

Third day of Gettysburg anniversary: Discussions on Snowden and the decay of democracy

Jerry White in Gettysburg
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On the third day of the commemoration of the 150th Anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, tens of thousands of visitors toured the battlefield along Cemetery Ridge, where Confederate forces were decisively defeated on July 3, 1863.

While General Robert E. Lee had designs of advancing his Northern invasion to Philadelphia or even Washington, DC, the repulsing of the Confederate attack turned the tide of the war toward the ultimate victory of the Union two years later.

Re-enactors from both sides gathered on the field where 12,500 Confederate forces attacked the center of the Union's defensive lines in what became known as "Pickett's Charge." Scarcely half survived the fierce resistance by Union defenders.

This reporter joined hundreds of visitors from all over the US and other countries in touring the famous sites of the three-day battle: Devil's Den, Little Round Top, the Peach Orchard, the Wheatfield and the Highwater Mark, the furthest north the Confederacy ever reached during the Civil War.

Downtown, just around the corner where Lincoln completed the Gettysburg Address, a reporting team from the *World Socialist Web Site* discussed the contemporary significance of the Civil War with workers and young people. Those we spoke with expressed a deep identification with the democratic ideals that animated Lincoln and the Union cause and the stark contrast with the current attack on the Bill of Rights by the government.

In particular, many expressed their solidarity with Edward Snowden, the National Security Agency contractor who exposed massive government spying and is now the target of an international manhunt by the

Obama administration.

"Snowden is fighting for what he thinks is right. Everybody should know what the government is doing," said, Lloyd Cavanaugh, a 72-year-old cook from Hartford City, Indiana, who spent 26 years in the military. "I came to Gettysburg because so many people died here fighting for basic rights.

"Today the government is only for the rich, not the people. It shouldn't be that way. The rich have to give up some, but all they are doing is taking and taking. It started with Reagan when he broke the unions. I lost my job then. Something is going to give, things are going to break loose in this country."

Members of the Civil War Club from Grand Valley State University, near Grand Rapids, Michigan stopped to speak with reporters from the WSWS. Michael said, "It's important to remember what the Union fought for. They believed that 'all men are created equal.' The Civil War acts as our collective memory. Today the government is getting away with everything."

"It used to be a 'rich man's war, a poor man's fight,' but now war is a rich man's hobby," interjected Aleixo Gomes, the leader of the Civil War Club. He then noted that comedian Wanda Sykes had denounced Snowden on the Jay Leno Show, saying the NSA contractor had violated his legal agreement when he released government secrets. "Wait a minute—what happens when the government breaks the law? The law doesn't define our morality. Slavery used to be defended by the law."

Turning to the meaning of the Civil War, Aleixo continued, "Sometimes it is claimed that the South was only fighting for 'state's rights'—but it was the right to have slaves. Several of the states that seceded cited the

threat to slavery as one of the reasons.

“The immense economic and political power the slaveholders had in the 1860s has a lot of parallels to the power of the banks today—but they don’t have control of humans as private property. The banks have control of financial property, for all practical purposes you’re enslaved when you are indebted to them.”

“What Snowden did is great,” said Dave Gamble, a worker at the Homer Laughlin China Company from Newell, West Virginia. “People have the right to know, and nothing the government does should be kept secret. When documents are released they’re usually blacked out parts. This isn’t a free country. People fought the South because they wanted rights for everyone. They didn’t want anybody to be someone else’s property.”

Pointing to the conditions in the West Virginia panhandle where he lives, Dave added, “Weirton Steel closed a long time ago. A lot of the coal mines are closed, and hundreds of jobs have been cut at Homer Laughlin, the only thing that’s left open.”

A visitor from Toronto, Ontario said, “It is only a matter of time before Snowden will be seen as a hero. It’s a shame that other countries are not giving him aid.” This was echoed by a student from Maryland who said, “I’m a fan of Snowden. I believe in the freedom of information.”

Bob Micheleni, a physician from nearby Carlisle, Pennsylvania, said, “The country has never held up to the ideals fought for in the Civil War. There has always been inequality among different classes of citizens. I’m not sure how to get to those ideals.

“The government says it’s protecting the citizens but it’s protecting profits and big business. I’m a Republican, but I see how the Republicans are restricting voting rights and tried to block minorities from voting in the elections.”

Jim and Andy are service workers from Gettysburg. “We’re not fans of the government,” said Jim. “They’re supposed to be for the people but they are for a few rich men. They give us the illusion of freedom.”

“Even in the election of Obama, race was used as a marketing tool,” said Andy. “Both parties are controlled by Wall Street and the stock market. A few years ago Harley Davidson told the workers they had no money to pay decent wages and cut the majority of their jobs. Come on, man, you’re Harley Davidson, you make millions.”

Jim added, “There are huge protests and revolutions in Egypt and other countries, but we let the government get away with everything. Come on, the American Revolution began over collecting taxes, and things are much worse now. It’s coming here though. You can see it with the Occupy Wall Street movement, but it got bought off and petered out. The government is supposed to govern with the consent of the people—we’re going to have to have a different kind of government.”

Jason Gilbert and Colby Haller are unemployed workers from Gettysburg. “What Snowden did was brave,” said Jason. “He was standing up to our government and they want to crucify him for telling the people the truth. I thought this was a free country and we could say what we want.”

Referring to the endless wars the US was engaged in, Jason added, “When we graduated from high school, Operation Iraqi Freedom was launched. The US military wasn’t freeing anyone, the soldiers were sent there to murder people and take away their freedom. Nobody in America wants their freedom taken away. Now they want us to ‘liberate’ Syria. I think they are trying to brainwash the soldiers to fight the people right here in America—but they are the same as us.

“We’re fed up with no jobs,” said Jason. “I agree with you—a job and health care should be basic rights. There is more than enough money to take care of everyone, not just the wealthy.”

Colby added, “The government must be afraid of us if they are spying on the people. They’re going after Snowden and they’d like to kill him. If the slaveholders were able to catch Frederick Douglass and the other abolitionists they would have hanged them, just like they did John Brown.”

Regarding another war, Colby stated, “It’s a way to direct our anger outward when the real problem is right here.”



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