexican-American War. Spending much of his time at the front lines, Grant closely observed colonels and generals, and especially admired how Zachary Taylor led his campaign.

When the war was over, Grant married Julia Dent. Grant was relocated by the Army a number of times after the wedding. When he was charged with bringing the 4th Infantry to California, Julia, who was pregnant with their second child, stayed behind. After two years separated from his family in California, Grant became depressed and started drinking. He resigned suddenly from the Army on July 31, 1854, and returned to his family. He spent the next few years in a variety of jobs, but with little success.

With the breakout of Civil War in 1861, the North was in desperate need of experienced officers. The governor of Illinois asked Grant to take over a volunteer regiment that no one had been able to train. He enthusiastically accepted the task, instituting discipline and showing the men how to focus on their main goals. Over time, he won their respect and was soon appointed brigadier general.

Grant began recruiting and training volunteers. His effective and energetic style earned him a promotion to colonel. His early engagements occurred around the area where the Ohio River meets the Mississippi River. Although some of these early battles were draws or losses, Grant was well respected. Unlike most Union leaders of the time, he had a willingness to fight.

In February of the following year, Grant led the successful captures of Fort Henry and Fort Donelson. These were the Union's first major victories of the war, and the success gained Grant national fame overnight. His surrender terms soon became famous as well – "no terms except unconditional and immediate surrender." In light of these victories, President Abraham Lincoln promoted Grant to major general of volunteers.

That April, the Battle of Shiloh was one of the bloodiest conflicts of the war. About 13,000 Union



From the 1890-93 Regular Issues.



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Stamp pictures Grant with fellow Civil War generals William T. Sherman and Philip Sheridan.

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troops and nearly 11,000 Confederate troops were killed or wounded at the battle. Many Northerners were outraged by the loss of life and called for Grant's replacement. But President Lincoln refused, stating, "I can't spare this man – he fights."

Despite the criticism he received in the press, Grant was the first Union leader to push the war into the South and force the Confederates to defend their territory. He was respected in the field for his calmness in the heat of battle, delivering clear, concise orders. In 1863 he was promoted to major general.

His successful 1863 Vicksburg Campaign gave the Union control of the Mississippi River and split the South in two. Following this, Grant was given command of the entire western theater. He was relentless and his tough tactics paid off. Grant cornered the Confederate Army in the small Appomattox Court House, forcing General Lee's surrender on April 9, 1865, ultimately ending the war. A national hero, Grant was named general of the Army, a new rank similar to the general of the Armies rank that previously had been held by George Washington only.

President Andrew Johnson appointed Grant secretary of War to replace Edwin Stanton. When Congress declared the move illegal, Grant willingly left the position, making him a hero to the Radical Republicans. They nominated him as their candidate for president in the 1868 election. In his acceptance letter, his closing words were "Let us have peace," which was used as his campaign slogan. Grant won the election with a 300,000-vote lead over his opponent, Horatio Seymour, and an Electoral College landslide of 214 votes to Seymour's 80.

Having never held a political office before, President Grant had little knowledge of the inner workings of the government. He appointed to his cabinet friends and people who helped him during his military years. While some of these appointments, such as Secretary of State Hamilton Fish, were good choices, many resulted in scandal.

Over the course of Grant's two-term presidency, 11 scandals were discovered, and many involved his personal secretary Orville E. Babcock. Although these scandals tarnished Grant's time in office, he was never a part of any of them. The greatest criticism of the president in relation to the scandals was his failure to remove the offenders from office.

In the wake of these scandals, Grant attempted to improve the way people were appointed to government positions. He appointed America's first Civil Service Commission, which suggested giving exams and creating regulations in relation to the hiring and promotion of government employees. This went into effect in 1872, but Congress refused to take the proper actions to make this system permanent.

Grant did not let scandals keep him from doing what he set out to do as president, which was largely promote civil rights and peace. Congress passed the 15th Amendment in 1869, which gave freedmen the right to vote. The 1871 Ku Klux Klan Act gave the Federal government the power "to arrest and break up disguised night marauders." Grant also pushed for the freedmen's civil rights, saying they should be "possessed of the civil rights which citizenship should carry with it." When more racist organizations began to appear and threaten African Americans out of voting, Grant signed the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which required equal treatment in public housing and jury selection. The president also aimed to extend civil rights to the Native Americans, lobbying to preserve their land from American westward expansion.

Upon leaving office, Grant admitted his mistaken appointments were "errors of judgment." He and his wife spent the next two years traveling the world. Grant spent his last days composing his memoirs, at the suggestion of his friend Mark Twain. The former president died on July 23, 1885, just days after completing them. Twain promoted Grant's book as "the most remarkable work of its kind since *The Commentaries of Julius Caesar*."



Grant stamp from the 1938 "Prexies."



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