

March 14, 2010

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Who's Buried in the History Books?

By SEAN WILENTZ

Princeton, N.J.

RONALD REAGAN deserves posterity's honor, and so it makes sense that the capital's airport and a major building there are named for him. But [the proposal to substitute his image](#) for that of Ulysses S. Grant on the \$50 bill is a travesty that would dishonor the nation's bedrock principles of union, freedom and equality — and damage its historical identity. Although slandered since his death, Grant, as general and as president, stood second only to Abraham Lincoln as the vindicator of those principles in the Civil War era.

Born to humble circumstances, Grant endured personal setbacks and terrible poverty to become the indispensable general of the Union Army. Although not himself an abolitionist, he recognized from the very start that the Civil War would cause, as he wrote, "the doom of slavery." Above all, he despised the Southern secessionists as traitors who would destroy democratic republican government, of which, Lincoln said in his first inaugural, there was no "better or equal hope in the world."

When one Union general after another proved unequal to the task of leading the army, Lincoln personally elevated Grant, who, with William Tecumseh Sherman and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, devised the strategy of "hard war" to defeat the slaveholders' Confederacy. "I cannot spare this man," Lincoln was reported to have said of Grant after the bloody Battle of Shiloh in 1862. "He fights."

Had his wife not declined to go to Ford's Theater the night of April 14, 1865, Grant might well have been killed himself. With Lincoln's assassination, Grant was left as the greatest Union hero of the Civil War. He chafed under the neo-Confederate presidency of Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, won the Republican presidential nomination in 1868 almost by acclamation and was elected twice — the only president to serve two successive full terms between Andrew Jackson and Woodrow Wilson.

As president, Grant was determined to achieve national reconciliation, but on the terms of the victorious North, not the defeated Confederates. He fought hard and successfully for ratification of the 15th Amendment, banning disenfranchisement on account of race, color or previous condition of servitude. When recalcitrant Southern whites fought back under the white hoods and robes of the Ku Klux Klan, murdering and terrorizing blacks and their political supporters, Grant secured legislation that empowered him to unleash federal force. By 1872, the Klan was effectively dead.

For Grant, Reconstruction always remained of paramount importance, and he remained steadfast, even when members of his own party turned their backs on the former slaves. After white supremacists slaughtered blacks and Republicans in Louisiana in 1873 and attempted a coup the following year, Grant

took swift and forceful action to restore order and legitimate government. With the political tide running heavily against him, Grant still managed to see through to enactment the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which prohibited discrimination according to race in all public accommodations.

Grant did not confine his reformism to expanding and protecting the rights of the freed slaves. Disgusted at the inhumanity of the nation's Indian policies, [he called for "the proper treatment of the original occupants of this land,"](#) and directed efforts to provide federal aid for food, clothing and schooling for the Indians as well as protection from violence. He also took strong and principled stands in favor of education reform and the separation of church and state.

Grant's presidency had its failures and blemishes. On the advice of his counselors, Grant appointed men to the Supreme Court who wound up gutting much of the legislation he himself championed. This included the 1875 civil rights law, which the court declared unconstitutional in 1883.

Certainly, Grant's administration was tainted by oft-remembered corruption scandals. But Grant was never seriously implicated in any of them, although emboldened Democrats and disloyal Republicans, with the help of a sensationalist press, did their best to make the president appear the villain. (Grant ill-advisedly decided to present a stoic public face instead of fighting back.)

In reality, what fueled the personal defamation of Grant was contempt for his Reconstruction policies, which supposedly sacrificed a prostrate South, as one critic put it, "on the altar of Radicalism." That he accomplished as much for freed slaves as he did within the constitutional limits of the presidency was remarkable. Without question, his was the most impressive record on civil rights and equality of any president from Lincoln to Lyndon B. Johnson.

After Grant left the presidency in 1877, he was widely hailed as the most famous and admired living American, his alleged transgressions overcome by a fabulously successful two-year world tour. He was still beloved at his death in 1885 — a reverence embodied by his monumental tomb in Manhattan, overlooking the Hudson.

But Grant came in for decades of disgraceful posthumous attacks that tore his reputation into tatters. Around 1900, pro-Confederate Southern historians began rewriting the history of the Civil War and cast Grant as a "butcher" during the conflict and a corrupt and vindictive tyrant during his presidency. And the conventional wisdom from the left has relied on the bitter comments of snobs like Henry Adams, who slandered Grant as the avatar of the crass, benighted Gilded Age.

Though much of the public and even some historians haven't yet heard the news, the vindication of Ulysses S. Grant is well under way. I expect that before too long Grant will be returned to the standing he deserves — not only as the military savior of the Union but as one of the great presidents of his era, and possibly one of the greatest in all American history.

Now, Ronald Reagan also has historic achievements — chiefly, discarding the advice of his hard-right supporters, embracing the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, and taking the first important steps toward ending the cold war. On the other hand, his record on domestic affairs — especially his unsubtle winking at pro-segregationist Southerners and his administration's fiercely reactionary policies on civil rights — was

appalling.

To honor Reagan's genuine achievements by downgrading those of Grant would deepen our chronic historical amnesia about the Civil War and Reconstruction, the central events of the first 250 years of American history, and their legacy of nationalism, freedom and equal rights. It's hard to imagine that Ronald Reagan, whose modesty was part of his charm, would have approved of such a disgraceful act toward another president from Illinois.

Sean Wilentz, a professor of history at Princeton, is the author, most recently, of "The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008."

[Copyright 2010 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

Delve into some of the amazing facts around who's buried in Westminster Abbey. Although Westminster Abbey may be better associated with royal weddings and coronations, London's iconic church is also the final resting place of thousands of influential people, from monarchs and consorts to poets, scientists and politicians. Get a true sense of history when you visit some of Westminster Abbey's most famous graves. But before you go, find out who's buried in Westminster Abbey, right here. From kings to nameless soldiers, this list includes: Edward the Confessor. Another literary icon buried in Poet's Corner is "Jungle Books" author Rudyard Kipling.