

U.S. Grant: American Hero, American Myth

Aaron Sheehan-Dean

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Sheehan-Dean, Aaron (2010) "U.S. Grant: American Hero, American Myth," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 .

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol12/iss1/14>

Review

Sheehan-Dean, Aaron

Winter 2010

Waugh, Joan *U.S. Grant: American Hero, American Myth*. University of North Carolina Press, \$30.00 ISBN 9780807833179

Reinvestigating U.S. Grant

The rise of Civil War memory studies in recent years has rested largely on studies of groups - Union veterans, Confederate women, African Americans - or broad analyses of public attitudes. Joan Waugh's study of Ulysses S. Grant reveals that focusing on a single individual can generate equally important insights into how nineteenth-century Americans understood the Civil War. Waugh offers a cogent biography of the army man, general, president, and author, but her main concern is to relate Grant's experiences to popular impressions of him during his lifetime and after. Waugh's analysis explores how Americans constructed the meaning of the Civil War, how they chose to represent that meaning (in statues and ritual), and how the meaning changed over time. In particular, Waugh shows how northerners celebrated Grant's central role in sustaining the Union even as they applauded his efforts to reunite the sections.

The central tension that animates the study is why Grant was so well-regarded in his own day and so unpopular or at least unknown today. This curious reversal has been little observed by modern historians who, aside from a few recent biographies on which Waugh draws, tend to disparage Grant's presidential record and view with skepticism any claims to military greatness. Commemorative statuary around the country reveals the change. As Waugh notes, the 1922 Ulysses S. Grant Memorial in Washington, D.C., which sits directly in front of the west face of the Capitol was inscribed only with "Grant," because no other identifiers were needed; every American knew and admired the hero of the Civil War. Except for late arrivals at presidential inaugurations, who have used the pedestal to gain a better view, few people stop or probably even recognize the man celebrated in bronze.

The book is divided into two sections, with the first three chapters carrying the story of Grant's life through his presidential administration. A brief interlude that explores Grant's 1877-79 around-the-world tour reveals how popular he remained among Americans and others across the globe despite the scandals and policy problems that consumed his administration. The last three chapters chronicle Grant's death, funeral, and the building of his tomb in New York City. Waugh's crisp descriptive prose makes Grant's already well-known story engaging, often riveting. Her chapter on Grant's death from throat cancer, which integrates accounts from his doctors, family, the national press (which posted a phalanx of reporters outside his home), and Grant himself, is a model of evocative writing.

Waugh's emphasis throughout is on Grant's perseverance and his steady intelligence. Beginning with the war in Mexico and continuing through the Civil War and his political career, Waugh shows a man who led and communicated with a remarkable subtlety and efficiency. To modern eyes, Waugh's narrative offers a very sympathetic reading of Grant's military and political life. Skeptics will undoubtedly take issue with elements of her interpretation, but that will only serve to prove her larger point. Waugh wants to show us the Ulysses S. Grant that his contemporaries knew and adored. That we cannot understand or imagine the reverence in which he was held reveals the historical gulf between his time and ours. Waugh is not blind to Grant's faults but, by focusing on his victories and accomplishments, she makes the public memory of Grant in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries intelligible. Above all, as Waugh shows, Americans and foreigners celebrated his rise from humble origins and the simplicity of his expression and personality. Unlike almost any other victorious general or president, Grant seems to have been little swayed by the public adulation he received. Throughout, Waugh's narrative is a sensitive and humane account that reveals the strength of combining biography and history, where the depth available in the former compellingly illuminates the larger trends and issues that define the latter.

Waugh's analysis of Grant's work on his memoirs, where he took on a new career as a historian, illuminates several aspects of early Civil War historiography and the debate over the war's meaning. Grant reacted sharply to Lost Cause portrayals of the war, particularly the Overland Campaign and Lee's generalship. Drawing on the voluminous reports and records he compiled during the war, Grant (and other writers with whom he communicated) articulated a decidedly pro-Union explanation to counteract the Confederate emphasis on

northern numerical superiority and Lee's infallibility. Unlike many other generals who penned less memorable recollections, Grant's were both superbly well-written and carefully researched and argued. He understood the political dimensions of writing the war's history and despite his eagerness to see sectional peace Grant refused to compromise the importance of either Union or emancipation.

The main challenge presented by the memory of Grant is that it encompasses two elements that modern historians regard as contradictory if not totally incompatible: Union and reconciliation. Grant insisted, through his presidency and his memoirs, that the northern cause was morally superior to the South's. He lauded the preservation of the Union and strongly supported emancipation. At the same time, in his speeches and public comments, Grant encouraged and celebrated sectional reconciliation. Like Lincoln, Grant saw the goal of the war as the true reunion of the nation. He held these two beliefs about the Civil War without regarding them as the paradox that some modern scholars do. In analyzing Grant and the public memory of him (and through him, of the Civil War itself) Waugh offers us a more complex vision of popular attitudes than do scholars who see a clear dichotomy between emancipation and reunion. Waugh's argument is a necessary and compelling corrective to the binary thesis that reconciliation entailed abandoning black freedom as a consequence of the war.

As Grant's relative obscurity today reveals, the complexity of Grant's conception of the war did not withstand the determined Lost Cause assault. By the mid-twentieth century, Grant's reputation as a butcher-general and a hack politician was well established. Waugh's book restores a vision of Grant as his contemporaries saw him. Joining other recent revisionist biographies, it should prompt historians to more carefully analyze Grant and his actions in the context of the era. More importantly, Waugh's book adds significantly to our understanding of northern memories of the Civil War and to the process by which Americans build and adapt the history of our nation's wars and leaders.

Aaron Sheehan-Dean, associate professor of history at the University of North Florida, is the author of Why Confederates Fought: Family and Nation in Civil War Virginia.