



Letter from Woodstock Rolf Diamant

Uncertain Footing on Hallowed Ground?

I HAD HOPED THAT THIS SUMMER EDITION OF MY LETTER FROM WOODSTOCK might focus on European protected areas after doing some hiking this June in Parc Naziunal Svisser, a national park located in the Engadine region of Switzerland. But as I returned to the US in early July, on the first day of the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, it was difficult to ignore the steady stream of related commentaries, news reports, interviews, and videos (courtesy of C-SPAN and YouTube) and not turn my attention closer to home.

The sesquicentennial of the American Civil War is presenting the US National Park Service (NPS) with a series of not-unexpected challenges as the four-year commemoration unfolds. Even before the commemoration got underway, as a harbinger of what was to come, there was internal disagreement in early NPS planning efforts over whether or not to brand the four years of associated activities with the theme “Civil War to Civil Rights,” a reflection of an on-going tension between an era of new scholarship and broader contextual interpretation of the war’s legacy and the acute sensitivity still associated with all things Civil War. Some of this tension was evident in the one of the largest and most publicized NPS sesquicentennial events, the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg. It was particularly interesting to see how Gettysburg National Military Park (GNMP) carefully tried to strike a balance, acknowledging the new emphasis on historical context, larger meaning, and civil rights, while still providing ample programs and activities for Civil War living-history buffs and other battlefield enthusiasts.

The George Wright Forum, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 117–121 (2013).

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The commemoration's carefully staged signature event, "Gettysburg: A New Birth of Freedom," held on the evening of June 30, demonstrated, however, how challenging this can sometimes be. In her welcoming remarks, Joanne Hanley, executive director of GNMP's primary partner, The Gettysburg Foundation, carefully praised universal virtues of "courage, honor and sacrifice." It is hard to find fault with this sentiment but there is a risk that this kind of language can also, even today, be misinterpreted to suggest a "moral equivalency" in the purposes and objectives of the two armies—a recurring theme that resonated throughout early 20th-century veteran reunions. As one commemorative publication for Gettysburg's 50th anniversary in 1913 stated, "[T]he two noblest armies in the annals of mankind fought for principles which each believed to be just." While no one would question the bravery of all the soldiers—Union and Confederate—the principles for which their armies fought were profoundly different. As historian Alan Guelzo (author of *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion*) reminds us, the Army of Northern Virginia "was coming as the army of slavery." During their brief incursion into Pennsylvania, according to Guelzo, Lee's army hunted down and rounded up all the free black residents it could get its hands on, "marching them off to the Richmond slave pens so that they can be sold into slavery." Lincoln, of course, would later remind everyone in his Gettysburg Address that the virtue of sacrifice would be in vain, if not dedicated to "a new birth of freedom."

So it was encouraging to hear Director Jon Jarvis, on behalf of NPS, publicly and unequivocally endorse the effort to focus on this larger meaning for both Gettysburg and the Civil War sesquicentennial:

I would suggest we're also here to reaffirm the principles that demanded such terrible sacrifices in the summer of 1863.... The 'new birth of freedom' President Lincoln spoke of was not a finite event;... it was part of a process that continued long after the Civil War and which, today, requires our constant vigilance.

The choice of Doris Kearns Goodwin as a keynote speaker, rather than a military historian, seemed to suggest that the evening's event organizers, to their credit, wanted to include a historical perspective that was larger than the battle itself. The focus of Goodwin's remarks was on the nation's contemporary civil rights movements, rather than a more traditional battlefield narrative. She placed the meaning of Gettysburg, and in particular Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, in the context of the on-going struggle to achieve full civil rights for all Americans, including women and the LGBT community, as well as people of color. Goodwin also pointed out the obvious irony that this commemoration of American freedom was being staged only a few days after the Supreme Court struck down a critical enforcement provision of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

In contrast to this exploration of the war's causes and its problematic legacy, many of the commemoration's extraordinary eleven-day (June 29–July 9) marathon of public programs and activities focused more closely on Gettysburg's battlefield stories. Along with guided walks and living-history programs, the park also offered a series of more in-depth talks and book signings by Civil War authors, historians, and NPS rangers. As stated in the official brochure, programs would "offer something for all ages and levels of interest."

My attention was drawn to one particularly high-profile public event, called “Pickett’s Charge Commemorative March,” that brought to the surface some issues that may continue to present a challenge to NPS at Gettysburg and elsewhere. Apparently, during past battle anniversaries, groups of re-enactors have attempted to mount their own unauthorized events within GMNP on the site of Pickett’s Charge in competition with other park-sanctioned anniversary activities. This year, on July 3, GMNP decided to organize its own battlefield crossing. The Pickett’s Charge Commemorative March offered visitors an opportunity to “walk in the footsteps of those that lived this terrible and tragic event” with national park rangers leading groups representing each of the nine assaulting Confederate brigades in a mile-long advance to Union lines where visitors could also assemble. According to publicity materials, “The rangers, volunteers and living historians will help each group form up in line of battle at approximately the same location the real brigade formed 150 years earlier.” When the nine rebel groups reached “Union lines” buglers would end the march with the playing of “Taps.” Interviewed before the event, one park official, perhaps hopefully, suggested that the march would be reverential in tone. “This is a commemorative march,” she said, “We’re trying to be respectful.”

On the day of the march, 20,000 to 25,000 visitors gathered to view the event from the Union battle line on Cemetery Ridge, while another 15,000 people swelled the ranks of the nine attack brigades (originally 12,000 soldiers.) At the front of each brigade were uniformed rebel re-enactors. It was difficult to distinguish the “living historians” sanctioned by GNMP from hundreds of other re-enactors (bringing with them numerous Confederate battle flags and banners) who decided to participate and to some extent try to make the event their own. In one video I watched (I want to be clear I was not there in person) a re-enactor noncommissioned officer led hundreds of enthusiastic march participants in practicing “a proper rebel yell.” And yell they did, as the unwieldy formations, one by one, made their way under waving flags across the open fields.

People obviously enjoyed themselves, experiencing the spectacle of the event, the camaraderie of their brigades, and the adrenaline-fueled rush of the charge. Notwithstanding the playing of “Taps” at the program’s conclusion, it seemed more of a recreational event than a “respectful commemorative march.” Perhaps sounding “Taps” was enough to shift the tone, but I think it remains an open question as to whether an event like this can offer more opportunity for reflecting on the battle’s larger meaning.

It may be, however, that the program became just too large—and, given the dynamic of the re-enactors—too difficult to manage as originally conceived. Or perhaps there were too many conflicting objectives from the beginning. If the event was to become, for all intents and purposes, a re-enactment of the charge, what then were uniformed park rangers doing in the middle of it? I’ve asked myself why I found this disorienting and unsettling. One reason is that NPS rangers seemed out of place in this tableau—appearing not in their traditional role of interpreters but rather as participants being swept along with thousands of park visitors under Confederate colors and amid choruses of rebel yells. (It should be noted that the 150th Gettysburg National Civil War Reenactment, organized independently of NPS, was staged July 4–7 on a farm just outside the national park.)

The other reason for my unease is the issue of flags. It appears that NPS guides were originally to have crossed the battlefield marching under plain blue flags identifying each of the nine rebel brigade commanders. But given the crush of people—living historians, re-enactors and visitor/participants—perhaps it was inevitable that uniformed NPS personnel would be repeatedly photographed and filmed intermingled with others advancing across the field with Confederate flags. For re-enactors, their military flags, like their weapons and uniforms, are an accepted part of a battlefield setting—seen in the context of a specific time and place. However, the addition of 21st-century NPS rangers in the picture changes that context, at least for me. The scene is no longer July 3, 1863, and the rangers were therefore marching alongside flags that are now not only associated with the battle but also with a conflicted and painful legacy of slavery, white supremacy, and the nation’s long struggle from “Civil War to Civil Rights.”



This photo of Pickett’s Charge Commemorative March appeared in several newspapers. © 2013 Jason Plotkin; reprinted by permission of the York Daily Record / York Sunday News.

I realize that there are very different perspectives on this event. A GNMP ranger wrote in his personal blog, “The Pickett’s Charge Commemorative Walk [sic] was one of the most amazing experiences of my life. I did not hear a single visitor complaint from the crowd of thousands.” Some 40,000 people, indeed, had a safe, totally engaging day at Gettysburg, a huge logistical and programmatic accomplishment.

These reservations I’ve expressed are from the perspective of someone from the outside looking in—at a lot of digital images. But in our media-driven culture, images, as well as content, can have considerable public impact. The National Park Service, an organization committed to greater inclusion and relevancy, may hopefully draw some constructive lessons from Pickett’s Charge Commemorative March that may minimize or avoid perceptions, particularly of its own people and brand, which could be interpreted as being inconsistent with these objectives.

That said, it is only fair that these personal observations should be considered in the larger perspective of all that has been achieved by GNMP since the Gettysburg Tower came tumbling down. On several recent visits I have been impressed by both the depth and quality of the park's exhibits and visitor programs. GNMP has worked with top national historians and scholars, setting the bar for NPS as a whole, on interpreting the causes and consequences of the war. The GNMP visitor center's museum is particularly successful in explaining post-war reconciliation in the painful context of suppressed Reconstruction, segregation, and the long struggle for civil rights. The NPS Civil War sesquicentennial effort has also found its footing, creating a remarkably thoughtful and content-rich webpage, and, in collaboration with Eastern National and leading scholars, an outstanding series of very readable publications.

The Organization of American Historians' 2011 report *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service* recommends rigorous program evaluation and open dialogue between interpreters and historians, inside and outside NPS, on ways visitors can gain a deeper understanding of complex, and often conflicting, interpretations of history (for more, see *The George Wright Forum*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2012). Hopefully we can all reflect on what can be learned from the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg. Organizing this commemoration was an extraordinarily difficult undertaking and GNMP should be commended for how successfully it was managed overall. However, as the Pickett's Charge Commemoration March demonstrates, GNMP, NPS, and all Americans may still have more work to do. In a recent radio interview, historian David Blight thoughtfully summed up the challenge before us:

Gettysburg is a good example of the power of place in memory.... The power of place is where we also learn to reflect on long-term meaning and not only the authenticity of the fight.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Roy Dammant". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.