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Militaristic Nationalism and Pseudo-Religion: A Material Culture Analysis of a 1911 Ulysses S. Grant Tobacco Card

Gracjan Kraszewski

Material culture, the study of man-made objects, allows scholars to construct a more complete and thorough understanding of the past.¹ However, documents only go so far. They are often biased, their human authors intentionally exaggerating points while simultaneously omitting crucial evidence. The rawness of objects helps historians remedy such problems. While objects, like documents, are human products built within cultural constructs and loaded with meaning, material goods stand apart. They can be intrinsically analyzed, producing historical cohesion and nuance. It must be noted that objects do not always challenge documents; at times they reinforce the written record, showing, ubiquitously, how deeply entrenched some historical claims are.

This essay focuses on a Ulysses S. Grant 1911 *Royal Bengals Little Cigars* tobacco card.² The card, tiny enough to forgetfully lose in a coat pocket, brims with deeper meaning

1 Henry Glassie, *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), 2.

2 Ulysses S. Grant Tobacco Card, *Royal Bengals Little Cigars, "Heroes of History" Series, 1911*. Card on file at the Ulysses S. Grant Presidential Library, Ulysses S. Grant Association, Mississippi State University Libraries, Starkville, MS. Henceforth, the card, textual and material, will not be footnoted.

about Grant's era and the object's time of production. Dual temporal analysis is a singular strength of material culture. A scholar can learn about an object's time of production as well as the object's historical person/theme. Grant's card is a "lived reburial;" restoration of reputation, according to Michael Kammen, is the prime reason behind the reburial of a person.³ Grant's tobacco card, conspicuous and mass produced, easy to buy and hold onto, is a lived reburial for two reasons. Primarily, Grant is portrayed only favorably; any signs of war weariness or the effects of alcohol are absent. Grant looks good, powerful and vital. The second reason is that by the time of the card's production in 1911, actual Civil War memories had disappeared. Tobacco cards, and other paraphernalia, replaced real memory within public imagination. The tobacco card presents a resplendent Grant; since card purchasers didn't actually experience the Civil War, or have any recollection of the real man, his reputation carries on without blemish. His lived reburial is a whitewashed one, forsaking realism in favor of lionization, presenting and passing along a shored up version of the truth.

The card presents Grant as a conquering military hero, the victor in a nationalistic war that brings peace and unity to America. Bernard L. Herman has shown how souvenirs serve as a conversation piece, a touchstone for first encounters or simply something to discuss.⁴ So it was with

3 Michael Kammen, *Digging up the Dead: A History of Notable American Reburials* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 7.

4 Bernard L. Herman, *Town House: Architecture and Material Life in the Early American City, 1780-1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 259.

the Grant card. The accessibility of the tobacco card meant that ordinary Americans had constant contact with Grant's military hero legend; emphasizing American militarism and a culture of nationalistic imperialism. The Grant card created, to paraphrase Benedict Anderson, an "imagined community" of Americans willingly bound by the portrait's fictitious claims of unity. The card was meant to call Americans to a glorious—if not fully veritable—recollection of the past and inspiring citizens of the then present to take up Grant's mantle of noble conquest and national achievement; which they did, largely, as evidenced by interventions in Hawaii, the Caribbean, the Pacific, and in Central America, i.e. construction of the Panama Canal.⁵

The wide accessibility of the card proved fertile ground for the budding of a "secular faith;" a pseudo-religious attachment to Grant in the vein of a hero's cult.⁶ In this way it was not enough to view the card as representative of America's glorious past, to affirm Grant's central role in that story, or to feel kinship with the multitude of Americans who saw and possessed the object. The card's saint like replica of Grant compelled Americans to view him, and their history, on a higher plane; a dynamic narrative demanding action, a missionary impulse to take Grant's brand of American exceptionalism to the world. As Walter McDougall has argued, Americans did just that: post-Civil War unity

⁵ See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983).

⁶ Kammen, *Digging up the Dead*, 31. See also Michael Burleigh, *Earth Powers: The Clash of Religion and Politics in Europe, from the French Revolution to the Great War* (New York: Harper, 2006); Michael Burleigh, *Sacred Causes: The Clash of Religion and Politics from the Great War to the War on Terror* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008).

spread Winthrop's "city on a hill" globally via imperialism, the (failed) League of Nations, United Nations, Cold War containment, and the global meliorism inherent in the Korean and Vietnamese Wars.⁷

Militaristic nationalism is the primary theme of the Grant tobacco card. On the front, he is pictured in full uniform, the caption at the top reading "GEN U.S. Grant." The card's back text, a miniature biography, goes into great detail illuminating Grant's military accomplishments. Little is mentioned of his presidency and even less, nothing in fact, about the Reconstruction Era. The sole line dedicated to his time in Washington reads "Was president of the United States from 1869 to 1877." Militaristic nationalism is a product of both the post-Civil War era as well as America's turn of the century imperialism. Strength, martial vigor, and unity were paramount to the American image in both the 1860s and the 1910s.⁸ A slew of historians have written on the Civil War's direct impact upon creating rampant American nationalism and recent scholarship has confirmed this belief. Susan-Mary Grant, writing in 2000, claimed that only after the Civil War did America become an ideologically / identifiably unified country.⁹ Louis Menand, writing in 2002, concurred with an argument made by historian Carl Degler in the 1970s that the Civil War substituted the nation for previous sectionalism,

7 See Walter McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1998).

8 One can justifiably argue that these themes have been present, conspicuously so, throughout the duration of American history; common to all Americans since the Revolution.

9 Susan-Mary Grant, *North Over South: Northern Nationalism and American Identity in the Antebellum Era* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2000), 172.

eliminating the possibility of a return to factionalism.¹⁰ And Stephen Mihm, in his 2009 book *A Nation of Counterfeiters*, extends nationalism to economics, arguing that the Civil War enabled “country and currency” to move forward united as one.¹¹

The above scholarship’s reasoning leads to this conclusion: righteous war brings peace which then brings the nation. Grant, therefore, in his role as the Federal Commander who defeated the Confederacy, is the embodiment of this belief. The card portrays his accomplishment as singular; the man who waged the good war to bring about peace that formed the American nation. But while peace and nation are heralded, Grant’s military uniform reminds the beholder that both come at a price, one settled on a battlefield.

Post-Civil War militaristic nationalism works in tandem with American imperialism because the same themes of physical virility, and unified American righteousness, run through both. It is no wonder that turn of the century America, having annexed Hawaii, won vast international territories in the Spanish-American War, and begun to probe “Open Door” economics in China, would produce a tobacco card of Grant highlighting his masculine, conqueror-like qualities; connective themes between the 1860s and 1910s and, as Gail Bederman has shown, particular points of

10 Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 67. See also Stanley Coben and Lorman Ratner, eds. *The Development of American Culture* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1970), 106-70.

11 Stephen Mihm, *Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 308.

emphasis in an hyper-masculine American culture.¹² After giving a detailed description of the card, from basic size and texture facets to textual and pictorial analysis, larger implications will be discussed; why the card is so militarily nationalistic and how this fit perfectly with the masculine culture of 1911. The card also creates an imagined American kinship, or secular faith, around a simultaneously blanched and camouflaged version of the past, and raises further questions about how the American culture of militaristic nationalism drove American exceptionalism policies into the twentieth century and beyond. Seemingly cold and lifeless objects have a vitality of their own, even those objects as diminutive as a tobacco card.

Tobacco cards are a nineteenth century product, a time when Americans, according to material culture scholars Ken Ames and David Jaffee, partook of an “artificial culture, obsessed with appearances and material goods.”¹³ The cards debuted in the 1870s and 1880s featuring, in addition to military men, athletes, movie stars and other cultural luminaries.¹⁴ They were easy to attain because in an affordable—a few dollars—cigar box, a set could include upwards of fifty cards.¹⁵ The London Cigarette Company

explains that the cards featured people that would appeal to

12 See Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

13 Ken Ames, *Death in the Dining Room and other Tales of Victorian Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 236, 23. See also David Jaffee, *A New Nation of Goods: The Material Culture of Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), ix.

14 “Allen and Ginter’s Champions”, sourced from: http://web.archive.org/web/20060405192229/http://www.wclynx.com/burntofferings/adsallen_and_ginter.html.

15 “Card History-London Cigarette Card Company,” sourced from: <http://www.londoncigcard.co.uk/cardhistory.php>.

male interests in order to drive a male dominated market.¹⁶ Although ephemeral construction made up the majority of cards, some included a silk print pressed onto the cardboard backing.¹⁷ Regardless of material, century old cards can still be found in good condition today thanks to owner diligence. In 2007, the famous T-206 1909 Honus Wagner card fetched \$2.35 million only to be turned around later in the year for a \$2.8 million profit.¹⁸ The Grant tobacco card's militaristic nationalism was widely disseminated and accepted due to its affordability, accessibility, and popular interest.

The card is 3.5 inches tall and 2.25 inches wide. It is razor thin, pliable, and coarse in texture; one can run a finger along the smooth glossy sides, and then flip the card over to feel cardboard like roughness. The workmanship is very thorough, magnificent when one considers an entire detailed Grant portrait has been sized down onto a 3.5-2.25 inch canvass.

On the front, a slim white border lines the outside of the card. Grant is in his blue military uniform—gold buttons and a white collar, centered against an orange, sunset-like background. Grant's face is serious, but he does not appear to be tired. His grey beard is perfectly trimmed, his grey hair combed, and confident assurance radiates from his face. Three objects, placed over Grant's chest, complete the picture. A red

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ "Tobacco Card Collection," 1861. *UNCW Archives and Special Collections Online Database*. By Lana Donaldson Taylor and Deborah A. Edwards, sourced from: <http://randall3.uncw.edu/ascod/?p=collections/findingaid&id=437&q=>.

¹⁸ "Card History-London Cigarette Company," sourced from: <http://www.londoncigcard.co.uk/cardhistory.php>.

and gold handled sword, its point not visible, lies on top of a white scroll inscribed with "Let us have peace U.S. Grant" in fine, black script; the scroll is on top of a red berry laden green laurel. At the top of the card, in capital letters, "GEN. U.S. GRANT" is written.

The back of the card is manila in color, a coffee hue. The back contains Grant's biography and company information. The script is black. At the top, it reads "GENERAL GRANT". Below that, Grant's biographical information is provided in one paragraph. It reads:

Ulysses Simpson (originally Hiram Ulysses) Grant was born a poor boy at Point Pleasant, Ohio, April 27, 1822, and was graduated at West Point in 1843, afterward serving through the Mexican War. He left the army in 1854. When living at Galena, Ill., he was made a colonel, June 17, 1861, and brigadier general on August 7, and after capturing Fort Donelson, February 16, 1862, was made major general of volunteers. Won the battles of Shiloh, Iuka, Fort Gibson, etc., and after winning at Vicksburg was made major general in the regular army. Gained the battle of Chattanooga, and was then made lieutenant general and given command of all the American armies in March, 1864. Received the surrender of Lee, then was given the title of general. Was president of the United States from 1869 to 1877. He died at Mount McGregor, near Saratoga, N.Y. July 23, 1885.

Beneath the biographical information there is a big, cursive letter "M". Underneath the "M" is, in small script, "FACTORY NO. 2 DIST. N.J."; below that it says:

HEROES of HISTORY
SERIES
FREE WITH
**ROYAL BENGALS
LITTLE CIGARS**
Their Quality, Convenience, Size
and Price Satisfy Cigar Smokers.

The London Cigarette Company's website claims that "this [the turn of the century] was before the days of cinema, radio or TV... newspapers carried few illustrations. ... For most smokers ... the cards ... were their window on the world, serving to educate."¹⁹ This paper agrees with this statement. The Grant tobacco card was an educational tool; a widely accessible propaganda piece easily proliferated amongst common society. Having provided textual and pictorial description, it is time to investigate how the Grant card embodies a masculine militaristic nationalism; and how this theme, in the vein of a lived reburial and hero's cult, facilitated a whitewashed secular faith that glorified a martial past in order to drive imperialistic efforts and set the tone for twentieth century American exceptionalism and global interventionism.

Militaristic nationalism is omnipresent. Most obviously, Grant is dressed in his military uniform. The man was also president of the United States; a more important title, it can be argued. Yet Grant as the hero of the Civil War makes up his most enduring legacy. Grant historiography confirms the

¹⁹ "Card History-London Cigarette Company", sourced from: <http://www.londoncigcard.co.uk/cardhistory.php>.

militaristic preoccupation of scholars; a point highlighted by Robin Neillands in the introduction of his 2004 book *Grant: The Man Who Won the Civil War*.²⁰ Richard Goldhurst, writing thirty years before Neillands, called Grant the “General who won the war”.²¹ Goldhurst claimed that Grant’s war record—more than any other factor—made him “the most famous man in America” until his death.²² Bruce Catton said Grant was “among the few who had seen the path clearly during the war...a great general”.²³ Neillands argues that Grant and the Civil war are inseparable, it “made him” and while he “failed in many things” during his life he was a “very great general.”²⁴

The biography on the back of the card confirms, if not exaggerates, infatuation with Grant’s militarism. As previously mentioned in the paper, only one line is dedicated to his time in office, just before the line announcing his death. Grant’s militarism is so exalted that more space—three lines total—is given to his Mexican war service, his leaving the army, and his time in Galena, Illinois than the one total given to his presidency and Reconstruction; the latter of which gets no mention at all.

Grant personage, his well-manicured appearance and confident look, shows the make-up of militaristic nationalism.

Even more telling are the objects placed over his body: the

20 Robin Neillands, *Grant: The Man Who Won the Civil War* (New York: Cold Spring Press, 2004), 15.

21 Richard Goldhurst, *Many are the Hearts: The agony and triumph of Ulysses S. Grant* (New York: Reader’s Digest Press, 1975), xix.

22 Ibid.

23 Bruce Catton, *Grant Takes Command* (New York: Book of the Month Club, 1994), 492.

24 Neillands, 17.

laurel, the sword, and the scroll. The laurel paints Grant as the conquering hero, the individual who, more than anyone else is responsible for Union victory. The sword demonstrates the means by which Grant has accomplished victory. It is important that the sword is *on top* of the other objects because the symbolism serves to say that first Grant had to pick up the sword, use it well and subdue his enemies before recognition, the laurel, was his.

The scroll, in between the sword and laurel, embodies the essence of militaristic nationalism and secular faith. It is crucial that the words read “let us have peace”, and nothing more. For someone to say “let us have peace” implies the individualistic agency to actually bring this about. The laurel, the scroll, and the sword work in tandem to promote Grant’s militaristic achievements. Grant deserves the laurel because he is the conquering hero, the man who defeated the South. He defeated them with the sword. Victory would not come easy, if at all, had Grant not taken up his duty to preserve the nation. When success was attained, Grant desired peace. Grant has the power to do this, the card implies; the power to say “let us have peace” and have it because he already demonstrated the battlefield ability to win the war.

These three objects, set over pristine portrait of Grant, sum up the whole heart of American militaristic nationalism. It is about masculine assertiveness, about picking up your sword and wining the fight. He who does this deserves the recognition, the laurel elevating individual achievement, the

pedestal set high. But what makes militaristic nationalism so American, the card implies, is that peace is the fundamental goal. At the fight's conclusion, no matter how bitter, a true American hero like Grant will desire only peace.

The sword and laurel's relationship to the scroll well illustrates the transition of militarism into nationalism.

The first two objects are strictly militaristic—a weapon and a wreath denoting success; but what makes a nation is reconciliation and that, according to historian David Blight, is the Reconstruction Era's lasting legacy, albeit tainted by white supremacy.²⁵ Grant is credited, in the card's representation, with engendering a productive, pro-nation reconciliation. Just as he, individually, won the war and deserves the credit, he merits even more respect for only saying “let us have peace” at war's conclusion. That is the essence of the card; Grant representing all the “right” American values of masculine martiality and individualistic military genius while tempering these with a commitment to peace and unity. Americans who beheld the card see the conspicuous militarism of Grant yet are called to remember that “true Americans” only use force for higher means. The military root of American nationalism is always for peace, a hard won peace that unified Americans to spread their Grant-like values to the world.

The secular faith is the means by which Americans could spread their militaristic and nationalistic values to the world. The theme of secular faith has a long history in

²⁵ See David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002).

America. Hans Kohn argued that nationalism is always a secular faith, substituting national holidays for religious feast days, reciting anthems instead of prayers, and giving borderline adulation to national heroes usually reserved for God.²⁶ Long before Grant, John Winthrop was claiming America as a place apart, a “city on a hill,” providentially fashioned to be an example to all nations. American attachment to exceptionalist rhetoric is congenital. It is not sufficient to include Grant in the pantheon of American legends based exclusively on military merit. He has to possess something extra, a commitment to higher goals.

“Let us have peace,” the words written on the scroll, is precisely that something extra. Grant’s unquestioned commitment to peace, to unification, rounds him out as the true American hero. With this, he can now rightly be honored as an American model, someone to emulate in skill and character. A secular faith cannot operate if the followers believe a leader’s righteousness is not genuine. Grant’s commitment to peace, highlighted on the tobacco card, made the connection between his military greatness and his moral fiber. The men and women of 1911, only a little more than a decade removed from the vast land gains of the Spanish American War, the annexation of Hawaii, and American involvement in China, could look at Grant’s card and take comfort; American militaristic nationalism, now taking imperial forms, was good at heart. Sure, it was intense, at times maybe brutish. Behind all the masculine martiality was

²⁶ See Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism* (New York: MacMillan Pub. Co., 1961).

a commitment to benevolence.

Grant's physical appearance also contributes to the seamless flow of militarism into nationalism within a secular faith justifying imperialism. Simply put, Grant looks good. There is no war weariness in his face; nor are there any moles, wrinkles, or signs of aging. Even though his grey hair betrays his age, he looks young at heart; still vital, capable of giving the people of 1911 an encore of his Civil War performance.

The militaristic nationalism of the Grant card reached many people due to the wide purchase of cigars and cigarettes. It is important to mention how people might have compared the card to other objects. Saints' cards, or Catholic prayer cards, and sports figure cards lend themselves well to comparison. Sports figure cards share much in common with the message of the Grant tobacco card. They portray their subject as a hero; only in a favorable light and as a means of inspiration. The masculine predominance of baseball tobacco cards resonates with the Grant card. In both cases, people who have the cards are supposed to see masculine virility unrefined, physical champions of the battlefield or the playing field, true American heroes who embody courage, skill, and success.

Good examples of baseball cards similar to Grant's tobacco card would be the previously mentioned Honus Wagner 1909 T 206. The Wagner card bears many similarities to the Grant tobacco card. Both men are in full dress, the uniforms spotlessly clean; anomalous for soldiers and

sportsmen. Grant and Wagner each wear a confident look on their face, almost triumphant, and their hair is well combed and free of blemish. While Wagner's front jersey reads "Pittsburgh," it is clear he is an ambassador for all of baseball, a sporting gentleman, who, like the Grant card implies, has the baseball talent—a corollary to Grant's military skill—to win on the field without relinquishing his composure and purpose.

Baseball tobacco cards were unfaithful to the rigors of baseball. Like the Grant card that obscures the strains of military life, sports cards exude a message of confidence, of purpose and triumph, which overrides realism. The many people who opened cigar boxes to find Grant, Wagner, and other assorted—Babe Ruth or Ty Cobb—cards received the same message: these men were heroes, physical men who won their fame on fields, possessed of gentlemanly ideals worthy of emulation. However, unlike Wagner, Grant's connection to the more serious business of war meant that the martial greatness he represented impacted, even subtly, American conceptions of a glorious past and exceptionalist future.

Comparing Catholic prayer cards to the Grant tobacco card lends understanding to how Grant became, in some ways, a symbol of American nationalistic secular faith. Prayer cards and tobacco cards are not the same thing. This point cannot be overstated. Devout Catholics use devotional cards in petitionary fashion, praying for a specific saint's

intercession with God; St. Christopher for safe travels, St. Blaise for maladies of the throat, Sts. Lucy and Harvey for eye troubles. No one literally prayed for Grant's intercession; however, it displays how Grant was perceived in this secular religion.

The similarity, then, between the Grant card and prayer cards is not spiritual but visual. Catholics who have a favorite saint, keeping his or her prayer card close at hand, develop a type of friendship with that person. The same effect can be said of the Grant card. People who saved the card as a souvenir, or boys who traded them like baseball cards, developed a fondness for Grant out of constant visibility; whether the Grant card was on a house mantle, used as a bookmark, or tucked into a jacket, its presence was constant, a quantity increased by the wide consumption of tobacco and easy access to the cards.

There is similarity in message between some Catholic prayer cards and the Grant card. The best example is Blessed Emperor Karl of Austria. In various portrayals, Blessed Karl, the last Hapsburg Emperor, is in full military dress similar to Grant. His uniform is replete with medals, his hair and mustache well-trimmed, and his demeanor calm and confident. Like Grant, the man who said "let us have peace," Blessed Karl is primarily remembered for his desire for a peaceful end to the Great War. The message is the same: a confident and able military man committed to peace. But were saints cards are supposed to point beholders

towards God, the Grant tobacco card directs attention to American nationalism; not a religious faith, but rather a pseudo-religious secular faith, connecting people to a proud militaristic tradition and giving cause for the continuation of that tradition into the future.

The usefulness of material culture lies within the field's unpacking vast meaning and depth from seemingly innocuous objects, here Grant's tobacco card. The card, like all objects, is not just a card. Rather, it served as a lived reburial for Grant, removing blemishes to honor him as a singular military hero within America's militaristic, nationalistic tradition. The wide accessibility of tobacco cards, and their similarity to both athletic and religious cards, ensured that Grant's militaristic nationalism was widely disseminated and helped build a foundation of American exceptionalism that honored the past while aiming to inspire the future.

As many historians have shown, Walter McDougall among the most recent that the militaristic and nationalistic values embodied in the Grant card, the overt expression of American exceptionalism, defined the United States' twentieth century outlook.²⁷ This approach to the world began with Theodore Roosevelt's turn of the century imperialistic ventures, continued via Woodrow Wilson's

27 For viewpoints both pro and con on militaristic and nationalistic American exceptionalism during the twentieth century, please see McDougall's *Promised Land, Crusader State*; William Appleton Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009); N. Gordon Levin, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics: America's Response to War and Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970); Lloyd Ambrosius, *Wilsonianism: Woodrow Wilson and His Legacy in American Foreign Relations* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002); Joseph S. Nye, *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go it Alone* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

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League of Nations charter and the founding of the United Nations, drove Cold War policy and has continued in recent, twenty-first century Middle Eastern excursions. American nationalistic and martial exceptionalism, writ small, can be read into the tiny, 3.5 by 2.25 inch, 1911 Grant tobacco card. Only material culture analysis, the willingness to go beyond documentary analysis, can find these connections. Whether a scholar is analyzing a tobacco card, cloth spinning, folk art or foodways, material culture allows the historian to go beyond documentary evidence. In this untapped and uncharted ground beyond the written record, often lies a better understanding of the past.