Grant vs. the Klan

David S. Reynolds

New books reconsider how Ulysses S. Grant became a forceful defender of the rights of African Americans after the Civil War.

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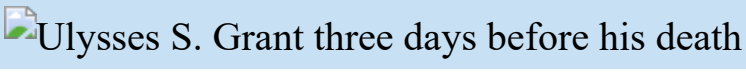

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Ulysses S. Grant three days before his death, at the cottage in the Adirondacks where he finished his memoirs, July 1885

Reviewed:

Soldier of Destiny: Slavery, Secession, and the Redemption of Ulysses S. Grant
by John Reeves
Pegasus, 289 pp., $29.95

Klan War: Ulysses S. Grant and the Battle to Save Reconstruction
by Fergus M. Bordewich
Knopf, 447 pp., $35.00

How could a slaveholder develop into one of America's most determined enforcers of rights for African Americans? The question arises when we consider two recent books on Ulysses S. Grant: John Reeves's *Soldier of Destiny* and Fergus M. Bordewich's *Klan War*. Reeves traces Grant's life between 1854, when the thirty-two-year-old ex–army officer became a Missouri farmer, and 1864, when his successes on Civil War battlefields led to his appointment as the commanding general of the Union Army. Bordewich describes Grant after the Civil War, when, during his first term as president, he forcefully challenged the Ku Klux Klan, which was terrorizing Black people in the South.

Grant came from an antislavery background. His father, the Ohio businessman Jesse Root Grant, was a fervent abolitionist who knew and respected John Brown. In Reeves's narrative, Jesse Grant becomes his son's antislavery conscience. When in 1848 Ulysses Grant, fresh out of officer service in the Mexican-American War, married the privileged Julia Dent, he buried that conscience. Julia's father, Frederick Dent, was a rabidly proslavery St. Louis merchant who had given her several enslaved people when she was a girl. Julia later reported that they "belonged to me up to the time of President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation." Like her father, she loathed abolitionism and, Reeves informs us, was "shockingly sympathetic to secessionist views" before the Civil War.

For Julia Grant, slavery was a family legacy. For her husband, it was circumstantial. When in 1854 he took up farming at White Haven, the Dent family's 890-acre plantation southwest of St. Louis, he worked alongside his father-in-law's enslaved laborers. By 1857 he had taken over the management of the farm, including the bondspeople.

Reeves weighs in on Grant's complicated attitudes toward slavery. Before the Civil War he considered abolitionism a threat to social stability. He told a friend, "I was never an Abolitionist, not even what could be called anti-slavery." In the 1856 presidential election he voted for the slavery-enabling Democrat James Buchanan, and four years later he supported Lincoln's opponent Stephen A. Douglas, who promoted noninterference with slavery. Grant confessed, "I have no hobby of my own with regard to the negro, either to effect his freedom or continue his bondage."

Such statements lead Reeves to reinterpret what is usually seen as a dramatic antislavery act on Grant's part: his setting free of William Jones, the only enslaved person he owned. On March 29, 1859, Grant filed manumission papers for Jones at the St. Louis County Courthouse. Most commentators see the emancipation of Jones as ethically motivated, especially because Grant could have sold him for a profit of at least $1,000 (more than $38,000 today).

[1] Reeves dismisses this as "wishful thinking." He points out that there's no evidence that Grant desired freedom for his wife's enslaved people. Also, Grant had previously proposed renting out an enslaved girl to make extra income. Reeves suggests that Jones may have been a free Black man who became a bonded servant with a date set for his release. Or, he vaguely writes, liberating Jones was "primarily a business decision of some sort and not a reflection of any antislavery views." Here Reeves seems to be reaching for support for his point that "Grant actively participated in the slave culture of St. Louis prior to the Civil War" and remained "after a year or so of war…indifferent to emancipation."

> Reeves places a great deal of emphasis on Grant's shortcomings and stumbles: his propensity for binge drinking (though he avoided alcohol for long periods) and his military unpreparedness at battles like Shiloh and Missionary Ridge. Reeves also probes the implications of Grant's infamous order of December 1862 that expelled "Jews as a class" from his military district—a response to unlicensed merchants, some of them Jewish, who were following his army in efforts to trade illegally in Southern cotton. If it had gone into effect, Reeves points out, it would have forced the removal not only of the merchants but also of other Jews in the region and even of some of Grant's own soldiers. The order, which President Lincoln immediately revoked, showed "an almost unfathomable lack of judgment and wisdom for someone of his high rank," Reeves writes. Grant's later disavowal of the order, which he explained as a rash battlefield decision, "wasn't entirely convincing," Reeves argues. Perhaps, but it should be noted that Grant's statement that he harbored "no prejudice against sect or class" was borne out during his presidency, when he appointed a record number of Jews, as well as many Blacks and one Native American, to positions in his administration—trailblazing appointments that are unmentioned in *Soldier of Destiny*.
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> Although Reeves notes that Grant supported Black enlistment and became a committed emancipationist during the war, he makes too little of Grant's progress on race. He could have profited from comparing him with the other main Union general, William Tecumseh Sherman, who was convinced of the inferiority of Black people and wrote, "I would prefer to have this a white man's war…. With my opinions of negroes and my experience, yea prejudice,

I cannot trust them yet." He wanted to use Blacks as workers but not as soldiers. On June 3, 1864, Sherman issued Special Field Order No. 16, which forbade the enlistment of Blacks in his army. Grant, in contrast, wrote to Lincoln that emancipating and arming African Americans was "the heaviest blow yet given the Confederacy." Reeves doesn't explore Grant's brilliant use of Black troops in his later campaigns. Nor does he quote Grant's wartime statement that it would be easy "eventually to put the ballot in [the Black man's] hand and make him a citizen" or Frederick Douglass's remark that Grant was a "great man" for overcoming "popular prejudice" and showing a capacity to "adjust himself to new conditions, and adopt the lessons taught by the events of the hour."

This flexibility is superbly demonstrated in Fergus Bordewich's well-researched, gripping, and often horrifying *Klan War*. Bordewich takes up Grant's life after the Civil War, when he was famous as a war hero. He was initially on good terms with President Andrew Johnson, who appointed him as general of the army. However, he split with Johnson over Reconstruction. As the head of the occupying army, Grant enforced the Freedmen's Bureau Act (1865), which provided vital aid to the South's millions of freedmen, and the Military Reconstruction Act (1867), which gave Black men the right to vote under the protection of generals appointed to five Southern military districts supervised by Grant. Johnson, the Tennessean who had been chosen as Lincoln's running mate in 1864 to attract border-state votes, was an incorrigible racist who declared, "Negroes have shown less capacity for government than any other race of people." Johnson vetoed four forward-looking Reconstruction bills passed by Congress, which overrode his vetoes.

Grant, whose silence on political issues led *The New York Times* to characterize him as "the Sphinx to the last," did not comment publicly on Johnson's battles with Congress, including his impeachment trial, in which he escaped removal from office by a single vote in the Senate. Grant, the laconic political outsider, was chosen as the Republican Party's presidential candidate in 1868. He won handily against a Democratic ticket led by the former New York governor Horatio Seymour, whose campaign slogan was "This is a white man's government."

When Grant took office in March 1869, the Ku Klux Klan had spread throughout the South. The Klan was reacting to advances that Black people had made in the early phase of Reconstruction. Bordewich shows how potent a political power African Americans had become in some areas of the South. In 1868 heavy voter turnout produced biracial Southern state governments. In Mississippi, for example, thirty-five of the 109 members of the state legislature were Black. In South Carolina, African Americans constituted more than two thirds of the legislature.

This sudden phenomenon of African American officeholding spurred a vicious reaction by the Ku Klux Klan. Formed in 1865 in Pulaski, Tennessee, it began as a social club but soon became a terrorist organization intent on preventing freedmen and white Republicans from voting. Early on, former Confederates controlled it. A paramilitary group whose members were sworn

to secrecy, the Klan adopted rituals, codes, special handshakes, outlandish disguises, and baroque officer titles. The group's first "grand wizard" was Nathan Bedford Forrest, the cavalry officer who had directed the massacre of nearly two hundred Black Union soldiers who had tried to surrender to him in the Battle of Fort Pillow in April 1864. By 1870 the Klan was a presence in most Southern states, reaching an estimated peak membership of 300,000. It called itself the Invisible Empire.

Bordewich, drawing from a vast array of sources, recounts the Klan's activities in appalling detail. In county after county, state after state, Black people were lynched, raped, dismembered, castrated, and otherwise tormented. One former slave, Jim Williams, was forced onto a tree limb with a rope around his neck; when he gripped the branch and dangled by his hands, a Klansman climbed up to him and hacked his fingers with a knife; Williams dropped and was hanged. A North Carolina man who had reportedly insulted a white woman was flogged and made to take out his penis and stab it with a knife; he later died from his wounds. A Black woman was forced to cook dinner for Klansmen who then took her out to a road and gang-raped her. White people who sympathized with Blacks were also assaulted. A woman who was found hiding two Black men in her home was taken outdoors, stripped, and held down while hot tar was poured into her "private parts."

The Klan, Bordewich demonstrates, was not a fringe group. Its membership included community leaders: lawyers, doctors, journalists, and churchmen. When brought to trial, Klan members usually escaped conviction, because juries consisted largely of fellow Klansmen. Many murder victims were judged to have died "at the hands of persons unknown."

President Grant was slow to respond to the Klan's atrocities. He considered voluntary colonization, the transportation out of the country of beleaguered Blacks who wished to leave—a quixotic idea, advocated previously by Lincoln, Martin Delany, and others, that had yielded meager results over the years. Grant's removal plan involved a proposed takeover of Santo Domingo (the Dominican Republic), which he considered large enough to receive relocated African Americans. The plan, which met with sharp criticism from Senator Charles Sumner and others, came to naught.

However, when Grant moved in more realistic directions, he did so aggressively. He stood firm in his support for the Fourteenth Amendment, which enforced civil rights nationally, and he pushed hard for the Fifteenth Amendment, which gave the vote to all American men regardless of color. When the amendment was ratified, he called it "the most important event that has occurred since the nation came into life."

To combat the Ku Klux Klan, Grant promoted and signed three Enforcement Acts that passed Congress between 1870 and 1871. The first made interference with voting a federal crime rather than a matter left to the states. The second put all national elections under federal authority and empowered federal judges and US marshals to oversee local polling places. The third, known as the Ku Klux Klan Act, imposed heavy penalties—ranging from

imprisonment to execution—for interference with voting. This draconian bill allowed for martial law in Klan-ridden areas, including federal arrest warrants, indictments, trials, and military action. Controversially, it also gave the president the power to suspend habeas corpus.

Grant exercised that power in 1871 in North Carolina. He had been overwhelmed by reports and letters describing shootings, whippings, and mutilations in the state, where more than 40,000 Klansmen operated. With the implacability he had exhibited in his 1864 military campaign in Virginia, he went after the Klan. He suspended habeas corpus in portions of North Carolina. There and elsewhere in the South, Klansmen were tracked down, arrested, and brought to trial. Mass convictions ensued. This chain of events led to the collapse of the Klan, though other hate groups survived, and the Klan reappeared in the twentieth century.

In recounting this drama, Bordewich brings to life a number of forgotten civil rights figures: the influential Georgia Republican George W. Ashburn, whose cold-blooded murder by masked home invaders first brought the Klan to national attention; the Ohio lawyer and war veteran Albion W. Tourgée, an active judge in campaigns against the Klan; Major Lewis Merrill, stationed in York County, South Carolina, where he identified many racial terrorists; Amos T. Akerman, a former slaveholding Confederate who converted to Radical Republicanism and, as Grant's attorney general, successfully oversaw the prosecution of hundreds of Klan members; and Benjamin Butler, the Massachusetts businessman and Civil War general who before the war had been a Democrat and supporter of the proslavery *Dred Scott* decision but after the war switched sides and became a Republican supporter of the African American cause.

Tragically, that cause was abandoned by prominent people who moved in the opposite direction. A disturbing underside of Bordewich's history is the record of erstwhile antislavery leaders who gave up on Radical Reconstruction. Carl Schurz, a former Union general and Missouri politician, began as an outspoken critic of Southern racism but later called for the termination of Reconstruction. The Illinoisan Lyman Trumbull, the author of the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery, decided that the South should be left alone and that Black people should not be concerned about voting. Schurz and Trumbull were leading organizers of the Liberal Republican Party, which advocated reconciliation between Northern and Southern whites. Horace Greeley, the longtime abolitionist editor of the *New-York Tribune*, was chosen by the Liberal Republicans to run against Grant in 1872. Greeley was attractive to the reconciliationists because of his remarkable political turnaround, expressed in his declaration: "Having done what I could for the complete emancipation of blacks, I now insist on the full enfranchisement of all my white countrymen." He called for "the emancipation of all the white men in the country" from the "ignorant, superstitious, semi-barbarians" who he said were now in control of the South.

Grant's victory over Greeley in the 1872 election did not stop the collapse of Reconstruction. Bordewich concisely summarizes the ever-worsening race relations during Grant's second term. In April 1873, a month after he resumed office, some sixty to seventy African Americans were massacred by white people in Colfax, Louisiana. Grant declared, "A butchery of citizens was committed at Colfax, which in blood-thirstiness and barbarity is hardly surpassed by any acts of savage warfare." However, Colfax led not to a reassertion of the Enforcement Acts but to their dissolution. The case against three of the accused murderers in the Colfax affair went to the Supreme Court, which ruled in *United States* v. *Cruikshank* that the Fourteenth Amendment applied only to actions by the states, not by individuals. Not only did the nine accused men go unpunished, but three white men who had died in the Colfax fray were later memorialized by an obelisk in a Louisiana cemetery inscribed with the words: "ERECTED TO THE MEMORY OF THE HEROES, STEPHEN DECATUR PARISH, JAMES WEST HADNOT, SIDNEY HARRIS, WHO FELL IN THE COLFAX RIOT FIGHTING FOR WHITE SUPREMACY."

This inscription encapsulates what happened after Reconstruction ended in 1876. In five cases of 1883 the Supreme Court tore civil rights to shreds, opening the way to Jim Crow laws. In *Plessy* v. *Ferguson* (1896) the Court legalized segregation. The spirit of national reconciliation, which restored local power to the former Confederate states, eclipsed concern for Black people who suffered disenfranchisement and intensified violence. Lynchings, formerly done in secret, now became public spectacles, attended by crowds who collected as souvenirs body parts cut off the corpses of Black victims.

In the rearview mirror, the Civil War seemed like a needless bloodbath caused by fanatical abolitionists, and Radical Reconstruction was a nightmarish moment of African American rule that was justly snuffed out by white redeemers. The Lost Cause, which romanticized the Old South and the Confederacy, flooded popular culture with best-selling books and movies like *Gone with the Wind* (1939), the highest-grossing film of all time (adjusted for inflation). D.W. Griffith's masterly but rancidly racist film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) demonized African Americans and their Radical Republican supporters while making heroes of the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan itself made a huge comeback in the 1920s, reaching a nationwide membership of between three and eight million. The new Klan's trademarks were pointed hoods, white robes, and cross-burning terrorism.

In this atmosphere, Grant's reputation sank. Revisionist historians influenced by the Columbia professor William Archibald Dunning had no use for Grant's pursuit of civil rights; they caricatured him as a bumbling battlefield slaughterer and an incompetent president whose second term was plagued by the corruption of people around him. This negative view of Grant lingered. When Harvard's Arthur Schlesinger Sr. took a poll of historians in 1948, Grant was put in the lowest tier of American presidents, a ranking that he retained until the early 2000s, when the growing interest in Black history brought a fresh appreciation of his dedication to citizenship for people of color. Grant steadily rose in experts' polls as historians recognized that the

scandals that rocked his presidency resulted largely from changing economic conditions and his poor judgment in making official appointments, not his own dishonesty. In the latest experts' poll, conducted in February 2024 by the American Political Science Association, Grant ranked seventeenth out of forty-five presidents, just below Ronald Reagan. ●

[2] Readers of Bordewich's outstanding *Klan War* will agree that he may well be headed even higher in the future.

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1. See, for example, Ron Chernow, *Grant* (Penguin, 2017), p. 106. See also "William Jones," Ulysses S. Grant National Historical Site, at www.nps.gov/people/william-jones .htm. ↩

2. Brandon Rottinghaus and Justin Vaughn, "Presidential Greatness Project," presidentialgreatnessproject.com. This poll ranked Lincoln first and Donald Trump last, with Andrew Johnson and James Buchanan joining Trump in the bottom three. ↩