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Interview

CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW: APPOMATTOX: VICTORY, DEFEAT, AND FREEDOM AT THE END OF THE CIVIL WAR

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Interview with Elizabeth Varon, the Langbourne M. Williams Professor of American History at the University of Virginia

Interviewed by Michael Frawley

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Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Today the Civil War Book Review is proud to speak with Elizabeth Varon, the Langbourne M. Williams Professor of American History at the University of Virginia, and discuss her recent book *Appomattox: Victory, Defeat, and Freedom at the End of the Civil War*. Thank you for joining us today.

Elizabeth Varon (EV): It is a delight to do so, thank you.

CWBR: What drew you to this topic?

EV: Well, some years ago, I was asked by the Library Company of Philadelphia to give a talk about Juneteenth: the moment of emancipation in Texas. And in the course of researching Juneteenth, I kept running across references in African-American discourse, spanning the immediate post-war era right up through the early 20th Century, to Appomattox as a "freedom day," commemorated as sort of a hallmark in the process of emancipation. Those references alluded to an image of Appomattox as a day of liberation for slaves--the exact moment of emancipation, for many, the day that fulfilled the promises of the earlier Emancipation Proclamation, the day that some slaves knew for the first time that they were free, or that others were able to truly experience freedom for the first time, now that the principal institution of the Confederacy, Lee's army, had met its demise. It was also a day, in African

American commemoration, of black liberation at the hands of African American liberators. This was a key element to the remembrance of the day: seven regiments of the United States Colored Troops had participated in the final campaign that culminated in Lee's surrender. They had been instrumental in blocking Lee's escape route, setting the trap that Lee tried, unsuccessfully, to punch a hole through on the morning of April 9. This was understood to have an enormous symbolic importance in the eyes of commentators. We can see this in African American sermons and speeches, including the landmark studies of George Washington Williams, the eminent historian who was a veteran of the Appomattox campaign: the treatment of Appomattox as a freedom day, and as a day that proved the fitness of the free people for citizenship. In this post war discourse on Appomattox, there was an effort to fuse the emancipationist and reconciliationist modes of Civil War remembrance, to argue that the Union victory (and the centrality of African Americans to the Union's victory) were proof of the fitness for citizenship of the freedpeople, and also a moment that heralded a promise of interracial reconciliation. For me, this discovery drew me towards the surrender. And my preliminary research confirmed that our dominant view of the surrender as a "gentlemen's agreement" does not do justice to the complex meaning and legacy of this event.

CWBR: Why was the campaign that led to Appomattox just as important as the surrender itself?

EV: That's right. There has been a tendency, a temptation, to think of that last campaign as a postscript to the great decisive "turning points" of the war. But that was not how the men who participated in the campaign saw it. They believed that the fate of the war effort still hung in the balance in those early days of April 1865. For men on the Union side, it wasn't just the fact of their victory but the way they had won it that loomed large. They would emphasize, in their accounts, that it took enormous skill and courage and discipline to chase down Lee's army, in those last days. For African Americans, the campaign had an additional level of symbolic meaning. Confederates, by contrast, are grappling at the moment of defeat with two competing narratives of these final days of fighting. One of those narratives, enshrined in Lee's Farwell Address, stresses the steadfastness and blamelessness of Lee's men in this moment of defeat. The other narrative, however, is a far more troubling narrative for Confederates. It is a story, perhaps, of a failure of will, and tactical and strategic mistakes, of disillusionment and desertion and disintegration. This is a story that is unbearable for Confederates. It leaves them vulnerable to self-doubt and recrimination, and so we see them push

it to the side, and to instead enshrine the story encapsulated in Lee's Farewell Address: the story of the Confederates having been overwhelmed by the brutal Yankee war machine, a story that fixates on the issue of odds. The Confederates will claim that they faced, in the end, during that last week and on the morning of April 9, in particular, worse odds than they had ever faced before in the war--odds of five to one or even worse--and that those terrible odds had necessitated Lee's surrender.

CWBR: So the ratio of Union to Confederate soldiers at Appomattox was extremely important to how Reconstruction developed?

EV: A numbers game emerges and it has profound political implications. So--we can establish in hindsight that there were roughly thirty thousand Confederates and roughly sixty thousand Union troops in the vicinity of Appomattox Courthouse on that last day on April 9. The Confederates will claim, following Lee's lead, that they had faced much worse odds, in the end: again, odds of five to one or worse, rather than two to one. (Lee had often beaten odds two to one earlier in the war.) They will claim that, in the end, they had only the eight thousand effective infantrymen that were really ready to fight--and that they faced a Yankee army of one hundred to two hundred thousand, and more, and so on. My point in the book is that Lee's reference in his Farewell Address to the "overwhelming numbers and resources" of the Yankees was political, and has to be put in the context of Confederate ideology: that the numbers game had political implications. For Confederates, "numbers"--the very phrase--conjured up images of the Yankee army's ruthless mercenaries and hirelings. "Resources" conjured up the dark satanic mills of northern capitalists. The numbers game, in other words, was part and parcel of an indictment of the North, an indictment that had its roots in proslavery and secessionist ideology, and that was translated during the war into the charge that the Yankees did not fight fair. This was important politically because Lee knew, as those who rallied around his "overwhelming numbers" interpretation of Confederate defeat knew, that by denying the legitimacy of the North's military victory, they could deny the North the right to impose its political will on the South after the war.

CWBR: So, as the importance of the surrender document, Lee's Farewell Address, the correspondence between Lee and Grant, and other writings show, during the Appomattox campaign itself the war shifted from one of bullets to one of words.

EV: Yes and no. I do think the war effectively ends at Appomattox. We will sometimes use war as a metaphor to describe the political battles of the postwar period--and we should be careful not to push that too far. The surrender does end the massive bloodletting of these two giant armies; although there is fighting after Appomattox and the surrenders that follow in its wake, the hopes for Confederate independence, I think, died at Appomattox. In some important sense, the war ends. But a war of words does begin. You are right about that. A big argument of my book is that we tend to see the artifacts of the surrender--the letters Lee and Grant exchanged, the terms themselves, the parole passes that are issued to Confederates, the Farewell Address of Lee--we tend to see these things as transparent in meaning. I am trying to make the case that these artifacts of the surrender are all sources of contention. The parole passes are sort of a perfect case in point, speaking about this emerging war of words. So Lee and Grant meet a second time on April 10. Lee requests of Grant that each of Lee's men be issued a printed parole certificate confirming that that soldier came under the Appomattox terms. Grant accedes to this request. Grant does so in part because he imagines that these certificates will remind the Confederates of the obligations attendant upon their status as paroled prisoners of war--that is what they are-- and remind them that their freedom was contingent on their good behavior. The parole passes contain a clause that ends up becoming quite a troublesome clause. In keeping with the language of the terms themselves, the parole certificates vouch that if a soldier observes the law where he resides, then that soldier was not to be "disturbed." While Union men imagined that these parole certificates would be a reminder of their obligations, the Confederates interpreted the parole certificates, and the very language in them--the not to be disturbed clause in particular--as a kind of promise that honorable Confederate men would not be treated dishonorably but the Yankees. In other words, the paroles, in Confederate eyes, imposed conditions on the North.

CWBR: Lee has come down to us today as a person who stayed out of politics after the war, clearly though this was not the case, why is our perception so different from reality?

EV: Our perception is grounded in two facts. First of all, Lee did technically observe the terms of his parole. And he did accept military defeat and reject the option of guerrilla warfare. But we miss the subtlety and dissonance in Lee's post war comportment, and I think generally it is underrated how political a man and how savvy a man Lee was. Lee was not a symbol of submission in the eyes of Confederates after the war. He was a symbol of defiance. In all of the artifacts to

which I have alluded, and also in a postwar interview that he does with the New York Herald, and congressional testimony he gives in February of 1866, Lee is pointing the way to the restoration of the South's power within the Union. Restoration is Lee's political keyword. For him it reflects the nostalgia, not uncommon for the men of his background, nostalgia for the days of the early republic, which in his mind are halcyon days before the Union had fallen from grace, before African Americans had been imbued with false hope--a time when the rest of the nation seemed to assume that Virginia would lead the nation. Lee was nostalgic for this kind of imaginary period of equilibrium. In his mind, a just peace will undo the "grievous effects" of the war, as he puts it, and sort of restore the old virtues. Now, in the service of this vision of restoration, Lee behaves politically. He denies the existence of anti-black violence in the South. He makes this denial quite brazenly as he testifies before the congressional committee. In his interview with the New York Herald, he essentially argues that if the North gives up the policy of magnanimity if it turns to vengeance or to vindictive or arbitrary policies--Southerners would consider the surrender terms as breached. Indeed there is this notion, I think, on the part of Confederates, that Lee had drawn a line in the sand at Appomattox--that Lee's position was, "You can ask us to surrender our arms, but you shouldn't ask anything more from us. We will yield, but we will do nothing more." This is a sort of defiance, and again we can come back to the artifacts of the surrender. The parole passes, that "not to be disturbed" clause, will reverberate in political debates. As Republicans will try to give freedpeople a measure of civil rights and civil protections, and begin discussing the possibility of African American suffrage, Confederates will turn to them and say that this radical agenda is a contravention of the Appomattox covenant, if you will--of the promise that white southern men will not be disturbed. They will literally say the prospect of black citizenship "disturbs" the South and therefore represents a betrayal of the Appomattox terms. There is a very complex political dynamic here. My point is that the terms and the artifacts of the surrender were a touchstone for these political debates during Reconstruction and that Lee is very much implicated in these debates.

CWBR: Grant and Lee then were representative of their societies, one looking to the future and the other to the past?

EV: I think that that is right. Grant has an entirely different interpretation of the surrender than Lee does. In Lee's mind, the surrender was a negotiation in which he secures honorable terms for his blameless men. In Grant's eyes, the surrender is a vindication of the cause of Union, of the ability of citizen-soldiers

to out fight the conscripts and dupes of an autocratic society. It is a vindication of freedom: and it will clear and open the way for the Union's ethos of moral and material progress to enter the South. Grant's terms are very much intended to effect a sort of mass conversion on the part of Southerners. He believes that the terms should foster a spirit of repentance and atonement. Again, Lee's position was that the Southerners had nothing to atone for. Grant's position was that the Union's magnanimity and its mercy were emblems of its moral authority, its moral superiority even, and that mercy should effect atonement and repentance. These are fundamentally different views, but in the book I stress that these debates over the terms don't simply pit Union against Confederacy or North versus South. They pit those who favor a transformation of the South against those who oppose it, and you will find Northerners and Southerners on both sides of that divide. The Peace Democrats, for example, "Copperheads" in the North, are loath for the Lincoln administration, Republicans, to interpret the surrender as a mandate for the Republican party. So the Copperheads embrace Lee's interpretation of the surrender: the "overwhelming numbers" interpretation of Southern defeat, Lee's notion that the Union victory was a victory of might over right. Southern Unionists, African Americans obviously, and some white southern Unionists, too, embrace Grant's view of the surrender: the Union victory as a victory of right over wrong. So we see fault lines, but we have to be very careful when acknowledging divisions within each society.

CWBR: Did the assassination of Lincoln magnify the meaning of Appomattox and make it much more important than it would have been had Lincoln lived?

EV: My emphasis, in a sense, in regard to the assassination, is on continuity. I try to show the heated debate about the meaning of the surrender begins before Lincoln died. Its interpretive lines persist after his death. If we look at Civil War historiography, we can see quite plainly that the assassination has utterly overshadowed the surrender. There has been an assumption in studying the assassination that Booth turns Northerners away from magnanimity and towards vengeance. I found something a little different. First of all, Northerners interpret the assassination as a direct response to the surrender. They believe that Booth is trying, through his deed, to undo or undermine the Union victory. We do see many Northerners call for vengeance in the wake of the assassination, but we see many others, in a sort of call-and-response, answer that cry for vengeance by upholding magnanimity and mercy--Lincoln's policy, Grant's policy--on the grounds that the best way to honor Lincoln's death is to uphold this idea of

mercy. In other words, this notion that mercy was an emblem of the North's moral authority proves very potent and popular, and I found that was true even among Radical Republicans, many of whom thought the best fate for the likes of Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee was to have to live in the brave new world that the Union victory has created.

CWBR: Why did Appomattox become a "golden moment lost" so quickly? Was there any real chance it was the golden moment many hoped it was?

EV: This "golden moment lost" phenomenon is really quite fascinating. Each of the three interpretations that I just outlined--the notion of the surrender as a vindication; the emphasis on the part of Southerners like Lee on restoration; and then the variation on vindication, the emphasis of African Americans on liberation--each of these interpretive modes came to incorporate an argument about the lost promise of Appomattox. For Lee and his followers, as I have suggested, Radical Republicans betray the true meaning of the surrender by imposing a regime that contravenes the promise that southerners won't be "disturbed." For Grant and his followers, it is Andrew Johnson who is the arch betrayer, as he seems to capitulate to Lee's idea that the peace must bring the restoration of power to elite southerners. In the eyes of African Americans, whites on both sides--both those who oppose and reject black citizenship but also those who give up the fight for it--let this moment of promise, of Appomattox, fade unfulfilled. I am trying to make two arguments about this. First of all I am asserting that there is never a moment of unity in this story. There is never a moment of shared reconciliation. There is never a moment when Southerners in unison mourn their lost cause and northerners in unison rejoice. There is never a moment in which Confederates are prepared to concede that their ideology has been discredited. In essence, Northerners who embrace Grant's terms said to the South, "We don't want to punish you any further, we want you to change." Southerners, Confederates, turned back and argued that the demand for change was a form of punishment. Northerners said "here is your chance to atone," and Confederates responded that they had nothing to atone for. I don't see much evidence of a true golden moment there. The battle lines were drawn very quickly. The terms became politicized very quickly. On the other hand, I am trying to account for why the golden moment interpretation, despite the fact that it was kind of wishful thinking, why it had such power and resilience. I observe that it tapped a strain of American exceptionalism: that even as they grappled over the surrender terms, Northerners and Southerners could, and did, congratulate themselves for ending their Civil War in a more civil way than any

other nation had ever done before. I also try to account in other ways for the resilience of this golden moment idea. I stress, for example, as I have stressed in our talk here today, that African Americans have had their own reasons for upholding the surrender as a golden moment. They believed that they had, at the moment of the surrender, won something, and earned something, and proven something that should never be taken away. So all of the various stakeholders had their own reasons for being intensely invested in the idea of the golden moment--and for charging their political rivals was having betrayed it.

CWBR: Professor Varon, I appreciate you taking the time to sit and discuss your most recent work, *Appomattox: Victory, Defeat, and Freedom at the End of the Civil War*.