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## Reconstruction's First Election: Various Interpretations of the Lasting Significance of a Grant Victory

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### Writing Process

This paper was completed during the Spring of 2018 for my ASI 120 course. The assignment was a multi-phased historiography paper centering around the topic of Reconstruction. To begin preparing for the writing of the historiography and to gain a better understanding of the historical context and political unrest surrounding the task of Reconstruction, I read Eric Foner's *A Short History of Reconstruction*. Foner's book provided me with the knowledge to begin writing my topic proposal and introduced me to the influential event of the Election of 1868. I was interested in exploring the consequences and effects of the Election of 1868 as I felt (and feel) that they still have relevance today pertaining to issues of continued racism—which necessitates movements such as Black Lives Matter in current culture. With this first phase complete, I next gathered scholarly sources that represented a range of varying interpretations and views related to the Election of 1868 and its societal significance. In combing through sources, consistent groupings of interpretation began to emerge and designated how attitudes surrounding the event of the Election of 1868 were shaped by the passage of time and the changing social environment. This leads to the next phase of the historiography assignment in which I wrote an annotated bibliography which summarized the opinions of these various historians and reflected the distinct groupings of interpretation. The historiography assignment culminated in a final paper in which the completed annotated bibliography served as the backbone of the paper's structure. We were also tasked with selecting the grouping of interpretation that we felt to be most compelling and presented the strongest argument. Upon completion of this draft of the historiography paper, I then had my paper reviewed by Core Write Place consultants, fellow Core students, and my professor, Dr. William Trollinger. After the editing process, I submitted my final paper which examined the Election of 1868 through a historiographical lens.

**Editor's note:** For this paper, the author received the Barbara Farrelly Award for Best Writing of the Issue (\$200 prize).

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# Reconstruction's First Election: Various Interpretations of the Lasting Significance of a Grant Victory

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*Shannon Stanforth*

The election of 1868, the first to occur under the Republican Reconstruction government, experienced heightened controversy as Republicans, Democrats, whites, and blacks wondered what the outcome of the election would mean for the future of their respective groups. Following the Civil War, three states involved in the secession of the South were barred from participating in the coming election, spurring Democratic concern over the fate of the presidency. The Democratic candidate nomination went to Horatio Seymour, who drew support from a racially prejudiced voting bloc (a majority of whom were white Southerners). Ulysses S. Grant secured the Republican nomination and would eventually win over the Electoral College to gain the role of Reconstruction's first president. Historians express a range of views on how a Republican victory was achieved and the implications that such a victory had for newly franchised blacks and their opponents. These various interpretations maintain relevance today as notions of white supremacy persist and continue to make the effects of the election of 1868 worthy of examining through a historiographical lens.

Four main groupings of interpretation have emerged from analysis of the historical sources pertaining to the election of 1868. Authors such as Wilson in *General Grant*, Hesseltine in *Ulysses S. Grant*, and Langguth in *After Lincoln: How the North Won the Civil War and Lost the Peace* express a view of general support for the election of Grant in 1868. The next observable category contradicts these authors' belief that the nomination of Grant was an obvious outcome. This category includes Stamp, who, in *The Era of Reconstruction: 1865-1877*, contends Grant was a loser. Taking positions focusing on party

perspectives, authors such as Dunning in his book *Reconstruction, Political, and Economic: 1865-1877* and Mantell in *Johnson, Grant, and the Politics of Reconstruction* assume hopeful tones when speaking about future Democratic prospects—despite the Republican success in the election. Dunning and Mantell fall under the third category of optimism for the Democrats. A fourth category focuses on the role that Southern white intimidation had on the result of the election. Dauphine’s article “The Knights of the White Camelia” and Formwalt’s article “The Camilla Massacre of 1868: Racial Violence as Political Propaganda” underscore the prevalence of white violence and its ties to Democratic organizations. This last category, emphasizing the tensions between blacks and whites during the 1868 election year, is most significant in understanding the election’s effects and is the most compelling interpretation of Reconstruction’s first election.

Beginning the category of historians purporting the obviousness of a Grant presidency, Wilson commends the future president for a series of successes leading to his victory in the election of 1868. His tone is overwhelmingly approving of Grant’s actions, politics, and character, stating, “so free was [Grant] from all party bias, so sincere and apparent his desire for truth, so simple and straightforward his course, [he has] utterly disarmed all party rancor.”<sup>1</sup> Evidently, Wilson believes Grant was responsible for uniting the aims of the Republican Party and dispelling any disagreements through his morally sound address to Congress when accepting the Republican nomination. As proof of Grant’s loyalty and devotion to upholding the law, Wilson references Grant’s response to the controversial Tenure of Office Bill incident surrounding the final years of the Johnson administration in which Grant insisted that he could not involve himself in a breach of the law, even if he did not agree with it. He offers little to no information on Seymour and lacks a characterization of the Democratic Party platform during the 1868 election year. After detailing Grant’s inaugural address and explaining Grant’s chief aim in securing peace for the union, Wilson asserts that Reconstruction advanced swiftly. Wilson attributes Grant’s success to his belief that Congress saw Grant as an ally to all and experienced little opposition to his plans for social reform.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James Grant Wilson, *General Grant* (New York: The University Society Inc., 1905), 294.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter XIII.

Unlike Wilson, Hesseltine had animosity for Ulysses S. Grant; it's apparent in his biographical accounts. Nonetheless, he seems to have been able to set aside his strong detestation for Grant's personality and character and examine the election of 1868 (including Grant's involvement) relatively objectively. Hesseltine expresses a tone of certainty in claiming that the only question raised at the Republican nominating convention would be who would appear on the ticket as vice president; Grant, he believes, had no competition for the presidential nomination. He proposes that the Democrats' decision required much more deliberation, as they had two options for selecting a candidate: tackling Reconstruction or pushing an economic platform. Hesseltine, like the other authors, reports Grant and Seymour's lack of active participation in their campaigns. In Grant's case, Hesseltine argues that this decision benefited the Republican candidate, praising Grant's shrewdness and "excellent political strategy"<sup>3</sup> for perhaps the only time in his career. The Democrats' difficulty in selecting a solid and definitive party platform, Hesseltine claims, ultimately left them with a weak candidate and squashed any hopes the Democrats may have had to win the election. Hesseltine notes that with "treason in his own ranks, Seymour could not have expected much success from his own last-minute appeal to the voters."<sup>4</sup> After Grant assumed the role as president, Hesseltine believes, the questions concerning the financial situation and Reconstruction were settled, but new political issues were just on the rise.<sup>5</sup>

Langguth depicts Grant's attitude toward the presidency as dispirited, though he contends that the general was confident in his abilities to win over the South if he did assume the office. He demarcates Grant's life including his military endeavors and political experience in order to illustrate Grant's policies—or lack thereof—and his reputation amongst politicians. Langguth asserts that Grant's most significant military battle, resulting in the surrender at Appomattox, should be credited with earning him the unanimous Republican candidate nomination. Furthermore, he claims that upon listening to Grant's acceptance of the nomination (his first political speech), the audience grasped that the would-be president also would take responsibility for mending divides within the nation that

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<sup>3</sup> William B. Hesseltine, *Ulysses S. Grant* (New York: Frederick Unger Publishing Co., 1935), 125.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 113-133.

had arisen as a result of the Civil War, including party, region, and economic philosophy. He indicates that Seymour was unimpressive and did little to challenge Grant's prospects of winning the election of 1868, stating simply, "Grant did not need to campaign"<sup>6</sup> Emphasizing Grant's campaign slogan, "Let us have peace," and his promise to secure peace for the nation, Langguth notes that Grant's address included many anti-prejudicial sentiments and supported extending the liberties of blacks even further. He predicts a Republican platform focused on promoting the Fifteenth Amendment in following years as a result of the election of 1868.<sup>7</sup>

While the previous three historians lack consistency in their personal opinions of Ulysses S. Grant and his legacy, they belong in the same category because of their agreement on Grant's role and success in the election of 1868. Wilson lavishly praises Grant and affirms his reputation as a Grant supporter with language connoting his extreme appreciation for the president. While Hesseltine and Langguth do not possess the same degree of veneration, they agree that during the 1868 election year, Grant's selection was manifest. All three historians communicate their shared belief that the nomination of Grant should have come as no surprise to Republicans and Democrats in 1868 and that Grant's victory was inevitable given the poor quality of the Democratic candidates. Wilson and Langguth incorporate descriptions of Grant's accomplishments as a general to build their cases that a Grant presidency was ensured. Hesseltine relies on depiction of Grant's hands-off political approach to explain that the office of president would assuredly go to Grant over Seymour. Whatever their means for proving their beliefs, all three can be grouped into this same category based on their common opinion that Grant's victory was evident.

A summary of Stamp's interpretation reveals his contrasting opinion through an analysis of Reconstruction that is highly critical of the Grant administration. His view of Grant as an exceedingly unqualified candidate and an equally unqualified president evidences itself throughout the delineation of his argument. An indication of his disappointment over the Republicans' nomination of Grant is provided through his quote expressing that "to pass over all of the reorganized

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<sup>6</sup> A.J. Langguth, *After Lincoln: How the North Won the Civil War and Lost the Peace* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 247.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 237-257.

Republican leaders in favor of a popular military hero”<sup>8</sup> was a sign of the devolution of the previously revolutionary political force of the Republican Party. Stamppp interprets the Republicans’ nomination of Grant as a sign of Republican resignation and considers the act an excuse for Democrats to attempt to reclaim their previous influence over the nation. Stamppp stresses his concern, predicting the ineffectiveness of the Grant administration based in his inference that Grant’s political leadership capacities were non-existent. Furthermore, Stamppp asserts that “as long as southern Democrats opposed Negro suffrage and insisted [on] white supremacy . . . this condition could hardly have changed.”<sup>9</sup> A portion of Stamppp’s argument is also dedicated to explaining the role that the black population had in the election. He states that by 1868, blacks had given up hope that the Republican congress would support them in gaining more political advantage. However, due to the violence perpetrated by whites over the blacks, most black voters still sided with the Republican Party—aiding the Republicans in gaining the presidency.<sup>10</sup>

Stamppp separates himself from Wilson, Hesseltine, and Langguth by purporting that there were other plausible options for the Republican nomination. His argument centers on the critique of Grant and the subsequent critique of the Republican Party following its nomination of the general. In contrast to the previous historians, Stamppp seems to believe that the Republicans had the opportunity to select a presidential nominee with political experience who would have better served in rebuilding the nation socially, politically, and economically. For this reason, this interpretation deserves its own category with only Stamppp and his belief that the Republicans had failed in their selection.

Marking a new category of interpretation, Dunning discusses the effects that the Grant victory had on the Democrats. In his analysis of the importance of the 1868 election, Dunning assumes a hopeful tone in predicting the prospects of the Democratic Party. He attributes Grant’s success in the fifteen previous slave-holding states chiefly to the fact that some prominent ex-confederates had been prohibited from voting. He presages the results of coming elections saying, “The securing of enough northern states, four or eight years later, to ensure a

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<sup>8</sup> Kenneth M. Stamppp, *The Era of Reconstruction: 1865-1877* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 187.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 166-168, Chapter VII.

presidential victory for the Democrats was by no means a hopeless task.”<sup>11</sup> Dunning provides a clear depiction of his interpretations of the Republican and Democratic platforms for the 1868 election year. He explains that while the Republicans unsurprisingly backed the terms of Congressional Reconstruction, they took fairly ambiguous stances on both their economic policy and the federal government’s capacity to determine the franchise (applying to ex-confederates and the blacks). In describing the Democratic platform, Dunning emphasizes that Reconstruction took a back seat to the Democrats’ demands for economic reform. Following the election outcome, Dunning claims that the Republicans’ ability to secure the presidency stemmed from their control over the franchise and that, in moving forward, the Republican aim would be to preserve the political rights that had been won for blacks.<sup>12</sup>

Mantell’s interpretation of the election of 1868 held that the race between Grant and Seymour was not as one-sided as it may have appeared. He, like Dunning, expresses an optimistic view of the Democratic Party, explaining how the end of the war had not obliterated Democratic strength. His thoughts can be summarized through his statement that “victory had clearly not added strength to the Republican coalition or destroyed the effectiveness of the Democratic Party.”<sup>13</sup> Mantell further claims that the Republicans’ lack of absolute control over the state of the nation was not, actually, that shocking—asserting that those Democratic supporters who shared the typical democratic ideals pertaining to race relations and the role of the national government would remain loyal heading into an election. He points to the Southern and border states as areas the Democrats could look to expand their power and claims that Republicans could not necessarily rely on a Southern black voting bloc. He works through various scenarios in which the Democrats may have been successful in bringing Seymour to a victory before acknowledging that, despite the plausibility of a Democratic presidency, Grant had won over the Electoral College to gain the role. Mantell’s interpretation of the outcome of the election, determines that a Republican victory meant the conclusion of an era of Reconstruction. However, he also adds that the

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<sup>11</sup> William A. Dunning, *Reconstruction, Political and Economic: 1865-1877* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1907), 134.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter VIII.

<sup>13</sup> Martin E. Mantell, *Johnson, Grant, and the Politics of Reconstruction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 147.

election results did not produce the peace that had been promised—rather, the battle for regaining political power had just begun.<sup>14</sup>

The overwhelmingly hopeful language used to explain the Democratic loss in the election of 1868 gives evidence of the Democratic optimism shared by both Dunning and Mantell. A summary of the interpretations of Dunning and Mantell, which can serve as an explanation for why the two sources share a category, includes the view that though the Democrats had failed to elect a president in the 1868 election year, Democratic sentiments and supporters remained strong following the conclusion of the Civil War. Both historians felt that while Grant had secured the presidency, it was important to highlight that the election could have easily gone the other way—especially if the Republicans had not had the guarantee of votes ensured to them by the black population. Dunning and Mantell clearly convey their conviction that Democratic success could soon be on the horizon and differ from the other sources in the amount of attention they dedicate to explaining this belief.

In the last and most significant grouping of interpretation surrounding the election of 1868, Dauphine communicates his belief that violence carried out by white Democrats and racial terrorist organizations such as the Knights of the White Camelia (KWC) was chiefly responsible for the high degree of success experienced by the Democratic Party in the Southern states. He describes the tense racial climate surrounding the election and suggests that the Democrats' implementation of such schemes severely skewed the results of the election. Furthermore, he argues that the link between the blatantly vicious KWC and the Democrats was undeniable, based on their shared aims and triumphs. This belief of his can be explained by his quote that “unquestionably, Democratic political fervor produced a reign of terror among the state's black population during the summer and fall of 1868.”<sup>15</sup> In defining the effects of the 1868 election outcome, Dauphine suggests that the acts of rebellion carried out by the Democrats, in ignoring the law and perpetuating a culture of violence, were momentarily halted by the seemingly insurmountable defeat. He asserts that Grant's election was responsible for puncturing the Democrats' political ambitions. However, he

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., Chapter IX.

<sup>15</sup> James G. Dauphine, “The Knights of the White Camelia and the Election of 1868: Louisiana's White Terrorists; A Benighting Legacy,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 30, no. 2 (1989):176, JSTOR.

acknowledges that the deep-rooted racial animosity that the KWC had been furthering in Southern white society would live on despite Grant's victory. He caps off his argument by proposing that members of the KWC be remembered as truly hateful people whose political aims were primarily driven by their prejudice against blacks.<sup>16</sup>

Contributing to the view that violence carried out by Southern white Democrats defined certain elements of the 1868 election and impacted the ability of blacks to exercise their newly won political freedoms, Formwalt offers his portrayal of the Camilla Massacre. He details the correlation between conflicts amongst the black and white residents living in Camilla and the approaching presidential election. He emphasizes the readiness and even enthusiasm that some white Democrats displayed for employing this violence in an effort to assert their supposed political and racial dominance. He, like Dauphine, notices a connection between the instigation of conflict and the instigators' involvement in Democratic organizations. Formwalt also describes how the Camilla Massacre was manipulated into a propaganda tool for both parties, though firmly emphasizing his belief that the Democrats had committed the wrong in the incident. The 1868 election, he claims, was marked by the racial discrimination and violence that events such as the massacre evidenced. He deems the white Democrats' portrayals of the event to be fables serving to extend the image of blacks as the aggressors and whites as the innocents long after the year 1868.<sup>17</sup>

Dauphine and Formwalt acknowledge the extreme severity with which white Democratic Southerners attacked blacks' newly won political freedoms. They illuminate the corrupt tactics employed by the Democrats in preventing blacks from exercising their right to vote. While other historians also pick up on the impact that Southern white intimidation had on diminishing the number of votes cast by the black population, which ultimately hurt the Republican cause, they spend only a minority of their argument on this point. Dauphine and Formwalt, however, highlight this issue as a topic of utmost importance. This interpretation is bolstered by the desire to expose the racism that drove the election of 1868, still present despite the Northern victory in the Civil War (and still present even amidst political defeat). Formwalt summarizes the influence that white violence

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 173-190.

<sup>17</sup> Lee W. Formwalt, "The Camilla Massacre of 1868: Racial Violence as Political Propaganda," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (1987): 399-426, JSTOR.

and racism had over the election of 1868 and illustrates that it is still a topic worthy of in depth examination:

The tragedy of Camilla was that its perpetrators won in the end, at least for the next century. ... In order to achieve their goals of home rule and race control, conservative Southerners made systematic use of terror, and, in the process, mythologized violence.<sup>18</sup>

Formwalt is correct in saying that those who actually practiced the violence managed to preserve positive images of themselves and reversed the negative associations tied to the violence, instead, onto their victims. This reversal was allowed to take place because of the deeply ingrained notions of racism that were widely accepted during the period, especially in the South. The presence of this same type of racism that existed during the election of 1868 in current society necessitates the re-analysis of history. For this reason, Dauphine and Formwalt's interpretation of the 1868 election, emphasizing the role of Southern white intimidation, is most significant in molding current understanding. Somehow, the image of blacks as "the aggressors" has remained a part of conventional culture. Despite the exposure of the falsity of these claims, movements such as Black Lives Matter are still needed to remind society of the collective failure in ensuring blacks' rights. It is important to work to remember history, to refrain from "being Whig," and to recognize that the election of 1868 still holds importance over today's political and social situation—especially in terms of racial violence.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 423.

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