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John Ferling, *Almost a Miracle: The American Victory in the War of Independence*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007. Pp. xiii, 679. ISBN 978-0-19-518121-0.

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John Ferling toiled for years in relative obscurity at West Georgia University, churning out at least nine books, dozens of articles, and uncounted reviews, almost all dealing with war and politics in eighteenth-century America, the same subjects that have brought fame and riches to Joseph Ellis, David Hackett Fischer, and David McCullough.¹ His prose may lack the elegance of Ellis's or McCullough's, and he may not have plumbed the depths of manuscript evidence as Fischer has done, but his work is solid—clear, sensible, and intellectually nourishing. His most recent book, a 575-page, detailed narrative of the American Revolutionary War, is a personal masterpiece.

His introductory chapter is a gem: a close-up account of the encounter between a small British force commanded by Captain William Glanville Evelyn, leading an infantry vanguard from the King's Own Regiment, landing at Pell's Point on Long Island Sound, ordered to cut off Washington's retreat through Westchester County in October 1776, and John Glover of Marblehead, Massachusetts, commanding a somewhat larger force of American troops, many of them tough ex-sailors, ordered to protect Washington's flank. Glover and his sailors got the best of the brief encounter, and poor Evelyn ended the day mortally wounded. This opening is well judged, because it brings the realities of eighteenth-century combat down to a graphic and very personal level for the modern reader, who will soon be trekking through the details of many, usually bigger battles in the course of a very long book about a long, hard war.

When historians start with a question as Ferling does—"How could the Americans possibly have won this war?"—they often focus on whatever argument they have developed to answer the Big Question, marshalling evidence in ways that best make the case. Ferling has not done this. Instead, he retells the whole story, as fully as and perhaps better than it has ever been told. Using detailed narrative rather than analysis to answer a complex question about historical outcome is not unlike what anthropologists call "thick description," observing closely and describing minutely a cultural phenomenon in order to explain it. The method, which subordinates theory, hypotheses, and even hunches to a rigorous factual inquiry, is empiricism taken as far it can go. It has the great advantage of letting readers see directly as much as the author sees without standing between them and reality, rather encouraging them to think along in the search for an answer. It has the additional virtue of not spoiling the story with heavy-handed analytical treatment. When "thick description" is

¹ Among Ferling's best are *The First of Men: A Life of George Washington* (Knoxville: U Tennessee Pr, 1988), and *Setting the World Ablaze: Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and the American Revolution* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2000). For his famous competitors, see Joseph Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (NY: Knopf, 2000), and *His Excellency: George Washington* (NY: Knopf, 2004); David Hackett Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1994), and *Washington's Crossing* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2004); David McCullough, *John Adams* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2001), and *1776* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2005), with my review at *MWSR* 2005.11.01.

Googled, it is quickly evident that the method emphasizes the *context* of events, events whose meaning is clear only when they are set fully in their context.

Ferling is very good at context, unlike so much military history, which sticks to its chosen subject without any digression that might deflate the drama. An example of the difference is Ferling's account of Washington's performance after 1778, praised by so many historians of this war for the "Fabian" strategy that kept the army intact at all costs, avoiding dangerous battles, and depending on French aid and the will of the American people to outlast the British. Ferling reminds us that while Washington remained inactive in the Hudson Highlands, the economy was crumbling, undermining civilian as well as military morale, the Great Powers were reportedly considering a brokered peace that would destroy the prospect of an independent United States, and the military and political situation in the South, which Washington virtually ignored, was critical. After initial failures to crush rebellion in 1775–1777, the British developed a new strategy for pacification in the South, pitting American Loyalists against the rebels, in effect unleashing a civil war, and this new strategy enjoyed great success through the summer of 1780. So the issue was not whether Washington's Fabian strategy was clever, but whether it rested on a sound overall appreciation of the context of the war.

Ferling does not tell stories simply for their own sake, but only when they bear on the larger issue—how the war was won rather than lost. For example, the adventures of Daniel Boone and George Rogers Clark are barely mentioned, because these men and their exploits had no bearing on the final peace, and were properly part of Southern land speculation west of the Appalachians (354–355).

Having ignored the main question for 560 pages of close narrative, Ferling returns to it in a fascinating final chapter. He begins by quoting Washington's expressed "astonishment," in his farewell order to the Army in November 1783, that the United States had won, calling it "little short of a standing miracle" (562). He then picks his way back through the story, emphasizing what emerges as crucial to the outcome. Though British troops outnumbered their American enemy two to one for the years 1776–1778, French entry in 1778 pushed British forces in America down to about 35,000, far too few to manage the tasks of occupation and pacification over such a vast territory. "French aid was the single most important factor in determining the outcome of the War of Independence.... With the American economy in ruins after 1778, it is inconceivable that the rebels could have waged war for three additional campaigns without a French ally, unless they had shifted almost entirely to guerrilla warfare" (564). Britain's best opportunity to win the war was lost by General Howe's caution, but the "Southern strategy" after 1778 might well have succeeded if it had started in the Chesapeake rather than the Carolinas. The American flaws that nearly lost the war were a fatally weak central government and a failure to commit to building a truly professional army. Washington's presence and his political skill were indisputable strengths, but his lack of operational skill and his indecisiveness were serious liabilities. As noted, his Fabian strategy rested on the dubious assumption that time was on his side.

Two of Ferling's conclusions in this final chapter will provoke debate. First, he suggests that, despite the decisive effect of British surrender at Yorktown, "in a great many ways the partisan war in the Carolinas and Georgia in 1780–1781 was where the war was won" (574).

That war was exactly the kind of nasty guerrilla and civil conflict that Congress and Washington had rejected in 1775, and for which Washington had shown little aptitude. Based on the record of a later meeting between Washington and Nathanael Greene on the site of the bloody little battle of Guilford Courthouse, North Carolina, in early 1781, Ferling suggests that Washington would not have done as well as Greene and was temperamentally unsuited for that kind of warfare (571).

The second provocative argument is that Washington, instead of sitting tight after 1777, should have at least considered another invasion of Canada, a first attempt having failed badly in 1775–1776. Ferling thinks that “a decisive victory in Canada in 1778 or 1779 would in all likelihood have brought the war to an end,” and if undertaken in 1780 would have stopped Britain from pursuing its new strategy in the South (572). This is one place where Ferling had me searching for any preceding “thick description” of the British situation in Canada generally or of why that northern base should have been so strategically sensitive. The commander and garrison in Canada supported, through their outposts at Niagara and Detroit, attacks all along the northern frontier of the United States, and the rationale of frontier defense for another invasion of Canada surfaced in American planning discussions throughout the war, often linked to the name of Lafayette. But France showed no interest in regaining its lost province of Quebec, and when Gates in early 1778, working through Congress, advanced the idea, which was popular in New York and New England, Washington dismissed it as “a child of folly” (290). It is difficult to assess the value of Ferling’s conjecture on Canada without the kind of thorough treatment he gives to other relevant subjects in this admirable book.