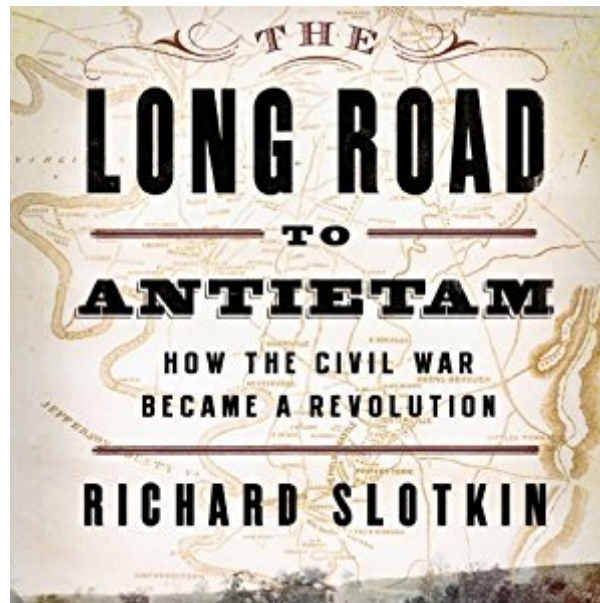




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The Long Road To Antietam: How The Civil War Became A Revolution



Synopsis

A masterful account of the Civil War's turning point in the tradition of James McPherson's *Crossroads of Freedom*. In the summer of 1862, after a year of protracted fighting, Abraham Lincoln decided on a radical change of strategy - one that abandoned hope for a compromise peace and committed the nation to all-out war. The centerpiece of that new strategy was the Emancipation Proclamation: an unprecedented use of federal power that would revolutionize Southern society. In *The Long Road to Antietam*, Richard Slotkin, a renowned cultural historian, reexamines the challenges that Lincoln encountered during that anguished summer 150 years ago. In an original and incisive study of character, Slotkin re-creates the showdown between Lincoln and General George McClellan, the "Young Napoleon" whose opposition to Lincoln included obsessive fantasies of dictatorship and a military coup. He brings to three-dimensional life their ruinous conflict, demonstrating how their political struggle provided Confederate General Robert E. Lee with his best opportunity to win the war, in the grand offensive that ended in September of 1862 at the bloody Battle of Antietam.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Stephen Sear's book 'Landscape Turned Red' is still one of the best books on the Battle of Antietam and his biography on McClellan and his book 'Controversies and Commanders' encompasses the detailed material on the political and dysfunctional 1862 Army of the Potomac. However, Slotkin provides a well written big picture of the campaign combined with the political intrigues of McClellan

and his generals and appropriately details the political importance of the Lee's invasion as well as Lincoln's capitalization of the standoff as the opportunity for the Emancipation Proclamation. Antietam was the true 'high tide of the Confederacy' with Bragg's invasion into Kentucky and Lee's entry into Maryland after the crushing 2nd Bull Run provided a huge opportunity for the south, not so much for foreign intervention but to capitalize on the political challenges of the union administration. The most fascinating part of the book is McClellan and his generals and McClellan's egotistical posturing and democratic party intrigues that allow talk of a military dictator. The poor performances of the Army of the Potomac doesn't allow Lincoln an opportunity to deal quite directly as he would like with the political army and his command options were limited in time of crisis. Slotkin presents an excellent telling of these conflicts and likens the time to the French Revolution where a fractured government was eventually taken over by a military dictator, Napoleon. Slotkin provides a well written summary of the tenuous union times with a fair but not overly detailed description of the battle, the strength of the book is the political intrigues of McClellan and the shrewdness of Lincoln to carefully manage McClellan, his political adversaries waiting for the right time to change the political course of the war and deal with McClellan. I gave the book 4 stars since Slotkin uses primarily secondary sources with limited foot notes.

The long road that led 125,000 Civil War soldiers to the rocky hills around Antietam Creek, Maryland, where they fought a battle that remains the bloodiest day in American history, began with key decisions made by four powerful men in two capitals. At the U.S. capital in Washington, President Abraham Lincoln mulled over the possibility that what had been, officially, a war strictly to restore the Union should be made a war to abolish slavery as well. Lincoln's top general, the "Young Napoleon" George B. McClellan, was afflicted by a Napoleonic belief in his own greatness; he despised President Lincoln, believed that the war should leave slavery untouched, and felt that a general of his ability should be able to set civilian as well as military policy. Meanwhile, at the rebel capital at Richmond, Confederate president Jefferson Davis acceded to the belief of his top general, Robert E. Lee, that an invasion of the North by Lee's Army of Northern Virginia could lead to a decisive military victory that would guarantee Confederate independence. Those decisions made at Washington and Richmond led directly to the carnage at Antietam, and to a fundamental change in the basis on which the American Civil War was fought. In "The Long Road to Antietam," Richard Slotkin, an emeritus professor at Wesleyan University, provides a well-written and thorough look at the political and military dimensions of the Civil War's Maryland Campaign and Battle of Antietam.

Where Slotkin's interpretation differs from that of other students of Antietam is largely in his focus on McClellan's political maneuverings in the weeks and months leading up to Antietam. Anyone who has read about this part of the Civil War knows of McClellan's predilection for grandiosity, his musings about what he would do if his army called upon him to take over the U.S. government and lead the Union war effort like a Caesar-esque dictator. In Slotkin's reading, those musings are more serious than other historians have thought. Slotkin focuses on how "Even McClellan's friends were concerned that he was breaching the wall between military and civil authority," with a friend and fellow officer, General William "Baldy" Smith, warning McClellan that one of McClellan's letters "looks like treason and will ruin you & all of us" (p. 100). After about 130 pages of political preliminaries, Slotkin proceeds to a strategic and tactical review of the Confederate invasion of Maryland; the Union Army's move northwest from Washington to block the rebel attack; the initial Union victory at the Battle of South Mountain on September 14, 1862, near Boonsboro, Maryland; and finally the much larger battle at Antietam three days later. Students of Antietam already know how the invasion of Maryland, combined with the need to reduce the Union garrison at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia), "confronted [Lee] with an extremely complex tactical problem. In trying to solve it he would expose his army to destruction" (p. 161). Lee's decision to split his army into five separate parts was characteristically bold, and reflected his belief that the usually cautious McClellan would move slowly enough to give Lee plenty of time to reunite the Army of Northern Virginia before giving battle; but a lost copy of Lee's Special Orders No. 191 (forever after known as the "Lost Order") found its way to McClellan, in "a piece of luck so outrageous and unearned that [McClellan] might be pardoned for thinking himself favored by providence" (p. 138). Outnumbering his enemy almost two-to-one and holding, as it were, a complimentary copy of the other team's playbook "McClellan still dithered and hesitated enough to give Lee just enough time to reassemble the Army of Northern Virginia and line it up west of Antietam Creek near Sharpsburg, Maryland. In Slotkin's telling, Antietam, from the Union perspective, is a story of brave soldiers fighting well in spite of often poor decisions by their commanders, as when Union General Edwin Sumner, commanding the Union II Corps, was overwhelmed by the battle action in which he saw the Union right wing engaged, and erroneously reported to headquarters that

“I have no command” my command, [Nathaniel] Banks’s command and [Joseph] Hooker’s command are all cut up and demoralized” (p. 318). The Confederate soldiers, meanwhile, also fought well and were generally better led. Lee “embraced the chaos and fluidity of battle, confident in his own ability to read the play of forces, and in the ability of his corps and division commanders to execute his orders with initiative, energy, and good judgment”; but his erroneous belief “that his soldiers were markedly superior to those of the enemy in both combat skills and morale” (p. 319) caused him to take great risks that, as Antietam as elsewhere, would result in the loss of rebel soldiers whom the Confederacy ultimately could not replace. Antietam was a tactical draw — a bloody watershed that resulted in 22,000 casualties (12,000 Union, 10,000 Confederate), including 2100 Yankees and 1600 rebels killed. In strategic terms, however, it may be the most important victory the Union ever won; in forcing Lee’s Confederate army back into Virginia, it enabled President Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, with its declaration that enslaved people in areas that refused to end the rebellion would be “forever free.” It is in his consideration of the Emancipation Proclamation and its impact that Slotkin’s emphasis on “How the Civil War Became a Revolution” (the book’s subtitle) becomes most clear. Slotkin argues persuasively that “by promising to eliminate slavery the Proclamation exposed the underlying problem of race in America — the contradiction between a political state based upon the presumption of civic equality and a culture deeply imbued with the values of white supremacy” (p. 408). McClellan’s vision of a restored Union with slavery intact was defunct — as was McClellan’s career, when he was relieved of command for failing to pursue the rebels after Antietam. By contrast, President Lincoln’s belief, expressed one year later in the Gettysburg Address, that the United States of America could have “a new birth of freedom” was vindicated. As a Marylander who grew up in a Montgomery County neighborhood that was built adjacent to part of the Civil War defenses of Washington, D.C., I have always found Antietam fascinating. I have visited the Antietam National Battlefield many times, and I am glad when I find a book that has something new to say about the Maryland Campaign. Slotkin’s emphasis on the historically transformative quality of the Maryland Campaign, and on an intriguing political question -- just how serious *was* McClellan about deposing President Lincoln and taking over the United States Government? -- may be the most significant contribution made by “The Long Road to Antietam.”

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