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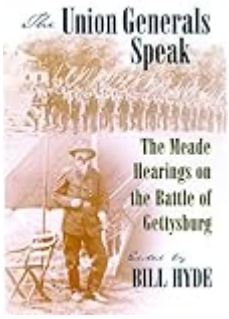

Bill Hyde, ed. *The Union Generals Speak: The Meade Hearings on the Battle of Gettysburg.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003. 428 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2581-6.

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Gettysburg and the Politics of War

On December 5, 1861, Republican Senator Zachariah Chandler of Michigan called for a committee to be formed to investigate the Union Army defeats at Bull Run and Ball's Bluff. Four days later an overwhelming vote gave birth to the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War. Consisting of three senators and four representatives, the Committee was tasked with examining any aspect of the war. Although both Republicans and Democrats were represented on the Committee they nearly all shared a common view on the war: that it needed to be prosecuted vigorously against the South, that the loyalty and willingness of most Democrats to do what was necessary to win the war was suspect, and that West Pointers should be regarded with skepticism and suspicion, for the Academy was considered by members of the Committee as a "hot-bed from which rebellion was hatched" (p. 4). They were all also anti-slavery men. Chandler and Senator Benjamin Wade of Ohio, the Committee chairman, in particular, were powerful men whose personalities dominated the Committee. They loudly advocated using whatever measures it took to crush the rebellion. "A Rebel has sacrificed all his rights," said Chandler, "he has no right to life, liberty or the pursuit of happiness" (p. 6). Any general officer that did not share such sentiments or was perceived as being cautious in taking the war to the enemy was a potential target of these men.

Not surprisingly the Committee quickly acquired a strictly partisan reputation. Although it accomplished some good during its tenure in exposing such things as fraud and waste, its objective more often was to expose those leaders it felt were too timid or whose politics were suspect–in short, were Democrats and favored a softer approach to the prosecution of the war. George B. McClellan was an early and favorite target. A Democrat and advocate of a limited war, he was the antithesis of what the Committee thought the nation needed leading the Army of the Potomac, and they used the Committee's investigate power to undermine his position and work for his removal. To damage reputations the Committee members were not above leaking supposedly secret testimony to the press.

In the winter of 1864 the Committee went after Army of the Potomac commander Major General George G. Meade, for what they perceived were his failures in the battle of Gettysburg and the pursuit of the Confederate

Army after the battle. Meade had several strikes against him. He had replaced Major General Joseph Hooker in command of the army on June 28, three days before the battle, when Hooker submitted his resignation over a conflict with the Army chief of staff, Henry W. Halleck. Hooker had been a favorite with the Committee. Meade was a Democrat, although he had no interest in partisan politics. In the odd logic of the Committee members they thought this lack of interest in politics displayed "lukewarm patriotism" on Meade's part (p. 27).

Meade had his share of enemies in the army who saw the Committee hearings as a chance to damage the Pennsylvanian and perhaps bring about his downfall as commander of the Army of the Potomac. The two principal officers, who were also favorites of Hooker's, were Generals Daniel Butterfield and Daniel E. Sickles. Butterfield had been Hooker's chief of staff and after Hooker's relief had agreed to stay on until Meade was through the emergency and could name his own chief of staff. Meade did so immediately after Gettysburg, abruptly ending Butterfield's association with the Army of the Potomac. Dan Sickles commanded the Third Army Corps at Gettysburg, and on July 2, in direct disobedience to his orders, advanced his command nearly three-quarters of a mile forward of the position Meade had assigned him to. In the ensuing battle the 3rd Corps suffered 4,200 casualties, and the Army of the Potomac had to fight desperately to avert a disaster. Sickles avoided a court-martial or public censure over his blunder largely because he was grievously wounded in the fight and lost a leg. By the winter of 1863 Sickles felt ready to return to the army but Meade barred the way. If Meade could be removed from command, Sickles believed this would clear the way for his return to the army.

The Committee also targeted Meade due to what they considered his timidity during and after the battle. Much of what they knew about the battle and Meade's performance came from Dan Sickles and others who held a grudge against the general for one reason or another. There were four major accusations about Meade's performance at Gettysburg. The first was that Meade had not wanted to fight at Gettysburg, and once the battle was joined there advocated retreat. Second, Meade had not pursued the beaten Rebels aggressively enough; third, he failed to destroy the Confederates when they were trapped against the Potomac River at Williamsport, Maryland. Fourth, in light of his failures during and after Gettysburg, was the question of his fitness to command the nation's largest field army.

The Committee's hearings on Gettysburg ran from February 1864 to the end of April that same year. Sixteen Union generals, including Meade, testified during this time period. The extensive testimony of the hearings has been available to researchers since May 1865, when the Committee's final report was published. They and the other hearings the Committee conducted during its existence can still be found in libraries in their original form, although they are not well known outside of keen students and scholars of the war. What editor Bill Hyde offers in *The Union Generals Speak* is the first publication of the complete Committee's hearings on Gettysburg supplemented by contextual and background commentary. Hyde examines who testified and why, and what they said. Combined with the original testimony it makes for fascinating reading and offers insight not only into the Committee's partisan approach to the hearings, but also to the personality conflicts, rivalries, and jealousy that marked the Army of the Potomac through most of its existence. Hyde clearly knows the controversies and personalities of Gettysburg, as well as the operations of the campaign and battle, and his comments provide the reader a fuller understanding of the Army of the Potomac's operations during and after the battle. He also helps provide understanding of how the Committee's manipulation of who testified and what they were asked helped damage Meade's reputation and foster some of the often inaccurate, but commonly held, opinions of the general that persist to this day. The reader will likely emerge with a more sympathetic view of Meade and his management of the army at Gettysburg, and a greater appreciation for the jealousy and intrigue that existed within the Army of the Potomac and how the Committee sought to exploit and encourage that to achieve their purpose. Hyde and Louisiana State University Press have offered a worthy addition to our understanding of this critical battle and the politics surrounding it.

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