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Butcher? Racist? An Examination of William S. Mcfeely's Grant: A Biography

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

BUTCHER? RACIST? AN EXAMINATION OF WILLIAM S. McFEELY'S GRANT: A BIOGRAPHY Brooks D. Simpson When William S. McFeely's Grant: A Biography appeared in 1981, it seemed to provide an all-encompassing examination of the life of that remarkable and controversial individual. Most previous studies of Grant had concentrated on either his military or political career; none could be termed a complete biography, making McFeely's book a landmark. Grant was awarded the Pulitzer and Parkman prizes, evidence of its popularity and acceptance among both the general public and professional historians, and won the plaudits of many reviewers. Marcus Cunliffe celebrated McFeely's "scholarly exactness" and called the result "biography at its best"; William L. Barney labelled it "the most satisfying complete portrait," offering "a perceptive

interpretation of that enigmatic personality." Michael Perman agreed, finding the account "generally sympathetic and always insightful." James Sefton commended McFeely for displaying "a sensitivity to the personal and intimate." "The picture that emerges in this admirable book is a moving and convincing portrait of the whole Grant," concluded McFeely's former adviser, C. Vann Woodward. "It is the biography for which we have been waiting." Most reviewers thought that McFeely had succeeded in one of his main goals—introducing his readers to "a man they would recognize if they met him in a crowd." "All the present study has tried to do," McFeely explained in his epilogue, "is to take him seriously as a man."¹ The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Milton M. Klein, John Y. Simon, Jean V. Berlin, and Patricia J. Anthony in the preparation of this paper. ¹Cunliffe rev. in *New York Times Book Review*, Mar. 22, 1981, 13; Barney rev. in *New York History* 63 (July 1982): 363-65; Perman rev. in *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 80 (Autumn 1982): 471-72; Sefton rev. in *Journal of Southern History* 48 (Feb. 1982): 117-18; Woodward rev. in *New York Review of Books*, Mar. 19, 1981, 3-4, 6; William S. McFeely, *Grant: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1981), 522. *Civil War History*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 1, « 1987 by The Kent State University Press 64

CIVIL WAR HISTORY Woodward was particularly interested in McFeely's treatment of Grant's attitudes toward race. The Yale historian asserted that "Grant had shown little interest during the war in emancipation as a late developing war aim and little but hostility toward the more radical war aim of the few for black franchise and racial equality." Instead, he argued that Grant "supported the conservative Johnson policy of reconstruction by urging that blacks be entrusted to the 'thinking people of the South' and that black troops not be used there. He also approved of critics of the Freedmen's Bureau and ignored mistreatment of the freedmen." Woodward concluded that Grant "bears a heavy share of the blame for the abandonment of reconstruction."² Several other reviewers seized upon McFeely's examination of Grant's feelings about the horrors of war; their comments recalled the image of Grant as a mindless butcher. Guy Davenport described how Grant "blundered up the ranks battle after bloody battle," some of which were, in Davenport's estimation, "the worst planned and the most cruelly executed in military history." Andrew Klaven deplored Grant's "uncomplicated strategy of deadly slaughter"; Esmond Wright charged that the general "won by merciless sacrifice of men." While the reviewer in *The Economist* wondered "how far [Grant's] conscience was troubled" by bloodshed, Cunliffe suggested that perhaps "Grant's limited sensibility was a great asset" in waging war. Justin Kaplan, echoing Woodward's comment on the timely nature of the study, remarked, "This version of Grant may not have been able to pass muster before the Vietnam era, but it seems just right, credible and corrective, for our present time and condition."³ McFeely's reviewers, then, seemed to agree that a major reason for Grant's success was the author's ability to probe Grant's personality. They took especial note of his treatment of Grant's attitudes toward blacks and war. And, in keeping with Woodward's statement that McFeely "has mined the archives scrupulously," few questioned the ev² *New York Review of Books*, Mar...

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