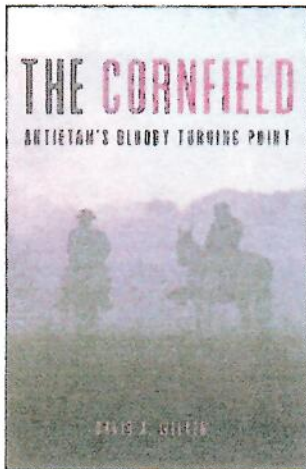


A New Study on an important Civil War Battle's Turning Point

The Cornfield: Antietam's Bloody Turning Point. By David A. Welker. Appendices, Bibliography, Endnotes, and Index, 384 pp., 2020. Casemate Publishers. www.casematepublishers.com. Cloth, \$34.95.

Reviewed by David Marshall



At the start of David Welker's stunning new title on the battle of Antietam, Generals Robert E. Lee and George B. McClellan plant the seeds of a campaign that moves the fighting to Northern territory. It was the culmination of Lee's goal to change the map of the eastern theater with hopes of winning the war, threatening Washington, D.C., convincing the United States population to turn away from preserving the Union, and gaining foreign intervention or recognition by England or France. The Battle of Antietam, also called the Battle of Sharpsburg, occurred on Sept. 17, 1862, along Antietam Creek near Sharpsburg, Md. In the end, this fight was America's single bloodiest day when 22,000 soldiers became casualties. The battle's outcome would be vital to shaping America's future.

Welker is one of the most readable of historians. With his latest book, "The Cornfield," he tells the story about one of several turning points in the Civil War. Considered an important moment in the conflict, the author shows how Lee's first invasion of the North changed the impetus of the war, since prior to September 1862, the Confederacy had lost several naval and military battles in the Western Theater to Union forces. A Southern victory in the east might lead to the end of hostilities and foreign recognition. However, the Union victory at Sharpsburg reversed a terrible deterioration in the confidence of Northern soldiers and citizens.

Military historians consider the Battle of Antietam a tactical stalemate and a Union strategic victory. After the Army of Northern Virginia departed the battlefield and returned to Virginia, President Lincoln was able to finally release his Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862. The end of slavery in the territory in rebellion became the second main reason for the Union fighting the Civil War against the Confederate States of America, weakened the South's ability to win the war, and helped the Federal's ability to ultimately win this important moment in U.S. history.

One essential location in this important battle, Miller's Cornfield, passed through both armies' hands several times and led to many casualties. Union General "Fighting Joe" Hooker led three divisions to the Cornfield where they fought with ferocity with men from Lee's elite forces, including Hood's Texas Brigade and others to win the day. This small thirty-acre farmland saw many regiments on both sides confronting and counterattacking for many hours, until this land was filled with many dead bodies. This significant piece of land and the efforts of the Union army did not allow the Confederate army to achieve their goal of a significant victory but did stall McClellan's overall plans.

Welker has done excellent work in clarifying the scrambled story of the battle of Antietam and the fighting that took place in the Cornfield. McClellan's many difficulties in directing this fight, the complicated contexts of Yankee and Southern plans, and in assessing the successes and failures of Lee and McClellan. He was able to weave the various threads of a back and forth fight for this contested ground in real time with numerous units fighting to gain ground during terrible carnage. Readers will gain a comprehensive and convincing understanding of what took place and will be yearning for more.

The author's analysis is often right on and groundbreaking.

An important example is showing that after the Confederates determined to fight the battle, it was unable to seize the initiative and gain an advantage during the many counterattacks launched throughout this critical phase of the battle. The failure of Southern commanders such as Jackson,

Longstreet, Hood, and others enabled Northern forces to regroup, attack over, leading to far too many lives lost, but in the end, a political victory.

Welker makes the important observation that McClellan was unable to change his battle plan and failed to make changes as the fighting went on throughout September 17, 1862. Perhaps if the Union commander adapted to the fighting, then he would have been able to use a greater amount of his forces throughout the battlefield and won a decisive victory.

This new text is lucid, lively, well written, and energetic, meticulously researched, the prose flows, and people will read from cover to cover without putting this exciting volume down.

Welker's scholarship provides an important contribution to the study of the battle of Antietam that complements an important body of work as well as enhances our understanding of the fighting

in the Cornfield. It is a valuable addition to the genre. The author has woven a fascinating story that includes many firsthand accounts by officers and common soldiers not usually found in modern scholarship. The twenty maps and twenty illustrations greatly illuminate the tactics and the battle action for the reader. The author could have increased his coverage of the Confederate forces throughout this wonderful narrative and included many more pages on each phase and individual in his index.

One of the best features of this narrative is Welker's fabulous breakdown of both armies' commanders decision making throughout. He mentions goals, successes, and failures by both commanding generals and other leading figures during this significant conflict which greatly helps make this an enlightening experience for scholars, students, and enthusiasts of the Civil War battles in the Eastern Theater. Highly recommended by this reviewer.

David Marshall is a high school American history teacher in the Miami-Dade School district for the past thirty-three years. A life-long Civil War enthusiast, David is president of the Miami Civil War Round Table Book Club. In addition to numerous reviews in *Civil War News* and other publications, he has given presentations to Civil War Round Tables on Joshua Chamberlain, Ulysses S. Grant, Abraham Lincoln, and more.