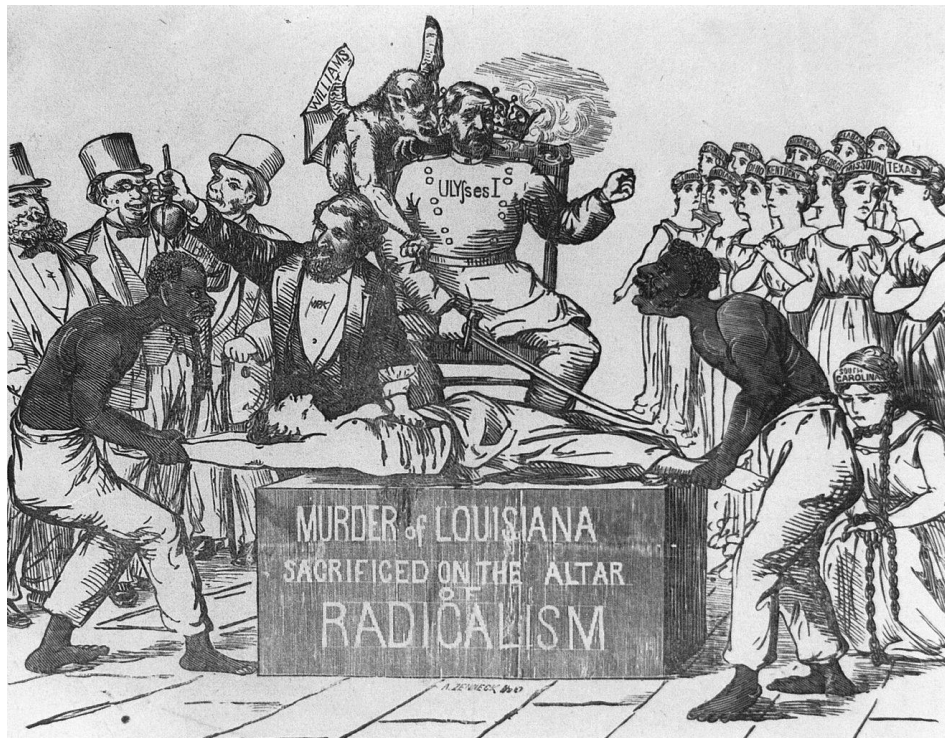


The Changing Historiography of President Ulysses S. Grant and Reconstruction



1872 political cartoon showing President Grant overseeing the sacrificial murder of "Lady Louisiana" who is held down by two freedmen as her heart is torn out by Reconstruction Governor William Kellogg. (Library of Congress)

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In general, the historiography of the presidency of Ulysses S. Grant has shifted dramatically over the past few decades after more than a century of initial revisionism which had dominated most of the twentieth century. As the cartoon on the cover page demonstrates, bitter criticisms of Grant and his presidency were constantly expressed by his most outspoken political enemies while he was still living, but these were clearly partisan political views and not works of scholarly research. In this essay, I will focus on the changing historiography of the two Grant administrations' policy of Reconstruction. This historiography has evolved from overall praise in the decades immediately following his presidency, to outright condemnation by the Dunning school during and after the Progressive Era, and finally, to a new, more favorable revisionist view over the past two decades or so. The publication of Grant's papers starting in 1967 and completed in 2007 have certainly contributed to the development of many historians' more recent views portraying Grant's commitment to Reconstruction in a much more positive light.¹ As might be expected, the popular characterization of Grant's presidency as inept and corrupt has also tended to wane over the recent period, with more than one historian pointing out that the real aim of playing up these various media-hyped "scandals" appears to have been motivated more by a desire to discredit and cripple Grant's Reconstruction initiatives than by any genuine concern to fight "corruption."

"Second only to that of Washington"

In 1888, scholar English James Bryce wrote that of all the presidents elected to date, only Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Grant "belong to a front rank."² As can be seen in Louis

¹ Ron Chernow, *Grant* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018), 961.

² Joan Waugh, *U. S. Grant: American Hero, American Myth* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 153.

Coolidge's 1897 *Ulysses S. Grant*, this was not at all an uncommon view of that period.

Coolidge goes even further than Bryce claiming that "Grant's Administration ranks second only to that of Washington," and that it "presents a record of success almost as striking though less dramatic than his career in war."³ Importantly, this was actually a somewhat popular view of Grant in this period as many Americans considered him a heroic leader and a true symbol of the American identity.⁴ Coolidge points out that any failures of Reconstruction during the Grant presidency were due to the problems inherited from the previous blunders of the Johnson administration which left Reconstruction in "its most sordid and repulsive phase" creating a situation where "threats of turbulence and bloodshed in the South marked the entire period of Grant's occupancy in the White House."⁵

Coolidge documents the historic achievements that occurred under Grant's presidency using long passages from the president's speeches. He especially emphasizes Grant's bold use of the 1870 Enforcement Acts to uphold the nation's newly ratified Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.⁶ These acts, authorized by congress, granted the president executive authority to deploy troops and suspend habeas corpus if necessary to enforce constitutional law. Coolidge writes that Grant's "firmness in using the instruments of enforcement" led to the successful elimination of the Ku Klux Klan in South Carolina, whereas "a weaker executive would have dallied with the disturbances until they passed beyond control."⁷ Coolidge makes sure to praise other achievements of Reconstruction under the Grant administrations such as the passing of the

³ Louis A. Coolidge, *Ulysses S. Grant* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1897), 533.

⁴ Waugh, 2.

⁵ Coolidge, 359-63, 533.

⁶ Coolidge, 368-73.

⁷ Coolidge, 376.

1872 Amnesty Bill, which he portrays as a major step toward reestablishing the unity of the nation.⁸

Enter the Dunning School

In his own words, Grant maintained that he was subject to “abuse and slander scarcely ever equaled in political history” both during his presidency and after.⁹ But it was William Archibald Dunning’s 1907 *Reconstruction: Political and Economic* that converted much of that “slander” into a historiography that would dominate most of the twentieth century. To Dunning, Grant’s presidency (and his attempt at Reconstruction) was nothing but that of “a gloomy despot, openly building up an imperial dominion on the ruins of the Constitution.”¹⁰ In Grant’s 1874 annual message he uttered the famous words that without the Enforcement Acts, enfranchisement would be “worse than a mockery and little better than a crime.” But to Dunning, it was “the whole system of interference under the enforcement acts [that] had become both a mockery and a crime.”¹¹ Dunning consistently downplays the Ku Klux Klan’s systematic terror campaign in the South as “the unorganized and sporadic expression of social demoralization” criticizing Grant’s application of the “extremist provisions of the Ku-Klux act in South Carolina” as politically motivated.¹² Dunning goes further claiming that under Grant, Reconstruction “was gradually transformed into the support of a social and political system in which all the forces that made for civilization were dominated by a mass of barbarous freedmen.” Dunning also asserts that the very idea of the Enforcement Acts amounted to nothing more than the “scandalous

⁸ Coolidge, 376-78.

⁹ Waugh, 145.

¹⁰ William Archibald Dunning, *Reconstruction: Political and Economic* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1907), 194.

¹¹ Dunning, 270.

¹² Dunning, 186-89.

prostitution of the army to merely partisan uses in the South.”¹³ Not surprisingly, Dunning views Grant personally as a headstrong man with no ability to judge people or events correctly overseeing an “administration of caprice, of favorites, and of malodorous intrigue.”¹⁴

In the 1930s, two of the most extensive works focusing exclusively on Grant’s presidency were published for the first time: William Hesselstine’s *Ulysses S. Grant, Politician*, and Allen Nevins’ *Hamilton Fish: The Inner History of the Grant Administration*. While the authors of both books assert that they are attempting to, in Hesselstine’s words, “reexamine Grant’s political career impartially,” still they essentially follow the Dunning school narrative regarding Reconstruction, with both portraying Grant as incompetent and motivated not by principle but by partisan politics.¹⁵ To Hesselstine, Grant was “ignorant of the Constitution and inept in handling men” and his Reconstruction efforts are portrayed as being that of a corrupt “alliance between Eastern financiers and the illiterate black voters of the South.”¹⁶ Hesselstine is also inconsistent in his analysis. While he implies that Grant’s Southern initiatives were motivated more by Republican Party politics than by principle,¹⁷ at the same time he also complains of the negative impact that Grant’s policy had on the electoral viability of the Republicans, especially by the end of the first term when “the mass of thinking men” in the country had come to distrust the party precisely because of the Reconstruction policy.¹⁸

Although, as the title suggests, Allen Nevins’ book clearly focuses more on Grant’s Secretary of State Hamilton Fish and the foreign policy aspect of the administration, he provides

¹³ Dunning, 212, 272.

¹⁴ Dunning, 178-79, 192.

¹⁵ William B. Hesselstine, *Ulysses S. Grant, Politician* (New York: Dodd mead and Company, 1935), vii.

¹⁶ Hesselstine, 372.

¹⁷ Hesselstine, 189, 417.

¹⁸ Hesselstine, 341.

an analysis of Grant and Reconstruction as well. Echoing Hesselstine, Nevins paints Grant as “sadly crippled by a total ignorance of law” which thus resulted in his total “failure in Southern affairs.” According to Nevins, military Reconstruction was an utter failure as Southern whites were driven “in desperation, [to use] force to throw off the intolerable yoke of Negroes, Scalawags and Carpetbaggers.”¹⁹ Thus, also following the Dunning school, Nevins asserts that Reconstruction under Grant’s presidency was the weakest aspect of the administration, and that, at best, he was merely a tool of the radical Republicans. Nevins portrays Grant as an unprincipled politician who “bore grudges and was a vengeful hater,” and even attempts to claim that Grant’s disdain for disloyal reformers derived from the “craving” for admiration by those around him because “he had grown up in a chilly home starved of affection by his mother.”²⁰

Following this same general pattern, historian C. Vann Woodward penned a journal article in 1957 entitled “The Lowest Ebb.” I am including his characterization of the Grant administration and Reconstruction here as Woodward was a follower of Charles Beard and did much to sustain the Dunning narrative regarding Reconstruction generally. As the title clearly indicates, Woodward’s depiction of Grant’s political career is that of a complete failure, achieving nothing more than leaving “his name on America’s sorriest administration.” According to Woodward, the Grant administration was the “all time low-point in statesmanship and political morality in our history.” Echoing previous authors cited, Woodward likewise asserts that Reconstruction under Grant was the major failure of the administration, an administration where “corruption spread like an epidemic.” Woodward also develops a common theme, later to be challenged by more recent revisionists, that Grant may have been a brilliant general in many

¹⁹ Allan Nevins, *Hamilton Fish: The Inner History of the Grant Administration* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1936), 288-92, 601.

²⁰ Nevins, 134-36.

respects, but he was wholly unable to make the adjustment from his military to political career. Note the sharp departure from the completely opposite viewpoint put forward in Louis Coolidge's pre-Dunning school biography. That said, Woodward is at least judicious in identifying the historic reality that Ulysses S. Grant was never *personally* corrupt, but "blamed for the misdeeds of others."²¹

Thomas Aldrich Baily's popular 1966 book *Presidential Greatness: The Image and the Man from George Washington to the Present* should be reviewed as well as Bailey was an influential historian and author of a widespread textbook on American history. Bailey writes that Grant was "ignorant and confused" and that his presidency was a "national disgrace." Under Grant, "the South was reconstructed by bayonet" by a man whose "job was too big for him."²² Of course the term "reconstruction by bayonet" refers back to the 1867 Republican-dominated congressional demands whereby, under threat of military enforcement ("Bayonet Rule"), the former Confederate states were required, among other things, to ratify the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution to gain readmittance to the Union. Interestingly, Bailey poses the irony that if Grant had indeed been such a failure as president, the American people certainly didn't think so, having elected him twice to the presidency with a greater margin of votes the second time than the first. Bailey also reports that the New York University Hall of Fame for Presidents' 1900 election put Grant among the *top five* of America's greatest presidents. Underscoring the influence of the post-Dunning school historiography of Grant's presidency,

²¹ Vann Woodward, "The Lowest Ebb," *American Heritage* 8, no. 3 (April 1957): 52-57, 106-09.
<https://www.americanheritage.com/lowest-ebb>

²² Thomas A. Bailey, *Presidential Greatness: The Image and the Man from George Washington to the Present* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1966), 295-96.

Bailey writes that by the time of the Arthur Schlesinger poll in 1962 Grant was placed in the bottom four as a “failure.”²³

In 1981, William McFeely published his Pulitzer Prize winning biography of Ulysses S. Grant covering both the war years as well as his presidency. In his introduction to the book, McFeely is quite explicit that he is offering no revision of Grant histography in his work. McFeely’s main assessment of Grant’s presidency was that “the opportunity of Reconstruction was not, in the main, taken.”²⁴ McFeely presents Grant the president as often fickle and even aloof to some of the great decisions regarding the healing of the nation from 1869-1876. Even Grant’s visit to congress in March of 1871 to secure the so-called Ku Klux Klan Act is portrayed as an almost feeble action by a president not fully committed to the idea.²⁵ Additionally, McFeely attempts to paint Grant as non-committal on the issue of the Fifteenth Amendment, and likewise disinterested in securing civil rights for blacks in certain circumstances.²⁶ McFeely especially singles out the failure of the federal government to prevent the horrific anti-Republican violence before and after the 1875 Mississippi elections, blaming Grant’s indecision as the reason. While Grant may have been sincere about a certain commitment to Reconstruction, McFeely’s net assessment is that he “did not find a way to make the laws effective.”²⁷

Grant Reconsidered

As mentioned previously, the publication of the thirty-two volumes of Grant’s papers beginning in 1967 provided what Ron Chernow has called a “scholarly feast” for serious students

²³ Bailey, 14, 23-24.

²⁴ William F. McFeely, *Grant: A Biography* (New York: Norton, 1981), xii.

²⁵ McFeely, 369.

²⁶ McFeely, 285, 376-77.

²⁷ McFeely, 425.

of the general and eighteenth president.²⁸ It is important to note that only two volumes relevant to his presidency had been published by 1995, the remainder finished by 2007. Author Frank Scaturro appropriately identifies this recent availability of Grant's writings as one reason for his pioneering revision of Ulysses S. Grant in his 1999 book *Grant Reconsidered*. Scaturro points out that although there were more favorable revisionist views of Reconstruction written during the 1960s, curiously, none of these accounts dealt with Grant's direct role.²⁹

On more than one account, Scaturro directly challenges McFeely's narrative that Grant somehow vacillated in making crucial decisions regarding Reconstruction. Scaturro demonstrates that Grant "interfered with [certain] state governments and elections more boldly than any other president," citing the cases of Louisiana (1872), Alabama (1872), Texas (1873) and Arkansas (1874).³⁰ Importantly, Scaturro asserts that Grant did not actually waver from action in the Mississippi situation in 1875, citing instead Attorney General Pierrepont's failure to communicate to Mississippi Governor Adelbert Ames the president's clear intention to send federal troops if required. Scaturro writes that McFeely is not alone in this misrepresentation as other historians have likewise left out the critical sentence in Grant's letter to the Attorney General:

[The] whole public is tired out with these annual, autumnal outbreaks in the South, and there is much unwholesome lying done by the press and people in regard to the cause and extent of these breeches of the peace that the majority are ready now to condemn any interference on

²⁸ Chernow, 961.

²⁹ Frank J. Scaturro, *President Grant Reconsidered* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998), 66.

³⁰ Scaturro, 80-86.

the part of the Government ...I heartily wish that peace and good order may be restored without issuing the proclamation [to disperse]. *But if it's not, the proclamation must be issued; and if it is, I shall instruct the commander of the forces to have no child's play.* [emphasis added]³¹

Scaturro also counters Hesseltine's and Nevins' depiction of Grant as the pragmatic (and unprincipled) politician strung along by radical Republicans by citing, among other things, his passionate commitment to racial equality as seen in President Grant's Sixth Annual Message (i.e., "Treat the negro as a citizen and a voter as he is and must remain and soon parties will be divided, not on the color line, but on principle.")³² To Scaturro, Grant's uncompromising commitment to counter the "prejudice of color" was an essential motivational force for many of his actions. To bolster the point, Scaturro quotes Frederick Douglass' praise for Grant, who certainly would offer no praise to one not fully committed to enfranchisement:

To [Grant] more than to any other man the negro owes his enfranchisement ...In the matter of the protection of the freedman from violence his moral courage surpassed that of his party; hence his place at its head was given to timid men, and the country was allowed to drift, instead of stemming the current with stalwart arms.³³

³¹ Scaturro, 88-90.

³² Scaturro, 108.

³³ Scaturro, 105-10.

Scaturro even asserts that Ulysses S. Grant more fully embodied “the party of Lincoln” than Lincoln did. His total commitment to Reconstruction never wavered and, echoing Louis Coolidge’s 1897 analysis, Scaturro posits that any failures that occurred ought to be attributed to the fact that Grant inherited a situation already out of control. Further, Scaturro reminds the reader that Grant’s later view of the situation was that the federal government should have “[held] the South in a territorial condition” for ten years after Appomattox in order to guarantee effective Reconstruction.³⁴

Also contrary to the Dunning narrative, Ron Chernow’s *Grant* offers an important revisionist view of Grant and Reconstruction—that Ulysses S. Grant’s presidency was responsible for the remarkable historic achievement of weaving together the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments “into the basic fabric of American life.”³⁵ Contrary to McFeely’s “aloof Grant” narrative, Chernow documents that time and time again Grant had sent federal troops into the South to uphold the Constitution. This resolve, along with Grant’s “noble desire” to protect the blacks in the South places Grant’s presidency “second only to Lincoln for what he did to free the slaves.”³⁶

Like Scaturro, Chernow also challenges the narrative that Grant had somehow callously given up his commitment to Reconstruction by the end of his second term, a narrative which has been repeated in almost every post-Dunning school’s interpretation of Grant’s presidency. By 1875, Thaddeus Stevens, the driving force of Reconstruction in the senate, was deceased, and the Republican Party had suffered huge political losses in the 1874 mid-term elections. Massive political pressure was being exerted on Grant on all sides to abandon Reconstruction altogether

³⁴ Scaturro, 112-13.

³⁵ Chernow, 856.

³⁶ Chernow, 858.

—by his bitter enemies in the Democratic party, by his Liberal Republicans enemies, and by members of his own administration. Chernow muses that, in these circumstances “The true wonder is not that Grant finally retreated from robust federal intervention, but that he had the courage to persist so long in his outspoken concern for black safety and civil rights ...”³⁷

Although Chernow also shows that Governor Ames and Attorney General Pierrepont played critical roles in the failure to send federal troops to Mississippi in the fall of 1875, he adds another element that demonstrates Grant’s character as a man deeply committed to principle.

Years later, black Mississippi Congressman John Roy Lynch revealed that Grant had told him that there was unbearable pressure being put on him to forego any increasingly unpopular military intervention into the South by virtually all of the Republicans in order to secure the re-election of Ohio Governor Rutherford B. Hayes. To Grant, this situation caused enough hesitation to prevent him from acting in time to prevent the bloodshed. In Grant’s words: “I should not have yielded, I believed at the time I was making a grave mistake ...it was duty on one side, and party obligation on the other.”³⁸ This is an important observation that one finds only in the more recent revisionist biographies of Grant: if there was any flaw in Grant as a president, it was simply that he had almost no inclination to sacrifice principle for pragmatic political gains and when on the rare occasion he may have weakened to do so, he deeply regretted it. Joan Waugh’s *U.S. Grant American Hero, American Myth* also underscores this point by referring to Grant’s final address as president: “I have acted in every instance from a conscientious desire to do what was right ...Failures have been errors of judgement, not of intent.”³⁹

³⁷ Chernow, 857.

³⁸ Chernow, 817.

³⁹ Waugh, 152.

“Let us have peace”

An important aspect of Grant’s vision of Reconstruction, highlighted previously by nineteenth century historians like Louis Coolidge and now by today’s revisionists, was his deep commitment to an honorable reconciliation with the South, a commitment portended by his conciliatory treatment toward Robert E. Lee during the surrender at Appomattox Courthouse.⁴⁰ Although only the last sentence of it is usually quoted, Grant’s often cited 1868 letter to General Hawley accepting the Republican nomination for president succinctly expresses his crucial understanding that successfully winning the peace was the key pathway to solving the nation’s problems: “Peace and universal prosperity, its sequence, with economy of administration, will lighten the burden of taxation, while it constantly reduces the national debt. Let us have peace.” And, contrary to McFeely and others, Scaturro points out that Grant truly believed that the Fifteenth Amendment was “indeed a measure of grander importance than any other one act of the kind from the foundation of our free government to the present day.”⁴¹

Perhaps one of the greatest differences between the present revisionist works on Grant and those of the previous Dunning school is that the former portray Grant as a courageous man of principle victimized by the more backward elements of post-Civil War American partisan politics, while the latter invert this by somehow grafting the political degeneracy of the era onto Grant himself. Since it has now been fourteen years since all thirty-two volumes of his writings have been published, a more comprehensive picture of Ulysses S. Grant’s incites and actions on Reconstruction would serve the public well, not to mention honoring the man whom many saw at the time of his presidency as the savior of the Union. Such renewed critical analysis of the one

⁴⁰ Chernow, 857.

⁴¹ Scaturro, 68.

man genuinely committed to healing the nation after the horrors of Civil War would be a productive addition to an ongoing dialogue on nineteenth century Reconstruction, its failures, and the necessity of revisiting that history today.

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