

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS, CIVIL WAR COMMANDERS<sup>1</sup>

REVIEWED BY MAJOR MICHAEL E. KLEIN<sup>2</sup>

A historian who relies primarily on the words of his subjects to present the historical fact, without embellishing or spinning their words, may ultimately render the role of historian irrelevant. Thankfully, historian T.J. Stiles has embraced such peril in presenting a study of the American Civil War through the words of the men who commanded the forces that fought those epic battles. His masterful presentation enhances historical understanding and does not detract from his role as historian.

*In Their Own Words, Civil War Commanders*, is a collection of first-person accounts of many of the most significant battles fought during the Civil War. Written by the Union and Confederate commanders who commanded nearly three million men,<sup>3</sup> these accounts provide an unembellished, though not necessarily unbiased, record of the events which defined this most critical juncture in American history.<sup>4</sup> Stiles' role in presenting this fine collection is more akin to the hunter and gatherer—who searches out and captures that which is available—rather than to the cook, who is chiefly concerned with preparing something palatable from the ingredients provided. With the few exceptions addressed later in this review, Stiles is content to allow the words of the participants to speak for themselves, unadorned by comment or critique. This is not to say Stiles is a passive bystander. Indeed, the structural framework he provides and the deft economy of his gap bridging from one battle to the next are integral to the work's success.

Stiles states the goal of this book in the opening sentence of its preface when he says it “aims to bring the drama of first-person accounts of Amer-

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1. T.J. STILES, *IN THEIR OWN WORDS, CIVIL WAR COMMANDERS* (New York: The Berkeley Publishing Group 1995); 327 pages, \$14.00 (softcover) (Introduction by Gary W. Gallagher, Head, History Dept., Pennsylvania State University).

2. Judge Advocate General's Corps, United States Army. Written while assigned as a Student, 45th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's School, United States Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

3. In his introduction to the book, Professor Gary W. Gallagher notes that between 1861 and 1865, more than 2,100,000 men served in the Union armies and approximately 800,000 served in the Confederate armies.

ican history into the hands of today's readers."<sup>5</sup> He continues by noting that "[t]he words of the actual historical actors, as they share their thoughts and observations, make historical events personal, immediate, and real."<sup>6</sup> Stiles both achieves his goal and is on the mark with his assessment of the virtue of the first hand account. The judge advocate knows well that Stiles' preference for a first-hand account is recognition of the value of direct evidence of a historical fact *vis a vis* reliance on hearsay. Judgments made, be they in a courtroom or classroom, are undeniably more reliable when based on direct evidence from the participants involved in the action, rather than from one who learned later of the events. Of course, this assertion presupposes that the credibility of the direct evidence participant can be verified. As will be discussed, Stiles alerts the reader to the portions of various accounts that should be viewed with a healthy dose of skepticism and which thus may not be entitled to the supposition of accuracy and reliability.

The author provides a structure for this work that greatly enhances critical analysis of Civil War battles. He uses a chronological progression

4. The Union commanders were:  
 George B. McClellan, Commander of the Army of the Potomac (1862);  
 U.S. Grant, Commander of the Army of Tennessee and later Commander-in-Chief of the Union Armies;  
 William T. Sherman, Commander of a Brigade at First Bull Run and later Commander-in-Chief in the West;  
 Philip H. Sheridan, Commander of an Infantry Division and later Commander-in-Chief of the Cavalry of the Army of the Potomac;  
 David D. Porter, Second-in-Command to Farragut at New Orleans;  
 David G. Farragut, Commander of the Gulf blockade Squadron, and  
 S. Dana Greene, Executive Officer on the U.S.S. *Monitor*.

The Confederate Commanders were:  
 P.G.T. Beauregard, Commander of the Confederate Army at Manassas;  
 Joseph E. Johnston, Commander-in-Chief in Northern Virginia, later Commander-in-Chief in the West during the Vicksburg Campaign, and Commander of the Army of Tennessee during the Atlanta Campaign;  
 James Longstreet, Commander of a Division and later a Corps under Robert E. Lee in the Army of Northern Virginia;  
 John B. Hod, Commander of the Army of Tennessee after Johnston;  
 John S. Mosby, Commander of the Partisan Rangers in Virginia;  
 John McCorkle, scout for William C. Quantrill and later squad leader under guerrilla George Todd in Missouri, and  
 John McIntosh Kell, Executive Officer under Captain Raphael Semmes on the C.S.S. *Alabama*.

5. STILES, *supra* note 1, at xi.  
 6. *Id.*

of significant battles as his framework. Starting with The First Battle of Bull Run in 1861, the reader learns of a tremendous Confederate victory in tactical detail that only the Confederate commander General P.G.T. Beauregard could possibly relate. The war's first real measure of soldiership and generalship is crystallized through the intimate knowledge that only Beauregard possesses. Similarly, an "After-Battle Report" written in the sobering days following the battle serves as the basis for observations by a Union brigade commander at Bull Run named William Tecumseh Sherman. General Sherman poignantly conveys a Union commander's perspective upon his first encounter with "cannonballs strik[ing] men and . . . a field strewn with dead men and horses . . ." <sup>7</sup> The juxtaposition of Beauregard's and Sherman's impressions of the first major battle of the war, without a single word of explication or critique from Stiles, establishes the structure for the remainder of the book. Stiles is content to set the stage for the battle—in three short pages he covers three months of social, political, and military events that take the reader from the ramparts of Fort Sumter to the rolling fields of Manassas—yet he leaves the detailed explanation of the battle to the men who commanded.

Although Stiles attempts evenhandedness in his selection of appropriate Confederate and Union commanders to tell the story of a given battle, he does not always succeed. Thus, while the reader enjoys the benefit of Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston's and Union General George B. McClellan's views of the Peninsula Campaign in 1862, or the views of Confederate General John B. Hood and Union General William T. Sherman on the Atlanta Campaign of 1864, the reader will be disappointed at hearing only McClellan's account of Antietam, or U.S. Grant's account of Shiloh. Certainly, the biggest disappointment in this regard is Stiles' decision to provide only Confederate General James Longstreet's perspective on the quintessential battle of the war—Gettysburg. Although he provides twenty-seven detailed and fascinating pages of Longstreet's perspective, Stiles nevertheless leaves the reader thirsting for the Union viewpoint. The words of Union Generals Meade, Sickles, Hancock or Sykes would contribute greatly to the symmetry of the Gettysburg perspective.

The omission of a Union perspective at Gettysburg, or a Confederate perspective at Antietam, Shiloh, The Wilderness, or Spotsylvania is symptomatic of the book's major flaw. In fairness to Stiles, however, it is a weakness not entirely of his own making, nor is it one of which he is unaware from the start. Stiles acknowledges in his preface that "[t]o keep

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7. *Id.* at 20.

the book from running on to thousands of pages, I have had to limit the number and scope of these selections . . . .”<sup>8</sup> The reader must ask whether Stiles was too solicitous of his publisher’s guidance on length. The investment of a dozen more pages might provide the reader with insight into the thought processes and perspectives of the Union leadership as Pickett was preparing his charge on that fateful third day of the Gettysburg conflict.

Whereas he may be chided for excessive thoroughness in some instances, Stiles is not to blame for the most significant omission in the entire book. Who better could provide the Confederate perspective at Antietam, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, The Wilderness, Spotsylvania, Petersburg, and finally Appomattox than the legendary commander of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia, General Robert E. Lee? Why are his words not represented in this work? The answer is disappointingly simple: one can neither hunt nor gather that which does not exist. Stiles publishes nothing from Robert E. Lee because Robert E. Lee published nothing regarding his command during the war.<sup>9</sup> Stiles should not be criticized for choosing not to answer McClellan’s Antietam with a perspective less informed than that of the Confederate commander at the battle, General Lee. The same can be said of his decision to forego a Confederate viewpoint at other battles which the great Confederate General could have, but chose not to, comment upon.

The occasional imbalance in command perspective has minimal impact on the overall analytical structure of the book. Believing that any first hand account is better than none, Stiles gives the reader ample opportunity to examine the war from the viewpoint of the commanders. The shoes which the reader is invited to wear are not only the worn and muddy boots of the Army commander; Stiles also invites analysis from the soggy shoes of the Navy commander. Therein lies one of the great treasures of this book. In a war renowned for the ferocity of its land battles, battles which forever immortalized the men who commanded the armies of both North and South, the exploits of the Union and Confederate naval forces often receive scant attention. Beyond the vague notion that the Civil War saw the first battle between ironclads, precious little about naval warfare is included in mainstream study of the war. Stiles is able to give the great

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8. *Id.* at xi.

9. In his introduction, Professor Gallagher notes that Robert E. Lee is the most significant, though not the only, Civil War commander who wrote nothing of his experience after the war. Confederate commander of the Army of Tennessee, General Braxton Bragg, and Union General George Henry Thomas also eschewed a written account of their time as Civil War commanders.

naval commanders their due in a fashion wholly consistent with his analytical structure.

Stiles does indeed present the first clash of ironclads in the waters of Hampton Roads off the coast of Virginia in March of 1862. S. Dana Greene, executive officer on the *U.S.S. Monitor*, gives a first hand account of the historic battle between his ship and the *C.S.S. Merrimack*. More important as a precursor to an epochal change from wooden ship to metal ship than as a decisive naval battle, the duel between the *Monitor* and *Merrimack* is nonetheless remarkable when seen from the shoes of a naval officer who is an actual participant in this signal event. The marvel of Stiles' effort is that he demonstrates, through artful bridging of events, the significance of this battle in the overall Union strategy of gaining superiority in the waters off the Confederacy for the dual purpose of strangling rebel commerce and maintaining freedom of movement for Union soldiers and supplies. At still other chronologically appropriate places in this book, Stiles employs the writing of Union Admiral David S. Porter to describe the opening of the lower Mississippi and the Battle of New Orleans. Naval forces are given their due in the West for the part they played in the capture of Vicksburg. So too is the perspective of the Confederate naval commander presented in John McIntosh Kell's account of the cruise of the *C.S.S. Alabama*, a ship that wreaked havoc upon the Union merchant fleet in the oceans of the world. Stiles' final offering in the naval realm is an account from Union Admiral David G. Farragut, of "Damn the Torpedoes" fame, who recounts the Battle of Mobile Bay.

Rounding out Stiles' presentation is an interesting and relevant detour into the world of the Confederate guerrilla. Through the account of Colonel John Mosby, Stiles gives the reader insight into the motivation of Confederate irregular forces and their impact on Union operations in Northern Virginia and the Shenandoah Valley. The reader is left with a real appreciation for the dash and daring of Colonel Mosby who recounts his foray behind Union lines to capture the sleeping Union General Stoughton. Mosby's impertinence characterizes the prevailing mood of the Confederate Army during the first eighteen months of the war. It also highlighted the impotence of the Union Army during this same time frame. A second look at Confederate guerrillas is provided through the words of a Missouri Bushwacker named John McCorkle. Stiles' inclusion of McCorkle's accounts of the Lawrence Kansas and Centralia Missouri massacres reminds the reader that by late summer 1863, the tide had turned against the Confederacy everywhere. As part of William C. Quantrill's Raiders, McCorkle was subordinate to a man Stiles' characterizes as "a dark coun-

terpart to Mosby of Virginia.”<sup>10</sup> Quantrill had an “evil genius [for] this sort of warfare”<sup>11</sup> and he and his men took no prisoners. McCorkle’s account of the wholesale slaughter of Union soldiers ratifies this assessment. The almost sophomoric hijinx of Mosby kidnapping a General in his bedclothes, when contrasted with the deadly serious business of Quantrill’s massacres, marks the limits of Confederate endeavor in the realm of guerilla forces.

Throughout this book, Stiles remains steadfast in his approach of letting the commanders tell the story of the great Civil War battles while he remains content to provide context or gap fill as necessary to preserve the chronology. However, in his preface, Stiles does make the reader aware that a critical eye is required when measuring the commanders’ accounts of their actions. Self-interest is the enemy of rectitude and Stiles allows Professor Gallagher the task of setting the historical record straight. Gallagher does so three times in his introduction by commenting upon: (1) McClellan’s excuses as to why he did not exploit initial success at Antietam with a robust reserve standing at the ready; (2) General Philip Sheridan’s gross understating of his numerical advantage against Early’s Confederate force during the Valley Campaign of 1864; and (3) General Longstreet’s failure to assume responsibility for his tardiness in bringing his force into the fray on the second day at Gettysburg. Thus, the reader has ample warning as to the potential shortcomings of several commander accounts.

Stiles’ success is complete when measured against his stated goal found in the book’s preface. *In Their Own Words, Civil War Commanders*, does provide the reader a fascinating appraisal of Civil War battles from the perspective of the men who commanded the blue and the gray. Reading these first-person accounts does make “personal, immediate, and real” the battles upon whose outcome hung the fate of our nation. The words of the various commanders, not the words of Stiles or Gallagher, tell the story of sacrifice, gallantry, fear, and respect. The outdated diction and the stilted language used by the commanders of the time reinforces for the reader the pleasure of knowing that he is learning about this epic struggle from the actual participants. Stiles, however, is not rendered irrelevant by his choice. Instead, Stiles provides valuable context and gap filling that wonderfully complements the words of Civil War veterans. He also serves the critical function of skeptic. Stiles knows that a soldier interested in

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10. STILES, *supra* note 1, at 184.

11. *Id.*

self-preservation may distort the truth. Thus, Stiles does not allow a commander to quibble without alerting the reader that self-interest may be skewing a particular account.

T.J. Stiles has compiled a tremendous collection of first-hand accounts of the great battles of the Civil War. Though not all inclusive, this collection is a valuable contribution to the study of our nation's defining moment. The serious historian and the casual reader can both benefit from this book. For the historian, this book serves as a point of departure for more in-depth study of any of the fourteen commanders and the battles they fought. For the casual reader, this book's value lies in it being very enjoyable. Wherever the judge advocate lies on the spectrum between historian and casual reader, this book is a "can't miss" and one that should find its way onto a shelf in the living room bookcase.