

### Appomattox: Victory, Defeat, and Freedom at the End of the Civil War

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## Review

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**Varon, Elizabeth R.** *Appomattox: Victory, Defeat, and Freedom at the End of the Civil War*. Oxford University Press, \$27.95 ISBN 9780199751716

### Placing an Important Event in the Proper Perspective

Professor Elizabeth Varon, who teaches at the University of Virginia, has previously written *Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859*; *We Mean to be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia*; and *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy: The True Story of Elizabeth Van Lew, a Union Agent in the Heart of the Confederacy*. To this impressive list she has now added the first full-scale analysis of the meaning of Confederate surrender, before, during, and after the famous event at Wilmer McLean's table. She treats Appomattox as a major event in American history, worth extensive analysis, but also as a very engaging human story, and so we get details down to the level of souvenir-hunting: one of Phil Sheridan's aides acquired a rag doll belonging to McLean's daughter, took it home, and named it "Silent Witness."

The Johnson-Crittenden Resolution of December 1861, denying that the war was to abolish slavery, said in effect that southern surrender would mean restoration of the Union and nothing more. The Emancipation Proclamation significantly changed that view, and thus raised Confederate fears about the meaning of defeat. Congressional adoption of the 13th Amendment just before the surrender further confirmed that in Union eyes the Old South was gone for good. Yet neither Union nor Confederate public opinion was uniform on the purposes of the war, and Professor Varon carefully dissects the two populations to reveal the extent of the divisions.

She is also very attentive to the views and actions of the enlisted men of both armies. Union soldiers did not victimize their opponents. They shared food and clothing with them and assisted them on their homeward journey. Confederates for the most part observed their paroles and treasured their parole certificates as proof that they had not deserted, but fought honorably to the end.

And more than Confederate civilians, Lee's soldiers trusted Grant's motives and intentions towards them.

The attitude of black soldiers and civilians is also highly instructive. Grant had seven black regiments brought to Appomattox as an affirmation of the role the United States Colored Troops had played in securing victory and freedom. For years after the war, former slaves dated significant events in relation to "Surrender Day." During the New Deal the government collected oral histories from former slaves. One elderly woman proudly noted the dates of important events and said, "You don't know nuthin' when you don't know dates."

Surrender was a military act, the result of a chain of strategic and tactical decisions. Thus, Professor Varon carefully narrates the Appomattox campaign of April 1865. She pursues letters and diaries from both sides to establish how the soldiers, prominent and forgotten, interpreted the meaning of surrender. Then there is the repeated effort of Lee to get Grant to agree to a negotiated surrender rather than an unconditional one. Here, issues of staging and protocol took on high significance. In the end, it was all Grant's show.

It should not be surprising that the meaning of Appomattox became controversial immediately after the event. For Grant, the meaning was not just preservation of the Union, but transformation of the Union into a nation of freedom and respect for black Americans. The course of early Reconstruction convinced Grant that the ballot was necessary to ensure freedom and protection for blacks. Lee, on the other hand, insisted that the surrender was only that – a military action made necessary by the "overwhelming numbers" his army faced. Thus the army left the field with its honor fully intact and need not think of itself as having been defeated.

Lee took the position that the surrender was a contract that also imposed terms on the North – no revenge, no political reprisals, no war crimes trials – and that if the North broke its word, resistance might resume. This position went against advice from a chief subordinate, General Richard Ewell, but it became popular in the South and in Copperhead circles in the North. Grant hoped that he and Lee could show politicians how generals behaved with regard to issues of state. But Lee was not in the mood, and Grant quickly got drawn into the maelstrom over Johnson's policies.

Indeed, Lee became a polarizing figure throughout the country. Not at all withdrawn, Lee made speeches, gave interviews, and corresponded with prominent editors nationwide, including even some with Copperhead views, much to Grant's disgust. The two generals personified the opposing labels for the postwar period. Lee favored "restoration" of the country to its postwar power alignments with the South in its rightful position of leadership and its leaders unpunished. Grant favored "reconstruction" of the country into a nation based on freedom and equality.

The "squandered opportunity" theory of Reconstruction's failure arose in contemporary reaction to Andrew Johnson's policies. Grant certainly accepted it. And it has been a fixture in Reconstruction historiography since the 1960s. But was there an effective tool with which to implement federal policy? Lee, with the support of many southerners, insisted that the surrender terms were a "let us alone" contract with the federal government which, if violated, would justify resistance. Prominent Radicals favored long-term military occupation.

The use of force to effect political, social, and cultural change is still a modern world issue. In 2009 the United States Naval War College organized its Senior Course on civil government in post-combat environments. The case studies, along with Iraq, were Germany and Japan 1945, Kosovo -- and Reconstruction, because officers serving in Iraq often faced issues similar to those their predecessors faced in the South. Untrained officers performed civil functions because civil government often did not exist, especially in the early years, or was unreliable. And what do surrender and defeat mean, long-term and short-term, in the sectarian, guerilla wars of the present?

In this very excellent and thought-provoking volume, essentially a study in military statesmanship, we follow the views and actions of the war's two most prominent soldiers. But we should not forget the views of a third, William T. Sherman, who in September 1865 wrote to his brother: "No matter what change we may desire in the feelings and thoughts of people South, we cannot accomplish it by force. Nor can we afford to maintain there an army large enough to hold them in subjugation. All we can, or should attempt is to give them rope, to develop in an honest way if possible, preserving in reserve enough military power to check any excesses if they attempt any."

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