The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era (2025), **24,** 304–325
doi:10.1017/S153778142500009X

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

The Death of Ulysses S. Grant and the Politics of Reconstruction Memory in the 1880s

Belle Grenville-Mathers

Arden University, Holborn Campus, London, UK
Email: bgrenvillemathers@arden.ac.uk

Abstract

When Ulysses S. Grant succumbed to cancer on July 23, 1885, the nation mourned the loss of one of its greatest generals and the first president to enforce the civil rights of African Americans. As scholars are increasingly recognizing, many Republicans remained committed to the protection of Black suffrage as late as 1890, but in exploring the reaction to Grant's death, Civil War memory scholars have overlooked the importance of memories of Grant's presidency. Through an examination of newspapers and biographies in the months after Grant's death and the immediate years thereafter, up to 1890, this article demonstrates that Americans of all political stripes used their memories of Grant's presidency to aid their long-term political goals of either restricting or promoting Black civil rights. Democrats and reform-minded Republicans tried to denigrate Grant's administration for supposed corruption while still applauding his magnanimity at Appomattox. In contrast, their Republican opponents, Black and white, contested this memory by constructing a politically purposeful memory of Grant's Reconstruction-era politics as part of their ongoing fight to enforce Black voting rights and by extension secure the fruits of Union military victory. In doing so, Americans demonstrated that they remained unreconciled and divided on both the battlefields of Civil War memory and Reconstruction.

Keywords: Ulysses S. Grant; Reconstruction; Civil War memory; Black civil rights; Republican Party

On July 23, 1885, after a protracted battle with terminal throat cancer, former president and general Ulysses S. Grant died. The outpouring of grief that followed his death was extraordinary, as the entire nation seemed to mourn him alongside his family. Church bells tolled to signal his demise; guns rang out to salute his passing; flags were lowered to half-mast; business came to a halt; cities and towns were shrouded in black crepe as people across the country displayed their sadness over the loss of one of the greatest Americans of the era. Tributes poured in from around the world, from Japan to Mexico, as the news of his passing was transmitted over telegraph cables to every corner of the earth. Former Confederates and Unionists, white northerners and white southerners, African Americans, and Native Americans memorialized Grant as the nation seemed to collectively

mourn the loss of its most famous citizen. The columns and pages of American newspapers were filled every day for weeks with the details of his passing, tributes to the great hero, and stories that illustrated the extent to which Grant's country revered him. Tributes repeated the same praises of Grant: they heralded him as the unifier of the country; the magnanimous general who simply sought to reunite his countrymen without any political prejudices toward his enemies; and the modest, gentle, and honorable man. Newspapers and politicians declared that the reaction to Grant's death illustrated that sectionalism was dead, as all corners of the United States grieved for him. They stated repeatedly that party feelings had been obliterated as the North and the South mourned Grant in equal measure and applauded him for his leadership during the Civil War and his generous treatment of his foe at Appomattox.

But this narrative, echoed by most Civil War memory scholars, ignores the numerous instances of dissent that detract from the story of a unified nation, many of which undoubtedly went unreported. As Sarah J. Purcell has noted, these occasions of public grieving "exaggerated unity among mourners." Officials used these occasions to "reinforce common or binding traditions within the polity."[1] In 1885, with a sitting Democratic president, Grover Cleveland, it was unsurprising to see these calls for unity throughout the nation. However, by stressing reconciliation over dissent, scholars have disregarded the complexities of the political landscape and underlying divisions engendered by an ongoing Reconstruction.[2] While it is undeniable that reconciliationist memorials were the most prominent (most likely intentionally so) – and that both white and Black Americans celebrated the show of unity between the sections – in focusing solely on the most popular remembrances, Civil War memory scholars have ignored the creation of a memory of Reconstruction. One side of this memory sought to vilify Grant's administrations, and the other promoted positive memories of Grant's presidency, in the hope of finding support for the enforcement of African American civil rights.[3] Americans did not simply remember Grant upon his death; rather, they politicized Grant in seemingly never-ending battle to define the meaning of Reconstruction and influence contemporary debates on civil rights for their political advantage. This article, by intervening in two historical debates – Ulysses S. Grant's public memory and its development over time, as well as the question of whether Reconstruction ended in 1877 – seeks to show how Americans used the memory of Grant upon his death to influence then-current debates regarding civil rights and who had the right to power. The memory of Grant, of both his generalcy and his presidency, did not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it intertwined with contemporary debates over power and demonstrated that Reconstruction – and the fight to enforce African American civil rights – was still ongoing. By focusing on the unity surrounding remembrances of Grant and his funeral, Civil War memory scholars do a disservice to the political record, which shows that Reconstruction and sectionalism were still alive.[4]

This article demonstrates that Americans on both sides of the political divide sought to fashion usable memories of Grant's presidency and Reconstruction to further their political goals. The debate indicated that Reconstruction had not ended. Opponents of Reconstruction, mostly Democrats and reform-orientated Republicans, fashioned an image of an honest, but foolish, president who allowed corruption to overrun his administration. In this conception, Grant allowed himself to be controlled and used by his friends, which showed his ineptitude for the presidency. In contrast, supporters of his presidency praised his support for equality and citizenship and celebrated his commitment to the Reconstruction Acts, especially the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871, which prosecuted those who obstructed southern Republicans in the exercise of their civil rights.[5] Praise for this act illustrated that there were still white Republicans willing to

agitate for African American civil rights despite the increasing reluctance of moderate Republicans to use the power of the federal government to protect them. It is evident, then, that Americans were not as united as the reconciliationist imagery of Grant's military career attempted to convey. The memory of Grant's presidency illustrated that not all white Americans had forgotten or abandoned Reconstruction, but rather some were still attempting to find ways to build support for the continued enforcement of Reconstruction-era civil rights gains for African Americans. By exploring Reconstruction memories at the time of Grant's death, this article intertwines two historiographical debates and contributes to the developing literature that rebukes the idea that Reconstruction was abandoned in 1877. It also refutes the idea that Grant's presidency was already considered a dismal failure in 1885, due to his steadfast support of Reconstruction. By focusing on the response to Grant's death in 1885 and the immediate years thereafter, up to 1890, this work seeks to provide an overview of Americans' memories of Reconstruction and Grant's presidency at that moment. It shows the continued division of the nation in the 1880s and builds on the emerging fields of the memory of Reconstruction, the public memory of Grant, and the debate over when Reconstruction ended.

Historian David W. Blight identified three unique strands of Civil War memory – reconciliationist, emancipationist, and the Lost Cause – in his groundbreaking 2001 book *Race and Reunion*, and argued for the dominance of the reconciliationist memory after the downfall of Grant's presidency in 1877. More recently, other historians have shown the disunity of Americans in their 1880s interpretations of the Civil War.[6] Caroline Janney, John R. Neff, and Robert J. Cook illustrate that reconciliationist memory did not supersede other memories until the 1890s, after the failure of the Lodge Federal Elections Bill of 1890.[7] Gary W. Gallagher, in his 2008 book *Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten*, identifies four strands of Civil War memory: reconciliationist, Unionist, emancipationist, and the Lost Cause.[8] Reconciliationist memory focused on the Civil War as a project to reunite the nation and emphasized the honor of both the Confederate and Union causes, highlighting the similarities between both the soldiers and the sections.[9] In contrast, Unionist memory concentrated on the Civil War as a struggle to reunite the nation but celebrated the North's cause as a worthy and victorious endeavor, without giving honor to the defeated Confederacy.[10] Emancipationist memory emphasized that the Civil War was fought over slavery and emancipated four million slaves.[11] Unionist and emancipationist memories often overlapped, as both white and Black Unionists recognized the importance of both causes to lasting reunification. Lastly, former Confederates and disillusioned southern Unionists championed the Lost Cause memory as equally honorable and worthy as the Union Cause, claiming that Confederate aims represented authentic American values like states' rights.[12] Rather than accepting reconciliationist or southern interpretations of the war, Republicans – especially Union veterans who were members of the Grand Army of the Republic – continued to oppose these sentiments after the end of Grant's presidency and insisted that a synthesis of Unionist and emancipationist interpretations was the most valid.

However, by focusing on these strands of Civil War memory, historians have overlooked the divisions provoked by remembrances of Grant's passing, especially memories of his presidency and a further strand of Civil War memory: Reconstruction. Scholars have focused on the symbolism of Grant's funeral and on southern remembrances of Grant, which stressed the unity of Americans in their grief for General Grant, and how this symbolism reinforced reconciliationist interpretations of reunion. For instance, Joan Waugh's 2009 book *U. S. Grant* focuses on the "Pageantry of Woe" that accompanied Grant's death, his funeral, and the building and opening of his tomb in Riverside Park,

New York City.[13] Waugh shows the extent to which Confederate and Union soldiers joined hands over Grant's body to stress the unity of the country and the forgetting of past divisions caused by both the war and Reconstruction. While she acknowledges the complexity of Civil War memory creation (especially in the southern states) and briefly covers African American memorials and Reconstruction, Waugh's book (with the exception of chapter four on Grant's memoirs and the Union Cause) focuses largely on reconciliationist sentiment. Similarly, Louis L. Picone's 2021 book *Grant's Tomb* also focuses on reconciliationist imagery in his analysis of support for the building of Grant's tomb and monument.[14] These and other Civil War memory scholars have highlighted the stories of Grant that numerous newspapers, both southern and northern, repeated as Americans recalled instances illustrating Grant's magnanimity and generosity toward his foe while purposely obscuring other memories.[15] This reconciliation symbolism is underscored, as Caroline Janney points out, in the *New York Times* headline after Grant's funeral, which stated, "If The War Did Not End in 1865, It Certainly Ended Yesterday."[16] By focusing on reconciliation memories, historians have overlooked the continuation of the battle for civil rights, portraying the very image of the nation that these newspapers wanted to show while minimalizing other issues. In doing so, historians have ignored the memory of Reconstruction exhibited at the time of Grant's death.

Southern voting rights issues still deeply concerned American voters, as Colin McConarty has shown in his 2020 article on Lodge's Federal Elections Bill of 1890. McConarty uses the private letters sent to Senator George F. Hoar, the bill's promoter in the Senate, to explore the bill's importance to ordinary Americans. These letters highlighted concerns regarding the inability of Republicans, both white and Black, to vote in southern elections, and indicated a higher level of support for the bill than contemporary newspapers portrayed. These ordinary Americans, both northerners and southerners, claimed that white southerners who did not support the Democrats were "ostracized," and they saw the protection of voting rights as a matter of "[e]lectoral justice" that superseded partisan interest. Some correspondents even supported using troops to support the enforcement of the Fifteenth Amendment. McConarty argues that the traditional periodization of Reconstruction (which ended in 1877) is incorrect, as these letters indicated that issues surrounding the franchise continued to concern people across the nation.[17]

By following this traditional periodization of Reconstruction, scholars have missed alternative memories of Grant's legacy – namely the memory of Reconstruction during his presidency – which had the power to impact the nation's political fabric. This article seeks to address this lack of alternative memories by looking at the public memories created upon Grant's death in 1885, an event heralded by both reconciliationists and historians as a moment of unity. This article shows that it is indisputable that purposeful memories of Grant's divisive presidency suffused responses to the general's death, thereby showing that not all Republicans had abandoned Reconstruction and African American civil rights in the 1880s. The celebration of Grant's efforts for African Americans, especially the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871, illustrated that the country remained deeply divided over the merits of Reconstruction. Moreover, it indicates that there was a creation of a memory of Reconstruction and Grant's presidency, distinct from emancipationist memories, which could be a powerful weapon in the fight for African American civil rights. While Grant's funeral may have given the impression of unity, the newspaper coverage of his death, especially the reporting of dissent around the country, indicates that Americans did not yet agree that Reconstruction had failed; rather, many Republicans and independents applauded it as an attempt to create a more equitable United States.

Reconciliationist Memory of Grant's Presidency

Rather than ignoring Grant's presidency, as many historians have claimed, reconciliationists – mainly white northern and southern Democrats, as well as reform-oriented white northern Republicans – attempted to create a compelling negative narrative of Grant's presidency and Reconstruction. To do this, they advanced the image of a personally honest man who allowed his friends to take advantage of his generosity. This portrayal allowed them to advance their reunion imagery of Grant as a gentle and benevolent man, and to present Reconstruction as the deeds of bad actors who took advantage of Grant's generous nature. By disassociating Grant from personal crookedness, they could criticize the corruption that took place, which in the nineteenth century encompassed "social, economic, and moral changes that could undermine the basis of republican society."[18] This criticism allowed reconciliationists to contend that Reconstruction had been a complete failure that should not be attempted again, as even a respectable man like Grant could not control the corruption it generated. Grant, in their view, was a foolhardy and naïve incumbent of the White House but still a generous, gentle, and modest military hero who personified the image of the great unifier.

But this portrayal did not stop many white Americans, particularly southern white Democrats, from accusing Grant of personal corruption, both directly and indirectly. One tactic claimed that Grant's virtues as a general made him a poor politician, as these individuals believed that the skills necessary for war and politics were opposites. They especially criticized Grant's loyalty to his friends. The highly partisan Democratic *Weekly Commercial Herald* in Vicksburg, Mississippi, illustrated that it was easy to link the qualities that southerners valued in Grant as a general to the corruption, real and imagined, in his presidency, and to use this link to undermine both his administrations and Reconstruction.[19] The paper stated that Grant was "simple and plain and honest. He was generous and magnanimous. These very qualities probably sometimes subjected him to the influence of shrewd and designing men, and his attachment to his friends caused him to be blinded to their faults."[20] In this sense, Grant's qualities as a general were perfectly compatible with his ineptitude as a president. Although the paper admitted that "the loose methods and excesses engendered by the war" resulted in corruption during Grant's presidency, they also claimed that Grant's status as a military man meant he "was not great in statecraft," thus rectifying the problems was "beyond his reach and power."[21] While this denigration of Grant by a Democratic paper in Mississippi may be unsurprising, its repetition by numerous other northern and southern newspapers, of both parties, showed that these statements had broad support in the country. Even an African American newspaper, the *Huntsville Gazette*, echoed these sentiments when it rued Grant's trust in his disreputable friends.[22] Newspapers printed stories about Grant's propensity to provide civil service jobs to his friends and to defend them even when the Republican Party desired their removal.[23] In one case, Confederate General Lafayette McLaws recounted a conversation where Grant accused southern congressmen of refusing his friendship, which hindered opportunities to heal sectional divisions in the South through the appointment system. McLaws, however, did not oppose serving under Grant and accepted an appointment to the Savannah, Georgia, post office.[24] Grant's opponents frequently cited these stories of cronyism to indirectly show his ineptitude as president.

Grant's inability to combat corruption in government also seemed to be a result of his honesty and his failure to understand attempts to manipulate him. Democratic, Republican, and independent newspapers alike recalled the "childlike" nature that made Grant an unwitting aid to corruption.[25] The *Memphis Daily Appeal* claimed he was "wonderfully

credulous" in believing the tales told to him.[26] This interpretation fits well with the story of Grant's financial ruin at the hands of Fernando Ward in 1884, as it illustrated his unsuspecting nature. Both northern and southern newspapers expressed surprise at his involvement in this partnership. In Michigan, the Republican *Crawford Avalanche* stated that "the honest old hero was used as a stool-pigeon by that wily rascal," while the New York *Herald* exclaimed, "Heaven knows how" he became involved in Ward's business venture.[27] These newspapers sought to imply that Grant's naivete led him to pursue Reconstruction and Black civil rights despite their disastrous outcomes for the nation. They constructed a usable memory of Grant's presidency that erased political divisions between white Americans and even Black Americans. Just as Grant's business venture with Ward was foolhardy and ill-conceived, so too was Reconstruction.

However, despite the popularity of this memory, many reconciliationists also held Grant directly responsible for the corruption in his administrations and accused him of governing dictatorially. This accusation had plagued Grant throughout his presidency and represented an often-successful attempt to undermine his ability to use his executive power to enforce Reconstruction.[28] While it remained a rarer type of attack than those that claimed his honesty, loyalty, and generosity toward friends had led him astray, there were still Democrats – especially southerners and former Confederates – willing to accuse Grant of personal ineptitude, sometimes in relation to his military background. The *Yorkville Enquirer* in South Carolina claimed that if an individual gave "a present" to Grant, he rewarded them with a public office. The *Memphis Daily Appeal* described Grant as unable to recognize a dishonest man partly due to his lack of intellect but also due to his "love of money and acquisition," which caused "his moral sense … to be strangely blunted or defective" so he could not tell "the difference between virtue and villainy."[29] Similarly, the Mississippi *Clarion* and the South Carolina *Fairfield News and Herald* both pointed out his inability to govern effectively as well as the widespread corruption in his administration.[30] Then, just after the release of the first volume of Grant's *Memoirs* in December 1885, a Louisiana newspaper, the *St. Landry Democrat*, launched a vicious attack on Grant. The newspaper claimed that Grant had a "very weak head" and "no intellectual powers of his own, was ruled and guided entirely by subordinate officers, a mere creature of circumstance."[31] Furthermore, it claimed that Grant's success came from the intellect of his friend and Secretary of War, General John A. Rawlins (a claim echoed by the *Memphis Daily Appeal*), and that after Rawlins's death, Grant "became the tool of the most corrupt and debauched party that ever existed," with his administration devolving into the "most rotten, disgraceful, corrupted and sectional ever chronicled in the annals of our national history … with the exception of [that of Rutherford] Hayes."[32] Moreover, Grant was "a weak, unconstitutional, unpatriotic, sectional and blundering statesman, a man of very short sight, narrow-minded and of no brains" who had a "vain, conceited and selfish head" and, after seeing how his world tour had increased his popularity, tried to run for a third term in 1880 to "dub himself Supreme Dictator, or King U.S. Grant the First."[33] The most likely cause of this newspaper's displeasure came from Grant's *Memoirs*, which fell squarely in the interconnected Unionist and emancipationist interpretations of the Civil War. As a result, supporters of the Lost Cause and reconciliationist memories often reacted unfavorably to them. Grant emphasized the role of slavery in the war and depicted the South as a backward society, an image that clashed sharply with the false idea of the Old South as a chivalrous and romantic place adored by both white plantation owners and Black enslaved people – a notion that scholars such as David Blight, Nina Silber, and Alice Fahs have explored in depth.[34] The negative reaction by southern newspapers,

such as the *St. Landry Democrat*, showed the shallowness of southern grief in the aftermath of Grant's passing.

However, while southern attacks may be expected, even prominent New York newspapers did not hesitate to deride Grant's ability to govern. The New York *Sun* wrote that Grant's Cabinet members paid "cheerful obedience to his slightest whims" and let him rule his administration without criticism, implying that Grant had brought military methods into government, with only Rawlins willing to question Grant's actions. These methods had resulted in "grievous mistakes," "dishonest men" in office, and "corruption and scandals" that could not have "occurred against his will." While most Democratic newspapers in the North espoused reconciliationist views, the *Sun* leaned toward the southern memory and even gave Jefferson Davis's views on Grant's demise front-page coverage in the first edition produced after Grant died.[35] The *Sun*'s criticism of Grant illustrated that even prominent, Democratic-leaning northern newspapers were willing to oppose the reconciliationist sentiment, which the majority of politicians, memorials, and newspapers sought to advance in order to stress the unity of the country.[36]

Many newspapers hastened to point out other signs of disrespect for Grant originating from both the North and the South. A West Virginia newspaper called Governor Hoadly of Ohio (Grant's birth state) "dumb" and claimed he had no "heart" because he had not issued a proclamation immediately upon Grant's death.[37] There were several instances of flags at half-mast being pulled down and derogatory comments made about Grant, including incidents in Georgia and Texas.[38] One source accused the chief of police of Erie, Pennsylvania, of "denouncing" Grant and likening him to "the cut-throat, Jack Sheppard" (a seventeenth-century English thief and escape artist). Meanwhile, in Chicago, an individual who destroyed a picture of Grant and made "blasphemous and derogatory remarks" had a warrant issued for his arrest.[39]

The most derisive remarks came from two South Carolina newspapers. The *Watchman and Southron* in Sumter celebrated the words of the "unreconstructed rebel," Mr. Harrison in the Georgia Legislature, after Harrison objected to the motion to adjourn proceedings on account of Grant's death. The paper wished Harrison would be elected to Congress in the future because he had refused to "compliment" Grant for his "services" to the nation and for saying "that Georgia was wrong" for its role in the Civil War.[40] Harrison would not "compliment the author of [Georgia's] misery," but he did withdraw his objection to the resolution after failing to find supporters for his motion.[41] Meanwhile, the *Fairfield News and Herald* claimed to speak for the whole region when it said that Grant was primarily responsible for maintaining the "bloody chasm" between the sections and that he had done his utmost "to oppress the people of the South and uphold the rule of Radicals in many Southern States." It then claimed that shows of southern grief were not genuine, lest the South "be so hypocritical."[42] The implications of this newspaper's statement are telling: the South simply performed a duty, but in a way to benefit itself politically. The South did not sincerely mourn Grant.

These negative memories of Grant's presidency, which hung on the idea that he enabled corruption during his administrations, provided a useful way to undermine Black civil rights legislation during the postwar era and fit well into the romance of reunion literature advanced by both white northerners and southerners. Scholars such as Silber, Fahs, and Blight have shown that this literature – both fiction and nonfiction, abetted by the mass production of magazines in the 1880s – resulted in both white northerners and southerners engaging in a type of historical amnesia regarding the role of slavery in causing the Civil War; and they did so in order to move on from Reconstruction and focus on other issues, such as the economy.[43] Southerners deemphasized the role of African

Americans in the Civil War to claim that both sides fought for equally honorable causes.[44] This shift in emphasis led to the focus on Grant's magnanimous behavior toward the Confederates upon their defeat, which southerners interpreted as conveying respect and honor upon them and their cause. It therefore made sense to paint Grant either as a corrupt dictatorial leader or as someone easily led astray by so-called friends, as it fit their portrait of the honest, generous general who merely sought the unity of his country rather than any ideological policies. These memories of Grant's presidency fit the reconciliationist narrative of reunion, which relied upon delegitimizing Reconstruction to undermine Grant's record on African American civil rights.

While some newspapers attempted to claim that these signs of disunity were rare, and quickly condemned, these examples are simply too numerous to be merely the actions of disgruntled individuals. It is clear from the remembrances of Grant's presidency upon his death that the country remained deeply divided over the merits of Reconstruction. And while national newspapers, such as the *New York Herald* tried to allege that negative portrayals of Grant came from "malice" that "merely springs from ill-breeding," this argument fails to hold up against the number of anti-Reconstruction memories.[45] It is evident from the public memorials, obituaries, and remembrances of Grant in 1885 that the country had not united around the flag of reconciliation. Rather a battle still raged to define popular perceptions of Reconstruction and the presidency most closely associated with it. Not until 1907, with the publication of William A. Dunning's *Reconstruction: Political and Economic, 1865–1877*, did these negative depictions transfer into the historiography. Subsequently, the consensus deemed both Grant's presidency and Reconstruction as disastrous.[46]

Celebrations of Grant's Presidency and Reconstruction

Two occurrences spurred the Republican Party's attempts to fashion a usable memory of Reconstruction: the loss of the 1884 presidential election and the Supreme Court's favorable rulings on the Enforcement Acts. Prior to the Republican nominating convention as well as afterward, Republican supporters and congressmen criticized the platform's failure to prioritize Black suffrage, which many felt could have ensured success in the southern states.[47] The loss of the election and the failure to win a single southern state only reinforced this belief.[48] However, the Supreme Court rulings on *Ex parte Siebold* (1880), *Ex parte Clarke* (1880), and *Ex parte Yarbrough* (1884), could also have buoyed Republican remembrances. These three rulings upheld the constitutionality of the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871 and other Enforcement Acts, which were incorporated into the *Revised Statutes* (1875). When this compilation of public laws was updated in 1878, the sections that were declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in its 1876 *Reece* and *Cruikshank* ruling – in which the Court declared that the Fourteenth Amendment did not apply to private citizens or the state governments – were included with a note on the ruling, which essentially circumvented it and kept the sections alive. These new rulings bolstered both the Enforcement Acts and the Fifteenth Amendment by declaring that the federal government had the right to supervise elections and protect Black suffrage. In the 1880s, the courts still received cases concerning violations of voting rights though the rates of convictions had significantly decreased in the South since 1881.[49] But Republicans may have hoped that the court's rulings would lead to the use of the Enforcement Acts again to protect and enforce Black suffrage in the South. Certainly, the election of African Americans such as James O'Hara and Robert Smalls in South Carolina gave Republicans

hope that support for the protection of Black suffrage could lead to Republican gains in the South. If the Republican Party could guard against Democratic intimidation and corruption, then they stood a good chance of regaining political power in the South. This situation made positive recollections of Reconstruction all the more salient for gaining political advantage.

As Republican Unionists and emancipationists saw their power base erode in the South, it became imperative to rally support for their political cause. Democratic frauds and corruption, especially in southern states, had robbed the Republicans of many election victories and forced them into coalitions with fusion politicians, such as the Readjusters in Virginia, who united some independents, Democrats, and Republicans to obtain power.[50] Some Republicans, after the loss of the 1884 presidential election, believed that to regain national political power in their own right, they had to defend African American suffrage, which made the memory of Grant's presidency and his role in Reconstruction particularly salient.[51] Grant's death presented a prime opportunity to revive support for policies that would help maintain a peaceful and equitable voting landscape. As a result, some Republicans used a positive memory of Grant's presidency – celebrating not only the Reconstruction Amendments and the Ku Klux Klan Act but, in fact, every aspect of Grant's administration – to appeal to a wide base of the electorate. These political remembrances indicated that significant numbers of Republicans remained committed to fighting for Black civil rights to ensure that southern Republicans could enjoy the same rights as their northern counterparts. But it also represented an attempt to ensure that the sacrifices of the Civil War were not wasted. These positive memories of Reconstruction illustrated that neither the battle for Civil War memory nor the battle for Reconstruction memory had yet concluded, regardless of the narrative portrayed by some national newspapers.

The removal of U.S. troops from their remaining positions in the South in 1877 increased the difficulties that Republican politicians faced in achieving electoral success, but the fight for Republican and Black political power did not vanish in the 1880s. Although the Supreme Court had deemed the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional in 1883, Republicans continued their attempts to fight for African American civil rights in Congress. Furthermore, to advance these civil rights, white and Black Republicans still sought political power at both the state and national levels. One salient example is that of James O'Hara, a Black Republican congressman from North Carolina who attempted to prevent discrimination against African American travel by adding an amendment to an interstate commerce bill in December 1884. Republicans united behind his amendment and they garnered some votes from northern Democrats as well; and despite Democratic efforts to rid the bill of this amendment, it eventually passed in a modified form that used "somewhat ambiguous language" to prevent railroad companies from discriminating against passengers. While not as clearly or strongly worded as O'Hara's or his colleagues' amendments, it formed the basis upon which the twentieth-century Civil Rights Movement challenged discrimination on interstate buses.[52] Occurrences like this one illustrated that African American politicians and their white allies in the Republican Party still wielded a modicum of national power, and they would still push for African American civil rights. This small victory highlighted how important it was to fashion a positive memory of Grant's presidency and his enforcement of Reconstruction upon his death, due to his steadfast support of Black civil rights.

However, the Republican Party remained deeply divided on the issue of Black suffrage. Following congressional Democrats' attempts, during Hayes's presidency, to undermine Reconstruction via amendments to appropriation bills, a distinct divide had existed in the

Republican Party between those who considered Black suffrage essential to electoral success and those who wished to focus on economic issues. The 1880 Republican National Convention epitomized this division when 302 delegates stood staunchly behind Grant's nomination for thirty-six ballots.[53] Grant's supporters desired a firm approach to civil rights abuses in the South and saw him as the most likely politician to enforce the Reconstruction Amendments with federal troops since he had repeatedly shown his willingness during Reconstruction to combat violence and illegal Democratic activities with the force of the federal government. But influential figures in the party, such as Carl Schurz and James G. Blaine, who did not support additional legislation to enforce African American civil rights, outmaneuvered them. Increasingly, these Republicans gained the upper hand over the supporters of firmer enforcement of civil rights.[54] As the party's priorities changed, African Americans' loyalty to the Republican Party waned in the 1880s as they increasingly declared themselves independent – willing to support whichever party promised them the most political leverage – to the extent that some supported the Democratic Party if it offered satisfactory patronage and civil rights protections.[55] This transformation served to deepen the division within the national Republican Party on defending African American civil rights as some members became preoccupied with other issues that they believed would reap more political and electoral benefits.

Furthermore, the difference between northern Democrats and southern Democrats further complicated the matter of electoral justice. Politically independent African Americans in the North could offer their support to northern Democrats in the knowledge that they accepted the Reconstruction Amendments, especially the Thirteenth and Fourteenth, but this situation did not always exist in the South. Black Americans in the South could not exchange political support for the Democratic Party for political advantages, because southern Democrats did not accept the changes wrought by the Civil War and Reconstruction and tried to circumvent their implementation. The most egregious example was the Black Codes, ultimately overturned by Congress, which had nearly returned African Americans to slavery in all but name. The severity of this hostility made it impossible for African Americans to support Democrats in some southern states, which meant that the Republican Party offered their only route to the enforcement of their civil rights.

To show that Reconstruction had a valuable place in the nation's history, many advocates of African American civil rights believed that they needed to craft a usable memory of Grant's presidency. After all, Reconstruction played a key part in Grant's legacy – he had made it clear in his rare speeches during his early presidency that no other issue since the end of the Civil War had concerned him as deeply as ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment.[56] When conditions deteriorated in the South, he again pushed Congress to act to remedy the "deplorable state of affairs" through an act of Congress, as well as sending troops to the South to restore order and prevent violence in volatile states such as Louisiana.[57] African Americans' desire for Grant as president in 1880 lay in his willingness to use troops to enforce the Reconstruction Amendments. Grant and Reconstruction were linked, which made celebrating Grant's presidency vital in the fight to save the just gains not only of Reconstruction but also of the Civil War. Republicans, especially Union veterans, understood these links and used the positive memories to show their disagreement with the idealized reconciliation notion that both sides in the Civil War fought for equal causes, which southerners increasingly promoted. Praise for Grant's settlement of the *Alabama* Claims (relating to the Confederate raiders that left Liverpool and destroyed Union ships after England had declared neutrality in the Civil War) highlighted this opposition as it illustrated that the two causes did not have moral

equivalency. In doing so, Republicans reminded Americans that there was a right and a wrong side to the Civil War and that Grant's actions, both during the Civil War and during his presidency, remained on the right side of history.

Both northern and southern newspapers, in offering praise for the Reconstruction Amendments and the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871, only briefly commended Grant for his actions. One notable newspaper article, the exact origin of which is unknown, was reprinted in several newspapers. It appeared at length in the Baltimore *Morning Herald*, possibly the original source, which mentioned the Ku Klux Klan Act and stated that that law led to the suspension of habeas corpus in South Carolina. Later, it stated that Grant had refused to interfere in the same state in 1874 and then commended him for the passage of the 1875 Civil Rights Act, which he "heartily advocated"; however, a reprint in the Ohio *Belmont Chronicle* omitted this latter piece of information.[58] Meanwhile, the independent *New York Herald* reprinted the eulogy of one of Grant's medical doctors, who praised the Reconstruction Amendments as "[g]reat and beneficial."[59] In partial contrast, a politically conservative Republican newspaper in Missouri, the *Iron County Register*, initially listed the actions as one aspect of many honorable acts undertaken by Grant during his presidency; then it gave a more discreet commendation. It stated that "some of his acts awoke bitter personal, factional and partisan hostility; but through every executive step taken by him can be traced the desire to do strict and impartial justice and to serve the best interests of all the people of every section."[60] Even a Democratic-affiliated Texas newspaper, the *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, commended some aspects of Grant's presidency, without directly commending Reconstruction. It praised Grant for the "cessation of the strifes [*sic*] which sprang from the war," for reducing the national debt and settling the *Alabama* Claims, and then contended that Grant won the 1872 election "by a larger vote and a larger majority than any candidate had received since the United States became a nation."[61] The inclusion of these acts among Grant's list of achievements indicated that at least some Republicans, in both the North and the South, believed in the enforcement of Black suffrage and saw the creation of a positive memory of Reconstruction as essential to this end. Whether mentioned briefly or in more detail, these remembrances showed that not all white Americans had abandoned Reconstruction for reunion. Nor had they decided to ignore Reconstruction, and by extension Grant's presidency, for fear of insulting the South. Instead, the country remained divided on the thorny issue of Reconstruction.

Another tactic that some Republicans used, possibly to sway more moderate voters to their ranks, involved combining the emancipationist and reconciliationist themes of remembrance. One Kansas newspaper, the *Emporia Weekly News*, which supported the Republican Party, decided to reprint former New York senator Roscoe Conkling's speech from the 1880 Republican National Convention in Chicago, where Grant had attempted to win a third nomination for the presidency. Notably, Frederick Douglass claimed in his memorial speech that Conkling would have the final word on Grant's legacy.[62] Conkling, in his convention speech, had combined the two ideas of emancipation and reunion in his attempt to secure the nomination for Grant. He claimed that Grant's ideas "presented for Lee's surrender foreshadowed the wisest prophecies and principles of true reconstruction"; this statement implied that Grant's handling of Lee's surrender – praised so highly by southerners – had equal standing with his handling of Reconstruction. The speech later detailed Grant's attitude toward African American civil rights and the abuse of the law in southern states. Conkling stated that Grant had promised to protect "the poor dwellers in the cabins of the south" so that they would "no longer be driven in terror from the homes of their childhood and the graves of their murdered dead." Conkling went

on to say that "lawlessness and disorder would always find a foe in him," by which Grant "meant that, popular or unpopular, he would hew to the line of right," regardless of the consequences.[63] Conkling's speech showcased Grant as the seemingly strong man of Reconstruction, who enforced the law without fear of the smears that the opposition, and indeed his party, threw at him.[64] Thus in reprinting this speech, the newspaper reminded Republican politicians and their allies, especially Union veterans who represented the core of their supporters in the Midwest, of the necessity of remembering the man brave enough to confront his enemies and uphold the law with both the sword and the pen. In doing so, the paper indicated that Unionists had a duty to support African American civil rights by highlighting that Grant had always tried to follow a just cause; he "let the chips fly where they may," as justice always meant more to him than popularity.[65] For this independent newspaper, justice meant both fairness to Confederates in defeat and fairness to African Americans and southern white Republicans in Reconstruction and beyond. Their inclusion of this speech in their reporting on Grant's death indicated that they still regarded southern voting rights as being of the utmost importance for the future peace of the country, as well as a valuable part of Grant's presidential legacy.

The African American community favorably remembered Grant's presidency, and thus celebrated his role in both their emancipation and their inclusion in "the American body politic." At an African American memorial meeting held in Washington, D.C., both Frederick Douglass and John M. Langston delivered speeches. Douglass celebrated Grant's vigorous defense of Black civil rights while offering a rebuke to the new direction in which he saw the Republican Party moving; this slant may explain why many newspapers did not print the speech. Douglass first commended Grant as "too enlightened to be influenced by popular prejudice; too humane to despise the humblest," before affirming that Grant held primary responsibility for providing suffrage to his race. Douglass recalled that "[w]hen red-handed violence ran riot through the south, and freedmen were being hunted down like wild beasts in the night, the moral courage and fidelity of Gen[eral] Grant, transcended that of his party, and hence, his place at its head was given to timid men, and the country allowed to drift, instead of stemming with stalwart arm the current of southern anarchy."[66] In memorializing Grant and praising him for enforcing the Fifteenth Amendment via the 1871 Ku Klux Klan Act, Douglass used the opportunity to scold Republican Party leaders for their decreasing support for the Black community and to remind them that one of their greatest leaders, which the whole country mourned, did not yield to public opinion. Douglass sought to compel the Republicans to defend African American civil rights more robustly by appealing to the power of Grant's memory and his fame. By doing so, he could show them that to truly honor Grant, they needed to continue the fight for Black civil rights so that Grant's efforts to restore peace would not wither away on the supposed altar of public opinion.

Many other Black leaders and African American newspapers also sought to promote a positive image of Grant's presidency. The *New York Freeman* covered the memorial at Mt. Olivet Baptist Church in New York City, where Professor Thomas McCants Stewart gave a well-received speech in which he claimed Grant as African Americans' "friend in the story period of Reconstruction; in the dark days of Ku Kluxism. Of midnight crime and murder … He protected and guided us in peace. He recognized our citizenship by advancing us, as no other President, to positions of honor and emolument in the public service."[67] Other Black leaders echoed these feelings in church services, including at St. Paul's African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Columbus, Ohio, as covered in the *Cleveland Gazette*. Those in attendance at that service approved a resolution recognizing Grant's commitment "to the cause of freedom and the equality of rights of all

people."[68] The *Huntsville Gazette* in Alabama printed a lengthy history of Grant's life, including an overview of both of his terms as president. Of the many "notable" acts in Grant's first term, this newspaper praised Reconstruction, especially the Ku Klux Klan Act, and "the suspension of habeus [*sic*] corpus in the northern counties of South Carolina"; regarding his second term, it celebrated "the passage of the supplementary Civil-rights bill."[69] Generally, African American newspapers that covered Grant's presidency and Reconstruction spoke positively of Grant's achievements for civil rights.

But these leaders, like Douglass, knew they needed to grasp this opportunity and use it to embed themselves within the body politic by reminding white Americans that reconciliation could only truly occur if Black suffrage was secure. J. G. Brown, writing in the *Cleveland Gazette*, claimed that Grant, "in his every public act," had worked to "solidify the people of this country into one grand and united Nation."[70] Professor McCants Stewart professed similar sentiments in his eulogy at a New York memorial; he praised Grant highly for his actions in advancing the African American race, but he also acknowledged that Grant's death had "perfected the reconciliation of the sections." As a result, he declared that the "colored people shall expect the South to imitate Grant in pursuing a course of equal and exact justice towards the entire colored race by stopping political oppression and ending the lawlessness which characterizes too large a part of this section."[71] Here, Stewart pushed the South to make true their tears of grief with actions befitting their talk of reconciliation. For African Americans, reconciliation and union could only occur if they included justice for their race. Their memorials to Grant endeavored to tie the three concepts together in an attempt to create lasting political change.[72]

Praise for Grant's Presidency in Biographies

Although newspapers recorded the majority of reactions to Grant's death, including the printing of public memorials and speeches, there was also a large number of biographies published soon after his death, many of which sought to create positive memories of his presidency and Reconstruction. While most authors sought to publish their books as close to Grant's death as possible, Frank A. Burr and Colonel Herman Dieck published their laudatory biographies later in 1885, which gave them time to focus on both Grant's military and civil career. Dieck chose to include praise for Grant from public and private memorials, such as the gathering at New York's Fifth Avenue Hotel after Grant's funeral, where former Louisiana politicians, Senator William Pitt Kellogg and Governor Stephen B. Packard, expressed their support for Grant's southern policy but also highlighted Grant's frustration at the lack of support from the Republican Party.[73] Dieck also included eulogies from many memorial services in August 1885, such as one in Augusta, Maine, where James G. Blaine commended Grant's presidency and heralded how Grant had "quietly enforced a policy which had been for four years the cause of embittered disputation."[74] Meanwhile, former general and member of the House of Representatives, Benjamin F. Butler, praised Grant in Lowell, Massachusetts, for enacting Reconstruction and "using the heavy hand only when great wrongs and outrages were perpetrated upon the unoffending citizens so that Grant's first term upon this topic was, in fact, but a firm grasp holding either section from unduly interfering, irritating or exasperating the other."[75] Burr's biography also praised Grant's strong hand when he described the opposition of the southern states to the Fifteenth Amendment. Burr contended that for Grant, reconciliation depended "upon absolute respect and obedience to the laws of the land," including the

Reconstruction Amendments.[76] To reinforce this sentiment, Burr used Grant's 1875 speech to the Society of the Army of the Tennessee at Des Moines, Iowa, in which he asked his audience to "labor to add all needful guarantees for the more perfect security of free thought, free speech and free press, pure morals, unfettered religious sentiments and of equal rights and privileges to all men irrespective of nationality, color or religion" so that the "sacrifices" of the Civil War dead would not be wasted.[77] In Burr's mind, historians would value Grant "among the great civil rulers of the nation" because even though Grant may have made mistakes in his choice of men to support him, he "never" erred in his "judgment in policy. In the doubtful and complicated perplexities of his position he was uniformly right."[78] Both Burr and Dieck made it clear that support remained strong among Republican mourners, especially in the North, for the enforcement of Reconstruction. They did so by highlighting the positive evaluations of Grant's presidency, including his use of federal troops to protect southern voting rights.

A few years later, in 1889, a biography of Roscoe Conkling also used Grant's voice to make the case for the enforcement of African American civil rights. Alfred Conkling included a speech that Grant delivered in support of James Garfield during the 1880 presidential campaign, promoting the protection of equal rights for all citizens. In this speech, Grant asserted that a Democratic voter could exercise his rights in all U.S. states while a Republican voter could not do so in fourteen states. He stated that only the Republican Party offered security to all American men at the ballot box, regardless of the party they supported and "no matter what his race, nationality, or previous condition."[79] But Grant went further. He claimed that during his recent travels in the South, he had spoken to many southern men who espoused a disdain for "this 'Solid South' political condition," and he who desired "to break away from the slavery which binds them to a party name. They want a pretext that enough of them can unite upon to make it respectable." Grant's conversations with these men gave him the confidence to say that "those who start it will be astonished to find how many of their friends have been in favor of it for a long time, and have only been waiting to see some one take the lead." But for Grant, this change could only be achieved through the Democrats' defeat.[80] The extent of Grant's influence on the Democratic Party is unknown, but a respectable southern man did step forth to make the break that Grant had encouraged. George Washington Cable had spoken in several Southern towns on this topic and many white southerners, both young and old, greeted him "cordially" afterward. This reception led him, in January 1885, to publish an article in *Century Magazine* addressing the problem of the freedman in the South. Cable urged his fellow southerners to grant the freedmen their full civil rights. Unlike Grant, Cable believed the solution to the freedman's problem lay in the hands of southerners who could only rectify the situation by accepting the Reconstruction Amendments and by allowing African Americans to exercise their rights in every sphere of public life.[81] As a former Confederate soldier and the descendant of slaveowners, Cable felt he had the gravitas to speak on this issue, but a hostile southern response met his words.[82] His second article, "The Silent South," published in April 1885, fared no better. And while Henry Cabot Lodge praised him for his "great and noble act," which resulted in him being "assailed, abused, and sneered at" in the South – so much so that he migrated to Massachusetts – the break that both Cable and Grant sought did not occur.[83] Southern hostility at the prospect of admitting African Americans to full citizenship showed that Democratic southerners would not willingly do so, which in turn illustrated the necessity of stronger means to ensure that both Black and white Republicans in the South could vote.

Continuing Agitation for African American Civil Rights in the 1880s and 1890s

While Cable and Grant encouraged white southerners to break the control of the Democratic Party in the South, white Republican politicians in the North agitated for continued support for equal rights for all citizens. Many political autobiographies, as well as political speeches, in the 1880s and early 1890s, echoed this support, including those by General John A. Logan and former Ohio governor, Joseph Foraker. Logan's book, published in 1886, praised "the Emancipation proclamations, together with the Constitutional amendments, and Congressional legislation," as providing "Freedom to all within the Nation's boundaries."[84] Foraker showed consistent support for African American civil rights and Reconstruction from the Civil War to the 1890s, as well as condemnation for Democratic violence and fraud. He frequently espoused support for legislation to punish those who committed electoral fraud. Foraker claimed that the fraud that resulted in Blaine's presidential defeat influenced the 1885 Ohio state platform to the extent that "the first plank of our [state] platform demanded a free ballot and a fair count," and resulted in the most comprehensive "discussion of the Southern question" than ever seen before in Ohio.[85] He also cited electoral fraud in Ohio that resulted in the imprisonment of 152 African American men until the polls had closed ("without [being given] a mouthful of food or a drink of water") as a key reason for the importance of protecting the franchise for everyone.[86] In a campaign speech at Bellefontaine, Ohio, Foraker stated that "the right to vote is a sacred right – that it must be protected and guaranteed by the Constitution and the laws, and that every man who has the right to vote must be accorded that right, free from all violence, fraud or intimidation, and that his ballot when cast must be counted as cast."[87] Moreover, Foraker insisted that the Republican platform went "further than that, and says that if under the Constitution and the laws as now existing, it is not possible so to protect the right of suffrage, then the Constitution and the laws must be made so that the protection can be given."[88] Foraker's promise aligned with statements he had made since the Civil War and demonstrated an enduring commitment to the fight for African American civil rights.

Another prominent Ohio Republican, John Sherman, also made strong statements and actions in support of African American civil rights. He, too, had not abandoned Reconstruction politics in the 1880s and 1890s. On August 26, 1885, at Mount Gilead, Ohio, Sherman referenced Grant's funeral and linked the Union victory with the Reconstruction Amendments.[89] Sherman stated that the Republican Party "fight[s] for the equal political rights of all men, and the faithful observance of the constitutional amendments. We are for the exercise of national authority, for the preservation of rights conferred by the constitution … Upon this issue we intend to make our appeal to the honest and honorable people of the Southern states. We think they are bound in honor to faithfully observe the conditions of peace granted to them by General Grant and prescribed by the constitutional amendments."[90] Sherman intentionally linked Grant's death with the generous peace, celebrated by the South, to the civil rights achievements of Reconstruction. He reminded his audience that this peace rested upon the South upholding these rights. Sherman thus linked the Unionist memory of the Civil War to a Reconstruction memory of Grant's presidency in an effort to convince voters that neither would be secure without the other. Sherman used Grant's memory several times on the campaign trail to impress upon his audience the importance of supporting the Republican Party. In October 1885, before a campaign speech in Toledo, Ohio, a voter asked Sherman what he intended to do to combat the electoral fraud that had taken place during the last presidential election. Sherman's speech replied, "we are going to arrange

that the vote of the man who followed Lee shall no longer have, in national affairs, three times the power of the vote of the man who followed Grant. The tendency of events guided by a growing popular opinion will, I believe, secure this condition."[91] Sherman had defended African American voting rights numerous times before and spoke of the need to investigate and punish fraud, but here he deliberately invoked Grant's memory to capitalize upon his death and to align his audience's approval of Grant with support for African American civil rights. Sherman understood the power of Grant's memory and the positive light in which Ohioans continued to hold the former president and knew that recalling his memory would help to gain support for the enforcement of Black voting rights. Furthermore, Sherman continued to advocate for equal rights even beyond the failure of Lodge's Federal Elections Bill of 1890. In an article on the history of the Republican Party for the New York *Independent*, which he included in his autobiography, Sherman wrote that the Republicans remained "the party of equal rights, an unsullied ballot and honest elections." This statement indicated that even after the issue of enforcing the Reconstruction Amendments became unpopular, he continued to support their implementation.[92] Grant's position as one of the most famous Americans meant his memory and image were uniquely positioned to marshal support toward the fight for nationwide enforcement of the Reconstruction Amendments.

The support generated for the protection of African American civil rights led to the Republicans introducing the Lodge Federal Elections Bill in June 1890. This bill sought to provide federal supervision of state elections and give the federal government the power to decide disputed elections.[93] Here, Republicans strove for long-term electoral reform and the revival of the Republican Party in the South. But despite their majority in both houses of Congress, and support from President Benjamin Harrison, the measure did not pass, due to Democratic filibustering in the Senate despite passage in the House of Representatives.[94] This impasse resulted in breakaway Republican supporters of pro-tariff and silver coinage allying with the Democrats to lay the bill aside multiple times. A vote on the bill never took place.[95] This result gave the impression that Republicans saw economic matters as more vital and electorally more successful than civil rights, as many African Americans in the North had already conceded. McConarty, however, has shown through the letters sent to the bill's promoter, Senator George F. Hoar, that issues of race and civil rights still garnered substantial interest. Both northerners and southerners expressed interest and offered analysis of the issues surrounding voting in the South. This interest indicated that Reconstruction remained an important issue in the minds of Americans even though leading independent and Democratic national newspapers waged "aggressive campaigns" against the bill.[96] Ultimately, though, Democratic filibustering and northern and western economic issues triumphed over attempts to secure African American voting rights in the South.

Conclusion

This analysis of post-death remembrances of Grant's presidency supports the emerging historiography of the 1880s and 1890s, which indicates that issues surrounding electoral rights remained very important to Americans regardless of whether they lived in the North or the South, or whether they were Black or white. Identification with these issues even stretched across party lines, as both Cable and some of the letters to Hoar on the federal elections bill showed. While it would be easy to focus on the most vocal individuals who remembered Grant's role as the unifier of the nation in the Civil War, doing so

obscures the era's ongoing attempts to support and enforce voting rights in the South. In presenting an image of a united nation, prominent national newspapers concealed the reality of a divided nation that had not yet declared Reconstruction a failure. It is clear from public memorials at the time of Grant's death, as well as from the speeches and memoirs of prominent Republican politicians, that the issues surrounding Reconstruction still occupied the minds of many Americans. Thus, the period after the traditional end of Reconstruction in 1877 is far more complex than previously thought. Reconstruction did not end with the removal of federal troops from the South, and the Republican Party did not simply abandon African Americans. Instead, a plethora of groups both southern and northern, though mainly Republican Unionists and emancipationists, continued to agitate for the continued protection of African American civil rights. Grant's death in 1885 presented the perfect opportunity for supporters of Reconstruction to remind Americans on both sides of the Civil War that the Union would only be secure if they enforced Grant's legacy of justice.

Grant's death and funeral is a key moment of division in the memory of the Civil War. Scholars of Civil War memory have largely overlooked this moment, mistakenly assuming that it merely represented another sign of the nation reuniting under the banner of reconciliation. On the one side, African Americans, along with white southern Republicans and some white northern Republicans, celebrated Grant's presidency – especially the Reconstruction Acts, the Fifteenth Amendment, and the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871 – in an attempt to secure support for additional legislation that would entrench African American civil rights. On the other side, however, Democratic reconciliationists and their Republican reformist allies conjured a negative image of his presidency, as a way to undermine attempts to support Black civil rights. In doing so, they started a process in which the South would set the narrative for future scholarly interpretations of Grant's presidency. Here was the personally honest yet naïve man who was far too loyal to his friends and too inept to prevent widespread corruption in his administration. This imagery of a great soldier who failed as president thereby gave rise to the idea of Reconstruction as a mistake that should never be repeated. By promoting these ideas, both camps created powerful memories of Reconstruction that could either be used to ensure its demise or as a strong weapon in the battle for the enforcement of African American civil rights. It is clear from these remembrances of Grant's presidency that the unity shown by "Reconciliation gushers, north and south" was superficial – and that the battle to define what the Civil War and Reconstruction meant was still ongoing.[97] Sectionalism did not die with Grant in 1885, and the verdict on Reconstruction and Grant's presidency remained undecided. For historians to truly understand the downfall of Reconstruction in the public consciousness, additional research is needed to explain the trajectory of its demise. But in 1885, Republicans and independents still held both President Grant and General Grant in high esteem.

Notes

1 Sarah J. Purcell, *Spectacle of Grief: Public Funerals and Memory in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022), 5.

2 As Sarah Purcell and others have pointed out, it is more beneficial to the historical record to study the competing viewpoints that contributed to the creation of the "imagined reconstitution of the nation," rather than debating which one was more dominant. See Purcell, *Spectacle of Grief*, 4.

3 Many scholars have explored the subject of Civil War memory since David W. Blight's 2001 *Race and Reunion*, but Grant's role is typically featured across a few pages and the memories of his presidency are

excluded. Blight briefly explores how Americans used Grant's death in Civil War memory to reunite the nation and gives an overview of his presidency without exploring the memories of it upon his death. See David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001). Caroline Janney, in her study of Civil War memory, shows the persistence of emancipationist and Unionist memories after the Civil War but again focuses on Grant's death and funeral as an example of the reunification of Americans without considering Reconstruction memories. She does mention the tirades against Reconstruction by staunch Lost Cause champions such as former Confederate generals Jubal Early and Dabney H. Maury, but it should be noted that some of these polemics occurred before Reconstruction had ended. See Caroline Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013). Similarly, Robert J. Cook focuses on the impact that Grant's death, his funeral, and his memoirs had on Civil War memory, especially the image of the magnanimous general. See Robert J. Cook, *Civil War Memories: Contesting the Past in the United States Since 1885* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017). For scholars who have examined the memory of Reconstruction but who have omitted memories of Grant's presidency, see Bruce E. Baker, *What Reconstruction Meant: Historical Memory in the American South* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007). Baker focuses on state politics in various southern states rather than exploring memories of the federal government's role in Reconstruction. Another notable book is a collection, edited by Carole Emberton and Bruce Baker, which aims to fill a void in Reconstruction scholarship by looking at memories of Reconstruction. Its ten chapters look at a range of issues including white supremacist and Black counter-memories, as well as exploring Reconstruction in relation to two presidents: Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Again, Grant's role in Reconstruction memories has been overlooked. See Carole Emberton and Bruce E. Baker, eds., *Remembering Reconstruction: Struggles Over the Meaning of America's Most Turbulent Era* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017).

4 The most prominent historian to examine Grant's death is Joan Waugh. Her book states that both Republicans and Democrats briefly acknowledged Grant's presidency. The parties claimed that Grant had his faults like all Americans and his presidency epitomized many of these faults which meant that it could not be recalled favorably. As a result, many people chose to simply ignore it or state that it was not of any consequence now that the country was reunited. See Joan Waugh, *U. S. Grant: American Hero, American Myth* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 222–23. Similarly, Richard G. Mannion also focuses on Grant as a symbol of reunification, with little to no focus on the memories of his presidency at the time of his death. See Richard G. Mannion, "The Life of a Reputation: The Public Memory of Ulysses S. Grant" (PhD diss., Georgia State University, 2012), 239–40, 262–63. The latest addition to the literature on this topic also focuses on the symbolism of unity and reunification in response to Grant's death, and the building of his tomb, without acknowledging the memories of Reconstruction and his presidency that were also present at that time. See Louis L. Picone, *Grant's Tomb: The Epic Death of Ulysses S. Grant and the Making of an American Pantheon* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2021).

5 Annabelle F. Grenville-Mathers, "Executive Power and Republicanism: The Battle to Define Ulysses S. Grant's Presidency 1868–1880" (PhD diss., University of Sheffield, 2015); Charles W. Calhoun, *The Presidency of Ulysses S.* Grant (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017); H. W. Brands, *The Man Who Saved the Union: Ulysses S. Grant in War and Peace* (New York: Anchor, 2013).

6 Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 2.

7 Historians who have challenged Blight's conception of a reconciled nation by the 1880s include John R. Neff, whose exploration of commemorating Civil War soldiers has shown that remembering the dead divided the nation more than it united them. The North clung ferociously to its Unionist interpretation of the war when it came to honoring their dead, and reconciliation only became possible due to the Spanish-American War at the end of the nineteenth century. See John R. Neff, *Honoring the Civil War Dead: Commemoration and the Problem of Reconciliation* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005). Janney shows the persistence of the Unionist and emancipationist memories of the Civil War, and how often they overlapped, especially by members of the Grand Army of the Republic, who strongly objected to other memories of the war. See Janney, *Remembering the Civil War*. Robert J. Cook also emphasizes this version of Civil War memory, highlighting its political uses and showing how many Republicans clung to Unionist and emancipationist interpretations of the war in order to support their political power and to resist a white southern resurgence. See Cook, *Civil War Memories*. Cook has also explored northern outrage over the white South's response to Jefferson Davis's death in 1889, using it to show that Republicans, Union veterans, and African Americans still strongly opposed the reconciliationist memories of white southerners.

See Robert J. Cook, "'Not Buried Yet': Northern Responses to the Death of Jefferson Davis and the Stuttering Progress of Sectional Reconciliation," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 18 (July 2019): 324–48. In a more recent article, Cook has examined the participation of federal veterans in the spread and downfall of the memory of the Union cause. See Robert J. Cook, "'Hollow Victory': Federal Veterans, Racial Justice and the Eclipse of the Union Cause in American Memory," *History and Memory* 33 (Spring–Summer 2021): 3–33.

8 Gary W. Gallagher, *Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten: How Hollywood and Popular Art Shape What We Know about the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 2.

9 Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 2, 5.

10 Cook, *Civil War Memories*, 4–6.

11 Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 2.

12 Cook, *Civil War Memories*, 4–6.

13 Waugh, *U.S. Grant*, 215–59.

14 Picone, *Grant's Tomb*.

15 For example, white southerners and former Confederates recalled how Grant had ceased fighting once Lee handed over his sword; they also praised Grant for feeding Lee's starving army and for allowing the Confederate soldiers to keep their horses to use for sowing crops in the spring. These actions, they stated, represented Grant's lack of animosity toward his enemy and illustrated that Grant viewed the Confederates as his equals and his countrymen. The exception in the scholarship is Elizabeth R. Varon's book on Appomattox, which explores how both Unionists and Confederates politicized the memory of that battle in 1865 and the immediate years afterward to either support or oppose Reconstruction. Varon illustrates how southerners interpreted and remembered Grant's magnanimous terms selectively; as a result, the stories told about Appomattox in 1885 by Southerners were ones used specifically to prevent action on Black civil rights by implying that Grant supported generous terms for the reunification of the country rather than just the Confederacy's surrender. However, Varon only documents this trend in the immediate aftermath of Appomattox and does not explore its use after Grant's death. See Elizabeth R. Varon, *Appomattox: Victory, Defeat, and Freedom at the End of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

16 Quoted in Janney, *Remembering the Civil War*, 170; *New York Times*, Aug. 9, 1885.

17 Colin McConarty, "The Federal Elections Bill of 1890: The Continuation of Reconstruction in America," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 19 (July 2020): 390–405, esp. 393 ("ostracized"), 397 ("[e]lectoral justice").

18 Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 47.

19 *Weekly Commercial Herald* (Vicksburg, Mississippi), July 31, 1885; Luis-Alejandro Dinnella-Borrego, *The Risen Phoenix: Black Politics in the Post-Civil War South* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 140.

20 *Weekly Commercial Herald* (Vicksburg, Mississippi), July 31, 1885.

21 *Weekly Commercial Herald* (Vicksburg, Mississippi), July 31, 1885. This accusation was backed up by publications such as *Sun* (New York), July 24, 1885.

22 *Huntsville* (Alabama) *Gazette*, July 25, 1885.

23 *Savannah Morning News*, July 27, 1885; *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 30, 1885; *Fairfield News and Herald* (Winnsboro, South Carolina), July 29, 1885; *Yorkville* (South Carolina) *Enquirer*, July 30, 1885.

24 *Savannah Morning News*, July 27, 1885.

25 *Albany Argus* article reproduced in *New York Herald*, July 29, 1885; *Weekly Commercial Herald* (Vicksburg, Mississippi), July 31, 1885.

26 *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 30, 1885.

27 *Crawford Avalanche* (Grayling, Michigan), July 30, 1885; *New York Herald*, July 24, 1885.

28 Grenville-Mathers, "Executive Power and Republicanism," 146–93.

29 *Yorkville* (South Carolina) *Enquirer*, July 30, 1885; *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 30, 1885.

30 *Clarion* (Jackson, Mississippi), July 29, 1885; *Fairfield News and Herald* (Winnsboro, South Carolina), July 29, 1885.

31 *St. Landry Democrat* (Opelousas, Louisiana), Dec. 5, 1885.

32 *St. Landry Democrat* (Opelousas, Louisiana), Dec. 5, 1885; *Memphis Daily Appeal*, July 30, 1885. Similar claims were made by the *Fairfield News and Herald* (Winnsboro, South Carolina), July 29, 1885.

33 *St. Landry Democrat* (Opelousas, Louisiana), Dec. 5, 1885 (quotation). There were plenty of white northern newspapers that also critiqued Grant's *Memoirs*, see the independent *Manitowoc* (Wisconsin) *Pilot*, Dec. 24, 1885; *Sun* (New York), Dec. 6, 1885; *McCook* (Nebraska) *Tribune*, Dec. 31, 1885.
34 David W. Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 103; Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Alice Fahs and Joan Waugh, eds., *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
35 New York *Sun*, July 24, 1885.
36 It should be noted that while the owner and editor of the New York *Sun*, Charles A. Dana, insisted that his newspaper was an independent, its working-class readership leaned Democratic and the newspaper represented Democratic views far more than Republican ones. See Mark Wahlgren Summers, *The Press Gang: Newspapers and Politics 1865–1878* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1994), 64, 311. Dana had a complicated relationship with Grant. In April 1863, while Dana was still working at the *New-York Tribune*, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton sent Dana to Vicksburg to verify whether rumors of Grant's drunkenness were true. Dana confirmed that they were not and sent highly favorable reports to Stanton about Grant's abilities and conduct. See James Harrison Wilson, *The Life of Charles A. Dana* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1907), 200–01, 207–19. Dana continued to support Grant after the Civil War ended, and when he became editor of the *Sun* in 1868, he supported Grant's bid for the presidency. However, once Grant was in power, Dana's support ceased and he became one of Grant's fiercest critics and opposed his re-election in 1872. See Summers, *Press Gang*, 64, 171, 182. In addition, it was well known that Dana often held contradictory opinions, and while he supported Jefferson Davis, he also admonished him in 1886 for failing to mention slavery in a speech on the Lost Cause. See Wilson, *Life of Charles A. Dana*, 472–73. Similarly, while he opposed the reinstatement of Grant's military pension in 1885, Dana advocated a popular subscription scheme to generate money to support Grant's family instead. See Wilson, *Life of Charles A. Dana*, 469.
37 *Wheeling Daily Intelligencer* (Wheeling, West Virginia), July 28, 1885. Governor Hoadly did issue a proclamation but not as quickly as desired by this newspaper.
38 New York *Sun*, July 28, 1885; *West Virginia Freeman* (Parkersburg, West Virginia), Aug. 12, 1885.
39 *Rock Island Argus* (Rock Island, Argus), July 29, 1885 (first and second quotations); *Wichita Daily Eagle* (Wichita, Kansas), July 28, 1885 (third quotation).
40 *Watchman and Southron* (Sumter, South Carolina), Aug. 4, 1885.
41 *Indianapolis Journal*, July 25, 1885.
42 *Fairfield News and Herald* (Winnsboro, South Carolina), July 29, 1885.
43 See Silber, *Romance of Reunion*; Fahs and Waugh, eds., *Memory of the Civil War in American Culture*; Blight, *Race and Reunion*; Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield.*
44 Fahs and Waugh, eds., *Memory of the Civil War in American Culture*, 22.
45 *New York Herald*, Aug. 6, 1885.
46 See William A. Dunning, *Reconstruction: Political and Economic, 1865–1877* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1907). Other historians influenced by Dunning whose works are considered part of the Dunning School include J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, *Reconstruction in North Carolina* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1914); C. Mildred Thompson, *Reconstruction in Georgia: Economic, Social, Political, 1865–1872* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1915); Claude G. Bowers, *The Tragic Era: The Revolution After Lincoln* (Cambridge, MA: Literary Guild of America, 1929); E. Merton Coulter, *The South During Reconstruction, 1865–1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1947).
47 Xi Wang, *The Trial of Democracy: Black Suffrage and Northern Republicans, 1860–1910* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 204–05; Stephen A. West, "Remembering Reconstruction in Its Twilight: Ulysses S. Grant and James G. Blaine on the Origins of Black Suffrage," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 10 (Dec. 2020): 511.
48 Cook, *Civil War Memories*, 91.
49 Wang, *Trial of Democracy*, 207–11, 300.
50 Dinnella-Borrego, *Risen Phoenix*, 165–66.
51 Cook, *Civil War Memories*, 91.
52 Jeffrey A. Jenkins and Justin Peck, "The Erosion of the First Civil Rights Era: Congress and the Redemption of the White South, 1877–1891," 20–22, 29 (quotation); paper presented at Annual Congress and History Conference, 2015, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.
53 *Clarion* (Jackson, Mississippi), July 29, 1885.

54 See Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865–1901* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Richard J. Jensen, *The Winning of the Midwest: Social and Political Conflict, 1888–1896* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971); Mark Wahlgren Summers, *Party Games: Getting, Keeping, and Using Power in Gilded Age Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
55 Millington Bergeson-Lockwood, "No Longer Pliant Tools: Urban Politics and Conflicts over African American Partisanship in 1880s Boston, Massachusetts," *Journal of Urban History* 44, no. 2 (2018): 169–86.
56 John Y. Simon, ed., *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* vol. 20: Nov. 1, 1869–Oct. 31, 1870 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press 1995), 137.
57 Simon, ed., *Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, 20:218–19.
58 *Morning Herald* (Baltimore), July 23, 1885; *Belmont Chronicle* (St. Clairsville, Ohio), July 30, 1885.
59 *New York Herald*, Aug. 5, 1885.
60 *Iron County Register* (Ironton, Missouri), July 30, 1885 (quotation). A similar message was conveyed by the Democratic (and former Confederate) *Memphis Daily Appeal*, which quoted a former cabinet member, ex-postmaster general John Cresswell, who stated that Grant "discharged his duties always without selfishness" and without considering the impact upon himself as long as justice was served. The paper then repeated Cresswell's words about Grant's attempt for a third term, which he claimed was to "reconcile the North and South." The paper supported reconciliation but did not disparage Grant's presidency while doing so. See *Memphis Daily Appeal* (Memphis, Tennessee), July 24, 1885.
61 *Fort Worth Daily Gazette* (Fort Worth, Texas), July 24, 1885.
62 *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), Aug. 15, 1885.
63 *Emporia Weekly News* (Emporia, Kansas), July 30, 1885.
64 Grenville-Mathers, "Executive Power and Republicanism", 245–94; Charles W. Calhoun, *From Bloody Shirt to Full Dinner Pail: The Transformation of Politics and Governance in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 67.
65 *Emporia Weekly News* (Emporia, Kansas), July 30, 1885.
66 *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), Aug. 15, 1885.
67 *New York Freeman*, Aug. 15, 1885.
68 *Cleveland Gazette* (Cleveland, Ohio), Aug. 8, 1885.
69 *Huntsville Gazette* (Huntsville, Alabama), July 25, 1885.
70 *Cleveland Gazette* (Cleveland, Ohio), Aug. 15, 1885. Similar sentiments were also present in the *West Virginia Freeman*, July 29, 1885.
71 *New York Freeman*, Aug. 15, 1885.
72 These efforts to turn words into action also saw several African American newspapers chastise people and places that excluded them from "white memorials," and celebrate those who included them. See *Huntsville* (Alabama) *Gazette*, Aug. 22, 1885; *Cleveland Gazette* (Cleveland, Ohio), Aug. 15, 1885.
73 Colonel Herman Dieck, *The Most Complete and Authentic History of the Life and Public Services of General U. S. Grant, "The Napoleon of America"* (Toronto: C. R. Parish, 1885), 641.
74 Dieck, *Life and Public Services of U.S. Grant*, 803.
75 Dieck, *Life and Public Services of U.S. Grant*, 806.
76 Frank A. Burr, *Life and Deeds of General U. S. Grant* (Toronto: J. S. Robertson, 1885), 860, 862 (quotation).
77 Burr, *Life and Deeds of General U. S. Grant*, 869–871 (first quotation on 871, second quotation on 869).
78 Burr, *Life and Deeds of General U. S. Grant*, 872.
79 Alfred R. Conkling, *The Life and Letters of Roscoe Conkling: Orator, Statesman, Advocate* (New York: Charles L. Webster, 1889), 619.
80 Conkling, *Life and Letters of Roscoe Conkling*, 620.
81 George W. Cable, *The Silent South* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), 1–39 (quotation on 21).
82 Henry Cabot Lodge, *Speeches and Addresses 1884–1909* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909), 22.
83 Lodge, *Speeches and Addresses 1884–1909*, 22.
84 John A. Logan, *The Great Conspiracy: Its Origins and History* (New York: A. R. Hart, 1886), 672.
85 Joseph Benson Foraker, *Notes of a Busy Life*, 2 vols. (Cincinnati: Stewart and Kidd, 1916), 1:192.
86 Foraker, *Notes of a Busy Life*, 1:195–96.
87 Foraker, *Notes of a Busy Life*, 1:196.
88 Foraker, *Notes of a Busy Life*, 1:196–97.

89 John Sherman, *Recollections of Forty Years in the House, Senate and Cabinet. An Autobiography*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Werner, 1895), 2:928.
90 Sherman, *Recollections of Forty Years*, 2:928.
91 Sherman, *Recollections of Forty Years*, 2:930.
92 Sherman, *Recollections of Forty Years*, 2:1166.
93 Wang, *Trial of Democracy*, 236–37.
94 McConarty, "Federal Elections Bill of 1890," 391.
95 Wang, *Trial of Democracy*, 240–49.
96 McConarty, "Federal Elections Bill of 1890," 393–94 (quotation on 393).
97 *Omaha* (Nebraska) *Daily Bee*, Dec. 22, 1885.

Belle Grenville-Mathers is an Academic Skills Tutor at Arden University. Her scholarship focuses on African American civil rights during Ulysses S. Grant's presidency and Reconstruction.

Cite this article: Belle Grenville-Mathers (2025) "The Death of Ulysses S. Grant and the Politics of Reconstruction Memory in the 1880s," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* **24,** 304–325. https://doi.org/10.1017/S153778142500009X