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April 1865: The Month That Saved America



Synopsis

One month in 1865 witnessed the frenzied fall of Richmond, a daring last-ditch Southern plan for guerrilla warfare, Lee's harrowing retreat, and then, Appomattox. It saw Lincoln's assassination just five days later and a near-successful plot to decapitate the Union government, followed by chaos and coup fears in the North, collapsed negotiations and continued bloodshed in the South, and finally, the start of national reconciliation. In the end, April 1865 emerged as not just the tale of the war's denouement, but the story of the making of our nation. Jay Winik offers a brilliant new look at the Civil War's final days that will forever change the way we see the war's end and the nation's new beginning. Uniquely set within the larger sweep of history and filled with rich profiles of outsize figures, fresh iconoclastic scholarship, and a gripping narrative, this is a masterful account of the thirty most pivotal days in the life of the United States. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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Customer Reviews

There are a few books that belong on the shelf of every Civil War buff: James M. McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom*, one of the better Abraham Lincoln biographies, something on Robert E. Lee, perhaps Shelby Foote's massive trilogy *The Civil War*. Add Jay Winik's wonderful *April 1865* to the list. This is one of those rare, shining books that takes a new look at an old subject and changes the way we think about it. Winik shows that there was nothing inevitable about the end of the Civil War, from the fall of Richmond to the surrender at Appomattox to the murder of Lincoln. It all happened

so quickly, in what "proved to be perhaps the most moving and decisive month not simply of the Civil War, but indeed, quite likely, in the life of the United States." Things might have been rather different, too. "What emerges from the panorama of April 1865 is that the whole of our national history could have been altered but for a few decisions, a quirk of fate, a sudden shift in luck." When Lee abandoned Richmond, for instance, his soldiers rendezvoused at a nearby town called Amelia Court House. There, the general expected to find boxcars full of food for his hungry troops. But "a mere administrative mix-up" left his army empty-handed and may have limited Lee's options in the days to come. Or what if Lee had decided not to surrender at all, but to turn his resourceful army into an outfit of guerrilla fighters who would harass federal officials? National reconciliation might have become impossible as the whole South turned into a region plagued with violence and terrorism. For the Union, "there would be no real rest, no real respite, no true amity, nor, for that matter, any real sense of victory--only an amorphous state of neither war nor peace, raging like a low-level fever." One of Lee's officers actually proposed this scenario to his commander in those final hours; America is fortunate Lee didn't choose this path. Winik is an exceptionally good storyteller. April 1865 is full of memorable images and you-are-there writing. Readers will come away with a new appreciation for that momentous month and a sharpened understanding of why and how the Civil War was fought. Let it be said plainly: April 1865 is a magnificent work, surely the best book on the Civil War to be published in some time. --John J. Miller --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Though the primary focus of this book is the last month of the Civil War, it opens in the 18th century with a view of Monticello, the home of Thomas Jefferson. Winik (whose previous book, *On the Brink*, was an account of the Reagan administration and the end of the Cold War) offers not just a study of four weeks of war, but a panoramic assessment of America and its contradictions. The opening Jeffersonian question is: does the good of the country take precedence over that of the individual states? The question of civil union or civil war is the central question of this new work. Winik goes on to describe how a series of events that occurred during a matter of weeks in April 1865 (the fall of Richmond; Lee's graceful surrender to Grant at Appomattox, and Grant's equally distinguished handling of his foe; Lincoln's assassination), none of them inevitable, would solve Jefferson's riddle: while a loose federation of states entered the war, what emerged from war and Reconstruction was a much stronger nation; the Union had decisively triumphed over the wishes of individual states. Winik's sense of the dramatic and his vivid writing bring a fitting flourish to his thesis that April 1865 marked a turning point in American history: "So, after April 1865, when the blood had clotted and

dried, when the cadavers had been removed and the graves filled in, what America was asking for, at war's end, was in fact something quite unique: a special exemption from the cruel edicts of history." Winik's ability to see the big picture in the close-up (and vice versa), and to compose riveting narrative, is masterful. This book is a triumph. (Apr. 4) Forecast: Popular history at its best, this book should appeal widely to readers beyond the usual Civil War crowd. Strong endorsements from a group of noted historians, including James M. McPherson and Douglas Brinkley, along with a 10-city author tour, should also help both review coverage and sales. Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

If this book were a multi-layered cake, the one word to describe it would be "delicious"....and on so many levels. The author is able to distill the broad history of events leading up to April 1865 and even reach a little into the future to include the aftermath into the bottle. One word of caution: one does not simply parachute into this book without at least a cursory understanding of American history. That aside, it is a first-class read and the epilogue itself was worthy of the time invested in reading the manuscript. I thoroughly enjoyed this masterpiece and was sorry that it, like the Civil War itself, had to finally come to an end. Splendid and superb...but mostly delicious.

I must have read fifty books on the Civil War era and I took more away from this author's analysis than so many of the authors I read formerly. Granted most Civil War historians restrict themselves to one day or one event and as a result they automatically limit the scope of their analysis. Mr. Winik delves into the psyche of our great country at a time when the country's psyche was still just forming. I loved the fact that the author did not just restrict himself to the events of the war's last month, but rather broadened his scope to surmise why the country went the way it did. When you think about it, the events at Appomattox could have lead to something completely different than what really did follow. It would not have taken much to completely alter the history of our country. The actions of a few men in both grey and blue uniforms lead to the eventual unification of our divided nation. I think one of the things that stood out to me most in this book was the fact that secession was not a new idea to our country's development. It was brought to my attention that the notion of secession was acted on numerous times prior to the Confederacy. Before I read Mr. Winik's book, I assumed secession was an act of last resort. Now I know secessionism was in the blood of our citizens in the nascent period of our nation. It puts my study of this country's greatest conflict in a totally new light. Bravo, Jay Winik, for a thorough study on who we were and why we are the way we are (in spite of this historical glitch we are currently going through right now with our

current President).

In American history courses in school, we see that Richmond fell early in April 1865 and that a mere week later Lee had surrendered to Grant at Appomattox. While it is natural to infer from this that the surrender was a foregone conclusion after Richmond's fall, in "April 1865" author Jay Winik teaches that that was by no means the case, and that there were several points both in that week and in that most fateful month that events could have gone off the rails to the great detriment of the future of America and the world. While the eleven states that formed the Confederate States of America were the only states to secede in American history, Winik notes that the generations of antebellum Americans had always viewed the unity of the nation as fragile and that secession movements, not all of them Southern, were plotted from the earliest days of the Republic. As April approached in 1865, the Confederacy was in increasingly desperate straits, so much so that many Southerners voiced what four years earlier had been unthinkable--giving blacks freedom in return for military service in the Confederate Army. That measure was taken too late to save the Confederacy, though, and after Richmond fell Lee attempted to join up with Johnston's troops in North Carolina. Within days, however, Lee's army was surrounded, and Winik rightly lauds the general for making the pivotal decision to surrender rather than attempt guerilla warfare. Winik's portrait of the surrender at Appomattox and its aftermath is superb. Lincoln and Grant were wise enough to know that knitting North and South back together into one nation called for magnanimity and the refusal to destroy the dignity of the South and Southerners. Most know that the South was devastated as a result of the war, but the author's assessment of the total extent of that devastation is truly arresting. Even with the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia, the war was not quite over and there were a few remaining anxious moments for all who hoped for peace, and Winik describes the surrender of the rest of the Confederate forces. Five days after Lee's surrender, President Lincoln was assassinated in Washington, and this volume tells the story of that tragedy in great detail. Winik notes that precedents for the transfer of power were still not robust in the 1860s and recalls how Andrew Johnson became Lincoln's successor, with the attendant effects on postwar politics. "April 1865" also offers biographical sketches of Lincoln, Davis, Grant, Lee, and other figures who played key roles during that month. This volume as much as any other I have ever read is a refutation of the Marxist doctrine of determinism and control of history by impersonal forces--Lincoln, Grant, and Lee especially show how much individuals and the decisions that they make (as well as fate and good or bad luck) can turn history on a dime and have effects that last generations if not centuries. This book has a great picture section, and it was enjoyable to read and elegantly written,

challenging the vocabulary of even serious readers. For those history buffs who love reading about the Civil War and who want to gain a deeper understanding of key figures of the war and of the importance of the conflict coming to a close in the manner that it did, I cannot recommend "April 1865" more highly.

Jay Winik's view of History gives a refreshing look at the interplay of leaders of both sides at the culmination of the Civil War. He also explores with substantial justification what might have been if Lincoln had lived. A real tragedy of the Civil War was the assassination of Lincoln and the resultant downgrading of two leaders who might have led a more successful reconstruction. They were Sherman and Lee in my opinion. This intense review of one month of history seems to prove that. Lee might have gained stature as a national leader and Sherman held on to and improved his stature to the benefit of successful reconstruction. All was lost with the sweeping desire for vengeance that followed Lincoln's death. Highly recommended for both Civil War buffs and lovers of our country.

In a brilliant telling of the history of the civil war, Jay Winik puts the focus on one pivot point month where the fate of the nation hung in the balance. With his focus on the people and places of the war, the author puts his spotlight on this one critical month, April 1865. This clearly drawn focus on the forces at play on the politics of the war on both sides and the people of this time provides a palatable story that for even the most casual armchair reader. The aftermath of April 1865 provided a foundation for a truly United States, confident, forward looking in union and free. April 1865 is brilliant storytelling by an author completely in control of his subject. Easy to read and easy to digest, April 1865 is a treasure of civil war history. This is a story for all of us to treasure.

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