

Citizen Of A Wider Commonwealth: Ulysses S. Grant's Postpresidential Diplomacy

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Review

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U.S. Grant: Diplomat

Being president of the United States is a tough act to follow. After living in the White House, a former president might find doing virtually anything afterward a bit of a letdown. Ulysses Grant faced that challenge after serving two terms from 1869 to 1877, but came up with an exciting short term plan. He, his wife Julia, son Jesse, and a group of friends would embark on a prolonged journey to places they had always dreamed of visiting in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. What was conceived as a pleasure trip morphed into an unofficial extended diplomatic mission. After learning about his predecessor's intentions, President Rutherford Hayes had Secretary of State William Evarts issue the Grant party special passports and inform all American foreign missions to assist them in any possible way. What ensued was a series of firsts for an ex-American president and American diplomacy during a circumnavigation of the world that lasted two years and four months.

Edwina Campbell has written a first-rate book on the subject. She is eminently qualified to do so, having served as an American diplomat for her first career and as a university professor for her second career. Her two most prominent previous books include *Germany's Past and Europe's Future: The Challenges of West German Foreign Policy* and *The Relevance of American Power: The Anglo-American Past and the Euro-Atlantic Future*.

Grant and his party departed Philadelphia on May 17, 1877 and reached Liverpool eleven days later. They took the train to London and swiftly immersed themselves in that nation's elite, meeting Queen Victoria and Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, being feted at London's Guildhall and lodged at Windsor castle, to name some of the highlights. But Grant also mingled with common

Britons, strolled the streets, chatted with onlookers, and addressed business and labor groups.

They then crossed the English Channel to France, but there Grant had to tread lightly. The French had suffered a humiliating and catastrophic defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71), followed by a short-lived but bloody communist revolution in Paris known as the Commune (1871). After years of turmoil, moderate and conservative leaders formed the Third Republic in 1875, but the French remained bitterly split against each other. Grant did not want to appear to favor any one party or politician so he and his family traveled as private citizens. Eventually he had private meetings with President Patrick MacMahon and opposition leader Leon Gambetta, among numerous other prominent politicians and businessmen.

The Grants spent over a year in Europe and visited every independent country. Campbell writes that by “the end of 1878, he knew every president, monarch, and prime minister in Europe.”(133) At Nice they boarded the U.S.S. Vandalia to tour the central and eastern Mediterranean, with Pompeii, the Vatican, the Parthenon, the Pyramids, and Jerusalem the highlights, and fascinating stops in Genoa, Venice, Rome, Florence, Naples, Alexandria, Cairo, and Constantinople.

Grant proved to be an outstanding diplomat. He was always a far better listener than talker, a key diplomatic skill. He was genuinely interested in the people, politics, history, and culture of each country that he visited. He was fascinated with the various ways that countries were governed and people earned their livings, especially what worked and what did not work. He was self-effacing and down-to-earth, traits that got others to trust and open up to him. And yet he was renowned as the general who was decisive in winning the American victory in the Civil War. In both his informal meetings and formal speeches, he extolled the virtues of republicanism, the peaceful settlement of disputes, free labor, and public education. He was no internationalist but instead the quintessential American. He made an revealing admission when he explained the number one reason among many that he enjoyed Paris so much: “One sees more Americans there than any place else in Europe, and I find it pleasant abroad exactly in proportion to the number of Americans one finds to talk to.”(85)

Occasionally there were diplomatic snags. In Rome, Ambassador George Perkins Marsh was so obsessed with the proper protocol for an ex-president for banquet seating arrangements with government officials and the foreign diplomatic corps that he finally refused to host one. The one thing that Grant found tedious was military reviews. He explained to German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck: “The truth is I am more of a farmer than a soldier. I take little or no interest in military affairs...I never went into the army without regret and never retired without pleasure.”(63)

Originally Grant had not planned to journey around the globe. But a suggestion by General William Sherman, eagerly seconded by Julia, convinced him to do so. After he cabled his decision back to Washington, the State and Navy Departments conceived the idea of assigning the *U.S.S. Richmond* to convey him from Marseilles through the Suez Canal to the various ports along his Asian itinerary. Then came word that the *Richmond* was delayed several weeks so the Grant party took a series of commercial vessels to ports in South, Southeast, and East Asia. That turned out to be an advantage because Grant could hobnob with important officials and businessmen, mostly British, heading to various colonies or countries.

Beyond Europe the mass poverty they observed appalled Grant and his entourage. He offered this explanation for that condition: “In the East they have a form of government and a civilization that will always repress progress and development...The people would be industrious if they had encouragement, but they are treated as slaves, and all they produce is taken from them for the benefit of the governing classes and to maintain them in a luxurious and licentious life.”(42)

Throughout his journey, Grant found his mind continually changing from what he expected to what he found. For instance, as an American he naturally imagined that British rule over its empire was repressive and exploitive. He was pleasantly surprised to find instead that British imperialism actually was progressive in promoting economic development and peace in war-torn regions. He correctly predicted that eventually, one by one, the colonies would fight for and win independence but the result would be “rapine and murder and wars between native chiefs.”(109)

From Singapore, Grant left behind the British Empire to spend five months visiting the independent countries of Siam (Thailand), China, and Japan that had

diplomatic and trade relations with the United States. In each country, he advocated what would be called the “open door” policy whereby Americans could freely trade, invest, and even proselytize there alongside people from other countries. He found that each government generally favored the open door notion if only to play off the different foreign countries against each other so that no one dominated let alone endangered its sovereignty. However, those governments drew the line at Christian attempts to convert their peoples, fearing that the result would be divisiveness, turmoil, and possibly even war. To an extraordinary degree, Grant sympathized with the struggles of the Siamese, Chinese, and Japanese governments to guard their sovereignty amidst constant pressure and jockeying for power by the western imperial countries: “I should not blame them if they were to drive out all Europeans—Americans included—and make new treaties in which they would claim equal rights.”(128) He encouraged the Siamese, Chinese, and Japanese to see the United States as a counterweight to the Europeans who “have no interests in Asia...that do not involve the humiliation and subjection of the Asiatic people.”(160) He also encouraged all three countries, but especially China and Japan, to forge peaceful, constructive relations among themselves.

Grant was astounded by how enterprising the overseas Chinese were with their “wonderful shrewdness and industry, and are rapidly monopolizing the trade as carriers, merchants, mechanics, market-gardeners, and servants from Bombay eastward.”(141) That observation prompted endless discussions among the Grant entourage and their hosts over why some European and Asian cultures were more dynamic and successful than others. And that in turn opened Grant’s mind to Chinese immigration to the United States, although he distinguished between accepting enterprising immigrants who came freely to the United States and barring those who were forced to come as quasi-slave labor. He assured his Chinese government hosts that he “had none but the kindest feelings toward the Chinese people and nation” and promised that Americans “would extend to them if they chose to make their home with us, the same welcome they extended to all the rest of the world.”(113) This was a rare example of Grant’s failing to foresee the future--Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882.

Yet Grant perceived a dark side to all that Chinese enterprise, ambition, and nationalism. Looking at a “not very far distant” future, he foresaw China making “rapid strides towards modern civilization, and become dangerous rivals to all powers interested in the trade of the East. They are patient, enduring and of long suffering in their weakness. But once feeling themselves strong they are likely to

become cruel, overbearing, and vindictive.”(137) That certainly describes contemporary China. After spending time in Japan, Grant revised his prediction about China. Japan’s government was successfully modernizing the country while China’s government was flailing at that challenge. Japan would be a threat to the power balance in the Far East long before China.

Grant finally stepped ashore at San Francisco on September 20, 1879. His journey did not end there. For six more weeks before reaching his home at Galena, Illinois on November 5, he journeyed across America meeting countless fellow citizens, as always listening far more than he spoke. He returned from his circumnavigation of the world to be the nation’s leading expert on world affairs. He hoped to use that knowledge if the election of 1880 carried him back to the White House. Much to his regret, the Republican Party never seriously considered him, instead eventually rallying around General James Garfield. Of all the lessons Grant tried to share, perhaps this is the most enduring: “America is respected throughout the world, but it is not to be presumed that...she is necessarily loved.”(186)

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