

Grant at 200: Reconsidering the Life and Legacy of Ulysses S. Grant

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Review

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Upon his death in 1885, Ulysses S. Grant was widely celebrated as the greatest American of his generation. Among his contemporaries, a revered and beloved Grant stood shoulder to shoulder with George Washington and Abraham Lincoln as one of the three greatest Americans in the history of the young Republic. The English periodical *Public Opinion* declared that “no Englishman who has lived and died within the last half-century fills so large a place in the hearts of Englishmen as Lincoln and Grant fill in the hearts of Americans.”¹ Yet within a scant generation, those memories, that legacy of Grant’s, would be lost, and his reputation would suffer a serious decline continuing for most of the twentieth century. Grant would be remembered both in the academic community and in public memory only as a drunkard, a butcher, an accident of history consistently regarded as one of the two worst American presidents. Grant’s reputational decline would prompt modern day historian Sean Wilentz to write that “No great American has suffered more cruelly and undeservedly at the hands of historians than Ulysses S. Grant.”²

Published in 2022 in honor of Ulysses S. Grant’s bicentennial birthday, *Grant at 200: Reconsidering the Life and Legacy of Ulysses S. Grant*, edited by Chris Mackowski and Frank Scaturro, is a joint collaboration between the Ulysses S. Grant Association and the Grant Monument Association. It is a compelling collection of essays designed to effect and promote the efficacy of Grant’s “reputational reclamation,” as well as to examine some lesser known aspects of Grant’s life. Written at times with great enthusiasm, the work is informative, on occasion quite quirky and will appeal to both serious students of Grant as well as the most casual of Grant enthusiasts.

¹ *Public Opinion*, 22, 1885; Reprinted in the *Atlanta Constitution*, July 24, 1885.

² Sean Wilentz, “Return of Ulysses,” Online review of *U.S. Grant: American Hero, American Myth*, by Joan Waugh, *The New Republic*, January 25, 2010, available at: <http://www.tnr.com/book/review/the-return-ulysses-s-grant>.

Quite the load at eleven pounds, Hiram Ulysses Grant was brought into this world on April 27, 1822, to Jesse and Hannah Simpson Grant in what was described as a lower-middle class farming family in Point Pleasant, Ohio (3). In personality, Jesse and Hannah were as disparate as a married couple could be. Jesse, boisterous, loud, and overbearing had no trouble sharing his opinions about anything, especially his unfailing and at times incendiary support for the abolitionist movement. In contrast, Hannah was quiet, soft spoken, and rarely one to share an opinion. “She was a woman of deep feeling but not demonstrative.” Hannah taught her children “an ethic of self-effacing” love and humility. It would be from her that Grant “inherited most of his enduring characteristics,” including his reluctance to share his opinions and vocalize his inner thoughts (17, 16). “Lyss,” as he was known, was taught never to swear, he did not dance, and he did not play cards. Grant’s one great passion was tending for, working with, and playing with horses. At the age of five, he began to establish his credentials as one of the finest horsemen in the territory. Embracing his family’s religion, Grant remained a devout Methodist his entire life. His religion became a powerful and lasting influence. “At heart a son of Methodism,” Grant would learn and employ “values that shaped his character-magnanimity, self effacement, his continuing ability to give credit to others” and retain a stoic nature his entire life (25).

Grant entered the U.S. Army Military Academy in 1839. Certainly an intimidating moment for a seventeen-year old who stood only 5’ 2” and weighed 117 pounds. Despite his reluctance to have anything to do with the military, his appointment had been secured at Jesse’s insistence and search for a free education. Due to a registration mix-up, Hiram Ulysses Grant would enter the Academy but, four years later, he would exit as Ulysses Simpson Grant. With this, he had no problem. The thought of having the initials H.U.G. on his footlocker held no appeal for him. U.S.G. was much preferable.

With one notable exception, Grant did not distinguish himself at the Academy. His continued excellence in handling and working with horses would make Grant universally recognized as the finest horseman at West Point. Otherwise, Grant was “Not impressive at the Academy,” and had “difficulty in marching,” making him the butt of frequent jokes, and other than displaying proficiency in math, did not distinguish himself in his other academic endeavors (7).

Upon graduation from the Academy, Grant would serve in the Mexican War beginning in 1846 where experiences gained would greatly facilitate his success in the Civil War. Returning

in 1848, Grant married Julia Dent, the sister of Army comrade Frederick Dent and would share his devout Methodist views with his in laws but would share little else. The Dent family patriarch, Frederick Dent, was a wealthy slaveholder, and although both Ulysses and Frederick had distinctly different ideas on where the country was headed, it appeared they shared a complicated but amiable relationship. And although many within the Dent family looked down on the Grant family due to their economic circumstance in those early years, and some in the Grant family resented what they felt was the Dent's lavish lifestyle, Julia Dent stated that Hannah Simpson Grant was "the sweetest, kindest woman she ever met" (34).

Grant and his growing family would enjoy marital bliss for a few years and then Grant's life would take a decided turn for the worse in 1852. Transferred to remote outposts on the West Coast, Grant would leave his young growing family behind and endure the worst years of his life. Lonely and depressed, Grant would turn to the bottle and was forced to resign from the service in 1854. He returned to his family in St. Louis and endured seven more years of economic failure, economic hardship, and misery before events dramatically changed Grant's life and the life of the nation in early spring, 1861.

Combined with his experience in Mexico, life's lessons learned in the 1850s, and his evolution during the Civil War, Grant "knew the winning formula for success in the American Civil War" (46). He was described as "Clausewitzian before Clausewitzian was cool," a reference to the great military theorist whose tactics of modern military warfare Grant embraced without having read Clausewitz. Destruction and annihilation of the enemy's army, not territory was the winning formula according to Clausewitz. And Grant possessed the fundamental ingredients that Clausewitz claimed were needed for military success, "courage and determination" and "common sense," all of which Grant possessed in abundance and all self-evident in Grant's "annihilating" victories at Belmont, Vicksburg, and Appomattox (42, 46).

Despite political intrigues and jealousies surrounding his early victories, Grant's first "annihilating" victory at Belmont had profound consequences for the Union effort making him the "first great military hero of the Union" (66). A follow-up annihilating victory at Vicksburg showed that Grant had learned well from Belmont. A scant three years later, following another annihilating victory, Appomattox was the height of Grant's career, "cementing his reputation as a magnanimous (and victorious) warrior foreshadowing his role as President (66.).

Grant entered politics with a great deal of trepidation. Again, his inspiration came from his need to serve the country that educated him. Entering office in 1869, he was not a natural politician but became an “adept politician and civilian leader of great consequence” (89). Grant was highly intelligent, in no sense the dullard his many detractors portrayed” (92). His successful military experience “had fostered in him a fierce determination to pursue his aims to a successful conclusion (93). He became a forceful and effective lobbyist who did not hesitate to visit Congress to promote his agenda. His one major flaw would be his well-known aversion to speaking in public, which allowed his detractors to “accuse him of lack of knowledge or even plain stupidity”(99, 93).

Grant was determined not to lose during Reconstruction what the Republicans had won during the war. He was driven by the need to “secure the results of the war” by guaranteeing the Constitutionally protected rights of African Americans while at the same time reconciling with a White South that was not about to recognize those rights (107). Grant’s task would be made more difficult due to Andrew Johnson’s years in office where his sympathy for plantation owners and unwillingness to support freedmen “encouraged past, present and future tormentors of former slaves” (114).

The resistance Grant faced was articulated by Georgia’s United States Senator, Ben Hill. In a speech on Oct. 6, 1868, to the Young Men’s Democratic League in New York City, Hill expressed the sentiments of the vast majority of white Southerners when he prophetically declared:

Southern whites will never consent to the government of the negro. Never! All your money spent in the effort to force it will be wasted. The Southern whites will never consent to social and political equality with the negro. You may destroy yourselves in the effort to force it, and then you will fail. You may send down your armies and exhaust the resources of the whole country for a whole century and then pile up the public debt till it lean against the skies; and you may burn our cities and murder our people—our unarmed people—but you will never make them consent to governments formed by negroes and strangers under the dictation of Congress by the power of the bayonet.³

Grant found his ideal of “governance marked by forbearance and conciliation won scant acceptance” by political opposition. “Democratic newspapers were unrelenting in their criticism and forced him to have no choice to become a politician and a partisan” (95, 96). Yet his 1872

³ Benjamin Hill Jr., *Senator Benjamin Hill of Georgia: His Life Speeches and Writings* (Atlanta: H.C. Hudgins and Co.), 329. Hill’s address in Georgia dated December 8, 1870. The address to the New York Young Men’s Democratic Union was on October 8, 1868.

election victory was secured by the largest popular margin between 1828 and 1904. Two years later however, Grant found himself squarely in the crosshairs of the Democrats who won a decisive victory in the 1874 congressional elections taking control of the House of Representatives. In combination with a series of unfavorable Supreme Court decisions, white Southerners' "determined opposition diminished and undid Grant's accomplishments by using all means at its disposal—legal and otherwise," allowing southern states to move quickly to relegate "African Americans and their descendants to second class citizenship" (107, 106). Yet Grant remained a transformational leader despite such fierce opposition, remaining firm in his commitment for he "was of no mind to abandon his goals" (126).

One of the more poignant pieces in the book is Ben Kemp's homage to Grant's courage, dedication, and concern for financially providing for his family at a time when death from cancer in 1885 was imminent at his final resting place in what was known as Grant's Cottage in Saratoga Springs, New York. In his chapter entitled "A Compensating Generosity," Kemp details the agony, pain, and suffering Grant endured while finishing his memoirs, a work regarded as a masterpiece of military writing. It was this innate sense of generosity Grant had for his loved ones, his concern and caring, this "bedrock of humanity" that allowed him to endure his misery and successfully complete his final mission: providing a lifetime of financial security for his family. "Grant Cottage represents an indomitable will to carry on aided by the generosity and support of others" (195, 203).

Instrumental in the recent ascendance of both the fortunes of Grant's reputation and of Grant's Tomb has been the work of longtime Grant advocate and supporter, co-author Frank Scaturro. With strong conviction and passionate dedication, Scaturro deftly explains the parallel trajectory of the decline of Grant's reputation with the physical decline of Grant's tomb from the early 1900s through the late 20th Century. Since his days at Columbia University, Scaturro has played a major role in this repair, yet his message is, more needs to be done.

The Grant described in this fine collection of essays is decidedly different from the incompetent buffoon portrayed by the ignorance of so many early historians. He was not "one of the remarkable accidents of the war."⁴ And he was certainly not, as historian William Henseltine described him in 1935, such a disagreeable, loathsome miscreant that "even dogs did not like

⁴ Edward Pollard, *The Lost Cause: A Southern History of the War of the Confederates* (1866), 509.

him.”⁵ But hearing no better, knowing no better, this is what the American public bought into. It was not until just a short thirty years ago that historians began to get it right. Recent influencers to set the record straight include marvelous works from Brooks Simpson, Jean Edward Smith, Gary Gallagher, Joan Waugh, and more recent works by Ronald White, Charles Calhoun, and Ron Chernow, amongst notable others, all fortified by the magnificent work of the late, great John Y. Simon and his prodigious thirty-year effort to publish *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*.

As Scaturro has suggested for years, the name Ulysses S. Grant indeed belongs in the Pantheon with the other greatest of American heroes. What had been written in his name for so long is a historical disgrace and a sad commentary of that bygone historical community. His “reputational renaissance” is long overdue, and this piece of literature is just one more recent convincing development that will allow Grant to earn his just do. Academia is today getting it right, but turning that public memory train in the correct direction will continue to be a project.

A professor of communications at St. Bonaventure University, Chris Mackowski is the editor-in-chief and co-founder of *Emerging Civil War* and the managing editor of the *Emerging Civil War Series* (Savas Beatie).

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⁵ William Hesseltine, *Ulysses S. Grant, Politician* (1935), 304.