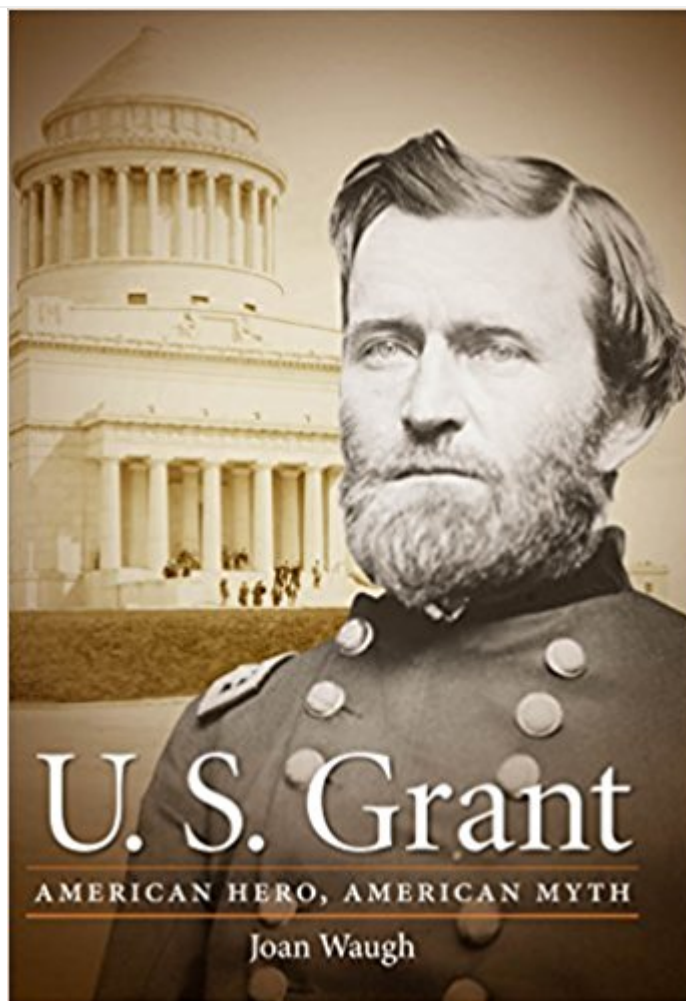


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U.S. Grant: American Hero, American Myth



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Reviewed Work(s)

U.S. Grant: American Hero, American Myth. By Joan Waugh (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). Pp. 384. Cloth, \$30.00.

Historians have recently begun to rethink and re-evaluate the wartime and presidential career of Ulysses S. Grant. Joan Waugh's *U.S. Grant: American Hero, American Myth* portrays a positive depiction of the man who oversaw Union victory and was president during much of the difficult period of Reconstruction. Her chapters are divided into sections about his early life, his wartime career, his presidency, the writing of his memoirs, his death and funeral, and the construction of his tomb in New York. Professor Waugh makes a persuasive case for seeing Grant as a "true hero" who overcame "severe obstacles" to secure Union victory and to advocate the principles of "justice and equality for all" during his presidency (1, 307). Though other biographies go into greater detail about Grant's wartime career, Waugh does a wonderful job of summarizing the most important events from his early days as a brigadier general in the western theatre to the surrender of General Robert E. Lee in April 1865. Her chapter on the war presents more than enough evidence to see that the negative depiction of Grant as a "butcher," who could only win battles through superior numbers, is plainly wrong. While acknowledging criticism that existed at the time of the Overland Campaign, Waugh shows that by 1865 Grant was wildly popular in the North, not just because of his victories but because his rise from humble origins to fame and success as the Union's top general was an inspirational story of the "common man" making good, a story that resonated in the "democratic, free-labor North" (2).

Yet more importantly than a positive reevaluation of Grant's life, Waugh's book reflects the recent scholarly interest in "memory studies" of the Civil War embodied in such works as David W. Blight's *Race and Reunion* and John R. Neff's *Honoring the Civil War Dead*.^[1] Indeed, she points her readers to other works if they want more in-depth detail on Grant's political and military careers for her true goal is to build her "case for Grant's centrality in Civil War history and memory" (2).

Waugh's most important contribution then is a comprehensive overview of Grant's legacy in Americans' historical memory, from the mid-

nineteenth century to the present. She conclusively demonstrates Grant's tremendous importance and popularity in late nineteenth-century America, which she illustrates in her discussion of Grant's tour around the world. Grant was cheered by thousands of people from Europe to Japan, and hundreds of thousands more turned out in Philadelphia to welcome him home (156-62).

Waugh also examines how Grant himself shaped our national memory of the war by writing his memoirs just before his death in 1885. While some historians of memory have criticized the reconciliation sentiments expressed in Grant's *Memoirs* as part of a growing amnesia among northerners about the importance of emancipation in the war effort, Waugh argues that Grant wanted "reconciliation-but on northern terms." Hoping for "great harmony" between the sections like many northerners after war, he always reasserted the superiority of the Union cause over the southern one until his death in 1885 (211-12). A further tribute to Grant's national importance in the minds of his late nineteenth-century contemporaries was revealed when his death was mourned in both the North and South, the funeral itself serving as a "vehicle for... political reconciliation of North and South." Waugh notes, however, that there were also signs of lingering "sectional animosities" in these commemorations of Grant, and that southerners would later take a more critical tone towards Grant (218, 256, 259). In her final chapter, Waugh skillfully uses the history of the building and later neglect of Grant's tomb as a metaphor for Grant's changing reputation in our national memory of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

Waugh's study ultimately presents a powerful case for a scholarly reexamination of Grant's legacy by carefully linking the decline of Grant's reputation to the work of authors and historians writing under the influence of the pro-Confederate interpretation of the war known as the "Lost Cause" tradition. She hopes that with the "obliteration of the Lost Cause" narrative of the war in recent decades, historians will come to appreciate better "the inspiring dimensions of a man who truly is both an American hero and an American myth" (185-86, 307-08). *U.S. Grant: American Hero, American Myth* is an important contribution to the study of Grant's life and Civil-War memory studies that this reviewer hopes will be emulated by further studies of the "Union Cause" in the memory of the conflict.

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[1] David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2001) and John R. Neff, *Honoring the Civil War Dead: Commemoration and the Problem of Reconciliation* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005).



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