# "Pageantry of Woe": The Funeral of Ulysses S. Grant

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ARTICLE



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## The Funeral of Ulysses S. Grant

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On August 8, 1885, Americans awoke to the solemn sound of tolling bells. Most needed no reminder that this was the day of the funeral of Union general and twice-elected president Ulysses S. Grant. Befitting his already larger-than-life legacy, 1.5 million people gathered in New York City to view Grant's funeral procession and the burial ceremonies. The spectacle, replete with religious, patriotic, and nationalistic imagery and rhetoric, was but the biggest of the thousands of memorial ceremonies held in the United States on that sad day.

In large and small cities, in bustling towns and dusty hamlets, citizens had prepared and planned commemorations that complemented New York's. Whether lavish or simple, these commemorations were much the same and usually included a procession lasting several hours that ended in a church or other public building. Against a backdrop that included a large picture of Grant, a floral decoration, a black-draped pulpit, a minister, a veteran, and an elected official would offer eulogies. Prayers, music, and poems completed the memorial services. The thousands of eulogies and obituaries for Grant across the country stressed his Christian moral character, his role in preserving the Union, and his magnanimity at Appomattox. The praise for the last was especially loud as eulogists likened the sentiment for sectional reconciliation engendered by Grant's death to a final, happy ending to the tragic national drama begun by the Civil War. "There is perhaps no parallel in the history of state funerals," an observer stated, "where so many orations were delivered as at yesterday's obsequies." One minister captured a powerful and popular theme of Grant's life: "By a single act General Grant put himself above the wisest of American **[End Page 151]** statesmen. That act was the terms he offered to Lee for the surrender of his Army. In a few, clear, simple lines [he] solved at once the problem of peace, and the possible unity and fraternity of the American people." A newspaper editorial reflected the prevailing sentiment across the country when it proclaimed that Grant's life did not need to be remembered in sculpture, pictures, prose or poetry, because "the Union [is] His Monument."[1]

The death and funeral of Ulysses S. Grant became a vehicle for a religiously tinged emotional and political reconciliation of North and South and as such is a critical event in the history of the political culture of the United States. "I am sorry General Grant is dead," proclaimed ex-Confederate general and pallbearer Simon Bolivar Buckner, "but his death has yet been the greatest blessing the country has ever received, now, reunion is perfect."[2] The reaction to Ulysses S. Grant's death also reveals a generation's connection between the memory of an event, in this case the Civil War; a commemoration, in this case Grant's funeral (beginning with the deathwatch); and the articulation of a new, or renewed, basis for American nationalism. Implicit in the statements issued north and south by former Civil War generals and prominent politicians, spoken by ministers of every denomination, and splashed across the headlines of major newspapers was the important assumption that Grant's deathwatch and funeral forged reconciliation between the sections that in turn ensured the emergence of a powerful and united American nation.[3]

Ulysses S. Grant occupied a special place in the hearts and minds of American citizens living in 1885. Beginning in 1862, and continuing until his death, Grant was the focus of constant attention and scrutiny. After his controversial terms as president, Ulysses and his wife, Julia, embarked on a lengthy, much-publicized tour around the world, which ended with his triumphal return to America in 1879. Grant's failed bid for a third term as president did **[End Page 152]** not diminish his standing with Republicans in the election of 1880. He actively worked for the Garfield-Arthur ticket and in the process demonstrated that he was still...

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