

Civil War: The Battle of Antietam—A political turning point in the Civil War

By Curtis Jerry Smothers

CIVIL WAR: THE BATTLE OF ANTIETAM
A POLITICAL TURNING POINT IN THE CIVIL WAR

"A great battle... the darkest day I have ever seen."
— Abner Doubleday, Union Officer

BACKGROUND AND FACTS

- ★ **Note on Name of Battle:** The battle took place near Antietam Creek in Maryland, close to the town of Sharpsburg. The Confederates' called it the Battle of Sharpsburg.
- ★ **Location:** In western Maryland, near Sharpsburg, about 80 miles west of Baltimore just south of Hagerstown.
- ★ **Date:** September 17, 1862
- ★ **Outcome:** Union victory
- ★ **Casualties:** Over 26,000 (12,000 Union and 14,000 Confederate).
- ★ **Significance:** Bloodiest one-day battle ever on American soil.
After the Union defeats at First and Second Bull Run, the Union strategic victory at Antietam was a morale booster for the North. It was also the "victory" that Lincoln was looking for to follow with his Emancipation Proclamation.
This battle, in effect, changed the course of the Civil War, by redefining Union war aims along two objectives: to preserve the Union and to abolish slavery.
Unfortunately, Union General McClellan failed to pursue the retreating Confederate army, and General Lee would fight and win more battles for the beleaguered South.

"SHILOH"
(HEBREW FOR "PEACE")
Ironically, the site of one of the bloodiest battles in American history.

EFFECTS ON THE NORTH

- ★ After humiliating defeats at First and Second Bull Run, the Union victory at Antietam was a morale booster.
- ★ Abraham Lincoln took advantage of the outcome to issue the Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862, freeing slaves in the states currently rebelling against Union authority.
- ★ The battle changed the war's purpose—to preserve the Union AND to abolish slavery.

THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION

"That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State... in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free."
— A. Lincoln

EFFECTS ON THE SOUTH

- ★ The Confederates lost about 30 percent of their invading army—nearly irreplaceable manpower.
- ★ General Lee withdrew to Virginia, recuperated, and remained on the defensive until the summer of 1863, when he marched to disaster at Gettysburg.
- ★ Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation freed not a single slave. It outraged Southerners and dashed hopes of European recognition.

A BATTLE THAT CHANGED HISTORY

"Shiloh was the event which solidified the relationship of Grant and Sherman and led them to a deeper appreciation of the war. In turn, all the principal victories of the North (out West) in 1863 and 1864 were made possible. Conversely, had Johnston's marshaled forces cut the Army of the Tennessee off from the river on April 6, the land-naval campaign against Vicksburg, the March to the Sea, and the Siege of Petersburg might not have occurred at all."
— W. Keith Beason, "Understanding Shiloh: The Death Knell of the Confederacy"

GRANT & SHERMAN
From victory at Shiloh to victory at Vicksburg—and beyond.

ANTIETAM—A TURNING POINT THAT LED TO VICKSBURG, GETTYSBURG AND VICTORY.

The Battle of Antietam is perhaps the most crucial in its importance in changing the political course of the American Civil War. The battle was tactically a draw, but had a direct connection to the Emancipation Proclamation, which foreshadowed the end of slavery

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Description of the Battle

After his August 1862 victory at Second Bull Run, Confederate General Robert E. Lee convinced President Jefferson Davis that an invasion of the North and another major Confederate victory would force Abraham Lincoln to sue for peace. Flanking Washington, D.C., by marching north to Maryland, Lee hoped to lure General McClellan’s army into a decisive battle. A Confederate victory would place Lee’s army in a position to threaten both Washington or a target of his choice in Pennsylvania. A Southern victory also might achieve diplomatic recognition by England and France.

The Confederate army of 40,000 met McClellan and his force of 70,000 in the wooded and farming country near Antietam Creek. General McClellan knew Lee’s plans and objectives after a Union soldier found a copy of Lee’s order of battle wrapped around some cigars. (A Confederate courier carelessly dropped this vital document; Union soldiers found it and turned it over to their officers.)

The Battle of Antietam was really three separate battles: One in a cornfield, another at a bridge spanning the creek, and the other at a sunken road. Each engagement was frightfully costly in soldiers’ lives, and the superior numbers of the North prevailed. Lee withdrew to Virginia and left the field to the Yankees.

Union General McClellan, to the dismay of Lincoln, failed to attack the retreating, but always dangerous, Confederates. Openly disobeying Lincoln’s direct orders, Again, General McClellan's desultory behavior and constant overestimation of the strength of his foe resulted in another prolongation of the war.

McClellan was again relieved of command. McClellan’s successor, Ambrose Burnside, would fare no better, leading failed and bloody campaigns south to Fredericksburg the following November.

Effects on the North

After humiliating defeats at First and Second Bull Run, the Union victory at Antietam was a morale booster, but at the cost of enormous casualties. Abraham Lincoln took advantage of the outcome to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing slaves in the states currently rebelling against Union authority.

The Battle of Antietam was the latest episode in Lincoln's frustrating search for an effective general to lead the Army of the Potomac against the wily, but outnumbered, Confederates. Following McClellan's failure to take advantage of the Confederate retreat, Lincoln's subsequent choices of commanding generals, Burnside and Hooker, led to the debacles at Fredricksburg and Vicksburg in Virginia. Lincoln would fare somewhat better with the choice of Geroge Meade, who faced the Confederates the following summer at Gettysburg.

Effects on the South

The Confederates lost about 30 percent of their invading army. These losses were nearly irreplaceable and were manpower assets that the underpopulated South could ill afford. General Lee would have to bring his battered army home, recuperate and remain on the defensive until the summer of 1863 when he marched to another disaster at Gettysburg.

Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, however, freed not a single slave. The proclamation was aimed at slaves held in non-Union occupied Southern states. Southerners were outraged at the proclamation and vowed to continue resisting. The failure to achieve victory at Antietam, coupled with Lincoln's winning the moral high ground on the slavery issue, for the moment dashed Southern hopes of European recognition.