“There is going to be another civil war”

Workers, young people discuss the enduring relevance of the Battle of Gettysburg

Jerry White in Gettysburg
2 July 2013

The commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Gettysburg battle is expected to draw an estimated 200,000 people to this small Pennsylvania town where the decisive Union victory on July 3, 1863 helped turn the tide of the Civil War.

Visitors, young and old, from throughout the US and internationally, are walking through the battlefields, attending historical lectures and watching military reenactments. In restaurants, people can be seen reading books on the Civil War. Everywhere there seems to be a keen interest in reconnecting with the political ideas that motivated the Union soldiers to sacrifice so much, and a search to understand the fundamental causes of that titanic struggle.

Of course, there are the official efforts to enshroud the event in militarism and patriotism, but more than 10 years of continuous wars by the United States, deteriorating social conditions and revelations of government spying on the American people have had an impact. Whatever the political confusion, it is a common conception that the US is run by a wealthy and powerful elite that is hostile to the democratic rights of the people.

More significant than open appeals to militarism was the effort, articulated most directly in the keynote address Sunday night by presidential biographer and historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, to conceal the extent to which democracy has eroded in the United States. Goodwin suggested that there was no reason to worry about the state of American democracy because of changes relating to various aspects of identity politics.

There was little of this complacency among the workers and young people who spoke with the World Socialist Web Site about the contemporary significance of the Gettysburg anniversary. Several discussed the massive National Security Agency (NSA) spying operation exposed by whistleblower Edward Snowden.

“The government is supposed to be ‘of the people, by the people and for the people,’ but it’s not working like that,” said Debbie, a worker from Delaware. “You said it better when you said we have a government of the rich, by the rich and for the rich.” Regarding the NSA spying, she added, “It’s starting to look like the Nazis.”

Referring to immigrants who fought in the Civil War, Debbie said, the Irish, Germans, Italians “all wanted to get away from their rulers.”

When asked what he thought the Union was fighting for, Jesse, a young worker, said, “Freedom, for their rights.”

Wanda said, “That [democratic rights] is what the Civil War was all about, and I am mad as hell. We were just talking about this, there is going to be another civil war. It will be the people against the rich.”

Adrian, a student at the New School in New York City, commented, “The Founding Fathers would be rolling over in their graves if they saw this country with so much inequality, with the government monitoring the phone calls and Internet usage of the people. They fought an oppressive government to make sure there would never be an oppressive government in America again.

“But we have that oppressive government again. We are going to need another…” he said, with a slight hesitation, “revolution.”

In the Declaration of Independence, he noted, “Thomas Jefferson wrote that the people had the right to abolish any form of government that violates our
inalienable rights.”

Adrian said Snowden had told the truth but was forced to escape the US to protect himself. “Everything is going down the path towards dictatorship. I’m a history major, and you can see how rights were slowly taken away from people in Germany in the 1930s. You can only see how much you have lost by comparing the present situation to a previous period.

“You can’t have equality when you don’t have the basic necessities like food, education and a decent place to live,” Adrian added. “If you are growing up poor you don’t have the same chance for success as those who come from a family that is wealthy.

“In the beginning I had faith in Barack Obama—but I’m convinced the whole system is screwed up. Anybody that participates in the system is going to be corrupted, if they weren’t corrupted to begin with.”

Anthony, a young worker from Fayetteville, North Carolina discussed the connection between the erosion of democracy and the endless wars waged by the US. “Every war is about money—those who have got it and those who want it.”

The American Civil War, he added, was “different because it was about opinions” on great issues like slavery.

Mike, a worker from London, Ontario said, “I love history, and this particular battle motivates me. The sacrifice, visualizing Pickett’s Charge—that gets my blood going about what they believed in and what they fought for. Slavery had to end some time.”

Mike noted that young men from around the world had fought in the Civil War, including one from London, Ontario who was recently honored.

Referring to Snowden, Mike said, “He’s got a lot of guts, hopefully he will not be found, because who knows what will happen.”

Mike noted that the giant earth-moving equipment maker Caterpillar had recently shut down a plant in London, Ontario after workers refused to take a 50 percent wage cut. The company moved production to Muncie, Indiana, where workers make less than half the wage made by the London workers. “I know they made billions of dollars. It’s getting bad. I work for Nestle—who knows, one day they could shut down too.”

This reporter suggested that the corporate elite, like the old slave-owning aristocracy in the South, controls the levers of political power and is willing to bring all of society to ruin in order to defend its property and wealth. It would take a social revolution to break their hold over economic and political life.

Mike responded, “Modern-day slave-holders, no kidding. There is definitely a similarity between the 1860s and now. I blame our governments for allowing this—they’re too weak. I don’t think we’re asking for too much—just good-paying jobs and a future for our children.”

Ken and Katherine, from northeastern Ohio, also spoke to the WSWS. Ken said, “You’ve got to worry about re-writing history. There is a modern attempt to say that the war was about ‘states’ rights’ not about slavery. It’s like Goebbels said, if you repeat a lie often enough, people will start to believe it.”

Katherine added, “Slavery wasn’t even supposed to be part of this country, but the Southern states would not sign the Declaration of Independence if it had been abolished.” Speaking of today, she said, “These wars in the Middle East are all about money.”

Matt, a young photographer from Gettysburg and an army veteran who was in Kosovo in the mid-2000s, spoke about Snowden. “We have the right to know. We have the right to know what this sneaky government is doing to us.”

When he was in the military, Matt said, soldiers were told anyone who spoke out against the government, like Snowden or Private Bradley Manning, was unpatriotic and helping the enemy. Since leaving the military, he has drawn different conclusions. Asked about the need for social revolution today, he said, “I honestly see it happening. I totally see a revolution. I read about Marx, about the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, I can see it happening.”

Ryan, a high school student from San Antonio, Texas, commented, “If I were a Union soldier in the Civil War I would be fighting for a revolution for all humans.” Referring to Snowden, he said, “I’m very upset that they want to put him away for telling the truth.

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