General Grant’s Order 11: Causes and Context

Seth Reid Clare

It is ironic that most Americans today recognize President Ulysses S. Grant from his picture on the fifty-dollar bill. Had Grant been asked how he wanted to be remembered, he almost certainly would not have chosen a cotton paper bill to bear his likeness. During Grant’s service as a general in the American Civil War, cotton proved to be a particularly troublesome issue. Indeed, his frustrations surrounding illegal cotton speculation during the Campaign of Vicksburg in 1862 ultimately caused Grant to declare what is today considered to be the most anti-Semitic military proclamation ever enacted in United States history. From the Union Headquarters at Holly Springs Mississippi, Grant wrote the following orders to all military zones under his command:

The Jews, as a class violating every regulation of trade established by the Treasury Department and also department orders, are hereby expelled from the department within twenty-four hours from the receipt of this order. Post commanders will see to it that all of this class of people be furnished passes and required to leave, and any one returning after such notification will be arrested and held in confinement until an opportunity occurs of sending them out as prisoners, unless furnished with permit from headquarters. No passes will be given to these people to visit headquarters for the purpose of making personal application of trade permits. By Order of Major-General U.S Grant. (Papers 7:50, italics added for emphasis)
The draconian nature of this decree is probably surprising to those unschooled in American Jewish history and, in fact, Order 11 stood out even in its own time as a glaring and embarrassing example of American religious intolerance (Lutz). Considering Grant’s importance as an American historical figure, it is important that the true causes of this order are assessed. Without broader context, it would be easy for contemporary history students to simply characterize Grant as an anti-Semite. An analysis of first-hand source material in the form of letters, telegraphs, and military orders reveals a more complicated picture; in light of *The Grant Papers*, it would seem that General Grant was not the complete anti-Semite that Order 11 might suggest. Instead, Order 11 represents a culmination of Grant’s failed efforts to curtail illegal cotton profiteering, mixed with common nineteenth-century anti-Semitic stereotyping and ignited by Grant’s father’s affiliation with Jewish trading partners. Under stress, when all else failed him, Grant succumbed to the temptation to aim his frustration at an easily identifiable scapegoat—the Jews—rather than accept his own shortcomings in dealing with cotton smugglers.

In early December 1862, General Grant was in an altogether harried state of mind (Lutz). It was during this time that Grant wrote to his sister Mary from Union headquarters, complaining, “For a conscience [sic] person, and I profess to be one, this is a most slavish life” (Papers 7: 44). When Grant wrote Mary, his position marked what was then the farthest point of advance in a campaign moving south down the Mississippi Valley to reach the Confederate stronghold at Vicksburg, and his melancholy attitude was well-warranted. Isolated from General Sherman’s army, which was preoccupied to the north, Grant and his men were deep into rebel territory, lacking both dependable supply trains and adequate reinforcements. Grant found himself plagued by Confederate cavalry led by Nathan Bedford Forrest and Earl Van Dorn, who perpetually harassed Grant’s troops without ever making themselves available for all-out combat (Ballard 145-49). Moreover, the Union public was becoming increasingly vocal in its discontent with Grant’s leadership on the Vicksburg campaign. While Grant may have outwardly claimed that he was indifferent to the numerous criticisms of his performance as a general, there can be no doubt that he was privately very troubled by these judgments (Ash 307). On top
of these issues, cotton speculators and smugglers pestered Grant on a day-to-day basis.

Historians debate the degree to which the South’s economic dependence on cotton (and slave labor) brought about the Civil War. Regardless, southern-grown cotton was certainly of pivotal importance to both the American and global economy in the mid-nineteenth century. One estimate suggests that cotton accounted for roughly 58 percent of all American exports in 1860, while approximately one-fifth of all Great Britain’s citizens were directly or indirectly tied to the textile industry, dependent on America’s “white gold” (Dattel 12-16). In 1858, South Carolina Senator James Henry Hammond boldly proclaimed that without American cotton, “England would topple headlong and carry the whole civilized world with her, save the South…Cotton is King” (Wilson 311-22). As Hammond’s statement shows, the southern states understood the incredible economic influence cotton had on Europe. Such profound leverage simultaneously prompted both the Union and the Confederacy to obstruct the flow of cotton abroad.

President Lincoln ordered an international blockade of southern exports at the outset of the war, while Jefferson Davis concurrently ordered an embargo of southern cotton. Both the Union and Confederacy believed that keeping cotton within the South would further their own objectives. The South thought that withholding cotton from Europe might help coerce France and England into supporting the Confederacy. The Union conversely supposed that preventing the sale of cotton to European buyers would starve the Confederacy of income and inhibit its ability to obtain war provisions. The stalled cotton trade that resulted from the combined Union blockade and Confederate embargo produced profound consequences; in less than a year, the price of cotton increased from ten cents to two dollars a bale (Dattel 12-16).

The astronomically high price of cotton brought about Order 11 because Salmon P. Chase, Secretary of the Treasury under Lincoln, enacted trade policies during the war wherein only territories loyal to the North were allowed to export raw cotton. Chase believed that free trade could be a useful tool in encouraging southern states to reaffirm their loyalty to the federal government. In territories that remained disloyal to the Union, Chase expected the Union army to seize captured
or abandoned crops and then sell them to traders to take north on their own. However, before anyone could legally ship cotton north, they first had to purchase permits to do so from the army (Lutz). This strategy was dually supposed to help finance the Union war effort and supply cotton to starved mills in New England (Simon 353).

Unfortunately, Chase placed too much faith in the scruples of his troops and the American people at large. Cotton had become so valuable during the war that speculators began to travel southward as if there were a gold rush. Grant and his officers were so relentlessly hounded by speculators requesting permission to ship cotton that Grant felt that the military’s responsibility to administer trade hindered his ability to focus on actually winning the Vicksburg campaign (Ash 365). As one writer for the Chicago Tribune wrote about Grant’s supply base in Mississippi: “If ever a community were insane, or afflicted with a disgusting moral malady, it is the crowds of speculators and vagrants which have congregated at Holly Springs to deal in cotton—they have ‘cotton’ in the brain—every one of them” (qtd. in Ash 365). Though many Americans in 1862 would probably have argued that the desire to make easy money hardly made a person “insane,” Grant shared this writer’s reproachful opinion of the cotton traders.

Those who could not legally buy cotton were still determined to make their trip south worthwhile. When speculators were unable to purchase trading permits from the Union Army, they illegally offered money, weapons, medical supplies, and gold to plantation owners who lacked any other way of turning a profit from their cotton during the embargo. Sometimes, speculators were even aided by bribed Union officers; Grant estimated that as much as a third of his army engaged in illicit smuggling activities (Lutz). Often, plantation owners used the income generated from illegally selling cotton to help finance the Confederate Army (Simon 355). The fact that cotton smuggling helped to financially sustain the Confederacy filled Grant with a particular hatred for smugglers; he could not believe that so many of his fellow Northerners were willing to betray the Union as soon as it became a worthwhile monetary investment to do so.

Writing to his sister, Grant bemoaned, “To all the other trials that I have to contend against, is added that of speculators whose patriotism is measured in dollars and cents. Country has no value with them
compared with money” (Papers 7: 44). Grant further thought that illegal cotton trading was detrimental to his cause because he believed that cotton speculators relayed tactical military information to the Confederates. This is why Grant regarded a cotton trader “within the lines of an Army as more dangerous than the shrewdest spy” (Papers 7: 403). The northern public was equally incensed by cotton profiteering, and it was the northern public that in fact accused the Jews of illegally smuggling cotton long before Grant issued Order 11.

Whether or not American Jewry disproportionately participated in illegally smuggling cotton seemed not to matter to the northern public. In “Grant’s Ignoble Act,” Stephen Lutz points to one particular investigation into illegal cotton speculation in the Mississippi Valley which turned up hundreds of perpetrators, including both civilians and soldiers, among which only four were Jewish. The investigation cited by Lutz and others like it did little to quell the Northern belief that Jews were chiefly responsible for the illegal cotton trade due to widespread stereotypes of Jews as “avaricious, exploitative, and politically subversive,” which “were common place in the American lexicon of anti-Semitism” (Bunker and Appel 311). In “‘Shoddy’ Anti-Semitism and the Civil War,” Gary L. Bunker and John Appel thoroughly explore the blatant intensification of American anti-Semitism during the Civil War era. They cite many factors to explain the dramatic increase in American intolerance of Jews, but none was more significant than the conspicuous rise in the number of Jewish immigrants settling in the United States during this time period.

Indeed, between 1845 and 1854 as many as 2,939,000 immigrants—mostly from Ireland and Eastern Europe—came to the United States, making up fourteen percent of the entire American population (Simon 355). Many of these eastern European immigrants were Jewish and when the Civil War began, about two-thirds of the approximately 150,000 Jews in America had been born across the Atlantic (Simon 355). Because so many Jews were immigrants who spoke German instead of English, they were particularly noticeable and their differences with their Christian neighbors were accentuated, especially in urban settings (Bunker and Appel 312). American Jewry’s sudden increase in numbers and visibility over such a short time contributed to an unprecedented amount of American anti-Semitic periodical literature.
During the course of the Civil War, numerous northern newspapers, including Vanity Fair, Phunny Phellow, Frank Leslie’s Budget of Fun, Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, Harper’s Weekly, and the New York Illustrated News all published obviously anti-Semitic cartoons suggesting that Jews were politically subversive to the Union (Bunker and Appel 312). “Old Moses Davis,” published in New York Illustrated News, is a quintessential example. Appearing in 1861, this political cartoon depicted a villainous looking southern Jew (most likely Judah P. Benjamin) enticing France to join the South and turn away from an old man who represented President Lincoln.

The caption, meant to be read in a thick German accent, reads, “Now, my dear poy, come over to our side—don’t go to the old man on de utter side of de vay. Ve vill let you have de cotton at your own price—sheap. Come, my poy!” The wide-spread proliferation of illustrations like this one during the Civil War may be surprising, yet anti-Semitic cartoons were relatively common and are useful for evaluating General Grant’s frame of mind during the December of 1862.
If “Old Moses Davis” and other cartoons like it can be used to make claims about the prejudicial atmosphere of mid nineteenth-century America, then there can be no doubt that there was a heightened sense that the Jews were wounding the Union, both from within and across Confederate lines. Like all educated men of his day, General Grant read newspapers and was therefore almost certainly influenced by these cartoons. It is worth noting that before the war even began, Grant had briefly considered joining the Know Nothing Party, a political organization of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants opposed to immigrants of all other races, cultures, and religions (Lutz). (Fortunately for his future presidential campaign, Grant thought better of the matter and only attended one Know Nothing Party meeting.) The broadly circulating fear and hatred of Jews no doubt influenced Grant’s personal attitudes and his response to the problem of rampant cotton smuggling.

Before issuing Order 11, Grant had first consulted General Sherman to try to come up with a preventative solution to illegal cotton speculation. Together, the two generals had suggested to Washington that gold and silver no longer be used as a currency during times of war and that federal notes be substituted instead (Papers 7: 56). This regulation, had it been enacted, would have made it significantly harder for cotton smugglers to buy directly from plantation owners. However, Lincoln refused to endorse this plan because he thought it would compromise Washington’s objective of using free trade to win back the loyalty of occupied southern states (Lutz). Grant’s subsequent anger was natural and to be expected; he was irritated not only with cotton traders, but also with his superiors in Washington who were unwilling to support what Grant thought was a reasonable solution to the problem at hand. As pressure mounted and he remained unable to prevent cotton smuggling, Grant was increasingly inclined to blame his frustrations on the Jews rather than on himself and his superiors.

To be sure, a number of the cotton speculators were Jewish, but because the Jews were the easiest to identify due to their often eastern European accents, mannerisms, and surnames, they came to symbolize all speculators and embody their very worst characteristics. In fact, the terms “Jew” and “trader” were frequently used interchangeably among Union officers (Ash 366). This stereotype manifested itself in increasingly anti-Semitic responses to cotton smuggling from Grant. In
July 1862, the general sent a telegraph to a subordinate in Kentucky ordering that he should “examine the baggage of all speculators coming South, and, when they have specie, turn them back. If medicine and other contraband articles [are found], arrest them and confiscate the contraband articles. Jews should receive special attention” (Papers 5: 270). This message shows that while Grant was beginning to target Jews specifically as an ethnic group, he was not motivated to do so purely out of religious hatred. Grant’s dislike of the Jews was at least to some extent a byproduct his perception of Jews as cotton smugglers. As Grant continued to witness the arrival of more and more speculators into his military district, he succumbed further to the notion that all cotton speculators were Jewish when really he only noticed Jews particularly because of their ready identifiably (Lutz).

In November, Grant telegraphed Major General Hurlbut instructing him to “Refuse all permits to come south for the present. The Israelites especially should be kept out” (Papers 6: 283). Within another week, Grant sent out another telegram to General J.D. Webster, commanding officer of military railroad operations, that read, “Give orders to all conductors on the road that no Jews are to be permitted to travel on the railroad southward from any point. They may go north and be encouraged in it; but they are such an intolerable nuisance, the Department must be purged of them” (Papers 6: 283). By this time, it was not uncommon for Union officers to complain that cotton speculation was mainly caused by “Jew traders,” no doubt partly because of General Grant’s prejudicial telegraphs (Lutz).

Yet despite Grant’s stereotyping, he was still unwilling to go so far as to try to forcibly expel the Jews from his military district. In a revealing turn of events, shortly before Grant issued Order 11 on December 17, he revoked a military order equally bigoted in caliber. In the first week of December 1862, Colonel John Du Bois issued General Order 2, which in hindsight bears a striking similarity to Grant’s future Order 11. Du Bois telegraphed from Holly Springs Mississippi:

All cotton speculators, Jews, and other vagrants having no honest means of support, except trading upon the miseries of their Country…who have no permission from the General Commanding to remain in this town, Will Leave in twenty four hours or they will be sent to duty in the trenches. (Papers 7: 9)
Clearly, Du Bois was attempting to deal with the same speculators that had been plaguing Grant. Instead of only discouraging their flow southward, Du Bois further obliged them to travel northward. Considering that this seemed to be what Grant ultimately wanted, it is extremely puzzling that, as Du Bois stated years later in a letter to *The Morning Chronicle*, that this order “was revoked by General Grant and I was relieved from command on account of it” (qtd. in *Papers* 7: 9). As it turned out, Grant immediately revoked Du Bois’ orders as soon as they came to his attention because they violated orders from Washington to maintain free trade in occupied territories (Simon 357). The fact that Grant revoked Order 2 less than two weeks before he himself issued Order 11 is particularly enlightening. It suggests that a single event drastically altered Grant’s view on the matter sometime between the issuance of Order 2 and Order 11, which subsequently triggered his heavy-handed actions. Though it has been suggested that Du Bois, rather than Grant, could somehow have been responsible for Order 11, this theory has been comprehensively disproved (Wallace 138-40).

Stephen Lutz postulates that the most probable cause of Grant’s abrupt change of heart was the sudden arrival of Jesse Grant, the general’s father, at headquarters in Mississippi. Lutz writes:

> On December 13, 1862, Grant received an unwelcome visitor at Holly Springs—his father, Jesse Root Grant. Their relationship was often strained. The younger Grant viewed speculators as a detriment to the Union’s war effort, and his father was a known speculator. Grant continually rebuked his father for his behavior.

General Grant’s uneasy relationship with his father began well before the Civil War. When Ulysses was seventeen, Jesse arranged for his son to attend West Point without even consulting him (Carr 12). After Grant graduated from West Point, in the period between the Mexican War and Civil War, Jesse showed very little interest in his son (Lutz). It was only after General Grant had become a nationally recognized public figure that Jesse, who was known for his association with gamblers, swindlers, speculators, and others of ill repute, took a newfound interest in his son (Lutz). Whatever the state of Jesse and Ulysses’ relationship may have been, one thing for certain was that the
elder Grant knew how to make a dollar.

Representing a Jewish textile firm from Cincinnati called Mack and Brothers, Jesse Grant had travelled to Holly Springs in order to take part in the very cotton speculating that Ulysses had condemned throughout the course of the war. Jesse had told Mack and Brothers that, in exchange for a quarter of the firm’s profits, he would use his relationship with his son to obtain especially favorable trading rights to ship precious cotton to Cincinnati (Simon 357). Grant was undoubtedly aware that his father represented a Jewish firm and it may very well have been the knowledge that his own flesh and blood was colluding with Jewish merchants that finally pushed Grant to disregard his orders from Washington and attempt to banish the Jews (Ash 367). However bigoted Order 11 may have been, it was clearly at least to some degree triggered by the General’s resentment of Jesse Grant and his Jewish partners, rather than solely out of hatred for Jews in general.

Though it is difficult to ascertain if Order 11 was meant to target the Jews as cotton traders rather than as an ethnic group, a letter that Grant wrote to Assistant Secretary of War Christopher P. Walcott on the same day as he issued Order 11 helps to clear some of this ambiguity:

I have long since believed that in spite of all the vigilance that can be infused into Post Commanders that the Specie Regulations of the Treasury Dept. have been violated, and that mostly by Jews and other unprincipled traders. So well satisfied of this have I been that I instructed the Commanding Officer at Columbus to refuse all permits to Jews to come south, and frequently have had them expelled from the Dept...If not permitted to buy cotton themselves they will act as Agents for someone else (Papers 7: 56).

Grant then goes on to reiterate his idea to use treasury notes for trade rather than gold or silver, after which he observes, “Then all traders, [as] they are a curse to the Army, might be expelled (Papers 7: 56). This letter suggests Grant’s intentions in Order 11: while Order 11 expelled “Jews as a class,” Grant reveals in his letter to Walcott that he is frustrated with “Jews and other unprincipled traders.” Grant was mistaken in his conviction that the Jews were the principal contributors to cotton smuggling, but this misconception is a crucial lens for
viewing Grant’s interior motives. If we are to believe this explanation to Walcott, then Grant must have thought that the prejudicial means of expelling the Jews justified the ends of eliminating the problem of cotton speculation. After the war, Grant remained committed to this justification during an interview with a well-known New York City Rabbi named E. B. M. Browne in 1875. When asked about Order 11, Grant remarked, “During war times…nice distinctions were disregarded. We had no time to handle things with kid gloves” (Grant 1: 399). However, if Grant had truly felt that Order 11 was justified, he would likely have attempted to defend his action in his memoirs, which completely ignore Order 11. The fact that his only other public statements on Order 11 (aside from the aforementioned interview) occurred in 1868, the year of his first presidential campaign, makes his explanation of ends justifying the means all the more suspicious (Ash 379).

Regardless of whatever Grant’s intentions in signing Order 11 may have been, Union troops wasted little time in carrying out the Order, which is unsurprising given the well-documented anti-Semitic atmosphere of Grant’s supply base (Ash 366). Jews, whether or not they had actually had any involvement in cotton speculation, were sought out and commanded to leave the region without any consideration of mitigating circumstances. Some of the Jews expelled from the region were longtime residents while still others were denied permission to use trains and had to travel by foot (Ash 366). When Lazurus Silberman, one of the Jews barred from using the railway system, attempted to telegraph Grant’s supply base for verification of this anomalous order, he was thrown in jail for the night (Ash 366). One particularly unlucky quartet of northern Jews who had earlier been detained by the Confederacy and just recently been given permission to return home, haplessly wandered into Oxford Mississippi on December 18. These four Jews had all of their possessions including their baggage, horse, and buggy appropriated from them and were sent North with orders never to return (Ash 366). While the treatment of these Jews was deplorable, it is worth noting that Order 11 was for the most part ignored by local commanders at trading posts and river towns outside the immediate vicinity of Grant’s supply base. Perhaps these commanders were not annoyed by the presence of Jews, thought that
Order 11 was only intended for those in close proximity to Grant himself, or maybe even found Order 11 unjust.

Whatever the reason for the disregard of Order 11 outside of Grant’s chief encampment may have been, it is quite possible that history could have forgotten the whole episode altogether had word of Order 11 not reached Paducah Kentucky—the one place far removed from Grant which actually saw the Order carried out in full effect. Located some fifty miles up the Ohio River from Holly Springs, Paducah did not hear word of Order 11 until late December. When the order finally reached Provost Marshall L. J. Wardell’s desk, it was carried out with a vengeance. Wardell had word sent to the thirty or so local Jewish families, commanding them to leave their homes within twenty-four hours regardless of the fact that not a single one of Paducah’s Jewish residents was known to have engaged in cotton smuggling. Only a day after Order 11 reached Paducah, the only Jews that remained in town were two sick women; the rest had taken what possessions they could manage to carry and had boarded a steamboat heading north up the Ohio River.

The events that transpired in Paducah have long puzzled historians. What made this one town carry out Order 11 with such vigor while all others did not? Stephen Ash, author of “Civil War Exodus: The Jews and Grant’s General Orders No. 11,” believes this almost bizarre turn of events was caused by the incredibly volatile social, economic, and political tensions, brewing in Paducah in the aftermath of a Union troop occupation rather than the individual bigotry or mindless obedience of Provost Marshall Wardell. Much like General Grant, the residents of Paducah chose to unleash their anxiety and frustration resulting from the war upon the Jews.

In sum, though we can never truly know the degree to which anti-Semitism motivated Grant to issue Order 11, one thing for certain is that Order 11 does not independently stand as comprehensive proof that Grant hated Jews: historians who claim that General Grant was any more anti-Semitic in character than the rest of the North in general will need far more evidence than what the general’s wife Julia referred to as “that obnoxious order” (Simon 353). Though it would be easy to attribute the root cause of Order 11 exclusively to Grant’s anti-Semitism, the case is more nuanced. Order 11 was not only the
result of Grant’s attitude towards the Jews, just as it was not solely the product of a soldier’s ‘ends will justify the means’ mentality, as Grant might have us believe. Given that Grant revoked Du Bois’ order, only to replace it with one of his own, one can surmise that Grant was probably lashing out in anger caused by Jesse Grant and his Jewish partners, rather than coherently drawing upon a preexisting anti-Semitic ideology. Frustrated and stressed, he chose to blame his problems on a distinctly visible minority rather than accept his own powerlessness to curb cotton smuggling. Order 11 was not some scheme that Grant had been waiting for the proper conditions to hatch, but a thoughtless and desperate act. However, this interpretation of Order 11 by no means excuses Grant’s actions. Whatever Grant’s true intentions or frame of mind may have been, they have no bearing on the fact that Order 11 was completely antithetical to the American ideals of justice and equality which the general supposedly fought for. Order 11 serves as a poignant reminder that society must be the most vigilant against prejudice and hatred in climates of fear and turmoil– for this is when minorities are the most vulnerable to injustice.

Works Cited


