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**A conversation with Joan Waugh**

Author of *U. S. Grant:*

*American Hero, American Myth*

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**Q: Why is reviving the image of Ulysses S. Grant as a great American hero so important?**

**A:** I see my book as not "reviving" but "recovering" or even "rediscovering" his image and reputation. I think it's important because people cannot really appreciate the enormous impact of the Civil War if they forget about or dismiss the meaning behind its symbols and heroes, such as U. S. Grant. He embodied the Union cause for Americans of his day—why the United States fought to preserve the country—more than any living person of the time.

**Q: Tell us about why you divide the book into two parts, first considering Grant's life and his status as an "American Hero" and then examining him as an "American Myth."**

**A:** That's such a good question, and to tell you the truth, I struggled with the organization of the book in terms of how much to write about his life. In the beginning of my project, I assumed that everyone knew about Grant's role in the Civil War and as president (whether they liked him or not), but after researching the topic for a few years, I realized that many of my potential readers might need to be educated about the *scale* of his accomplishments and achievements. That is why the first chapters of the book highlight his ascent into heroic status while the remaining chapters chronicle the mythic general.

**Q: In his day, Grant was considered a hero comparable to the likes of Abraham Lincoln and George Washington. Why was Grant so popular in the nineteenth century? What did he represent to the American people?**

**A:** Most Americans held a high regard for the man who, with Lincoln, preserved and sustained the United States. In my book I make clear that white southerners did not esteem Grant and his memory like so many in the northern states. (The overwhelming majority of Americans lived in the northeast during the nineteenth century.) Yet in 1885, the year of Grant's death, I found a number of published southern eulogies linking Washington, the Father, with Grant, the Savior, emphasizing Grant's magnanimity at

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Contact Gina Mahalek for review copies/author interviews [919] 962-0581

Fax [919] 966-3829 | E-mail: Gina\_Mahalek@unc.edu

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Appomattox. In the north, Lincoln, the Martyr, was added in countless representations of the "great triumvirate."

**Q: Why have his status as an American hero and his importance as a historical figure diminished since the mid-twentieth century?**

**A:** Undoubtedly the fallout from the Vietnam War turned Americans, and certainly many historians, away from a favorable portrayal of military heroes in war and peace, and General Grant's historical status suffered and declined. The perception persists in the popular mind that Grant's generalship was brutal and presaged "modern" war while his Confederate counterpart, General Robert E. Lee, waged a "gentlemanly" type of old-fashioned warfare. The fact that soldiers in the Army of Northern Virginia suffered many more deaths and casualties (proportionately) in comparison with soldiers under Grant has not really changed the perception of Grant the "butcher."

**Q: Today, Confederate General Robert E. Lee's memory often overshadows Grant's image as a Civil War general. Why?**

**A:** As the memory and meaning of the Union cause faded somewhat in the twentieth century, the pro-Confederate depiction of the war called the "Lost Cause" seemed to gather strength, and Lee was the patron saint of that effort. In addition, Lee was also genuinely admired by northerners for his faultless public acceptance of the results of the war. Indeed, Lee's high born status, his link with George Washington, his striking good looks, and his remarkable talent as a military leader made him the perfect choice for the reconciliationist icon along with President Abraham Lincoln. Those two—Lincoln and Lee—emerged as the symbols of the war, not Lincoln and Grant. Recently, Lee's image has suffered as academic scholars have dismantled the myths of the Lost Cause, including the idea that Lee hated slavery. Recent scholarship on Grant has been trending more favorably both for his reputation as general and as president.

**Q: Did Grant's early life foretell his future as a great military leader?**

**A:** I have always thought that many biographers made too much of his humble beginnings and his failure in his first career in the army. Certainly his early life—especially his elite education at West Point, his success in the Mexican War, and his father's growing prosperity—provided him a fair chance at achieving military and business success. His odds of achievement were certainly better than Lincoln's! Still, there is no doubt that the story of Grant's rise is compelling and continues to fascinate even after all these years.

**Q: Why did Grant become so revered by the American people as a general in the war?**

**A:** In both the western and eastern theaters, Grant fought aggressively, secured a vast amount of Confederate territory, and received the surrender of three rebel armies at Fort Donelson in 1862; at Vicksburg in 1863; at Appomattox Courthouse in 1865. He was, by

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far, the most successful Union general of the Civil War and by November 1863 (after his victory at Chattanooga) emerged as the military symbol of Union victory and a reunited country, offering hope for an end to the terrible bloodshed.

It may seem odd to us that military heroes were so revered, but in many ways, Civil War generals were treated like today's celebrities. (This was already an established American tradition—think of general-presidents George Washington, Andrew Jackson, William Henry Harrison, and Zachary Taylor.) After 1863 until the end of his life, Grant attracted huge crowds wherever he went, and the extent and depth of his fame rivals the movie stars or sports celebrities of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

**Q: How did he use his popularity to secure his two terms as president?**

**A:** Grant's immense prestige, lending stability to a war-weary country was enough to make both his elections a certain thing. He did not seek the presidency and was a reluctant politician. He stated his reasons for accepting the 1868 Republican nomination very clearly when he wrote that the fate of the United States could not be trusted to "mere trading politicians," expressing the fear that the war's gains would be lost if left to them.

**Q: What did nineteenth-century Americans think of Grant's presidency? How is Grant's presidency remembered today?**

**A:** We do not have the benefit of extensive opinion polls to help interpret nineteenth-century voters' mood swings toward their politicians and political parties. Besides newspapers, orations, letters, and other material, we must rely on election results. Despite huge challenges and controversies, we know that Grant won two commanding victories in 1868 and 1872. During his administrations, a majority approved his actions toward western development, Indian policy, reconstruction, and diplomacy, particularly the resolution of the so-called Alabama claims with Great Britain.

His second term brought disappointment and disaster in the form of scandals and a severe economic depression (1873). His dream of a peaceful reconstruction was dashed by the harsh realities of white resistance, the failure of Republican state governments, and a growing impatience with military intervention in the south. In 1876, I think that even Grant's most stalwart supporters were happy to see him leave office, which, by the way, makes him little different than most of our second term presidents!

**Q: After leaving office, Grant commenced on a world tour that lasted from 1877-1879. How did it contribute to his public image?**

**A:** Grant, who never lost his iconic military status even in the worst days of his presidency, saw his popularity rise once again when he left the White House. He became a global celebrity and international statesman, traveling to England, France, Denmark, Italy, Germany, Austria, Russia, Holland, Spain, and Portugal (among many other

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#### 4-4-4 U. S. Grant

countries), and ending in China and Japan. The first time any ex-president traveled so widely, Grant was greeted everywhere by huge crowds and treated with great respect by kings and queens, generals and prime ministers. To his hosts, General Grant symbolized a new American identity born of war, freedom, economic prosperity, and a nationalism and internationalism leavened with democratic ideals.

In short, U. S. Grant embodied the wave of the future to admiring nations, and the extraordinary press coverage abroad and in the American press made him a formidable figure upon his return to his country in 1879.

**Q: You include many illustrations and political cartoons in this biography. What do they say about Grant's image during his lifetime?**

**A:** They convey great meaning and are indispensable to demonstrating my case for Grant as a hero of mythic status. As Grant emerged from obscurity to fame for his victories in the west (in 1862), the newspapers and journals often printed the wrong image! This was largely corrected by the time he was invited by Lincoln to lead the entire war effort in early 1864. Possessed of a quiet and unpretentious personal style, Grant's public and imposing martial image was plastered everywhere—on patriotic posters, illustrations, medals, and paintings. These images demonstrated strength, power, courage, and a country that would remain united by virtue of his successful generalship.

The transition from victorious military warrior to president brought huge changes to his public image as represented in cartoons and other illustrations. Now, he was subject, like all presidents and politicians (American politics has always been a blood sport), to savage caricature and withering attacks. I think both the pro- and anti-Grant cartoons are extraordinarily brilliant, as are the men who captured this political era for posterity—Thomas Nast, Matt Morgan, and Joseph Keppler. Aside from the cartoons, what is most interesting to me are the many images that sought to domesticate Grant by placing him in a family setting with his wife and children. These types of representations were very appealing to Republican voters who expected President Grant to be more accessible than the stern military figure.

**Q: How much of what we know about Grant's life and how we remember the Civil War is influenced by Grant's own writing in his memoir, *The Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*?**

**A:** Grant's two-volume autobiography is largely the history of his generalship in the Civil War, and, as such, it is a riveting narrative of the entire war from one of its leading participants. From its publication in 1885, the *Memoirs* have been considered an indispensable source for historians as well as a large reading public audience.

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## 5-5-5 U. S. Grant

Frankly, I approached my first experience reading the volumes with the expectation that I would find them hard going, but I was pleasantly surprised. There is a good reason why the *Memoirs* are considered by many to be both a literary and historical masterpiece. For the purposes of my book, they represent the best explication of what the Union cause was all about. Modern readers expecting a "tell-all" memoir will be sorely disappointed. In the nineteenth century, both autobiographies and biographies were intended to deliberately inspire, not to cater to the desire for scandal and gossip. Grant penned a short (but nonetheless illuminating) section on his family and youthful experiences, but neither addressed his personal failings (for example, alcoholism) nor revealed details of his private life.

**Q: The publicity surrounding Grant's death and his funeral, which was attended by a million and a half people, was unheard of in the late nineteenth century and represent his overwhelming status as a great American hero at the time of his death. How is his funeral representative of the memory he left behind and his status as a symbol of the Civil War?**

**A:** While over a million and a half people gathered in New York City to view Grant's funeral procession and burial ceremonies, it was but the biggest of the thousands of memorial ceremonies (in the south too) held on August 8, 1885. Grant's funeral was by far the largest ever held and suggests that his passing sparked a national conversation about the meaning and memory of the war which had ended twenty years earlier.

What was especially notable about this event—which was at once patriotic, religious, and emotional—is how Grant's death marked an important milestone on the road to sectional reconciliation. Indeed his death and funeral became a vehicle for exploring and celebrating how his generous surrender terms at Appomattox began the hard but successful work in bringing the nation back together.

Even as serious divisions persisted and large groups of veterans and others cherished and honored their memories of the war (Union cause, Lost Cause, emancipationist), a version of the war emphasizing "sectional harmony" emerged (both sides fought for honorable causes; both Confederate and Union soldiers were brave and honorable; the best outcome was that of a strong and united America). This version of the war allowed both northerners and southerners to agree on a non-controversial memory of the war and to commemorate it together at certain times. Thus, commemorating Grant at his death and during the national funeral became a way of acknowledging the fact that "The north and south are reunited forever."

**Q: How do Grant's Tomb, The General Grant National Memorial in New York City, and its construction represent his legacy?**

**A:** The most important and surprising aspect of Grant's Tomb that came out of my research was how the sheer scale of tragic death and heroic sacrifice endured by the Civil

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## 6-6-6 U. S. Grant

War generation resulted in the building of statues and other structures in so many places north and south. Grant's Manhattan monument was the largest and most expensive memorial of all, but its essence was to immortalize in granite, marble, and bronze both Grant's legacy of preserving the Union and bringing freedom to enslaved people, and the entire generations' role in the conflict.

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116 South Boundary Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27514-3808

919-966-3561 (office) 1-800-848-6224 (orders) 919-966-3829 (fax)

### CONTACTS

Publicity: Gina Mahalek, 919-962-0581; [gina\\_mahalek@unc.edu](mailto:gina_mahalek@unc.edu)

Sales: Michael Donatelli, 919-962-0475; [michael\\_donatelli@unc.edu](mailto:michael_donatelli@unc.edu)

Rights: Vicky Wells, 919-962-0369; [vicky\\_wells@unc.edu](mailto:vicky_wells@unc.edu)

Contact Gina Mahalek for review copies/author interviews [919] 962-0581

Fax [919] 966-3829 | E-mail: [Gina\\_Mahalek@unc.edu](mailto:Gina_Mahalek@unc.edu)