

Review

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John Reeves. *Soldier of Destiny: Slavery, Secession, and the Redemption of Ulysses S. Grant*. New York and London: Pegasus Books, 2023. Pp. 289.

Shortly after Ulysses S. Grant won the presidency in 1868, the *Atlantic Monthly* reflected on the epoch's near mystic significance. "We have at last had an American President and an American generalissimo," the magazine opined. But these were not strongmen of the Old World. Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant personified "the American Demos," the "patience, integrity, wise good-nature, untiring energy, simplicity, and perfect faith" of the common American citizen. Products of the national stock, Lincoln, "the first citizen during the war," and Grant, "the leather-dresser who succeeded him," would be forever "distinctly stamped with the popular impress." They led their people not from towering heights but rather from a shared modesty in their noble cause.¹

Lincoln and Grant were the unlikeliest of characters to populate the American pantheon. And yet, in their quintessence of the republic that they preserved, they joined with George Washington as the great national triumvirate. John Reeves's *Soldier of Destiny: Slavery, Secession, and the Redemption of Ulysses S. Grant* tells the origin story of this most improbable tale. This lively if not understated reading of Grant's life between 1854 and 1864 unveils the soldier's evolution from an ambivalent observer of and even complicit agent in American slavery into one of the most committed authors of the institution's wartime death. Reeves offers a story of human complexity and contradiction, of principle and purpose, of the drive to fulfill one's better angels.

Reeves's book is the latest addition to a generational rehabilitation of Grant's historical legacy. Having cashiered the unfair characterizations of Grant as a butcher and a crook, a tidal wave of literature beginning in the 1990s resurrected the Grant who existed in fact. No longer a militant, coldhearted, pathetic drunk, or an inept, corrupt politician, Grant now appears as a quiet, honorable, discerning general,

1. "Reviews and Literary Notices," *Atlantic Monthly*, 22 (December 1868): 753–754.

and a respectable, principled statesman. Part of the revisionist project has emphasized Grant's antislavery credentials. Even William S. McFeely's famously critical *Grant: A Biography* (1981) acknowledged Grant's nascent aversion to slavery. Subsequent scholars, including Brooks D. Simpson, Joan Waugh, Jean Edward Smith, H. W. Brands, Ron Chernow, and Ronald J. White, likewise portray Grant either as undecided about or, as Chernow averred, "as a staunch critic of slavery."² Among other things, they point to Grant's 1859 manumission of William Jones, an enslaved man whose market value of \$1,500 could have furnished money that Grant desperately needed as he struggled to eke out a living. Recent scholarship thus distances Grant from the institution into which he married and on which his beloved wife, Julia, relied well into the Civil War.

Grant hailed from a devout antislavery family, while Julia's Missouri father, Frederick Dent, boasted fierce proslavery convictions. The scholarly consensus positions Grant in the middle of the awkward family squabble. "As an army man nurtured in a military culture that wasn't concerned with politics," observes Ron White, Grant "was still working out his own convictions" on the slavery issue.³ Grant's ambivalence toward the institution thus liberated him from the suffocating reliance on and dehumanization wrought by human bondage.

Reeves confronts such revisionist assumptions. Rather than a virtue, he paints Grant's ambivalence as a defect. He takes a page from Nicholas Sacco's 2019 neo-revisionist essay that repositions Grant as an active partaker in Upper South slaveholding culture.⁴ Though born in Ohio to abolitionist parents, and himself never the master of a large plantation regime, Grant nevertheless accommodated his wife's dependence on slavery by participating in the institution as a resident at White Haven, his father-in-law's Missouri estate. Indeed, when Julia inherited 80 acres of land at White Haven, she also received five enslaved individuals. Grant benefitted from the labor furnished by these and other enslaved people on the Dent property to build and maintain his family home, Hardscrabble. Julia even depended on the physical labor of an enslaved woman to nurse her and Ulysses's four children. It is true that Grant hired out his wife's enslaved people, that he paid free Blacks a fair laboring wage, and that some of the enslaved at White Haven later remembered Grant as a kind, gentle

2. Ron Chernow, *Grant* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017), 99.

3. Ronald C. White, *American Ulysses: A Life of Ulysses S. Grant* (New York: Random House, 2016), 132.

4. Nicholas W. Sacco, "I Was Never an Abolitionist': Ulysses S. Grant and Slavery, 1854–1863," *Journal of the Civil War Era*, 9 (September 2019): 410–437.

man. “Regardless of what Ulysses truly thought about of slavery in 1857,” Reeves counters, “he was highly reliant on the institution just four years before the outbreak of the Civil War” (p. 45).

Grant’s relationship to slavery became even more complex. Upon leaving the U. S. Army in 1854, he pursued a humble life of farming. Reeves portrays a Grant entangled in competing forces of antislavery independence and slaveholding dependence. While Grant manumitted William Jones, he likely never encouraged Julia to do the same for her own bondspeople. Grant’s ambivalence toward slavery, Reeves concludes, grew from the family’s accommodation to the institution, influenced partly by Grant’s dire financial prospects during the late 1850s. Reeves thus implies that these conditions influenced Grant’s political support for Democrats James Buchanan in 1856 and Stephen A. Douglas in 1860 (though Illinois residency requirements barred Grant from voting in the election of 1860). For a man seemingly so ambivalent to slavery, Buchanan and Douglas appeared as opportune candidates, especially since they scorned the radical abolitionism which Grant believed could sunder the Union.

Herein lies one of the book’s implications at which Reeves hints but never fully develops. Grant appears in *Soldier of Destiny* as the kind of citizen whom Abraham Lincoln worried about during the 1850s. Ambivalence toward and even tacit participation in the slave system sullied the mores of free society, corrupting the moral sense of all who encountered the institution. Grant was anything but a fire-breathing proslavery defender or even a white supremacist apologist. But the likes of Buchanan and Douglas equivocated on slavery’s immorality. They preached false dogmas of human inequality. They condemned antislavery for fueling civil convulsions. Lincoln thus warned that slavery’s inbred deceit could well hijack decent citizens like Grant.

This was precisely Lincoln’s message in his first major antislavery speech in October 1854 at Peoria, Illinois. The “*declared indifference*” toward slavery, Lincoln advanced, “deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world—enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites.” Though they yet did not know each other, we can almost sense Lincoln imagining Grant when he observed how slavery “forces so many really good men amongst ourselves into an open war with the very fundamental principles of civil liberty—criticising the Declaration of Independence, and insisting that there is no right principle of action but self-interest.”⁵

5. Abraham Lincoln, “Speech at Peoria, Illinois,” October 16, 1854, in Roy P. Basler et al., eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953–1955), 2:255 (hereafter cited as CW).

In fairness, Grant likely well knew as much, having grown up with his father's staunch abolitionism. Like Lincoln, Jesse Root Grant hailed from Kentucky. The elder Grant once said, "I never held a slave. I made up my mind, when I was a young man, that I would never have slaves. This was the reason I left Kentucky and went to Ohio. I would not own slaves, and I would not live where there were slaves and not own them" (p. 30). Jesse's sentiment echoes Lincoln's own words from 1859: "This is a world of compensations; and he who would *be* no slave, must consent to *have* no slave. Those who deny freedom to others, deserve it not for themselves."⁶

Here, then, was the thorny life of Ulysses S. Grant during the late 1850s. Grant was a man of good conscience, ensnared in a system not of his own making but complicit in its perpetuation. He knew slavery was wrong enough in his manumission of William Jones. But he tolerated the institution out of financial and familial necessity. And he supported politicians whose platforms blurred the moral effects of human bondage. The currents of history were nonetheless unpredictable. Wiped out by the economic Panic of 1857, Grant soon relocated to Galena, Illinois, where he accepted a clerkship in his father's prosperous leather goods store. Reeves assesses the move as "*the* critical turning point" in Grant's life (p. 81). Relieved from the slaveholding burdens on his father-in-law's plantation, Grant now lived in an anti-secession state. However, the election of 1860 exposed the rifts in Grant's extended family. His father and brothers supported Lincoln and the antislavery Republicans. Julia and her father supported the southern Democrats. Grant and his new friend, the prominent Galena resident John Rawlins, supported Stephen Douglas.

Grant faced a critical decision when, in 1860–1861, the Deep South seceded in response to Lincoln's election. "No longer able to remain in the moral no-man's land between the Dents and the Grants," writes Reeves, "Ulysses clearly made his choice on the side of the Union and the Grants" (p. 98). Grant always maintained a staunch loyalty to the American Union. Like Lincoln, Grant regarded the Union as *the* source of individual prosperity, *the* fount of constitutional liberty, *the* bulwark against tyranny. Like Lincoln, Grant's western roots influenced his Unionism. The free labor system and the ease of access to national markets facilitated economic mobility and personal improvement. And though he might have been ambivalent to slavery, Grant recognized the institution's threat toward national turmoil.

6. Lincoln to Henry Pierce and Others, April 6, 1859, CW, 3:376.

Reeves distinguishes between Grant's Democratic political leanings, his distrust of abolitionism, and his commitment to federal supremacy. "Whatever may have been my political opinions before I have but one sentiment now," Grant wrote his father in April 1861. "This is we have a Government, and laws and a flag and they must all be sustained. There are but two parties now, Traitors & Patriots and I want hereafter to be ranked with the latter" (p. 98). And to his slaveholding father-in-law, Grant predicted that making war against the Union and Constitution would occasion "the doom of slavery" (pp. 97). Like so many western soldiers, Grant could align two seemingly contradictory propositions: fealty to the Union *and* his rejection of the Republican Party. But when he volunteered for service in the Union army, he dutifully respected his obligations to his civilian commander-in-chief, Lincoln the Republican.

The second half of Reeves's book charts Grant's military record as a committed defender of the republic. Reeves recites all the familiar stories, from Grant's obscure entrance into the army to his first indecisive battle at Belmont, Missouri, from his stunning victories at Forts Henry and Donelson to the bloodletting at Shiloh, from his tense relationship with Gen. Henry Halleck to his rise to independent field command, and from his struggles and triumph against Vicksburg to his successful capture of Chattanooga. Along the way, we encounter the critics who questioned Grant's drinking habits. We meet Grant's defenders, including Congressman Elihu Washburne, John Rawlins, and John Eaton. We also confront Grant's infamous General Orders No. 11, which expelled Jews from his military district. And we sense Grant's evolution into a dedicated opponent of slavery. As the book's subtitle indicates, the war offered Grant some kind of "redemption" from his earlier associations with the institution. Readers might assume that the entire narrative builds to Grant's August 1863 letter to Washburne in which he confessed, "I never was an Abolitionest, [n]ot even what could be called anti slavery, but I try to judge farely & honestly and it become patent to my mind early in the rebellion that the North & South could never live at peace with each other except as one nation, and that without Slavery."⁷

Reeves complicates Grant's assessment. For Reeves, Grant's ambivalence toward slavery lingered well into 1862. The general was loath to interfere with the property of loyal citizens, including his wife's.

7. Grant to Elihu B. Washburne, August 30, 1863, in John Y. Simon et al., eds., *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, 32 vols. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 9:218.

Indeed, Julia traveled to and lived in Grant's lines with her own bondsperson, Jule, who finally fled for her freedom on the eve of Grant's March 1864 promotion to Lieutenant General. Grant's wartime evolution on slavery between the summers of 1862 and 1863 is compelling and illustrative. But Reeves does not take full advantage of the opportunity. Though Grant became a genuine supporter of President Lincoln's emancipation policies, the enlistment and deployment of Black soldiers into Union armies, and the systematic military destruction of slavery, Reeves only gestures at these momentous events. They operate in the distant background of a standard retelling of Grant's military campaigns.

The reader is left instead to assemble the full portrait of Grant's "redemption." Reeves hints that this salvation stemmed from Lincoln's confidence in Grant, evinced by Grant's promotion in 1864 to Commanding General of the U.S. Army. But we are not entirely certain. On the one hand, the Grant whom we leave at the end of the book just prior to the 1864 campaigns in Virginia is a very different Grant whom we met in 1854. And yet, on the other hand, he also appears as the *same* Grant who had always been ambivalent toward slavery. We neither know why the book ends in 1864, nor do we receive a hypothesis on why Grant would become one of the most ardent defenders of emancipation and later biracial civil rights. Secession and civil war played critical roles in Grant's personal and moral evolution. Just as he was the kind of citizen about whom Lincoln worried during the 1850s, so too did Grant embody the transformation necessitated by Lincoln's "new birth of freedom." Reeves offers only a partial rendering of this remarkable conversion, leaving Grant in the kind of no-man's-land from which he always hoped to escape.