

# Turning Points of the American Civil War

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## Review

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**Mackowski, Chris and Kristopher D. White.** *Turning Points of the American Civil War*. Southern Illinois University Press, \$24.50 ISBN 9780809336210

Turning points can be tricky things. Witnesses rarely recognize them as such until long after the fact, and each successive generation is likely to have its own favorite anyway. As a grade school Civil War buff touring the Gettysburg battlefield in the Summer of 1963, I stood at the so-called "High Water Mark" while my father pondered the related "might have been" aloud. Not until college – E.B. Long's Civil War course at the University of Wyoming – did I get a whiff of 1864: Grant's butcher bill, Lincoln's political problems, and, thanks to B.H. Liddell Hart, the significance of Atlanta being "ours, and fairly won." So, if Lee's biggest failure and Sherman's most important success were both watersheds, which was the Continental Divide?

Or was there one? In the foreword, Thomas Desjardin notes that the High Water Mark was mainly John Badger Bachelder's cash cow and that others more qualified to comment on Gettysburg's historical significance had already moved on to other battlefields when Bachelder arrived there. Co-editors Mackowski and White, founders of the *Emerging Civil War* blog, include nine turning points explored by public historians with backgrounds in each. No contribution refutes another; the editors intend only that their volume serve as a point of departure for readers in search of their own conclusions. The happy result is that we can see turning points for what they really are: ex post facto conventionalizations that make something as numbingly chaotic as war appear slightly more orderly and understandable.

Some of those turning points will come as no surprise. Kevin Pawlak notes that the Emancipation Proclamation opened the door for U.S. recruitment of 180,000-plus blacks, over half of which were former slaves. What U.S. Grant termed "the heaviest [sic] blow yet given the Confederacy" (Pawlak's title) changed the war's dimensions by ultimately forcing the South to choose between slavery and independence. When Patrick Cleburne and others urged manumission as payment for Confederate military service, they did so because no other route to independence remained. Not that such a desperation measure would have helped: escaped slaves who wore blue were free the day they enlisted. Given more space, the author might also have noted that Lincoln's additional war aim sometimes hurt Union reenlistments and unit performance in 1864 because not every bluecoat savored the role of de facto abolitionist. In *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac* (reviewed in this journal's Winter 2012 issue) Lawrence A. Kreisler elaborates on that unintended result.

Not surprisingly, two of the contributors focus on Ulysses S. Grant. Like J.F.C. Fuller and numerous others, Daniel T. Davis sees the fall of Vicksburg as Grant's springboard to

stardom, not only because of operational daring, low casualties (except for the Union assaults of 19 and 22 May), and significant strategic results, but because the capture of that particular objective encouraged Grant to see all subsequent operations in strategic perspective. Although peripheral to Davis's central argument, two or three more sentences on the 30,000-plus paroled Confederate prisoners would have added perspective; not only did parole violations help convince Grant to suspend prisoner exchanges, but a large number of non-violators quit the war for good. Especially when compared with the Army of Northern Virginia's simultaneous retreat in good order from Gettysburg, such disintegration stands out.

Ryan Longfellow's portrayal of Grant in the Wilderness also underlines Grant's strategic insight, while noting the concomitant determination so essential now that he faced an enemy who enjoyed the advantage of interior lines. Having famously chastised an officer for worrying too much about what Lee was going to do, Grant nevertheless realized that Lee was a cut above anyone he had faced previously. And by ordering an advance after such a bloody tactical stalemate, the general indeed convinced his troops that a significant change had occurred. Even so, this reviewer remains unsure of Grant's most important turning point. He built his reputation slowly and advanced, sometimes by default, as others failed. One might argue that the Grant who looked as though "he had determined to drive his head through a brick wall" first emerged at Belmont in November 1861, when he learned to overcome the undue counsel of his fears. (p. 162) Possibly the key event was his 30 April 1863 crossing of the Mississippi when, cut off from his base of supply, he nevertheless appreciated being "on dry ground on the same side of the river with the enemy." (p. 144)

John Bell Hood's appointment to command the Army of Tennessee and the election of 1864 both relate to the fall of Atlanta. Addressing the former, Stephen Davis emphasizes the flaws of Hood's predecessor as much as Hood's, as well as the lack of alternatives open to Jefferson Davis during July 1864. Many readers will concede both points, but remember that neither Grant nor Sherman criticized Joseph E. Johnston's Fabian approach after the war. Davis notes this, yet chalks up the Confederates' lost opportunity at Cassville on 19 May in one sentence to a changed tactical situation on Hood's front. This take on a self-promoting subordinate who shamelessly lobbied for Johnston's job on the grounds that Johnston lacked a killer instinct would have been more compelling had the author discredited the most popular competing argument: that Hood misread the situation and did not attack when he should have, thereby squandering Joe Johnston's only opportunity to counterpunch. As for Hood's subsequent evacuation of the city he was sworn to defend, Andrew Rea Redd gives it no more ink than Confederate defeats at Mobile Bay or in the Shenandoah Valley, all of which exacerbated severe divisions within the Democratic Party as Lincoln stood for reelection. Redd's most important observation stems from a counterfactual: even if McClellan had been elected, he argues, Union military campaigns would have continued as long as they yielded success.

This volume's four other turning points will appear to many in the lower case, not as watersheds so much as actions that yielded consequences. Nevertheless, commentary on these provokes thought as well. Robert Orrison reminds us that, despite its small scale and the lack of a rebel exploitation, Union defeat at First Bull Run enabled George B. McClellan's emergence and his creation of the Army of the Potomac, the largest and best supplied field army on either

side. Whether the U.S. military "came of age that summer" (p. 23) without a major victory or a grand strategy is more debatable.

James A. Morgan's commentary on the Union defeat at Ball's Bluff is a similarly mixed bag. The consequence was civilian interference, the battle's most famous fatality being Colonel Edward D. Baker, a friend of Lincoln's and popular abolitionist senator-turned brigade commander. Baker's radical Republican colleagues responded by creating the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, which blamed Baker's commander, Brigadier General Charles Stone. Stone had been nowhere near the battle, but was a Democrat who had returned two Maryland slaves to their owners. That he had done so in perfect accordance with federal policy mattered not. The JCCW's abuse of power in the wake of Ball's Bluff is thus obvious enough, yet Morgan allows that Stone would have been targeted later anyway. Indeed, *any* civil war in which political patronage and outright micromanagement do not play inflated roles is hard to imagine. That the JCCW wanted a war to extinguish slavery is also clear, but its creation in the wake of such a minor engagement suggests ongoing dysfunction as much as change.

Of the nine authors under consideration, Gregory A. Mertz has the toughest task of all, and one that will likely continue to keep Civil War roundtables occupied: determining how much Albert Sidney Johnston's death hurt the Confederate cause. And now that counterfactual analysis has gained some credibility, "What if?" is more than a parlor game. America's largest battle to date by far, the bloodletting at Shiloh would have been a turning point even had Sidney Johnston survived it. Staying within the current historiographical mainstream, Mertz rejects a favorite Lost Cause lament: that the Confederates would have won at Shiloh and controlled the West had that fateful shot missed. Disclaimers notwithstanding – no one can tell what a luckier Johnston *would* have done late in the afternoon of 6 April 1862 – available evidence suggests that Grant's Last Line probably would have repelled an assault should Johnston have led one. So, too, does Mertz hold that only the failures of Johnston's successors make his death worthy of consideration as a turning point. The overall assessment of Johnston's potential is positive, yet the author treats his subject's mistakes thoroughly enough so that the reader can extrapolate from those as well.

Kristopher D. White sees Chancellorsville not only as Lee's greatest triumph, but as a turning point because all of his subsequent victories came while on the strategic defensive. Giving another black eye to Lost Cause historiography, he treats Jackson's death as part of a larger problem. The "battering ram"-like Confederate attacks of 3 May, he argues, were the tip of an iceberg: the unsustainable casualty rate that Lee's generalship had always inflicted, and would continue to inflict, on his own army and key subordinates (122). Like Malvern Hill, Second Manassas, Antietam, and even Fredericksburg, that key moment at Chancellorsville was a self-inflicted wound that led inexorably to another – in this case, the biggest of all. That Gettysburg might have turned out differently had Lee's pre-Chancellorsville chain of command survived must remain another of those tempting "what ifs."

In sharing public historians' thoughts about various turning points, Mackowski and White invite the rest of us to ponder the concept for ourselves. Are turning points invented by historians or merely discovered by them? To what extent can an event's participants recognize its significance? Do park visitors who have not done several thousand pages of background

reading need these signposts more than those of us who have? And if turning points are necessary constructs that make a larger event more understandable, how much might they distort it in the process? Amidst these uncertainties is a given: this volume will force at least some readers to rethink their preconceptions.

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