

Too Useful to Sacrifice, Reconsidering George B McClellan's Generalship in the Maryland Campaign from South Mountain to Antietam by Steven R. Stotelmyer, El Dorado Hills: Savas Beatie LLC, 2019, a Tennessee Valley Civil War Round Table reviewed by Emil L. Posey

The summer of 1862 was a dynamic time for Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia and a sad time for George B. McClellan and his Army of the Potomac. Early July saw McClellan's first eclipse with the demise of his Peninsula Campaign. Some five weeks later, in mid-August, Lee and the AoNV had relocated north of Richmond and engaged and defeated John Pope's Army of Virginia (along with elements of the AoP) in the Battle of Second Bull Run. (This was Pope's eclipse.) From there, Lee led the AoNV on its first invasion of the North where he would again come up against McClellan and AoP near Sharpsburg, Maryland, west of Frederick, in what would become known as the Battle of Antietam.

McClellan's rise in the Union Army had been meteoric. His ability to organize, train, and ready the AoP for large scale operations in the field became legend. His field abilities, alas, were not up to the legend, a conclusion well borne out by studying his Peninsula Campaign. The Maryland Campaign was an opportunity to prove himself and regain the glory he had held just a few short months before. Instead, it saw his second and final eclipse. The Battle of Antietam ended in a Union victory – some characterize it as a stalemate – with Lee and the AoNV having pulled back across the Potomac after a day of the bloodiest fighting the war had seen up to that point. McClellan's reputation was dashed, and he faded from the military scene.

The disparaging view of McClellan is conventional wisdom not shared by all. Steven Stotelmyer's Too Useful to Sacrifice is the latest attempt to rehabilitate McClellan's image. He focuses on the Maryland Campaign, the Peninsula Campaign being more problematic.

The importance of the Maryland Campaign is difficult to overstate. A decisive Confederate victory may well have spun the war in an entirely different direction. In the event, history has cast McClellan as a slow and overly cautious general who allowed opportunities and Lee's battered army to slip through his grasp. Mr. Stotelmyer disagrees and argues that McClellan deserves significant credit for moving quickly, acting decisively, and defeating and turning back the South's most able general. Moreover, Mr. Stotelmyer argues that not only must the battle be viewed in the context of the whole campaign (particularly with the battles for the South Mountain gaps on September 14 and the subsequently movement of both armies back into Virginia after Antietam), Antietam should be seen as a coherent battle lasting four days (September 14-17) rather than as a separate one-day affair, massive as it was, on September 17.

Mr. Stotelmyer makes his case through five essays. The first, "Fallacies Regarding the Lost Orders of the Maryland Campaign of 1862" centers around McClellan's good fortune of landing a copy of Lee's Special Orders No. 191. Conventional wisdom has it that McClellan squandered the opportunity. Mr.

Stotelmyer believes McClellan made the best of whatever opportunity the document provided, which probably was not as much as most people believe. The second, "Antietam: The Sequel to South Mountain" describes the operational importance of September 14 and the subsequent set-up for the engagement at Antietam, to the point that the battles for the South Mountain gaps are part and parcel of the action on September 17. The third, "All the Injury Possible: The True 'Prelude' to Antietam" addresses criticism that McClellan did not press the AoP's advantage after securing the South Mountain gaps. In the fourth essay, "General John Pope at Antietam and the Politics Behind the Myth of General Fitz-John Porter's Reserves", Mr. Stotelmyer defends Porter's employment of his V Corps, and blames, at least in part, Porter's subsequent court-martial and conviction (after Antietam) for actions during the Second Battle of Bull Run as having resulted from his association with McClellan. The fifth and final essay, "Supplies and Demands", deals with perceptions that McClellan failed to pursue the AoNV after Antietam and President Lincoln's frustrations that led to McClellan's removal from command.

Typical of revisionist attempts, Stotelmyer has an uphill climb. Many competent historians over the years have weighed in on McClellan's command abilities and activities leading the AoP in the field. One of the prime resources is McClellan's own words captured in his extensive correspondence. Mr. Stotelmyer makes a gallant effort but, by focusing on only one campaign, falls short. McClellan had many attributes that gained him the love and devotion of the soldiers of the AoP, but he clearly had shortcomings that compromised his exercise of field command.

That said, the book is well written, full of rich detail and visuals, and loaded with opinions, contemporary and current. It provides an excellent description of the campaign and is most useful for its insights and arguments. Enjoy!

A native of Hagerstown, Maryland and a navy veteran, Steven Stotelmyer earned a Bachelor of Arts degree at Frostburg State College (Allegany County, Maryland) and a Master of Arts from Hood College in Frederick, Maryland. He was a founding member of the Central Maryland Heritage League in 1989-2000, during which time he helped preserve some of the South Mountain Battlefield. From 1989 through 1994 Mr. Stotelmyer volunteered at the Antietam National Battlefield. In 1992 he published The Bivouacs of the Dead: The Story of Those Who Died at Antietam and South Mountain (Toomey Press, Baltimore, Maryland). From 2000 through 2005, Mr. Stotelmyer served as a part-time volunteer and historical consultant for the South Mountain State Battlefield. He currently enjoys being a National Park Service Certified Antietam and South Mountain Tour Guide.

Your reviewer is Emil L. Posey, former Vice President of the TVCWRT, now continuing to support by being part of the Stage Crew. His work history spans almost 45 years of military and civilian service to our country. He retired from NASA/George C. Marshall Space Flight Center on December 27, 2014. He has a bachelor's degree in Political Science from Hood College, Frederick, Maryland; is a former president of the Huntsville chapter of the National Contract Management

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