

this is more accurately a separate consideration, one suggesting that an effective national campaign does not necessarily translate into a successful presidential term. Of course, nine of our presidents—William H. Harrison, Tyler, Taylor, Fillmore, Andrew Johnson, Garfield, Arthur, Harding, and Ford—either died before they could complete a single term or served less than four years after succeeding to the office through the death or resignation of a predecessor. None of these nine, however, received high marks for their abilities during these abbreviated presidencies, and certainly not for achieving any significant degree of popularity with voters.

Presidents whose reputations reached impressive highs and fell to crippling lows during their White House years are far more interesting to chart than the men who largely stumbled through unsuccessful terms. Four in particular—Grant, Truman, Lyndon Johnson, and Nixon—deserve a closer examination.

→ Ulysses S. Grant was, for a time, the most successful of the country's post-Civil War presidents until TR. In the tradition of Jackson and Lincoln, Grant was a self-made man who had overcome great personal adversity—alcoholism, and failed careers in business and the pre-Civil War military—on the path to triumph and fame as a Union general. Winning victories at Vicksburg, Mississippi, and Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1863, and against Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia in 1864–1865, Grant was rewarded with appointments as lieutenant general and supreme commander of the Union armies. He emerged from the war as the country's preeminent military hero and patriot.

During Andrew Johnson's unhappy time in office, Grant, as head of the army, steered a neutral course between Johnson and the Radical Republicans. As dissatisfaction with Johnson mounted, Grant's stock as a potential successor increased. One wartime staff associate, who spoke confidently about the people's "temper," described Grant's public image in 1866 as that of "a latter-day George Washington: 'He is the country's best hope in Peace, as he has been in War!'" By that time, Grant biographer William S. McFeely says, "Everyone in Washington talked of the general as the next President." During a floor debate in the House that had first considered raising Grant's rank to general, Pennsylvania radical Thaddeus Stevens declared his readiness to advance "this Martborough, this Wellington," to "a higher office whenever the happy

moment shall arrive." "It looks to me as if General Grant was to be the rising man," Associate Supreme Court Justice David Davis said. "The people love military glory and renown and love to honor it."

In a time of continuing national strife, after the worst bloodletting in American history, Grant seemed to promise a period of tranquility and a return to shared national purpose. In May 1868, when two delegations of veterans brought him news of his nomination for president, he replied: "I shall have no policy of my own to interfere against the will of the people." McFeely adds: "He had almost said that he would have no policy at all; almost too well he had suggested that he offered the nation a clean slate." In a written statement of acceptance, he included his well-known slogan, "Let us have peace," reflecting the country's perceived need for a recovery from the ordeal of civil war and now its first presidential impeachment and trial.

Grant's 1868 presidential campaign was notably devoid of content. On questions of enfranchisement for blacks, which agitated voters in the North as well as the South, and monetary policy, which divided conservative creditors and liberal debtors, Grant adopted a studied silence. "There was, in fact, no issue he cared about deeply," McFeely remarks, "no cause in the furtherance of which he sought the presidency. He did not introduce into the campaign any issue of personal concern to him." Though one Radical complained, "It is a bad sign when we take men instead of princes," Grant's passive approach worked perfectly with an electorate eager for quieter times and leadership by a president they admired and trusted and considered the embodiment of victory and virtue. Spending the campaign at his home in Galena, Illinois, from which he wrote a supporter, "A person would not know there was a stirring canvas going on if it were not for the accounts we read in the papers," Grant won a solid 53 percent of the popular vote, making him one of only two presidents (along with McKinley) in the eight elections of the late nineteenth century to reach the White House with popular majorities.

Domestic debates over tariffs, civil service reform, corruption, the annexation of the Dominican Republic, and the resolution of tensions with Great Britain over claims arising from damages caused by the British-built Confederate frigate *Alabama* marked

Grant's first term. Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner, who wanted the Dominican Republic as the center of a black West Indian confederation, effectively defied and humiliated Grant in his fight for annexation. The *Crédit Mobilier* scandal of 1872 also undermined the president by revealing the role of Vice President Schuyler Colfax. A construction firm controlled by the directors of the Union Pacific Railroad, who enriched themselves at the expense of both companies, the *Mobilier* tried to fend off public investigation by giving Colfax and other politicians corporate shares paid for by later dividend earnings.

Yet neither episode, when balanced against Grant's ability to find compromise solutions to other problems and to promote national unity through both symbolic and more tangible expressions of patriotism, inflicted much damage on his public standing. Indeed, in the 1872 election, despite opposition from Liberal Republicans as well as Democrats, Grant won reelection by a decisive 55 percent of the vote. Distancing himself from any hint of personal corruption and depicting his opponents as elitists indifferent to the concerns of farmers and ordinary workingmen, Grant strengthened his power over the populace, receiving the largest majority votes in any presidential election between 1836 and 1892. "I was the worst beaten man that ever ran for that high office," his Democratic opponent Horace Greeley complained. The fervor of support for Grant and opposition to Greeley moved him to remark that he had been "assailed so bitterly that I hardly know whether I was running for president or the penitentiary." He went out of his mind and died a few weeks after the election. Grant himself saw the election as a vindication of "his private character, which had been assailed during the campaign."

Yet inevitably Grant's high standing fell victim to his personal limitations and changes in national circumstance. His second term sullied his reputation for honest dealings as a result of a series of scandals involving leading members of his administration, but more permanently damaging was the longest economic depression in U.S. history, which undermined his popularity and ultimately led to his being one of the least well-thought-of presidents in American history. Scandals in the Navy, Treasury, and War departments involved Grant appointees who received payoffs respectively from shipbuilding companies for lucrative contracts, importers for fa-

orable treatment by customs officers, and merchants chosen to sell goods to Indians and soldiers at frontier posts. The extent of the corruption suggested that Grant was a man of lax standards all too ready to accommodate himself to subordinates who had no moral compass.

But the most severely compromising scandal—that involving the Whiskey Ring—was yet to come. Grant's personal secretary Orville E. Babcock was accused of helping a number of whiskey distillers avoid excise taxes and of receiving gifts and favors in return. Though Grant met news of the affair with the admonition, "Let no guilty man escape," he subsequently did all he could to protect his associates from investigation and prosecution. He gave a deposition on behalf of Babcock, which attorneys used successfully to defend his integrity at a trial. Babcock's acquittal received Grant's approval, and his continuation in the administration was assured.

Even more critical than the misdeeds of his staff in shattering Grant's heroic image was his passivity toward the suffering caused by the Panic of 1873 and subsequent depression. The collapse, which lasted six years, reduced daily wages of city workers by 25 percent. With no government support programs available to help the unemployed, more than a million workers subsisted on meager handouts from private charities. "It would be anachronistic to expect Ulysses Grant to have become the spiritual cheerleader that Franklin Roosevelt made of himself in a similar period sixty years later," McFeely observes. "Still, it is curious that Grant could not stretch his imagination" to fight for better conditions for farmers and workingmen. But Grant was paralyzed by his inability to free himself from the need for deference from America's "better" people, which he had won by cautious conservative monetary and economic policies. The depression revealed him to be not a man of the people, but a social climber who lacked the courage to risk his political ties to wealthy Americans by becoming an advocate for those who most needed his help. Grant's second term largely put an end to his authority as a leader by showing him to be all too human—a man of limited talents governed more by self-serving concerns than greater national needs.

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