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## Ulysses S. Grant and Reconstruction

David L. Wilson

Ulysses S. Grant accepted the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia from Robert E. Lee on April 9, 1865. The following morning Grant and Lee met alone for an hour, presumably to discuss reuniting the sundered nation. Lee's surrender doomed the Confederacy and resistance collapsed with spectacular speed. Grant's Civil War career is well known; much has been written about April 9 and the many bloody days which preceded it. Less well known is the four-year period in Grant's life from the end of the war to his assumption of the Presidency. Grant played a key role during a time with no precedent in the nation's history.

Grant gave generous military terms to the tattered Confederate soldiers at Appomattox, but President Abraham Lincoln had made it clear to him that he could not discuss political questions with Southern leaders. The terms for restoration of the South remained in presidential hands. This suited Grant perfectly because he disliked political controversy and preferred to avoid personal involvement in such matters. He believed that professional army officers had an obligation to carry out the law as interpreted by the president and Congress. To do their duty, soldiers had to remain above politics. Ultimately, this belief placed Grant squarely in the middle of a continuing civil war, one between Congress and the president.

Grant hurried back to Washington from his last battlefield. He did not gloat over his vanquished foe; he made no triumphal entry into Richmond. Southern soldiers had surrendered honorably, in Grant's view, and should be left in peace as long as they abided by the terms of their parole.

Grant rushed to Washington for another reason: Reconstruction of the North weighed heavily on his mind. He had to do something quickly about reducing the costs of

normal lives. Reconstruction in the North took place rapidly as a result. Other events, however, had already soured Northern feelings concerning Reconstruction.

Lincoln's assassination stunned Grant. The two men had grown close during an extended presidential visit to Grant's headquarters in March 1865. They discussed a wide range of topics from military movements to Northern economic problems and Lincoln's plans for peace. Grant certainly agreed with his commander that the Southern states should be restored to the Union as quickly as circumstances permitted. Lincoln's death changed everything.

Grant had first worked with Andrew Johnson in Tennessee where Johnson had presided as military governor. The relationship had not been an easy one. Even so, Grant wrote shortly after the assassination: "I am satisfied that the country has nothing to fear from his administration. It is unpatriotic at this time for professed lovers of their country to express doubts of the capacity and integrity of our Chief Magistrate" (1). Johnson's early views on Reconstruction were far different than Lincoln's. "Treason must be made odious," Johnson pronounced to all visitors. He disliked the Southern aristocracy, whom he blamed for the war. They had to be punished. In June, a federal grand jury in Norfolk indicted Lee and other high-ranking military officers and civilians for treason, a

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maintaining the enormous Union army of over one million men. The North had nearly prostrated itself in defeating the South. The Reconstruction process had to begin first in the North by reducing government costs. Volunteer soldiers clamored to go home to reconstruct their lives which had been disrupted by war service. Grant agreed and by mid-summer, two-thirds of the army had been mustered out, and by the following summer all of the white volunteers with the exception of a few staff officers had resumed their

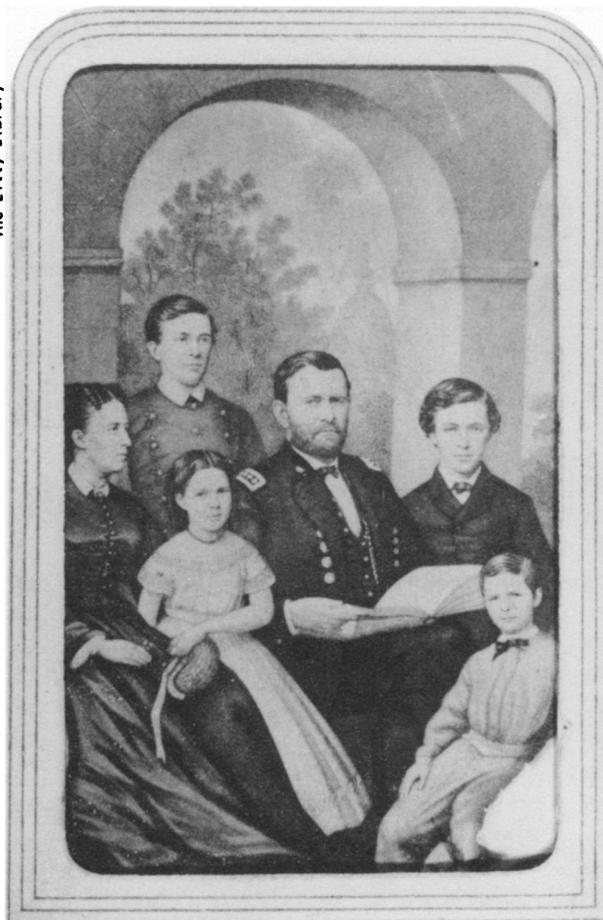
administration. It is unpatriotic at this time for professed lovers of their country to express doubts of the capacity and integrity of our Chief Magistrate" (1). Johnson's early views on Reconstruction were far different than Lincoln's. "Treason must be made odious," Johnson pronounced to all visitors. He disliked the Southern aristocracy, whom he blamed for the war. They had to be punished. In June, a federal grand jury in Norfolk indicted Lee and other high-ranking military officers and civilians for treason, a

capital offense. "In my opinion," Grant wrote to Johnson, "the officers and men paroled at Appomattox C. H. and since upon the same terms given to Lee, can not be tried for treason so long as they observe the terms of their parole" (2). Privately, Grant threatened to resign and take his case to the country if Johnson persisted in trying Lee. Threatening resignation, not Grant's style, indicated the depth of the general's feelings about his solemn word to protect former Southern soldiers from persecution as long as they obeyed their paroles. Johnson backed down and plans to punish numerous Southerners through state trials faded away.

Johnson soon reversed himself on plans for Reconstruction and encouraged Southern states to send representatives to Congress when it resumed session in December 1865. The reason for Johnson's reversal is clear. While he disliked the Southern aristocracy, he hated and feared blacks even more. The newly freed slaves threatened Johnson's view of Southern society, and he wanted no radical changes. The Radical Republicans, on the other hand, based their plans for Reconstruction on the newly freed slaves. The only way for Johnson to avoid Radical Reconstruction was to restore the Southern states to their former status before Congress met. Blacks, at the heart of the emerging quarrel between Johnson and congressional Republicans, became the principle victims of the quarrel.

Grant preferred to stay on the sidelines in political disputes, but circumstances drew him gradually into the fray. At Johnson's request, Grant made a whirlwind tour of the South in late 1865. "I am satisfied," Grant reported, "that the mass of

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General Ulysses S. Grant and family.

thinking men in the South accept the present situation of affairs in good faith" (3). The best known man of his day, Grant's opinions had enormous impact. He had been used by Johnson to counter less favorable reports on Southern conditions as Congress opened for business. Indeed, Johnson simply treated professional army officers as he did other politicians. As time passed, Grant and other professional officers resented Johnson's attempt to manipulate the army. Even officers such as William T. Sherman (who shared Johnson's social views) resented Johnson's interference. Perhaps Johnson's use of Grant's report made the general more wary of involvement in political affairs.

Black soldiers played an increasingly important role in Union victories after 1863. Slaves, in effect, became soldiers and freed not only themselves but all of their people. Grant felt a special obligation to these men who were truly

fighting for their own liberation. The general, for example, refused to allow the exchange of prisoners as long as the South treated captured black soldiers differently than captured white soldiers. This ended the exchange of prisoners from spring 1864 until near the end of the conflict. By late 1865, black soldiers made up the majority of the army as their white compatriots went home to resume their normal lives. Protecting former black soldiers and their families in the South assumed a position of growing importance to Grant.

Reports of violence against blacks had a disquieting effect in early 1866. Southern states, under Johnson's plan, had passed Black Codes keeping former slaves in virtual slavery. Southerners attempted to reassert

social control over blacks using violence and intimidation. Reports of violence poured into the War Department. Also, Southerners started using civil courts to retaliate against Unionists in their midst, including members of the occupying military forces. Johnson cared little about the growing violence against blacks or the persecution of Unionists as his quarrel with Radical Republicans intensified. Grant did care, however, and he quietly took action to protect blacks and Unionists in the South. In January, Grant issued orders to military officers to protect "colored persons from prosecutions in any of said states charged with offenses for which white persons are not prosecuted or punished in the same manner and degree" (4). Sickened by violence against blacks in Memphis and elsewhere, Grant issued additional orders in July requiring commanders "to arrest all persons . . . charged with the commission of crimes and offenses . . .

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irrespective of color, in cases where the civil authorities have failed, neglected, or are unable to arrest and bring such parties to trial" (5). The army had assumed a role in Southern political affairs.

The prewar army had been a small force of approximately twelve thousand officers and men in keeping with American mistrust of a large standing military force. The postwar army had to be expanded, at least temporarily, to meet obligations in the South and on the frontier. Grant worked closely with Congress to create a larger, more efficient military force of fifty thousand enlisted men which could be expanded quickly to one hundred thousand men. One issue resolved itself when the army bill finally passed Congress in July 1866. Many prewar officers had defected to the South in 1861, and no one wanted to see this happen again. Grant effectively Northernized the army by appointing combat-tested volunteer officers to the many vacancies. The army, its loyalty to the North assured for many years to come, could be relied on to put down any attempts to renew rebellion.

ostensibly to dedicate a monument to Stephen A. Douglas in Chicago. Johnson's real motive, to influence fall congressional elections, became clear as the journey progressed. Johnson failed. Indeed, he thoroughly alienated voters and alarmed Grant with his long-winded, vitriolic attacks on Congress.

"I regret to say," Grant cautioned Philip H. Sheridan, commander in Louisiana and Texas, "that since the unfortunate differences between the President and Congress, the former becomes more violent with the opposition he meets with until now, but few people who were loyal to the government during the rebellion seem to have any influence with him." Grant added: "None have unless they join in a crusade against Congress and declare their acts, the principal ones, illegal and indeed I much fear that we are fast approaching the point where he will want to declare the body itself illegal, unconstitutional and revolutionary" (6). Southerners had armed themselves initially in 1861 by seizing local federal arsenals. In 1866, Grant ordered his commanders to remove all surplus

sion to Mexico. Grant refused, and Sherman went to Mexico instead. In late October and early November, Grant negotiated a settlement in Baltimore between Radical Republicans and Democrats, preventing a potentially dangerous situation. Johnson had wanted Grant to use the army against the radicals. At the same time, Grant privately encouraged Southerners to submit to congressional will, and, as a minimum, ratify the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. His attempts failed. The gulf widened between North and South, between Congress and President, and all focused on Grant as the best hope.

Congress passed the First Reconstruction Act on March 2, 1867, over Johnson's veto. This bill, and two passed later, provided for military Reconstruction of the South. Congress also made sure that Johnson could not give orders directly to the army; all orders had to pass through Grant. Grant, as army commander, played a pivotal role. Military Reconstruction made Grant and the army uncomfortable as the army simply had not been constituted to cope with essentially political questions. Grant and the five district commanders, however, busied themselves in carrying out congressional will.

Grant consistently sought to avoid entanglement in political affairs. He reluctantly agreed to become secretary of war *ad interim* in August when Johnson suspended Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton from office as required by the Tenure of Office Act. Grant took the job to protect the interests of the army and, after attending several unpleasant cabinet meetings, he asked to be excused from attending future meetings unless military affairs were to be discussed. Grant's disgust with Johnson escalated during this period. The Senate restored Stanton to

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Grant's views on Reconstruction were in flux during 1866. Johnson hoped to use Grant, the symbol, to further the presidential Reconstruction program and to counteract Radical Republicans. Johnson ordered Grant to accompany him on the now-famous "Swing around the Circle" in late summer,

weapons from the South that had been surrendered at the war's end. Grant prepared his forces for the worst, a renewal of civil war, but he still hoped for the best, a speedy restoration of the Union.

In October, Johnson plotted to replace Grant with Sherman by sending Grant on an extended mis-



Tennessee Klansman, identities unknown, c. 1880. As President, Grant temporarily slowed Klan terror and intimidation in the South through use of the Force Bills.

office in January 1868, leading to a public rupture between Johnson and Grant.

Accused of bad faith, Grant reacted angrily against newspaper criticism emanating from Johnson's office. In the spring, he became convinced that Johnson's removal as

president was in the country's best interest. Formerly, Grant had opposed impeachment proceedings in progress against Johnson. To protect the victory won at Appomattox, his thoughts turned to the presidency. Grant's sense of duty to the nation led him to accept the Repub-

lican party's nomination and to proclaim "Let us have peace." True peace did not come as the North lost interest in reconstructing the South. Grant hoped to maintain the black civil rights in the face of growing Southern opposition to their participation in the political process. Grant won temporary victories over the Ku Klux Klan, but in the end the South reasserted itself and restored more conservative social and political patterns.

Had Grant viewed the presidency in the same manner as he did military command during the Civil War, Reconstruction might have been different. Congress and the North ultimately ignored the South, leaving blacks without the means to resist Southern intimidation. As president, Grant believed that it was his duty to execute the law and to carry out the will of Congress. He never surrendered to the idea that the South had the right to oppress blacks, and had he asserted his personal beliefs, a different South might have emerged. Thus, Appomattox became only one-half of a victory as memories of the Civil War faded away. ■

#### NOTES

1. Simon, John Y., editor. *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: The Ulysses S. Grant Association and Southern Illinois University Press) 14, (1967-): 429.
2. *Ibid.* 15:149.
3. *Ibid.* 15:434.
4. *Ibid.* 16:8.
5. *Ibid.* 16:228.
6. *Ibid.* 16:330.

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