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Review of "Fateful Lightning: A New History of the Civil War and Reconstruction"

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Allen Guelzo. *Fateful Lightning: A New History of the Civil War and Reconstruction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

An historian once remarked to me that James McPherson's magisterial *Battle Cry of Freedom* "killed Civil War studies." McPherson's tome, this historian argued, was so accurate, so deftly and entertainingly written, that no one would match it. By taking a macro approach of the conflict, though, Gettysburg College professor Allen C. Guelzo's *Fateful Lightning: A New History of the Civil War and Reconstruction* shows that skillful historians can not only match McPherson's eloquent and engaging writing style but also shed new light on the coming and aftermath of the Civil War.

Guelzo's 536-page book covers an extraordinary amount of history with remarkable economy. Instead of following the lead of other Civil War narratives and beginning with the Mexican American War, Guelzo's first chapter addresses a coterie of topics, from the political philosophy of the revolutionary generation and the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions to the rise of the Cotton South and the tactics of the abolitionist movement. *Fateful Lightning's* final chapter and epilogue, on the other hand, extend the story through Reconstruction, addressing not only the end of the war itself but also the adoption of the Fourteenth Amendment, the battles between the Radical Republicans in Congress and President Andrew Johnson, the rise of the Lost Cause and Redeemers in the South, and the North's tiring of Reconstruction.

For those unfamiliar with the Civil War, the remaining chapters provide an introduction to the causes of and events during the "War between the States." Guelzo addresses the extensive list of events, legislation, and electoral developments that historians have long pointed to as integral for understanding the Civil War (e.g., the Mexican American War, Wilmot's Proviso, the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the rise of the Republican party, *Dred Scott*, John Brown's raid, Lincoln's election). For those more familiar with this drama, Guelzo's historical insight and interpretation of events should prove insightful and thought-provoking. For instance, Guelzo asks, Did politicians act *irrationally* in the lead up to war? Guelzo believes that "Northerners and Southerners were driven...by the clearest political logic," struggling "for workable compromises right down to the last minute..." (96). For those who think the war was an avoidable mistake—and this includes a long list of historians—*Fateful Lightning* provides much to ponder.

Guelzo demonstrates a keen understanding of military strategy and shows a knack for biography when writing about the war years (1861-1865). Readers not well acquainted with the Civil War will learn about the day-to-day life of a soldier, the intricacies of the Union blockade and the South's raiding of Federal commerce ships, and the battle between the ironclads *Monitor* and *Virginia*. A large part of this story centers around the North's search for a general, as George B. McClellan, the "Young Napoleon," along with a string of other Union generals, prove inadequate in challenging the South's paragon of military excellence, Robert E. Lee. In the end, only Ulysses Grant succeeds against Lee. In addition, Guelzo covers the challenges that both Abraham Lincoln



and Confederate President Jefferson Davis faced from within their own governments and from Britain and France. Lincoln's confrontations with the Democratic party, including the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus, receives adequate attention in *Fateful Lightning*, as do the challenges Davis faced from more states' rights-minded southerners. On foreign policy, Guelzo's particularly adept at explaining the anti-democratic impulses of the British and French monarchs and their desire for the end of America's republican experiment.

For Civil War "buffs," the narrative includes details, descriptions, and interpretations of the Civil War era that will entertain and provoke debate. For example, the description that "[n]o one in American history has ever looked less like a great general than Ulysses Grant" will conjure images of the general for those familiar with his disheveled, unkempt look (197). More importantly, the book's foray into Reconstruction helps place the Civil War in greater historical context. As such, Guelzo addresses three questions central to Reconstruction: 1) What was the constitutional status of the Confederate states at war's end?; 2) What was the slaves legal status?; and 3) Who would now be in power, not only in the old Confederacy, but in Washington itself? (484). Guelzo provides cursory coverage to each of these questions, highlighting the drama that engulfed Washington as Andrew Johnson and the Radical Republicans battled each other over the direction and purpose of Reconstruction.

Fateful Lightning won't satisfy all readers, though. For those interested in military tactics, the narrative may feel wont of detail. Missing are minutiae about Pickett's charge, Chamberlain's stand on Little Round Top, among other famous moments on the battlefield. Others, on the other hand, might feel unsatisfied with the number of pages devoted to Reconstruction. These readers may believe more emphasis could have been placed on the question, What shall be done with the freed slaves? (181). Or put differently: What happened to the freed slaves after the war? Providing greater detail about the early "Black Codes" and the violence groups like the Ku Klux Klan inflicted upon African Americans would further highlight the difficulty blacks faced in their struggle for equality.

Despite these mild criticisms, Guelzo's *Fateful Lightning* proves that McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* could not even "kill" the one-volume account of the Civil War. Guelzo has shown that the standard and oftentimes unchallenged periodizations of American history (e.g., early republic, antebellum, Civil War, Reconstruction) cannot be so easily isolated from each other. Combining a mastery of sources with an accessible and engaging prose, Guelzo's *Fateful Lightning* should find its place alongside *Battle Cry of Freedom* as a classic of this critical period in American history.

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