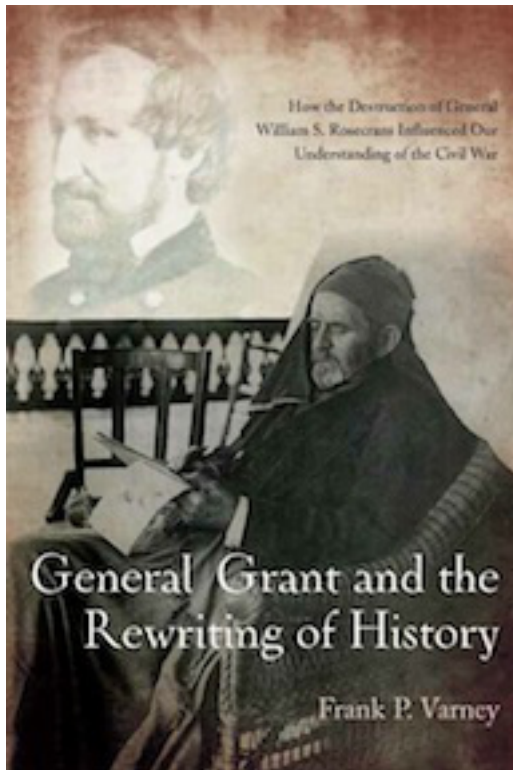


## Review: General Grant and the Rewriting of History

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One of Ulysses S. Grant's greatest strokes of genius was to title his book *The Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*. The label "memoir" gave him tremendous latitude to present his story as he remembered it and wanted it told. Unfortunately, too many people—including professional historians—have accepted Grant's *Memoirs* as history. These are often the same people who blast Shelby Foote or Jeff Shaara for presenting stories as history. However, accepting a memoir as history can be tantamount as the same thing. Even if it's a primary source, a memoir can be tricky, tricky territory because the story it tells is so subjective.

"The shame is that Grant shaped history," laments historian Frank Varney in his marvelously bold new book, *General Grant and the Rewriting of History: How the Destruction of General William S. Rosecrans Influenced Our Understanding of the Civil War*. "[I]t is his version of the story, and not the truth, which has become the accepted account." By taking Grant's word for the matter instead of checking other sources, he later says, historians "have allowed one man's personal agenda to dictate how history is written."

And Grant did, indeed, have an agenda: nothing less was at stake for him than how the meaning of the war would be remembered (a war he would largely lose over time to Lost Cause writers). In that narrative, Grant was the Man Who Saved the Union. His *Memoirs* serve as the central text in that narrative.

“As important as Grant’s *Memoirs* are,” Varney concedes, “there is much more to know and to understand—and, I would argue—errors to correct, prejudices to overcome, and distortions to be balanced.”

And with that, Varney sets off on a quest to do just that, using Grant’s treatment of Maj. Gen. William Rosecrans as a case study. (He makes several references to a follow-up volume that will focus on Grant’s mistreatment of “Fightin’ Joe” Hooker and Gouverneur K. Warren.)

Varney’s book is a litany of “the deliberate efforts of Grant to manipulate the historical record.” “He refused to hold courts of inquiry that might have cleared the names of his victims, he advanced the careers of his allies, and he cut short the careers of his enemies,” Varney argues. “It all added up, I suggest, to deliberate manipulation and distortion.” He even contends that, in one instance, “there are strong indications that he made an attempt to cover his mistake after the fact through falsifying documents.”

One of the most delightful things about Varney’s book is that he’s not afraid to call “bullshit” on Grant when Grant’s being hypocritical. For instance, “it was not unusual for Grant to be critical of other generals for not being vigorous enough in pursuit of a beaten foe,” Varney writes. Yet, of his actions after Shiloh—when Grant was severely criticized for not being vigorous enough in his pursuit of a beaten foe—Varney points out that “Grant’s official report said: ‘My force was too much fatigued from two days’ hard fighting and exposure in the open air to a drenching rain during the intervening night to pursue immediately.’” The book outlines a couple such instances. Ironically, just as Grant was persecuted by his superior, Henry Halleck, Grant later persecuted Rosecrans in much the same ways.

Varney also has a talent for asking impertinent questions. “If Grant had begun to lose faith in Rosecrans after Iuka, as he implied in his *Memoirs*, why did he entrust him with the defense of such a vital point? Since both Sherman and Ord were senior in rank, logically one of them could easily have been chosen to command the largest element of Grant’s command, at

the most likely point of contact.” Time and again, Varney asks such questions, then has the tenacity to run down the answers with evidence and logic. The historical record, at times, flies in the face of the historical memory.

Varney goes to great length to tease out that historical record and he traces the Grant/Rosecrans relationship. During their earliest days together out West, they seemed to get along just fine. But as battles add up, casualties mount, jealousies build, and fingers point, Grant begins to appear duplicitous and insincere; Rosecrans first appears naive about Grant’s darkening opinion and later seems insistent on taking the high road.

Once Varney gets into the battle of Chickamauga and events surrounding the siege of Chattanooga, though, everything up to that point in the book suddenly feels as though it’s been the warm-up. He hits his stride and meticulously explores and explodes the conventional Grant-influenced history surrounding both battles. The conclusion he reaches:

Grant presumably was appointed to command in the West and concluded that Rosecrans needed to go because the latter’s army was starving; because Rosecrans had lost the confidence of his men by deserting them on the field of battle; and, because if left to his own devices, he would have abandoned the vital city of Chattanooga. None of those things are true.

“If [Rosecrans] was competent . . . then we must ask why Grant, and others, did not give him the credit he deserves,” Varney goes on to say. “As we shall see, when we look at Rosecrans shorn of the distortions of Grant, the record indicates that, although he was certainly far from perfect, he was in fact important to the Union victory. When, then, does he get so little credit for his contributions?”

This speaks to one of Varney’s other strengths: His historiography takes what we know and traces it to its sources, then follows those sources down through the rabbit hole where, more often than not, Ulysses S. Grant sits waiting, either with his *Memoirs* or with his supporters and proxies. Rosecrans’s reputation gets rabbit punched the whole way.

At times, Varney does miss the mark with his interpretation, but this might be more a result of trying to cut to the chase rather than get sidetracked into issues that might only be useful as wider background context. For instance,

in a photo caption for Halleck, he says, “When superseded by Grant, Halleck was moved into the new position of Chief of Staff of the Army, in which position he performed competently.” That is, I would suggest, a generous interpretation considering Lincoln called Halleck “little more since that than a first-rate clerk.”

Elsewhere, when discussing the 1864 Overland Campaign in Virginia, Varney says “Grant was incurring massive losses in his attempt to get past Robert E. Lee’s army and close on Richmond.” This represents a fundamental misreading of Grant’s intent that summer. Grant wasn’t trying to get *past* Robert E. Lee’s army, he was trying to get *at* it. He moved on Richmond only as a way to draw Lee into combat. “Where Lee goes, you shall go, too,” Grant had ordered Army of the Potomac commander George Meade.

In the scope of the book, such interpretations seem small and tangential to Varney’s larger purpose, which is monumental and worthy, so mentioning them perhaps seems niggling. Because they’re secondary to his larger point, perhaps he was less focused on how he was articulating those parts of his interpretation. I’ll give Varney the benefit of the doubt just as he, in the end, gives Grant some leeway. “We must bear in mind that Grant wrote his *Memoirs* years after the events he discussed,” Varney says. “If there are lapses because Grant did not check his facts, then perhaps some of his misstatements were the result of error rather than malice.”

Grant did have a small staff of fact-checkers working with him on his manuscript—including his son, Fred, and former members of his wartime staff—but he died before he had the chance to finish his proofs of the *Memoirs*’ second volume. So, it is possible that things did slip through the cracks. That’s less likely for volume one than volume two, though, which Grant was making changes to even in the galley-proof stages (which drove his publisher nuts).

While Varney’s overall verdict of Grant isn’t especially complementary, he is fair in his treatment and he does give Grant his due. “This evidence that Grant was willing to play fast and loose with the truth does not completely invalidate Grant’s account(s),” he points out. “But it does illustrate that he was not always a completely reliable source.”

That, it seems, is Varney's overall goal—not to Grant bash. History does, after all, get written by the winners, and Grant was The Man Who Saved the Union. Varney's invaluable book helps us understand why we remember him that way.