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The Battle of Gettysburg:
What Has Shaped its Existence in American Memory

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“Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” These thirty words comprise the opening of arguably the most commonly known speech in American history: The Gettysburg Address. This speech has greatly contributed to forming the Battle of Gettysburg’s mythic status in the memory of the American people. Gettysburg is mythic not only in the sense that it has attained a level of legend and notoriety that persists in the minds of a vast number of people, but also in the sense of perpetuation of unfounded, false, and embellished depictions of reality. Understanding the contributing factors that have led to the way that the Battle of Gettysburg is viewed in American memory is central to placing it within the larger context of American history. Without question, the military engagement had strategic influence on the outcome of the war. However, more importantly, the legacy of Gettysburg, manifested in its prominent existence within the minds of the American public, transcends the tactical and military facets of the battle. Three striking areas greatly contribute to the establishment of Gettysburg in American memory: The Gettysburg Address, tourism at the site of the battlefield, and its depiction in modern film.

First, in the words of “The Gettysburg Address” at the dedication of the Soldiers’ National Cemetery at Gettysburg, President Abraham Lincoln delivered some of the most renowned words in American history. These words transformed American views of the Constitution, and paved a path for a new notion of freedom, justice, and equality in the United States. The fact that this speech was given at Gettysburg contributed greatly to its elevated status.

Second, the creation and development of Gettysburg as a tourist location and a site of commemoration and reconciliation has helped establish the battlefield as a prominent, historically relevant venue in American memory. Just a few weeks after the completion of the battle efforts began to preserve the park, and over the years it has developed into the most visited national military park. In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War it also served as the central place for reuniting and reconciliation between the North and the South. The importance of Gettysburg as the location for remembrance of the Civil War lives on, and contributes to the mythology that is the Battle of Gettysburg.

The final key area I researched demonstrated the inaccuracy and embellishment of events at Gettysburg in modern film production. I analyzed two films that have reached the greatest number of viewers due to the notion that a huge number of Americans get their history through television and movies. In looking at *Gettysburg* by Ronald Maxwell and *The Civil War* by Ken Burns' I developed an understanding of these films' perpetuation of Gettysburg mythology as well as adherence to a rejected interpretation of the Civil War. Despite apparent historical faultiness, over 100 million Americans have viewed these two films, and to ignore their importance in Gettysburg's existence in American memory would have been careless.

The combination of these three predominant portals through which to examine Gettysburg's existence in American memory, develops an understanding of the battle's place in the fabric of American society. By identifying the impact these areas had, and through analysis of the preeminence of Gettysburg in American culture today, it is clear that although the military and tactical outcomes served an important purpose in the war, the enduring ideas, beliefs, and values that have placed Gettysburg at the pinnacle of

American historical memory transcend those immediate military results and the war itself.

Historical Context

Foremost to understanding the placement of Gettysburg in the memory of America, it is vital to recognize its' the military significance. With certainty, the battle was of great strategic importance for both the Union and the Confederacy, and considering the decimation that the Union had experienced leading up to this battle, it was crucial in altering both strategic and psychological momentum for the North. The tactics of the battle, the troop movements, and the truly heroic activities of the men who fought are part of the mythology of Gettysburg. Dissecting the events through the work of military historians provides a valuable framework for perceiving the most accurate description of the events of the battle. Much of what is remembered by the public is reflective of the actual events, though through a lens that is slightly out of focus. The scope of Gettysburg's impact and existence in American memory is massive, and to avoid acknowledging the factual events of the battle would be to contribute to the perpetuation of such myths. Gettysburg truly was one of the great battles in American history, understanding its' events surely help one to understand how it has gain the distinction it has in American memory.

In a war that required defensive tactics in order to preserve their secession and achieve liberty, the Confederacy found themselves being pressured by the Union on several fronts.¹ At the same time, Robert E. Lee, commander of the Confederate Army of

¹ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 646.

Northern Virginia, had recently experienced a great deal of success soon after taking command. Given his success, he had attained considerable power among Confederate leadership. As a result of the accomplishments he had made, and the need to relieve some of the pressure building on the South, Lee convince Confederate president, Jefferson Davis, to authorize his invasion of Pennsylvania.

This decision was not clear-cut because of the situation in Mississippi. Vicksburg continued to withstand the besiegement of Ulysses S. Grant's army, and many military strategists argued that the troops should be designated to support the important Mississippi stronghold. Lee also acknowledged the importance of defending Vicksburg, but his proposition of the imminent peril of his own army from another Union attack, eventually led to the decision to reinforce the Army of Northern Virginia, and wage a new invasion of the North.²

In light of this success, the Army of Northern Virginia was at an all-time high for morale, and this seemed to be exacerbated by the state of disarray and lack of motivated leadership in the Union command. Lincoln had realized that Joseph Hooker would be insufficient in leading the army in the looming battle with Lee, and he replaced him with the somewhat proven but unknown George Meade on June 28th. With both armies in relative proximity, the scene was set, only a catalyst was needed to spark the most notorious battle in American history – Gettysburg – a catalyst to draw both armies together and fight to the death.

A common notion among public memory is that this necessary catalyst was a shoe factory. Supplies and clothing, especially shoes and boots were always in short supply

² Ibid., 647.

during the American Civil War. Heading towards Gettysburg to raid a shoe factory makes a lot of sense. However, no such factory existed at all. Gettysburg was not a town known for shoe making, but rather for carriage construction. General Henry Heth asserted this through an off-handed comment, “I ordered ...Pettigrew to take his brigade to Gettysburg, search the town for army supplies (shoes especially), and return the same day.”³ This parenthetical comment from a diary entry led to the creation of one of the most enduring myths of the Civil War. As Thomas Desjardin puts it, “few Gettysburg myths have been more persistently repeated than the Gettysburg shoe myth.”⁴ In fact, three days prior to the start of the battle, Robert E. Lee ordered his entire army to “concentrate at Gettysburg.”⁵ The notion that shoes were the reason for the bloodiest battle in American history is simply a myth. The reason behind this development will be addressed later in the paper; however to gain a more clear understanding of the battle, it is important to turn to what actually led to the great conflict being initiated at Gettysburg.

Despite the lack of shoes, Henry Heth did send a brigade to scout the town of Gettysburg, and to perhaps accumulate some supplies, if available. Though the commanding officer of the brigade received word of a large cavalry division in the area, Heth asserts that the rest of the Union force was nowhere near the town. Unknown to the Confederate sympathizer who relayed information that Union soldiers were nowhere to be seen, the Union soldiers began arriving in Gettysburg later that afternoon.⁶ George

³ Thomas A. Desjardin, *These Honored Dead: How the Story of Gettysburg Shaped American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo, 2005.), 57.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Robert N. Scott, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Harrisburg, Pa.: National Historical Society :, 1985.), 298.

⁶ Edwin C. Bearss and Parker Hills, *Receding Tide: Vicksburg and Gettysburg : the*

Meade, the newly appointed commander of the Army of the Potomac, had no intention of starting the battle at Gettysburg. His main intention was to protect Baltimore and Washington from the Confederate Army. Moving on Gettysburg was, at this point, an attempt to position the troops in a defensive manner.⁷ However, on the evening of June 30th, upon receiving intelligence of Lee's positioning, John Reynolds, one of Meade's generals, was assured that battle was looming.⁸

By the afternoon of July 1st, over 40,000 Union troops had gathered along a semicircle to the north and west of Gettysburg. Still neither Lee nor Meade had arrived at the battlefield and would not until the evening and night, respectively. Understanding that the remainder of Meade's army was surely on its way to Gettysburg, Lee issued discretionary orders for Lieutenant General Richard Ewell to commit as many troops as available to attempt to overcome the Union flank, which he disregarded.⁹ This decision allowed three more Union corps and General Meade to arrive and bolster their defenses, and would ultimately prove to be one of the biggest criticisms of the Confederate army at Gettysburg. On top of that, disagreement between Lieutenant General James Longstreet and Lee led to disorganization, and a certain degree of insubordination, on the part of Longstreet. At the end of the first two days, the South was left in a desperate position attempting to formulate attack at the Union left center.¹⁰

Campaigns that Changed the Civil War (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2010.), 295.

⁷ Bearss, 288.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 298.

⁹ McPherson 655.

¹⁰ G. S. Boritt, *The Gettysburg Nobody Knows* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.), 84.

The reckless determination showed by Lee, culminated in his insistence to attack the middle of the Union line against, seemingly insurmountable odds. He placed Longstreet in charge of formulating this attack, which was preceded by hours of artillery bombardment. Longstreet led with a heavy heart, understanding the odds he and his men were up against, "I could see the desperate and hopeless nature of the charge and the hopeless slaughter it would cause. . . That day at Gettysburg was one of the saddest of my life."¹¹ Despite the obvious disadvantage and impending failure, Longstreet mustered up a final attack on the Union center, led by General George Pickett.¹²

In total, eleven brigades, amounting to around 30,000 men joined in "Pickett's Charge." This charge would prove to be the military failure that would perpetually exist as the fatal blow to Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Not only had their hours of artillery bombardment not knocked out all of the Union guns, it had in fact, caused minimal damage. Despite the valiant charge, the Confederate soldiers were blown apart by Union artillery. The charge ended in disaster for the Confederacy, as the survivors found themselves turned away, forced to assemble for an anticipated counterattack by Meade, which never materialized.¹³

While certainly many details of the battle have been omitted, its' framework is important to understand Gettysburg's existence in American memory. However, the question that arises concerns Gettysburg's significance relative to the other military engagements at the time. Vicksburg appears to be at least equally important to the Union's victory, yet it is not remembered nearly as well. Do people remember

¹¹ Scott, 343, 345.

¹² McPherson, 662.

¹³ McPherson, 663.

Gettysburg because of the military tactics described here, or for more symbolic reasons? By taking a look at the importance of Vicksburg strategically for both the Union and the Confederacy, perhaps one can begin to realize that it may have been more important militarily than Gettysburg. With this understanding, it is easier to acknowledge the non-military factors that have led to the establishment of the mythic status of the Battle of Gettysburg.

Vicksburg and its Strategic Importance

The summer of 1863 delivered two very significant military victories for the Union; the commonly known Battle of Gettysburg and the Siege of Vicksburg. Both of these engagements ended during the first week of July, within one day of each other. Each battle also had significant implications both psychologically and strategically. However, when examining history, the Battle of Gettysburg garners much more attention both from Civil War scholars and from the general public. A comprehensive bibliography of the Gettysburg campaign contained over 6,000 entries, a fraction of which might be found on Vicksburg, should such a work exist, argues Gary Gallagher.¹⁴ Despite the lack of research regarding Vicksburg, there is a lot to suggest that it was equally, if not, more important for the Union in regard to winning the war. To better analyze the importance and impact that the successful Siege of Vicksburg had, it is crucial to examine the tactical and strategic aspects of the battle.

The majority of the importance of the town of Vicksburg was its vital position on the bank of the Mississippi River. While railroads were important to the economic

¹⁴ Gary W. Gallagher, "Did the Fall of Vicksburg Really Matter?" *Civil War Times* 50, no. 4 (August 2011): 23-25. America: History and Life with Full Text, (accessed March 16, 2012).

structure of the continent at the time, the Mississippi River was still the single most important economic and geographical feature.¹⁵ The Union controlled the mouth of the river at New Orleans, which prevented Confederate use of the Gulf of Mexico, and denied troop movements and supply chains from making use of the water passage. However, because of Confederate strongholds between New Orleans and central Arkansas, most notably Vicksburg, the Union was also denied these same strategic advantages.

Not only did the economic impact of Vicksburg and the Mississippi River resonate among military personnel, but President Abraham Lincoln was assured of the importance of the stronghold on the river. Long before Ulysses S. Grant successfully captured the town, Lincoln asserted the need to take the city from the Confederacy: “See what a lot of land these fellows hold, of which Vicksburg is the key....Let us get Vicksburg and all that country is ours. The war can never be brought to a close until that key is in our pocket.”¹⁶ By acknowledging the importance of Vicksburg towards the onset of the war, Lincoln demonstrated his tactical knowledge, and Grant followed through with determination until the job was complete.

After a failed assault of the town on May 19, 1863, Grant and his army settled in for an all-out siege of the town.¹⁷ By the time the Union had Vicksburg surrounded, both Grant and General John C. Pemberton of the Confederacy knew that the outcome of the battle was inevitable. Grant asserted that the enemy was “in our grasp. The fall of

¹⁵ “Vicksburg: Strategic Setting” <<http://ocean.otr.usm.edu/~w416373/.../Lsn%2016%20Vicksburg%201.ppt>> (accessed March 16, 2012).

¹⁶ Stephen E. Ambrose *Americans at War* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997.), 1.

¹⁷ Ambrose, 41.

Vicksburg and the capture of most of the garrison can only be a question of time.”

Pemberton too addressed the severity of the situation in journals claiming the only way that they could hold out was by receiving reinforcements, which never came.¹⁸ Finally after enduring the siege for ninety-eight days, and no sign of reinforcements, Pemberton surrendered to Grant on July 4th, 1863. It would take nearly one hundred years for the town of Vicksburg to get over this surrender; they would not celebrate Independence Day until the 1960s.¹⁹

The bitterness of the people of Vicksburg certainly deserves some attention, as the sense of pride shared by the people reflects the fundamental motivations of the Confederacy. However, this also presents an inquiry into methods of commemoration of the Civil War on a much broader scale. Why are some battles remembered more than others? Why is extra significance placed on the battle of Gettysburg as opposed to the decisive Union victory at Vicksburg? To best understand these questions, it is crucial to analyze the way history and memory is constructed, especially in the face of conflict and war.

When exploring history and memory in relation to war and conflict, it is first important to distinguish between history and memory. David Blight suggests that history is “a reasoned reconstruction of the past rooted in research...it assesses change and progress over time.” Memory, he defines as “a sacred set of potentially absolute meanings and stories.” Memory, he also describes as owned by and manifested in sacred places and monuments; whereas, history is manifested in revision and myriads of

¹⁸ McPherson, 633.

¹⁹ James W. Loewen, “Vicksburg or Gettysburg” *The History Channel Club Online*. July 29, 2009. (accessed March 16, 2012).

evidence.²⁰ The first section of this paper has documented the histories of Gettysburg and Vicksburg during the American Civil War. However, by acknowledging the distinction Blight makes between history and memory, the focus will now turn towards the questions of why and how memory is constructed regarding these two conflicts within the context of the American Civil War. By analyzing the impact and influence of three main factors of memory: the Gettysburg Address, commemorative practices at the site of the battle, and depictions in modern film, one can develop a complete understanding of the Civil War, especially Gettysburg, in American memory.

The Address

The importance of realizing the American perception of the Battle of Gettysburg in its immediate aftermath cannot go understated. Even as late as 1864 the battle was not seen as a pivotal event in the war, on which the balance swung.²¹ Indeed, the battle eventually proved to carry strategic importance, but not nearly to the level it is now assumed to be at by the public. Through the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln elevated the status and importance of the battle. At the same time he helped contribute to the mythology that is the Battle of Gettysburg, and American society would not be the same.²²

On the afternoon of November 19th, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln changed the way the Constitution would be interpreted, and at the same time contributed greatly to the memory of the Battle of Gettysburg. This speech is emblematic in American history of racial struggles, and the eternal striving for equality among the population. As Garry

²⁰ David W. Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory & the American Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002.),2.

²¹ Desjardin, 199.

²² Desjardin, 200.

Wills puts it, with this address, Lincoln performed a “verbal coup” and in doing so, he “revolutionized the revolution.”²³ To be sure, the original wording of the Constitution of “all men are created equal” was intended to only apply to white, male, property owners, not the rest of the population, and certainly not women or African-Americans. This is clearly evidenced in Gordon Wood’s, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, where he asserts a notion of a natural aristocracy.²⁴ The natural aristocracy refers to a new aristocratic class based on merit, clearly only for those who had the opportunity to achieve such merit, white males. The Gettysburg Address allowed for that natural aristocracy to be applied across the country to all people regardless of race. The carefully chosen words that Abraham Lincoln spoke at Gettysburg truly did send shockwaves through the United States, and the impact of which is still felt today. “The ‘Gettysburg Address’ transcends the particularities of present history...subsumes the Declaration of Independence and the Federal Constitution, reduces them to...a word.”²⁵ Without question this speech is emblematic of American society and has engrained Gettysburg in our memory, but how and why?

Lincoln had clear intent in his preparation of the address at Gettysburg. Contrary to the popular belief that the speech was quickly scribbled on the back of an envelope, he spent weeks developing the speech, and had it inspected by some of his most trusted advisors. The fallacy of the envelope merely adds to the mythology that surrounds

²³ Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992.), 38.

²⁴ Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1992.), 236.

²⁵ Neil Schmitz, 2006. "Doing "The Gettysburg Address": Jefferson / Calhoun / Lincoln / King." *Arizona Quarterly* 62, no. 2: 145-152. *America: History and Life with Full Text*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 6, 2012), 147.

Lincoln and the Battle of Gettysburg.²⁶ With clear diction he stated, “It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion.”²⁷ Indeed, although succinct, the intent of the address is clear: to urge the North to continue the valiant fight that the efforts of the men who died at Gettysburg showed not go in vain. Not only this, but the words Lincoln spoke resonated with the ideals of republicanism, freedom, and equality.²⁸ Through his reference to the founding fathers’ words, he expanded the meaning of the Constitution and elevated the efforts to ensure freedom for all.

The United States had found itself in turmoil and in the midst of the most trying and difficult times the nation had ever seen, or perhaps would ever see, and Abraham Lincoln took this opportunity to “re-found” the nation on a brand new notion of equality. To this point Lincoln stated, “...our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedication to the proposition that all men are created equal.”²⁹ No longer to all men refer to the white male population, but now it would mean just what it said, all men. The nation was torn seemingly beyond repair, and the war was proving to create a contentious history to be the foundation for the nation as it moved on. What Lincoln did at Gettysburg gave Americans a new history to live with that would forever change their future.³⁰ His words did not change the actual events of the battle, but rather they altered the way we remember its significance. The battle did not merely impact the

²⁶ Desjardin, 198.

²⁷ Abraham Lincoln. "The Gettysburg Address", *Abraham Lincoln Online*, <http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm> (accessed March 20, 2012).

²⁸ Borrit, 258.

²⁹ Abraham Lincoln. "The Gettysburg Address."

³⁰ Blight, 139.

war at its time; indeed, Americans today are still deconstructing and reconstructing the events of Gettysburg and the Civil War. We shape and produce history in this way that makes it representative of what is good and important to us.³¹ So as a result of the tumultuous struggle between the North and South, Americans can procure a meaningful symbol and rallying point for the notions of freedom, justice, and equality.

Though emblematic by nature, the words of the address carried much true significance in the restructuring of American society in the post-Civil War era. “This nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”³² Here called for a truly free society that included, though not explicitly, slaves and African-Americans. In a speech that was deliberately ambiguous, Lincoln was doing his best to generate favor within the South, while still expressing his desire for a nation build on equality.

Throughout the ensuing centuries, presidents and activists alike have recalled the word of Abraham Lincoln. Woodrow Wilson cited Lincoln’s words fifty years later at Gettysburg, Martin Luther King Jr. referred to the address from the steps of Lincoln’s monument in Washington, and Governor George Pataki read from the Gettysburg Address in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City.³³ The address certainly carries weight, and has endured as an illustrative symbol of the recreation of the Constitution. Its meaning has permeated society and along with it has vastly contributed to enshrining Gettysburg as a climax in American history.

³¹ Desjardin, xvi.

³² Abraham Lincoln, "The Gettysburg Address."

³³ Desjardin, 204.

Battlefield Commemoration

Gettysburg serves as a memorial rallying point for all of America, to be sure, because of the military role of the battle, but perhaps more significantly, due to the long lasting effects of Abraham Lincoln's great speech, the "Gettysburg Address." *USA Today Weekend Magazine* has called Gettysburg, "the consensus top choice as the essential American place, Gettysburg is the symbolic heart of America."³⁴ This existence of Gettysburg in American memory demands a high level of commemoration and pageantry to surround the great battlefield. Over time, the manner in which the American Civil War, especially Gettysburg, is celebrated and memorialized has changed and evolved to reflect the contextual situation of the United States. The divide between North and South constantly hangs in the balance when considering proper and honorable forms of commemoration. The changes in these commemorative practices have an impact on public memory of the war, and understanding this development can clarify the significance of Gettysburg and the Civil War.

True to the spirit of American capitalism, within weeks of the culmination of the battle work began to commercialize Gettysburg and cater the "hallowed ground" for tourists. Spearheading this endeavor, local attorney David McConaughy worked to transform the battlefield into a land suitable for what would become the first major group of tourists accommodated at Gettysburg: the genteel tourists.³⁵ In an attempt to gain control over the most important and aesthetically pleasing locations of the battlefield,

³⁴ Weeks, 16.

³⁵ Weeks, 18.

McConaughy created the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association (GBMA). By 1866, the GBMA, largely due to McConaughy, had coaxed several thousand dollars out of the state legislature for the purpose of “erecting low monuments and enduring structures” in turn, making Gettysburg “the Mecca of the American patriot.”³⁶ Between the monuments and observation areas constructed, and the creation of pathways to facilitate carriage travel, the improvements made on the battlefield of Gettysburg created welcoming a tourist environment, and specifically catered to the genteel population. Throughout the remainder of the 19th century, a steady stream of tourists made the trek to the newly memorialized Gettysburg battlefield, and upon the completion of a new railroad, many more would make the journey, and the face of Gettysburg would begin to evolve.³⁷ To be sure, the efforts of McConaughy paved the path for future development of Gettysburg as a tourist location and helped cement the battle in American memory.

Just as the development of the railroad shaped all of post-Civil War America, it had a corresponding effect on Gettysburg; the memorialized battlefield was now readily available for a much wider group of visitors, including veterans, working-class citizens, and African-Americans. As a result of this shift in tourists, the shape of Gettysburg changed to meet the needs and desires of these new visitors. Because people could come from all over the country to visit the park, many state legislatures began allocating funds for construction of monuments for their regiments at the battle. By 1895, three hundred twenty monuments had been constructed, one for nearly every Union volunteer unit, as well as almost twenty miles of avenues.³⁸ So while perhaps the initial purpose of the

³⁶Ibid., 21.

³⁷Ibid., 46.

³⁸ Weeks, 61.

memorialization of the battlefield was to honor those who had fought, by the end of the 19th century, Gettysburg had begun to demonstrate its latent function of entertainment.

While the memorials and monuments were what brought the people to the site, during the beginning of the 20th century, the battlefield became a vehicle for knowledgeable and enterprising individuals to become tour guides for visitors. The tour guides provided an ample supply of information and interesting facts regarding the battle and the war in general. However, operating in a business model, they knew they must do their absolute best to entertain those they were guiding around the site. Due to this, many narratives delivered by park tour guides emphasized anecdotal asides, which are often riddled with elements that contribute to Gettysburg's mythology. The truth is important for these guides; however, the entertaining quality of their tour is more valuable to them than delivering accurate historical depictions.³⁹ With certainty, these tour guides offer an important lens through which to understand the development of American memory of Gettysburg, and especially the mythological aspects that have been constructed over time.

Tourism reigned supreme for the culture and atmosphere of Gettysburg; however, reunions of both Union and Confederate soldiers at Gettysburg proved to be emblematic of the national progress towards reconciliation. The process of reconciliation went as smoothly as one might assume, though it certainly did not happen overnight. For the most part, Union soldiers dominated early reunions, though Southern attendance would improve significantly over time. From only two confederate soldiers attending in 1869, to several hundred in 1888, to several thousand in 1913, the progress of reconciliation can

³⁹ James W. Wensyel, 1994. "Tales of a Gettysburg Guide." *American Heritage* 45, no. 2: 104. *America: History and Life with Full Text*. (accessed April 22, 2012).

be observed.⁴⁰ Not only are numbers of people in attendance reflective of the reconciliation efforts, but also the events and attitudes portrayed at such reunions characterize how this has changed over time.

The fifty-year reunion in 1913 at Gettysburg best represents the way public figures addressed the activities to promote national unity. Through nuanced articulations about courage, valor, and selfless devotion, President Woodrow Wilson gained the approval and brought about spirited applause from Northerners and Southerners alike. Wilson proclaimed, “Valor? Yes! Greater no man shall see in war; and self-sacrifice, and loss to the uttermost; the high recklessness of exalted devotion which does not count the cost”⁴¹ In speaking to veterans from both sides of the fight, Wilson united them in a way that had not been experienced, and provided exponential gains in terms of fostering national unity. Gettysburg was a stage to which the nation looked to help mend the deep wounds created in the Civil War. Through its existence as a national meeting place for the North and the South, it has further entrenched its mythological status in the memory of the American public. This status developed from the early 20th century, and through the course of the next sixty years, the battlefield would continue to reflect American society.

Post-World War II America experience rampant changes in culture, technology, and societal organization, and these changes certainly did not leave Gettysburg or its significance in American minds untouched. During this time, the emergence of the

⁴⁰ Weeks, 104.

⁴¹ M. Keith. Harris, 2007. “Slavery, Emancipation., and Veterans of the Union Cause: Commemorating Freedom in the Era of Reconciliation, 1895-1915.” *Civil War History* 53, no. 3: 264-290. *America: History and Life with Full Text*. (accessed April 22, 2012).

automobile shaped the lives of Americans and Gettysburg adapted to this newfound ability to travel. To meet this need by the 1950s the National Park Service, which had obtained control of the grounds in 1933, added many roads, highlighted by a chronologically laid out path of the major events of the battle for cars to follow.⁴² This development expanded Gettysburg's existence as a tourist stop and allowed more people to relate to the events that were being memorialized.

Along with the shift towards automobile prominence, mass culture developed and allowed for Gettysburg to attract visitors in new ways. Through the expansion of magazines, newspapers, and television, images of the battlefield could be spread in a large way around America. Mass culture had reached the public and Gettysburg maximized on it by transforming into a truly tourist attraction. By the middle of the century, the town contained more restaurants, hotels, and gift shops than any town of comparable size.⁴³ Popular culture had begun to revolutionize Gettysburg's meaning in America, and now it was becoming the entertainment spectacle that is reflected in the late 20th century, which is evidenced in the proceeding section.

While the changes in the park itself were worthy of note, simultaneously, memory of Gettysburg via the battlefield was molding to adhere to the patriotism brought about by the Cold War. Family unity was commonly built up by car vacations visiting historic sites. Gettysburg proved to be an important tool for parents to use in raising good patriotic children. Trips like these also supported traditional American values of freedom and capitalism in the face of godless communism.⁴⁴ The commercial nature of

⁴² Weeks, 123.

⁴³ Ibid., 130.

⁴⁴ Weeks, 156.

this era of Gettysburg greatly symbolized the rest of American culture at that time, and the combination of that with the impact of the Cold War on American families, meant that the battlefield proved emblematic once again of American identity, and further engrained itself in history.

Shifting into more modern times, memorialization at the battlefield of Gettysburg has become more of a spectacle and less of an accurate depiction of history, in the emphasis on reenactment. Robert Bloom, a professor of history at Gettysburg College, deplors these activities as “juvenile” understandings of the war which, “manifest itself in obsession with military strategy and tactics, with collecting mementos and souvenirs and, for some in playing soldier, an impulse which for most of us passed in reaching puberty.”⁴⁵ This assertion was made at a time where numbers of visitors were low from the frenzied Cold War era; however, it is attuned with the shift in perception of Gettysburg in America. Just a few years later with the release of *Gettysburg* and Ken Burns’s *The Civil War*, a new interest in the battlefield was sparked. More and more people came to the site where it all happened to seek an equally entertaining medium through which to consume the war. To meet this need, much of what Bloom stated revealed itself, and became inseparable from how American perceived Gettysburg and its importance to society.

Media and Popular Culture

In a large and meaningful way, media and popular culture reflect and influence public sentiments regarding the American Civil War, particularly the war’s most

⁴⁵ Robert Bloom, “The Celebration at Gettysburg” *Gettysburg Times*, July 9, 1988, vol. 86 no.160.

notorious battle at Gettysburg. Feature-length films, documentary films, music, artwork and sculpture are principal outlets for media depictions of these pivotal events in American history. Particularly in the past three decades, emphasis on four major traditions of Civil War interpretation has led to a marked shift towards the Lost Cause tradition in their representation in popular culture. Looking especially at two popular feature-length films – Ron Maxwell’s *Gettysburg* and *Gods and Generals*, and Ken Burns’ *The Civil War* – one can observe the emphasis on the historically faulty Lost Cause. Through analysis of this shift, one can understand the construction of Gettysburg’s mythology in American memory.

The four perspectives that drive Civil War representation contain some overlap, yet indeed present distinct interpretations through which media and history on the subject is produced. Gary Gallagher outlines these four traditions in *Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten*. The Lost Cause tradition portrays the admirability of the South’s struggle against seemingly insurmountable odds, while downplaying the influence of slavery on the war.⁴⁶ The Union Cause demonstrates conservative traditionalist views of maintenance of the republican values set forth by the founding fathers, and the threat that the seceding South brought to the establishment of self-rule by free people. The Emancipation Cause emphasizes the importance of slavery and the fight to rid the country of its destructive influence on American society. Finally, the Reconciliation Cause brings the restoration of national unity that emerged from the Civil War to the forefront of the argument, especially by highlighting “American” virtue, and reducing the

⁴⁶ Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.), 45.

role of African Americans.⁴⁷ These four perspectives through which to view the war have directed the decision-making process to some extent in film production, but they are seen more so in academic history. However, when it comes to filmmaking, these perspectives fail to be the basis for the creation of plot. Instead, production teams focus on the entertainment value of the film.

Perhaps the most significant source of history for the American public lies in the hands of economically driven Hollywood movie producers. The American Civil War is not exception to this notion, and amount of material produced on the topic of the war certainly is at no shortage. From popular feature length films like *Gettysburg* (1993) and *God and Generals* (2003) to made-for-television documentaries like Ken Burn's *The Civil War*, film plays a tremendous role in developing a shaping how Americans view the events of the Civil War. As these films are produced, they tend to adhere to one of the four traditional approaches, however it is also important to note that despite this interest in promoting specific perspectives providing profitable entertainment is the underlying goal of film producers.⁴⁸ With that in consideration, these films do present valuable insight to beliefs and attitudes about the Civil War.

Richard Maxwell's *Gettysburg* exists as one of the most popular depictions of the Battle of Gettysburg in American. Though the feature length film absolutely bombed at the box office, once the film was released on cable television, it generated the largest viewing audience for a drama on cable television with over forty million viewers.⁴⁹ To

⁴⁷ Gary W. Gallagher, *Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten: How Hollywood & Popular Art Shape What we Know About the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008.), 2.

⁴⁸ Gallagher, *Causes*, 9.

⁴⁹ Desjardin, 180.

be sure this number was managed because of the effective work of a Hollywood production company, as well as creation and perpetuation of some of the most popular myths of Gettysburg. To emphasize this point, one need only look as far as Ted Turner's prologue to the film in which he simply lies to the public by asserting that more men died at Gettysburg than in the entire Vietnam War. This, along with the perpetuation of other common myths for added dramatic quality, proves the notion that the creation of popular media, by men such as media mogul Ted Turner, contributes vastly more to public perception of historical reality than the work of thousands of scholars.⁵⁰ Riddled with mythology and overdramatic representations of the actual events of the battle, *Gettysburg*, based on Michael Shaara's, *Fallen Angels*, demonstrates many of the ideals related to the Lost Cause interpretation.

Gettysburg and its prequel, *Gods and Generals* from the same director, both contributed greatly to American memory, and in many ways perpetuated the mythology associated with the Lost Cause doctrine. Critics celebrated *Gettysburg* as a theatrical success and great depiction of history; however, historians voiced their dissatisfaction with the portrayal of the battle and the Civil War in general through these films. Steven Woodworth criticizes *Gods and Generals* saying, "Despite the makers' large expenditures and serious efforts towards accuracy in some details, they marred the result by their willingness to perpetuate a distorted view of the Civil War."⁵¹ Acclaimed movie critic, Roger Ebert, however wrote otherwise, "This is a film that Civil War buffs will find indispensable...I understood the Civil War in a more immediate way than ever

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Steven E. Woodworth 2003. "Gods and Generals (Film)." *Journal of American History* 90, no. 3: 1123-1124. *Academic Search Premier* (accessed April 15, 2012).

before.”⁵² Despite these films’ enormous popularity as feature-length films, they certainly lack historical accuracy and seem to cater to Lost Cause ideals, which permeate the two films.

Maxwell presents the most exaggerated Lost Cause ideal through an assertion in the opening voice over that implicates Confederate independence in the event of their victory at Gettysburg:

Their main objective is to draw the Union army out into the open where it can be destroyed ... General Lee knows that a letter has been prepared by the southern government, a letter which offers peace. It is to be placed on the desk of Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, the day after Lee has destroyed the Army of the Potomac somewhere north of Washington⁵³

Not only is this opening statement flawed as a piece of historical evidence surrounding the Battle of Gettysburg, thus bolstering the mythology of the battle, but also it presents an absolutely perfect Lost Cause analysis of the possibilities for the Confederacy in Lee’s invasion of the North.⁵⁴ The inaccuracy of these representations troubles Civil War scholars, especially because of the popularity of these films and the confidence that the American public places in what they believe to be historical accuracy.

To be sure, *Gettysburg* does place some emphasis on Reconciliationist ideals. The presence of exactly zero African-Americans with speaking parts sets the Reconciliationist tone throughout the movie. In this view, slavery and blacks were not essential to the conflict. Instead, the film focuses on common American values and

⁵² Roger Ebert, "Gettysburg." rogerebert.com :: Movie reviews, essays and the Movie Answer Man from film critic Roger Ebert. <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19931008/REVIEWS/310080301/1023> (accessed April 2, 2012).

⁵³ *Gettysburg*. DVD. Directed by Ronald Maxwell. Atlanta: Turner Home Entertainment, 1993.

⁵⁴ Gallagher, *Causes*, 56.

shared heritage between the North and the South.⁵⁵ This movie, along with other pieces of Civil War mythology emphasizes the idea of “brother versus brother.” That is not to say that there were not instances when this occurred, but with certainty it adds to the drama of the war and contributes heavily to the Reconciliationist tradition.

The American public ventures further than Hollywood feature films to expand their historical awareness, and in the case of the Civil War and Gettysburg, they turned to Ken Burns’ *The Civil War*. Just as *Gettysburg* set viewership records, *The Civil War* brought out forty million viewers in the five-night event, the largest audience ever generated by PBS.⁵⁶ Americans are captivated by the impact of the Civil War and the audience of this event provides evidence of its popularity beyond the movie theaters. For some historians, the popularity of this film, along with the resulting excitement created about the topic among the public, proves to be a positive impact in American society. However, many historians have taken issue with the film and its failure to address the difficult questions that have arisen from the Civil War.⁵⁷

The most significant criticism by academic historians of Burns’ film suggests its support of Lost Cause mythology, which supports the notion of the South’s heroic struggle against insurmountable odds. The series emphasizes the importance of Gettysburg, in a way that helps cement the battle as a pivotal point in the war. At the same time, *The Civil War* strongly echoes the sentiments of Michael Shaara’s *The Killer*

⁵⁵ Gallagher, *Causes*, 110.

⁵⁶ Michael A. Morrison and Robert E. May, “The limitations of classroom media: Ken Burns’ Civil War series as test case.” *Journal of American Culture* 19, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 39. *America: History and Life with Full Text* (accessed April 17, 2012).

⁵⁷ Karen Everhart Bedford, “Ken Burns’ fans and critics have their say.” *History on the screen: who speaks for the past?*. <http://current.org/hi/hi308.html> (accessed April 2, 2012).

Angels in dealing with the battle of Gettysburg. This main emphasis given is on Joshua Chamberlain's valiant leadership in defense of "Little Round Top."⁵⁸ The depiction and retelling in such a dramatic fashion gives credence to the sensational portrayal of this event in the battle, and it contributes to the revelation of Burns' entertainment motivations.

Though critical on the whole, there is some inclination among historians to support the value of Burns' popularization of history, despite its obvious historical shortcomings. Gary Gallagher lands solidly within this camp of critical, yet somewhat supportive, academics. He praises Burns's "ability to fire the imaginations of millions of Americans, sending them in large numbers to the libraries and bookstores." However he quickly writes off the historicity, describing *The Civil War* as "utterly conventional" and demonstrating "ignorance of modern scholarship."⁵⁹ This modern scholarship that Gallagher refers to contains an inclusion of minority groups and their influence on Gettysburg and the entire war. Catherine Clinton assaults Burns's series for its lack of incorporation of the views of women, both white and black, and how they may have been affected in the short and long term.⁶⁰ Gabor Boritt, a Hungarian by birth, is dismayed at Burns's failure to mark the role of white immigrants, who comprised roughly twenty percent of the Union armies.⁶¹ Despite the general praise given for the popularization of the war among the public, which certainly carries some weight, the general attitude of the

⁵⁸ Blight, 216.

⁵⁹ Robert B. Toplin, *Ken Burns' The Civil War: Historians Respond* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.), 42-43.

⁶⁰ Toplin, 65-67.

⁶¹ Toplin, 84-85.

academic field is one of dissatisfaction with Burns's treatment of the Battle of Gettysburg and the Civil War.

Conclusion

Understanding that actual memory of an event often varies from the original event itself helps clarify why public belief exists the way it does. Perhaps, we alter history to make up for the gruesome details that we are not comfortable with having in our national history. Thomas Desjardin suggests that, "The truth about Gettysburg is buried beneath layer upon layer of flawed human memory and our attempts to fashion our past into something that makes our present a little easier to live in."⁶² Gettysburg arguably signified the high tide of the American Civil War which, indeed, continues to live on as the darkest era in American history. However, Gettysburg has become an icon of American spirit and values largely due to the way society has created meaning transcendent of the blood, gore, and hatred that divided the nation. Americans have taken one of the most tragic events in their history and transformed it to become a focal point of national pride and value.

The establishment of Gettysburg in fabric of American memory reflects the efforts, both intentional and inadvertent of the American people. While Abraham Lincoln had a clear intent to speak with abolitionist sentiment, he had no idea of the power that the words of the "Gettysburg Address" would hold for centuries to come. Similarly, in David McConaughy's initial memorialization efforts, he surely intended to establish a site that would honor those who fought at the battle. However, not in the slightest, did he foresee the spectacle that Gettysburg has become and the events that

⁶² Desjardin, xvi.

would transpire on those hallowed grounds. In the efforts of Hollywood movie producers and documentary filmmakers surely a large audience was intended, though the interest in the Civil War and Gettysburg that was spurred by their efforts was not envisioned.

Without the developments in these three areas, Gettysburg would never have attained the mythological status that it has in American memory. The combination of the “Gettysburg Address,” the development of the hallowed grounds of the battlefield, and popular films like *Gettysburg* and *The Civil War*, has established the Battle of Gettysburg as the most important battle in American history, and the meaning that Americans have given to the events that unfolded there eclipses the military engagement itself and has embedded Gettysburg into the fabric of American society.

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