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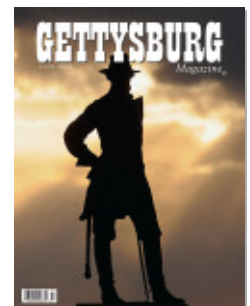
Gettysburg: The Last Invasion by Allen C. Guelzo (review)

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Book Notes

Allen C. Guelzo, *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion* (New York: Knopf, 2013). 672 pp.
ISBN 978-0-3077-4069-4.

Allen C. Guelzo's *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion* is a beautifully written, compelling study of the Gettysburg Campaign that blends analysis of commanders' decision making with explorations of the experiences of soldiers and civilians. Guelzo's work emphasizes the complex realities of waging war in nineteenth-century America; and he argues that even in the face of Gettysburg's horrifying casualties, northern Americans renewed their commitment to preserving what they considered to be the "virtues of democracy and preaching its worth as the one true and natural system of human society" (480–81).

Guelzo shows how the contingency of Civil War combat and the contested politics of memory shaped the Battle of Gettysburg. He delves deeply into the backgrounds and personalities of senior and junior officers and discusses how personality conflicts, political ambition, feelings of paranoia, and traumatic experiences in battle shaped their command decisions. In doing so, he reveals the intricacies of leadership as well as the topographical, logistical, and disciplinary difficulties inherent in waging a massive, three-day engagement. Guelzo contends that these complications accounted not only for the frustrating delays, mishaps, and horrific casualty figures, but they also minimized the damage done to noncombatants and private property. In his opinion, this catastrophic engagement was neither total nor decisive.

Guelzo takes issues with armchair historians and battlefield visitors who criticize commanding generals for their lackluster decision making, those who argue that the Battle of Gettysburg could have gone completely differently, or those who believe that the Battle of Gettysburg could have ended the

war. Guelzo argues that such ahistorical assertions encourage carelessness, an irresponsible way of understanding human events. In his opinion, contingency mattered: each component of the battle unfolded as a logical, direct response to the episode preceding it, even as the fog of war obscured the most basic tenets of command and control.

Guelzo's appreciation for historical contingency is easy to see. He confirms that although the battle's participants believed the fate of the war hung in the balance, the results of the battle did not end the war, "nor did it write a blank check for the Union forces," nor did it constitute a final knockout punch for the Confederate States (462–64). Comprised of hundreds of miniature victories and defeats—a complex knot of northern victories and southern failures, successes and mishaps, possibilities and missed opportunities, well-executed plans and last-minute luck, horror and glory—Gettysburg undoubtedly shifted the war's momentum and its politics, but it hardly made the war's conclusion inevitable (464).

As Guelzo concludes, a more complex understanding of the battle does not diminish its significance. In complicating the picture, Guelzo suggests that these remarkable challenges, intricacies, and high-stakes risks teach us far more about nineteenth-century American combat than we have traditionally thought possible.

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