

# Rick Atkinson

Author of *The Guns At Last Light*

Excerpt from transcript of speech at 2013 National Book Festival

[The German attack] fell almost entirely on the Americans arrayed in the Belgian Ardennes and in the Ardennes that extend down into Luxembourg, took them almost entirely by surprise. It was an enormous intelligence failure. It was an intelligence failure ranking right up there with Pearl Harbor and 9/11. Because there was great surprise, and because the Germans had attacked at a part of the Ardennes where we were particularly lightly defended there was great confusion. And in fact Courtney Hodges, Lieutenant General who was the commander of the U.S. First Army, had what appears to be a nervous breakdown of sorts at a very inopportune moment. He closed the door of his office and spa and put his head down on the desk, and basically for 24 hours his Chief of Staff ran First Army at a time when it appeared as though the Germans might overrun First Army. There was concern that Hodges was obviously not up to.

[British] Field Marshal [Bernard] Montgomery, although this was out of his sector, was given the responsibility of taking over Hodges' First Army and a big portion of the American forces, and Montgomery went and looked Hodges directly in the eye and came to the conclusion that in fact he had righted the ship somehow, that whatever affliction had caused him to put his head down on the desk seemed to have passed. He wrote to Eisenhower who was the Supreme Commander in Europe and said, "He's not the man I would have chosen at all, but I think we're going to be okay. And I'll keep a close eye on him." Hodges actually recovered sufficiently to finish the war out. There were a number of instances where commanders, not just at the Battle of the Bulge, just simply didn't measure up, and they were relieved. First Army in particular, ironically, was very precipitous in relieving commanders and replacing them. In Hodges' case he got a second chance.