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# Butler's Private Detective

BY DANIEL J. DEMERS

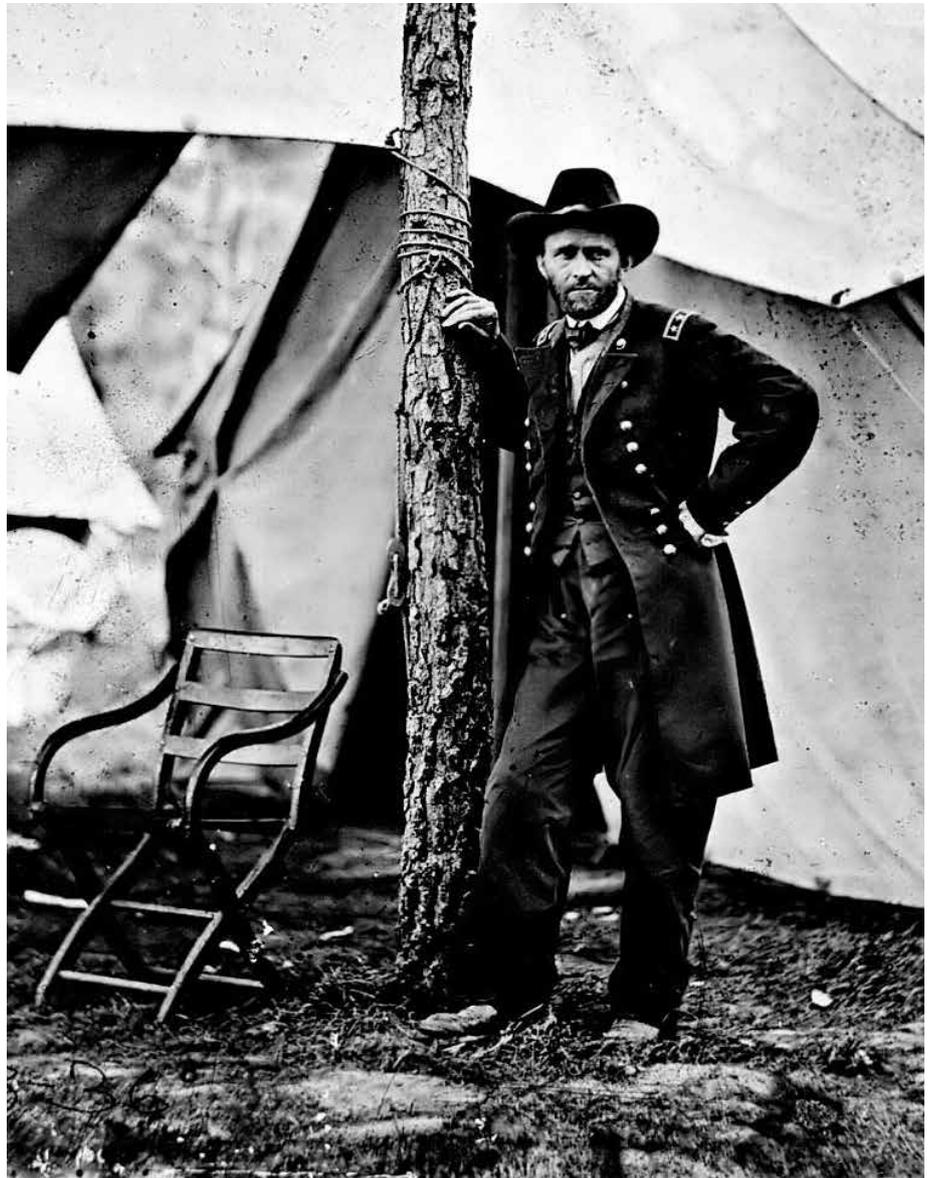
In July of 1867, as the nation headed towards the 1868 election, a “curious story” was reported in the nation’s newspapers. *The Philadelphia Evening Telegraph* broke the story, which related that “a well-known [but unnamed] Massachusetts politician” had hired a “private detective” to shadow General Ulysses S. Grant. The intent was to “ferret out something to the disadvantage of that distinguished commander.” A week later, the *New York Herald* revealed the unnamed Massachusetts politician was Congressman Benjamin Butler. Grant confronted the unnamed detective who had been “watching him wherever he” went and “was prowling about” wherever he happened to be. The detective denied following the president, claiming it was all a coincidence.

There was bad blood between Grant and Butler.

Benjamin Butler had been appointed a “political” general at the beginning of the Civil War—due to his ability to raise and fund a militia in Massachusetts. Ultimately, he was appointed military governor of New Orleans. There he expressed extreme anti-Semitic views towards New Orleans’s Jewish population. His rule was draconian, and his corrupt war profiteering as military governor became widely known. Butler’s brother, Andrew, was, in fact, the conduit for corrupt financial war dealings to the benefit of the Butler family. Ultimately President Lincoln was forced to recall him from the New Orleans post.

Reappointed to another position, Butler mismanaged an assault in North Carolina and was recalled by General Ulysses Grant. Even so, Butler was popular in the North and was considered a possible opponent against Lincoln in 1864. After the 1864 election, President Lincoln, at Grant’s request, recalled Butler from yet another command. It essentially ended Butler’s military career.

Butler then ran and was elected in 1866 to the House of Representatives. There he became an avid post-Civil War Radical Republican. As a congressman, he managed the impeachment of President Andrew Johnson in 1868.



General Ulysses S. Grant

The impeachment of Johnson revolved around his refusal to abide by the Tenure of Office Act, which became law over his veto in 1867. The law prohibited the president from firing a cabinet secretary who had been confirmed by the U. S. Senate without first getting consent from the senate. The law was designed to protect Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, who was an avid Radical Republican. Johnson disregarded the law and fired Stanton asserting

executive privilege expecting it to be challenged in court. It was not, and the impeachment was on. The issue was whether or not a President should be removed from office when Congress disagreed with him over policy, style, and administration of the office.

The major dispute between the Radicals and General Grant was the future of Confederate leaders and military officers and planned reconstruction policies of President Lincoln.

When Robert E. Lee surrendered to Grant at the Appomattox Court House, the terms of the agreement provided that all Confederate officers and soldiers were paroled and set free (with their horses or mules for farming) with the implied promise not to take up arms against the U. S. again. Prior to their release, each soldier was also given food before his trek home. Lincoln and Grant reckoned that these generous terms would induce other significant Confederate armies (well in excess of 100,000 armed soldiers) operating throughout the south to also surrender, and that is exactly what happened.

The Appomattox surrender occurred on April 9, 1865. Six days later, on April 15, 1865, Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. Twenty days later, on May 5, 1865, the Confederate President, Jefferson Davis, and his cabinet dissolved the Confederate government.

Lincoln's plan for reconstruction was based on forgiveness, which he outlined in his second inaugural address: "with malice towards none, with charity for all...let us strive...to bind up the nation's wounds...to do all which may achieve a just and lasting peace among ourselves." He also offered readmittance to the Union to all the Southern states once ten percent of the "white" voters of each state swore an oath of allegiance to the United States; revised their state constitutions by eliminating anti-slave provisions; asserting black civil rights, and; establish new state governments—thus regaining their rightful positions in the Union He also granted a pardon to all to southerners excepting high-ranking Confederate army officers and government officials. Lincoln also promised to protect the property rights of southern plantation owners. He worried that if the war didn't end, it would lose public support and the nation would never be reunited.

The radical republicans, on the other hand, wanted the South punished for the war, including the arrest of former Confederate officers and government officials on charges of treason, which implied executions. They also wanted to transform southern society by disbanding the planter aristocracy and, in its place, develop new industries. Additionally, they wanted to confiscate and redistribute all plantation lands by doling them out to the former slaves and poor whites and granting the slaves civil liberties, including the right to vote. To these ends, they proposed and successfully passed legislation that required that 50% of the "white" voters must swear an oath of allegiance to the U. S., but Lincoln was able to pocket veto the law. In 1865 the Radical Republicans also enacted



General Benjamin Butler

legislation to distribute food, establish schools, distribute some confiscated lands to former slaves and poor whites.

After the war, President Johnson, a Democrat, also wanted to arrest and try General Lee and other top Confederates but was stymied by Grant. Grant, then the most popular man in America, threatened to resign as the army chief if any attempts were made to arrest Lee and abrogate the Appomattox surrender agreement. With that exception, Johnson mostly agreed with and pushed Lincoln's plan of reconstruction. The unsuccessful impeachment of Andrew Johnson did lead to his political demise. General Grant received the Republican Party presidential nomination and was elected in 1868.

Thus, the showdown between Grant and Butler. As Grant's popularity led him to the presidency in 1868, Butler and the Radical Republicans fought his election bid, including the use of a private detective because Grant supported Lincoln's lenient reconstruction plan.

During his lifetime, Butler (1818-1893) was a well-known American lawyer, Civil War gen-

eral and Congressman, and in the 1880s would be elected Governor of Massachusetts. He was cross-eyed and popularly referred to as "frog eyes." He had to close one eye in order to read.

Regardless, the Radical Republicans did successfully push through the adoption of three amendments to the Constitution (XIII, XIV and XV), guaranteeing civil rights, citizenship and voting rights to former slaves. In the end, it would be President Grant who was able to temper the escalating tensions within the Republican Party and steer the nation through the Civil War's aftermath. A major achievement was to put down the Ku Klux Klan.

Despite the radical republicans' efforts, reconstruction of the south slowly didn't take. Anti-Black civil rights violations, killings and the adoption of "Jim Crow Laws" doomed their efforts. In the 1920s, the Klu Klux Klan re-emerged as a volatile force against Black Americans rights. It would take eighty years for the enactment of new civil rights legislation to steer the nation, once again, towards a more perfect union. **PI**