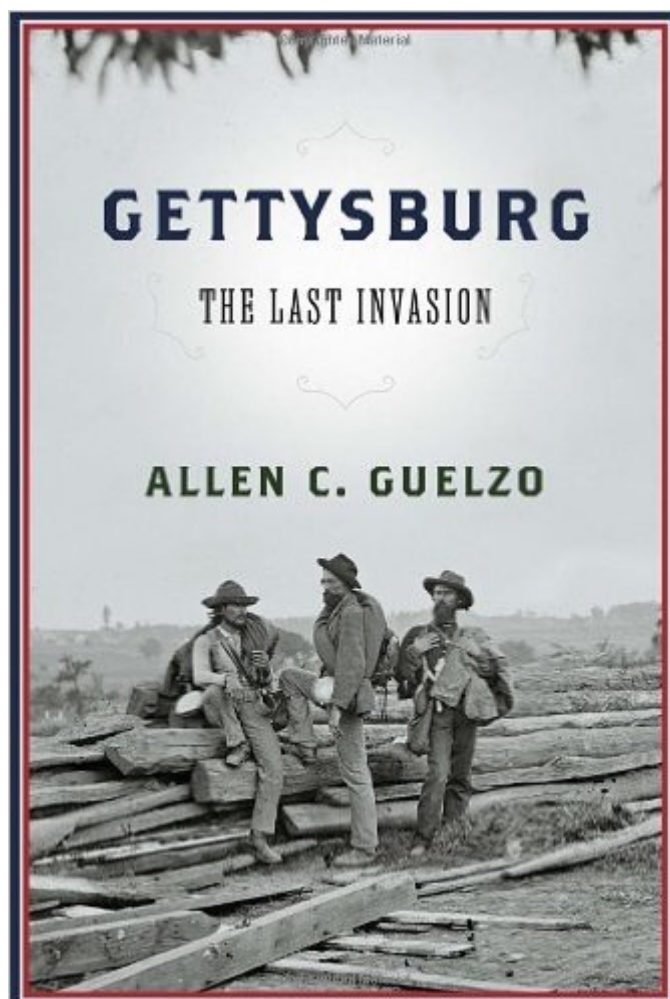


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Gettysburg: The Last Invasion



Synopsis

From the acclaimed Civil War historian, a brilliant new historyâ€”the most intimate and richly readable account we have hadâ€”of the climactic three-day battle of Gettysburg (July 1â€”3, 1863), which draws the reader into the heat, smoke, and grime of Gettysburg alongside the ordinary soldier, and depicts the combination of personalities and circumstances that produced the greatest battle of the Civil War, and one of the greatest in human history. Of the half-dozen full-length histories of the battle of Gettysburg written over the last century, none dives down so closely to the experience of the individual soldier, or looks so closely at the sway of politics over military decisions, or places the battle so firmly in the context of nineteenth-century military practice. Allen C. Guelzo shows us the face, the sights, and the sounds of nineteenth-century combat: the lay of the land, the fences and the stone walls, the gunpowder clouds that hampered movement and vision; the armies that caroused, foraged, kidnapped, sang, and were so filthy they could be smelled before they could be seen; the head-swimming difficulties of marshaling massive numbers of poorly trained soldiers, plus thousands of animals and wagons, with no better means of communication than those of Caesar and Alexander. What emerges is an untold story, from the trapped and terrified civilians in Gettysburgâ€™s cellars to the insolent attitude of artillerymen, from the taste of gunpowder cartridges torn with the teeth to the sounds of marching columns, their tin cups clanking like an anvil chorus. Guelzo depicts the battle with unprecedented clarity, evoking a world where disoriented soldiers and officers wheel nearly blindly through woods and fields toward their clash, even as poetry and hymns spring to their minds with ease in the midst of carnage. Rebel soldiers look to march on Philadelphia and even New York, while the Union struggles to repel what will be the final invasion of the North. One hundred and fifty years later, the cornerstone battle of the Civil War comes vividly to life as a national epic, inspiring both horror and admiration.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I was torn over purchasing this book inasmuch as I thought that the last thing I needed was another general treatment of the Gettysburg Campaign. Nevertheless, I ended up buying "Gettysburg: The Last Invasion," and started reading it dutifully until, realizing the great book I had in my hands, I enthusiastically devoured it in a day or so. While the book doesn't really break much new ground insofar as the Gettysburg campaign and battle are concerned, Prof Guelzo nevertheless approaches the subject from a slightly different perspective compared to many other historians. Thus, I was intrigued by his presentation of the Army of the Potomac's internal politics and how he demonstrated that the battles between the pro and anti McClellan camps were concurrently (and perhaps primarily) those between conservative Democrats and Abolitionists. I also enjoyed how Prof Guelzo presented the internal politics of the Army of Northern Virginia as revolving around a (perceived?) bias towards Virginians and those who were "politically correct" toward secession (that is, enthusiastically in favor of it). I also appreciated how the issue of slavery and the experience (and plight) of free blacks in the path of the invasion was a thread interwoven throughout the narrative. In addition, I thought the biographical vignettes of the major players, being both bitingly provocative and perceptive, were a particular highlight. With regard to the battle itself, I thought the way Prof Guelzo laid out the battle in his presentation was both accurate and coherent. While the book does not go into great tactical detail there is enough there for a general survey and what is there is powerful and insightful.

I am not sure why this book has received so many 4 and 5 star reviews. To be sure, Professor Guelzo is an unquestioned expert on the details of the battle. The depth of knowledge and detail here is stunning. However, this detail is the very reason that the book is tedious and a real struggle to get through. I am a former military officer and as such have spent a good deal of time studying battles, history, tactics and strategy, and I'm not sure I have ever read a drier account of any battle than this one. The book is somewhere between a tactical history of the battle and a strategic overview of the campaign. Neither objective is achieved. As mentioned, the detail is impressive, to the regiment level and below. But because of that detail, there is no real sense of the overall strategic decisions pursued by the commanders. Perhaps because of his detailed knowledge,

Professor Guelzo writes in a fairly condescending manner, seemingly in an attempt to 'unlearn' his readers from what they thought they knew. Central to this, are several discussions about how the rifle didn't have nearly the impact that it was thought to have, mainly because it was inaccurate. A rather ridiculous analysis of how many rounds of ammunition needed to be fired before actually hitting a soldier is conducted, with a subtle tone suggesting that it really wasn't that bad to be a soldier. Whatever the numbers are or how they were calculated, the fact is that roughly 1 in 4 soldiers were killed or wounded in the battle. I would not have wanted to be there.

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