

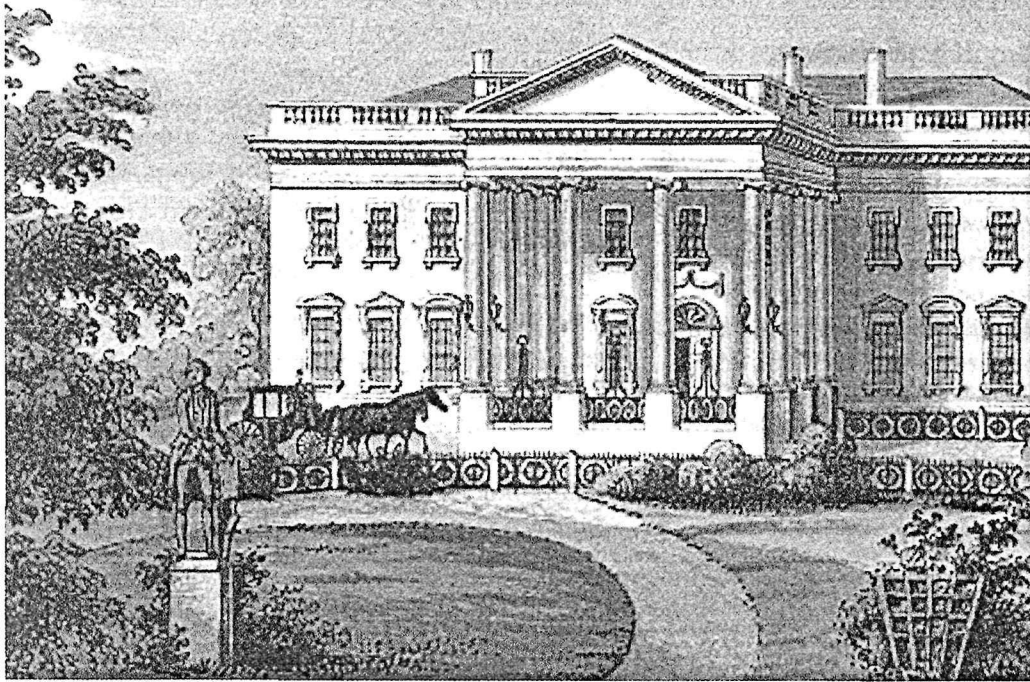
Ulysses S. Grant

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site



18th President of the United States



Introduction

Ulysses S. Grant wrote in his famous memoirs that “Man proposes and God disposes.” There are but few important events in the affairs of men brought about by their own choice.” This powerful statement was reinforced by the tragic assassination of Abraham Lincoln in April 1865. Few would have known at the time, but that sad moment led to Grant’s election as the 18th President of the United States three years later.

Grant, as General-in-Chief, moved to Washington, D.C. at the end of the Civil War to oversee the demobilization of the Federal Army. His position and fame unavoidably pulled him into the political turmoil between the Radical Republicans in Congress and President Andrew Johnson.

When the Republicans nominated Grant as their candidate for the presidential election of 1868, he accepted it rather than continue to watch the growing dispute over the course of Reconstruction. His acceptance of the nomination, ending with the words “Let us have peace,” expressed his wish that Americans put aside their old grievances in the interest of reunion and equality for all.

Grant’s First Administration (1869-1873)

Grant ran against New York Democrat Horatio Seymour in the 1868 election. He won the electoral college by a large margin, but the popular vote was much closer than originally anticipated. Grant’s 400,000 margin came largely from African American voters in the South who overwhelmingly supported him at the polls.

Shortly into his term in office, Grant learned of an attempt by a few financiers to corner the gold market. Grant took immediate action, which he knew would be unpopular among some, to break the scheme. He ordered the U.S. Treasury to sell large quantities of gold. The strategy worked, although it caused a panic and the stock market collapsed on September 24, 1869, a day that would become known as “Black Friday.”

In foreign affairs, Grant faced the delicate problem of settling war claims with England regarding that nation’s neutrality during the Civil War. Despite loud demands by some congressmen for war against England, Grant insisted on arbitration. “The Alabama Claims,” as they came to be known, were successfully resolved and led to the two countries becoming lasting allies.

Reconstruction, the political process of readmitting the former Confederate states into the Union and guaranteeing black Americans liberty and equality, occupied much of Grant’s first term. The rights established by the newly ratified 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution were viewed by many Southern Democrats as incompatible with their beliefs. However, Grant approached this task with moral conviction and a belief that compassion shown to former Confederate leaders (in the form of pardons) would help unify the country. It was not that easy. Federal troops were



Signing of the 15th Amendment, March 1870
Library of Congress

needed in the south, and Congress passed the Enforcement Acts in order to quell the violence perpetrated by the newly formed white supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan.

Grant's Second Administration (1873-1877)



Ulysses S. Grant meets Red Cloud. Harper's Weekly, June 18, 1870. Library of Congress

Some Republicans became dissatisfied with Grant because they believed he assumed too much power through the Enforcement Acts. Grant nevertheless defeated his opponent Horace Greely by an even larger margin than his victory in 1868. Reelection gave Grant the chance to continue his work in social, financial, and economic endeavors.

Grant faced many difficult challenges during his second term. His Indian peace policy was predicated on the concept of assimilation rather than the prevailing sentiment of Indian annihilation. He believed the Indians could best survive by relocating to reservations where they could become civilized, adopt Christian values, and eventually become citizens. He even appointed missionaries to oversee some of this work. However, many Native Americans were unwilling to abandon their cultural heritage. Their reservation lands, some containing gold, became valuable, and were therefore demanded

by white settlers. The Battle of Little Big Horn on June 25, 1876, effectively ended Grant's peace initiative as the country looked for revenge rather than understanding.

In late 1873, a financial panic (recession) spread across the country. To alleviate the hardship the panic created, Congress sent Grant a bill that would increase the amount of paper currency in circulation. Grant was heavily pressured by his advisors to sign the bill, but he vetoed it. Grant believed its passage would cause an unstable inflationary climate in the country. After the veto, Grant supported a "Resumption Act" to restore specie (gold and silver) currency. Its passage led the way to eventual economic recovery.

The success of these financial policy decisions generated some prestige for Grant, and thoughts of a third term began to cross the minds of many Republicans—but not Grant's. He soon went on record that he would not accept the nomination.

Scandals

During Ulysses Grant's presidency, numerous scandals were exposed. Historians have debated the scope and extent of this corruption. In some cases Grant was slow to act and too trusting of administration officials. Although he was never personally implicated in any of the scandals, Grant discovered he had misjudged the integrity of others. A few scandals became well known.

The Crédit Mobilier scandal involved a fictitious company of that name acting as a contractor for the Union Pacific Railroad. Stock in the company was used to reward the corrupt business owners, who also gave stock to influential members of Congress in an attempt to hide the misuse of government subsidies. While this corruption occurred in 1867 and 1868, before Grant was even nominated for president, its revelation during his term served to attach it to his name and administration.

The scandal surrounding William Belknap, Grant's Secretary of War, involved bribery at the Indian trading post at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Belknap's family benefited from the bribes. When exposure appeared imminent, Belknap submitted his resignation which Grant accepted without question. Congress nevertheless impeached Belknap, the only cabinet member in U.S. history to ever be impeached.

The Whiskey Ring involved a large group of distillers who falsified alcohol production quantities to avoid tax payments. Treasury Department revenue agents were involved and Grant appointees were also implicated, including his own aide and friend, Orville Babcock. Grant's response to this scandal, which included trials in St. Louis, Missouri, stressed that no guilty man should escape punishment. Many were jailed, but Babcock was exonerated. The scandal was a personal and distressing shock to Grant.



Grant on trapeze holding individuals implicated in various scandals. Puck, Feb. 4, 1880. Library of Congress

The Grant Family in the White House

Four years of war, followed by the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln and the sub-sequent fight between Congress and President Andrew Johnson over Reconstruction in the South, left the nation anxious for peace. As Ulysses and Julia Grant, with their four children, Fred, Ulysses Jr., Ellen, and Jesse, entered the White House, they became representative of this desire for a return to normal life.

Julia Grant initiated a restoration of the White House that reflected the rebuilding of the nation after the Civil War. As First Lady she supported her husband's policy of bi-partisanship by hosting dinners that brought political opponents together in a setting that encouraged gentlemanly discussion and cooperation.

The two older boys were away at school during most of Grant's presidency (the eldest, Fred, attended his father's alma mater, West Point). With the youngest two still at home, the back grounds of the White House were closed to the public to allow them room to play without crowds of onlookers intruding. In 1874, the Grants only daughter was married in an extravagant ceremony that was the highlight of the social season.

After the responsibilities of two terms in office, Grant said he felt "like a boy getting out of school" when he left the White House. Mrs. Grant, however, recalled that time fondly, mainly because the eight years in the White House was the longest they ever spent in one residence.

Conclusion

Ulysses Grant was the first president in thirty years to serve two full terms in office. During those eight years, he faced a wide range of complex and controversial issues. His straightforward military mind that served him so well during the war proved less valuable in the challenging political climate of the times. In addition, scandals and corruption during his administrations compromised his ability to be an effective leader. Through it all, he remained a dedicated public servant as he guided the country past a difficult crossroads in our nation's history. When he left office he could count several lasting accomplishments in the areas of civil rights, economic policy, and foreign affairs.