

The Appomattox Generals: The Parallel Lives of Joshua L. Chamberlain, USA, and John B. Gordon, CSA, Commanders at the Surrender Ceremony of April 12, 1865

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Review

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Primomo, John W. *The Appomattox Generals: The Parallel Lives of Joshua L. Chamberlain, USA, and John B. Gordon, CSA, Commanders at the Surrender Ceremony of April 12, 1865.* McFarland, \$35.00 ISBN 978-0-7864-7632-9

A Study of the Men who Ended the War

As the title suggests, John W. Primomo – a United States Magistrate Judge for the Western District of Texas in San Antonio – sets out to examine the rise of Joshua L. Chamberlain and John B. Gordon from their enlistments in their respective armies to being tapped to conduct the ceremonial surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia to the Army of the Potomac. Primomo stresses that while neither Chamberlain nor Gordon came to the war with a military background, their commitment to their respective causes and innate fortitude quickly earned the respect of their comrades and commanding officers. For Primomo, their “parallel” lives encompassed more than their rise through the ranks. Both Gordon and Chamberlain were wounded multiple times during the war, though they would return to their posts. In the years after the war, Chamberlain gravitated towards politics, culminating in the governorship of Maine. Gordon likewise entered politics and eventually became governor of his native state of Georgia. Throughout his study, Primomo relies heavily on Chamberlain’s and Gordon’s postwar reminiscences, in addition to a handful of archival collections and secondary sources, which tend to be rather dated. Chapter lengths range from a few pages to much longer chapters on Gettysburg and the months leading up to Lee’s surrender. While a “popular audience” might find Primomo’s narrative interesting, there is not much new for historians or those with an in-depth understanding of the war.

The theme of honor is the driving force for the author’s narrative. At the outset of the book, Primomo recounts the well-known circumstances surrounding the ceremonial surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia. As Confederates began the processional, Chamberlain ordered Union soldiers to salute their

vanquished foes. Touched by Chamberlain's conduct, Gordon ordered his men to respond in kind. According to the author, "Chamberlain's and Gordon's grace and dignity set the example, not only for the men under their commands but also for a divided nation. The war was over. Soldiers and citizens, both North and South, were countrymen once again. The Civil War began in an atmosphere of hatred and distrust. It would end with honor answering honor" (8). In the concluding page of the book, the author reiterates his view on the significance of honor and the mutual respect Chamberlain and Gordon displayed for each other. "On that momentous occasion, two special soldiers demonstrated not only the greatness of their character but also sent a message of reunion and reconciliation to people in the North and the South and set an example of honor and dignity for all to live by" (196). While Gordon's and Chamberlain's respective orders that their men salute each other is a touching end to a horrific war, the author is overreaching in his claim that it set the stage for reconciliation. There is overwhelming evidence from ex-Confederates that their acknowledgment of military defeat did not mean that they sought a harmonious return to the Union. In the immediate Reconstruction period, southern whites emphatically made clear in their letters, speeches, and actions that their disdain for the Union, Republicans, and emancipation was resolute. One prime example of this would be the various "Black Codes" that ex-Confederates supported in an effort to thwart federal laws in an attempt to minimize the rights ex-slaves had earned and won as a result of the war.

After opening the book with April 1865, Primomo briefly retraces Chamberlain's and Gordon's lives leading up to the war, before moving on to their participation in major battles. The author offers a broad overview of these battles while pointing out that Gordon's and Chamberlain's courageous actions and sage decisions earned the admiration of their comrades, commanding generals, and even the enemy. This ground level approach offers telling commentary on the importance of these men to their army and how they were able to influence the actions and morale of those around them during harrowing situations. Primomo also offers compelling analysis on Chamberlain's and Gordon's tenacious desire to return to action after suffering life threatening wounds on the field of battle.

At times, however, the author goes too far in solely focusing on the bravery these men displayed. Primomo stated at the beginning of the book that Gordon and Chamberlain were "not perfect" (2), but aside from a passing comment about Gordon's potential association with the Klan, passages throughout the book

border on hagiography. A more well-rounded and analytical examination of the potentially poor decisions these men made and how they learned from their mistakes might have resulted in a more penetrating understanding on what ultimately made Chamberlain and Gordon effective leaders during what turned out to be crucial moments of battles.

Despite some shortcomings, *The Appomattox Generals* is an earnest attempt at shedding greater light on the deeds of two Civil War generals whose wartime actions continue to fascinate general readers and academics alike.

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