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The Return of Ulysses

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U.S. Grant: American Hero, American Myth

by Joan Waugh

SEAN WILENTZ on THE REHABILITATION OF ULYSSES S. GRANT

No great American has suffered more cruelly and undeservedly at the hands of historians than Ulysses S. Grant. The dominating influence of pro-Southern historians early in the twentieth century—an influence that tainted scholarship on the Civil War for decades—helps to explain Grant's abysmal reputation. But it does not explain Grant's fate in full, nor why the vilification of the man has continued into our own time.

Grant is caricatured both as a drunken military brute and the heavy, venal presidential overseer of what Mark Twain, in the satiric novel he wrote with Charles Dudley Warner, called the *Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*. In fact, Grant's presidency, far more than his generalship, has been the chief reason why condemnation of him has proved so enduring and so nearly universal. And therein lies a paradox—for Twain, who named the age, was also one of Grant's closest friends in his later life, the man who arranged for the publication of Grant's *Personal Memoirs*, a genuinely great book, and whose admiration for Grant led to the general's initials appearing in the dedication of *Huckleberry Finn*. By the lights of the received wisdom, the combination makes no sense. Yet Twain is still remembered as Twain, whereas Grant is remembered as the sort of figure Twain should have ridiculed.

But Grant may be on the verge of finally receiving his due. Quietly, outside the view of most readers—including professional historians who do not specialize in the Civil War era—Grant's reputation, including his service in the White House, has enjoyed a friendly revision over the past fifteen years. A handful of unconventional scholars, including Richard N. Current, Brooks D. Simpson, Jean Edward Smith, and Josiah Bunting III, have attempted to vindicate Grant from some of the worst accusations against him. Joan Waugh's engrossing new book advances that salutary revision by examining Grant's public reputation during and after his lifetime, and exploring what it reveals about shifting intellectual trends.

As is well known, the study of collective memory has become a faddish subject inside the American academy, inspired largely by the work—pioneered in the 1980s—of French historian Pierre Nora. Given the centrality of the Civil War in American myth and remembrance, the memory of that war has, not surprisingly, been the subject of numerous recent books, notably David Blight's distinguished study, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. But none of these books has challenged views long accepted by historians as cogently—and as startlingly—as Waugh's fine volume does.

Waugh describes how the estimation of Grant, especially as a political leader, has itself had a curious and telling history. That his presidency has ranked so low for so long—his current, somewhat improved standing places him roughly on a par with Calvin Coolidge and Gerald Ford—says practically nothing about Grant's public reputation during, and especially just after, the Civil War. Immediately after Appomattox, Grant was of course hailed in the North as a savior; and then, following Lincoln's assassination, he became the greatest living hero of the war. The approval proved lasting. Grant won the presidency in 1868 with just under fifty-three percent of the popular vote, a larger margin than expected. Four years later, he crushed his opponent, Horace Greeley, in both the popular vote and the Electoral College.

Grant thereby became only the second president since Andrew Jackson to win re-election (Lincoln was the other); and he was the only president in the decades between Andrew Jackson and Woodrow Wilson to serve two full consecutive terms. Allegations of scandal followed by Democratic resurgence at the polls marred his second term, but Grant was hailed as the most admired American on earth when he left office. "In stark contrast to what the literature might suggest," Waugh observes, "Grant retained much of his iconic status during his presidency and regained what had been lost in his postpresidential years." There were even serious efforts to nominate him for president on the Republican ticket in 1880.

During his presidency, to be sure, the Democratic press condemned Grant as at once feeble, conniving, and imperious—attacks similar to those that the Democrats had made on Lincoln. But even nastier rebukes came from members of Grant's own party, the so-called Liberal Republicans, including Charles Sumner and Carl Schurz, who for a combination of reasons—displeasure with Grant's executive appointments, disgust at his friendliness with party organization polls, opposition to his resolute Reconstruction policy, all of it colored by a snobbish hauteur—came to despise the president. The most famous slurs emanated from Henry

Adams, who lived just across Lafayette Square, and who WASPishly joked that Grant's initials stood for "uniquely stupid." Many years later Adams observed that "the progress of evolution from President Washington to President Grant, was alone enough to upset Darwin." The *bien pensants* at the *Nation* called Grant "an ignorant soldier, coarse in his taste and blunt in his perceptions, fond of money and material enjoyment and of low company." When Grant died in 1885, the *New York Tribune* praised his military career, but charged that "the greatest mistake of his life was the acceptance of the presidency."

But as Waugh shows, Grant's admirers greatly outnumbered his detractors, and his death brought a tidal wave of emotional eulogizing. On the very next day after Grant was laid to rest in New York City, his adopted home, talk began of replacing his temporary vault overlooking the Hudson River with a grand memorial. A dozen years later the gigantic domed edifice that is familiarly known as Grant's Tomb was dedicated—and for the succeeding two decades, the memorial was New York's most popular tourist site, attracting more than five hundred thousand people annually, far more than the Statue of Liberty did. Observers as astute as the Scots-born James Bryce, in his formidable *The American Commonwealth*, which appeared in 1888, asserted that although American presidents had not usually been the greatest men available, four of them did "belong to a front rank": Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Grant.

Grant's standing began to erode drastically after 1920 owing to several currents, cultural and intellectual, that emerged from diverse quarters. First, the rising racist, pro-Southern, so-called "revisionist," or "Lost Cause" school of American historians, pioneered at the turn of the century by William Dunning of Columbia University, portrayed Grant as a sociopathic killer during the war and a tyrant during Reconstruction. General Robert E. Lee, the man whom Grant had defeated on the battlefield, now became widely viewed as the war's supreme military genius, lionized in the South and respected in the North as the gentleman-soldier who supposedly embodied the courage and the gallantry of the doomed Confederacy. Abraham Lincoln became the true giant of the Union cause, regarded even by some in the South as the compassionate patriot who, had he lived, would have spared the country the folly and (for Southern whites) the humiliation of Reconstruction. But Grant, by contrast, seemed to possess not an ounce of decency or forgiveness. Demonized as an inept, even crooked president, he emerged from these accounts as the lowlife who presided over what Dunning crudely called the "blackout of honest government" during the Reconstruction years, and who personally ushered in the crimes and excesses of the Gilded Age.

The disillusionment among the American intelligentsia over World War I—and over the claims that waging war advanced democracy—further damaged Grant's image during the 1920s, a view later reinforced in the public mind with entertainment spectacles like the book and film versions of *Gone With the Wind*. The leftist climate of the 1930s led to renewed attacks on Grant's presidency as an emblem of Gilded Age dishonesty. And the rising historians of the 1940s and 1950s, even as they challenged both the Dunning School and Depression-era leftist simplicities, affirmed that Grant's political career was disastrous. Richard Hofstadter, among the most

respected new historians, could write in 1948, without fear of contradiction, that “Grant’s administrations are notorious for their corruption.”

In 1962, in *Patriotic Gore*, his major study of the literature of the Civil War, Edmund Wilson revived Grant’s reputation by praising his performance in battle and lauding the taut, sinewy prose of Grant’s memoirs, completed just before his death. But Wilson, too, had nothing good to say about Grant’s two presidential administrations, under which, he wrote, “there flapped through the national capital a whole phantasmagoria of insolent fraud, while a swarm of predatory adventurers was let loose on the helpless South.”

The civil rights and Vietnam War era brought renewed sharp attacks on Grant, most skillfully in William S. McFeely’s acclaimed work *Grant: A Biography*—as a vicious Union commander and, at best, a half-hearted defender of the ex-slaves during Reconstruction, whose unenlightened views on race led him to waver and finally to retreat from resisting the violent forces of white supremacy. Curiously, in the 1960s and 1970s, even after an outpouring of new scholarship had finally overturned the racist, anti-Grant interpretations of the Dunning School, Grant himself remained an object of contempt. “Sensitive intellectuals, then and since,” the distinguished Civil War historian Charles Royster observed in 1992, “have looked at Grant’s career and marveled that he could hold his head up without shame or remorse.”

The revision of Grant’s reputation would seem to be an uphill battle. Waugh devotes the second half of her book to reclaiming the honor accorded Grant during the years after he left the presidency, culminating in a fair-minded reading of his *Personal Memoirs* (composed while he was heavily drugged with palliatives for the agonizing throat cancer that finally killed him) and a detailed description of what she calls the “pageantry of woe”that accompanied Grant’s grand state funeral. The decline of Grant’s Tomb from a popular shrine through the 1920s into a nearly-forgotten, seedy, even dangerous refuge for homeless junkies fifty years later becomes a fitting symbol, for Waugh, of how Grant’s reputation has crumbled.

But the poignancy and, finally, the outrage of that story become clear only because the first half of Waugh’s book tells of how Grant rose from the social depths, overcame crushing adversity, and achieved all he did as general and as president. And in this part of her book Waugh’s approach somewhat undermines her larger effort. Since she focuses on images of Grant—as the intrepid fighter, the magnanimous victor, the unifying president—Waugh relies largely on the work of her fellow revisionists to begin putting the lie to the calumnies that now encrust Grant’s name. She is therefore not as full-throated as she might be in vindicating Grant from, for example, the charges that he deliberately and perversely caused needless death and suffering during the war, or that he sold out the freedmen, or that he either overlooked or indulged the corruption that was all around him during his presidency—none of which is true. Having provided an archeology of Grant’s reputation, Waugh leaves it to others to advance what she calls the recent upswing in Grant’s standing, which has included the renovation of Grant’s Tomb in 1997 as well as a refreshingly fair-minded PBS documentary in 2002. The imminent Civil War sesquicentennial of 2011 to 2015 augurs a full recasting of popular as well as scholarly

understanding of the war and its major figures, including, inevitably, Grant. Perhaps then, Waugh concludes, visitors to the tomb “may be able to see all the tangled, complicated, but ultimately inspiring dimensions of a man who truly is both an American hero and an American myth.”

If indeed justice is done and truth is served, those visitors will be inspired by far more than certain particular dimensions of Grant. A superb modern general who, with Lincoln, finally unleashed the force required to crush the slaveholders’ rebellion, Grant went on, as president, to press vigorously for the reunification of the severed nation, but on the terms of the victorious North and not of the defeated South. Given all that he was up against—not simply from Confederates and Southern white terrorists but, as president, from high-minded factional opponents and schismatics from his own Republican Party—it is quite remarkable that Grant sustained his commitment to the freedmen for as long and as hard as he did. The evidence clearly shows that he created the most auspicious record on racial equality and civil rights of any president from Lincoln to Lyndon B. Johnson. He also formulated some remarkably humane and advanced ideas on subjects ranging from federal Indian policy to public education. Given the limitations imposed on executive power by the Constitution, it is all the more remarkable that he acted as boldly as he did.

So Grant’s full vindication—which will render him one of the greatest presidents of his era, if not of all American history—still awaits. But when it comes, we will better understand our complicated history, and historians and citizens will have Joan Waugh to thank for helping to make this belated illumination possible.

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