

### Ends of War: The Unfinished Fight of Lee's Army after Appomattox

Andrew F. Lang

Mississippi State University, [alang@history.msstate.edu](mailto:alang@history.msstate.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Lang, Andrew F. (2022) "Ends of War: The Unfinished Fight of Lee's Army after Appomattox," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 24 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.24.2.08

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol24/iss2/8>

## Review

Lang, Andrew F.

Spring 2022

**Janney, Caroline E.** *Ends of War: The Unfinished Fight of Lee's Army after Appomattox.* University of North Carolina Press, 2021. HARDCOVER. \$30.00 ISBN 9781469663371 pp. 344

Caroline E. Janney's remarkable *Ends of War* transports us to 1865 and the small village of Appomattox Court House, host to the two warring armies that for four years had scarred the Virginia landscape. The book opens with the smell of battle. We feel the tension as R. E. Lee contemplates surrendering to Ulysses S. Grant. We sense the pending jubilation bubbling in the Union ranks. We see the rays of emancipation beaming in the distance. And we perceive the labored groans emanating from near-conquered Confederates. When the armies departed Appomattox, *their* wars had ended. But had *the* war ended?

Just as the Civil War's grand finale appears, Janney intervenes. She informs us that the ends of war were much in doubt for those who experienced the dramatic events of April 9, 1865. On that day, the once formidable Army of Northern Virginia disappeared. But the nation's struggle continued. Janney, the John L. Nau III Professor in the History of the American Civil War at the University of Virginia, guides us on a spell-binding tour beyond Appomattox. She retraces the weary steps of Lee's disillusioned but defiant veterans as they wandered home. We also enter the Army of the Potomac and watch as loyal soldiers demobilized their Confederate foes, desperate to avoid the horrors of a stateless insurgency. And what of enslaved people coerced to labor in Lee's ranks? Some claimed their freedom. A few contemplated returning to their former plantations. Others endured the violent, brutal wrath from those white southerners whose dream of an independent slaveholding republic teetered on the verge of collapse.

Janney implores us to move slowly as we navigate the tumultuous days and weeks after Lee's surrender. Hastiness cedes a vital thread of understanding. Janney laments the many victims who have fallen prey to Appomattox's seductive allure. She reminds us that the capitulation of the Army of Northern Virginia did not signal a clean break between war and peace. Nor did it function as a seamless turning point in a war that continued long after April

1865, subsuming the politics and violence of Reconstruction. She instead “aims to strike a middle ground” to reveal how “the lived experience often does not offer such clear markers of periodization. What individuals and groups perceived as the ‘end of the war’ shifted and changed, often multiple times” (264).

Nowhere is Janney’s observation more significant than in her dismantling of Lost Cause mythology. Peaceful reconciliation did not follow Lee and Grant as they exited Wilmer McLean’s Appomattox home. Resentful and often seething, former Confederates proclaimed the nobility of their cause. They defied any allegation that they had been defeated in a fair fight. Lee himself fueled such devious renderings. Merciless Yankee hordes, he announced in his farewell speech to the troops, “compelled” the beleaguered southern army “to yield to overwhelming numbers and resources.”<sup>1</sup> Of this foundational Lost Cause trope Janney observes, “they might have succumbed to a superior military power . . . but might did not make right. Defeat had not rendered their cause immoral or its soldiers less than heroic” (56-57). The Confederacy lived on in spirit though it had died in deed.

The unsettling reality of a vanquished yet vengeful enemy informed Ulysses S. Grant’s terms of surrender. In the manner of his beloved commander-in-chief, Grant sought above all a just and lasting peace. He did not demand an unconditional capitulation. He worried that Lee’s veterans might take to the hills and wage a devastating guerrilla war. The ensuing chaos would pervert the entire nation, reducing once virtuous combatants into bloodthirsty murderers. The “violent and remorseless revolutionary struggle” that Lincoln long feared<sup>2</sup> would collapse the republic in ways about which secessionists could only fantasize.

Grant thus opted to parole the Army of Northern Virginia’s 26,000 soldiers who conceded at Appomattox. His terms permitted Lee’s men to surrender their arms and return home on the condition that they would not resume hostilities against the United States. In exchange, the federal government would not harass Confederate veterans in their private lives.

With flawless precision, Janney traverses the dizzying intellectual and legal paradoxes of military paroles. Paroles afforded federal authorities with formal lists of soldiers who capitulated. Anyone who violated the terms of parole could be indicted. A parole also served to encourage

---

<sup>1</sup> General Order No. 9: <https://www.nps.gov/apco/general-order-9.htm>

<sup>2</sup><https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/december-3-1861-first-annual-message#:~:text=purpose%20shall%20not-,degenerate%20into%20a%20violent%20and%20remorseless%20revolutionary%20struggle.,-I%20have%20therefore>

soldiers who had *not* surrendered on April 9 to do so elsewhere as soon as possible. Indeed, 12,000 soldiers of Lee's army had never surrendered at Appomattox. *Their* war continued, placing Union authorities in hot pursuit of the diehard rebels. Most problematic, had Grant inadvertently shielded Confederate veterans from federal prosecution? Some Unionists howled that the republic's premier military hero had exonerated Lee's army from its terrible crimes against the nation.

To complicate matters, paroles did not convey an admission of guilt, nor did they require a veteran to swear an oath of loyalty. And what of a veteran's citizenship rights? Did a parolee enjoy the same protections as an individual who had been granted amnesty? In Janney's telling, Grant is a far more complex figure than our popular imagination might otherwise convey. He was resolute in occasioning a definitive end to hostilities. Peace and an enduring Union motivated his actions. But his fateful calculus on April 9 *forestalled* peace and blurred the process of reunion.

Grant, his surrender terms, and the disbanding of Lee's army, are thus avatars of Janney's primary point: Ending wars are just as difficult, contingent, and uncertain as waging wars. The United States' twenty-first-century military conflicts offer a painful reminder that wars can be won in an overwhelming, decisive manner. The same was true for the United States during the Civil War: Union and emancipation triumphed unequivocally. But in 1865, just as in the post-9/11 world, the wake of war always translates into the persistent strife of "peace." As Janney so powerfully expresses, individual actions, no matter how seemingly inconsequential in the moment, can carry profound, transformative consequences. Though laden with chaos, war demands controlled humility, requiring its participants—and historians alike—to "slow down the pace, taking the story frame by frame, looking at events as they unfolded" (3). Janney has performed a superb task in helping us understand our greatest war and the workings of the human condition.

*Andrew F. Lang, Associate Professor of History at Mississippi State University, is the recipient of the Tom Watson Brown Book Award from the Society of Civil War Historians and a finalist for the Gilder Lehrman Lincoln Prize.*