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Interview

'DRAMATIC CONSEQUENCES': JAMES MCPHERSON ANALYZES ANTIETAM

Ng, Laura

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Civil War Book Review (cwbr): You chose to write about September 13, 1862, and McClellan's lack of aggressive action concerning Lee's orders in Days of Destiny: Crossroads in American History (DK Publishing, ISBN 0789480107, \$34.95, hardcover). What motivated you to choose this moment from among all others of the Civil War?

James M. McPherson (jm): The finding and verification of a copy of Lee's Orders no. 191 was potentially one of the great windfalls of military history. If McClellan had acted immediately instead of waiting six hours after he was certain of the genuineness of the orders, and if he had ordered the Union VI and IX Corps to march through the night to be in a position to attack the South Mountain passes at first light on September 14, he might have destroyed a considerable part of Lee's army in detail and would also have saved the Union garrison at Harpers Ferry. This might have enabled McClellan to carry out Lincoln's injunction to Destroy the rebel army, if possible. It might have brought the end of the war closer. It would have rescued McClellan's reputation. But it just was not in McClellan to move decisively, quickly, and aggressively, and thus the opportunity for a truly decisive victory on September 14 or 15 slipped through his hands. But the finding of the orders did set in train a series of events that led to the battle of Antietam, which, despite its equivocal tactical outcome, was nevertheless a strategic Union victory that changed the course of the war by causing Britain and France to back off from diplomatic recognition of the Confederacy, preventing probable Democratic takeover of the House of Representatives in the 1862 northern elections, arresting a disastrous decline in northern morale, and giving Lincoln the opportunity he had been awaiting to issue the Emancipation Proclamation.

cwbr: In your article, "History: It's Still About Stories," you agree with C. Vann Woodward "that narrative history is the story of human beings (not abstract 'forces') making choices, acting on such decisions and coping with the consequences." How do you apply this with respect to Antietam and the military choices of McClellan, Burnside, and Lee, as well as Lincoln's decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation based on the battle's outcome?

jm: More than most campaigns in the Civil War, Antietam illustrates the true excitement of narrative history--the stories of people making choices, acting on them, and dealing with the consequences. The case of Lee illustrates dramatic decision-making and dramatic consequences. After the Union breakthrough at the South Mountain passes on September 14, Lee initially decided to abandon his Maryland invasion and retreat to Virginia before his divided army could be chewed up. But when he received word from Jackson, in the early morning of September 15, that Harpers Ferry would fall that day, Lee changed his mind and decided to make a stand at Antietam, hoping for a victory that would enable him to continue his invasion of Maryland and possibly even Pennsylvania, and further demoralize the northern people. Lee had gone north with the hope of conquering a peace for an independent Confederacy, and on September 15 his decision to stay and fight was a reaffirmation of that hope. The consequence was the battle of Antietam. You mentioned Burnside. He is a puzzle at Antietam, delaying for hours with his poorly conceived efforts to cross the bridge, then delaying further once he got his divisions across the Antietam. If he had acted more decisively and aggressively, he might have cut the ANV off from its sole retreat route across the Potomac before A.P. Hill arrived. McClellan also made at least two key decisions on September 17 that affected the outcome of the battle--a decision in the early afternoon not to reinforce the Union breakthrough at Bloody Lane with Franklin's two fresh divisions, and a decision later in the afternoon not to reinforce the success of a part of Burnside's assault almost to the streets of Sharpsburg with part of Porter's V Corps. In both cases, McClellan held back because he feared a potential counterattack by what he supposed were Lee's massive reserves (Mac credited Lee with three times as many men as he actually had) and needed to keep Franklin and Porter in reserve to meet this phantom attack. The next day McClellan made another key decision--not to renew the attack--again, because he feared those supposedly massive reserves. These decisions kept the value of the Union achievement at Antietam far short of what it might have been. This is a dramatic story.

cwbr: What do you see as the key economic and foreign affairs ramifications of the proclamation for the North and South?

jm: At first, the consequences of the Emancipation Proclamation were largely symbolic and political. And those consequences went both ways. Almost as many in the North reacted negatively to what they regarded as a shift in northern aims from union to emancipation as reacted positively to what Lincoln saw as an expansion of war aims to include emancipation as a means to achieve union. The European reaction to the preliminary proclamation of September 22 was also cynical or negative. But when they discovered in January that Lincoln really meant it, there was a powerful reaction in favor of the Union cause, especially in Britain, which pretty much ended any remaining slim hopes Southerners may have cherished for British recognition and support. The economic consequences were gradual but in the end powerful. By promising freedom, the Proclamation encouraged the already-occurring exodus of slaves to Union lines, thus weakening the Confederate economy and war effort. Eventually a large majority of the northern people fell in line behind the Proclamation, and eventually, of course, it proved to be a significant step in the transition of the southern economy from a slave-labor to a free-labor economy.

cwbr: Alexander Gardner's photos of Antietam were the first such depictions of war dead that confronted the public. Do you see this graphic representation changing public perception of the war and the respective causes of North and South?

jm: The Gardner photos of the dead at Antietam were certainly an eye-opener. They were the last nail in the coffin of the bright-eyed romantic vision of heroic war that both sides cherished in 1861. By changing the dull statistics about battlefield casualties into graphic photographs of bloated bodies, they reminded viewers of what was at stake in this war and what victory would cost. The pictures may also have caused some viewers to wonder whether victory would be worth the cost. But a majority felt the other way--those dead must not have died in vain.

cwbr: What do you consider missing from current Antietam scholarship?

jm: The current scholarship on Antietam, especially the military strategy and tactics of the campaign, is very good. The earlier books by James Murfin and Stephen Sears are outstanding. Both also provide an adequate discussion of

the political and diplomatic context of the battle. Joe Harsh's recent book, *Taken At The Flood* (Kent State University Press, ISBN 0873386310, \$45.00, hardcover), is an outstanding microhistory of Lee's strategic and tactical decisions and the implementation of them. In my forthcoming book I have tried to compress all of these things into a relatively brief, readable narrative and to place them in the context of the seesawing morale in armies and on the home front in both North and South during the seven or eight months leading up to the battle, and to interweave this narrative with the diplomatic efforts of the Confederacy to achieve recognition and of northern diplomats to prevent it. In doing so, however, I owe much to existing scholarship. What is different about my book is the compression of these complex events into a brief compass.

cwbr: America never suffered a loss of lives comparable to Antietam until September 11, 2001. Many historians and politicians have compared these two events. Can you talk about Antietam in light of the September 11 tragedy?

jm: The terrorist attacks of September 11 were the second bloodiest day in American history. The number of killed and mortally wounded at Antietam were twice the number on September 11. Both events were shocking, both caused many Americans to say that things would never again be the same. That prediction was certainly true about September 17, 1862. We are still too close to September 11, 2001, to make a final judgment. The American republic survived that earlier ghastly experience with death in September, and grew stronger and better as a consequence. I hope that this more recently ghastly experience may also lead to a stronger and better nation.

James M. McPherson, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era (Ballantine, ISBN 0345359429, \$18.00, softcover), has recently completed a short book on Antietam as a major turning point in the war. This work will be released in September, and will examine Antietam's part in forestalling European recognition of the Confederacy, temporarily reversing the decline in northern morale, preventing Democratic control of the House of Representatives in the election of 1862, and providing Lincoln with the occasion for issuing the Emancipation Proclamation. This text will be a part of Oxford University Press's Pivotal Moments in American History series, which McPherson co-edits.