

MILITARY ORDER OF THE LOYAL LEGION OF THE UNITED STATES



Loyal Legion Vignettes



MILITARY ORDER OF THE LOYAL LEGION OF THE UNITED STATES
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By
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Gettysburg National Military Park

It is indeed a great pleasure to have the opportunity to appear before you this evening, and to thank you for choosing Gettysburg National Military Park as the site of your 123rd National Congress. And it is a particular pleasure, of course, to be able to appear before you as an Honorary Companion of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States. When this honor was bestowed upon me 12 years ago, I told you that I would do my utmost best to live up to your expectations. I hope I have done so.

Our mission at Gettysburg National Military Park is to preserve and protect the resources associated with the Battle of Gettysburg and the Soldiers' National Cemetery, and provide understanding of the events that occurred there, within the context of the causes and consequences of the American Civil War.

I don't know how long it's been since some of you had to opportunity to visit Gettysburg, but we have made good progress towards the accomplishment of that mission in the past 12 years. First, on the battlefield itself, we are enjoying great progress in returning the battlefield landscapes to their 1863 appearance. The purpose of this is simple: as you explore this great battlefield, where so many of your ancestors struggled and died, we hope that you can gain a better understanding of why the generals made the decisions they did as they organized their troops for battle, and what the soldiers endured as they carried out their commanders' orders.

Second, of course, we have our grand new museum and visitor center. Thanks to our partnership with the Gettysburg Foundation, we can now say, for the first time since Gettysburg NMP was created 113 years ago, that our priceless collection of Civil War artifacts and archival materials are now preserved, unimpaired, for the enjoyment of future generations.

We can also say, for the first time since 1892, that the incredible Cyclorama Painting is now restored and will be preserved, unimpaired, for the enjoyment of future generations. Within a year, we hope to remove the old visitor center and Cyclorama building from the Union battle lines of July 2-3, 1863, so that ground now covered with asphalt and concrete and brick, will be restored to its 1863 appearance, in honor of the soldiers who fought and died there.

Those are our tangible objectives, which are highly visible and easy to measure. But our most important objective – to provide our visitors with a basic understanding of the significance of the Gettysburg Campaign within the context of the causes and consequences of the American Civil War – and what that means to us today – is highly intangible and difficult to measure.

To be successful, a good museum must do two things. First, it must take visitors back into the time period in question, to provide understanding of how these two great armies met on the fields of Gettysburg, who these people were who fought and died here, as well as how they fought, the weapons they used, the clothing and equipment they carried, the heroism and valor of both individuals and regiments, and the suffering and devastation that the battle left behind in this little town of Gettysburg, and in homes across the nation who lost their loved ones. That's all vastly important.

But even more important, I believe, is providing some understanding of why they were fighting in the first place – the causes of it all – and what did it mean to us as a nation. Indeed, why should we care about what happened here? Why does it matter?

I can think of no better time to ask you to judge our success in providing this deeper version of understanding, than this, a Presidential election year. The Presidential election of 2008 has been fairly contentious, although perhaps not quite as nasty as those of 2004 and 2000. Nevertheless, as we prepare to choose a new President in just a few weeks, the electorate is sharply divided on numerous issues. Each party's faithful holds the other party's candidates with a high degree of disdain. We have soldiers dying in foreign lands, and sharply contrasting opinions about whether they should be there, what their purpose should be, or how soon they can come home. Voters' opinions about whether our economy is in good shape or bad are based primarily on where they reside on the economic scale. And, of course, we have the usual plethora of contentious social issues that have dogged the last several elections – access to health care, rising energy costs, environmental protection, gun control, abortion, gay rights, etc. Undoubtedly, the results of November's election will have some short-term effects upon our nation. However, as a historian, I predict that it will not go down in history as a particularly significant election. Let me explain.

By way of contrast, consider the Presidential election of 1860. In 1860, the stakes were incredibly high, as our young nation drifted towards war. After half a century of conflict and compromise between the "free states" and the "slave states," it appeared that both the ability and desire for further compromise was exhausted.

The political argument that divided our nation in 1860 was the constitutional question of whether or not States that had voluntarily joined together to form that nation, could subsequently withdraw from the Union. That question was hotly debated from the 1820s through the 1860s, with respected public figures taking opposing sides.

But the reason the question regarding the legality of secession came into play at all was, quite simply, the debate over slavery – the dichotomy between the promise of the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal," and the reality that the United States Constitution protected the institution of slavery. In 1860, slavery was legal in 15 states and the District of Columbia, which together held approximately 4 million slaves in bondage.

In 1857 the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that blacks – whether slave or free – were not citizens under the Constitution. Thus, the Supreme Court felt it had resolved that dichotomy –

Negroes were not “men” in the meaning of the Declaration of Independence, and therefore could not be citizens. Much of the nation’s population, both north and south, agreed with that reasoning. Many did not.

In order to understand how divisive this question was, we must understand how deeply the institution of slavery permeated the entire American economy. In 1860, total investments in slavery in the United States exceeded total investments in railroads, banking, and industry combined. And not just in the South. Entire northern enterprises depended upon the products of slavery, such as the New England cotton mills – America’s first faltering steps into the Industrial Revolution.

The only modern analogy which could serve to illustrate the economic importance of slavery to the American economy of 1860 is the importance of oil to our national economy today. Although not many of us actually own stock in Exxon-Mobile, even fewer of us could be easily persuaded to give up our automobiles.

I cannot over-emphasize how truly and deeply divisive this question of slavery was. No question – bar none – before or since – has so divided the American people as the question concerning slavery: should it be protected; should it be allowed to spread into the western territories; should it be “contained” in the states where it existed but prohibited from the western territories; should it be abolished? Was slavery a moral evil, or a benevolent institution designed to care for an inferior race?

No other question – bar none – had been subject to more petitions to Congress, more Congressional debates, more compromises, more anguish, more anger, more despair in the first decades of our nation. The acrimony in Congress had grown so divisive and bitter by 1856, that a Congressman used his cane to beat a Senator into bloody unconsciousness on the Senate floor (which at least puts the general incivility of recent campaigns in perspective).

In the end, as we approached the election of 1860, all the compromises failed, our nation divided against itself, and the war came. As Abraham Lincoln said, “Both parties deprecated war; but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would accept war rather than let it perish.”

The Meaning of Gettysburg

Gettysburg has often been described as a turning point in the Civil War, which it was. But to understand the significance of that turning point, we must first understand what was at stake as the troops gathered for battle.

In the early months of the Civil War, both sides thought the war would not last long – a single battle, sufficient demonstration by one side that the other was determined to “stay the course” – would be enough to cause the leaders to resolve their differences and reach yet another compromise – to either restore the union, or agree to let the United States break into two nations. But it didn’t happen, and the war grew in ferocity, in scale, and in losses of blood and treasure.

As we approach 1863 and the Battle of Gettysburg, the Confederacy appeared to be winning the war. Remember, in order to succeed, all the Confederacy had to do, was to avoid losing – exactly what George Washington and the Continental Army successfully did in the Revolutionary War. But the Union - in order to win the war, had even a larger challenge than the British – they had to defeat the Confederate armies, conquer half a continent, occupy hostile territory, and suppress a rebellion. Quite a different task.

And in June of 1863, the Confederacy was far closer to achieving its goal than was the Union. Granted, the north had won several key battles out west, occupied some Confederate territory, and had kept the crucial (slave-holding) border states of Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland and Delaware in the Union. But in the east the war was not going well. The Army of Northern Virginia had inflicted

defeat after defeat upon the Union armies of the east –1st Manassas, the Seven Days, 2nd Manassas, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville. Antietam, at best, was a draw. In early 1863, foreign observers concluded – correctly - that the Confederacy was winning the war.

But in the spring of 1863, both Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis were woefully aware that the Confederacy could not win a long, drawn-out war of attrition. The enormous industrial and manpower advantages of the north would be too much to prevail against indefinitely. And so they decided to take the war to the North; hence, the invasion of Pennsylvania. Their purpose? Not to conquer and occupy territory, for they knew they could not hold northern ground. The tactical reasons for the invasion were numerous.

But the strategic purpose of the invasion was simple, and its ultimate political purpose was obvious: to effect northern support of the war. At best, they hoped to capture a northern capital such as Harrisburg, or throw panic into Baltimore or Washington. But all they really needed to do to make the invasion a success was to inflict a major defeat upon a Union army on Union soil. For, you see, they knew what we often forget: the key to the military front is the home front.

They knew that the civilian population of the north – the home front – was growing increasingly discouraged over the conduct of the war. They knew that the Republican majorities in both Congress and State houses had been reduced by the mid-term elections of 1862. They knew that Congress had instituted a Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, which was constantly second-guessing Lincoln. They knew that the northern home front was in shock and dismay over the mounting death tolls. They knew that a victory on northern soil would do more to affect the northern population's will to continue the war than anything else.

In short, for those of you of my generation, they were launching their Tet Offensive. That 1968 offensive, if you'll remember, was a total military defeat for North Vietnam. But it was a resounding political success, and a turning point in the American peoples' willingness to support the war in Vietnam. 105 years before Tet, Lee and Davis had the same objective.

The fact that this invasion resulted in the Battle of Gettysburg, that the two armies met at the little town of Gettysburg, less than ten miles inside Pennsylvania, was more an accident of geography, road networks, and timing, rather than a planned engagement by either commander. But there 163,000 soldiers joined in struggle for three long, bloody days with, literally, the fate of a nation – or nations - at stake.

Suffice it to say that the Union won at Gettysburg, as you well know. Although it wasn't the end of the war, which drug on for two more bloody, weary, years, it was definitely a turning point of the war. After Gettysburg, the Union held the initiative, and the war of attrition that Lee and Davis had feared was upon them. After Gettysburg, as long as the will of the northern population to support the war was unabated, the end was inevitable.

What does it mean to us today?

Part of the answer to that question is easy: The Civil War was truly a turning point in our development as a nation, and Gettysburg was a turning point of the war. The Civil War was indeed "the most momentous era in American history" - it defined who we are as a nation, both then and now, and what beliefs we hold "self-evident." It was the both the greatest disaster which has ever befallen our nation, and also our era of greatest achievement. To sum:

- The Civil War decided, once and for all, the question of Union or secession;
- The Civil War abolished, once and for all, the institution of slavery; and
- The 14th and 15th amendments to the Constitution defined, for the first time, the rights and

benefits of citizenship of this nation.

Viewed in these terms, the Civil War era saw not only our greatest military struggle, but our greatest social revolution. Granted, we still struggle after 145 years, to refine this concept of citizenship, and to meet Abraham Lincoln's challenge of a "new birth of freedom."

Another part of that understanding of the past is the incredible price paid by the Civil War generation. The breadth of involvement, the depth of commitment, and the scope of sacrifice that Americans of the 1860's endured, is absolutely astounding to contemplate today.

- **In 1860, the total population of the United States was 31.4 million;**
- **12.4 percent of the total population, 3,800,000 men were enrolled in military service; and**
- **620,000 lost their lives (2% of total population).**

If we had another Civil War today, and those same percentages held:

- **Today's population is 301.1 million;**
- **37.3 million people would be enrolled in military service; and**
- **6 million Americans would die.**

Yet another way to provide that understanding is to contemplate for a moment the incredible impact that the events of September 11, 2001 have had upon our nation. Then consider that the death toll at Gettysburg - measured as a percentage of the nation's population - was twenty-one times that of September 11th. In fact, measured as a comparative percentage of the American population, there were 42 Civil War battles in which the death toll exceeded that of September 11th, or almost one a month, for four long years.

We cannot even begin to comprehend today how we could cope with such a horrific and prolonged struggle. But understanding what they lived through does help – I think - put the issues and struggles of today into perspective.

As part of that perspective, are there lessons in this museum and on this battlefield, which have relevance to the election which is approaching in two weeks? You tell me:

- **Are the politics of exclusion, which shaped the national debate over slavery for 40 years prior to the onset of the Civil War, still with us today?**
- **Did arguments in the 1850s over the re-opening of the Atlantic slave trade mask the real question of our nation's dependency upon slave labor then, any more than arguments about the level of foreign oil imports or the opening of more off-shore drilling leases, mask the real question of our dependency on oil today?**
- **In 1848, Senator James Hammond of South Carolina asked "Were ever any people, civilized or savage, persuaded by argument, human or divine, to surrender voluntarily two thousand million dollars [of property]?" The answer then was no. Has the answer changed today?**
- **The arguments then about whether slavery was a moral evil, or a benevolent institution designed to care for an inferior race, split America's two largest religious denominations – the Methodists and the Baptists – into separate churches, both of which quoted Biblical scripture in defense of their position. Is this much different from the Biblical scriptures being quoted today in support or opposition of one candidate or another?**

- **In the early months of the Civil War, both sides thought the war would not last long. Didn't that generation – like ours – have to learn that war, once launched, is difficult to control, has a tendency to become ungovernable, refuses to be managed logically, takes turns that no one anticipates?**
- **Is Abraham Lincoln's challenge of a "new birth of freedom" as relevant to us today as it was to our forefathers in 1863?**
- **And perhaps most important – both then and now - is understanding that in a democracy, the home front – you and I - are directly responsible for what happens on the battle front. After all, as Sir John Keegan, perhaps the most acclaimed military historian of our time, wrote:**
... [A]n army is...an expression of the society from which it issues. The purposes for which it fights and the way it does so will therefore be determined in large measure by what a society wants from a war and how far it expects its army to go in delivering that outcome.

I think Lincoln understood that perfectly – hence, his decision to come to Gettysburg in the fall of 1863 and use the opportunity of providing "a few appropriate remarks," to redefine the purpose of the war, not just for the battle front, but primarily for the home front; and not just for his generation, but also for ours.

Abraham Lincoln once said, "If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could then better judge what to do, and how to do it." That is the relevancy of history – and the power of museums. If this new museum – and this hallowed battlefield - can help us better understand the issues, the trials, the sacrifices, and the struggles that past generations endured, to bring us where we are today, we can better "judge what to do, and how to do it" today, and in the future.

And if that takes places, then we will have accomplished our mission of "providing understanding." So in closing, let me make two ironclad predictions:

- **The majority opinion on the home front will dictate what happens to our soldiers on the battle front, and what they are ordered to do next. So it has always been since the birth of democracy, and so (I hope) it shall always be; and**
- **On November 5th, we will all get up in the morning and go about our daily lives.**

Whether we are encouraged or discouraged by the results of November's election, we do not have to wake up with the prospects of our nation dividing asunder. The people of the Civil War generation gave us that assurance – that this nation, created at Philadelphia, saved at Gettysburg, forged by the fire of the Civil War - is more powerful, and more enduring than any single Presidential election. That is, ladies and gentlemen, the strength of our democracy, of the people, by the people, for the people, bequeathed to us by the Civil War generation – bequeathed to us by your ancestors.

And if we could ask them about the issues facing us today, I am certain they would assure us that:

- **This nation has survived far, far greater crises in the past than those imposed by the post 9/11 world;**
- **This nation has been far, far more divided in the past than it is today; and**
- **As compared to the issues that our forefathers faced in the Civil War era, the issues facing us today should be well within our ability to resolve in a civil manner.**

And that is our hope for the future. We are one people, and we do believe in the "new birth of

freedom.” Of course, we have work yet to do. Our part of that work at Gettysburg is “providing understanding” to the 1,800,000 people who visit us each year. We invite you all to join us in that mission, by exploring our new museum, and roaming this great battlefield, where so many gave that “last full measure of devotion.”

Hereditary membership is available in the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States (MOLLUS - founded by Civil War officers on April 15, 1865) and the Dames of the Loyal Legion of the United States (founded in 1899 as the auxiliary to the MOLLUS). For more information on either or both organizations, please visit each organization's national website:

[Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States](#)

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