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Presidential Memoirs: An Oversold Genre?

Is Bill Clinton's 957-page memoir the longest by a former president? Do memoirs have any impact on a president's reputation?*

Presidential memoirs are often greeted with skepticism -- for several reasons. First, many have been ghostwritten, so readers naturally wonder how authentic the words are. It's an open secret that Ronald Reagan's memoir, *An American Life*, was ghosted. At the press conference unveiling the book in New York City, Reagan held the volume up and cracked, "I hear it's terrific. Maybe someday I'll read it."



There's a suspicion that even the best presidential memoir of all time, by U. S. Grant, was ghostwritten. If true, the question is: by whom? Shortly after Grant's death, Adam Badeau claimed authorship; he had been a general on Grant's staff and had written a three-volume military biography of the Union general. There is also speculation that Mark Twain played a considerable role in drafting the memoir. We know he helped edit the manuscript for publication. Surely the humorist was doing more than just having a cigar with Grant when he dropped in to see his dying friend at regular intervals. Was Twain patting himself on the back when he said Grant's memoir was the finest piece of military writing since Caesar's?^[1]

Second, presidential memoirs are met with skepticism even when they are not ghosted because their authors are overly concerned with their reputation. Prior to Bill Clinton's memoir hitting bookstores -- to record-breaking advance sales -- the best-selling presidential memoir was *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*. That book is even longer than Clinton's, and one-third of it is devoted to Watergate. Almost everybody who bought Nixon's book was hoping to gain new insights into the scandal. Nobody did. And that's the problem with Nixon's or any other president's memoir. Ex-presidents want to raise their stock with posterity; the politician in them makes them loathe to bare their soul.

Third, presidential memoirs can be disappointing because they seek to settle old scores and hash old issues. Herbert Hoover devoted the third volume of his memoir to refighting the 1932 campaign. As Hoover biographer George H. Nash points out, "The book is too argumentative. It is relentlessly critical of FDR and the New Deal -- so not the best primary source."^[2]

Nash also notes that he has seen a lot of the manuscript that did not make the final cut; earlier drafts are back in the Hoover Library in West Branch, Iowa. When Hoover was writing his memoirs during World War II, he had given up running for president any more. (He had wanted to challenge Franklin Roosevelt as late as 1940.) Hoover perceived that he was an elder-statesman-in-the-making, however, so he refrained from including his more gratuitous jabs at FDR's character in the final draft. The work was thus robbed of some of its pith, and the historical record is the poorer.

Fourth and finally, presidential memoirs are often filled with inaccuracies because the president's memory was faulty. Hoover certainly had this problem, according to Nash, in part because he wrote of events that were more than a decade old. But so did U. S. Grant, whose accounts of Civil War battles characteristically attributed too much strength to Lee's Army of Northern Virginia and too much weakness to his own Army of the Potomac. A very human trait, that.

Feeling cynical? You're not alone. Read the comments of presidential historians as reported in newspapers^[3] on the eve of the release of Bill Clinton's memoir, and you'll see a consensus: presidential memoirs are typically neither good history nor great literature. Not one has ever won the Pulitzer Prize.

Richard Shenkman: "A memoir, to be successful, must be honest. No president can afford to be truly honest. He can't explain the deals he made, the compromises he accepted, the sacrifices of his principles on the altar of personal ambition. So instead of the truth, we get the president as he would like to be remembered. This is death to a good memoir. There are no revealing anecdotes that explain who he really is or what motivated him. For a person who has spent their life concealing who they are -- and all politicians do this to an extent -- the memoir is especially unsuited to presidents." Furthermore, "Only a few presidents were wordsmiths: Jefferson, Lincoln, Wilson. In Jefferson's day, presidents simply didn't write memoirs. Lincoln was assassinated before he could possibly have written his. Wilson suffered a stroke a year before leaving office, incapacitating him."

Louis Gould: "There are not a lot of great presidential memoirs. In fact, I'd be hard-pressed to think of one that you'd want to take home and read over the weekend just for the sheer joy of it." The reason? "Most presidents don't do their own writing. They spend four or eight years having everybody write stuff for them. Their skills in that regard shrink. Many [presidential autobiographies], I suppose, are dictated, or as-told-to, or written with either an official ghost or an unofficial ghost. That's the death of individuality right there."

Robert Caro: "Most presidential memoirs are pretty canned. If they're not written by somebody else, they seem like they are."

Robert Dallek: "There was only one [great presidential memoir], and that was Ulysses Grant's. All the rest are dreary, overly partisan attempts at self-defense or self-justification. This doesn't make for great reading at all. It leaves out the flaws and weaknesses that make any human being interesting."

Douglas Brinkley: "It's almost become a tradition in America that when you leave the White House, you raise money for your presidential library and gin out a memoir as quickly as possible."

THE PRESIDENTS' VANTAGE POINT

Clearly the historians aren't keen on presidential memoirs. But one of the men they study was. Harry S. Truman lamented that few of his predecessors had written an account of their time in the White House:

I have often thought in reading the history of our country how much is lost to us because so few of our Presidents have told their own stories. It would have been helpful for us to know more of what was in their minds and what impelled them to do what they did.

Why didn't more presidents write their memoir? Why, by contrast, did Truman take on such an arduous task? He explained:

Unfortunately some of our Presidents were prevented from telling all the facts of their administrations because they died in office. Some were physically spent on leaving the White House and could not have undertaken to write even if they had wanted to. Some were embittered by the experience and did not care about living it again in telling about it. As for myself, I should like to record, before it is too late, as much of the story of my occupancy of the White House as I am able to tell.

Other presidents who have written memoirs include U. S. Grant, Herbert Hoover, Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan. Not all of them were prolix. Not all of them were totally self-serving. LBJ explained:

I have tried to avoid engaging in historical pamphleteering. I did not set out to write a propaganda piece in support of my decisions. My purpose has been to state the problems that I faced as President, to record the facts as they came to me, to list the alternatives available, and to review what I did and why I did it.

CLINTON'S MEMOIR

Does size matter? The memoir Bill Clinton wanted to write was much longer than the book you can buy. His editor, Robert Gottlieb, talked the ex-president out of making it a two-volume production -- he cut some 500 pages.^[4]

At least five of Clinton's predecessors wrote memoirs that are longer than his: Herbert Hoover needed three volumes to review his life. Harry S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and George H. W. Bush each took two-volumes to describe, analyze, and justify their presidency. Richard Nixon did it in one volume, but with a larger word count than Clinton's.

Following are early comments by historians about President Clinton's memoir, *My Life*.

Robert Caro: "From what I hear, because we have the same editor, President Clinton wrote this himself, every word, longhand. The idea of an ex-president writing a book of that length himself makes me feel that this, more perhaps than any other presidential memoir, will be worth reading. Just from that fact that he wrote it himself, it almost has to have perceptions and insights about the presidency that will help us understand that office more than we have before."

Richard Shenkman: "I cannot imagine him writing a dull book. His publisher won't let him -- they have to recoup their investment. And he isn't dull."

Robert Dallek: "For 10 million bucks, he ought to say something."

MEMOIRS AND REPUTATION

Bill Clinton is concerned about his reputation. Richard Nixon was too. Nixon used to say that 50 years would have to elapse before an historian could write about him objectively. What has the impact of memoirs been on the reputation of our chief executives?

Most historians would concur that *The Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant* are the finest in the genre. But has the quality of that book helped Grant's reputation? Apparently not. In virtually all presidential polls, he is ranked in the lower half of all presidents.

Same with Herbert Hoover, who devoted three volumes to his life. The third volume, a hash of the 1932 election that saw him lose to FDR, was written two decades after the fact. Still, observes George Nash, it lacked true historical distance and thus had virtually no impact on Hoover's poor reputation as president.

Historian Richard Norton Smith points out that presidential memoirs seem to be irrelevant to one's long-term reputation [5]. On the one hand, James Buchanan wrote a memoir justifying why his presidency was not a failure even though the nation drifted toward Civil War during his administration. He wasn't highly regarded in 1861, the year he left office, and he isn't highly regarded now. No one even remembers that he wrote a memoir. It is irrelevant. On the other hand, three presidents wrote memoirs soon after leaving office but got little bounce for their effort. Harry S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Ronald Reagan were about as popular after the publication of their memoirs as before. But with the passage of time, each of these three climbed up the presidential rankings. Again, their memoirs seem irrelevant to their rising esteem.

Many former presidents have written a memoir to help pay bills. Bill Clinton and Richard Nixon racked up legal debts while in office. U. S. Grant had made a bad investment and was in dire financial straits when he wrote his masterpiece. Harry Truman was broke when he left the White House. There was no presidential pension in those days, and he didn't make tons of money on the speaking circuit. According to Richard Norton Smith, when he signed a contract for \$600,000 to write his two-volume memoir, it was the first real money he had made in his entire life.

SELECTED MEMOIRS

Cynicism aside, memoirs are important documents because Americans should know how a president explained the most important decisions he made and how those decisions have affected our country. Memoirs are also valuable because they are among the source materials that historians use to write biographies, construct narratives of an era, compare presidents, analyze change over time, study ideas and institutions, etc.

James Buchanan

Mr. Buchanan's Administration on the Eve of the Rebellion

U. S. Grant

Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant

Herbert Hoover

The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover

Harry S. Truman

Memoirs by Harry S. Truman: 1945: Year of Decisions

Memoirs by Harry S. Truman: Years of Trial and Hope

Dwight D. Eisenhower

The White House Years: Mandate for Change, 1953-1956

The White House Years: Waging Peace, 1956-1961

Lyndon Baines Johnson

The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969

Richard Nixon

RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon

(Nixon received a \$2.5 million advance in 1974 to write his memoir. It is the longest one-volume presidential memoir. One third of the book is devoted to Watergate.)

Jimmy Carter

Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President

Ronald Reagan

An American Life

George H. W. Bush

A World Transformed (with Brent Scowcroft)

All the Best: My Life in Letters and Other Writings

Bill Clinton

My Life

(Question from Dane W. of Notre Dame, Indiana)

* Bill Clinton's 957-page memoir is coming out today. Is it the longest? How many presidents have written their life story? Do memoirs have any impact on a

president's reputation?

[1] E. B. Long, Introduction to *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo, 2001), pp. xxviii-xxx.

[2] George H. Nash, interview by Gleaves Whitney, June 27, 2004.

[3] The following quotations are from Kevin Canfield, "Presidential Memoirs," *Journal News*, June 20, 2004; accessed at <http://www.njournalnews.com/newsroom/062004/e0120presmemoirs.html>

[4] Harriet Rubin, "Presidential Memoirs Rarely Inspire: In Walks Clinton," *USA Today*, June 20, 2004; accessed at http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2004-06-20-rubin_x.htm

[5] Richard Norton Smith, interview with Gwen Ifill, *NewHour with Jim Lehrer*, PBS, June 21, 2004.