

### Seizing Destiny: The Army Of The Potomac's "valley Forge" And The Civil War Winter That Saved The Union

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## Review

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**Conner, Albert Z. and Mackowski, Christopher.** *Seizing Destiny: The Army of the Potomac's "Valley Forge" and the Civil War Winter that Saved the Union.* Savas Beatie, \$34.95 ISBN 9781611211566

Destiny's Conditions: Joseph Hooker's Long Winter with the Army of the Potomac

The Civil War must occupy the top rank as the least forgotten conflict in the American experience with warfare. Nevertheless, despite many thousands of books and articles on the American Civil War, there are aspects of that conflict that remain unfamiliar to many readers more than one hundred fifty years later. Albert Z. Conner and Chris Mackowski explore one of these episodes in their history of the Army of the Potomac during a largely overlooked three-month period from January 26 to the end of April 1863.

In *Seizing Destiny: The Army of the Potomac's "Valley Forge" and the Civil War Winter that Saved the Union*, the authors examine the revival of the Army of the Potomac under Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker's command after its defeat at Fredericksburg and the infamous Mud March under Maj. Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside. Depression, desertion, and disease affected an Army that had been beaten down physically and mentally when it moved into winter quarters on the north bank of the Rappahannock. When Burnside offered to resign following these two disasters, Lincoln replaced him with his insubordinate subordinate, Hooker, who had commanded the Center Grand Division at Fredericksburg.

The relationship between Abraham Lincoln and Joe Hooker began with probably the most singular letter of appointment ever issued by a political leader to the general in command of the war's most important theater. Lincoln wrote, "General: I have placed you at the head of the Army of the Potomac. Of course I have done this upon what appears to me to be sufficient reasons, and I think it best for you to know that there are some things in regard to which I am not quite satisfied with you."

Lincoln tells Hooker that his behavior toward General Ambrose Burnside, his predecessor, was “a great wrong to the country and to a most meritorious and honorable brother officer.” He then informs Hooker that “I have heard ... of your recently saying that both the Army and the Government needed a dictator. Of course, it was not for this, but in spite of it, that I have given you the Command.” Then he bluntly challenges Hooker: “Only those generals who gain successes can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship” (49-50).

After his appointment Hooker said, “...I trembled at the task before me, in entering upon so important a command” (51). And well he might. As *Seizing Destiny* illustrates, Hooker’s tenure as commander began with the Army racked by exhaustion, desertions, illness, harsh weather, and slumping morale. Over the next few months, Hooker worked to achieve the success Lincoln demanded by returning to military fundamentals to regenerate the morale and fighting power of the Army of the Potomac. Conner and Mackowski tell the story of that renewal.

*Seizing Destiny* is the result of research that takes advantage of many hundreds of primary manuscript sources located at the Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park. As the bibliography notes, over 500 volumes exist in the Park’s Bound Volume Collection. They, in addition to several other important private collections, provide the material for *Seizing Destiny*. The official military and naval records collected and printed by the Government Printing Office in the late nineteenth century also are referenced throughout along with many contemporary newspapers and periodicals, diaries and correspondence collections, and numerous regimental histories. The words of soldiers of all ranks supplemented by a broad sampling of other material create an interesting depiction of an army undergoing a complex process of recovery, renewal, and preparation.

The basic argument of *Seizing Destiny* turns on two concepts, the strategic pause and the non-battle turning point. Saratoga, Buena Vista, Midway, Inchon, and Tet are battles that historians have identified as turning points in American military history. Gettysburg and Vicksburg are considered turning points in the Civil War. Less attention-grabbing are the measures taken (or that ought to have been taken) in the weeks and months before those battles to create the conditions for victory (or defeat). That is the purview of *Seizing Destiny*. Indispensable to

the realization of this non-battle turning point is what the authors call a “strategic pause.”

The authors write that the strategic pause is “regrettably (but revealingly) missing from U.S. military historical terminology,” but it is doubtful that experienced regular Army officers were unfamiliar with the need occasionally to suspend operations to rest and regroup (xii). Even successful armies must halt and reorganize from time to time to allow supporting units and supply trains to catch up. Moreover, in January 1863 as the Mud March makes clear, the weather dictated a pause in military operations as much as any deliberate plan by Union leadership to refrain from battle.

As for the use of the label “strategic” in relation to this pause, the term “operational pause” is more accurate. Suggesting that the national war effort—i.e., the strategic level of war—was suspended just because one Federal army was stuck in the Virginia mud is inaccurate and overlooks activities in other theaters. Still, there’s no arguing over the fact that the eastern front was seen as the most important theater, and it was there that Hooker went to work. Styled “Fighting Joe” as the result of a chance headline, Hooker set his organizational and leadership skills to work rebuilding the worn out Army of the Potomac for a new spring campaign while continuing to fight minor engagements around the Army’s northern Virginia winter quarters (97, 199).

Hooker is given credit by the authors for the reformation of the Army. They specifically point out that the Army’s turnaround could not have occurred before Hooker’s tenure and that there wasn’t time after his removal from command for Gen. George Meade to put his stamp on the Army before Gettysburg.(x-xi) However, it is worth noting that many of the problems encountered by Hooker echoed the chaos of the early days faced by Gen. George McClellan when he transformed the Army after First Bull Run. Then, everything—manned defenses, proper encampments, troop training, extended enlistments, and even regular discipline to keep the men in camp—was lacking. Little Mac advanced the work on these formative problems even if he proved not to be the field commander needed to lead the Army successfully in battle. Hooker by contrast did not have to deal with such utterly raw conditions; he could build on some of foundations laid by the earlier commanders and on the recent battlefield experiences of the soldiers in the ranks, who by January 1863 were well on their way to becoming true veterans.

Hooker proved to be an able administrator. Operating on the principle that a commander gets what he inspects and not what he expects, Hooker added an inspector-general to his staff (183). His administrative reforms corrected problems of supply and transportation and provided the Union soldiers with fresher food, new clothing, improved medical care, and better discipline. Private George Wolcott wrote home to tell his family that “I am still in enjoyment of excellent health and would you believe it, weight 167 lbs.—19 lbs. more than ever before in my life” (168). Hooker also reformed the leave system, a necessary corrective that kept soldiers from wandering away from the camps without authority while permitting those men with valid reasons to take time away from camp. He made way for the promotion of officers of proven merit and fired incompetent officers as a 7th Wisconsin captain reported in a letter. “Gen. Hooker is weeding it out, almost every day there are a number of officers dismissed the service ... hurrah for Old Joe as the boys call him” (109, 168, 291-292). Hooker enhanced training, and as the authors noted, by mid-February “Discipline and training were accepted in a businesslike manner by the soldiers and junior officers” (141). As a result of all this work, desertions declined, morale increased, and the Army’s self-confidence grew.

Hooker also undertook other changes to what is now called the Table of Organization and Equipment (T/O&E;), some more successful than others. He reorganized the Army’s cavalry into a cavalry corps, which soon proved its value against the Confederate units that had previously tormented Union forces (90), and created a military intelligence bureau under Colonel George H. Sharpe to replace the informal organization that had existed previously (100). He also made changes to the Army’s artillery organization that made it less effective during the coming battle at Chancellorsville (90).

It takes more than a dozen weeks, or even a dozen months, to make an effective army. In Northern Virginia in early 1863 there was time enough, however, for Hooker—whose modifications and improvements of the Army were informed by recent experience—to build on the work of those who had gone before. These housekeeping, administrative, and logistical tasks are not sexy. Nearly all readers and too many historians prefer the grand sweep of battle and the political intrigues that exist behind the lines. Fans of drum-and-trumpet history regularly fail to appreciate the long support and experience tail that extends behind the spear point of a successful modern army. The Romans knew the importance of this work. “They do not wait for the war to begin before handling their arms,” as Josephus wrote in *The Jewish War*, and “It would not be

far from the truth to call their drills bloodless battles, their battles bloody drills.” Training, supply, sound organization, and competent administration are crucial if not necessarily sufficient for victory.

That this was so was proven when Hooker put the Army on the road in late April 1863. Gen. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia remained in position around Fredericksburg, and Hooker, now commanding a rested and ready Army, set out to destroy Lee’s force, saying “May God have mercy on General Lee, for I will have none” (230). For various reasons, Hooker’s offensive failed despite the reorganization of the Army. It may seem like a peculiar sort of turning point that the Army Hooker had rebuilt immediately failed its first test at Chancellorsville, but Conner and Mackowski argue that the key conclusion to be drawn from this period is that the Army did not break or falter as it had done after Fredericksburg (268-269). Nevertheless, Lincoln fired Hooker on June 28, 1863, replacing him with Maj. Gen. George G. Meade just prior to the battle of Gettysburg. Hooker, like McClellan before him, left a legacy of an incrementally more professional, more honed military tool than the one he found. If he proved not to be the man to wield it, he helped form the edge until that man arrived.

It is a belief firmly held by military professionals that the study of military history is a fundamental part of understanding and preparing for war. The story of Hooker’s reforms as told in *Seizing Destiny* by Albert Z. Conner, Jr., who passed away in May 2016, and Chris Mackowski will be another source soldiers should study.

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<sup>1</sup> As James M. McPherson wrote in an essay in *Jefferson Davis’s Generals* (Gabor S. Boritt, ed., Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 172), “...Lee was far from alone in perceiving Virginia as the most important theater. Most people in the North and South alike, as well as European observers, shared that view.”

<sup>2</sup> Josephus, *The Jewish War*, trans. G. A. Williamson, Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1969, pp. 194-195