

General Grant and the Rewriting of History: How the Destruction of General William S. Rosecrans Influenced Our Understanding of the Civil War

By Frank P. Varney

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In 1885, a former president of the United States published one of the most influential books ever written about the Civil War. An entire generation of Americans had eagerly awaited his memoirs and it has remained so popular that it has never gone out of print. Historians then and now have made extensive use of Grant's recollections, which have shaped how we understand and evaluate not only the Union army's triumphs and failures, but many of the war's key participants. The Memoirs of Ulysses Simpson Grant may be a superbly written book, Frank P. Varney persuasively argues in *General Grant and the Rewriting of History*, but is so riddled with flaws as to be unreliable.

Juxtaposing primary source documents (some of them published here for the first time) against Grant's own pen and other sources, Professor Varney sheds new light on what really happened on some of the Civil War's most important battlefields. He does so by focusing much of his work on Grant's treatment of Maj. Gen. William S. Rosecrans, a capable army commander whose reputation Grant (and others working with him) conspired to destroy. Grant's memoirs contain not only misstatements but outright inventions to manipulate the historical record. But Grant's injustices go much deeper. He submitted decidedly biased reports, falsified official documents, and even perjured himself before an army court of inquiry. There is also strong evidence that his often-discussed drinking problem affected the outcome of at least one battle.

General Grant was an outstanding soldier and, so we have long believed, a good man. History's wholesale acceptance of his version of events has distorted our assessment of Rosecrans and other officers, and even of the Civil War itself. Grant intentionally tried to control how future generations would remember the Civil War, and in large measure he succeeded. The first of two volumes on this

subject, General Grant and the Rewriting of History aptly demonstrates, however, that blindly accepting historical “truths” without vigorous challenge is a perilous path to understanding real history.

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Editorial Review

Review

"This superb book disproves the notion that there's nothing new to learn about the Civil War. Frank Varney builds a convincing case that William Rosecrans has been treated unfairly by historians and, perhaps more significantly, that Ulysses S. Grant deliberately destroyed his reputation and the reputations of other Civil War generals." (*Civil War News*)

"An invaluable addition to Civil War Studies and reference shelves . . . and a sharp caution against putting too much blind faith in any one person's testimony, memoir, or historical accounting. Highly Recommended." (*Midwest Book Review*)

"I dropped everything and plunged into this book. Every page I read presented challenges to accepted views, including my own. General Grant and the Rewriting of History represents considerable ingenuity and independence of thought." (*John Y. Simon, editor of the Grant Papers*)

About the Author

Frank Varney earned his Ph.D. at Cornell University. He regularly leads student groups to Civil War battlefields and makes frequent speaking appearances before Civil War Roundtables and historical societies. Professor Varney is currently developing a course to be taught on-site at Gettysburg, and will do the same for a course on Chickamauga. He teaches U.S. and classical history at Dickinson State University of North Dakota, where he is also the director of the Theodore Roosevelt Honors Leadership Program. This is his first book.

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