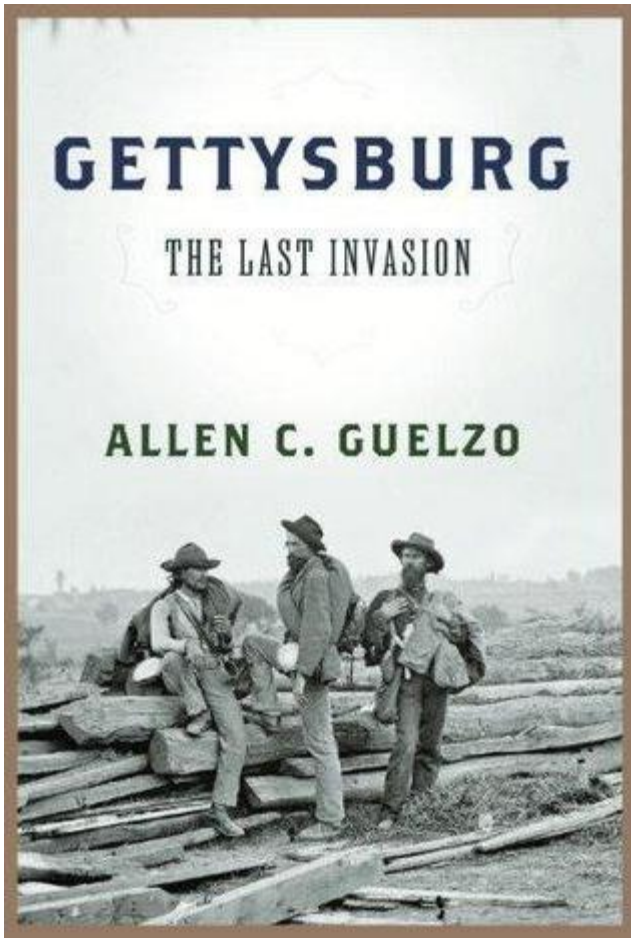


'Gettysburg: The Last Invasion'

By Allen C. Guelzo

Review by George Arnold

By one estimate, the bibliography on the Battle of Gettysburg now includes more than 6,000 books, articles, chapters and pamphlets. With all of this verbiage on this greatest battle of the American Civil War, why yet another book? What could there possibly be left to say? Well, as it turns out, in the capable hands of Allen C. Guelzo, quite a lot.



When I picked up this book, I was not familiar with Author Guelzo. But a list of his works show that he's written other Civil War history books, several of them on Abraham Lincoln. He also comes by his scholarly interest in the Battle of Gettysburg naturally, as he is the director of Civil War Era Studies at Gettysburg College, an institution that has been around long enough to have played its own role in the battle 150 years ago.

This new book on the battle covers a lot of ground, some that obviously will be familiar to students of the battle; other parts will be less familiar. The author has done his research, tracking down original sources that shed new light on the battle and those who fought it. The book is broken down into four sections, each made up of several chapters. The sections include "The March Up," "The First Day," "The Second Day" and "The Third Day."

There is also a short prologue setting the scene and an epilogue about Lincoln's Gettysburg Address four months after the battle, which put the meaning of Gettysburg in the broader context of the American experiment in self-government. Finally, there are lots of maps that help the often confusing events of the battle make more sense. In some parts of the book where the narrative is describing the ebb and flow of certain engagements, there are maps on every other page. Very helpful.

Guelzo views the battle from the perspective of many participants, from the generals to the lowliest privates. There's where his wide-ranging research pays off. He's able to find

telling first-person descriptions in episode after episode. Those, combined with the official reports and records, make his description of the three days' events both sweeping and intensely personal. It all makes for a fast-paced read, which is also unexpectedly suspenseful, despite already knowing how the battle turned out.

Guelzo is willing to challenge some of the standard interpretations of many aspects of the battle, and the standard analyses of many of the better-known players in this drama. He's unimpressed by the usual descriptions of tactical combat in the Civil War. Despite the improved range of the rifled musket, for example, he suggests that long-range fighting with rifles was mostly ineffective in this war. Troops on both sides were poorly trained in marksmanship and when they were able to hit anything at all -- not at all a given -- it was at close range. Artillery fire was also less lethal at longer ranges. Banging away at thin battle lines only got really murderous when the lines drew close enough to be fired at with canister, which has been described as using a really large shotgun on the close-approaching enemy.

Don't expect an uncritical analysis of the sainted Robert E. Lee, commander of the Confederate army at Gettysburg. Guelzo finds Lee's leadership style consistently lacking. And the author dispels the myth of Lee taking responsibility for the Confederate defeat afterward. True, he told the survivors of Pickett's Charge as they returned from their failed attack that it was all his fault. But he artfully tried shifting the blame in later correspondence. Guelzo provides chapter and verse. It adds some tarnish to that halo of Lee's.

The Union army's commander, George G. Meade, doesn't come off well either. Meade never really wanted to fight at Gettysburg. He had another defensive site already picked out when a couple of his corps commanders forced his hand by closing with the Confederates at Gettysburg. Even then, at a council of war with his top commanders at the end of the second day's fighting, Meade wanted to pull the army back to his preferred position. The firm determination by his subordinates to stay at Gettysburg and fight for a third day dissuaded Meade, although it was evident his heart really wasn't in it. As Pickett's Charge began forming up to his front, Meade made the odd decision to go to the rear. He explained this as his desire to begin organizing his supply and ammunition wagons for a possible retreat if the charge succeeded. In short, Guelzo finds Meade to have been a defeatist during most of the battle.

Part of the reason for Meade's attitude probably had to do with the politics of his Army of the Potomac. The army's upper leadership was still divided nearly a year after the departure of its former commander, George B. McClellan. McClellan had been a "soft war" general, ultimately favoring negotiation with the Confederacy and believing the abolition of slavery an over-reach on the part of the North. Many of McClellan's supporters still remained in the upper echelons of the Army of the Potomac, and that included Meade. But avowed abolitionists had also achieved high command in the army, and were much more likely to prefer outright military victory over the rebellion. Interestingly enough, the two Union corps commanders who initiated battle at Gettysburg, John Reynolds and O.O. Howard, were "hard war" men. They were looking

for a fight and were determined to bring one on.

Not all readers will agree with Guelzo's many interpretations of the battle. But they're well-reasoned and emphatic and will require solid rebuttal and not mere dismissal.

When I first saw this new treatment of the battle on the shelves, I wasn't expecting too much. What a pleasant surprise to learn otherwise. This is a fine addition to the Gettysburg canon. Highly recommended.

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