

Burnside during the battle of antietam



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Although some choose to accept the information given in textbooks as hard facts, history is actually a continuing process that is under constant scrutiny by a myriad of historians who have differing viewpoints, opinions and biases. This is no exception for the bloody struggle that took place around Antietam Creek on September 17, 1862. One of the most controversial aspects of the Battle of Antietam surrounds the leadership of General Ambrose Everett Burnside.

Though most historians chastise Burnside for his lethargy during the battle, some praise his skill; this was caused by their backgrounds and beliefs in certain ideals. Nevertheless, historians agree unanimously that Burnside had a large impact on outcome of the Battle of Antietam. Most historians believed the Battle of Antietam was the pivotal point of the Civil War. For the Confederates, it was an opportunity that would allow the South to fight an offensive war and to persuade Britain to intervene in their favor.

For the Union, it was a victory that finally gave Lincoln the confidence to announce his Emancipation Proclamation. The battle began early in the morning with a Union offensive to capture the strategic vantage point of the plateau where Dunker Church stood. As the push for Dunker Church came to a grinding halt, McClellan next focused on punching a hole through the middle where Lee's forces have deeply entrenched themselves in the Sunken Road. The Union forces eventually succeeded in muscling their way past the Confederate line but were just to end up being pounded back by General Longstreet's artillery.

In the afternoon, the battle shifted to the south of Antietam Creek, and General Ambrose Burnside was ordered to cross Rohrbach's Bridge (later renamed Burnside's Bridge) with his IX corps. After sending waves and waves of troops, the Union forces were finally able to push the heavily outnumbered Confederate soldiers past Cemetery Hill. However, to McClellan and Burnside's dismay, General A. P. Hill arrived just in time to counterattack and drive the Union brigades back.

With this final Confederate surge, the battle for Antietam Creek drew to a close when the overly-cautious McClellan was unwilling to further commit any troops. Lee's army was left effectively decimated. Though officially, the battle ended in a stalemate, Lee's Maryland campaign failed; from that point on the Confederates would continue defensive struggle, one that inevitably ended in defeat. As the sun set on this gory day, 23, 000 troops would become casualties, making September 17, 1862 the single bloodiest day in American history.

Many historians felt that General Burnside's actions were responsible for the Union's heavy losses at Antietam. In his book *Crossroads of Freedom*, James McPherson supports the popular belief that Burnside's "lack of action" and his "subsequent lethargy and ineptness" gave Lee the opportunity to remove a few brigades from his unthreatened right flank to aid his pulverized left flank (McPherson 124 – 125). With these much needed reinforcements, the Confederate troops on the left flank were able to repulse the Union offensive and totally decimate General Sedgwick's division.

If Burnside's attack had been coordinated with Hooker's earlier advances, then Lee would not have been able to repulse this two-pronged attack, as his men would have been simultaneously engaged in combat and unable to support each other. In addition, McPherson criticizes Burnside for being too narrow-minded and for spending too much effort in crossing the southern bridge " even though the thirty-yard wide Antietam was shallow and fordable at several places" (McPherson 125). Maurice D'Aoust adds that no amount of obstacles could justify the seven hour delay.