

# Josiah Bushnell Grinnell:

## Radical Abolitionist Through and Through

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*Content Warning: This essay includes direct quotes from historical sources and transcripts which use derogatory racial epithets.*

On June 14, 1866 congressman Lovell Rousseau from Kentucky cornered Josiah Bushnell Grinnell, a representative from Iowa, in the east front house portico of the United States Capitol building and repeatedly beat Grinnell with an iron-tipped cane until the cane broke. The incident was the culmination of several months of fiery arguments between Rousseau and Grinnell, which devolved over the course of 1866 into a bitter vendetta consisting of personal attacks exchanged on the House floor.<sup>1</sup> On the surface, the caning of Grinnell by Rousseau was yet another incident illustrative of the violent tensions between leaders from different parts of the country endemic of the Civil War and early Reconstruction eras. However, the caning represents a much more complex story: J.B. Grinnell's individual role in shaping the Union during the most turbulent time in American history.

Residents of Grinnell, Iowa, named after J.B. Grinnell, consider his legacy to be the foundation of the town and namesake of Grinnell College.<sup>2</sup> The foremost historian on J.B. Grinnell, Charles E. Payne, presents Grinnell as a man with vigorous character and strong abolitionist convictions that produced significant progress in his local community, the state of Iowa, and the country during his lifetime.<sup>3</sup> Considering Grinnell's achievements over the course of his life, the legacy given to him by Payne and his fellow Grinnellians is accurate and rightly deserved. Yet, if Grinnell maintained a righteous character throughout his lifetime, as Payne argues, how did his character and abolitionist beliefs weather the profound impact of the events of the Civil War on himself and other Union leaders?

In the debate over Union politics during the Civil War, scholars agree that the progress of the war effort directly influenced Union politics, causing ideological transformations by Union politicians toward the acceptance of abolition as a war measure. Congress was far from united at the outset of the war. Northern

Democrats were strongly against abolition, and while the Republican coalition was firmly antislavery, Congress' dominant party lacked unity regarding when, how, and why abolition should occur. It is important to note that the Republican Party was still in its fledgling stage: as a combination of former Free-Soilers, Whigs, and other progressives, the party's umbrella ideology was constantly evolving before the war broke out.

Once the war broke out, Union politicians faced an unprecedented national crisis which created the necessity for leaders to abandon their personal ambitions and agendas and compromise on the Capitol floor, or in clandestine meetings in the dead of night, in order to preserve the United States. Given the extraordinary circumstances of a Congress in war, Michael Vorenberg argues that the Thirteenth Amendment was possible only after the war began, and that scholars underestimate the extent and complexity of the inter-party and intra party discourse that went into the emancipation question.<sup>4</sup> J.B. Grinnell served in Congress during a time when his Republican party was evolving, becoming more radical in policy and public discourse in response to the increasingly dire prospect of saving the Union. Despite their pre-war convictions regarding abolition, Michael Green contends that the Republicans put aside their regional, moral, and political differences and united under a wartime ideology valuing freedom, the Union, and power.<sup>5</sup>

The importance of the evolution of Union politics highlighted by these scholars suggests that J.B. Grinnell's legacy is incomplete without a close examination of his actions taken in Congress during the Civil War. Based on Grinnell's autobiography and speeches given by Grinnell in the House recorded in the Congressional Globe, his efforts in Congress during the war contradict the scholarly assumption that all Union politicians departed from their antebellum convictions and adapted to the Union cause. J.B. Grinnell's efforts in