

American Napoleon: McClellan, His Friends And Foes, And Union Army Squabbles

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Review

AMERICAN NAPOLEON

McClellan, his friends and foes, and Union Army squabbles

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Sears, Stephen W. *Controversies & Commanders: Dispatches from the Army of the Potomac*. Houghton Mifflin, ISBN 395867606

Civil War historians have discovered once again the power of essay collections. Whether multiple-authored under an editor's guiding hand, or created by a single accomplished writer like Stephen Sears (as in the case of the present volume), they nearly always provide new wine for old vessels. In short, they yield distinctively focused snapshots of particular themes, events, or person'. Sears thus joins other recent vintners like Gabor Boritt, Gary Gallagher, James McPherson, and Steven Woodworth in selecting an area where talent and interest combine to give us new thoughts and dimensions of some exciting issues. In Sears's case, the theme concerns controversial leadership in the Army of the Potomac.

Sears's forte is "Mr. Lincoln's Army," although his principal concentration in the past has been the rather formative period of that military instrument. Readers will immediately associate his name with the study of the archetypical controversial leader George B. McClellan and the Peninsula and Maryland campaigns in which the general figured so prominently. More recently, Sears has expanded his field of vision to include Chancellorsville and the juxtaposition of Joseph Hooker with the immortal Lee and Jackson as battlefield and army commanders.

Now, in **Controversies & Commanders**, the author uses ten distinctive essays to dissect this phlegmatic army's performance and response to a variety of leadership styles and personalities. Fully half the chapters refer to the early period of the army's existence. And again, as might be expected, the leitmotif remains the preeminent *minence grise* -- McClellan, his presence, his influence, and his legacy.

Sears commences the journey with an analysis of how historians have handled "Little Mac." He follows that introductory essay with chapters defining the September 1862 campaign which saw McClellan's restoration to army command over the opposition of virtually everyone in Washington (with even Abraham Lincoln less than pleased with his own necessary decision). Sears then contributes some "last thoughts" about the famous Lost Order of the Maryland campaign in which he advances how, if nothing more, the finding of Lee's campaign plan decidedly affected the unfolding of events.

Additional chapters illustrate McClellan's influence over events and people as Sears describes the sacking of relatively obscure Brigadier Charles P. Stone (for the Balls Bluff debacle) and better known corps commander Fitz John Porter (for noncooperation with Pope at Second Bull Run). In both cases, he implies, their association with "Little Mac" contributed to their demise with the army.

Next comes an especially winsome piece on "the Revolt of the Generals" against Ambrose Burnside that plays back to the continuing existence of McClellan's "old boy network," which plagued a continuously unsuccessful army. One wonders if the Army of the Potomac ever truly overcame its "infatuation" with this wannabe American Napoleon. That the Union finally did so is suggested by Sears's handling of the lingering ghosts of McClellan. Sears puts them to rest in one sense as he leaves us with the perception that by re-reading McClellan's own words, we can finally decide whether a McClellan victory at the polls in 1864 and elevation to the presidency six months later would have appreciably changed the vigorous prosecution of the Union war effort to ultimate suppression of the rebellion. He concludes that "Little Mac" as well as Lincoln saw subjugation of the Confederacy as the ultimate war aim. Of course, their methods differed substantially.

When Sears turns to the middle and latter periods of the Army of the Potomac's mottled history, he uncovers several episodes of note, but possibly loses an opportunity to explore and explain better the army's singularly unsung but possibly most intriguing commander. True, Sears does a superb job of rehabilitating "Fighting Joe" Hooker from some unjust criticism. He sees the cannon ball-disabling of the army commander as more instructive in explaining Chancellorsville than any preemptive brilliance of Lee and Jackson.

Less controversial will be his chapter about the ineptness of that quirky politico-general Dan Sickles, whose claim to rank and reputation was forever washed away by the bloodbath on the second day at Gettysburg. It is here, however, that Sears fumbled a golden opportunity to include something major about General George Meade, although the Pennsylvanian remains the butt of Sickles's postwar efforts at rescue and redemption in the Sickles chapter. We simply need to know more about Meade and the late-war army in a period largely made obscure by the presence of General-in-Chief Ulysses S. Grant travelling with the Army of the Potomac and rendering some rather controversial decisions on its behalf.

Sears concludes his volume with several episodes that suggest the presence of controversial leadership still apparent in the late-war army. A vignette of the very questionable sacking of corps commander Gouverneur K. Warren by Grant and his favorite, Philip Sheridan, (apparently with Meade's acquiescence) is particularly striking. But, this was certainly a classic reflection of organizational management response between "old" and "new" -- the clash of Western and Eastern army generals and their military style and culture. Sears could have amplified the incident in that context, rather than merely emphasizing late-war injustice to a loyal subordinate like Warren.

The hour was late, the conflict needed termination, and men like Grant and Sheridan could brook no further lethargy in a vigorous thrust to the hilt. Warren seemingly reflected the Army of the Potomac's traditional inability to administer any *coup de grace*. An example had to be set -- no matter that the individual's previous service was exemplary. Perhaps the damage was so slight because Appomattox loomed so near.

Sears's seeming genuflection to the arms and services that undergirded the Army of the Potomac comes in a chapter examining the tangential but controversial raid on Richmond, which was engineered by the questionably competent Judson Kilpatrick and his Byronesque subordinate, Ulric Dahlgren, largely for the purpose of kidnapping Jefferson Davis and attacking the Confederacy's central nervous system. What it all amounted to was quite divorced from the main operations of the Army of the Potomac and spoke more to a bizarre late-war twist of spawning a "get the king" game -- which, of course, eventually resulted in Lincoln's assassination.

Surely some other examination of use or misuse of Eastern cavalry or even artillery -- or better, a consideration of the logistical branches of the army's overall performance -- would have made for a more rounded treatment. But, of course, such topics might be less entertaining and might potentially contravene Sears's avowed theme of controversies and commanders. Best that they be left to another place and time no matter how much better they might inform us of the war machine that was the Army of the Potomac.

How then to assess Sears's effort? Comfortably documented, it provides readers with an unshowy, crisp book that should delight the Round Table set and students of the War in the East. The work needs maps since much of the discussion relates to operations as well as personalities. Most certainly, **Controversies & Commanders** speaks to the topics clearly enunciated in earlier years by Bruce Catton -- the political machinations, the controversial helmsmanship, the notoriety of the middle rank figures as well as the principal field force of the Union "that could have lost the war in a single afternoon." That Sears's work has seemingly downplayed (if not omitted) the central role of Lincoln in "Mr. Lincoln's Army" needs to be clearly understood. But, here is an easily read, enjoyable jaunt that will complement the work of Noah Trudeau, Gordon Rhea, and others who continue to find stimulating themes in the campaigns from the Mason-Dixon line to southside Virginia in the battle for the capitals.

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