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# 1

## Introduction

**Abstract:** *The reputation of the “Gilded Age,” the years from the end of the Civil War to the century’s end, is dismal. The stereotypes are wrong. Recent work demonstrates that they misrepresent Reconstruction and exaggerate corruption while maligning the period’s presidents (especially Grant), most of whom were strong and able leaders (including Grant). The misinformation began early, coming from reformers who resented leaders who did not recognize their superior wisdom, from former Confederates with axes to grind, and from misreading the works of Woodrow Wilson and Lord Bryce. Theses such as the “modern presidency” and “rhetorical presidency” contributed, making too many scholars too quick to assume that there was a sharp divergence between recent presidents and their predecessors, or that earlier presidents avoided political rhetoric.*

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## Why have so many written so much for so long that is so wrong?

There is no serious doubt about the powerful presence in American history of Abraham Lincoln, nor about his contributions to the presidency as well as to the nation. Similarly, the enormous energy that Theodore Roosevelt—the first president to serve entirely in the twentieth century—brought to the executive, and to the government overall, should be obvious to any observer of the period.

In between, though, we find a time generally portrayed as the Dark Ages of the Republic. Whatever the merits of that view, and more recent scholars have raised substantial questions about its accuracy,<sup>1</sup> presidents of the period have been besmirched with the same historical brush. The presidency in the Gilded Age, we are told, was at its lowest ebb, and as a result presidents of the late nineteenth century have tended to be the targets of scorn—when they receive any notice at all. We hear that Congress overshadowed them, that they were of marginal competence and were virtually indistinguishable. Perhaps most damning to post-modern American scholars, they seem to blur together as bewhiskered white men, now dead.

Thomas C. Reeves, the major biographer of one of those presidents, Chester A. Arthur, said in that biography, “the politics of late nineteenth-century America have attracted few historians in recent years.” He wrote that long ago, in 1975. Now, there has been some change, but too little. “Polemicists of the Progressive Era and the Great Depression,” Reeves noted perceptively that “amplifying the shrill condemnations and oversimplifications of such contemporary critics as Henry Adams and Lord Bryce, were profoundly influential in persuading succeeding generations of scholars that the Gilded Age required little study.” He proceeded to say that “even the Presidents of the era have been generally ignored and forgotten. Chester A. Arthur? The name brings smiles. One might as well consider Rutherford B. Hayes or Benjamin Harrison. ...”<sup>2</sup>

It is interesting to note that enlightened biographers of Gilded Age presidents—Reeves among them—are not necessarily any better informed about them all than the conventional wisdom has been. Ari Hoogenboom, who produced one of the best books on Rutherford B. Hayes, displays no more understanding of Grant than any pedestrian writer. “Grant’s attitude,” he wrote, was “that the presidency was a reward—a semi-retirement to be enjoyed—when coupled with his

political ignorance, created a weak and passive president who was easily influenced and manipulated by friends, congressmen and cabinet members.” A statement as absurd as this demands at least a citation, but he provides none.<sup>3</sup> Hoogenboom would hardly, one hopes, accept such writing about Hayes, but with regard to Hayes, he writes about a subject he knows. To be fair, when he does make similar statements about Grant earlier, he provides a citation, which is (unsurprisingly) to Allan Nevins, an anti-Grant historian of the “Revisionist” school.<sup>4</sup>

Reeves, himself, as indicated, seems hardly more well-informed about Grant, than were the bulk of others who were writing at the time Reeves produced his book. He could note with approval Grant’s efforts to establish a merit-based civil service, saying that Grant supported establishment of a civil service commission, and that Grant required the commission to adopt rules providing that applicants for federal service be able to speak English and to provide evidence of good character, as well as ensuring that “political assessments under any guise were strictly forbidden.”<sup>5</sup>

When discussing Grant’s renomination, though, Reeves said that “Republicans were keenly aware that he possessed a sorry record,” and that his Reconstruction policies “had earned intense hatred throughout the South” (which might have been expected for any such policy if it were to be all effective, and thus would not necessarily have been a criticism), that “rumors of corruption were persistent, and that the reform wing of the party was disgusted by his disposition to turn over patronage to a coterie of bosses who shamelessly manipulated public offices to their own advantage.”<sup>6</sup> Reeves is not exactly contradicting himself directly, although the shift in tone ignores and obscures the fact that Grant had made an effort to reform the civil service, and that the political dynamics of the time might have made it impossible for any president to have succeeded.

Certainly there was much disapproval of Grant, but suggesting some doubt about Reeves’s assertion that it was widespread, is that Grant, of course, won re-election overwhelmingly, in both the electoral college and the popular vote. In fact, his popular vote margin of victory was the highest for any president between Jackson’s first election in 1828, and Theodore Roosevelt’s record-setting total in 1904.<sup>7</sup> Regardless, Reeves then proceeded to condemn Grant’s second term in language demonstrating that he had absorbed much of the scurrilous commentary from the anti-Grant school, but he cites no authority for the most sweeping judgments, or for the most snide assertions.

Grant's administration, he said, "quickly degenerated into one of the most sordid periods in American political history." Whatever the merits of that claim—undoubtedly there was corruption at the time, unquestionably it was sordid, but assuredly this is an overstatement—how could Reeves profess to be objective when he comments that "Grant could barely comprehend what was going on about him?"<sup>8</sup>

Another treatment of Arthur, also gratuitously and erroneously, condemns President Grant in the course of considering Arthur. Michael Gerhardt understandably includes Arthur in his volume, *Forgotten Presidents*, and since Arthur figures prominently in laying the foundation for the merit-based civil service, Gerhardt quite naturally discusses Arthur's role in civil service reform. When he throws Grant into the mix, though, his statements become not only erroneous, but also illogical.

At least Reeves gives Grant credit here. Gerhardt, on the other hand, seems clearly to be confused. "The three Republican presidents who immediately preceded Arthur," he wrote, "did little to reform the civil service system." That is technically accurate, because Grant, Hayes, and Garfield accomplished nothing. Grant, though, did make the attempt, and only ceased when he concluded that Congress would never provide funding for the commission that Congress had established at his urging.

Gerhardt, however, seems to think that the commission was something that Congress forced on Grant. "Grant generally appointed people who were not the best qualified but who were loyal to him," he wrote without giving a source. "In response," he said, "Congress authorized Grant to set regulations for federal employment and to appoint an oversight body. By the end of Grant's administration, the commission was defunct since Congress had not funded it."<sup>9</sup> This is simply silly, and especially astonishing in that it appears in an otherwise rather good book. It makes no sense that Congress would force Grant to establish a merit-based scheme for appointments because members were unhappy with his nominees: the Senate had to approve them, regardless of what system was in place. Moreover, opposition to merit appointments was strong in Congress, but if Congress decided it wanted a merit system, why did the legislature permit it to languish, and refuse funding?

Similarly, just as deep knowledge of one Gilded Age president does not guarantee understanding of other presidents in the period, so too does expert knowledge of the Progressive period—so near in time to the Gilded Age—fail to carry with it any assurance that there will be any expertise at all with regard to the presidents immediately preceding Roosevelt,

Taft, and Wilson. Peri Arnold, for instance, so astute in analyzing the Progressive presidents, ventures not at all beyond the conventional wisdom when referring to those who had held the office in the decades just past. He explains his concern for the Progressives as growing from the need to explain just how Theodore Roosevelt and Wilson could have “gained iconic status in presidential history,” inasmuch as they “served in a time of relatively modest and unmemorable presidencies.”<sup>10</sup> He especially contrasts Roosevelt with McKinley. “Is the salient difference between McKinley and Roosevelt merely a difference in personality”? he asks.<sup>11</sup> The question is understandable. Theodore Roosevelt was unique; he would have been in sharp contrast to virtually anyone else. Yet recent scholarship on McKinley suggests that underneath these obvious differences there may actually have been more similarity than appears on the surface.<sup>12</sup> McKinley, this research concludes, may indeed have paved the way for the Bull Moose dynamism.

Our concentration here will be primarily on presidents and the presidency, and only secondarily on the period. With regard to the presidency, was the period really one of nothing but reaction against the power in the executive that Lincoln had amassed, a reaction that submerged the presidential office so much that the best candidates hardly ever sought it? Was there nothing in the three decades or so after Lincoln that set precedents, or laid the groundwork, for the vigorous innovation of the first Roosevelt? Might the assumption that Reconstruction was so corrupt and inexcusable that it tainted an entire period have discouraged scholars from devoting the time and energy to reconsidering the assumption? Might the fact that the Gilded Age came immediately before the twentieth century, and therefore by definition came before the “modern presidency,” have led generations of scholars so immersed in notions of a modern presidency to dismiss the presidents who came immediately before, simply assuming that they had been amply studied and dismissed, and thus did not warrant further attention?

Certainly the presidency of Lincoln’s successor, Andrew Johnson, was a disaster. His ponderous approach may have served him well in the rough-hewn politics of mid-century Tennessee, but he lacked the finesse or the understandings to deal successfully with the far more sophisticated world he found in Washington. He sought to bludgeon Congress into submission, and as a result instead received a drubbing himself.

It is doubtful, moreover, that America ever has had another president more in the grip of virulent racism. Johnson fought against civil rights

laws, turned his back on violence in the South, undercut Reconstruction to such an extent that the region, tragically, could not develop a true two-party system (a situation that continues to plague the country almost a century and a half later), and ultimately welcomed Confederate leaders (whom he initially considered to be traitors and wanted to hang) back into power in the defeated states. Although he survived the Senate trial, his heavy-handed policies brought him impeachment, which ended whatever influence he had retained to that time in his presidency.

The perceptive historian, Brooks Simpson, said of Johnson that of the four Reconstruction presidents (Lincoln, Johnson, Grant, and Hayes), he was the only one who “lacked any sincere commitment to helping black Americans.”<sup>13</sup> Simpson was correct. Ironically, though, of all the presidents between Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt, a number of historians and political scientists have viewed Johnson more favorably than they view his nineteenth-century successors. This was especially true in the early twentieth century when pro-Confederate bias dominated writing on American history. He “stood up to the Radical Congress,” and he “did his best to eliminate Reconstruction policies,” summed up the tone of their comments.

The policies of Reconstruction, of course, were the policies that Confederate-tainted generations of American historians, followed by political scientists, too frequently viewed as “corrupt,” and as unconscionable efforts by a victorious North to suppress the valiant South. That Johnson’s racism counted for nothing to them demonstrates clearly how little regard much of the academy’s mainstream for so long had for civil rights in general, and for the rights of American citizens of African descent in particular.

Some of the most flagrant demonstration of this complete dismissal of America’s black citizens can be found in the works of historian Avery Craven. In 1939 he set forth his Revisionist views of the Civil War in *The Repressible Conflict*. His position, supported by numerous followers such as J. G. Randall, was that abolitionist extremists so whipped up fury in the South, that “reasonable men” of all opinions simply failed to work out their differences. Slavery, he insisted, was hardly a factor. Over the next decade, literary critic Bernard DeVoto and historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., began dismantling the Revisionist argument. “There was in the Randall-Craven view,” Schlesinger wrote, “no legitimate moral power in the slavery argument, no profound conflict in values, for which men ought to kill and die. Rather, a ‘blundering generation,’ had transformed

a ‘repressible conflict’ into a ‘needless war.’”<sup>14</sup> Lest it seem that this must exaggerate the views of the Revisionists, consider this statement of Craven’s—a statement that can only be described as mind-boggling: he wrote: it is perfectly clear that “slavery played a rather minor part in the life of the South *and of the Negro*” [emphasis supplied].<sup>15</sup>

Even as keen an observer of American history as the late Clinton Rossiter—a noted conservative scholar—viewed Johnson as nearing greatness, because he stood firm against a Congress that Rossiter viewed as out of control.<sup>16</sup> Another typical example, also from the 1960s, comes from a journalist and publishing executive turned political historian, David Whitney. In his volume of presidential biographies from Washington to Nixon, *The American Presidents*, he treated Johnson kindly, but condemned his successor, Grant, for “unfortunately” enforcing the Reconstruction Acts “stringently.” Whitney classed these acts as bad and obnoxious, and since southerners, he said, “had no legal power to repeal them,” they formed, in retaliation, “The Ku Klux Klan, a secret terror society that undertook to restore white rule by killings, burnings, and floggings.” Reconstruction, he wrote, “proved a failure and left a bitter legacy to future generations.”<sup>17</sup>

The unmistakable implication here is that white terrorists in the South were justified, and that the fault was Grant’s, for having enforced unreasonable laws that impeded the restoration of white rule. There is not a hint of recognition that “the restoration of white rule,” itself was morally wrong. Nor was there recognition that much of the fault may have lain with Johnson, who tacitly encouraged violence, weakened Reconstruction so much that Grant’s ability to control the situation was irreparably impaired, assisted the former Confederates in their efforts to prevent civil participation of black citizens, and ensured that the area of the Confederacy would develop largely as a one-party region, by thwarting any chance that the South might have had to develop a Republican Party to compete for power in the region with Democrats. More recent—and more thoughtful—opinion recognizes that Johnson was the president more influential than any other in shaping the way Reconstruction turned out, and that he did his greatest damage early in his term of office.<sup>18</sup>

*Maligned Presidents* will examine the records and reputations of presidents who followed Johnson and who served during the “Gilded Age” to determine how accurate their reputations are—that is, to determine the extent to which the actual record does or does not support their

reputations. The book will seek to determine to what extent, if any, Theodore Roosevelt's predecessors may have paved the way for his substantial re-shaping of the presidency. This is a group, from Grant to the end of the century, that has been derided as consisting of interchangeable nonentities who permitted Congress to trample them under its collective feet. "Usually portrayed as colorless and opinionless men of portly bearing and drab countenance, they were more often subject to quips than to analysis. Novelist Thomas Wolfe undoubtedly represented the attitudes of many of his countrymen when he referred to them as 'the lost Americans: their gravely vacant and bewhiskered faces mixed, melted, swam together.'"<sup>19</sup> That such opinion came to be held so widely among scholars suggests that the influence of groupthink or the conventional wisdom requires more than research skills to overcome. A hard look at the period reveals that in many respects, the existence of corruption notwithstanding, it belies the stereotypes, and was a time of considerable political vitality.

### **A brief look at general assessments of the "Gilded Age" executive (and suggestions for closer scrutiny)**

It bears repeating that scholars and the public in general have long assumed the period between Lincoln and Roosevelt to have been a presidential "Dark Age;" one dominated by a Congress that was reacting—successfully—against the expansion of presidential power in the Civil War. I advance it as a possibility that the enormous popularity of the "modern presidency" theories of the late Richard Neustadt may have contributed to a warped view of the period, and may have encouraged many who mention the late nineteenth century (without specializing in the period) to assume that presidents then were weak. This speculation is that Neustadt may have contributed to the jaundiced view of the period, not that he caused it. The view existed before Neustadt wrote.<sup>20</sup>

Neustadt asserted that a president's strongest power was the power to persuade, and his work at least by implication was critical of presidents who made use of the office's institutional powers. In the hands of most of his interpreters this becomes a highly questionable corollary to Neustadt's main theme: presidents who resort to the executive's institutional powers, such as the veto, display weakness. Neustadt's actual work, it may be

added, is somewhat more nuanced than this suggesting that presidents may indeed have to resort to command and direct action, but that to do so exacts a price.

It may seem reasonable to conclude that Andrew Johnson's use of the veto reflected weakness—he cast more vetoes than any of his predecessors but had more than half, 15 of his 29, overridden; that is even worse than it sounds, because 8 of the 29 were pocket vetoes, and could not be overridden. Thus of Johnson's vetoes that Congress could override, it did so more than 70% of the time. How, though, could it reflect weakness for Grant to cast 93 vetoes, more than all his predecessors combined, when he prevailed on all but four? How could that reflect congressional dominance? The first president to have broken precedent regarding the veto, and to have used it relatively frequently and as a policy measure, was Andrew Jackson. No one interprets him as a weak president. Is that because he was not in office during the Gilded Age, or because too many interpreters simply know little of, and are too ready to dismiss, the office before the “modern presidency” that allegedly began with Franklin Roosevelt?

The argument here is that the true picture is considerably more complex than the one normally presented. Approaching the period from a broader point of view would bring more thorough—and one would hope more realistic—assessments of the presidents then in office.

Regardless of whether Neustadt actually did influence interpretations of the Gilded Age presidency, there is one thread of influence that is clear and unmistakable: many people who are so critical of the presidency in the late nineteenth century have been affected directly or indirectly, by misinterpretations of the works of one or both of two prominent nineteenth century scholars, Lord Bryce and Woodrow Wilson.

In 1885, the future president complained that Congress overwhelmed the executive.<sup>21</sup> This opinion, though, was Wilson's criticism of the constitutional structure of American government as he interpreted it. He was not concluding that there had been a post-Civil War weakening of the presidency.

Wilson was favorably impressed by the manner in which he believed Britain's cabinet system of government concentrated power in the prime minister. He was influenced not only by British theory, but also, as John Morton Blum perceptively noted, by “American reformers and publicists who for over a decade had been developing the ideas *Congressional Government* elaborated. Like his creditors, Wilson dealt only with

political mechanisms, ignoring the social and economic influences on political behavior and congressional activity....Minimizing the power of the American executive, Wilson failed to take into account the large achievements of strong presidents such as Jackson and Lincoln.”<sup>22</sup> It bears repeating that Wilson was not writing about the decline of the American executive. Rather, he was setting forth his ideas that the trouble as he saw it began with the founding; that the founders themselves had created an imbalance toward legislative power.

The prevailing view, though, often misrepresents Wilson’s work, and asserts that he saw presidential weakness as a post-Civil War phenomenon. Roger Davidson expressed that view well in *Understanding the Presidency*. “After Lincoln’s death in 1865,” he wrote, “there ensued an era of presidential eclipse that lasted for more than a generation: ‘Congressional government,’ political scientist Woodrow Wilson called it in 1885—long before he himself served in the White House.”<sup>23</sup>

Sidney Milkis and Michael Nelson agree regarding the presidency’s decline, expressing the conventional wisdom but without turning to Wilson for support. Their *American Presidency* is one of the best general works on the presidency. Its relevant chapter is titled: “The Reaction Against Presidential Power: Andrew Johnson to William McKinley.”<sup>24</sup> To be sure, their treatment of individual presidents, at least for the most part, is more nuanced than are often found in similar works.

In another standard work on the presidency, Joseph Pike and Jon Maltese play a variation on a similar theme. They do not cite Wilson, but instead center on Bryce to misrepresent. They share the general disdain for presidents of the Gilded Age, but they do not allege a diminution of the office following the Civil War. Instead, they go so far as to cast aspersions upon most of the executive for the entire century. They made exceptions for such figures as Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln but otherwise argued that during the nineteenth century, “the office languished, so much so that Lord Bryce, the British chronicler of American government, felt compelled to explain in 1890 that because of the institution’s weakness, ‘great men do not become president.’ Government during this period centered on Congress and political parties.”<sup>25</sup>

Here, as is so often the case, the generalities of those who attempt to paint with a broad brush are misleading, and suggest either a lack of detailed knowledge, or simple inattention to details. Bryce, to be sure, did speak of presidential quality as often reflecting far less than the ideal, but the title of his chapter was “Why Great Men are Not Chosen President,”

which is somewhat ambiguous. This chapter title does not really say that great men *never* become president, but that great men often fail to do so.

In fact, in the course of the chapter in question, Bryce made his own formulation more precise, by saying that he would return to the question from which he started: “Great men have not often been chosen president.” He, who certainly painted with his own quite broad brush, divided presidents from the beginning until the end of the nineteenth century into three categories. The first went from Washington through J. Q. Adams. The second, “from Jackson till the outbreak of the Civil War.” The third, he saw as a “new series,” beginning with Lincoln in 1861. “He and General Grant, his successor, who cover sixteen years between them,” Bryce wrote [here, he seems to have forgotten Andrew Johnson], “belong to the history of the world. The other less distinguished presidents of this period contrast favourably,” he said, “with the Polks and Pierces of the days before the war,” although he did concede that “they are not, like the early presidents, the first men of the country.”<sup>26</sup>

Thus, despite common assertions to the contrary, Bryce’s magisterial work did not portray the presidency as declining after the Civil War. In fact, he wrote explicitly that even those postwar presidents who were “less distinguished” than Lincoln or Grant contrasted *favorably* with those in the prewar period. Moreover, although he did see Grant’s presidency as flawed, he placed him among the four American presidents whom he argued could “claim to belong to a front rank” among world leaders: Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Grant. As Joan Waugh put it, “In Bryce’s estimation Grant deserved accolades because his presidency, with all its flaws, completed Lincoln’s vision of a reunited country.” In quoting Bryce’s quartet of presidents from the beginning to 1900 who “belong to a front rank,” she pointed out that Bryce was departing “dramatically from most of the historical assessments of his generation, of the next three generations and indeed even of those who are presently revising Grant’s presidential reputation.”<sup>27</sup>

Most authorities now, concentrating upon strong executives, consider Jackson and Polk to have been outstanding. Recently, Forbes—arguing along the same lines as a number of Monroe scholars—has made an excellent case that Monroe also should be added as a “hidden-hand president”<sup>28</sup> (although he does not use Greenstein’s felicitous term). So one may find praise for presidents such as Jefferson, Monroe, Jackson, Polk, or Lincoln. Rarely, however, does a presidential generalist offer a favorable assessment of any of the eight men who held the presidency

between Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt, except possibly (and oddly) Andrew Johnson. This book argues that Johnson was the *only* failure among the Gilded Age group. The conventional wisdom has it that presidents beginning with Grant and continuing through McKinley—that is, late nineteenth-century presidents—were especially colorless. Examples from current and recent works are numerous.

Although as indicated above Milkis and Nelson's *The American Presidency* may be one of the best of the general works (and, to be sure, it is, with good writing and an appreciation of history), it does have some questionable parts. Their chapter on presidents from the close of the Civil War to the end of the century sets forth the general theme in its title: "The Reaction Against Presidential Power: Andrew Johnson to William McKinley." The title of their subsection on Grant is: "Ulysses S. Grant and the Abdication of Executive Power." Another subsection bears the title, "Congressional Government and the Prelude to a More Active Presidency." They suggest that the prestige of the presidency began an abrupt decline following the Civil War (which certainly is true with regard to the administration of Andrew Johnson), but that the decline continued only until sometime "during the twelve years that passed between the beginning of the Hayes administration in 1877 and the end of Cleveland's first term in 1889." During Benjamin Harrison's term, 1889–1893, they say, "Congress and the party organizations reigned supreme."<sup>29</sup>

A strange anomaly jars the reader in their section on Grant—at least it should jar attentive readers, who may be in short supply considering that there has been no revision to the anomaly since it first appeared in the 4th edition. It continued into the 5th edition, and still exists in the 6th, the current one at the time of this writing. Milkis and Nelson say that, "if the American people, made uneasy by Johnson's subordination to Congress [!], thought they were electing a forceful leader in Grant, they were sorely mistaken." Grant's "shortcomings as a civilian leader were demonstrated almost immediately."<sup>30</sup> His notion of the executive "accorded well with that of the Republican leaders in the Senate, who embraced the old Whig principle of legislative supremacy. In Grant, unlike Lincoln or Johnson [so much for Johnson's 'subordination to Congress'], congressional Republicans believed they had a president they could manage. As a result, the Senate was never more powerful than during Grant's tenure."<sup>31</sup> Oddly, the authors cite the unprecedented legislative activity, "1,012 laws and resolutions," in the 42nd Congress

(1871–1873) as somehow indicating executive weakness.<sup>32</sup> (Has anyone ever argued that the enormous legislative activity during the presidencies of Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Lyndon B. Johnson indicates that any of these were weak presidents?)

Nevertheless, on the same page they admit that “Grant did not abdicate presidential responsibilities entirely in the face of this legislative onslaught. Indeed,” they write, “he restored to effectiveness the most important power of the nineteenth-century executive: the veto. Johnson had wielded this weapon aggressively, but most of his vetoes were overturned. Grant vetoed ninety-three bills—more than all of his predecessors combined—and only four were overturned.” They cite Frank Scaturro<sup>33</sup> approvingly (Scaturro is arguably Grant’s most vigorous and uncompromising defender), as arguing that Grant’s rejection of the “1874 Inflation Bill” made him “the president most responsible for putting the country on the gold standard.”<sup>34</sup> After another two lengthy paragraphs largely praising Grant, Milkis and Nelson say, “clearly, Grant was a stronger president than most scholars have recognized.”<sup>35</sup>

Astonishingly, though, the section returns immediately to the skeptical, if not scornful, tone of its beginning, and that tone continues until its end. “Grant exposed his administration to patronage abuses and outright speculation.” Although he was “personally honest,” his conduct tended to be “unfortunate.”<sup>36</sup> Grant “resigned himself to cooperating with the Stalwarts,” and “retired from the presidency in 1877, leaving the office he had occupied for eight years at a low ebb.”<sup>37</sup>

The Stalwarts, it should be noted, constituted the “conservative” wing of Grant’s Republican Party, the wing that remained dedicated to the “spoils system,” as opposed to the “Half Breeds” (supporters of James Blaine, derided as not fully Republican; the term suggests today’s “RINO,” Republican in name only) who advocated a merit-based civil service. All segments of the party by this time had come to be aligned with business interests, so all were equally “conservative” in economic matters. Earlier, during Grant’s race for re-election, his antagonists within the party called themselves “Liberal Republicans.” They also were reformers who opposed corruption—which, they believed, included the spoils system. In general, the “reform” Republicans were those who had distanced themselves from their party’s radical heritage that led it to fight against slavery. They opposed Reconstruction, argued that it bred corruption, and generally took the position that the job had been done and that thus there was no need to work for civil rights for former slaves

and others of African descent. They saw national attempts to enforce civil rights as “oppressing the South’s Better People.” However misleading their choice of labels, “liberal,” and “reform,” worked for them, and helped to encourage subsequent generations to view them as the “Good Guys,” even though their sympathies tended to be with the “better people” of the South, the white gentry, and certainly not with the poor and black.

So what do Milkis and Nelson conclude was the situation? Was Grant a political naïf who “left his office at a low ebb,” or was he “clearly a stronger president than most scholars have recognized?” In this usage, “stronger” seems undoubtedly to signify “better.”

The answer they give varies from one part of their section on Grant to another. As indicated, the same confusing treatment of Grant in their *American Presidency* exists in the fourth edition of 2003, the fifth of 2008, and continues in the most recent, the sixth edition of 2011. On the other hand, their third edition of 1999 may shed some light upon the puzzle. There, they treat Grant consistently, and negatively—in fact, their discussion of Grant is the same as that in the subsequent editions as in their earlier ones, except that it lacks the exculpatory paragraphs that make it so puzzling. It seems as though they took note of more recent scholarship beginning with their fourth edition, but simply inserted a section reflecting that new and more thoughtful information into their treatment of Grant—just thrusting it into the midst of what they had written earlier, without going to the trouble of revising the entire section accordingly, in order to add consistency and continuity throughout.

It is rare to find general treatments of the presidency that do not group late nineteenth-century presidents together under a heading such as “the diminished presidency,” “the legislative presidency,” “the weak presidency era,” “congressional supremacy,” “the eclipsed presidency,” “the presidency at its lowest ebb,” or something similar. There is no doubt that the period saw Congress seeking to reassert power lost to the executive during the war, but the assumption goes far beyond that to assert, or at least to imply clearly, that presidents were victims (usually passive victims) of a triumphant legislature. All the presidents of that period pushed back against Congress and sought vigorously to protect executive powers seems largely to have been forgotten, even though the executive efforts were often—perhaps even usually—successful. It was far more a time of energetic struggles between presidents and Congress than it was a period of congressional subjugation of lackluster chief executives.

Elsewhere I have been highly critical of presidential rankings, however interesting or popular they may be.<sup>38</sup> Most authorities, though, appear to take them seriously.

Jeffrey Cohen and David Nice, for example, in *The Presidency*, speak of presidential rankings and remark that Grant often appears near the bottom. They do concede implicitly that rankings have shortcomings, but they nevertheless seem willing to take them seriously, because “most presidential ranking are quite stable over time.”<sup>39</sup>

Obviously, they consider stability to indicate that the rankings are accurate. They do not consider that rankings may be self-reinforcing; that broadcasting survey findings may “taint the results” and affect the manner in which those participating in future rankings respond. Nor do they seem to recognize that the larger the pool of respondents the *less* likely those in the pool are to have specialized knowledge of presidents, and thus the more likely they are simply to follow the crowd in their evaluations.

Cohen and Nice do say that “a few presidents have been reassessed, often as more research has been done on their presidencies and new information made available,” and they note that some recent ranking have moved Grant up the scale, although “he stays quite low in the Riding-McIver one.”<sup>40</sup> In discussing relations between presidents and the news media, they categorize the period from 1865 to 1900 as the “weak presidency era.”<sup>41</sup>

Prominent presidential scholar Richard Pious writes in *The Presidency* that “with the election of General Ulysses S. Grant, a period of congressional supremacy was begun that would last the remainder of the nineteenth century. ... Weak and ineffectual presidents presided over cabinets composed of party hack politicians. ... their powers were limited and their conception of the office narrow.”<sup>42</sup> And so it goes.

## Assessments of individual “Gilded Age” executives

In moving to assess individual presidents, it is well to keep in mind a comment by historian Brooks Simpson. He argues that models of presidential leadership tend to be unhelpful when applied to presidents of the nineteenth century, that they are based on “selective syntheses of prevailing scholarship and the need to derive principles from case studies.” It would be more helpful, he says, to have “historically-grounded analysis.”<sup>43</sup>

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