

Presidency of Ulysses S. Grant

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Review

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Calhoun, Charles W. *Presidency of Ulysses S. Grant*. University Press of Kansas, \$39.95 ISBN 9780700624843

The Man Who Saved the Presidency

To Civil War enthusiasts and scholars alike, Ulysses S. Grant is one of the most interesting figures of the era. His name is as recognizable as that of military icons Robert E. Lee, Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson, and William Tecumseh Sherman. What is more, of all of the great leading figures of the war, only Grant managed to rise to the same office as that of Abraham Lincoln—a man recognized in recent studies as among the most significant figures in World History. Yet Grant is also the least understood of the above-mentioned persons. Historians often view his military career in a positive light. However, regardless of the fact that he was the only president to successfully serve two consecutive terms between Lincoln and Woodrow Wilson, Grant’s time in the White House has suffered at the hands of scholars. Charles W. Calhoun’s *The Presidency of Ulysses S. Grant* seeks to reverse that trend, and in the process provides a much more balanced assessment of an administration that the author himself calls “the polestar of American public life during a crucial decade in the nation’s political development (2).”

Aside from the General’s *Memoirs*, published posthumously in 1885 and never out of print, perhaps William McFeely’s *Grant* (1981) has in modern-times been the most accessible one-volume biography of the eighteenth president. McFeely’s work, though, largely reinforced the view of Grant’s earliest biographers that he was a butcher and a drunk in war, and a simpleton in peace wholly unprepared to navigate the subtle intricacies of presidential politics. Fortunately, a campaign has been waged for the better part of the last thirty years to revise this narrative. To that end, scholars owe a great deal to Brooks Simpson, who in *Let Us Have Peace: Ulysses S. Grant and the Politics of War and Reconstruction* (1991), *The Reconstruction Presidents* (1998), and *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph over Adversity* (2000) portrayed Grant as an adept commander of both military affairs, as well as politics. Likewise, with the explosion of scholarly works published during the sesquicentennial of the American Civil War, icons such as Lee, Jackson, and Sherman benefitted from new studies of their impacts on that watershed moment in American History. Among these American giants, Grant’s reputation was most in

need of a new look. Given the circumstances, then, H.W. Brands's *The Man Who Saved the Union* (2012) was greatly welcomed by Grant aficionados.

As America moves into the sesquicentennial of Reconstruction, further revitalization of Grant's memory is underway. 2016, for instance, saw the publication of Ronald C. White's *American Ulysses*, while in 2017 we received not only the much anticipated *The Republic for Which It Stands*—Richard White's exhaustive installment for the Oxford History of the United States on Reconstruction and the Gilded Age—but also Ron Chernow's celebrated *Grant*. For all the work of revisionist historians, however, Grant's presidency remains the most under-appreciated part of his legacy. To be fair, each of the above-mentioned authors hit upon the subject, but none focused their attention solely on this period of his life. Grant himself is at least partially to blame for this. After all, it was he who omitted that period completely—almost as if to say he wished it had not happened—from his famous *Memoirs*. Thus it was that while it included works on un-inspiring presidencies such as William Howard Taft and Warren G. Harding, the American Presidency Series at the University Press of Kansas sorely lacked a volume on Grant. For the serious scholar, then, Calhoun's *The Presidency of Ulysses S. Grant* is as anticipated as Chernow's popular biography.

Calhoun takes a balanced and objective look of Grant as president. Thoroughly combing through evidence surrounding the more controversial aspects of his time in the White House, he concludes that Grant was indeed at times the victim of spiteful members of his own party who left accounts for posterity that painted him in a bad light. However, in some if not all of the instances, their criticism of Grant was merited. “A good president can become a great one,” Calhoun writes, “if he can break restraints and transcend a context that works against him. Ulysses S. Grant could sometimes, but not always do that (4).”

One-by-one, Calhoun examines the greatest and the worst moments of the Grant Presidency. Starting with his earliest troubles involving the inability of the Senate to confirm some of his cabinet appointments, Calhoun blames Grant's woes on his decision to rely, much as he did in the army, on the advice of a core group of men rather than on party leaders in Congress. In his coverage of Grant's attempts to protect black Americans' rights in the South, Calhoun argues that while the President's intentions were to end Reconstruction peacefully and swiftly, those plans were ultimately thwarted by corrupt government agents and voter intimidation in the South. Likewise, in his examination of Jay Gould and James Fisk's attempt to influence the President and corner the gold market, Calhoun effectively shows that Grant was well aware of the plot, and actively worked to undermine it. Nonetheless, Calhoun does not give Grant an entirely free pass, noting that the President failed to effectively divorce his personal connections to the scandal, irreparably damaging his presidency in the process.

On the subject of Grant's reputation as a bad president, perhaps Calhoun's greatest remarks come early in the book when he writes that, "The record of a presidency is made not only by those who serve in the administration but also by those who engage it...(86)" To that end, in examining matters such as the unsuccessful annexation of Santo Domingo, the disaster of U.S. and Native American relations, the failure of civil service reform, and even the notorious Whiskey Ring, Calhoun is careful to make sure that Grant's detractors in and outside of the government share the blame. More like his predecessor Andrew Johnson than he would like to admit, Grant placed himself and his office at the forefront of federal policy. In doing so, Calhoun states he made himself a target for the misdeeds of his subordinates. At the same time, however, he left his most notable mark on the presidency—for Grant took an office severely damaged by the controversies surrounding Andrew Johnson's administration and the early years of Reconstruction, and began the process of modernizing it as the center of American politics—instead of Congress—that it eventually became in the twentieth century. Suggests Calhoun, Grant bridged the gap between the less effective executives of the early nineteenth century and the vigorous administrations of the twentieth. If H.W. Brands thinks of Grant as "the man who saved the union," then perhaps it is safe to say that in Calhoun's eyes, we should remember him also as "the man who saved the presidency."

Charles Calhoun's task is daunting—resurrect in a fair-minded way one of the least-understood presidencies of the nineteenth century. In this, however, he has surpassed expectations. Scholars should expect nothing less from the American Presidency Series at the University Press of Kansas. Over the past decades, the editors have recruited serious historians to cover nearly all of the forty-five presidents and their administrations (volumes remain to be written on Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama). Furthermore, while some of the series' earlier editions—those on George Washington and Thomas Jefferson come to mind—were surprisingly short, in recent years the volumes have become incredibly thorough in their analysis. The mission of the series is to cover "not only of contemporary politics but also economics, international relations, law, morals, public administration, religion, and thought (ix)," and this perhaps accounts for why some of the earlier volumes in the series are now being replaced with new studies, as happened with Lewis Gould's *The Presidency of William Howard Taft* (2009), which replaced Paolo Coletta's 1973 volume of the same title. This of course leads to an interesting observation. Calhoun's volume on Grant weighs in at a surprising 736 pages (including notes), while the series' treatment on Lincoln—that other great president of the Civil War era—is nearly half the length. Notwithstanding the fact that Grant served four years longer than Lincoln, one wonders if new treatments of the other presidents are in the planning. If so, and if they are anything like the current volume on Grant, readers will have much for which to look forward!

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