



The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, Volume 30: October 1, 1880-December 31, 1882

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In the final weeks of the 1880 campaign, Ulysses S. Grant left Galena and headed east to stump for the Republican ticket. At rallies in New England, upstate New York, Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York City, sometimes several times a day, the reticent Grant warmed to his role. Sounding a familiar postwar theme, he repeatedly condemned voter harassment in the South, asserting the right of “our fellow-citizens of African descent,... to go to the polls, even though they are in the minority, and put in their ballot without being burned out of their homes, and without being threatened or intimidated.” James A. Garfield won a narrow victory over Major General Winfield S. Hancock and welcomed Grant's advice on matters ranging from cabinet choices to foreign policy.

Rootless since their White House days, unsatisfied with backwater Galena, the Grants now decided to settle in New York City and took rooms at the Fifth Avenue Hotel. In January, 1881, Grant accepted the presidency of the 1883 World's Fair Commission, charged with bringing an exposition to New York City. Initial enthusiasm soon gave way to rancor, as factions split over where to place the fair. Grant favored Central Park, but public sentiment intervened, and funding evaporated. By March, Grant resigned. A friend told a reporter, “Grant and I had a long talk over the matter across the way in his son's office, and we both arrived at the conclusion that the people of New-York don't want a World's Fair.”

Grant's business interests reflected the international stage he now occupied. Competing plans for an isthmian canal through Panama, Mexico, and Nicaragua jockeyed for support, and Grant had his favorite. “The only feasible route for a canal across from the Atlantic to the Pacific is by the Nicaragua route. I have been all over the routes myself, besides having examined all the reports made regarding each of them carefully, and that is my firm conviction.” Grant published an article championing Nicaragua even as momentum swung behind Panama. But Grant's attention was drawn more to railroads and to Mexico. When his friend Matías Romero promoted a new line through Oaxaca, Grant jumped on board. A speech to American capitalists in November, 1880, led a few months later to the incorporation of the Mexican Southern Railroad, with Grant as president. By April, 1881, he was in Mexico City, where he told lawmakers: “I predict, with the building of these roads, a development of the country will take place such as has never been witnessed in any country before. . . . There is nothing, in my opinion, to stand in the way of Mexican progress and grandeur, and wealth, but the people themselves.”

In June, Grant returned from Mexico with a new charter in hand. But his mind was on Garfield and Secretary of State James G. Blaine, two men who had thwarted him at the Republican convention one year earlier. Grant supported his Stalwart ally, Roscoe Conkling, in a power struggle with Garfield and Blaine. From New Orleans to New York City, Grant spoke candidly. “If you want to know what I think of the manner in which Mr. Conkling has been treated by the President and his colleagues in the Senate, I will tell you without any hesitation. I think it is most outrageous.” The feud ended after Garfield was shot on July 2. When he died in September, Grant wept with the nation.

Fitz John Porter had sought restoration to the army since his dismissal after the Second Battle of Bull Run. Grant had previously rebuffed Porter but now reversed course. “I believe I have heretofore done you an injustice, both in thought & speech.” Taking up a case that divided former commanders now in Congress, Grant forcefully argued for Porter's vindication.

Grant and wife Julia bought a home just off Fifth Avenue in New York City. In the summer, he commuted from his seaside cottage at Long Branch, New Jersey, to his office on Wall Street, where he greeted a steady stream of admirers and influence-seekers. A silent partner in the brokerage firm his son Ulysses, Jr., formed with Ferdinand Ward, Grant left finances in Ward's hands. Surveys for the Mexican Southern proceeded. Banquets and parties filled many evenings. The Grants settled into Manhattan society.

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