

Counter-Thrust: From the Peninsula to the Antietam

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Recommended Citation

Beckenbaugh, Terry (2008) "Counter-Thrust: From the Peninsula to the Antietam," *Civil War Book Review*.
Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol10/iss2/11>

Review

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Spring 2008

Cooling, Benjamin Franklin *Counter-Thrust: From the Peninsula to the Antietam*. University of Nebraska Press, \$45.00 hardcover ISBN 9780803215153

Command and Leadership in the Antietam Campaign

The University of Nebraska Press's *Great Campaigns of the Civil War* series features excellent scholarship, crisp writing, and syntheses that incorporate the best and most recent historiography of the subject at hand. Benjamin Franklin Cooling's *Counter-Thrust: From the Peninsula to the Antietam*, the tenth in the series, displays all the above-mentioned traits. *Counter-Thrust* examines the Eastern Theater from the end of the Peninsular Campaign in early July 1862 to the Battle of Antietam on 17 September 1862 and Lincoln's issuance of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation a week later.

Counter-Thrust focuses on the relationship of the political/military high commands with the leaders of the armies. Considering the failures of the Federals in the Eastern Theater during this time frame, the dispiriting results of the Seven Days, the disaster at Second Bull Run, and the failure to properly follow up the hard fighting at Antietam, it makes sense that Cooling spends more time analyzing the Federals than their Rebel counterparts. Confederate General Robert E. Lee and President Jefferson Davis generally saw eye-to-eye, unlike Lincoln, members of his staff and Major Generals George B. McClellan and John Pope. A constant friction between members of the Lincoln administration and McClellan was whether to make the conflict a hard war, namely to destroy civilian property that might aid the Confederates, or liberate the slaves who played such a vital role to the southern war effort.

McClellan loathed taking the next logical step to destroy civilian property or strike at the reservoir of slave labor at the Confederacy's disposal. After his less than stellar performance on the Peninsula, McClellan was shoved aside in favor of a general who was more in line with Lincoln in making it a harder war on the

Confederate population, Pope. The Federal drubbing endured at Second Bull Run discredited the hard-war advocate Pope, and in desperation Lincoln was forced despite the pleas of some in his cabinet to turn to McClellan to revitalize war effort in the east. McClellan did a remarkable job of inspiring and re-organizing the Army of the Potomac in a short period of time. The Federals fought Lee to a tactical draw at Antietam, but in the process so weakened the Rebel Army of Northern Virginia that it retreated south across the Potomac River. Yet, ironically enough, it was soft-war advocate McClellan's perceived victory at Antietam that allowed Lincoln to issue the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation a week later to fundamentally change the nature of the war.

Although *Counter-Thrust's* assertions are not overly controversial, Cooling does dispute Antietam as the seminal watershed of the conflict. Cooling argues The refusal of Confederate leaders, soldiery, and populace to regard Lee's abortive expedition (as well as those in Kentucky and elsewhere) as defeats renders questionable modern assertions that Antietam in particular was the pivotal turning point of the war(xiv). Certainly, THE claim of most significant engagement of the entire war can be argued *ad infinitum*. However, the argument that because the soldiers and people did not recognize Antietam's defeat and the subsequent issuance of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation is not the most persuasive argument that could have been used. It has only been in hindsight that historians have come to appreciate the true significance of Antietam, its role in the Emancipation Proclamation, and the eventual Federal victory. This is a minor point and does not detract from Cooling's excellent study.

Cooling's analysis of McClellan is especially insightful, as he synthesizes the latest scholarship on that enigmatic figure. Although critical, Cooling gives Mac more credit than most historians believe he deserves. One example is when Cooling discusses whether McClellan could have forced a crossing of the James River and captured Richmond in 1862 (30). Cooling is perhaps a bit too kind to McClellan. He rightly states that Grant could not do it in 1864, and the latter had the national political and military leadership squarely behind him. No doubt. However, the problem is that McClellan was no Grant, and never exhibited the kind of aggressiveness that Grant consistently displayed. To have forced a crossing of the James in 1862 required McClellan to be something he never was, with or without support from Washington.

Overall *Counter-Thrust* delivers as advertised with thorough research, historiographical knowledge and excellent writing, melding this with sharp analysis. It is a worthy addition to the University of Nebraska's *Great Campaigns of the Civil War* series.

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