Day two of the Gettysburg Anniversary: Visitors speak on the Civil War and contemporary matters

Eric London in Gettysburg
3 July 2013

In the late afternoon of July 2, 1863, the second day of the Battle of Gettysburg, General James Longstreet marched 15,000 screaming Confederate soldiers across a peach orchard and wheat field in an attempt to break the Union's left flank and seize Cemetery Ridge, a crucial north-south high position. The charge failed due in no small part to the heroics of the 20th Maine Brigade at Little Round Top and its commander, Colonel Joshua Chamberlain, who was ostensibly on sabbatical as a professor of rhetoric at Bowdoin College.

A mile north, 262 veteran soldiers from the 1st Minnesota—the Union Grand Army of the Republic's first volunteer brigade—led a counter attack on 1,600 Alabamians who had broken Union lines. The Minnesotans fought back the Confederates and prevented a disastrous breakthrough that may have changed the outcome of the battle. All but 47 of the Minnesotans died in the attack.

One hundred and fifty years later, tens of thousands of visitors from around the US and internationally toured the battlefields and the center of the small Pennsylvania town to commemorate the event. In the coming days, some 15,000 re-enactors will stage the crucial events of the three-day battle, culminating in a reenactment of Pickett's charge this Sunday, marking the defeat of the Confederates on July 3, 1863.

Conversations about the historical significance of the war and of the Battle of Gettysburg abound, and discussions quickly turn to broader, including contemporary, topics.

There is a fair amount of confusion as to the historical and political issues behind the war, a product of the generally reactionary political and intellectual climate that has prevailed in the US for decades. A glorification of militarism is not uncommon, which isolates the battles of the Civil War from their social context.

Nevertheless, there is a general understanding of the sharp contrast between the democratic and egalitarian ideals espoused by Lincoln, on the one hand, and contemporary American society, with the destruction of democratic rights, immense social inequality and a government beholden to the corporate and financial elite, on the other.

"It's a government of the corporations, by the corporations and for the corporations," one National Parks Department employee told the WSWS, adding she hoped it wouldn't come to the point of civil war in the US. Pointing to the huge crowds visiting Gettysburg that weekend, the NPS employee, who was visiting from a job at another park, said, "There is something about the Civil War that attracts so much feeling." She concluded by saying that she hoped "this would save the national parks," which are facing sharp federal budget cuts.

WSWS reporters spoke to visitors in downtown Gettysburg, just a block from the hotel where Lincoln completed his Gettysburg Address.

Phil, a retired firefighter from Muskogee, Oklahoma, drove two days with his family to attend the ceremonies. He voiced deep anger over the anti-democratic character of the Obama administration. "This is the most destructive administration we've had in years," he said.

His wife, Sarah, who had initially been hesitant to discuss politics, interjected, "Yeah, let the politicians live with Obamacare, with the Medicare cuts and Social Security cuts."

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The couple initially expressed anti-immigrant sentiment, citing high levels of unemployment. After reporters discussed the age-old policy of the ruling class to divide and weaken workers, and that American workers had far more in common with Mexican or Chinese workers that the ruling elite in America, Phil exclaimed, “Exactly! You’re right!”

“It’s really coming to another civil war,” he continued. “I believe it’s just all up to the working class people to get in there and kick them all out.”

Rich, a postal worker from Akton, Maine, said the Civil War was “to free the slaves because enslaving human beings is wrong. It was about property and a few people making a lot of money on very cheap labor.”

His wife added, “It had a lot to do with treating people right and getting rid of slavery, which was a disgusting practice.”

When asked if the current government upheld Lincoln’s preservation of a government “of the people, by the people, and for the people,” Rich explained: “I voted for Barack Obama twice, and I am very disappointed.”

The conversation developed into a discussion on the role of the working class in American history and the degeneration of the trade unions.

“The union is for management. They do not work for us,” said Rich.

In separate conversations with Mike, a GM worker at the Lordstown, Ohio, and Vince, an iron worker from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, questions about the Civil War developed along similar lines. “Unions are a for-profit business,” Mike said. “The unions got greedy, because big business runs them. The unions are not as strong as they used to be.”

When the conversation turned to the subject of Edward Snowden, Mike expressed a belief that the whistleblower’s actions may have been harmful to “national security.” “No!” His 16 year-old son, Marcus, interjected. “BS. I don’t have anything to hide, but I still want my privacy. It’s not only emails they’re reading.”

Vince added, “When I retire, I’m looking at $2,000 a month, and I can’t live like this. Then some of these corporate guys, they’re net worth will grow $20 billion a year. Like this Gates guy, he goes and takes a crap and he makes $5 million. Things are out of line with the rich controlling things.”

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