

Ulysses S. Grant's fight against voter suppression

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The Brennan Center for Justice at New York University stated earlier this month that “14 states will have new voting restrictions in place for the first time in a presidential election.” Enacted by Republican legislatures, “the new laws range from strict photo ID requirements to early voting cutbacks to registration restrictions.” (The states are Alabama, Arizona, Indiana, Kansas, Mississippi, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Ohio, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin.) As for what the Brennan Center calls the “myth of voter fraud,” their ongoing examination found that such fraud is “very rare.”

One of the central stories in the presidency of Ulysses S. Grant involved his fight against voter suppression. This son of Methodism, whose faith story has been overlooked, made what he called “moral courage” the marching orders of his life as Civil War general and as president. Although he was raised in an antislavery family, it took encounters with thousands of slaves—who were attempting to get inside Union lines as Grant led his army deeper and deeper into the South—to transform him into a passionate foe of slavery.

Grant won the popular vote for president in the 1868 election, but he lost a majority of white voters. His victory relied on the votes of 400,000 African-Americans. A Republican, Grant fought a courageous battle against voter suppression waged by Democrats tied at the hip with the Ku Klux Klan. While the violent tactics of the Klan in the 1870s and the maneuvers of state legislatures today are different in kind, the goal is the same: denying the vote to African-American citizens. When Grant saw he could trust neither state legislatures nor local courts in the south, he determined to wield the power of the federal government to ensure the right to vote.

Grant was up against a determined foe. Organized in 1866 as a mysterious organization with a Greek name, secret rituals, and members dressed in white sheets, the Klan quickly struck terror across the South. They beat, whipped, maimed, kidnapped, and hanged thousands of black citizens. Their main aim was voter suppression: to block the votes of African Americans who were enabled to vote

by the Fifteenth Amendment, ratified in 1870. The Klan knew that black voters would vote overwhelmingly Republican in local and state elections.

By 1871 Grant mounted a comprehensive campaign against the Klan. Having placed his confidence in the ballot box, and sensitive to criticism of military overreach, Grant made the decision to act even as he saw Congress retreating from Reconstruction. Some Republicans—once strongly antislavery and supportive of the Reconstruction constitutional amendments—joined with Democrats in either minimizing the stories of Klan violence or arguing that the solution should be left to southern states.

Of all the problems Grant confronted—domestic and foreign—none aroused his passion more than the increasing attacks on black people. In March 1872, he wrote to Congress: “The power to correct these evils, is beyond the control of the State authorities.” Wishing to underscore the centrality of the issue of racial oppression, he told members of Congress, “There is no other subject, on which I would recommend legislation during the present session.”

Fully aware of the firestorm erupting over voting rights, Grant did not step back. “I will not hesitate to exhaust the powers thus vested in the Executive . . . for the purpose of securing to all citizens of the United States the peaceful enjoyment of the rights guaranteed to them by the Constitution and laws.”

It’s an irony of American history that Republican legislatures today are trying to suppress the votes of African-American and Hispanic people. The leadership of a Republican president, Ulysses S. Grant, offers a powerful historical reminder of his moral courage to defend the right of all Americans to vote.

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