

# Falsifying the American Civil War: Doris Kearns Goodwin at Gettysburg

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8 July 2013

Last week, hundreds of thousands of people gathered in Gettysburg to commemorate a pivotal battle in the American Civil War. In July 1863, fundamental questions of democratic rights and the socio-economic foundations of society were being fought out on the plains of Pennsylvania. At the anniversary ceremonies 150 years later, those in attendance evinced a deep desire to discuss the significance of the Civil War and the essential questions that underlay it.

These questions were entirely ignored in the keynote address given Sunday night by historian Doris Kearns Goodwin. Her primary goal appeared to be to strip the American Civil War of its lasting revolutionary significance.

Goodwin, author of *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* and other books, is a leading figure in the American academic-political establishment. A Democratic Party insider since the Johnson administration, she now plays the role of semi-official state historian.

It is first of all notable that her speech paid scant attention to the event itself—the Battle of Gettysburg and the Civil War of which it was a part. This fact was noted by many in the audience. Not a few of those with whom the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke in the following days expressed puzzlement and even anger that Goodwin seemed more interested in speaking about her own relations with various political officials than in discussing the momentous battle she was called on to commemorate.

This dismissive attitude was bound up with a broader purpose: to defuse the revolutionary significance of the conflict, suggest that it would have been better if it had never happened, and equate the struggle against slavery with the modern-day politics of race, gender and sexual orientation that is the stock in trade, in particular, of the Democratic Party.

Goodwin's basic attitude toward the Civil War as an event was summed up in remarks she made just prior to the address in an interview with *The Gettysburg Times*. "Not being able to resolve a political battle between the North and South and the issues of slavery led to the worst war in our history and to hundreds of thousands of people dying and the

treasures of the country being devastated," she said. "It should be a warning lesson to the American political system that created democracy in order for people to come together through politics to solve our problems, as opposed to violence when it failed."

In other words, for Goodwin, the Civil War was a misfortune that arose from the unfortunate inability of the North and the South to reach a lasting compromise on the question of slavery. Such a position would not have been out of place among pro-slavery Northern "Copperheads." Through attempts to portray the Union (and Lincoln) as racist on account of the North's discriminatory laws, Goodwin presents the Civil War not as a struggle to abolish slavery as an institution and form of property ownership, but as a step towards the elimination of racial prejudice.

While neglecting to describe the scourge of slavery in the South, Goodwin said that "[i]n the North, a long standing set of black laws denied all manner of fundamental rights to black Americans. In many northern states, blacks could not vote, hold political office, give testimony against whites, sit on juries, or intermarry."

Though discrimination certainly did exist in the North, this account presents slavery as a product of racism instead of the other way around. In fact, racial prejudice arose to justify an already existing economic system based on human bondage.

Goodwin separates the Civil War from the movement and relationship of class forces in order to equate the abolition of slavery with modern identity politics. Since Goodwin is forced to draw a straight line through the 20th century to make her connection, the Civil Rights movement becomes another casualty of her presentation. To Goodwin, "the Lyndon Johnson I was fortunate enough to serve" "took up the challenge" to "bring us closer to Abraham Lincoln's ideal" by passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Declaring that Johnson was "a consummate politician" who had a "magnificent partnership with Congress," and who "had Republicans and Democrats over for breakfast, lunch, cocktails and dinner" in order to

bypass the filibuster mounted by his own party, Goodwin called for bipartisan unity today to “come together to solve the nation’s problems through politics and not violence.”

It is a gross historical falsification to attribute the reforms of the 1960s to the wheelings and dealings of Lyndon Johnson, who Goodwin referred to, somewhat strangely, as an “aging lion of a man.” The basis of Goodwin’s claim is that the reforms made in the 1960s had nothing to do with the masses of people who demonstrated in the millions against segregation. Instead, it was the enlightened liberals who handed down equality from a pedestal.

In fact, masses of people had to wrench basic civil reforms from the Democratic Party and its southern wing in the 1960s.

Goodwin’s potted portrayal of the Civil War and the Civil Rights movement was aimed at masking the profound social tensions that characterize contemporary America. Goodwin’s attempt to christen the gay rights movement as the inheritor of the egalitarian legacy of the Civil War reveals even more clearly the class interests behind her historical falsification.

In fact, the adoption of identity politics—the politics of race, gender and sexual orientation—as an official policy was inseparably bound-up with the Democratic Party’s abandonment of any commitment to reforms like the Civil Rights Act, Voting Rights Act, and Medicare. It began to use identity as a “left” veneer as it turned to waging a vicious assault on the democratic rights and living standards of all sections of the working class.

In her speech, Goodwin remarks:

“That each generation faces its own chapter in the struggle for man’s unending search for freedom was dramatically illustrated this past week with several stunning decisions on the Supreme Court.

“On the one hand, a critical section of that same 1965 Voting Rights Act, which had stood for fifty years was struck down. On the other hand, the struggle to end discrimination against gay and lesbian Americans took a giant step forward when the Supreme Court declared unconstitutional the Defense of Marriage Act... and also nullified California’s ban on same-sex marriages.”

With utter complacency—arguing in essence that “you win some and you lose some” in an otherwise healthy American democracy—Goodwin cannot garner from herself anything more than a dry, one-sentence reference to the effective repeal of the Voting Rights Act.

Moreover, Goodwin made no attempt to explain how or why the Supreme Court ruled on consecutive days in favor of gay marriage but against voting rights for the working class. There is no doubt that marriage and equal access to federal benefits are democratic rights. However, the

Supreme Court, along with both Republicans and Democrats, gave its stamp of approval to the measure because it does not in any way challenge the foundations of bourgeois rule. To equate the achievements of the Civil War to the court’s ruling on gay marriage is an insult to the intelligence of the American people. The Supreme Court decisions in fact illustrate how the political establishment has officially adopted identity politics as part of a right-wing political framework that involves the assault on social programs and core democratic rights carried out by both big business parties. Goodwin’s remarks were entirely within this framework. Notably, her speech lacked any reference to poverty, social inequality, war or the assault on democratic rights in America.

Underlying the ruling class’ project of historical falsification relating to the Civil War is a nervousness and fear—however consciously understood by figures like Goodwin—that the American and international working class will draw from an understanding of this earlier period far-reaching conclusions about what is required today.

Four months after the Battle of Gettysburg, Lincoln was clear about what was at stake in the war.

“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...

“The great task remaining before us,” Lincoln said, was that “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, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

Yet the American ruling class, represented by both the Democrats and Republicans, is seeking, with deliberation and conscious intent, to defend at all costs not “government of the people, by the people, and for the people,” but “government of the rich, by the rich, and for the rich.” For this reason, it cannot address with any degree of honesty even the bourgeois democratic revolutionary traditions of the United States itself.



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