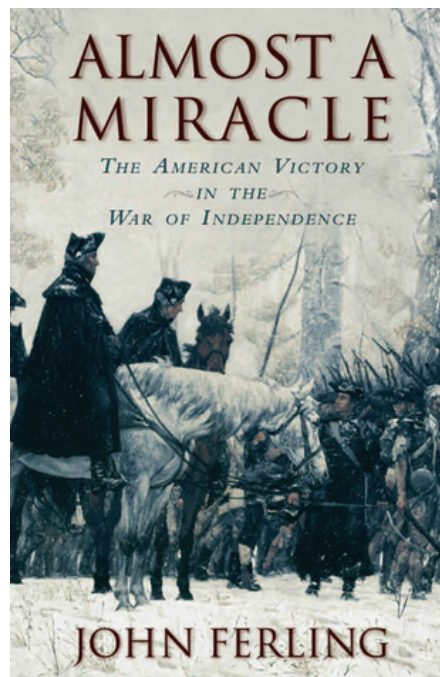




Almost A Miracle: The American Victory in the War of Independence

John Ferling

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In this gripping chronicle of America's struggle for independence, award-winning historian John Ferling transports readers to the grim realities of that war, capturing an eight-year conflict filled with heroism, suffering, cowardice, betrayal, and fierce dedication. As Ferling demonstrates, it was a war that America came much closer to losing than is now usually remembered. General George Washington put it best when he said that the American victory was "little short of a standing miracle."

Almost a Miracle offers an illuminating portrait of America's triumph, offering vivid descriptions of all the major engagements, from the first shots fired on Lexington Green to the surrender of General Cornwallis at Yorktown, revealing how these battles often hinged on intangibles such as leadership under fire, heroism, good fortune, blunders, tenacity, and surprise. Ferling paints sharp-eyed portraits of the key figures in the war, including General Washington and other American officers and civilian leaders. Some do not always measure up to their iconic reputations, including Washington himself. The book also examines the many faceless men who soldiered, often for years on end, braving untold dangers and enduring abounding miseries. The author explains why they served and sacrificed, and sees them as the forgotten heroes who won American independence.

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From Reader Review Almost A Miracle: The American Victory in the War of Independence for online ebook

Heinz Reinhardt says

An excellent one volume narrative of the War for Independence. The British were stuck with a terrible task: repacify a region an ocean away, with more expanse than all of Europe, with an Army smaller than Frederick's in the Seven Years War. Part of the fascination with the tale is how close they came regardless. However, the British made several key mistakes that doomed their efforts. Firstly they underutilized the large numbers of Loyalists in America. Torie regiments wouldn't be built till the last year's of the war, and in few numbers. The British only late in the game recognized the disruption to the rebel economy that taking their slaves represented. Typical of British decision making, it was too little far too late.

The Crown and the Commandery in the field routinely undercut their own efforts by underestimating their foes, especially the rural militias. While the American militias did not always stand up well in main line engagements, they often did, and at Cowpens, King's Mountain and Guilford Courthouse were instrumental in turning the war against the British.

Perhaps the greatest failing of the Crown's efforts were their inability to hold Generals to a rigid chain of command and to force them to adhere to a grand strategy. Time and again the best of London's intentions were frustrated and ruined by bull headed, ambitious, and contentious men in the field who preferred a shot at glory, irregardless of wether or not said personal ambition rhymed with the prospect of winning the war. Howe routing the Continental's at Brandywine and seizing Philadelphia came at the cost of allowing his strategic rival Johnny Burgoyne's invasion of New York to end in disaster at Saratoga.

When Washington struck Howe, at Germantown, although the British tactically were triumphant, strategically Washington had all but blockaded Howe and his army in Philadelphia, making their presence there a liability.

And lastly, the British displayed a daft dilatory nature that doomed them.

This was especially problematic with the Royal Navy, which time and again showed up too late to stop French squadrons sailing to America and the Caribbean. Armies tended to wait weeks before marching after orders were set, and campaigns were rarely persecuted with vigor.

The Americans, although winning the war, also had their share of troubles.

Washington was not a great Captain. He was overly cautious, indecisive, inept tactically and had a truly unhealthy fixation on New York City that nearly doomed the Southern campaigns in the last year's of the war. He was jealous of his own prerogatives, rarely sending help to other commanders, and far too often played favorites and politics within his command, and with other senior officers (Horatio Gates his biggest victim).

Still, he kept his army together by sheer force of will, and earned his mens respect if he was never as well loved as a McClellan or a Lee. He was a terrific logistician, and though he tended to lose his battles, his willingness to fight for territory, even in defeat, tended to diffuse British efforts.

The Americans made a nearly fatal mistake by clinging to the defense of cities and large urban areas. They are hard to defend, harder still to take by force, and yet an occupier loses much in strategic consumption by trying to hold them and, if the enemy controls the surrounding rural areas, the holder of a city is at their mercy for food and provendor. Leningrad and Stalingrad are exceptions in war, not the norm.

American persistence in clinging to cities lead to disaster in New York, Charleston, Savannah, and Philadelphia. And yet holding those cities were ruinous to British plans as they became lodestones around their strategic necks.

John Ferling tells all of this in a moving, detailed narrative that goes into the totality of the war. His showcasing of the British strategy sessions are worth the price of the book alone as many times this gets ignored.

He is not overly fond of Washington as a General, then again Ferling does a good job of showcasing

everyone's faults as a commander, and their really was little in the realm of true genius in this long, frustrating war.

Although he skimps on tactical details, Ferling does an excellent job on the operational and strategic level, and all the while he reminds you of the human cost of this war.

This is an astoundingly excellent book on a war that, frankly, is largely ignored now a days.

Very highly recommended.

Ken says

Ferling, John. *Almost a Miracle: The American Victory in the War of Independence*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

...T.S. reading the letter that Renee wrote to break up with Brodie...“Whoa, she calls you callow in here.”

Brodie—“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

T.S.—“Well, it means frightened and weak-willed.”

Brodie—“Oh, I thought it was the only part of the letter that was complimentary.”

---from the movie *Mallrats* directed by Kevin Smith.

A rather unusual start to a book review of a military history, I know. Normally I would not begin a review with a criticism, but Ferling’s overuse of the word “callow” was egregious. I lost count of how often the word came up in the text, and the book is a whopping 575 pages. However, at least Ferling used the word correctly, unlike the screenwriter for *Mallrats*. Callow does not mean “frightened and weak-willed,” rather it means immature or unseasoned. It is a wonderful adjective, but its continual presence was a little distracting, even if I laughed remembering a vulgar yet funny movie from my college days. My biggest question in its use is how, in a war that lasted eight years, could the soldiers on either side not move past their callowness, even granting new enlistments over the years? This is my biggest criticism of the book; and it’s not really one against Ferling, but rather his editors, who should have corrected the problem. In the end it is a minor critique. Now on to the rest of the review...

John Ferling’s military history of the American Revolution is the companion volume to his 2003 political history of the time, *A Leap in the Dark*. Both volumes are excellent. Ferling was wise to divide his coverage. Many general histories of the period cram both areas into one book the size of just one of these two. The result is that inevitably the battles get short shrift in favor of the politics and intellectual history. There are histories of one theater or another, for example the Southern Strategy late in the war, and plenty more of single battles such as Bunker Hill or Saratoga, but I can’t think of many that cover the whole scope of the fighting from 1775 to 1783. Thus *Almost a Miracle* fills a real void in the study of the Revolution as a fine overview of the subject.

Ferling proceeds chronologically through the war, beginning with the buildup to Lexington and Concord in April 1775. Chronological arrangement is not always easy in military affairs that cross wide swaths of land as well as oceans. The movement of the war aided Ferling’s arrangement because the Revolution was not World War Two. In the latter war, battles raged concurrently on multiple fronts. During the War for Independence, the war began in New England and was waged in the North before moving to the South later. The war at sea had its most influential events in the years 1778 and 1779, so Ferling was able to place his coverage of that theater in that time. Of course events occur in the South earlier than 1780, and the North re-enters the narrative after, but Ferling tucks these intrusions into the broader story quite well. He begins each year with a chapter entitled Choices. These set the military decisions for each year in the broader political and diplomatic happenings of the Revolution. These chapters are important because while battlefield events

don't always play out as the result of the decisions made by politicians, many times they do. Ferling covers all the major battles in every theater: Bunker Hill, the Canadian campaign, New York, Trenton and Princeton, Saratoga, Philadelphia, Monmouth, Charleston, Camden, Cowpens, and Yorktown. Some highlights from the book have nothing to do with the actual events described in the book. The author's preface offers a personal account of how he came to write this book—how he discovered through his studies that his generation was not the only one profoundly influenced by wars. I found this short reflection to be a nice introduction. At the other end of the book is Ferling's superb bibliography. It is organized by subject, such as biographies, battles, general histories and documentary collections, unit histories, and diplomacy. One whole section is devoted to biographies of George Washington. If anyone is looking for a list of books on the Revolution, this bibliography is a fantastic place to begin.

Going back to the preface, Ferling mentions that in writing the book he came to recognize the importance of the war in the South in bringing about America's ultimate victory. I found this a bit odd, since I think that many historians of the War of Independence came to see how vital that theater was much earlier. Buchanan's *Road to Guilford Courthouse* and Lawrence Babits' study of Cowpens came out in 1997 and 1998 respectively. I think it safe to say that these books definitely brought the South Strategy to the forefront of historical opinion a full ten years before *Almost a Miracle* was published. Of course, Ferling used both texts as sources for his work, so I'm sure they helped influence his opinion.

Another important aspect that Ferling refers to in his preface is George Washington's generalship. He says he "came to see more flaws and greater virtues in Washington's leadership" (page xii). Indeed, both of these points are played out in the text of the book to great effect. One sees Washington's unreasonable obsession with New York even to the end of the war, and his disdain for moving South. Many realize that Washington lost many battles, but won the important ones like Trenton. More than that though, one sees Washington's charisma holding an army together through the darkest days of the war. The great thing about a book that covers the whole scope of the conflict is that the reader gets to see Washington improve as a general both in strategy and battlefield tactics. Certainly his bravery is always on display. Washington's warts are exposed, but his character shines through even in his weakest moments. He learns from his mistakes and grows over the eight years of the war.

If there is one weakness in the book, it is Ferling's coverage of the war in the backcountry against the Indians. He does cover it some, particularly the American campaigns against Joseph Brant and the Iroquois in the 1777 and 1778. The casual reader may not realize more could be said on the subject. However I spent a semester in an Early American Frontiers class and we dwelt a great deal on the War in Indian Country. Thankfully Ferling's bibliography gives the reader more sources to delve deeper into this section of the Revolution. I appreciate the fact that *Almost a Miracle* is quite lengthy at almost 600 pages, and sacrifices must be made so that a book should not become unwieldy; but it would have been nice in a military history to read something of the actual final battle of the war—the Battle of Blue Licks which took place in Kentucky in 1782, almost a year after Yorktown. Granted it had little strategic significance on the whole, but it was the true final battle of the Revolution.

Ferling closes the book with a couple of excellent concluding chapters which account for America's victory. On page 541 he mentions that British General Henry Clinton believed the Battle of Kings Mountain to be the turning point in the war. While there are a few excellent histories of the Southern theater as a whole, the last full length study of Kings Mountain came out in 1881. I find this a big hole in the scholarship of the war. Certainly Ferling's coverage of the 1780 battle was exciting and made me want to drive the three hours to the battlefield to get the lay of the land!

More interesting than that gap in the chronicles of America's historians is idea that Britain wrote off New England as lost by 1779 and turned to the Southern Strategy in order to keep the remainder of the colonies. Ferling's final chapter is a brilliant analysis of why Britain could not win, and why, in the end, America could not lose. The book reads well, and while it gets bogged down in the dreariness of 1779, one feels that

since America and Britain were both mucking around in the mire during that time, perhaps the reading should go slowly at that point as well. I truly enjoyed making my way through Ferling's history. It gave me ideas of study to pursue further. I happily recommend the book to other readers—and those same readers should pick up A Leap in the Dark as well.

S. says

unfortunately a new low in ebook descriptions-- book is 1/3rd footnotes and references. so it is not 700 pages, but a solid 450. however, the amazon.com special price of 1.99 erases most of any ill feeling.

crisply written; well-researched; flowing text. about as good as an eighteenth century war book can be, given that modern war books feature people who are more similar to us, whereas in the 18th century there's a bit of 'good sirr, if you would bee so kindd as to resrain your troops from looting, I would be most obliged' going on.

plenty of month-by-month information on the course of the war, featuring the various mood shifts as Saratoga, New Jersey battles, Charleston (little discussed in US history texts; a patriot defeat) switches the sense of who is prevailing.

many uncanny parallels to modern nation building in iraq; same dilemmas of civilian sentiment vs. military efficacy.

4/5

23 June 2013 reread: reconfirm 4/5 with nice, professional, smooth prose lacking only the absolute 'heart-stopping' quality of Hastings or eyes-glued-to-the-page of Atkinson. good nice professional work, but I'm just not running to buy every Ferling. a good read for war buffs; and very readable despite the fact the war is 240 years old.

fun facts:

New York clearly Tory / Loyalist compared to rebel capital Philly; radical hotbed Boston. (I sorta suspected this already, but several acccounts in this book more or less confirm).

quebec/saratoga illustrating of people's support determining victory. clearly the americans wanted independence; clearly quebec was a bit too far.

charleston was clearly important battle.

Arvind Sharma says

My first in-depth exposure to the American Revolution. Got interested in the topic after David McCullough's 1776. The book does a fantastic job of setting up the key characters, following the plot through years from

North to South, ending in Yorktown, highlighting the role of luck and providence at every step.

Since the book is from a History Professor and he probably needs to stay true to the details, it does get a bit tedious at times. But kept me interested throughout.

Mark Singer says

All history books should be this well written and as fun to read. I own about 25 books on the American Revolution and this is absolutely the best. If you have to read one book only on the American War for Independence then this is the one! This was required reading for a course I had on that subject in the Spring of 2010 at Temple University - Ambler.

edited (2/4/11) ***** now re-reading
Even better the second time through.

Captain Sir Roddy, R.N. (Ret.) says

I read this shortly after it was published in 2007, and thoroughly enjoyed it. If you're looking for a really well written and interesting account of the military history of the American War of Independence, from both the strategic as well as tactical perspective, this is one of the best one-volume accounts out there. This volume does an excellent job of 'humanizing' the commanders on both sides, and also focuses on telling the story of the soldiers in the ranks. Another feature of this book that I truly enjoyed was Ferling's recounting of the war in the southern region (i.e., mostly in South Carolina) of the United States. There was some particularly vicious fighting in this theater, and it typically receives little attention in most accounts of the American Revolutionary War. The book is profusely illustrated, and contains twenty excellent maps that support the text. I can pretty much guarantee that American history and military history buffs will enjoy reading this book.

Patrick says

I am about half-way through this book and enjoy it immensely. It is shaping up to be the best single volume history of the American Revolution that I have read. John Ferling does an excellent job of humanizing the many mythical leaders of that time period. Readers are introduced to General Washington's legendary temper and jealousy of potential rivals, General Howe's desire to resolve the crisis on favorable terms for Britain with as little bloodshed as possible, and King George III's absolute intransigence when it came to reconciliation in the early stages of the war. So far this is a great book and well worth the read.

I just finished the book this morning and the second half was as great as the first. The well known characters, who have become demi-gods with the passage of time, are revealed as what they truly were; ordinary men and women who accomplished extraordinary things. I also appreciated the emphasis on other, less well known individuals (in particular General Nathaniel Greene) and their vital contributions to the American cause. A very easy-to-read history that I highly recommend.

Matt says

The American Revolution holds very little interest to me, especially in comparison to the French and Indian War, which indirectly precipitated the Revolution. I think it's because it's a pastiche of lies, half-truths, legends and myths. The American Revolution is the American Creation story, and like the Book of Genesis, is better taken figuratively than literally.

I suppose on some level, America needs the myth of the Revolution in the same way overweight, pimply-faced high school students needs comic books: to believe we can be better than we are.

The Revolution often seems like it's told the way we *want* it to be, rather than how it was. From the beginning its been embellished, exaggerated, burnished, and massaged into something palatable. The Founding Fathers, to whom we've given so much homage, allegedly went to war over liberty. Not really. The war was fomented by wealthy New England merchants who disliked high taxes, and was backed by Southerners who owned slaves and supported the institution of slavery. Liberty indeed! Tyranny indeed! (Pop quiz: who abolished slavery first, England or America?)

Paul Revere didn't finish his ride. George Washington only won a single major battle without an assist. If it wasn't for the French, we couldn't have won. It took us another 80 odd years to abolish slavery. The War of Independence, the War for Liberty, is something much more nuanced and complex.

John Ferling isn't nearly as cynical about the Revolution as I am, but he does provide a corrective. *Almost a Miracle* is a well-researched, capably written military history of the Revolution. He surgically excises the fatty myths, leaving mean, hard-boiled history.

Ferling sets up the reasons for war quite quickly, which is appropriate. A full explanation of the various causes, the twists and turn, would take far too much space. Instead, he gives the general context, then dives right into battle.

Here's an excerpt from the battle of Bunker Hill (which actually took place on Breed's Hill - like I said...lies):

When the regulars were at fifty yards, and near the point where they would deploy and charge, the Americans opened fire. The volley blew apart the redcoats' line. When the back rows stepped into the breach, they, too, were cut down by the salvos that followed. What the British were attempting, wrote historian Christopher Ward, was akin to "pushing a wax candle against a red-hot plane." Lead units disintegrated. Men fell where they had stood. Others were driven backward or were spun around by the force of the shot that struck them, and some toppled mortally wounded into the nearby water. Still, the regulars regrouped and came again, and again, stumbling over their fallen comrades. But they, too, were stopped with heavy losses.

This is punchy, muscular narrative history that really brings the period, the experience, to life. But this is not mere narrative history. Ferling helpfully includes a number of chapters called "Choices" in which he analyzes the events which he just narrated, and provides further context for the actions and decisions made by the British and Colonial leadership.

Ferling does a good job of including the war in broad scope. He not only touches on the major battles and movements, but works hard to include the war at sea, the lesser-known war in the South, and the everyday experience of being a soldier of the Revolution.

Almost a Miracle does not propose any major revisions to the Revolution. Instead, Ferling shades several well-known figures differently. For instance, he is not nearly as harsh towards General Charles Lee as other historians (which considering his traitorous activities while in British captivity, is surprising). He is also fairly dispassionate towards Horatio Gates, the victor of Saratoga, who insulted later generations of historians by deigning to scheme against Washington. Gate's disastrous defeat at Camden almost seems reasonable in Ferling's hands.

Ferling gives high praise to Nathaniel Greene and Dan Morgan, and lesser marks to George Washington.

On the matter of Washington, Ferling positions himself as the anti-Joseph Ellis. During and after the war, Washington became a near-mythical figure. It's hard, in this day, to empathize with Washington because he doesn't seem like a flesh-and-blood human. His poise, cool, and moral rectitude lifted him above the ordinary human fray (think of Washington copping to chopping down that cherry tree). Ferling accepts that this is the view that existed, but argues Washington created the image himself. By furiously stomping his opposition, refusing to accept blame, and generally acting with Machiavellian cunning, Washington positioned himself as a new country's heir apparent.

The old story is that Washington tenaciously kept his Army together and by this act of will, won the day. Ferling's take is that Washington was a great politician but not a great soldier. Or even a good soldier. Or even average. He was actually not quite good at all. Which is historically true. As far back as the French and Indian War, which Washington started by assassinating a French diplomat, Washington was a loser. He lost Fort Mifflin; he precipitated a deadly friendly-fire incident then tried to avoid blame; he was nearly destroyed at Long Island, then showed a remarkable capacity to learn nothing from his mistakes by repeating the same blunder at Brandywine (which cost the Colonials their capitol of Philadelphia). Washington had one real victory, at Trenton, and fought another draw at Monmouth. Then it was up to Rochambeau and the French fleet to seal things at Yorktown.

During the war's endgame, Washington played little role. Instead it was Greene and Morgan in the South, at Cowpens and Guilford Courthouse, forcing Cornwallis to make his great mistake.

Other than giving a different gloss to old characters, I also appreciated how Ferling demolished what I like to call "the 2nd Amendment Theory of the American Revolution." This theory holds that it was the American militiaman, the farmer who put down his plow and picked up his musket, that won the Revolution. As Ferling shows time and again, this couldn't be further from the truth.

It wasn't the rural libertarian ideal that won the war; it was good old urban professionalism: the standing army. The militia failed at every turn, from Long Island to Camden. The only time they were put to any use was at the battle of Cowpens, where they were put in the dead center of the American lines, because Morgan knew they would run. When they did, Banastre Tarleton plunged forward, thinking he had a victory; instead he ran into a double envelopment.

The book is incredibly easy to follow, made easier by the inclusion of many maps. The battles were fairly simple to begin with, there being little tactical maneuver; the maps just make it that much simpler to grasp.

If you're interested in a reasoned, critical military history of the Revolution, you could pick worse places to start than with this book.

Carol Dobson says

A comprehensive, factual and fascinating account of the dramatic years of the American Revolution.

George Washington remarked that it was almost a miracle that the Americans had won the war and Ferling has used these words as the title for this book. He attempts to explain why America won the war, and why the British lost it.

War almost invariably encompasses terrible suffering, and the American Revolution was no exception; for the population near the eastern seaboard whose homes and lands were often destroyed, for the half-starved and nearly naked Continental soldiers and militia who lacked ammunition, and for the British (and Hessian) regulars fighting a ghastly war so far from home.

A fascinating and in-depth study of the American victory in the war of Independence.

Cobbcegmail.Com says

Enjoyed the broad overview of the war. After reading biographies of several founding fathers, it was helpful to get the whole picture. Boggled down in a few places in the second half going into details cataloguing numbers of supplies and such, but was just a minor inconvenience.

Jodi says

Despite my professor's view that this is not "truly" a history text (whatever that means), I really loved this book. It is a military history which I didn't think would be my thing, but I really enjoyed it. Ferling's book is more of a concrete time-line type rather than the ideological type of texts that my professor prefers. I found Ferling very refreshing after the large doses of ideology and Marxism of my other class readings. As a fan of George Washington, I also appreciated Ferling's approach to the good General. I dislike the seemingly current trend of tearing down our founding fathers--I don't mind learning of their flaws; they were just regular people after all, but I prefer to learn of their flaws balanced with some mention of their contributions. After all, if flawed men can do great things, there is hope for all of us.

Matt says

John Ferling has done excellent service as a writer and historian in this volume. It is an excellent and extremely readable survey of the military history of the American Revolution, and in particular is maybe the best treatment of the late war years you'll encounter. It is a thick book, but not as thick as advertised. It runs only 575 pages - the remainder of the book being extensive bibliography and indexes. I enjoyed it immensely.

For a new student of American history, much of what Ferling writes will be revelatory. For those more studied, it will offer fresh takes and insights. There is nothing here however revisionist or driven by churlish motivations. The men and women of the period are made to appear simply as they were, both good and bad, without hypocritical judgment or a too reverent and unskeptical awe. As such, those looking for contrivance or self-serving validation of one modern belief system or the other will need to look elsewhere, as Ferling does not bother indulging his audiences prejudices.

If there is one point on which Ferling departs from orthodox interpretation of the documents, it seemed to me that it was in his portrayal of the relative skills of Franklin and Adams as diplomatic envoys to France. Ferling reverses the usual role of Franklin as the cunning and skilled diplomat, and Adams as the bumbling, naive, and abrasive fool. Instead Ferling portrays Franklin as the all too pliable dupe of his cunning French hosts whose charisma never persuades the French to provide anything that they had not already planned to give anyway to further their own interests. Adams he paints as the far seeing and wise statesman who enrages the French principally by refusing to sacrifice his nation's interests in the furtherance of their imperial scheming. Since I'm a great admirer of both Franklin and Adams, but hitherto had held the French posting to be unsuitable to Adams temperament this left me much to think about and desiring to do further research.

There are only two things which prevent 'Almost a Miracle' from garnering from me five stars, and in fairness both of these are personal preferences rather than serious attacks on Ferling's methods or scholarship. The first is that Ferling is I think too loathe to employ the long quotation in his narrative. His short quotations - rarely more than sentence fragments - greatly reduce the burden of reading such a tome and keep up the brisk pace of the text, but at the same time a certain amount of weight to me seems proper in a history text. A richer experience of the characters in their own words is I think at times proper.

The second is even more minor. Having read several other accounts, I am acquainted with a bit more of the details of certain events in Ferling's narrative which Ferling is content to pass over in a sentence or two. While he is quite willing to admit in passing that "No one was as lucky as Washington" and that "the gods of war" were on the side of Greene, had Ferling stopped to explore those occasions in greater detail, he might readily have dropped the 'Almost' from the title. Still, since I'd much rather our secular brothers and sisters read this book than discount it or be offended by it, I'll be content with the excellent work as it is.

Joshua says

This is the second work that I have read from John Ferling, and I have found both works to be fantastic. The history of the American Revolution can become muddled by what Dr. Bernstein calls "founders chic." It can also become burdened by an over-critical, harsh assessment of the founders which fails to interpret them in the light of their own time or world. Dr. Ferling avoids both pitfalls and while he does not shy away from the weaknesses of the characters he is writing about, he does not vilify them either. He is a moderate in his approach which makes him come across as a very even-handed historian; I think this adds to his credibility as well. Before reviewing this work it should be clarified that this book focuses for the most part on the military aspects of the revolution. I have never been a great fan of military history, strategy, and tactics, but Dr. Ferling does a great job enlivening this story. This is a great book and here are just a few thoughts on the merits of this work.

The title of the book is called "Almost a Miracle" and this is the premise that Dr. Ferling sets out to explore. How the Americans actually won the war for independence is in many ways inexplicable. We had great military leaders but they were met by formidable opponents who had superior numbers and experience. George Washington was a great commander but he spent much of the war on the run using what is known as "Fabian tactics." This war of attrition placed him in peril that for some reason never turned against him. At least three times Washington could have easily been killed, and numerous times he could have been replaced. The decisions made by the British, the turn of the weather in Washington's favor, the downright lucky breaks of his junior officers all contributed to the big win that turned the war into the favor of the Americans. Much of the war had the Americans on the ropes and the army was always under threat of breaking down, dismantling, and mutiny. Certainly, Dr. Ferling is quick to point out the successful and genius strokes of American leaders in this war. When credit is due, he is quick to ascribe credit. However, the war did not really go very well for the Americans throughout its 7 years. The French were also a big asset

to us and we could not have won it without their help; yet, it was not the French alone that turned the war. In fact, the winning of the American revolution was "almost a miracle" just as Washington had said.

Dr. Ferling moves in a very linear pattern. He starts in 1776 and discusses the campaigns as well as decisions that were made by congress during that year. Each year he stops to discuss choices that had to be made by those in power and the various possibilities that they were faced with. He gives a clear picture what the founders had to consider before waging the war on Great Britain and the decisions that had to be made were sometimes staggering. Washington lived in constant threat that his job would be taken and given to another. General Gates and General Lee were both considered, but somehow Washington hung on. While both men might have been able to out-general Washington, I am not sure that both men would have been able to out-lead him. He had to make practical decisions that did not always lend himself to favorable public opinion. General Lee might have acted on his vanity more than his good sense. Washington could be indecisive but it was when his leaders turned on him that he discovered that he must follow his own instincts. As the book continues one finds himself or herself thinking that the war is a lost cause. Large and small British victories tax the continental army to breaking point.

Dr. Ferling does a great job drawing the readers into the suspense of the story. As battles are occurring one might discover that he or she is finding themselves emotionally and mentally invested in the outcome of the story. I got swept up in the story many times and found myself feeling like I was dragging when the war progressed slow and uncertain. That is a testimony to the writing style of author in that he captures the imagination. There were moments in the book where it seemed to be dragging and that is generally to be expected in any book of its size. There is no doubt that this is a very large work on the revolution and it takes a great deal of time to make any progress. By the end of the war I was so glad that things came to an end. The Americans were literally hanging on by "a wing and a prayer." When it comes to a close he really paints the characters of the story as a little bewildered. The British had a sizable army in the north and could have easily prosecuted the war in New York. The mistake of General Clinton in not bringing Cornwallis' army to the north was the decisive blow that ultimately determined the fate of the war.

While the book focuses a great deal on Washington and his actions, there is also a fair amount about the British generals as well. Howe lost the war, in my opinion, due to being indolent and not pursuing victory more aggressively. Cornwallis was in fact the most aggressive of the generals and achieved the greatest success in his southern campaign. General Clinton was a little too cautious but overall he was a good military leader. His biggest failing seems to be that there was a breach in the leadership between he and Cornwallis. In a war of this size it is important that the leaders like each other and agree to work together for the common good. Clinton had been there so long that he likely should have been recalled and replaced by another general. Washington's strategy of wearing out the opposition took its toll on the generals who fought on the American front. You gain a real sense of the stress and exhaustion that goes along with pressing a campaign in sultry swampland of South Carolina and Georgia. The soldiers marched for days on end in the sweltering heat and faced danger on every side. The war was difficult on the Americans who were more adjusted to the climate so you can imagine what it is was like for the redcoats. Cornwallis waged the right kind of war but he was little overconfident in his abilities.

Overall, this was a great read and I can't recommend it enough. The first book I read by Dr. Ferling was entitled "Independence" and it is a great companion to the this piece. In fact that would be a great book to start with so that the background of congress will set the stage for the military campaigns that are discussed in this book. I have another work of his that I will soon be reading and I am excited about it. If you are looking to analyzes the causes of the American victory, the people who were behind it's success, and the strategies employed to win, then this book is probably for you. Again, I appreciate the even-handed way that Dr. Ferling treated the war and those involved in it. There is no hero worship but it is clear that he does genuinely respect the genius and ability of the American leaders who spearheaded the military successes of the continental army. If you are only buying a couple of books on the American War of Independence then I would strongly recommend that this be one of those books. It is not a small work so it is not for the faint of

heart. It is well worth the time that you will invest in it and I look forward to taking the material I have learned and using to teach American history to my future students.

Bob Mobley says

John Ferling examines the American War of Independence in a compelling, interesting and intellectually perceptive manner. He is a fine historian, whose knowledge is enhanced by his ability as a writer to craft a compelling narrative. I recommend this book to anyone who is interested in the strategy and personal stories behind the leadership that is so important for American success against the British during our war of Independence. After you have finished John Ferling's fine history, most likely you will agree with him, that the American success is very close to being, "Almost a Miracle". I found one of the most interesting aspects of Ferling's book his examination into the leadership and thinking of many of the key decision makers who helped set the strategy and direction for the entire campaign. Especially interesting was his insights into George Washington, and how he developed as a leader and military strategist. Equally as fascinating is his examination of the British commanders and their lack of mutual support for each other during the war, resulting in a flawed strategy. The British Army was led by men who were essentially competing for the attention of their King and their own positions of power within their society.

Jason says

Almost a Miracle is a very well written, one volume, and strategic history of the military action in the American War of Independence. In a little over 600 pages of text, Ferling attempts to show how and why the American forces won a war that at the beginning was beyond reasonable to expect. Being a strategic history, the book begins from 1775 onwards, toward the settling of peace in 1783. Many Revolutionary War histories include almost a prelude, with lengthy sections on the causes of the war, and the political consequences of the actions of those on the Imperial and the Patriot sides. By sticking to a strict military retelling of the conflict, Ferling avoids any distractions from the thesis of his book, which is that the American forces simply made the fewest mistakes over the eight years of conflict.

A long time professor at West Georgia University, Ferling presents the familiar course of the war, from Lexington to New York, and ending up in the south at Yorktown, as a matter of difficult military choices. His conclusion for the British side that they were severely hindered by a decentralized command, on the front and at home, an ocean away, along with a total disregard for how to fight and win a conflict; stopped them from actually achieving any goal. His conclusion for the American side, that good leadership, geography and a willing populace led to the desire to see the war out, even beyond the economic ruin that the nation faced.

Ferling shows that he has been immersed in the subject for years with good research. The maps are excellent for a book of this nature, as the reader will be able to follow every major battle and campaign visually, and understand why they happened the way they did. In telling a strategic history, Ferling uses character profiles of every major military officer, on both sides. General Washington is his central figure, and in a sense, Ferling shows why he became the embodiment for the American resolve to continue the war. Yet Ferling makes, what seem to be, fair critiques of the major characters. British General Clinton is heavily criticized for being slow. Lafayette and Hamilton for being syncopates. Most of all, since Washington is the central actor, Ferling critiques to extents perhaps not usual for books of this period, showing how Washington's strengths and weaknesses contributed to how the conflict turned.

For this book, the Battle of New York City is really a turning point, for both sides changed their strategy, and committed to them, after this battle. About a third of the book is about the Southern campaign of 1779 – 1781. The strategy that Ferling emphasizes is that the British believed they had already lost the northern colonies by this point, and were simply trying to take as much territory as possible before peace talks began. I am not sure if the decentralized command structure of the Crown realized that was their strategy in 1779, but it makes sense in retrospect.

This is simply a very well written, and enjoyable to read military history of the War for Independence. The general reader should come away with a definite feel for the horrors of that war, why it was fought the way it was, and with definite conclusions about why the militaries acted the way they did. Almost a Miracle is highly recommended.
