

Daniel Ritchie  
TAH: A More Perfect Union  
2010-2011  
Final Project

*Jay Winik's April 1865: Class Application and Review*

**Class Application:** Students enrolled in AP U.S. History (Juniors) are given Jay Winik's *April 1865: The Month That Saved America* as summer reading and asked to write a 4-6 page paper analyzing Winik's thesis. They should cover the following ideas in their essay: 1) Is Winik's thesis that April 1865 is the month that saved America convincing? Why or why not? 2) What are the strengths/weaknesses of Winik's argument? 3) What information does Winik use in his work? Is there proper historical evidence to support his case? What themes are apparent throughout? 4) Did you come to another conclusion or do you agree with Winik?

**Review:**

*Jay Winik's April 1865: The Month That Saved America* is an entertaining historical work that threads not only the events of April 1865 together into a cohesive argument, but also includes tangential historical evidence such as the Boer War, Hannibal's army, and the musings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, to name a few, to help bolster it. These all apply to the central thesis: that the noble experiment of the United States was anything but a sure bet as the Civil War began to wind down to its dire conclusion. As the hungry, tired, poorly-equipped Confederacy began to see its chances of victory dwindle, a very different devastating path could have been tread by the Southern leadership, namely General Lee, General Johnston, and General Forrest.

On the other side of the equation was a variable just as important; the Union response to Confederate surrender. Instead of enacting punitive measures aimed at humiliating their opponent, President Lincoln, General Grant, and General Sherman all sought an honorable and mutually agreeable ending to the conflict. Although the reason for vengeful action certainly existed, with hundreds and thousands of men dead or maimed, along with millions of dollars in property damage, the end-result was one of conciliation and respect, with an eye toward rebuilding the nation. Winik explains on p. xi:

Lee's reluctant yet dignified surrender to Grant at Appomattox, accompanied by Grant's equally dignified, and largely unprecedented, handling of his fallen foe, [was] a masterful act that set the tone for the rest of the war and the peace to come.

This is an important idea that Winik vividly brings to life, and is a series of events that many Americans now take for granted. The fact that the Confederacy came back to be a part of the United States was not a forgone conclusion. In fact, history would point to a completely alternate ending; one that would have led to a prolonged, painful conflict, fought by bands of guerilla fighters, clinging to the ideals of their cause for years to come.

Winik opens the book with Thomas Jefferson at Monticello, dealing with the multiple phases and problems in constructing his beloved home, yet ultimately crafting one of the greatest architectural masterpieces in U.S. history. This metaphor fits with the evolution of the United States as well, difficult as it has been. The nation continues to be, in many regards, a work in progress full of contradictions, but hopefully on a path of social justice and equality for all in what would be a political masterpiece.

Jefferson was also a contradiction in many regards: a slave owner that penned the *Declaration of Independence*, an aristocrat who would champion the idyllic life of the farmer,

a politician that sought “smaller” government yet did more to expand America as President with the Louisiana Purchase. Jefferson would wrestle with these contradictions throughout his life, just as the nation did in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Jefferson, in essence, is the embodiment of U.S. contradictions and thus is central to Winik’s opening chapter.

The ultimate contradiction, however, in the creation and evolution of the United States, was the institution of slavery. Slavery would be the central force behind the severing of the nation into two. As Winik states:

Over the course of 250 years...slavery became so intertwined and intermixed with the fabric of the South—even though only one-third of Southerners owned slaves—that any assault on slavery was seen as an assault on Southern institutions, Southern values, and the very Southern way of life (49).

Slavery and the implications of the institution, along with the abrupt ending of it, would shape and define the nation throughout much of its history. In the end, the institution that led to the Civil War, which Southerners would fight to save, would be a difficult aspect of American society to overcome. Without a doubt, slavery, the emancipation of slaves, and the racial implications of it are deeply rooted in the American identity and still exist to this day. The paradox of slavery existing in a nation built on ideals of liberty and freedom was now a dead issue. With the conclusion of the Civil War, the South had to swallow a bitter pill, giving up a key component of their livelihood. For many, it was purely unacceptable, namely John Wilkes Booth.

Before Booth fired his fatal shot at Ford’s Theatre, President Lincoln was ready and willing to offer lenient terms to the Confederacy to bring them back into the United States. As Winik highlights, Lincoln’s willingness to preach forgiveness toward the Confederacy was important in bringing them back. In terms of Lincoln’s approach to policy before and during

the Civil War, he had always sought the law and the Constitution to justify his actions. Though the South despised Lincoln, he was overall considerate of the needs of the South. He was against slavery; however was by no means out to abolish it with one swift action. Only with secession did the law no longer apply to the Confederacy and provided Lincoln carte blanche to do as he would to ensure U.S. victory in the Civil War. To do so meant freeing the slaves, which Lincoln would do with the Emancipation Proclamation. As Winik describes, "...the Emancipation Proclamation was the most revolutionary document in the country's history since the Declaration of Independence..." (149). Still the ultimate task at hand--getting the Confederate States to rejoin the nation and healing the deep wounds of the Civil War--still lie ahead. As Lincoln would famously say in his Second Inaugural Address in 1865, "with malice toward none; with charity for all," setting the tone for his Reconstruction policy. This would all be abruptly halted by an assassin's bullet.

As if the challenges of the Civil War had not been enough for the nation, the first ever presidential assassination was now another moment of uncertainty. Winik states:

Never before had a president been assassinated. Never before had a president died while a war was under way. Never before had an attempt been made to decapitate the very seat of government. How would a presidential transition process work in a crisis? (258)

With the gift of hindsight, we can clearly say that a major crisis was averted with the ultimate plot of killing the President, Vice President and Secretary of State failing, but the question leads to the often used phrase in historical debate: "what if." If the plot had been successful in eliminating the leadership of the nation what would have been the next move and who would have led the way to make this call? As in all "what if" scenarios the probable course of action is always conjecture and we can only wonder. However, what would play

out would be just as challenging, as Andrew Johnson--born of Southern origin in North Carolina--was no Lincoln.

In stark contrast to Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, Johnson, twelve days before being sworn in as President, was heard saying "'Treason must be made infamous, and traitors must be impoverished'" (273). It was no secret that Johnson had it out for the planter elite of the South, and he sought to destroy them by any means necessary. Though the efforts of Reconstruction would fail in many regards, Winik does not stray too heavily on this topic. Rather, the focus instead is on the decision of who was next in line during those tumultuous days, one that was not explicitly constitutional. Since there was no precedent in regards to assassination, the act of Vice President becoming President (as occurred in the deaths of William Henry Harrison and Zachary Taylor) would be the agreed upon action. And so, Johnson would take the helm and arguably conduct one of the worst presidencies the nation has ever seen.

In Winik's *Epilogue* a series of questions are asked that may be useful for class discussion purposes. The following are on page 376:

- What if Lee had found an abundance of food at Amelia Court House—and safely made his way south to link up with Joe Johnston? Or if he had decided that honor lay not in surrendering but in fighting on and on for the mother South—with organized guerilla warfare?
- What if Grant and Sherman had neglected Lincoln's admonitions at City Point and responded not with generosity of spirit, but with unbridled anger? Or if there had not been an honorable stacking of the arms and mutual salute to set the tone for the end of the war, but hangings and humiliations?
- What if Andrew Johnson had been assassinated after all—and the blade hadn't missed its mark of Seward's jugular? Or if after the assassination of Lincoln all went to pieces and the presidential transition process fell prey to momentary passions and fears?
- What if Joe Johnston had not decided to disobey Jefferson Davis's orders?

Winik's provocative work does provide a clear and concise point of debate—that of the month April 1865 “saving” America. This truly was a climactic point in our nation's history that could have gone in multiple directions. Almost miraculously, the U.S. was able to bring the Confederacy back into the nation and do so on agreeable terms, while also eliminating the “peculiar institution,” putting the trajectory of the nation on a path of human equality and liberty. However, the problem in Winik's overall analysis lies in the semantics of the title. America was not “saved”—at least in the traditional sense--by the uncharacteristic actions of Southern Generals that wanted to preserve honor, or by the relatively peaceful transition of power after the unprecedented assassination of the President.

It is without a doubt that the collective actions of men such as Lincoln, Grant, Lee, Johnston, etc. led to a desirable end to bring the nation back together again, but these events read more as actions made because of happenstance and the conditions at hand and not as actions that were made to “save” America from ultimate peril. Other questions must also be raised: What if the plot had succeeded? Did it even make sense for Southern Generals to continue on in a long, drawn out guerilla war? One might even argue that as Lincoln lie prostrate on a bed too small for his large stature, awaiting certain death, the promise of a successful Reconstruction died there along with Lincoln's last breath. Perhaps it was April 1865 that destroyed America, rather than saved it, and prolonged a racial struggle with a failed Reconstruction that still resonates to this day. These questions all can be discussed and debated, providing a deeper, enriching, and engaging understanding of this

moment in U.S. history. Without question, this climactic moment is worth careful analysis and Jay Winik's work can provide a worthy foundation for that discussion in the classroom.