Ulysses S. Grant Life Story Outline

by Frank Scaturro of the Grant Monument Association

The Presidency of Ulysses S. Grant, 1869-1877

A. First Term, 1869-1873.
1. First inauguration, March 4, 1869. Advocated freedom from sectional prejudice, resumption of specie payments, restoration of the national credit, healthy national commerce, reform in national policy toward American Indians leading to their ultimate citizenship, and ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment. Grant's first inaugural address.

2. Signed Public Credit Act, providing that government obligations were to be paid in gold, March 18, 1869.

3. "Black Friday" financial panic erupted when Jay Gould and Jim Fisk attempted to corner the gold market. September 24, 1869, but ended when Grant ordered the sale of government gold to stabilize the market.

4. Following the expulsion of black legislators in Georgia, Grant requested that state's temporary return to military rule, adding much needed momentum to efforts to ratify the proposed Fifteenth Amendment.

5. Issued proclamation celebrating ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution, March 30, 1870.
The Fifteenth Amendment states that no citizen can be denied the right to vote based upon race, color, or previous condition of servitude.
In this proclamation, Grant called the amendment "a measure of grander importance than any other one act of the kind from the foundation of our free government to the present day."

6. Signed first Enforcement Act, which protected the voting rights of blacks, May 31, 1870.

7. Resisting strong pressure for U.S. military involvement in the Cuban rebellion, Grant issued an announcement of strict neutrality, June 13, 1870.

8. Signed bill creating the Department of Justice under the Attorney General, June 22, 1870. This marked a major consolidation of the federal government's power to enforce civil rights.


10. Grant's "Quaker" Indian Peace Policy:

- Grant signed the Indian Appropriation Act, which established Indians as national wards and nullified Indian Treaties, March 3, 1871.
- A major part of Grant's Peace Policy, this act caused the government to recognize for the first time the need to insure the welfare of Indians as individuals rather than as tribal entities.
- This was the first step in years of federal initiatives toward Indian policy reform that ultimately led to the Indians' citizenship.
- Under Grant's program, educational and medical programs were institutionalized in the Interior Department, and tons of food, clothing, and books were donated by churches and relief organizations to tribes.
- Between 1868 and 1876 the number of houses on reservations climbed from 7,500 to 56,000. The amount of land under cultivation increased sixfold. Teachers and schools tripled. Indian ownership of livestock increased by over fifteen times.

11. Issued proclamation against unlawful combinations in South Carolina, March 24, 1871.

12. Signed Ku Klux Klan Act, which enabled the president to suspend *habeas corpus* to further enforce the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendment rights of southern blacks, April 20, 1871.

13. Enacted successful arbitration of *Alabama* claim dispute:

- This controversy centered around extensive damage caused by the Alabama, a Confederate warship built in British shipyards, during the Civil War.
- Grant faced strong pressure throughout the country for war against Great Britain and failure on the part of the Johnson administration to reach a settlement.
- In his Second Annual message, Grant made an international issue of the dispute and ultimately secured British cooperation in submitting the matter to its peaceful resolution.

White supremacist terrorists made persistent attempts throughout Reconstruction to suppress the political rights of former slaves, most notoriously through the Ku Klux Klan, established in 1866. Grant issued a proclamation ordering the Ku Klux Klan in South Carolina to disperse and surrender arms, October 12, 1871. He suspended the writ of habeas corpus in nine South Caroline counties, one of the boldest displays of peacetime presidential power in U.S. history, October 17, 1871. Following this, Grant sent federal troops to South Carolina and pursued a prosecution of white supremacist terrorism that would destroy the Ku Klux Klan by the end of 1872.

15. Grant signed the act establishing Yellowstone as the world's first national park, March 1, 1872. This was the genesis of the National Park System.

16. He signed the Amnesty Act, May 22, 1872, which restored civil rights to all southerners except certain former Confederate leaders.

17. Election of 1872

Much of the election season was marred by the Credit Mobilier scandal, which revealed that several congressmen had taken bribes between 1867 and 1868 during the construction of the Union Pacific Railroad in exchange for legislation. Grant's strong civil rights record had forced the Democratic Party for the first time to accept the finality of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. This "new departure," however, did not end their opposition to federal military intervention in the South during Reconstruction. A number of elite reformers, who considered themselves the "best men" for positions in government, embraced civil service reform, and opposed Grant's Reconstruction policies, formed the Liberal Republican Party to oppose the president's reelection.
The Democrats and Liberal Republicans nominated New York Tribune editor Horace Greeley for president. 
Grant was reelected by a landslide, November 5, 1872.

18. Grant signed the Coinage Act, making gold the sole monetary standard, February 12, 1873.

B. Grant's Second Administration, 1873-1877

1. In his second inaugural address, March 4, 1873, Grant advocated civil rights legislation for former slaves, the gold standard, domestic and international commerce, industrial development, and continued reform of Indian policy.

2. He ordered disorderly bands in Louisiana to disperse, May 22, 1873.
   - Louisiana, which had a small black majority and a fragile government, required Grant's military support throughout his term in order to retain its Republican governors who were repeatedly threatened within the state. 
   - During his second administration, Grant's intervention in the South on behalf of blacks became widely unpopular in both North and South, largely because of racist attitudes throughout the nation.

3. The Panic of 1873 began with the failure of Jay Cooke and Company, a major New York banking firm, September 18, 1873.

4. Virginius dispute with Spain.
   - The Virginius, a merchant ship commanded by Captain John Fry, a U.S. citizen, and flying the American flag, was captured by the Spanish gunboat Tornado 
   - Claiming that the vessel was aiding Cuban rebels, Spanish authorities executed Fry, 36 of the crew members, and 16 passengers. 
   - Resisting intense pressure to declare war on Spain, Grant secured a successful arbitration of the matter, including an indemnity and apology from the Spanish government, November 28, 1873.
   - Authorities later discovered that the Virginius was owned by Cubans, was illegally registered, and had no right to fly the American flag.

5. Vetoed inflation of currency bill, April 22, 1874.
   - This was perhaps the most important of Grant's 94 vetoes, a greater number than all of his predecessors' vetoes combined. 
   - This move began a minor party realignment by making Republicans the party of "hard money" and paving the way for the resumption of specie payments.

6. Grant's daughter, Nellie, married Algernon Sartoris in the White House, on May 21, 1874, in one of the largest Washington social events of the century.
7. Acknowledging the widespread unpopularity of his southern policy, Grant expressed his continuing commitment to Reconstruction in his Sixth Annual Message with the following words: "While I remain Executive all the laws of Congress and the provisions of the Constitution ... will be enforced with rigor ... Treat the negro as a citizen and a voter, as he is and must remain ... Then we shall have no complaint of sectional interference."

8. Ordered disorderly gatherings in Mississippi to disperse, December 21, 1874.

   Following the mass murder of blacks in Vicksburg, federal troops restored order and removed a fraudulently installed Democratic sheriff.
   Due to intimidation during the election of 1875, Mississippi would become the only state with a black majority to be seized by a Democratic (anti-Reconstruction) administration during Grant's term.


   This act would help stabilize currency by reducing greenbacks in circulation and by resuming specie (gold) payments starting January 1, 1879.
   At the time this act went into effect, the depression that started with the Panic of 1873 came to an abrupt end.

10. Signed the Civil Rights Act, March 1, 1875.

   This act prohibited racial segregation in various modes of public accommodations and transportation and in jury selection.
   The most sweeping piece of civil rights legislation before 1964, this would be ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1883.
   While Grant saw this as a stand taken on principle, the law was unpopular and lamented by many as a move that would hurt the Republican Party.
   Congress would not pass another civil rights law until 1957.

11. The "Whisky Ring," a conspiracy of whisky distillers who had been defrauding the government for years, is uncovered, May 1, 1875.

   With Grant's support, Secretary of the Treasury, Benjamin Bristow, secured over 350 indictments.
   After someone hinted that Orville Babcock, his personal secretary, might be among the guilty, Grant stated, "Let no guilty man escape if it can avoided ... No personal consideration should stand in the way of performing a public duty."
   Weighing the evidence, Grant later defended Babcock, who was acquitted of the questionable charges against him due to a lack of evidence.

12. Ordered white terrorist "rifle clubs" in South Carolina to disperse, October 17, 1876.

13. Election of 1876.
Republican Rutherford B. Hayes faced Democrat Samuel J. Tilden. Grant utilized troops to protect the rights of black voters in South Carolina and Louisiana, both of which had black majorities and were holding gubernatorial elections.

a. Elections in both states were disputed, but the Republican candidates would be inaugurated.
b. Grant sustained both governors until the end of his term.


Louisiana, South Carolina, Florida, and Oregon all submitted two sets of electoral returns, one by the Democrats and one by the Republicans, bringing the presidential election into dispute.

Facing this unprecedented controversy in which the nation was unsure who, if either candidate, would be inaugurated in March, a crisis developed.

Grant supported the establishment of an electoral commission to decide the dispute, though playing no role in its deliberations.

a. In a controversial move, the Commission decided that Hayes had won the electoral votes of all four states, giving him the presidency by one electoral vote.
b. In the Compromise of 1877 Democrats agreed to recognize Hayes in exchange for an assurance by Republicans that the new president would end intervention in the South.

Grant was widely credited for preserving the peace during this crisis and silently prepared troops to prevent any disruptions.

a. Hayes was peacefully inaugurated on March 5, 1877.
b. One of Hayes' first actions was the withdrawal of the last remaining federal troops in the South from South Carolina, Louisiana, and Florida, thus ending Reconstruction.
c. The Republican regimes of all three states collapsed, and the "Solid South" was born.
d. With the end of Reconstruction, the government had repudiated Grant's policy, and subsequent decades would see a new era of disenfranchisement and segregation sweep the South until the 20th century Civil Rights Movement.

Please return to the Students page in LibGuides for the other segments of Grant’s life history.

Grant’s Early Years, Through the Start of the Civil War, 1822-1861

Grant During the Civil War, 1861-1865

Grant as General-in-Chief, After the Civil War, 1865-1869

Grant’s Later Years, 1877-1885

Further reading: Ulysses S. Grant Chronology, at the Ulysses S. Grant Association website.
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