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

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Richard Slotkin, *The Long Road to Antietam: How the Civil War Became a Revolution* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012.

The purpose of Richard Slotkin's *The Long Road to Antietam: How the Civil War Became a Revolution* is to examine how and why the Battle of Antietam in September of 1862 should be considered a turning point in America's Civil War. Slotkin, a historian who has written a number of books on war and American society, is also a prize winning novelist. This combination of talents as a researcher and a writer serve both general readers and scholars of the Civil War in this vivid and well-crafted examination of Antietam.

Slotkin argues that the significance of Antietam is not in the battle itself, but rather in how it marked a radical turn in the war strategies of Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis. Before the battle, Slotkin argues, many Americans believed it was possible to find a compromise to end the war and re-unify the nation. Both sides, consequently, fought a limited war of maneuver with the idea of minimizing casualties and the destruction of property. Slotkin argues that in the Summer of 1862 both sides were becoming convinced that a limited war would not achieve victory, compromise, or reunion and that the Battle of Antietam and the Emancipation Proclamation which followed marked the conscious strategic change to a kind of war that would end only by the outright victory of one side over the other. The Civil War, in short, became a revolution.

The Long Road to Antietam differs from previous examinations of the battle and its significance in that Slotkin provides multiple view points to the events and integrates social, political, and military factors with the variable of how the personalities of the generals and politicians impacted events. More specifically, he takes a different perspective than James McPherson's *Cross roads of Freedom: Antietam*(2002) by arguing that the battle did much more than arrest Confederate military success, forestall foreign diplomatic recognition of the Confederacy, and provide Lincoln with an opportunity to issue the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. The Battle of Antietam, Slotkin maintains, signaled the beginning of a remorseless and uncompromising strategy for total victory.

Slotkin argues that the Antietam campaign was the result of decisions made by Abraham Lincoln and by Jefferson Davis in response to what they perceived to be the failure to achieve victory. For his part, Lincoln decided to radically transform Union war strategy. He consciously and deliberately dropped the limited war policy and tactics that the Union had pursued for the first year and half, and, based upon his astute understanding of political, economic, social, and military factors, began to implement an uncompromising strategy of total war. Slotkin contends that Jefferson Davis also changed Confederate strategy. Because of Confederate victories in the Seven Days Battles and Second Manassas and Union mismanagement in the West, Davis also decided to pursue a more aggressive strategy to achieve victory. Even though Antietam was militarily indecisive, the battle produced profound political results. It allowed Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, which altered the character of the war. Prospects for compromise were now nearly impossible. The North would be fighting a war of subjugation and the South a war of survival.

One of the greatest strengths of *The Long Road to Antietam* is Slotkin's ability to portray the "fog of war." The characterization of the uncertainty, or fog of war, comes from Carl von Clausewitz, 19th century Prussian military theorist. The concept, however, is probably more vividly expressed by another German, Adolf Hitler, who supposedly said that war was very much like kicking in the door of a dark room because one had no idea what was inside. Slotkin brilliantly describes the uncertainty, the confusion, the "fog" of war from when Confederate leaders first concluded to risk an invasion of Maryland to when President Lincoln decided to relieve George B. McClellan of command of the Army of the Potomac. Slotkin describes calculations and plans based upon false assumptions that achieve great success, and he describes actions that failed miserably even though they were predicated upon rational tactics. He vividly recounts



how events slipped beyond control in a tragicomedy of errors, paradoxes, and contradictions. Incompetence, unfathomable courage, miscalculation, and unexpected circumstances turned Robert E. Lee's virtues as an aggressive commander into a liability, and George B. McClellan's liabilities as a cautious general into an asset. In the end, according to Slotkin, the "fog of war" gave the victory of Antietam to the weaker tactical commander with the less effective command structure.

Another strength of Slotkin's work is his ability to describe the dynamic interplay among the personalities of individuals and how those personalities impacted military and political decisions. For example, Slotkin's skillful discussion of how the personalities of Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, George McClellan, John Pope, Henry Halleck, and Abraham Lincoln influenced political decisions which shaped the tactical decisions leading up to the Battle of Second Bull Run provides new and deeper understanding of the events. Likewise, Slotkin's deft handling of these same variables provides a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the Antietam campaign.

Not all historians will agree with Slotkin's interpretations. The depiction of a resolute Lincoln who consciously leads the nation into a total war with revolutionary consequences will draw sharp criticism from those who see a more pragmatic and conservative Lincoln who cautiously and even tentatively attempted to find the middle ground in prosecuting the war. Other historians will question Slotkin's contention that the Civil War was a total war. While the standard narrative of the Civil War was that it constituted a new era of warfare, many historians have recently begun to question whether the Civil War was either a "modern" war or a "total" war. Slotkin fails to acknowledge these debates, which leaves the reader questioning the veracity of his underlining assumption that Lincoln consciously steered the nation to a total war in order to achieve victory.

Regardless of these criticisms, Slotkin has written a vivid narrative that provides a fresh and provocative perspective. *The Long Road to Antietam*, intended for general readers as well as scholars, provides good background information for teachers but it is not intended for either secondary school or undergraduate students. Nevertheless, it is an outstanding contribution to our understanding of this pivotal event in the American Civil War.

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