

Ulysses S. Grant Presidency and His Commitment to Civil Rights

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Ulysses S. Grant was the eighteenth president of the United States. He was elected in 1868 during the Reconstruction era following the Civil War and would serve two presidential terms. During his two terms, Grant was a proponent of civil rights, somewhat opposite of the previous president, Andrew Johnson. Grant carried out Lincoln's legacy surrounding Black civil rights. Grant's civil rights efforts are shown through many of his presidential rulings to protect Black voters, legislative and militant efforts to eradicate the Ku Klux Klan, and passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution. Grants' presidency is often overlooked in traditional textbooks and classrooms; however, his presidential efforts are exceptionally notable when it comes to civil rights and other civil matters.

Grant made efforts to follow Lincoln's legacy particularly through support of Civil Rights legislation during in presidency. This essay examines the many civil rights efforts made by Grant during his presidency, including support and passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1875.¹ Grant used military might to protect Black citizens and combat resistance in the South. Valiant efforts to protect Black citizens by eliminating the Ku Klux Klan were made through the Enforcement Acts of 1870 and 1871, Ku Klux Klan Act of 1870, the Klan Suppression Act of 1871, and the creation of the Department of Justice under Grant's presidency.² Ulysses S. Grant's presidency harbored exceptional legislative and executive efforts to combat Reconstruction era violence and racism towards the newly freed slaves, thus Grant continued Lincoln's legacy surrounding emancipation through civil rights legislation and military use.

¹ Feuerherd, Peter. "Why Ulysses S. Grant Was More Important Than You Think." *JSTOR Daily*, April 2, 2020. <https://daily.jstor.org/why-ulysses-s-grant-was-more-important-than-you-think/>.

² Feuerherd, "Why Ulysses S. Grant Was More Important Than You Think."

Grant served in the Civil War under the Union Army. He commanded thousands of soldiers and led the Union to a victory over the Confederacy. He despised slavery and at the outbreak of the war, he wrote, “There are but two parties now: traitors and patriots. And I want hereafter to be ranked with the latter.”³ His service in the Union army under President Lincoln brought a great respect for President Lincoln thus Grant showed continuous commitment later as president to uphold Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. Grant’s support for Black civil and political rights stemmed from several reasons including failures in his personal life, and his time in the army. Grant empathized with the Black experience therefore he continued to enforce civil rights legislation during his presidency. Before Grant’s presidency he greatly supported the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution.

Prior to becoming president, Grant supported the Thirteenth Amendment which abolished slavery. His time in the army during the Civil War yielded a greater understanding of the need to abolish slavery. He believed that the Union could only be maintained if slavery was abolished.⁴ The end of slavery was also needed to enforce proper post-war Reconstruction policies. While Johnson was president following Lincoln’s assassination, Johnson continuously vetoed Reconstruction bills what were “designed to nullify Southern states’ oppressive Black Codes and their encouragement of race-based violence.”⁵ Further, Johnson delayed the adoption of the Fourteenth Amendment which aimed to define citizenship and equal protection under law for all citizens. The Fourteenth Amendment would be ratified in 1868.⁶ Grant viewed Johnson’s lenient

³ Orlikoff, A. J. “National Museum of the United States Army,” n.d. <https://www.thenmusa.org/biographies/ulysses-s-grant/>.

⁴ Sacco, Nicholas W. “‘I Never Was an Abolitionist’: Ulysses S. Grant and Slavery, 1854–1863.” *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 9, no. 3 (January 1, 2019): 410–37. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cwe.2019.0051>.

⁵ Robert J. Pushaw, Jr, “Ulysses S. Grant and the Lost Opportunity for Racial Justice,” 2018, <https://constitutionalcommentary.lib.umn.edu/article/ulysses-s-grant-and-the-lost-opportunity-for-racial-justice/>.

⁶ Orlikoff, “National Museum of the United States Army.”

policies towards Confederates as fuel for possible future conflict between the North and South. Grant became increasingly frustrated with Johnson inability to carry out Lincoln's work and following Johnson's impeachment, Grant thought he was the only person who could reunite the North and the South. He became the Republican Party candidate and was elected president in 1868.

As President, Grant insistently enforced policies that supported Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, including support for the Fourteenth Amendment and its enforcement. In a message regarding the Fourteenth Amendment made by Grant in 1871, he states "It is my earnest wish that peace and cheerful obedience to law may prevail throughout the land and that all traces of our late unhappy civil strife may be speedily removed. These ends can be easily reached by acquiescence in the results of the conflict, now written in our Constitution, and by the due and proper enforcement of equal, just, and impartial laws in every part of our country."⁷ Grant reminds citizens that civil rights legislation is now written into the Constitution and that it will be enforced to ensure that all citizens, regardless of race, have access to equal treatment. Further, he warns citizens of the United States that any resistance to the Fourteenth Amendment will not be tolerated. He states, "The failure of local communities to furnish such means for the attainment of results so earnestly desired imposes upon the National Government the duty of putting forth all its energies for the protection of its citizens of every race and color and for the restoration of peace and order throughout the entire country."⁸ Grant was committed to Reconstruction legislation that ensured equal rights for all, unlike his predecessor, Johnson, thus showing a

⁷ Ulysses S. Grant, "May 3, 1871: Message Regarding Fourteenth Amendment | Miller Center," *Miller Center*, October 20, 2016, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/may-3-1871-message-regarding-fourteenth-amendment>.

⁸ Grant, "May 3, 1871: Message Regarding Fourteenth Amendment | Miller Center."

commitment to carrying out Lincoln's legacy. Grant's statements regarding the Fourteenth Amendment would reflect his attitudes and treatment of the Ku Klux Klan and his use of the military to quell civil unrest and mistreatment towards Black Americans in the South. Grant's support for the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments resulted in the passing of the Fifteenth Amendment during his presidency.

The Fifteenth Amendment was passed under the Grant administration in 1868 and ratified by the states in 1870. The Fifteenth Amendment aimed to guarantee Black men, who were now citizens, the right to vote. The passage of the amendment shows Grant's commitment to upholding the language of the founding documents that all men were created equal. In a Special Message on March 30, 1870, Grant wrote to Congress regarding his views on the Fifteenth Amendment. He writes, "I repeat that the adoption of the fifteenth amendment to the Constitution completes the greatest civil change and constitutes the most important event that has occurred since the nation came into life."⁹ Grant advocates for the importance of the amendment and the assurance of the Black vote. He explains that it is only just for Black men to exercise their civic duties and have access to knowledge surrounding voting. He further writes, "upon the people everywhere to see to it that all who possess and exercise political rights shall have the opportunity to acquire the knowledge which will make their share in the Government a blessing and not a danger."¹⁰ He states that all should have access to voting to improve the government through their civic engagement. The adoption of the Fifteenth Amendment sparked heavy, violent resistance from white extremist groups including the KKK and other white militias. Southerners would try to prevent Black men from voting through violence and scare tactics to

⁹ Ulysses S. Grant, "Ulysses S. Grant & the 15th Amendment (U.S. National Park Service)," n.d., <https://www.nps.gov/articles/ulysses-s-grant-the-15th-amendment.htm>.

¹⁰ Grant, "Ulysses S. Grant & the 15th Amendment (U.S. National Park Service)."

discourage participation in civic life. Grant was disgusted by groups like the Ku Klux Klan and used his presidential powers to prevent their violence and eliminate their influence.

Grant issued legislations to combat violence against Black Americans. The adoption of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments granted increased protection to former slaves and expelled states from disenfranchising voters. However, violent backlash towards Black Americans was a response to these amendments. Therefore, Grant issued the Enforcement Acts in 1870 and 1871 which were passed by Congress. To counter violence towards former slaves and ensure their newfound rights, Grant passed the Enforcement Act of May 1870. The act states, “all citizens of the United States who are or shall be otherwise qualified by law to vote at any election by the people in any State... shall be entitled and allowed to vote at all such elections, without distinction of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”¹¹ Grant supported such legislation because of the importance of ensuring civil and political rights of the Black population. Further, the language of the act prohibited groups of people from banding together with the intention of violating a citizen’s constitutional rights.¹² Although, the act alone did not eliminate harassment of Black voters.

Further, Grant continued to have Congressional committees investigating the resistance to the Enforcement Act in the South and southern attempts to halt Reconstruction. These committees were known as the Select Committee of the Senate to Investigate the Alleged Outrages in the Southern States and the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States.¹³ Southern resistance yielded two more Enforcement

¹¹ U.S. Statutes at Large, “U.S. Senate: Enforcement Act of 1870,” December 2, 2024, https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/image/EnforcementAct_1870_Page_1.htm.

¹² Senate Historical Office, “U.S. Senate: The Enforcement Acts of 1870 And 1871,” August 8, 2023, <https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/EnforcementActs.htm>.

¹³ Senate Historical Office, “U.S. Senate: The Enforcement Acts of 1870 And 1871.”

Acts known as the Second Force Act and the Third Force Act both passed in 1871. The second and third acts aimed to enforce the Fourteenth Amendment and “empowered federal judges and United States marshals to supervise local polling places.”¹⁴ The acts also allowed the president to use armed forces on individuals who tried to deny equal protection of the laws and to possibly suspend habeas corpus to enforce the act. Grant uses the executive powers of the military like how Lincoln did during the Civil War. Lincoln believed that the uses of presidential war or military powers may be used to preserve equal opportunity for all. As Grant continued to follow Lincoln’s legacy, he used presidential might to stop outward violence towards the newly freed slaves. Grant’s Enforcement Acts would also be known as the Ku Klux Klan Acts. These acts directly aimed to destroy the Klan.

The Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871 was part of the Third Enforcement effort. The act stated if any group or individual were to violently impede any person from holding office or voting will be “liable to the person injured . . . for all damages caused by any such wrongful act which such first-named person or persons by reasonable diligence.”¹⁵ The act also states, “That in all cases where insurrection, domestic violence, unlawful combinations, or conspiracies in any State shall so obstruct or hinder the execution of the laws thereof... it shall be lawful for the President, and it shall be his duty to take such measures, by the employment of the militia or the land and naval forces of the United States, or of either, or by other means, as he may deem necessary for the suppressions of such insurrection, domestic violence, or combinations.”¹⁶ The language of the act

¹⁴ Senate Historical Office, “U.S. Senate: The Enforcement Acts of 1870 And 1871.”

¹⁵ “Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871, ‘An Act to Enforce the Provisions of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, and for Other Purposes,’” National Constitution Center – constitutioncenter.org, n.d., <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/historic-document-library/detail/ku-klux-klan-act-of-1871-april-20-1871-an-act-to-enforce-the-provisions-of-the-fourteenth-amendment-to-the-constitution-of-the-united-states-and-for-other-purposes>.

¹⁶ “Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871, ‘An Act to Enforce the Provisions of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, and for Other Purposes.’”

empowered the President to use military intervention on such occasions of violence towards Black Americans. Grant shows his eagerness to protect the rights of Black citizens. These acts were aimed at the Ku Klux Klan and other white militias as their increased violence towards Black Americans were plaguing the Reconstruction South and hindering the full involvement of Black citizens in civic life. Instances of military involvement to combat violence were exercised by the Grant Presidency in the state of Louisiana.

The state of Louisiana was home to many acts of violence towards Black Americans. The state was one target of Grant's military efforts to erase white mob violence towards Black citizens. In a message to the U.S. Senate on January 13, 1875, Grant states, "many colored citizens had been denied registration and others deterred by fear from casting their ballots."¹⁷ Further, "several thousand voters of the State had been deprived of the elective franchise on account of their color, and praying that steps might be taken to have said votes counted and for general relief."¹⁸ The instance he is referring to is the election for governor of the state. The election was fraudulent because of Black voter suppression. Much of the violence directed towards Black men was because of their vote for the Republican party. Therefore, white southerners who voted Democrat felt threatened by the Black man's vote for the opposite party.

The white power structure interfered in the gubernatorial election of Louisiana by suppressing the Black vote through violence. Grant issued the army to the state to deal with the white mob. In the same Senate message, Grant claims, "I caused detachments of troops to be stationed in various localities in the State, to aid him in the performance of his official duties."¹⁹

¹⁷ Ulysses S. Grant, "Special Message | the American Presidency Project," January 13, 1875, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/special-message-1885>.

¹⁸ Grant, "Special Message | the American Presidency Project."

¹⁹ Grant, "Special Message | the American Presidency Project."

The courthouse in New Orleans had been taken over by Klan militias in 1874. The army was sent to take back the courthouse. Eventually the Klan attacks were suppressed, and the courthouse was retaken. Louisiana's proper governor was restored. All such Executive actions were allowed through the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871 as Grant outlines in the message, thus demonstrating the presidential powers of the military. Grant further states that he only uses troop intervention when it is necessary to act in a way that preserves the Constitution and laws of the United States, like that of Lincoln. Grant's aggressive use of the army in the South was to protect Black civil and political rights. Many more efforts were made to combat white resistance.

In South Carolina, the Klan failed to listen to Grant's warning outlined in the Ku Klux Klan Act. Grant thereby used the Third Force Act and suspended habeas corpus, meaning that an individual's right to challenge their detention in court is removed, and martial law was declared in the state.²⁰ Grant stationed the 7th U.S. Cavalry in South Carolina to gather information and intelligence on Klan activities. Suspected Klan members were captured by U.S. marshals and taken for trial. Suspected Klan members could not challenge their capture because of the habeas corpus suspension. Further, they were prosecuted for engaging in terroristic violence.²¹ Suspected members were prosecuted by the newly created Justice Department.

Under Grant's presidency the United States Department of Justice was created. According to the Federal Judicial Center, the Justice Department was created to take over the financial administration of the judiciary from the Interior Department.²² Jed H. Shugerman of Fordham University School of Law argues that the creation of the DOJ was "to shrink and professionalize

²⁰ National Park Service, "President Grant Takes on the Ku Klux Klan (U.S. National Park Service)," December 16, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/president-grant-takes-on-the-ku-klux-klan.htm>.

²¹ National Park Service, "President Grant Takes on the Ku Klux Klan (U.S. National Park Service)."

²² "Department of Justice | Federal Judicial Center," n.d., <https://www.fjc.gov/history/timeline/departments-justice>.

the federal government.”²³ It is also argued that “The founding of the DOJ had less to do with Reconstruction, and more to do with “retrenchment” (budget-cutting and fiscal conservatism) and anti-patronage reform.” However, Grant’s creation of the Justice Department was used to protect the rights of the newly freed Black Americans. The department aided in the prosecution the Klan and other violent white militias.

Along with the many Enforcement Acts, also known as the Ku Klux Klan Acts, and the newly found DOJ, it was possible to fully prosecute the Ku Klux Klan and other individuals involved in acts of violence towards Black Americans. In the instances of heavy Klan violence such as in Louisiana and South Carolina, the legislation protecting Black rights passed by Grant and the prosecution from the DOJ greatly impacted the suppression of the Klan and was a great effort in protecting Black Americans. Grant’s efforts to combat the Klan through legislation and military use contributed to the slow elimination of the Klan. The Klan, due to Grant’s efforts, would fade and only resurge in 1915 where it expanded beyond the south.

Continuing Grants commitment to Black civil and political rights, as demonstrated through previously mentioned legislation and executive power use, Grant also commissioned the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1875. The act outlawed segregation in the public and aimed to provide universal access to public spaces, regardless of race. Grant’s support of the act is not a surprise given his commitment to Black civil and political rights and the continuation of Lincoln’s legacy. During his time in the Union army, he insisted that Black American’s be allowed to serve in the military.²⁴ Further, Grant had also ended segregation in the capital and

²³ Jed H. Shugerman, “The Creation of the Department of Justice: Professionalization Without Civil Rights or Civil Service,” FLASH: The Fordham Law Archive of Scholarship and History, n.d., https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/faculty_scholarship/639/.

²⁴ Pushaw, Jr, “Ulysses S. Grant and the Lost Opportunity for Racial Justice.”

openly encouraged Black participation in the United States government. Because of his record on desegregation in the military and the U.S. capital, he fully pushed for the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1875. Unfortunately, the act would be ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1883 on the reasoning that “the Fourteenth Amendment applied only to state, and not to private, action.”²⁵ The overturn of the act reflects a great mistake in our countries history that halted civil rights progress made by people like President Grant.

Unfortunately, Grant’s presidency would be stained by series of scandals. Grant himself was not exclusively involved in such scandals, but his administration was deeply involved, reflecting the judgment of his presidency and his appointments. Notable scandals include the Whiskey Ring. In 1875 it was discovered that Grant’s appointment of General John McDonald to supervisor of the Internal Revenue Service in St. Louis was convicted of defrauding the government of millions of dollars by conspiring with distillers to not pay federal taxes.²⁶ Grant’s private secretary, General Orville E. Babcock, was also involved. Several of Grant’s other officials were caught up in corruption scandals such as his two vice presidents, William Richardson of the Treasury Department, and William Belknap the Secretary of War. Such scandals and corruption carried out by Grant’s administration reflected poorly on his image and his legacy. Grant is more deserving of a legacy surrounding his various efforts to protect and enforce Black civil and political rights.

U.S. Grant’s efforts to further Lincoln’s legacy particularly surrounding Black civil and political rights through his progressive legislation and military use is a valiant mark on his

²⁵ Pushaw, Jr, “Ulysses S. Grant and the Lost Opportunity for Racial Justice.”

²⁶ “Scandals of the Grant Administration | Research Starters | EBSCO Research,” EBSCO, n.d., <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/scandals-grant-administration>.

presidency. His background in the Union Army and his admiration for Lincoln yielded support for Black rights and desegregation efforts. Grants' support for the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments before his election greatly influenced his legislation during his presidency. He also pushed for the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment to establish Black voting rights within the language of the Constitution. He continuously passed legislation that enforced the Fourteenth Amendment such as the Enforcement Acts of 1870 and 1871 with the last two acts being known as the Ku Klux Klan Act. The acts were aimed to suppress violence committed by the Klan and other white terrorist groups towards the newly freed slaves in the south. Such acts allowed army intervention in Klan attacks on institutions such as cases in Louisiana and South Carolina. Grant's vigorous enforcement of the military, his anti-Klan legislation, and the creation of DOJ and the prosecution of Klan members greatly aided in eradicating the Klan. Grant's administration is stained with corruption yielding an unfortunate legacy. However, his valiant efforts to protect Black civil rights should be celebrated.

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