

150 years since the Battle of Gettysburg

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On July 1, 1863, in the fourth month of the third year of the Civil War, armies of the Union and the Confederacy met near the small southeastern Pennsylvania town of Gettysburg. Over the next three days, the bloodiest battle in North American history would rage, resulting in more than 46,000 dead, wounded and captured, before the Confederates were defeated and driven from Northern territory.

It was the second and final Southern invasion of the North under General Robert E. Lee. In September of 1862, Lee had invaded Maryland with an eye toward wresting that divided state from the Union and perhaps winning British recognition of the Confederacy. He was forced to retreat after the Battle of Antietam, the single bloodiest day in US history. That victory allowed Lincoln to release the Emancipation Proclamation, which went into effect on January 1, 1863.

The Emancipation Proclamation, the executive order freeing the slaves, had changed the dynamic of the war from a war for a return to the *status quo ante*—the restoration of the Union with slavery intact—to a social revolution for the destruction of slavery and the planter aristocracy. Yet by the summer of 1863, the Proclamation largely remained a legal order awaiting enforcement, which could be purchased only by victory in the field.

Military success had not followed. The commander of the Grand Army of the Potomac, George McClellan, a Democrat who sympathized with the South, refused to pursue Lee after Antietam. Lincoln finally sacked McClellan, but the next two generals to command the Union army in the Eastern theater, Ambrose Burnside and “Fighting Joe” Hooker, proved no more successful, suffering lopsided defeats to Lee at the battles of Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, and in the process taking upwards of 30,000 casualties. Hooker was finally replaced by George Meade days before the Battle of Gettysburg.

Failure in the field compounded the political crisis, with Republicans suffering serious losses in mid-term elections in the fall of 1862. Democrats used emancipation to race-bait the Republicans and openly encouraged defiance of a new military draft law put in place in March of 1863. This contributed to widespread draft resistance in the two most populous states, New York and Pennsylvania. The New York draft riots of July, 1863 rank as the largest domestic uprising in US history outside of the Southern rebellion itself. Union soldiers fresh from Gettysburg were called to the city to put it down.

Lee was aware of the importance of politics in the North, and when he marched his 75,000 soldiers of the Army of Northern Virginia across Maryland and into Pennsylvania, he anticipated that a decisive victory would lead to a collapse of support in the Union for the war. His army would feed off of Pennsylvania's

fields, relieving Virginia's, and he would aim to take Harrisburg, capital of Pennsylvania, and perhaps Philadelphia. Lincoln would then be forced to sue for peace.

It is impossible to understand the heroism of the soldiers at Gettysburg without an appreciation of the political aims of the war. This was true on both sides. Ulysses S. Grant later said of Lee and the Confederates that they fought “long and valiantly... and had suffered so much for a cause, though that cause was, I believe, one of the worst for which a people ever fought, and one for which there was the least excuse.” Perhaps one quarter of the soldiers were slave-owners, and well over half of the officers were. As Lee's army drove into southern Pennsylvania, it captured free blacks and sent them south into slavery.

The extent to which anti-slavery sentiment had spread through the Union army by the time of Gettysburg cannot be known. It was certainly greater by the autumn of 1864, when the army voted over 80 percent for Lincoln's reelection, than it was in the summer of 1863. Yet according to the leading scholar on this question, James McPherson, the Emancipation Proclamation had deepened the army's politicization. In a three-day battle full of twists and turns, the politicized character of parts of the 90,000-strong Union army, in critical moments, proved decisive.

On the battle's second day, soldiers from Maine's 20th Regiment under Joshua Chamberlain protected the Union army's vulnerable left flank at Little Round Top. Chamberlain, an anti-slavery man and an acquaintance of abolitionist author Harriet Beecher Stowe, ordered a bayonet charge when his men were low on ammunition. The daring move repulsed the Alabama 15th.

Earlier, Chamberlain had been given charge of Maine soldiers from a different regiment who had been accused of attempting to desert. Given the right to execute the men, he instead made a political appeal to them, convincing them to fight. The extra men proved decisive in the engagement.

Another crucial moment also unfolded on the second day. General Winfield Scott Hancock ordered the Minnesota 1st to fill the breach in order to buy time to refortify defensive positions on the highest ground of Cemetery Hill. The loss of that position would have likely spelled defeat for the Union.

The Minnesotans, outnumbered perhaps 10 to 1, must have recognized that the order meant likely death, but they successfully held off the attacking Alabamians. Of 262 soldiers, only 47 returned to Hancock's lines. The casualty rate was the highest of any regiment in the Civil War.

The 1st Minnesota was comprised of the first from the state to rally to Lincoln's call for 75,000 volunteers after the attack on Fort Sumter in April, 1861. These men had subsequently re-

mustered for three years' service. They had already suffered heavy casualties at First Bull Run and Antietam.

In a cruel twist, the surviving 47 were reassigned to the center of the defensive positions on Cemetery Ridge for the third day of battle, commanding officers believing that this would be an area that would not see combat. It instead became one of two locations where Confederate soldiers breached Union defenses in Pickett's charge on July 3, the last day of the battle.

Pickett's charge, named after Confederate General George Pickett, who was tasked with leading it, turned out to be the decisive moment in the three-day battle. At about 2 p.m., Lee ordered some 12,500 men to advance across three-quarters of a mile of open field toward Union defenders positioned behind a stone fence on Cemetery Ridge. The Confederates marched uphill through cannon fire until coming within 400 yards of the Union line. Thereafter they were raked with musket and canister shot from three directions. They broke the Union lines briefly, but were routed in hand-to-hand combat.

Gettysburg was not the decisive event of the war, which would drag on for nearly two more years. To be sure, it was devastating to Lee's army, which could not afford to lose men and materiel the way the North could. The industrialized capitalist society of the North was, in fact, gaining strength—its population and army growing; its factories, mines, and fields producing more and more. The defeat at Gettysburg meant that the Confederate army could not menace the North again. Lee could now only hope for a defensive stalemate and political exhaustion within the Union.

The Union commander at Gettysburg, Meade, had done well to shield Philadelphia and Washington from Lee, and when the Confederates were found near Gettysburg, he quickly moved his armies into good defensive position. But like McClellan after Antietam, Meade failed to pursue Lee, letting go a chance to destroy the Army of Northern Virginia. Like McClellan, Meade was a Philadelphia Democrat who hoped, as he said, "to make terms of some kind with the South."

After the battle, an exasperated Lincoln authored a letter to Meade but did not mail it, instead filing it away in a folder marked "To Gen. Meade, never sent, or signed." Lincoln wrote, "I do not believe you appreciate the magnitude of the misfortune involved in Lee's escape. He was within your easy grasp, and to have closed upon him would, in connection with our other late successes, have ended the war. As it is, the war will be prolonged indefinitely."

Perhaps a more significant event, at least in a strategic sense, took place the day after. On Independence Day 1863, and far to the west, General Ulysses S. Grant received the surrender of the last Confederate stronghold on the Mississippi, Vicksburg. The Union now exercised total control of the river.

"The Father of Waters flows unvexed to the sea," a relieved Lincoln said. In "Unconditional Surrender Grant" and his subordinates William Tecumseh Sherman and Philip Sheridan, Lincoln had finally found generals whose strategy matched the new revolutionary character of the war. With Vicksburg securing his credentials, Grant was brought east to replace Meade, and in the spring and summer of 1864 he launched a devastating attack on Virginia, while Sherman drove on Atlanta.

Aside from its staggering death toll, Gettysburg's hold on our

memory rests with Lincoln's famous Gettysburg address. On November 19, 1863, Lincoln stood on a crowded platform with thousands of shallow graves strewn across the battlefield all around him. In about two minutes, he spelled out that the Civil War was the continuation of the American Revolution, that it was at its heart a struggle for equality, and that the war would forever test whether or not democratic principles and self-government could survive:

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.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But in a larger sense, we can not dedicate, we can not consecrate, we can not hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that 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.



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