



Ronald C. White. *American Ulysses: A Life of Ulysses S. Grant.* New York: Random House, 2016. Maps. 864 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4000-6902-6.

Reviewed by Chris Fobare

Published on H-Slavery (June, 2017)

Commissioned by David M. Prior (University of New Mexico)

Over the course of the last two decades, historical inquiry into Ulysses S. Grant has enjoyed a renaissance. Ronald C. White builds on this growing historiographical trend by examining Grant with fresh eyes. White frames the “American Ulysses” around his namesake—the mythical Greek general who wandered for a decade in the wake of the Trojan War. Having spent seven years combing through the vast array of primary sources related to Grant, White challenges previous biographers who have cast him as “a simple man of action, not ideas” (p. xxiv). He argues that the general turned president should be understood as “a tragic hero” who was “an exceptional person and leader,” even in the wake of the scandals that tainted his presidency (p. xxiv). For White, Grant’s odyssey from the ranks of obscurity to becoming one of the most notable figures in American history was as much about his inner resolve in the face of adversity as it was about the personal and professional relationships that he cultivated over the course of his life.

As with many biographies, White opens *American Ulysses* by tracing the Grant family’s lineage. By the early nineteenth century, Ulysses’s father, Jesse, experienced the developing sectional conflict between slaveholders and free laborers after moving to Kentucky where he apprenticed as a tanner. Like so many others, Jesse ultimately

chose to move beyond the boundaries of the burgeoning cotton frontier to the Northwest Territory with the hope of escaping what Ulysses’s generation popularly referred to as the Slave Power. White’s effort to situate the family’s ancestry within the broader context of western migration serves as a useful segue to understand the increasingly important role that sectionalism played in the younger Grant’s life.

The first section of the book grapples with the run up to the Mexican-American War. Both the frontier and Jesse Grant’s unwavering commitment to young Ulysses’s education defined his formative years. Literature and drawing captured his imagination, and by his teenage years, he became a skilled horseman. White frames Grant’s childhood as preparation for his college years. At West Point, Ulysses excelled in drawing, maintained his passion for literature, and dazzled fellow classmates with his expert horsemanship; yet the complicated cast of characters who moved in and out of Grant’s life proved equally consequential. He roomed with Fred Dent, his future brother-in-law; Simon Bolivar Buckner lent the young cadet ten dollars long before the two faced off at Fort Donelson; and others who were on the campus but not personally familiar with Grant encountered him as he transitioned into a military career following graduation. White positions

Grant's early life as a springboard to illustrate how sectional tensions undermined friendships and strained personal relationships with each passing year.

After West Point, Grant continued to be on the move as he accepted a post at Jefferson Barracks in St. Louis, formed a budding relationship with Julia Dent, and worked to convince her father that the son of a tanner could provide for a family on soldier's pay. White differentiates himself from previous Grant biographers by drawing on new correspondence between Ulysses and Julia to illustrate the deep personal strain that his deployment placed on their relationship, especially after President James K. Polk ordered the creation of an "Army of Observation" to assemble along the nation's southern border. As tensions continued to escalate between the Polk administration and the Mexican government, Grant mustered the strength to ask his future father-in-law's permission for his daughter's hand in marriage. White performs the yeoman's work of drawing on a litany of correspondence to illustrate that the young soldier's deployment was the most transformative event up to that point of his personal and professional life.

In detailing the Mexican-American War, White illustrates that General Zachary Taylor's calm approach on the battlefield and the respect that soldiers afforded him because of his accessibility served as a model for the future Civil War general. In addition, the author traces how Grant's responsibilities as a regimental quartermaster led him to become a "cultural observer" that translated into a lifelong interest in Mexico's economic development (p. 85). Grant periodically threw his support behind efforts to spread liberal democratic values to the Mexican people, believing it would bring permanent political stability and a rising standard of living. As evidence, White points to several instances in which Grant periodically pushed for American military intervention or economic investment in the country.

The second and third sections of the book trace Grant's transition from a state of personal and economic uncertainty in the wake of the Mexican-American War to lieutenant general of the Union army. Although little new ground is covered in these sections, White's keen eye for storytelling offers a compelling narrative situating Grant within the broader context of the unsettled political and economic climate that encompassed the late antebellum and Civil War years. Beautifully illustrated maps and a well-organized narrative walks the reader through key military strategies, officers, and politicians who formed the lynchpin of the northern and southern war efforts. Both popular audiences and historians—particularly those interested in political and military history—will find White's narrative one of the most approachable accounts of Grant's dynamic approach to military strategy and the complex role that he played in subduing the South's rebellion.

The remainder of the book explores Grant's presidency and life as a private citizen. White illustrates that President Andrew Johnson's effort to win over northern support for his "restoration" program by exploiting Grant's popularity increasingly forced the general into the divisive political climate of Reconstruction. His growing opposition to the Johnson administration's subterfuge landed Grant the Republican Party's nomination in 1868. For the author, Grant's famous "Let us have peace" pronouncement is evidence that he planned to take up the call in Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural for sectional reconciliation (p. 460). Indeed, White's extensive archival research illustrates the general turned president believed that he "could not back down without ... leaving the contest for power ... between mere trading politicians, the elevation of whom ... would lose ... the results of the costly war which we have gone through" (p. 461). Instead of portraying Grant as an aloof military figure who was thrust into the presidency by the extraordinary demands of Reconstruction, the author provides the most con-

vincing evidence to date that the general actively positioned himself as Lincoln's heir.

Falling in line with scholars like Joan Waugh, Heather Cox Richardson, and Brooks Simpson, the author continues the well-worn effort to move Grant's presidency out of the long shadow cast by the Dunning school, which labeled him as a despot bent on placing the South under permanent military control. White asserts that the Grant administration worked to develop forward-thinking policies in the realm of civil rights that stood firm against white paramilitary efforts to undermine Reconstruction and deprive freedpeople of their newly acquired rights. White agrees with historian Andrew Slap's contention that Carl Schurz and others who formed the Liberal Republican phalanx and opposed Grant's nomination for a second term ultimately placed their growing concerns of centralized federal power before "their earlier support for African American civil rights" (p. 537).

Although White's detailed account of Grant's push for civil rights complicates our understanding of the administration's approach to addressing white paramilitary violence, the author is too generous in positioning Grant as forward thinking when it comes to Indian policy. While the former general certainly rose above William T. Sherman and other officers who entertained genocidal plans for western tribes, White does not engage recent studies like Richardson's *West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War* (2007) and *Wounded Knee: Party Politics and the Road to an American Massacre* (2010) or Philip Weeks's *"Farewell, My Nation": American Indians and the United States in the Nineteenth Century* (1990), for example, which illustrate that the administration's "reforms" were designed to pave the way for western settlement and national development.

White's limited discussion of both civil service reform and the ubiquitous role that New York Senator Roscoe Conkling played in the politi-

cal life of the 1870s is somewhat surprising. Such scholars as Ari Hoogenboom, John Sproat, and Andrew Slap have traced the multifaceted ways in which civil service reform assumed a central role in Grant's scandal-laden second administration. The author explains that the president's refusal to "refute or even reply" to the ongoing investigations of several cabinet members led a growing number of Americans "to believe he should bear some responsibility"; however, he brushes off Grant's inability to "discern the motives and behavior of his close associates" as a matter of loyalty to those he trusted (p. 569). White's interpretation does not quiet the long-running historiographical debate about the amount of blame that should be placed on Grant's shoulders for stocking several positions in government with either unqualified appointees, friends, or personal acquaintances.

American Ulysses concludes with a refreshing analysis of Grant's life as a private citizen. White counters previous biographers who suggest that the former president was a disinterested observer on his celebrated thirty-one-month world tour. He instead illustrates that Grant exercised a clear eye for diplomacy that would become far more common among future former presidents. Although Grant failed to turn his renewed popularity from the tour into a successful third-term presidential bid in 1880, the close nature with which Americans followed his more than two-year-long foray abroad, combined with the publication of the former general's memoirs approximately three years later, led Grant to become a symbol of sectional reconciliation at the end of his life. White closes by noting that at his well-attended funeral two Union officers and two Confederate officers—William T. Sherman, Philip Sheridan, James Longstreet, and Simon Bolivar Buckner—served as pallbearers. Falling in line with such scholars as David Blight, Gary Gallagher, Gaines Foster, and Joan Waugh, White illustrates that our understanding of the towering figures who emerged at the center of American life during the mid-nine-

teenth century remains muddled by the more than 150-year-long struggle to control both the memory and meaning of the Civil War.

Overall, *American Ulysses* is an elegantly written, well-researched, and important contribution to the historiography of one of the most complicated figures of the nineteenth century. White achieves his goal of proving that “like an old photograph blurred from wear, [Grant’s] story needs to be refocused for today” (p. xxvii). Popular audiences, students, and scholars will all find a great deal to like in this engaging and well-researched biography.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-slavery>

Citation: Chris Fobare. Review of White, Ronald C. *American Ulysses: A Life of Ulysses S. Grant*. H-Slavery, H-Net Reviews. June, 2017.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=48127>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.