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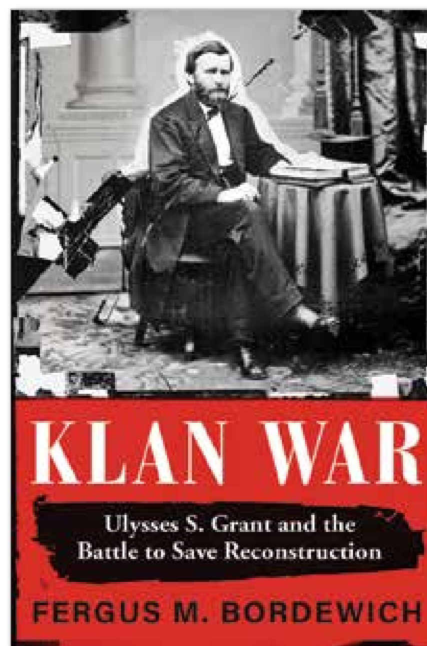
# Ulysses S. Grant's Forgotten War

## The 18th president continued his Civil War battles with an all-out fight against the Ku Klux Klan. The history books barely mention it.

**By Allen C. Guelzo**




**Klan War: Ulysses S. Grant and the Battle to Save Reconstruction**

by Fergus M. Bordewich
Knopf, 480 pp.

Reconstruction might be the single most difficult moment in the American past. It came in the wake of what might be the bravest moment, the American Civil War and the abolition of slavery. But the vividness of the war years only makes the failures of Reconstruction seem all the more abject. The cast of characters in Reconstruction underscores those failures, since we move in 1865 from one of the greatest of American presidents—Abraham Lincoln—to one of the worst, in the form of Andrew Johnson. Even Ulysses S. Grant, the greatest military leader of the war years, manages to go behind a cloud of corruption and indifference when he succeeds Johnson in the presidency in 1869.

For a long time, the way historians wrote about Reconstruction only made matters worse. The so-called Dunning School of Reconstruction historians (named for William A. Dunning of Columbia University) painted the era as a "hopelessly corrupted … military despotism" inflicted by vengeful northerners on hapless, quivering southerners. Passages in school textbooks were even drearier. The Reconstruction governments imposed on the defeated Confederate states were, in David Saville Muzzey's *An American History* (1911), "sorry affairs" of "extravagance, fraud and disgusting incompetence," and all of it the result of the federal government's determination to force "Negro suffrage on the South at the point of a bayonet." These governments "were scandalous beyond precedent," wailed Henry William Elson's 1926 high school textbook, choked by "the newly enfranchised freemen" who "were utterly unfit to take the lead" and by unscrupulous northerners who "soon had the state governments under their control" and looted them to their vast profit.

Not until 1965, and the publication of Kenneth Stampp's *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865–1877*, did academic historians, working in the new day of the civil rights movement, begin to reconstruct Reconstruction as a crusade for racial civil equality that had been subverted by truculent white southerners. Eric Foner's immense *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (1988), followed in widening succession by Thomas Brown's *Reconstructions* (2006), Douglas Egerton's *The Wars of Reconstruction* (2014), Mark Summers's *The Ordeal of the Reunion* (2014), and many others, have reversed the polarities of Reconstruction. Not that the era appears as any less of a botch. Only now, it is a botch caused by the ugliest versions of white racial rage, with some noteworthy pockets of nobility and civic honor that should be the real focus of American historical memory.

One of those pockets surrounds Grant, and the extraordinary contest he waged as president against the Ku Klux Klan in South Carolina. It is one of the great injus-

tices of American history that Grant's military genius during the Civil War has been written off as the victory of mere attrition, while his presidential administration has been dismissed as the worst example of Gilded Age governmental corruption. In truth, it was not Grant, but his Confederate opposite, Robert E. Lee, who fed soldiers into the proverbial meat grinder. And in even starker truth, Grant's presidency was no more afflicted by corruption than that of Rutherford B. Hayes, James Garfield, or Chester A. Arthur, and a good deal less tainted by the corruption in Congress and municipal governments.

Fergus Bordewich's *Klan War: Ulysses S. Grant and the Battle to Save Reconstruction* is the first large-scale attempt to restore Grant's presidency to a position of nobility for his campaign to suppress the Klan. It joins the shelf of Bordewich's political histories—*Congress at War* (2020), *The First Congress* (2016), and *America's Great Debate* (2012), on the creation of the Compromise of 1850—which have made him one of the outstanding independent scholars of American history. But *Klan War* outdoes them all, in terms of both the depth of its research and the passionate pace of its vivid storytelling. This may come as a surprise, since Grant was far from being a dramatic character. When he took command of the Union's western armies in 1863, one veteran remembered that "he came into the army quietly, no splendor, no airs, no staff." His uniforms were plain and often rumpled, his manner matter-of-fact, almost shy. A mail clerk warned a new arrival at headquarters, "Look him straight in the eye and don't say 'Sir' too much." Even George McClellan, the man he eventually replaced at the helm of the Union armies, admitted that Grant "wears his great honors so modestly—it is a very good feature in his character."

> *After months of watching white-on-Black violence mount in the South, Grant told* The New York Times *that it appeared to him that southerners had learned nothing from their defeat and thought they "will yet triumph, not in war but in politics."*

But dogged and persistent as Grant was on campaign, he was never unwilling to admit that he had made a mistake. "I was never an Abolitionist, not even what could be called anti-slavery," he wrote in 1863, but "it became 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." And it is with one of those changes of mind that *Klan War* opens. In November 1865, Grant was dispatched on a tour of the defeated Confederacy, and the assessment he made was naively upbeat: "I am satisfied that the mass of thinking men of the South accept the present situation of affairs in good faith," and that members of "the colored race" were too feckless and ignorant to enjoy anything like civil equality with their onetime masters. He was wrong, disastrously wrong, and after six months of watching white-on-Black violence mount in the South, Grant told *The New York Times* that it now appeared to him that southerners had learned nothing from their defeat and thought they "will yet triumph, not in war but in politics."

By the time Grant was nominated for the presidency in 1868, Congress had taken steps of its own to win that political war. In addition to the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery, the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, confirming equal citizenship and voting rights irrespective of race, had been passed, and three Reconstruction acts had put the former Confederate states under military oversight until the amendments were ratified. But the amendments needed enforcement—and Grant became the enforcer in chief. He won a crushing victory in the election and began signaling at once his support for the "security of person, property, and free religious and political opinion in every part of our common country," all of which would be settled by "the ratification of the fifteenth article of amendment to the Constitution."

He was not a moment too soon. His predecessor, Johnson, had done everything in his power to frustrate the intent of Congress, and by 1867, a bevy of armed white resistance groups had sprung up to terrorize the freedmen. The most notorious of these was the Ku Klux Klan, which grew rapidly from a social fraternity into an organized militia "to annoy and intimidate the colored people." Within a year, the Klan had committed its first assassination, of a white Unionist politician, George Ashburn, and, even more boldly, had tried to kidnap and murder a federal judge and a member of Congress. Under the leadership of the former slave trader and Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest, the Klan dressed in horrifying disguises (and not the white robes and pointed hats of the Klan's 20th-century rebirth), hanging or shooting its victims after torturing them. By the time of Grant's inauguration in March 1869, the Klan had spread to North and South Carolina, Arkansas, Alabama, and Georgia. At its peak, it may have enrolled up to 300,000 white southerners, many of them Confederate army veterans.

Grant, however, believed that the amendments required that "all citizens undoubtedly in all respects should be equal." When Klan violence set alight the upcountry of South Carolina in 1870, Congress began passing a series of three enforcement acts especially aimed at empowering the president to deal with the Klan, including the authority to suspend the writ of habeas corpus. In June 1870, he appointed as his attorney general Amos Tappan Akerman, who had successfully argued the case of a mixed-race county clerk to hold office in Georgia. Although he had served in the Confederate army, Akerman set his face against the Klan. "Your blood would be curdled if you knew one-tenth of what I know about the

upper part of South Carolina," he wrote to a friend the next year.

Grant swung into direct executive action in the spring of 1871 by ordering four companies from both the 18th U.S. Infantry and the 7th U.S. Cavalry to subdue the "turbulent" districts. In command of these detachments was the 7th Cavalry's Major Lewis Merrill, who drew on not only a substantial amount of experience in dealing with guerilla warfare during the Civil War but also a clear-eyed understanding that the Klan was proof of an "astonishing ignorance of the rights of free society" in the South, "with no respect for law save what is bred of their fear of its penalties." Together, Merrill and Akerman chased down the Klan, arresting as many as 600 suspects in a single month and bringing indictments against hundreds more. When the trials of South Carolina Klan members began in November 1871, sentences ranged up to 10 years in prison. "There is not one in fifty of them but is uneasy and trembling at the sight of an officer or a blue-coat," testified Elias Hill, a Baptist preacher who had been attacked by the Klan, "and they are staying out in the woods by day, and some by night, like we used to do."

And yet the "Klan war" did not last. For reasons that remain murky, Grant asked for Akerman's resignation as attorney general in December 1871. (A personal grievance on the part of Grant's secretary of state, Hamilton Fish, may have played a role, but conclusive evidence is thin.) Even worse, the Supreme Court, in *Blyew v. United States*, let stand a Kentucky state law banning the testimony of "a slave, negro, or Indian" against whites, erasing the evidence provided by most of the victims of race crimes. When the Court was asked to overturn *Blyew* in *United States v. Avery* and apply the Bill of Rights directly to state cases—an early form of the incorporation doctrine—the Court refused. A year later, the bottom dropped out of the economy in a massive recession, and in the 1874 congressional elections, Grant's Republicans lost control of the House of Representatives for the first time since the Civil War. Grant remained defiant, but defiance could not fund further enforcement of Reconstruction. By the time he left office in 1877, Reconstruction was a dead letter in the South, and the reign of Jim Crow was about to begin.

Bordewich's Grant is determined, idealistic, and generous, and on those terms, it would not be too much to describe him as the first civil rights president. This is an image of Grant that is likely to be strengthened by recent Grant biographies by Ronald White (*American Ulysses*, in 2016) and Ron Chernow (*Grant*, in 2017), and by Robert Cwiklik's new *Sheridan's Secret Mission*, in which Grant uses the 1875 visit of his wartime protégé, Philip Sheridan, to New Orleans as an exploration of martial law as a tool to shut down the White League in Louisiana.

But Grant did not, in the end, "save Reconstruction." He did break the Ku Klux Klan, which didn't reappear in any organized fashion for another 40 years. He could not, however, break the White League or the Red Shirts, which ultimately destroyed South Carolina's Reconstruction government in 1877. It is possible that no one could have broken them, given the misbegotten obstructions that the federal courts, the collapse of the economy in the Panic of 1873, and northern Democrats put in the way.

Bordewich falls into one common, but mistaken, assumption: that Grant and Reconstruction ultimately failed because "Northern Republicans were bored with the South's troubles and, in truth, bored with the fate of Blacks." This forgets how much Abraham Lincoln and his Republicans were always a minority party, whom the accident of civil war vaulted into a temporary ascendency in Washington. Reconstruction did not wither from boredom; it was overthrown, in the courts and in the polling places, and not even Ulysses S. Grant had the power to prevent it.

**Allen C. Guelzo**, a senior research scholar at Princeton University, is a Civil War historian and three-time winner of the Lincoln Prize.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