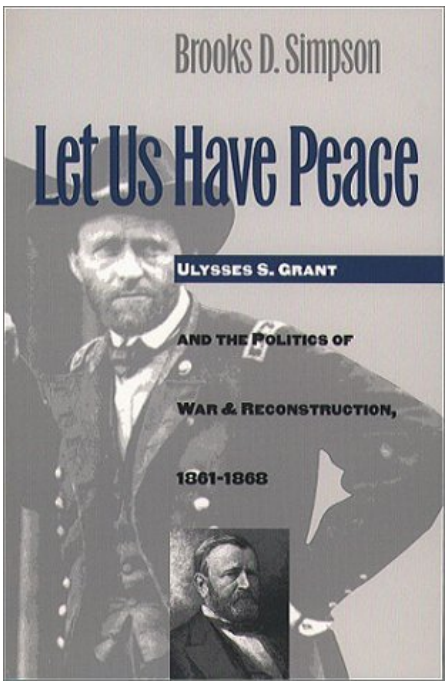

Let Us Have Peace: Ulysses S. Grant and the Politics of War and Reconstruction, 1861-1868

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Historians have traditionally drawn distinctions between Ulysses S. Grant's military and political careers. In *Let Us Have Peace*, Brooks Simpson questions such distinctions and offers a new understanding of this often enigmatic leader. He argues that during the 1860s Grant was both soldier and politician, for military and civil policy were inevitably intertwined during the Civil War and Reconstruction era. According to Simpson, Grant instinctively understood that war was 'politics by other means.' Moreover, he realized that civil wars presented special challenges: reconciliation, not conquest, was the Union's ultimate goal. And in peace, Grant sought to secure what had been won in war, stepping in to assume a more active role in policymaking when the intransigence of white Southerners and the obstructionist behavior of President Andrew Johnson threatened to spoil the fruits of Northern victory.

Let Us Have Peace: Ulysses S. Grant and the Politics of War and Reconstruction, 1861-1868 Details

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From Reader Review Let Us Have Peace: Ulysses S. Grant and the Politics of War and Reconstruction, 1861-1868 for online ebook

Jim says

Ulysses S. Grant is perhaps one of the most misunderstood, caricatured, and in my opinion, underestimated figures in American History. Mostly recalled in popular memory as an alcoholic who bumbled his way to victory through luck and superior numbers, he is barely recalled as a two-term President of the United States. Were it not for his portrait on the fifty-dollar bill I am not sure even that recollection would be preserved. Grant has also fared poorly with historical biographers over the years. While his defeated foe, Robert E. Lee, has been nearly canonized since his surrender at Appomattox, Grant's accomplishments have often been belittled and marginalized, most recently, and most effectively, by William McFeely in his Pulitzer Prize winning book *Grant: A Biography*. Recently however, there has been a turnaround in Grant's fortunes among historians. Recent works by Geoffrey Perret, Jean Edward Smith, and Brooks Simpson, along with the efforts of The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant editor John Y. Simon, have forced a reevaluation of Grant's career. While not fawning these books have in my opinion restored Grant to his properly viewed role in American history; as a flawed man, a military genius and, along with Lincoln, the savior of the Union.[1] Even his Presidency, generally viewed as a failure, has received a second, more critical look by some authors, and while no revision could credibly term his two terms in the White House as a success, it is now being viewed more soberly and carefully in context with the overall political climate of the time.

Most works dealing with the career of Ulysses S. Grant look at his military and political careers as separate and distinct from one another with "Appomattox as the dividing line."[2] While Grant's military career often gets mixed reviews, even his harshest critics view Appomattox as his finest hour. After this however, the preponderance of the literature has taken an overwhelmingly negative view of Grant's political career. There are a number of reasons for this, many having to do with the later effort by southern historians to obfuscate slavery's role as a catalyst for the war. This is not the subject of this review however; suffice it to say the historical view of Grant's career in my opinion, does not reflect reality. Brooks Simpson in his book *Let Us Have Peace: Ulysses S. Grant and the Politics of War & Reconstruction, 1861 – 1868*, takes on this prevailing view in two ways: first by removing what he views as an artificial distinction between Grant's military and political careers, and second by taking a more positive view of Grant's political efforts both during the Civil War and in the early years of Reconstruction.

Simpson argues that Grant's overwhelming success as a General and a statesman was directly attributable to his political acumen during and after the war. For Simpson, Grant was "both a warrior and a statesman from 1861 to 1868."[3] Grant viewed the war and Reconstruction as part of the "same long struggle to preserve the union, destroy slavery, and establish a durable peace."[4] Embodying Clausewitz's maxim that "war is merely the continuation of policy by other means," Grant, Simpson argues, broadened its meaning by understanding the end of hostilities did not mean the end of the struggle.[5] "If the Civil War was politics by other means, " Simpson notes, "then Reconstruction was in some sense a continuation of the struggle to achieve through political means the aims for which the war was fought."[6]

While not a military biography, Simpson devotes about one-third of his book to describing Grant's efforts during the war. He attributes Grant's success not only to exceptional military and leadership skills, but also to his political acumen in dealing with government policy makers; accommodating and adopting the war aims set by them. He does this most effectively by following Grant's evolving notion of the purposes for the war and how those notions roughly paralleled those of his superiors, particularly President Lincoln. Much like Lincoln, Grant started with one overriding concern in mind, that of saving the union. Whatever their

personal inclinations, the question of whether slavery survived was secondary to that goal. Soon after the fall of Fort Sumter, Grant made clear his views in a letter to his father-in-law in which he stated his belief that given the clear aggression of the South he could see no outcome but “the doom of slavery.”[7] He went on to say however that the “North do not want, nor will they want, to interfere with the institution.”[8]

Grant also reflected the dominant northern view that the war would be a short affair; as he stated in a letter to his wife after the victory at Fort Donelson, he did not see “how the rebellion is to be sustained.”[9] With this in mind Grant believed it was important not to do anything that would hinder a quick reconciliation with the South, and his orders to subordinates reflected that mindset. He strictly controlled the behavior of Union troops towards civilians, prohibiting foraging as he made his way through Missouri in 1861, because it was “apt to make open enemies where they would not otherwise exist.”[10] His views on the question of fugitive slaves reflected the confusion in policy represented by the refusal of Congress to renew the Johnson-Crittenden resolutions limiting war aims to reconciliation only. He scrupulously tried to adhere to federal policy no matter how confusing by using some slaves as laborers and returning others to their owners based the interpretation of federal policy applied in each case. After the blood bath at Shiloh and the subsequent increase in Confederate guerrilla activity Grant, like his superiors in Washington, discarded the notion there would be a quick end to the war. Abandoning the limited warfare they had been waging in hopes of enticing the South into reconciliation, the Union army, including Grant started a no holds barred campaign to force southern capitulation. Grant’s success here is well known and is not detailed by Simpson. Suffice it to say Grant went on to force the surrender of three Confederate Armies, was elevated to the command of all Federal troops, and eventually accepted the surrender of Robert E. Lee at Appomattox, effectively ending the military phase of the struggle.

As views in Washington towards slavery evolved, so did Grant’s. In 1862 President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation freeing all slaves in states then in rebellion. Grant wholeheartedly endorsed this policy as the quickest and surest way to weaken the Confederacy. Later, Grant supported Lincoln’s decision to allow enlistment of black troops into the Union Army. During the Vicksburg campaign Grant received reports that black troops under his command had seen their first action at Miliken’s Bend. Grant in a note appended to his battle report commented they “had been most gallant and doubted not but with good officers they will be good troops.”[11]

During the debate over whether to promote him to Lieutenant General, a rank not held in he U.S. Army since George Washington, Simpson observes Grant again displayed a sophisticated political sense. There were concerns among some that Grant was beginning to think of himself a rival to Lincoln in the election of 1864. In a bit legerdemain worthy of any experienced politician, Grant let it be known through back channels that he was in no way interested in running for President, “particularly so long as there is a possibility of having Mr. Lincoln re-elected.”[12] Thus assured, Grant was awarded his third star and command of all Union forces.

Finally, as Simpson and many other historians (including those generally critical of Grant) have pointed out, Grant displayed the touch of a statesman and a finely tuned political ear for what was needed to heal the country in offering generous terms to Robert E. Lee and the surrendering Army of Northern Virginia. In keeping with Lincoln’s wish to “let ’em up easy,” Grant offered effective immunity for all confederate soldiers, up to and including Lee himself, and allowed Confederate troops to keep their personal baggage, horses and weapons. Simpson calls this “politics with a vengeance.”[13] Grant, he notes, was “executing a fait accompli, [making] sure that there were would be no future reprisals of treason trials.”[14] It is a credit to his political sense according to Simpson, that Grant knew exactly what President Lincoln would wish for in a surrender agreement.

As unique a treatment of Grant's military career as SImpson has given us, the real strength of his book lies in his description of Grant's attempt to navigate the political terrain in which he found himself between Appomattox and his ascendancy to the White House. It became obvious to Grant soon after Lee's surrender that as commander of all U.S. forces he would be forced to play a significant role in the nation's subsequent reconstruction. To that end Grant believed it was his duty to try and support President Johnson as much as possible, little realizing at the time what that would entail.

Simpson skillfully describes Grant's role during the administration of Andrew Johnson. Grant initially tried to restrain what he viewed as Johnson's excessive enthusiasm for punishing Confederate leaders. He genuinely tried to work with the President in order to help facilitate a peaceful Reconstruction, only breaking with the President when he tried to appropriate Grant's popularity in his ongoing conflict with Edwin M. Stanton. Finally, Grant made a complete intellectual and political break with Johnson, adopting a more radical position regarding Reconstruction and the treatment of freedmen. In this description, which does not break any new factual ground, Simpson has revealed to us a Grant who skillfully maneuvered his way through this dangerously political period, and came out the other side as President of the United States.

Following Abraham Lincoln's assassination at Ford's Theater on April 14, 1865, there was good reason to worry about the ascendancy of Andreas Johnson to the Presidency. A wartime Democrat with a well-known vindictive streak, there were genuine fears that he would seek retribution against those in the South responsible for initiating the war. This was confirmed in Grant's eyes by the vehement reaction of Johnson to the surrender terms granted to Joseph Johnston's Confederate Army of the Tennessee by General Sherman. Grant also thought them too generous, but was appalled at the treatment of Sherman by Johnson and other leaders. Not long afterward Grant found himself threatening resignation if Johnson moved forward with his plan to punish Confederate leaders, including those protected, in Grant's view, by the Appomattox accords. So, as Simpson points out within two months of Appomattox Grant found himself mediating between the excessive leniency of Sherman and Johnson's "desire for vengeance." All grant desired was "peace and cooperation in rebuilding a nation that would realize Lincoln's desire 'to see all the people of the United States enter again upon the full privileges of citizenship with equality among all'"[15]

As the restoration process progressed and in his attempts to support the President, Simpson reveals a Grant who much like in his initial views of the war's likely duration, displayed a naivete about what would be required to reconcile the country. He believed, as did many others, that a quick conciliation was best so the best course of action would be to do nothing that would not excessively insult the sensibilities of southerners. To that end he urged the quick pardon of Confederate military leaders, a rapid demobilization of the Army, and attempted to remove black soldiers from any situation in which they might come into contact with Southern civilians. In Grant's view according to Simpson, the "best way to reduce friction, no matter the cause, was to control black behavior, for to place additional restraints on whites would antagonize them, prolonging sectional division."[16] Later, in another effort to work with Johnson, Grant agreed to tour the South and report on his findings. Realizing Johnson was using him to counteract damaging reports submitted by Carl Schurz, Grant nevertheless attempted to produce a fair and evenhanded report. Producing a much more moderate report than Schurz's, it was at this time according to Simpson, that Grant began to revise his thinking regarding Southern attitudes towards the freedmen and the need to move from reconciliation to protection. As time passed, and Grant received reports of recalcitrance in the part of Southern whites to accept the civil rights of freedmen. Grant was moving inexorably to a far more radical view of Reconstruction.

Meanwhile, reflecting his innate racism, President Johnson was moving further away from his ostensible Republican allies in Congress in an attempt to assure the South remained under white control. To that end he eased the way for former Confederate leaders to obtain pardons, he vetoed the freedman's bureau and civil

rights bills, and he opposed passage of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. Grant opposed Johnson on these issues, but remained silent either out of a sense or propriety or as a way to position himself for the 1868 Republican nomination for President. Likely it was a bit of both. Finally, Johnson tried to co-opt Grant by involving him in the attempt to depose Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. Johnson suspended Stanton and appointed Grant as caretaker in accordance with the Tenure of Office Act which required Congressional approval before any Senate confirmed cabinet officer could be terminated. Later, when he tried to remove Stanton permanently in violation of that act, Grant resigned and handed the office back to Stanton in accordance with the Tenure of Office Act. This was the final break with Johnson and induced Grant to take a more public role in opposition to his Reconstruction policies. Grant certainly viewed it as a matter of honor; to preserve the principals for which the army had fought which meant not only reconciliation but now included protection of the rights of former slaves. No doubt politics was also on his mind as well, as it was obvious the political wind was blowing in favor of the Radical Republicans. After the unsuccessful attempt to remove Johnson from office and as the appeal of Radical Republicanism began to wane in the North, Grant became the only viable option for Republicans in the 1868 election. And so, contrary to his wishes, but believing it was the only way to preserve the fruits of Union victory, Grant was elected President of the United States. Simpson's view of Grant's reticence is not universally shared. William Gillette in *Retreat From Reconstruction* takes the contrary view, that Grant was more ambitious for political power than is typically thought. I do believe Grant was bitten, at least a bit, by the Presidential bug. In my view no one can be willing to put themselves through the rigors demanded by the office, and not have some confidence they are best for the job. However, I have no doubt Grant was sincere in his belief that it was necessary for him to accept the nomination in order to preserve the gains won during the war. Certainly no one, other than former slaves, had a bigger stake in making sure that happened.

Overall I enjoyed this book very much. Though not breaking any new ground factually as evidenced by his heavy reliance on previously published sources, Simpson has successfully re-oriented the way we look at Grant's military and political careers. By removing the artificial dividing line between the military and political portions of his career, Simpson has elevated in my eyes the political skills of Grant. By realizing his success on the battlefield was directly attributable to his ability to effectively relate with his superiors in Washington, Grant is revealed to us as a sophisticated and successful political player. Simpson also shows us that Grant, despite his inability to counteract Johnson's lawyerly arguments regarding issues on which they conflicted, was able to effectively maneuver his way through the minefields of postwar Reconstruction politics, and ultimately end up as President of the United States.

This book did have its weaknesses. Believing as I do, that Simpson is attempting to give us a more positive view of Grant's skills, I believe it was a mistake not to include his Presidency as part of his treatment. It is this period for which Grant is most criticized by historians. Second, I believe more attention should have been given to Grant's military success, That is the period for which Grant is most often praised by historians so perhaps should have been viewed in a little more detail. Finally, although I did enjoy the book, I am one of those that has always had an interest in Grant so I am not overly concerned by the stylistic nature of the work. However, most readers with either no previous interest or only a passing interest in grant would I believe, find this a dry read.

[1]Smith Jean Edward, *Grant* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2001), Simpson, Brooks D., *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph Over Adversity, 1822-1863* (New York, Houghton Miflin Company, 2000), Perret, Geoffrey, *Ulysses S. Grant: Soldier & President* (New York, Random House, 1997). Of the three authors the work by Smith comes closest to hagiography. It takes an almost uncritical look at Grant through all phases of his life, often glossing over areas where Grant could legitimately be criticized. Perret's book makes no secret

of its attempt to counteract McFeely's analysis of Grant. Unfortunately it is plagued with errors, misstating the date of the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter, the date of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, and the Battle of Chickamauga to name a few, which tend to undermine its credibility. Of the three I found Simpson's work the most balanced while still giving a largely positive view of grant's life and career.

[2] Brooks D. Simpson, *Let Us Have Peace: Ulysses S. Grant and the Politics of War and Reconstruction, 1861-1868* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1991), page xiii

[3] Simpson, *Let Us Have Peace*, p. xiv

[4] Simpson, *Let Us Have Peace*

[8] Simpson, *Let Us Have Peace*, p. 11. This of course parallels Lincoln's famous statement on the question of emancipation made more than a year earlier when he said "My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slaves I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that."

[9] Simpson, *Let Us Have Peace*, p. 23

[10] Brig. Gen U.S. Grant to Col. R.J. Oglesby, November 3, 1861, The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies.

[11] Simpson, *Let Us Have Peace*, p.20

[12] Simpson, *Let Us Have Peace*, p.54

[13] Simpson, *Let Us Have Peace*, p. 84

[14] Simpson, *Let Us Have Peace*, p.55

[15] Simpson, *Let Us Have Peace*, p. 108

[16] Simpson, *Let Us Have Peace*, p. 118