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Grant biography is a revelation



George Will
Washington Post writers

Ron Chernow's 1,074-page book on Ulysses Simpson Grant is a tutorial on measured, mature judgment.

It has been said that the best biographer is a conscientious enemy of his or her subject — scrupulous but un-

thrilled.

Chernow, laden with honors for his biographies of George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, is a true friend of the general who did so much to preserve the nation. And of the unjustly maligned president — the only one between Andrew Jackson and Woodrow Wilson to serve two full consecutive terms.

Grant nobly, if unsuccessfully, strove to prevent the war's brutal aftermath in the South from delaying, for a century, freedom's arrival there.

After reluctantly attending West Point and competently participating in the war with Mexico, his military career foundered on alcohol abuse exacerbated by the aching loneliness of a man missing his family. His civilian life was marred by commercial failures.

Then the war came. Four years after he was reduced to selling firewood on St. Louis streets, he was leading the siege of Vicksburg. Six years after Vicksburg fell he was president.

And a good one. He was hopelessly naive regarding the rascality unleashed by the sudden postwar arrival of industrialism entangled with government. But the corruptions during his administration showed only his negligence, not his cupidity.

More importantly, Grant, says Chernow, "showed a deep reservoir of courage in directing the fight against the Ku Klux Klan and crushing the largest wave of domestic terrorism in American history."

He ranks behind only Abraham Lincoln and Lyndon Johnson as a presidential advancer of African-American freedom.

After the presidency, he was financially ruined by his characteristic misjudgment of his friends and associates. His rescuer was Mark Twain, who got Grant launched on his memoirs.

This taciturn military man of few words, writing at a punishing pace during the agony of terminal cancer, produced

This taciturn military man of few words produced the greatest military memoir in the English language.

the greatest military memoir in the English language, and the finest book published by any U.S. president.

Chernow is clear-eyed in examining and evenhanded in assessing Grant's defects. He had an episodic drinking problem but was not a problem drinker: He was rarely incapacitated, and never during military campaigns or when with Julia.

Grant was by far the war's greatest soldier, tactically and strategically, and the percentage of casualties in his armies was, Chernow says, "often lower than those of many Confederate generals."

Sentimentality about Robert E. Lee has driven much disdain for Grant. Chernow's judgment about Lee is appropriately icy: Even after failing to dismember the nation he "remained a Southern partisan" who "never retreated from his retrograde views on slavery."

Chernow's large readership (and the successes of such non-academic historians as Rick Atkinson, Richard Brookhiser, David McCullough, Nathaniel Philbrick, Jon Meacham, Erik Larson and others) raises a question: Why are so many academic historians so little read?

Here is a hint: Academics attain status by being obscure and opaque.

Chernow leans against today's belief that because greatness is rare, celebrating it is undemocratic. And against the populist tear-them-down rage to disparage.

The political philosopher Harvey Mansfield, Harvard's conservative, says education should teach how to praise. How, that is, to recognize excellence of character when it is entwined, as it always is, with flaws.

And how to acknowledge excellence of achievement amid the contingencies that always partially defeat good intentions.

Chernow's "Grant" is a gift to a nation presently much in need of measured judgments about its past.

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JEA moves backward with solar

point of view

angela demonbreun

Florida is the nation's fastest growing state for solar. The number of residential permits has more than

doubled over the past year.

Homeowners are eager to benefit from solar, a clean, economical energy source that gives us control of where our electricity comes from.

So it's baffling that JEA wants to take us backward. The JEA board has proposed unfair cuts to the credit Jacksonville solar owners receive for the electricity they produce.

Solar customers reduce their electric bills through a policy called "net metering." This allows solar customers to lower their electric bills by the amount of solar energy they produce.

When homeowners' solar systems produce more electricity than their home uses at a particular moment, that electricity is sent back through the customers' electric meters to neighbors.

JEA sells this electricity at full price, while not bearing the cost of transmitting the energy from a distant power plant. Net metering acts like rollover minutes, enabling solar customers to count the solar energy they've generated against the electricity they've used from the utility.

Previously, JEA compensated solar customers at 10 cents per kilowatt-hour for the solar sent to neighbors.

This figure is roughly equal to the cost customers pay for electricity from JEA. The utility board's recent decision unfairly reduces this compensation rate to 3 cents per kilowatt-hour, a fraction of the electricity's true cost.

The board also voted to make it harder for homeowners to recoup the value of the solar they generate. They've reduced the net metering calculation period to 15 minutes, down from a month.

Shortening this rollover period means more of the excess solar energy they've produced will be credited at the 3 cent rate rather than counted against the electricity consumers purchase from JEA at the full retail rate.

JEA's new system won't just harm solar customers. Everyone benefits from having distributed solar generation. It reduces the need for expensive transmission infrastructure because the elec-

JEA should give consumers with solar power the full value of the power they generate.

tricity is generated close to the source of energy demand.

Solar energy provides low-cost power during the day when demand and prices for electricity are highest, saving money for everyone. These broadly shared benefits, documented in dozens of national studies, demonstrate solar's value is higher than what JEA has arbitrarily and capriciously decided it should be.

JEA's decision takes away this fair compensation system. To make matters worse, JEA arbitrarily determined the credit for solar production solar owners receive on their energy bill should be considered taxable income. There is no precedent or justification for this because homeowners merely use solar to reduce their bill by the amount of energy they produce. This punitive measure will further hamper rooftop solar.

JEA passed these measures with little public engagement and less data to back it up. While there were a handful of stakeholder meetings on the subject, the current and prospective solar homeowners most likely to be impacted by the decision were not invited to attend.

I've worked with communities across the state to help homeowners go solar in solar co-ops. Cities have helped grow solar by educating their residents and streamlining permitting rules to make it easier to go solar.

Locally, nearly 200 homeowners in St. Johns County signed up to go solar with the co-op. I was excited to launch a similar group in my Jacksonville hometown, but JEA's proposed rules have put these plans on hold.

JEA should re-instate the full value of net metering until it has developed a workable solution that enables its customers to get the full value of the solar electricity they generate. Doing so will maintain Florida's solar momentum and protect our right to go solar.

Angela DeMonbreun of Jacksonville is program director for Solar United Neighbors of Florida.

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