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General Grant, the \$50 Bill and the Jewish Question

By J.J. Goldberg

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Republican Representative Patrick McHenry of North Carolina has stirred up a bit of a storm lately with his proposal that Ulysses S. Grant's face be removed from the \$50 bill and replaced with Ronald Reagan's.

Leave aside the obvious implications of a Southern Republican maneuvering to demote the president best remembered for defeating the Confederacy. Overlook that fact that the new face on the \$50 would be the president who restored the pride and honor of the Confederate flag. Stipulate that it's unheard of for a president's face to appear on currency less than half a century after he left office—indeed, less than a decade after his death.

The more charged question is who was the better president. Many of us tend to think of Grant, if at all, as a drunk and a failure whose one moment of glory was the Civil War. If you've dug a little deeper, you may be aware of him as the president who haplessly looked on while America entered the Gilded Age and fell into the clutches of greedy capitalists, railroad trusts and robber barons. (Come to think of it, you would expect today's Republicans to celebrate him for that if nothing else.)

Jews have a special complaint. As alert readers recall, Grant was responsible for perhaps the most blatantly antisemitic federal government action in the history of the Republic. On December 17, 1862, at the height of the war, he issued the infamous General Order No. 11, instructing that "The Jews, as a class violating every regulation of trade established by the Treasury Department," be expelled within 24 hours from the Department of Tennessee (a military zone including Tennessee and Kentucky). Jews throughout the country were thunderstruck. At least one Jewish officer under Grant's command resigned in protest.

It took Representative McHenry to reopen the public debate on Grant, which has been simmering in the Academy for decades. It turns out that Grant has more defenders than detractors these days.

Even the Jewish case against him — perhaps especially the Jewish case — is beginning to look a bit thin.

The eminent and staunchly progressive Princeton history Sean Wilentz laid out the basic argument for Grant as a great and underappreciated president in an Op-Ed essay in the New York Times this week. Another interesting piece on Grant's merits is this blog post by Matt Yglesias of Think Progress. The reader responses are as interesting as Yglesias's post itself.

What's still largely unknown is Grant's deep connections to the Jewish community of his day. Far from being an antisemite in the White House, he was probably the most actively friendly president the American Jewish community had had up to that time.

Here are the facts:

First, Grant was the first president to nominate a Jew to his Cabinet. His first choice for Treasury secretary after he was elected in 1868 was Wall Street baron Joseph Seligman, an old friend going back to the days when Grant was a young lieutenant and Seligman was a small-town merchant. Seligman, who was one of the most prominent leaders of the New York Jewish community by 1868, turned the job down, partly because he was afraid it would arouse antisemitism. (He was probably right in those days.) The two remained close and Seligman served several times as a close adviser to Grant, the first Jew ever to have that kind of White House access.

Second, it was during Grant's presidency in 1870 that Romania gained partial independence from the Ottoman Empire. The celebrations included a wave of anti-Jewish rioting. Grant responded by appointing as the first American consul general to Romania a New York attorney named Benjamin Franklin Peixotto, the immediate past national president of B'nai B'rith. It's said that the rioting stopped within a day of Peixotto's arrival in Bucharest.

Third, Grant was the first president ever to attend a synagogue service, participating in the dedication in 1874 of Adas Israel Congregation in Washington.

As for General Order No. 11, it was rescinded within three weeks, after a group of Jewish businessmen from Paducah, Kentucky, met with President Lincoln in the White House. Grant's order was aimed at stopping illegal smugglers who were violating the Union blockade of the South, particularly those spiriting Southern cotton crops to Northern markets. Grant claimed he hadn't carefully read the order, which was drawn up by a subordinate. He said he thought it was referring to Jewish traders, who were indeed prominent in the smuggling. It sounds like a lame excuse until you look at the rest of his record.

If we want to honor Reagan appropriately on the currency, we might consider putting his face on a new \$2.6 trillion IOU note. That's the national debt he bequeathed us when he left office, up from \$900 billion when he started, the biggest peacetime debt legacy of any president.