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Elizabeth R. Varon, *Appomattox: Victory, Defeat, and Freedom at the End of the Civil War*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013. Pp. viii, 305. ISBN 978-0-19-975171-6.

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In *Appomattox*, Elizabeth Varon (Univ. of Virginia) sets out to revise the canonical story of Robert E. Lee's surrender to Ulysses S. Grant on 9 April 1865. The American tendency to mythologize the past has distorted the events of that day into a "gentlemen's agreement"—a sublime moment of selflessness on the part of two great leaders, who rose above their hatreds and resentments, and, for the good of the nation they both loved, ceased ... to be enemies" (246). The reality, Varon shows, was more fraught; she argues persuasively that "the seeds of continuing strife were sown at the very moment of Union victory and Confederate defeat" (49). In her rendering, a more nuanced image of Lee and Grant replaces the hagiography that has shaped how many of us think about the Civil War.

Varon places the two generals, and the meaning they imparted to the conflict, at the heart of postwar strife. Convinced that "his victory ... vindicated free society and the Union's way of war," Grant assumed "Southerners, chastened and repentant, would join their Northern brethren in the march towards moral and material progress" (2). Lee, on the other hand, "was intent on restoration—on turning the clocks back ... to the days when Virginia led the nation and before sectional extremism alienated the North from the South" (2). Various constituencies in both regions echoed these views. Republicans, War Democrats, Southern Unionists, and freed slaves coalesced around Grant, seeing the war as a vindication of their cause. Former Confederates and antiwar, "Copperhead" Democrats saw the genteel tone of the surrender and the liberal terms Grant offered as the beginning of a "restoration"— "a concession to the moral rectitude of the defeated Confederates and a promise that honorable men would not be treated dishonorably" (3).

"Did Appomattox signify the triumph of right over wrong or of might over right?" (78). Did Grant succeed because of his superior generalship and the prowess of his troops? Was the North, with its free labor ideology, better able to produce good soldiers? Or was Grant's victory merely statistical, a function of the North's superior manufacturing capacity and vast reserves of manpower, both native and foreign? *Appomattox* suggests that the answers to these questions depended on one's perspective and were freighted with tremendous implications for one's view of Reconstruction.

Varon is a talented a historian, adept at posing critical questions as they would have occurred to contemporaries. In a forceful narrative style, she displays a firm grasp of both the tactical aspects of Lee's retreat from Richmond and the human costs of Grant's "hard war" strategy. Having detailed the maneuvers and counter-maneuvers at the Battles of Sailor's Creek, she quotes the lament of Rhode Island infantryman Elisha Hunt Rhodes: "So near the end and yet men must die" (14). This "fitting epitaph" to Grant's Appomattox campaign could apply equally well to his Overland campaign, during which seven thousand Union soldiers fell in a span of twenty minutes at Cold Harbor.

The specter of such bloodletting, Varon maintains, was at the forefront of Grant's mind as he and Lee began to trade communiqués on 7 April; the painful knowledge of what happened before the fateful meeting on 9 April suggests that magnanimity was not the prime consideration governing the generals' language. In his first missive, Grant mentions his "duty to shift from myself the responsibility of any further effusion of blood" (20). On the one hand, the phrase "effusion of blood" had by 1865 become part of the American military lexicon: Varon reminds us that George Washington used similar language in his correspondence with Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown. On the other hand, Grant "had deeply personal reasons for wanting to shift to Lee the responsibility for further bloodshed" (21). Hounded by accusations in the Copperhead press that his fanatical concentration on crushing the Confederacy bespoke a disregard for the lives

of his men, Grant may well have devoutly wished that “the mantle of ‘butcher’ would necessarily fall, at last, from [his] shoulders” (22).

Grant was not alone in abjuring blame for the war’s carnage. Abraham Lincoln’s belief in the inscrutable albeit benevolent purposes of God, expressed most cogently in his September 1862 “Meditation on the Divine Will,” may have signified a desire to shift responsibility for hundreds of thousands of war dead to a higher power.¹ The Second Inaugural Address, too, depicted the Civil War as inevitable. No human agency could stop it—“And the war came.” All casualties, Lincoln implied, could be ascribed to the providence of a “living God” who intervenes directly in American history. Varon detects in Grant’s choice of words a similar self-exculpatory aim. By highlighting the subtext of self-interest in the messages between Grant and Lee, she refines and complicates our understanding of a pivotal moment in American history.

Self-interest, however, cut both ways. In a note to Grant on 8 April, Lee averred that “restoration of peace should be the sole object of all” (35). Varon cautions that “Lee’s understanding of restoration was distinct ... steeped in nostalgia for the days of the early Republic, when the other states ‘almost took it for granted that Virginia would be their leader’” (36). The implications of this view for Reconstruction were momentous:

In the war’s closing moments, Lee’s political heritage—a strain of Unionism in which Virginians were at the center of the national experiment—represented an ideological fallback position for him. An honorable peace, for Lee, would be marked by moderation and restraint. It would restore to the Union the equilibrium and legitimacy and to the South the “prosperity & influence” he associated with the halcyon days of an imagined past, before the nation had drifted away from the principles of the Virginia founders and before the slavery controversy had attenuated the affective bonds between North and South. (37)

“From April 1865 on,” Varon continues, “‘restoration’ would be Lee’s political keyword” (37). His General Orders No. 9, later dubbed the “Farewell Address,” stated that “the Army of Northern Virginia has been compelled to yield to overwhelming numbers and resources” (69). This opening salvo in Lee’s campaign to exaggerate his disadvantage at Appomattox implied that the North owed its victory to its raw industrial strength rather than the righteousness of its cause. By discerning no rebuke of Southern society in the Confederacy’s defeat, Lee set the tone for unrepentant Confederates during Reconstruction.

Grant recoiled at such language. He looked to secure “the consolidation of Republican power, repudiation of the doctrine of secession, emancipation of the slaves, and enlistment of black troops” (39). He responded to Lee’s yearning for a “restoration of peace” by declaring, “the terms upon which peace can be had are well understood” (39). They were unchanged since Lincoln, in a meeting with Confederate Vice President Alexander H. Stephens at Hampton Roads, had insisted that the South lay down its arms and accede to emancipation. Precisely what “emancipation” signified, however, became more and more constrained the farther South one went, which became evident as Reconstruction progressed.

The commanding general of the Union army had a clear idea of what the term meant:

In Grant’s eyes, the Union’s triumph vindicated the principle of “rule by the majority”; the founders’ belief in a perpetual Union; and the capacity of citizen-soldiers, representing democracy, to outfight the conscripts and dupes of an autocratic society. The downfall of the Confederacy unburdened the South and the nation of slavery, “an institution abhorrent to all civilized people not brought up under it.” Now the way was open for the Union’s ethos of moral and material progress—and the mass of white Southerners could be disenthralled from their subservience to a slave-holding class whose alleged “patent of nobility” the Northern army had, at bayonet point, revoked. (61)

The paroles that Grant issued to Confederate prisoners after Lee’s surrender remained open to interpretation, according to which view one accepted. “A parole certificate vouchsafed that a soldier would ‘not be disturbed’—so long as he observed the ‘laws in force’ where he resided” (72). Throughout Reconstruction, former Confederates, abetted by President Andrew Johnson, championed the first clause at the expense of

1. I owe this insight to Prof. George Forgie.

the second. They saw Radical Republican attempts to codify the social revolution that accompanied emancipation as an abrogation of the paroles' terms. After conceding defeat, they felt, white Southerners should be allowed to erect anew the prewar power structure. To that end, they resorted to segregation, mob violence, black disenfranchisement, and exploitive sharecropping.

Federal soldiers, by contrast, fell in line with Grant: "Their diary entries, letters, and memoirs constitute a counternarrative to the overwhelming numbers and resources interpretation of the war's end" (82). Varon's judicious reliance on both secondary authorities and exhaustive original research to illustrate this point is typical of her scholarship. She holds up Maine's Maj. Holman S. Melcher as representative of the "widely shared conviction among the Union troops that Providence had, in the end, rewarded the righteous"; in a letter to his brother, he wrote "Thanks! And praise Almighty God, for the great thing He has done for us, in saving our country" (84). That the surrender took place on Palm Sunday augmented the perceived providential significance of Appomattox. "It was the universal expression," wrote army chaplain A.O. Roe, that the surrender was a "blessed Sabbath's work" (85). The role of US Colored Troops (USCT) in preventing Lee's escape on the morning of 9 April further heightened the Union's sense of divine favor: the black soldiers "were also agents of Providence," demonstrating the "superior morality and courage" of the North (98-99).

As Northern soldiers, specifically Grant, saw it, they had a mandate to remake the South in their own image. This spirit informed the Radical Republican vision of Reconstruction. Though Radicals in Congress exercised some control over Reconstruction between 1867 and the Democratic resurgence of 1877, they failed to disenfranchise former Confederates, confiscate and redistribute land, and impeach President Johnson. Historians have reached consensus that the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were more moderate than radical, enabling rather than preventing the abuses perpetrated by former Confederates. Southern recalcitrance triumphed over Northern millennialism for the next century.

The exultation of Union soldiers echoed as well on the home front, the focus of the second part of Varon's book. Her analysis of Republican and War Democrat newspapers shows that, while most Northerners supported Lincoln's calls for magnanimity for reasons of political expediency, they also had little doubt about the meaning of Union victory: "In an article entitled 'The End,' the *Philadelphia Press* concisely summed up the dominant Northern understanding of the war: 'Right had triumphed over Wrong'" (126). The voices of Copperhead newspaper editors parroting the "overwhelming numbers and resources" line were drowned out by those of Northern triumphalism, particularly after Lincoln's assassination. In this regard, "Grant's terms raised the question of not only how much mercy Northerners might show Southerners but also how much mercy they would show each other" (134). Appomattox signified the North's military victory, but only hardened preconceptions about which side was right.

This was not just a Northern phenomenon. Mary Custis Lee's assessment of the Union's victory was emblematic of the Southern refusal to admit fault: "The cruel policy of the enemy has accomplished its work too well. They have achieved by *starvation* what they could never win by their valor" (160). "Whatever the exact figure they offered," Varon notes, "Confederate commentators asserted that Lee had confronted insurmountable odds, much worse than those he faced earlier in the war" (162). Some estimates pegged Confederate forces at 8,000 versus a Union force of 250,000; these numbers, as well as reports that Lee faced ten-to-one odds, are wildly inaccurate. Lee fell back from Petersburg and Richmond on 5 April with 60,000 muskets, a number that had dwindled to 25,000-30,000 by the time Grant's 90,000 men provided rations for the Confederates four days later. But these more accurate figures would have amounted to an acknowledgement that flagging Confederate spirits had as much to do with Lee's surrender as Northern mercenaries—an unthinkable admission for loyal Rebels. Mary Custis Lee and other Southern authors, like Mary Chestnut, endorsed the narrative that General Lee, her husband, had established in his note to Grant. The North did not triumph because of the righteousness of its cause and therefore had no right to stop the South from reverting to its antebellum ways.

Lee's own complicity in popularizing the notion that he was grossly outnumbered removes the mantle of rectitude with which the myth of the "Lost Cause" has clothed him. So does his testimony to a congress-

sional committee on Reconstruction, which figures prominently in the third part of Varon's book. Andrew Johnson, whose deep antipathy toward the Southern planters had apparently deserted him by the time he ascended to the presidency, "initiated a period of 'self-reconstruction' in the South, during which provisional governors appointed thousands of former rebels to political office and in which the new Southern state governments proscribed the rights of the freedpeople" (193).

In response, Sen. Lyman Trumbull proposed a Civil Rights Bill. Lee, in subsequent testimony before Congress, "denied the reality of violence against blacks in the postwar South" (222). The anecdote of Lee saving a freedman from the garrote during his presidency of Washington College, indicating that he was aware of mob violence in this period, does not diminish the suspicion that he was in this instance being disingenuous and that his paternalistic belief in white supremacy had not ended with his military command. Edmund Wilson's vision of an unbowed Lee championing education as a way to revitalize Southern society must undergo some amendment.

Appomattox will compel its readers to reconsider their understanding of an iconic event in American history. Its author has demonstrated that the principal actors were susceptible to human failings and that the benefits of the Civil War—principally a united nation committed to racial equality—were contentious topics long after the war. Appomattox marked the beginning, not the end, of a debate about what the war, and the United States, meant. The putative yearning for reconciliation and progress at Appomattox is more a product of the 1960s than the 1860s. For these keen insights and for the nuanced argumentation so essential to good history, Elizabeth Varon's elegantly written book is to be heartily commended and widely read.