

UCLA historian attempts to revive reputation of Union general, Reconstruction president

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(PhysOrg.com) -- In a new book, UCLA historian Joan Waugh argues that Ulysses S. Grant deserves to be remembered with as much reverence and gratitude as Abraham Lincoln.

At the time of his death in 1885, Ulysses S. Grant was easily the most famous man in the United States — if not the world — and his funeral attracted the largest crowd up to that time, as 1.5 million mourners poured onto the streets of [New York City](#).

Yet, if Americans today remember this Civil War general and two-term U.S. president, they tend to think of a drunken, cigar-smoking military butcher who lacked integrity when he moved into the White House.

But if one UCLA [historian](#) has her way, Grant will rise again. In a new book that combines a biography of Grant with an assessment of his legacy, Joan Waugh argues that the mastermind behind the Union victory and a driving force behind Reconstruction deserves to be remembered with as much reverence and gratitude as Abraham Lincoln.

"What Grant accomplished with Lincoln was incredible," said Waugh, author of "U.S. Grant: American Hero, American Myth," which is slated for publication Nov. 15. "In 1860, 4 million people were enslaved. But by 1863, emancipation had occurred, and by 1870, all male former

slaves had the vote. Grant oversaw a social revolution that was unprecedented."

Marshalling a range of sources, Waugh shows how the reputation of the military hero who came to personify the Union cause has mostly waned over the years.

"He was a tremendously important figure who has been treated unfairly," said Waugh, a UCLA professor of history.

Waugh believes the seeds for today's low estimation of Grant were planted immediately after Reconstruction by proponents of the "Lost Cause," a literary and intellectual movement that sought moral equivalency between the goals of the Union and the Confederacy. Buoyed by sympathetic scholars, the Lost Cause philosophy eventually infected popular culture with sanitized representations of slave ownership, the Confederacy, and its general Robert E. Lee, while simultaneously caricaturing Union leadership, Waugh maintains.

Although similarly maligned Union figures were rehabilitated during a reevaluation of the Civil War by scholars during the 1960s, Grant enjoyed no reprieve then, largely because he has been credited with introducing modern warfare to the U.S. military, Waugh said.

"Recent scholars generally tend to be antiwar, especially after the Vietnam era," she explained. "And here is the man who presided over the Union Army at Shiloh, Tennessee, which saw more deaths in a single day than all American wars to that point, and the 30-minute assault at Cold Harbor, Virginia, which resulted in 7,000 casualties."

But Grant's reputation among scholars is now on the upswing, thanks largely to a publishing project initiated during the Civil War's centennial and just now drawing to a conclusion. The multivolume "Papers of

Ulysses S. Grant" puts the letters, orders, official proclamations and public messages of the contested historical figure within reach of a wide range of scholars, including Waugh.

A Los Angeles native, Waugh remembers first being captivated by the Civil War when she picked up "Gone With the Wind" as an 11-year-old. But as a scholar, she didn't originally focus on the war, gravitating instead to the history of women and social reformers.

Waugh's first book explored Josephine Shaw Lowell, a late 19th-century New York reformer whose brother Robert Gould Shaw was the white colonel in the black Massachusetts 54th Division, which was immortalized in the 1989 movie "Glory." While Waugh researched Shaw Lowell, Grant repeatedly tugged at her attention.

"I was really struck by what a remarkable life he led," Waugh said.

To do justice to his story, she educated herself about military [history](#), partly by fashioning an award-winning summer study program for UCLA undergraduates at Gettysburg and other Civil War sites. To this day, Grant figures prominently in her undergraduate courses on the Civil War and Reconstruction.

The son of an Ohio tanner and abolitionist, Grant first endeared himself to the nation as a war hero in the Mexican-American War of 1846 and seemed destined for a bright future in the army. Eight years later, however, he was discharged under a cloud, possibly due to a drinking problem.

While Grant's detractors have seized on the incident, Waugh says that scholarly investigations of the affair remain inconclusive, but there is no doubt that he was suffering great loneliness at the time, stationed for two years away from his family.

"Whether or not Grant was an alcoholic, it has been thoroughly documented that he drank or was drunk very rarely, and never when it mattered," she said. "Historians who have gone back and taken a fine-tooth comb to the question have all come to the same conclusion."

His military career seemed forgotten until the Civil War broke out in 1861 and his Illinois townsmen begged him to train them to answer a call from Lincoln for volunteers.

Through a combination of what Waugh describes as "steely determination, fortitude and calm," Grant steadily rose in the ranks of the Union Army to appointment as Lincoln's general-in-chief, racking up a long list of victories and eventually dealing the fatal blow to Confederate forces.

Grant's detractors have minimized his achievements by pointing out that the Union consistently outnumbered and outspent its rival, but Waugh insists that the disparities belie significant military advantages enjoyed by the Confederacy.

"Most of the time, the Confederate forces were defending a smaller geographical position, which meant they could afford fewer men and resources than the forces surrounding it," she explained. "The North had to win a total victory, while the South just had to wear down the Union will to fight. That is why it took the United States four terrible years to win the war. Before Grant, no other Northern military leader figured out a strategy to use those extra resources to the Union's advantage."

While Robert E. Lee today is remembered as courtly and gentlemanly, it is Grant's character that shines most brightly in Waugh's book. Over and over again, she details the magnanimous way in which the general accepted Confederate surrenders. At Appomattox Court House, the site of the war's end, Grant called off a 100-gun salute planned by his men to

celebrate their victory.

"The rebels are our countrymen again, and the best sign of rejoicing after the victory will be to abstain from all demonstrations in the field," Waugh quotes Grant as saying.

Waugh insists Grant had no political ambitions after the Civil War and agreed only reluctantly to run for president out of a sense of duty to complete Lincoln's goals for reconciliation, following his assassination and the impeachment of his disastrous successor, Andrew Johnson.

"I am afraid I am elected," Grant told his wife, Julia, after winning his first election.

While Grant's administration was marked by scandal, frequently owing to a propensity for cronyism, Waugh insists his stumbles stemmed from political innocence, not malice or greed.

She laments the fact that the trials of Reconstruction, as well as Grant's achievements during the period, have been consistently minimized. Dispatching troops to the South to take on the Ku Klux Klan and guarantee African American suffrage, Grant strove to enact civil rights goals not even envisioned by Lincoln. During Grant's presidency, the 15th Amendment, which guarantees the right to vote regardless of race, was ratified.

"I don't think he was a great president, but I do think he was an essential president," Waugh said. "I can't think of anybody else who could have brought the stability to the country that he did. The importance of that contribution in the aftermath of this devastating civil war just can't be overestimated."

After his second term, Grant spent two years traveling the world with

Julia. Welcomed by dozens of heads of state, the Grants became international celebrities as a hungry press followed their every move. Grant's nine-month battle with throat cancer became a similar media spectacle, with newspapers running daily updates on his condition. His two-volume memoir, written during his illness, was published after his death. To this day, it is considered both a military and literary masterpiece.

In a precursor to television comedian Jay Leno's popular "Jay Walking" routine, Groucho Marx in his 1950s TV show "You Bet Your Life" famously posed the question: Who's buried in Grant's Tomb? Since Marx's contestants should have known that North America's largest tomb contained Grant's remains, the stunt suggested the permanent decline of Grant's reputation. New York City's most popular tourist attraction until 1929, by which time nearly all the [Civil War](#) veterans had died off, the tomb steadily descended into disrepair throughout the 20th century. Its derelict and graffiti-strewn state became a scandal following filmmaker Ken Burns' popular 1990 television series on the war. But the tomb's 1997 renovation once again made it a safe and attractive place to visit, Waugh notes.

"Perhaps now is the time for a new kind of tourist, one more appreciative and knowledgeable," Waugh writes. "Never again will most citizens feel an uncomplicated pride in Grant's achievement, or in what America has become since Appomattox, but there should be a realization that Grant's goal of national reconciliation ... included principles that are vitally important today: justice and equality for all."

Provided by University of California Los Angeles ([news](#) : [web](#))

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