

A vote for Grant

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [September 7, 2010](#) issue

Earlier this year there was talk in Congress about replacing the picture of Ulysses S. Grant on the \$50 bill with a picture of Ronald Reagan. What I knew about Grant was that he was from Illinois, that he was known as a hard drinker, that he was the general who won the Civil War, and that he was a mediocre president who was buried in upper Manhattan near Union Theological Seminary.

But—on my brother's recommendation—I read a biography of Grant, by Jean Edward Smith, and was chastened to realize that what I took to be conventional wisdom about Grant had little basis in fact. Grant never allowed alcohol to interfere with his responsibilities. His reputation as a corrupt, inadequate president is also wrong, or at least incomplete. Grant's corrupt behavior was limited to naively accepting gifts from grateful northern industrialists. His error in judgment was to trust his appointees too much and to be loyal to them in the face of evident scandal and corruption.

I came away from the book with an appreciation not only for his decisive military leadership, which turned the tide for the Union, but also for the fact that his presidency occurred at a time when the nation and the Constitution were fragile.

The really mediocre and problematic president was the man Grant succeeded, Lincoln's vice president, Andrew Johnson. As general in chief, Grant was responsible for how the victorious Union dealt with the Confederacy. Grant showed his hand at the surrender ceremony at Appomattox by treating Confederate General Robert E. Lee with respect, providing food for the starving Confederate troops and sending them home with their horses so they could resume farming and feed their families. "Grant," Smith reports, "did not pause to celebrate, and he halted the firing of victory salutes. 'The war is over,' he told his staff. 'The rebels are our countrymen again.'"

Grant continued to lead Reconstruction efforts as president. He believed that healing would happen only when freed slaves were granted full rights, including the right to vote, and he never wavered in his conviction that African Americans were citizens.

I hope he stays on the \$50 bill. In fact, I think he deserves wider circulation—like on the \$10 bill.