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Coming to Terms with the Civil War at Gettysburg National Military Park

In order to understand the interpretive challenges we are facing at Gettysburg NMP and our other Civil War sites, we must first understand the historical struggle for the memory of the Civil War era in the United States. The first 100 years of that struggle for memory - from the end of the war in 1865 to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1965- can be aptly summed up by the adage that "The North may have won the war, but the South won the history." This version of memory - classically labeled "The Myth of the Lost Cause" - proclaimed that the Civil War was caused exclusively by a struggle over "state's rights" (slavery was not a cause of the war), that the Confederacy was defeated because of the overwhelming industrial and manpower advantages of the North (thus, defeat did not mean dishonor), and that slavery was a benign institution necessary to protect the well-being of an inferior race.

Over the last 35 years, the "Myth of the Lost Cause" has been systematically challenged and thoroughly discredited within the academic world. But not so in the general memory of our nation, where it persistently remains. For example, the Immigration and Naturalization Service exam for prospective citizenship includes the question "The Civil War was fought over what important issue?" There are two correct answers: "Slavery, or, states rights."¹ And the popular debate continues. In the month preceding our meeting here in Houston, newspapers both North and South covered arguments and debates dealing with the contested history of the Civil War, such as the pros and cons of a statue of Abraham and Tad Lincoln in Richmond, the pending referendum over a new state flag in Georgia, the "Lost Cause" overtones of the movie *Gods and Generals*, and, as always, NPS interpretation at Civil War parks.

David Blight's remarkable book, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American History*, is a remarkable account of how America's memory of the Civil War era was shaped between the years 1865 and 1915. He describes how "Three overall visions of Civil War memory" - emancipation, white supremacy, and reconciliation - "collided and combined over time" and how "In the end...a segregated memory...of reconciliation overwhelmed the emancipationist vision in the national culture..."² Reading David's book was both an intellectual and an emotional experience for me, because what he wrote rings so true in those parts that touched upon my youth and in those that touched upon the development of Gettysburg as a symbol of commemoration and reconciliation. His work speaks directly to our current interpretive challenges at Gettysburg NMP, for there is no doubt that at Gettysburg, we are dealing with some of the problems of the history of memory of which he writes so eloquently.

Shortly after I arrived at Gettysburg NMP, the park celebrated the 100th anniversary of its creation in 1895 as a National Military Park. We celebrated with a symposium dedicated to the topic of "Gettysburg - The First 100 Years," wherein scholars examined the history and development of the park. Being relatively new and relatively naïve, I accepted an invitation to speak on the topic of "Gettysburg - The Next 100 Years."

¹ Charles B. Dew, *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War*. University Press of Virginia, 2001.

² David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. Harvard University Press, 2001.

In my remarks, I suggested that it might be a mistake to assume that Gettysburg NMP would still exist 100 years hence, and that it might be a mistake to assume that anyone would care about the battle of Gettysburg, or the Civil War, in the year 2095. It wasn't meant to be a doomsday prediction, but I did feel it was worth using the occasion to question the presumption that Gettysburg or the Civil War would always be relevant to the American public. Indeed, all one had to do to question that relevance was to look at the profile of the American public that visits Gettysburg.

Our visitors are predominantly adult white males. Males far outnumber females and whites far, far outnumber blacks and all other minorities. If we're going to survive, I suggested, we might want to reverse that trend.

Our Civil War parks, I suggested, have failed to appeal to the black population of America. Theoretically, blacks should be intensely interested in the Civil War, but they are not. I speculated part of this might be due to their understandable reluctance to dwell upon a historical period in which they were considered sub-human by a majority of the white population, both north and south.

But a portion of this failure, I suggested, may be our own fault. In our efforts to honor both the Union and the Confederate forces that fought on our battlefields, our interpretive programs had been avoiding discussions of what they were fighting about. For blacks, I suggested, it has always been abundantly clear what the Civil War was all about. In their view, the primary purpose behind the creation of the Confederate States of America was to protect and preserve the institution of slavery (a view largely endorsed by the academic community). Until we started talking about issues such as this, I concluded, we could not hope to make Civil War battlefields relevant to them.

Excerpts from this speech were picked up and reprinted in *The Civil War News*, and you could probably predict what happened next. The Secretary of the Interior received 1,100 postcards from the Southern Heritage Coalition, condemning my plans to "modify and alter historical events to make them more 'palatable' to a greater number of park visitors." The postcards demanded that the Park Service "return to its unaligned and apolitical policies of the past, presenting history, not opinions."

I was surprised by this reaction. After all, I was only stating the obvious: that slavery had something to do with the Civil War and we ought to talk about that. But I shouldn't have been surprised - I had just forgotten what I had been taught 30 years before.

I was raised in Virginia and South Carolina. I grew up in a completely segregated society that taught segregation as the natural condition of the races. As a product of the educational systems of Virginia and South Carolina, I was thoroughly indoctrinated into "Myth of the Lost Cause." I grew up in the Douglas Southall Freeman era, at a time when Freeman's credibility was just slightly below the King James Version of the Bible, and slightly above the Revised Standard Version (which was still considered somewhat suspect). I shouldn't have been surprised that the "myth" still has a powerful hold upon the minds and emotions of my fellow graduates of Southern school systems of that time. (59% of the visitors to Gettysburg graduated from high school before the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1965; 24% are from Southern states.)

With a new awareness, I started to look at Gettysburg and what we were presenting to the public. The battlefield itself - our teaching tool - is a perfect example of what David Blight has described as commemoration through reconciliation. We have over 1,400 monuments, memorials, tablets and markers at Gettysburg, primarily erected between the 1870s and the 1920s. These 1,400 monuments describe the order of battle, disposition and movements of troops, and (almost invariably) their casualty lists. The majority of the monuments, particularly those installed by the veterans themselves, call particular attention to the bravery, the courage, the valor and the

manliness of the soldiers. A few commemorate the preservation of the Union. None commemorate the ending of slavery.

In other words, the monumentation of Gettysburg is a physical manifestation of the reconciliationist memory of the Civil War. As a somewhat natural consequence, our interpretive programs traditionally emphasized (safe) reconciliationist topics. We discussed battle and tactics, the decisions of generals, the moving of regiments and batteries, the engagements of opposing units, and tales of heroism and valor. All of this was central to our mission, and seemed to be what the majority of visitors wanted to hear about. (Internally, we call this type of interpretation "who shot whom, where.")

And, of course, there are those veterans' reunions for which Gettysburg is so renowned. The story of the famous "hands across the wall" at the 50th anniversary of the battle at Gettysburg in 1913, which symbolizes the reconciliation of the veterans themselves, is guaranteed to bring tears to visitors' eyes. We tell that story. Stories related to the consequences of that reconciliation - Woodrow Wilson's forced segregation of the Federal bureaucracy in 1913, or the 70 lynchings that took place that year - might also bring tears to visitors' eyes if we told them. But we don't.

In 1996, we started to move towards a more contextual interpretation of the battle, and began to offer programs addressing slavery and the impact of war upon civilians. In 1988, through the cooperative agreement between the NPS and the Organization of American Historians, Professors Jim McPherson (Princeton), Eric Foner (Columbia), and Nina Silber (Boston University) came to spend a few days with us. We asked their advice on our programs and how to put the Gettysburg campaign into the context of the political, social, and economic environment of the mid-nineteenth-century United States; in short, how to present the story of Gettysburg within the larger story of the causes and consequences of the Civil War.

Their advice was invaluable. One of their most insightful observations was that, because we had traditionally related the reconciliationist version of the Civil War to our visitors, our interpretive programs had a pervasive (although unintended) southern sympathy. After all, they pointed out, Gettysburg was most commonly known as being the site of Pickett's Charge (rather than Hancock's defense), and as the "High Water Mark of the Confederacy."

We instantly knew they were right. By primarily emphasizing the heroism and sacrifices of the soldiers, without discussing why they were fighting, we were presenting the reconciliationist memory of the Civil War to our visitors, to the exclusion of the emancipationist vision.

Taking their advice, we have revised our themes. Now, instead of emphasizing only the battle itself, we also stress the meaning of the battle. That meaning, of course, was eloquently captured by President Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address. Our new interpretive themes are designed to emphasize Gettysburg as the place of "A New Birth of Freedom."

Also in 1998, a conference of all the superintendents of NPS Civil War sites was held in Nashville. One purpose of the conference was to discuss our mutual "recognition that our interpretive efforts do not convey the full range and context of the stories our sites can tell." On the subject of "Interpreting Civil War Battlefields" the superintendents unanimously concluded that we should all broaden our interpretive stories to

...establish the site's particular place in the continuum of war; illuminate the social, economic, and cultural issues that caused or were affected by the war; illustrate the breadth of human experience during the period, and establish the relevance of the war to people today.³

In other words, on an agency-wide basis, the NPS made the decision to ground our stories of battles and tactics in the larger issue of "causes and consequences."

In 1999, the new General Management Plan for Gettysburg NMP stated that:

"The enduring legacy of Gettysburg and its place in the nation's history provide a rare opportunity to discuss the social, cultural and political changes that brought about the Civil War and that were occasioned by it. The Civil War was a dramatic national struggle that touched the lives of every American alive then. The war, this battle, and the Gettysburg Address helped define the ideals of freedom that we, as a nation, still strive to achieve today."⁴

The same year, Congress gave the NPS additional encouragement to broaden our interpretive scope, when it declared that;

The Service does an outstanding job of documenting and describing the particular battle at any given site, but ...it does not always do a similarly good job of documenting and describing the historical social, economic, legal, cultural and political forces and events that...led to the...war.... In particular, the Civil War battlefields are often weak or missing vital information about the role that the institution of slavery played in causing the American Civil War.

As a result, Congress directed the NPS "to encourage Civil War battle sites to recognize and include in all of their public displays and multi-media educational presentations the unique role that the institution of slavery played in causing the Civil War..."⁵

Constituency Concerns

As we move in this direction, we will continue to tell the stories of battles and tactics, illustrated by the experiences of military leaders and individual soldiers. These will always be fascinating subjects. (Stories of how people react under stress always make good literature and good drama.)

But we are now presenting these stories of "who shot whom, where" within the important historical issues of "why were they shooting?" and "why did it matter?" By whatever method you choose to measure - the events of September 11th notwithstanding - the Civil War was the greatest disaster in the history of our country.⁶ And the outcome of the war, its consequences, was the greatest factor in the subsequent development of our country. As we introduce our visitors to the story of what the war was all about, we hope it can provide a deeper meaning concerning why those men fought and died on the fields at Gettysburg.

³ "Holding the High Ground: Principles and Strategies for Managing and Interpreting Civil War Battlefield Landscapes," p. 11. NPS, 1998.

⁴ "Final General Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement: Gettysburg National Military Park," p. 6. NPS, 1999.

⁵ "Department of the Interior FY2000 Appropriations: Joint Explanatory Statement of the Committee of the Conference," Title I, p. 96. U.S. Congress, 1999.

⁶ In 1860, the population of the US was 43.3 million; 3.8 million were enrolled in military service and 620,000 died. If the Civil War was fought today and the same percentages held, 29.8 million would be enrolled in military service and 4.8 million would die.

But as we introduce these issues of "contextual history" we are making some folks nervous. Some "military buffs" are concerned that any time spent talking about causes and consequences would be time taken away from the true purpose of battlefields, which they define (in unconscious reconciliationist terms) as "commemorating the battle and honoring the men who fought there." They argue that battlefields were not established to interpret the Civil War, but only to commemorate and interpret individual battles. "Interpreting the broader scope of Civil War history" wrote one critic, "was NOT in the 'mission statement' of the battlefields." That kind of stuff should be left to the academic historians.

To these critics, we reply that it is not our intent to downplay the military history of the campaign, but to make that military history more meaningful and understandable to our visitors, by providing an understanding of the social, political and economic influences that produced the soldiers and the armies in which they fought. After all, as Sir John Keegan, the most acclaimed military historian of our time, wrote:

...an army is...an expression of the society from which it issues. The purposes for which it fights and the way it does so will therefore be determined in large measure by what a society wants from a war and how far it expects its army to go in delivering that outcome.⁷

In other words, in order to understand armies, good military historians must first understand the societies that produced those armies. In order to understand the battle-front, you must first understand the home front. In order to understand the significance of Gettysburg, you must first understand what was at stake as the armies prepared for battle.

Other constituents have a more personal concern, which is how the memory and honor of their ancestors will be treated in this type of "contextual" history. In the words of one correspondent from North Carolina, "...I see the political climate as becoming very dangerous for anything Southern and white. I have never condoned discrimination, I have never denied slavery was a cause of the War. But, slavery was NOT the ONLY cause. And I'll be damned if I will sit idly by and let revisionist historians tell me MY ancestors, who owned NOT one slave...fought to keep them in bondage."

This question of "honor" is still incredibly important to these constituents. How we can approach this subject without bringing "dishonor" upon their ancestors? The question has two answers, both of which are part and parcel of doing "good history." The first is that interpretation of 19th century events through the lens of 21st century values is "bad history," which we shall not do. The participants of this mid-19th century struggle must be understood within the context of the values of the times and the societies in which they lived.

Secondly, as Jim McPherson has so ably pointed out, the reasons that nations go to war, and the reasons that men go to war, are often two different sets of reasons. It is perfectly understandable, in the context of the 1860s, why a citizen of North Carolina or Pennsylvania chose to enlist under the banner of their state. Indeed, it would be unusual had they not done so. To conclude that those soldiers who did enlist, thus automatically supported the reasons that their governments went to war, is bad history. Some did, and some did not. There are hundreds of reasons why men go to war.

As personal example, I "volunteered" to join the Army and thus went to Vietnam. I hope that does not mean that my descendants (or future historians) will presume that I believed in the Domino Theory, or that I had any intention of sacrificing my life (or honor) to save the world from the evils of communist domination. But in the context of the times in which I lived, I had four choices: to be drafted and go as an enlisted person, to volunteer and go as an officer, to go to jail, or to flee my

⁷ John Keegan, The Mask of Command, p. 2. Penguin Books, 1987.

country. I took the choice that seemed best for me and my family. That choice was influenced by the social, economic, and political context of American life of the 1960s. How many choices did typical 22-year-olds have in the 1860s, and how were those choices effected by the context of their times?

In summary, if we can explain why the North and South went to war, introduce the myriad of personal reasons which caused the citizens of both the North and South to support that war, and talk about the consequences of those decisions - both individual and collective - then we shall have succeeded in doing "good history" which should dishonor no one.

And, perhaps, we will have taken a small step forward in reconnecting our cultural memories of the Civil War era in America, including memories of both reconciliation and emancipation.