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Gettysburg: The Last Invasion

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Gettysburg: The Last Invasion.

By Allen C. Guelzo. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2013. Pp. xii-632. \$35.00. ISBN 978-0-307-59408-2.)

Reviewed by Jay Jared Smith

IN *GETTYSBURG: The Last Invasion* Allen Guelzo recounted the battle between “two great armies, bound for the greatest and most violent collision the North American continent had ever seen” (5). In this study, while mentioning the characters and reasons for the engagement, Guelzo mainly focused on the battle itself—the blow by blow accounts of the three days of fighting. Through this detailed analysis of the battle, Guelzo made a compelling argument that demonstrated just how close the Confederacy came to winning at Gettysburg. A Confederate victory, Guelzo tells us, would have had such an injurious effect on northern public opinion that it might have changed the whole history of the war.

Guelzo began his study by giving the reader a feel for the state of the military prior to the outbreak of the war. He noted that the military budget “before the war was at a level befitting a national constabulary” (10). Guelzo explained that, at the time, the United States had an aversion to standing armies. If war did break out, the government would need to implement a massive call for troops—a fact that did not sit well with some, especially in the North.

Guelzo then offered a superb description of the common soldier, which contrasts with what one might expect from a typical professional soldier. Guelzo stated that “few of them grasped what discipline meant and fewer still saw any sense in unquestioningly following orders” (11). This seemed to be true for both sides in the conflict. Guelzo related the story of a Michigan officer who said that many of the men seem to think they should never be spoken to unless the remarks are prefaced by some words

of deferential politeness. As for the Confederate soldier, he considered it “his privilege to always believe that he would decide some questions for himself” (11). Nevertheless, these state-based volunteers, although lacking in discipline, prided themselves on their ability for battle.

Guelzo continued this excellent account by turning his attention to the commanders of each army. Here we see another similarity between the two armies—the divisiveness that existed among the commanders. In the Confederate army, a rivalry existed between the Virginians and the soldiers from the other southern states. As for the Union army, the McClellan Democrats, who did not seek to abolish slavery, contended with the anti-slavery Republicans. Suffice it to say these rivalries affected the way each army performed.

In this work Guelzo contested many long held assumptions of the battle. For many historians and scholars, Joshua Chamberlain stood as the hero of Little Round Top. However, Guelzo credited the hilltop victory to Chamberlain’s men and the other officers in his division. Guelzo also protested the notion of the Civil War as the first modern total war. Many scholars have cited the advance in weaponry and the death tolls to support this interpretation. Guelzo, however, maintained that the casualties were not a result of advances in technology, but a result of the way the soldiers fought. Another area where Guelzo differs with other historians, thus adding significantly to the literature of the subject, is the importance he placed on the Battle of Gettysburg. Many scholars contend that the most important theatre of the war was in the West. Guelzo, however, makes it clear that the Battle of Gettysburg was of

paramount importance. As mentioned earlier, if the South would have won, which, as Guelzo contended, they almost did, then Northern public opinion might have been swayed so much as to force the government to sue for peace. After the battle, though, the tide had shifted. This gave Lincoln the breathing room he needed to continue the war.

Gettysburg: The Last Invasion served as a great contribution to the history of the three deadliest days in American military history. In his chronological account, which began with the march to Gettysburg and ended with the march out, Guelzo's deft use of sources, which included memoirs, diaries, and regimental records, allowed him to present an extremely accurate account of the battle. In addition, Guelzo overturned some long held beliefs about the battle. These included Chamberlain's actions on Little Round Top, as well as the belief that the Civil War was the first modern war. Guelzo also differed with some scholars by attributing the outcome of the battle to Lee's mistakes, as Lee himself did. With this work, Guelzo literally compiled a minute by minute retelling of the three days in Pennsylvania. He also explored the broader implications of the outcome. Scholars and Civil War enthusiasts will surely consider this work as an immense contribution to the history of America's deadliest battle.
