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Op/Ed

Gettysburg: Saving The Union At What Cost?

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GETTYSBURG, Pa.—Independence Day 1863. Late in the evening Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee began the retreat of the Army of Northern Virginia from the Pennsylvania town of Gettysburg back to southern soil. The conflict's most celebrated commander had lost the war's most celebrated battle. The American Union survived.

Gettysburg is peaceful today. Tourists throng the battlefield and monuments dot the landscape. But history hangs heavy. Nearly 150 years ago on a hot Friday afternoon America's future hung in the balance.

North and South had been fighting inconclusively for two years. The North won more often than it lost in the West, though few battles were decisive. The results were reversed in the East, where Lee outfought a succession of Union commanders. Two months before Gettysburg Lee won his greatest victory, at Chancellorsville, where he led a badly outnumbered army to a dramatic triumph over the Army of the Potomac.

Confident in himself and his men, he led the Army of Northern Virginia across the Potomac aiming for Harrisburg, Pennsylvania's capital. The two armies collided on Wednesday, July 1 in the small town of Gettysburg, into which several roads flowed.

The Army of Northern Virginia and Army of the Potomac spent two days battling to a draw. Lee came close to victory on both days. On July 3 the Confederate cannonade ceased about three p.m. and the attack on the Union center commenced.

The famed Copse of Trees seemed so close, less than a mile away. The gently undulating countryside beckoned. But what became known as Pickett's Charge was anything but a pleasant stroll. The Park Service has helpfully cut a path through the high grass and opened sections of two intervening fences, allowing today's faux warriors to succeed where 12,500 Confederate soldiers failed. Of course, the latter faced murderous cannon and musket fire. The southern troops broke the Union line, but could not hold off ensuing counterattacks. And Gen. J.E.B. Stuart's cavalry, which some historians believe was supposed to simultaneously hit Meade's center, was blocked by Union forces under George C. Custer.

As survivors straggled back to their lines Lee looked to save his army. Union Gen. George G. Meade's pursuit was half-hearted, since his forces also suffered badly. In fact, the latest research indicates that the Army of the Potomac endured around the same number of casualties, 23,000, as the Confederates (whose losses originally were pegged at about 28,000), though the latter suffered disproportionately since they had fewer troops at the start.

Disastrous as the defeat may have seemed for the South, the war continued for nearly two more years. Although the Confederate armies collapsed out West, in the eastern theater Lee continued to fend off Union advances. Not until April 1865 did the Army of Northern Virginia surrender.

Historians, professional and amateur alike, continue to debate responsibility for Lee's loss at Gettysburg. George Meade, a competent general, and the Army of the Potomac, a brave, battle-tested force, deserved the lion's share of the credit.

Lee, the war's most talented military leader, underperformed — perhaps made overconfident by persistent success. Corps commanders Richard Ewell and James Longstreet

failed at critical moments. Gen. Stuart left Lee without the latter's "eyes" by riding off on a grand raid.

Naturally, then the "what-ifs?" continue to intrigue and fascinate.

But a more basic question flows from America's most costly battle. Can the war be justified?

Today U.S. officials criticize, and sometimes even bomb, other governments which forcibly prevent secession. The majority of Americans have come to believe that political arrangements should be voluntary. Thus, the fact that some people want to break away is no cause for war.

That was not the view in 1861, however.

People argue incessantly whether the southern states could constitutionally secede from the national government. But the more important question is: should the North have tried to forcibly stop the South from leaving?

The morally odious practice of slavery, which triggered secession, hangs over the debate. But the North went to war against secession, not slavery. President Abraham Lincoln called up 75,000 militiamen to suppress rebellion, not free the slaves. He promised not to interfere with the odious practice and famously wrote journalist Horace Greeley: "My paramount object in the struggle *is* to save the Union, and *is not* either to save or to destroy slavery." Ironically, had the South's eastern commander been less talented than Lee the war might have ended much earlier, in which case slavery would have survived.

Equally important, only the seven Deep South states seceded over slavery. Arkansas, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia did not withdraw from the Union until President Lincoln announced plans to invade their neighbors. Lincoln's call to arms dissipated the loyalty that had kept these slave states from joining the Confederacy. One North Carolina citizen explained: "Union sentiment was largely in the ascendant and gaining strength until Lincoln prostrated us. He could have adopted no policy so effectual to destroy the Union. ... Lincoln has made us a unit to resist until we repel our invaders or die."

Why then did the federal government plunge the two sections into war? If not a crusade to liberate enslaved Americans, it is much harder to conjure up a serious justification for killing some 620,000 people and convulsing a nation.

In his 1861 inaugural address President Lincoln claimed that the rejection of majority rule meant "the central idea of secession is the essence of anarchy." This argument is simply false. Whether or not southerners were justified in what they did, they did not reject majority rule—large majorities in the respective states voted to leave the Union—but *national* majority rule. The highly hierarchical southerners abhorred the idea of

anarchy; they simply transferred their established institutions, including a revised version of the federal Constitution, to a southern Confederacy. Most of the political leaders transferred as well: the so-called fire-eaters, who did so much to trigger secession, were largely bypassed when people chose the Confederacy's leaders.

There were practical concerns in the North—for instance, would the new southern government close off navigation on the Mississippi to New Orleans and out into the Gulf of Mexico? But these issues certainly could have been negotiated.

What mattered most to Unionists was raw nationalism. Many Americans were convinced that the United States of America was indivisible and divinely destined to overspread the entire continent. President Lincoln tapped into these sentiments when he eloquently cited “The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land.”

This vision obviously was attractive, especially when compared to a slave republic based on the subjugation of people whose ancestors had been kidnapped from another continent. However, the fundamental premise of any supposedly free society should be voluntary political arrangements. Otherwise a more genteel form of political servitude results.

There were supporters of the Union who nevertheless opposed coercing those who wanted to leave. Col. Robert E. Lee, who rejected command of the northern forces, explained: “I can anticipate no greater calamity for the country than a dissolution of the Union. . . . Still, a Union that can only be maintained by swords and bayonets, and in which strife and civil war are to take the place of brotherly love and kindness, has no charm for me.” Unionist Horace Greeley voiced similar sentiments in the *New York Tribune*: “We hope never to live in a republic whereof one section is pinned to the residue by bayonets.”

Walking the Gettysburg battlefield and imagining fighting in the Peach Orchard, at Devil's Den, or on Little Round Top vividly reminds one of the cost of pinning one section of the country to another with bayonets. Thousands upon thousands died so one set of people could force another group to remain in a common political order.

Of course, in the early days of 1861 virtually no one imagined what the total cost would be.

Many of those who enthusiastically marched off to war did so in the mistaken belief that those on the other side—Yankee shopkeepers and slave barons, respectively—would not fight. In fact, Sen. James Chestnut of South Carolina offered to drink all the blood that would be shed as a result of secession.

Alas, it turns out that Americans north and south were equally brave and equally dedicated. The result was unprecedented carnage and bloodshed. Sen. Henry Wilson of Massachusetts watched the hideous Wilderness Campaign of May 1864 in which a month

of combat cost the North roughly 60,000 casualties and said: "If that scene could have been presented to me before the war, anxious as I was for the preservation of the Union, I should have said: 'The cost is too great; erring sisters, go in peace'."

More than people died. So did the decentralized republic in which the national government only rarely threatened individual liberty. Indeed, the national security state, with its assault on civil liberties, restrictions on political freedom, and controls over economic activity, began during the Civil War. Destroying slavery was a very real but perhaps the only serious benefit of the conflict. Moreover, that gain was partially overturned after Reconstruction ended when southern states imposed white supremacist rule. A century after the Civil War ended Americans were still struggling to rid their nation of this horrid blight.

Today Independence Day is a time for fun and relaxation for most Americans. The bucolic slope leading to Cemetery Hill looks fit for a picnic and fireworks. But on that day in 1863 it was covered with dead Americans who had been fighting each other over what America was going to be.

The what-ifs persist, but one certainty remains. It is foolish to underestimate the cost of loosing the dogs of war. A society at war risks plunging into an abyss far deeper than anyone expects. Just like in the Civil War.