{essays in history}

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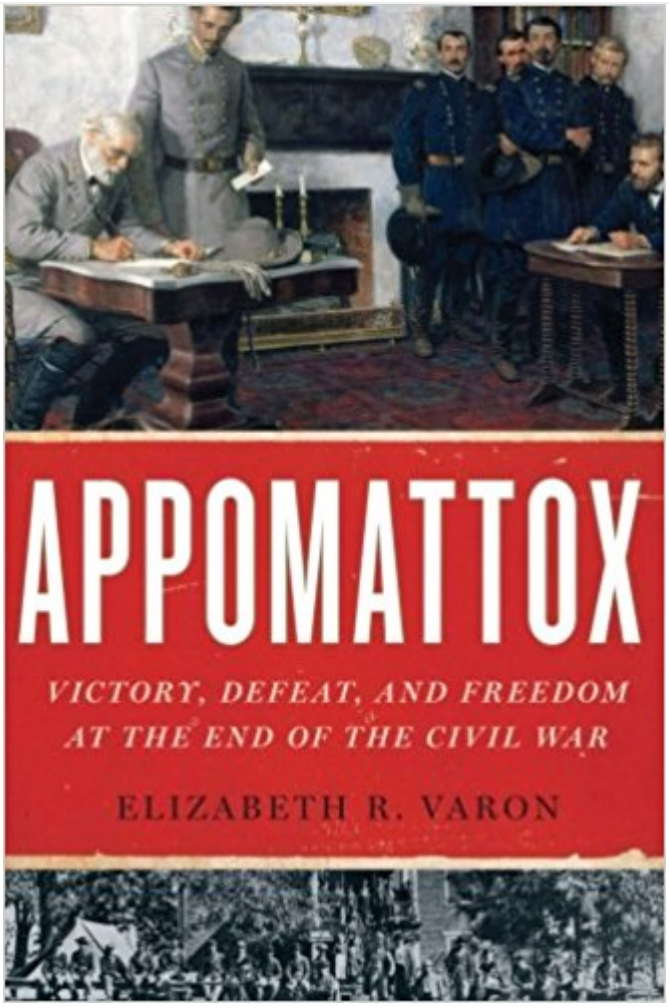
Appomattox: Victory, Defeat, and Freedom at the End of the Civil War



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Reviewed Work(s)

Appomattox: Victory, Defeat, and Freedom at the End of the Civil War. By Elizabeth R. Varon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). Pp. 305. Hardcover, $28.00.

The events of April 8-12, 1865, are some of the most recounted in American history. Two armies and two generals, already legendary in their lifetime, faced off against each other. The great Army of Northern Virginia, believed at one time to be invincible, surrendered. The events that occurred in the parlor of Wilmer McLean's house in Appomattox, Virginia, were debated and analyzed practically as soon as they happened, and for good reason. Both Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee understood what the surrender would mean to Americans, both in the North and the South. Both men knew that their actions and the words they chose to use that day would carry important implications for the period that was to follow. In *Appomattox: Victory, Defeat, and Freedom at the End of the Civil War*, Elizabeth R. Varon reexamines this momentous event and seeks to dispel the numerous myths that surround those fateful April days. Varon argues that each general possessed his own idea of what peace would mean. These conflicting interpretations influenced not only the politics of the era and many people's memories of the war, but also the fate of the millions of freed African Americans. It was also these interpretations that subsequently led to the varying historical analyses of Reconstruction and post-war America.

Varon begins by explaining the very different ways in which Lee and Grant understood the events of Palm Sunday, 1865. Grant, Varon argues, believed "the Union victory was one of right over wrong" while Lee believed "that the Union victory was one of might over right" (2). Grant's generosity at Appomattox is well known and Lee interpreted that mercy to be a concession to the South, believing that Confederates "had nothing to repent of and had survived the war with their honor and principles intact" (2). While Lee looked to the past and hoped the South, and especially Virginia, would regain what he believed was its rightful place at the forefront of American politics, Varon illustrates how Grant looked to the future—a future in which the South, newly repentant, would join

the North in a "march towards moral and material progress" (2). These very different views of what the surrender ultimately meant did not remain merely the purview of the two powerful commanders but also influenced politics and the way in which the newly reunited country began to remember the war.

In the first part of her book, Varon recounts the final days of fighting between the Army of Northern Virginia and the Armies of the Potomac and the James. She deftly tells a story familiar to all Civil War historians but in a fresh and moving way. The momentous event that occurred at Appomattox takes on a new meaning in light of Varon's desire to see just how the effects of the surrender reverberated in the years to come. Varon is careful not to focus simply on the commanders. She also emphasizes the ways in which the soldiers of both armies received the news of the surrender. As Varon adeptly illustrates, just as Grant and Lee were shaping how they wished the war to be remembered, their men were doing the same. Lee's men clung to the sentiments he expressed in his farewell address, believing they surrendered to an army of inferior men. Additionally, as Varon demonstrates, the Confederate soldiers also struggled to come to terms with defeat, wondering if they had failed Lee and the army. In contrast, many of Grant's soldiers celebrated the Confederacy's defeat and approved of their commander's magnanimous gesture, believing, as the general did, that it was "the best means to secure the redemption and reconstruction of the South (87). Varon also illuminates the role played by African American soldiers at the surrender, arguing that their presence added new meaning to the defeat of Lee's army. African Americans were hopeful for what the future would bring, believing theirs to be a moral victory.

Varon moves from the battlefront to the home front to illustrate how the events of Appomattox affected both politics and public opinion. From the moment the surrender was announced, Northern newspapers were trumpeting Grant's success and denying Lee's argument that he was defeated as the result of "overwhelming resources and numbers." In response, Copperhead Democrats and Southerners rejected Grant's assertion that right triumphed over wrong. Lincoln's desire "that the country transcend 'feelings of hate and vindictiveness'" was well known even as the more radical members of his party pushed for a harsher plan of reconstruction (135). Varon, contrary to much existing scholarship,

argues that the death of Lincoln did not cause the North to cry for vengeance against the South. Instead, Varon contends, "northerners coped with the tragedy of Lincoln's death by clinging to the triumph – Lincoln's triumph – at Appomattox" (136). It was their desire to honor Lincoln that led Union soldiers to uphold the fragile peace in the days immediately following the president's assassination.

Varon is careful to emphasize the lack of definitive opinion in the North and South regarding Appomattox and Lincoln's death immediately after both events. Instead, in the year following Appomattox, Americans turned to Lee, Grant and Andrew Johnson for cues on how to respond. As Varon illustrates, Grant always hoped Lee would cooperate and help him to show the politicians how to politely accept defeat and victory. While Grant never got his wish (Lee continued to interpret Confederate defeat in a way he believed protected southern honor), he never gave up hope that there was still a chance for the South, and Lee, to join the North on its march towards progress. Progress would no doubt include some form of equality for millions of newly freed African Americans. A steady presence throughout the book, Varon does not forget to analyze what the events of April 1865 meant to the former slaves. Many viewed April 9 as the day of their liberation and as the final fulfillment of the Emancipation Proclamation (173). Unfortunately, they would be forced to cling to those memories as the promise of political and social equality drifted further and further away.

Although retelling a very familiar story, Varon deftly peels back the layers of myth that surround the events of Appomattox in 1865. Relying on a wealth of primary sources, Varon is able to demonstrate how the actions and words of Grant and Lee impacted the events of Reconstruction and post-war America. This book is a welcome addition to the growing field of Civil War memory studies as Varon once more reminds us of the important role of public opinion in shaping historical narratives. The actions of army officers and politicians as well as the perception and memories of ordinary Americans directly influenced the ways in which the events of April 1865 were remembered. Varon illustrates how the memories of those fateful April days tell a story of victory for one army, defeat for another, and freedom for an entire group of oppressed people. Never before have the events surrounding the surrender at Appomattox been studied in such an enlightening way.

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