

The Long Road to Antietam: How the Civil War Became a Revolution

Thomas Clemens

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Clemens, Thomas (2013) "The Long Road to Antietam: How the Civil War Became a Revolution," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 2, Article 23.

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.15.2.25

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol15/iss2/23>

Review

Clemens, Thomas

Spring 2013

Slotkin, Richard *The Long Road to Antietam: How the Civil War Became a Revolution*. Liverlight Publishing, \$32.95 ISBN 978-0-87140-411-4

Placing Antietam in a Larger Context

The sesquicentennial of the Civil War has spawned a number of works dedicated to the individual battles as their anniversaries occur. One such book is Richard Slotkin's *Long Road to Antietam* in which he presents the thesis that the Maryland Campaign of 1862 not only represented a turning point in the conflict, but that it also was a time of revolutionary change for both the United States and Confederate States governments. This revolution involved a political change of direction in the war for the Union, as Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation changed the direction of the war from suppressing an insurrection to a revolutionary war to end slavery, which would re-order the social and economic structure of the country. For the South the "revolution" was a shift in war strategy to invade northern, or at least border, states, thereby undermining northern morale and hopefully achieving independence by shifting from a purely defensive strategy to an offensive one.

Both of these themes have been argued before and Slotkin has chosen to present them in a work of synthesis of other works rather than presenting any new research of his own. James McPherson's *Crossroads of Freedom* made much the same argument about the Emancipation Proclamation several years ago, and Slotkin borrows most of his discussion of Confederate strategy from the works of Joseph Harsh, especially *Confederate Tide Rising and Taken at the Flood*.

As for his treatment of the military aspects of the Maryland Campaign of 1862, Slotkin is at his best when he follows Harsh's narrative in *Taken at the Flood*, although he ignores the more nuanced and balanced treatment of McClellan in that work. He opted instead for the works of Stephen Sears,

including *Landscape Turned Red*, *McClellan the Young Napoleon* and *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan*. In fact, the only real primary source Slotkin cites is Sears' edition of the McClellan papers. Although occasionally citing Ethan Rafuse's more recent and balanced study of the Army of the Potomac's most controversial commander, Slotkin constantly bases his constant and often undocumented criticism of McClellan on Sears' biography. Even more provocative is that despite using the most negative portrayal of George McClellan this book surpasses Sears' view, frequently accusing McClellan of traitorous activities and schemes. All these accusations are evidently based on his opinion, as no other evidence is presented other than what is found in Sears' books.

The cast of characters in Slotkin's re-telling of this pivotal campaign of the war are the familiar stereotypes so engrained in Civil War literature. Lincoln is omniscient, Lee infallible, McClellan pusillanimous, Jackson mysteriously brilliant, Sumner a blundering dotard, etc. While these caricatures allow the author to skillfully tell his tale, they do not reflect reality.

In the details of the campaign Slotkin demonstrates a great unfamiliarity with the terrain and gets many simple facts twisted. Examples abound, but a few should suffice: On page 205 the author writes that John Gibbon "fought his battery well at First Bull Run" although it is a fact that Gibbon was not present at that battle. On the same page he also ignores recent scholarship by referring to Gibbon's brigade at South Mountain as the "Iron Brigade," a nickname they did not receive until later in the war. On page 100 Union General Phillip Kearney is described as "a West Point graduate," a school Kearney never attended. In his narrative Slotkin placed Crampton's Gap "Twelve miles to the south [of Fox's Gap] as the crow flies, but almost twice that by road..." Neither statement is correct. And the map on the facing page ignores the existence of Elk Ridge and places Gen. McLaws Confederate division on South Mountain, which is physically out of cannon range of Harpers Ferry. Chronologically incorrect, Slotkin writes that it rained on the night of September 15; it was the following night. Perhaps his most obvious error occurs on page 239 where Slotkin asserts that it was the Roulette farm, and not the Mumma farm, which was deliberately burned by the Confederates. Even the casual Civil War enthusiast knows differently.

Perhaps more troubling than the factual errors are the many times when Slotkin attributes thoughts and motives to various commanders on both sides,

often undocumented, and at other times not supported by the sources cited. This technique allows the author to ascribe or deny certain knowledge to those involved in the campaign, to critique the tactical handling of the Union army based on after-the-fact knowledge and to positively state McClellan approved of toppling the Lincoln administration when there is no conclusive evidence that he encouraged or acknowledged such talk. It makes an intriguing narrative, but not a factual one.

With no new themes in *Long Road to Antietam*, and much of the military action described taken from secondary sources that are thirty years old, we cannot expect much from this book. It is a well-written and thrilling, if inaccurate, narrative of perhaps the most pivotal campaign of the Civil War. The quality of this book might be improved had the author done a thorough study of the more recent works on the subject; such as Vince Armstrong's fine work on *McClellan, Sumner and the Second Corps at Antietam*, and John Hoptak's *The Battle of South Mountain*. A thorough study is not, however, the intent of this book. Slotkin appears to be dedicated to a comforting fable of heroes and villains, of nobility and baseness, and any ambiguity simply gets in the way of a good story.

Dr. Thomas G. Clemens is professor emeritus from Hagerstown Community College and the editor of Antietam historian Ezra A. Carman's authoritative manuscript of the Maryland Campaign of September 1862; Volume I 2010, Vol. II 2012, and Vol. III to be published later this year. He is the President of Save Historic Antietam Foundation, lives a few miles from Antietam National Battlefield where he has volunteered over thirty years and is a licensed Antietam Battlefield Guide.