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Title

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Journal

UCLA Historical Journal, 21(0)

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Publication Date

2006

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Civil Rights Meets the Civil War Centennial: The 100th Anniversary Reenactments of Manassas and Gettysburg

By Christopher Bates

It might well be said that Karl Betts lived his life in reverse. Born in 1892, the critical event of his early life was World War I. That conflict imbued him with a deep sense of patriotism, and a fascination with military history. It also gave him his wife of 39 years. "I came back from World War I with a French Wife and a German police dog," he remarked. "The dog left me but my wife remained for 39 years."¹

By the time Betts' wife died in 1957, a different war had come to dominate his life. The Civil War had always been a passion for him, but by the late 1950s, it had grown into an obsession. In the 1930s, Betts and a group of friends had begun taking hikes of Civil War battlefields. These eventually grew into "Battlefield Crackpates," informal Civil War discussion groups. In 1951, Betts and three friends decided a more formal organization was in order, and they founded the Washington, D.C. Civil War Round Table (CWRT). The D.C. CWRT began life with 26 members, and then quickly expanded to 100. By the end of 1951, the membership rolls included noted historian Bruce Catton, Major General Ulysses S. Grant III, and Rear Admiral John B. Heffernan. The group continued to grow in size, eventually reaching a peak of about 500 members.²

In late 1956, the members of the D.C. CWRT decided among themselves that the federal government should take steps to commemorate properly the upcoming Civil War centennial. They formed a centennial subcommittee, with Betts as its chair. By December of that year, the committee had completed work on a proposed Congressional Joint Resolution that called for the establishment of a national Centennial Commission of 25 members. Betts and his fellow D.C. CWRT members were well connected, and so it was not hard for them to gain the attention of Congress, which approved a resolution creating the National Civil War Centennial Commission on September 7, 1957, giving it a budget of \$100,000.³

At that time, \$100,000 was a substantial amount of money for such a

¹ Quoted in Victor Gondos, Jr., "Karl S. Betts and the Civil War Centennial Commission," in *Military Affairs* 27:2 (Summer 1963), 52.

² *Ibid.*, 52-53.

³ This budget was renewed in most, but not all, of the years between 1958 and 1965.

project, and the federal government had clear expectations as to what was it was buying with its money. The Cold War was at its height in 1957. The Korean War had ended only a few years before, and the United States was committed increasingly militarily to the Middle East and Vietnam. Nikita Khrushchev had assumed the premiership of the Soviet Union in 1955, and had adopted a militant stance toward the United States. In November of 1956, Khrushchev made a jingoistic speech addressed to Western political leaders, concluding with the promise that, "We will bury you!" In August of 1957, little more than a week before the Centennial Committee legislation passed, the Soviet Union conducted its first ICBM test. Shortly thereafter, in October of 1957, the USSR became the first nation to reach space with the launching of Sputnik.

In this context, political leaders saw the Centennial as an invaluable opportunity to promote national unity and civic pride. President Dwight D. Eisenhower expressed his enthusiasm for the Centennial project, proclaiming:

That a nation which contained hardly more than 30 million people, North and South together could sustain 600,000 deaths without faltering is a lasting testimonial to something unconquerable in the American spirit. And that a transcending sense of unity and larger common purpose could, in the end, cause the men and women who had suffered so greatly to close ranks once the contest ended to go on together to build a greater, freer, and happier America must be a source of inspiration as long as our country may last.⁴

Other leaders linked the Centennial celebration to the Cold War even more explicitly. Secretary of the Army Wilbur C. Brucker, for example, suggested that Americans should take care to heed the example provided by both sides in the Civil War, for the United States now faced, "the most ominous challenge since the birth of the nation," from the "Communist conspiracy."⁵

In 1958, Grant and Betts became the leaders of the Centennial Commission, as chair and executive director, respectively. Both men had a clear understanding of the Commission's purpose. "We are confident," Grant asserted, "That the results will lead to a better popular understanding of America's days of greatness, a more unified country." Betts concurred, writing that, "Every section of our land and our people won from the Civil

⁴ Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Proclamation on the Centennial," December 8, 1960, quoted in *Civil War Centennial Commission, The Civil War Centennial: A Report to the Congress* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968), 11.

⁵ *Washington Post*, Apr. 9, 1958.

War is the treasure of our national unity. And that is what Americans will glory in when the Centennial rolls its curtain.”⁶

Neither Grant nor Betts, particularly Betts, had any inkling that their approach might be controversial. When asked about the possibility in 1959, Betts naively replied, “We don’t fight these battles any more, we study them.” Grant and Betts were both Northerners by birth, but they had an essentially Southern understanding of the Civil War. In the 1850s this might have earned them the sobriquet “doughface,” but in the 1950s such a view was unexceptional. Around the time that Grant and Betts were born, in 1881 and 1892 respectively, the South was winning the battle for control of the memory of the Civil War. The Civil War had been a war for both union and liberty. However, once the contest was decided, Southern polemicists strove to focus the nation’s attention on the former concern, and to downplay the latter. By the end of the nineteenth century, they had achieved near-total victory, focusing the memory of the Civil War onto liberty.⁷

African Americans naturally had their own memory of the war that centered on liberty, but white Americans largely ignored it after Reconstruction. Frederick Douglass, among others, anticipated that this would be the case. In a speech delivered in Washington, D.C. on the Fourth of July in 1875, Douglass asked, “If war among the whites brought peace and liberty to the blacks, what will peace among the whites bring?” Douglass anticipated the answer to his question, expressing his fears that the nation would, “lift to the sky its million voices in one grand Centennial hosanna of peace and good will to all the white race.” Throughout the nineteenth century, and in the first half of the twentieth century, African Americans worked to re-insert civil rights into the story of the Civil War, but without great success.⁸

⁶ Minutes of the Civil War Centennial Commission, June 5, 1960, Records of the Civil War Centennial Commission (henceforth RCWCC), box 20, National Archives. Karl S. Betts, “A Centennial For All Americans,” February, 1960, quoted in Gondos, “Karl S. Betts and the Civil War Centennial Commission,” 56-57.

⁷ *New York Times*, 9 June, 1957. The postwar interpretation of the Civil War developed by Southern writers and leaders came to be known as the Lost Cause.

⁸ Frederick Douglass, “The Color Question,” 5 July, 1875, Frederick Douglass Papers, reel 15, Library of Congress. For discussions of African American struggles over the memory of the Civil War see John Hope Franklin, “A Century of Civil War Observance,” in *The Journal of Negro History* 47:2 (April 1962), 97-107; Scott A. Sandage, “A Marble House Divided: The Lincoln Memorial, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Politics of Memory, 1939-1963,” in *Journal of American History* 80:1 (June 1993), 135-167; Robert Cook, “From Shiloh to Selma: The Impact of the Civil War Centennial on the Black Freedom Struggle in the United States, 1961-65,” in *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Brian Ward and Tony Badger, (Basingstoke, Hampshire : Macmillan, 1996), 131-46; David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American*

By 1960, however, times were changing. In an incredibly brief time, the consensus that emerged among white Americans in the late nineteenth century collapsed. The Civil War became politicized once again, this time linked to the issues of the twentieth century. The debate that had seemingly ended by 1900 was renewed. The National Centennial Committee was first swept up in this change, followed by the centennial itself. The radical reconstruction of Civil War memory is evident by comparing the two largest reenactments of the Centennial era: Manassas and Gettysburg.⁹

Manassas, 1961

Held on the weekend closest to the 100th anniversary of the First Battle of Bull Run, the centennial celebration at Manassas was not the first event of the Civil War Centennial, but it was certainly the largest, attracting an estimated 100,000 spectators. According to newspaper accounts, the division between Northerners and Southerners the attendees was about equal and included people from each of the 50 states as well as Canada. The centerpiece of the event was a three-hour-long reenactment of the highlights of the battle, staged on both Saturday and Sunday of the centennial weekend.

The Manassas centennial celebration resulted from a remarkable amount of cooperation between various groups. Local businesses sponsored the event, while local residents volunteered their labor. The federal government, in the form of the National Park Service, allowed the use of the battlefield itself, and also helped a great deal with the planning. The National Civil War Centennial Committee, while not directly in charge of the event, provided substantial logistical and financial support. The state government of Virginia, and the Virginia Centennial Civil War commission also provided financial support. The state governments of every other state that had sent troops to the original battle sent a

Memory (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001); and "Unfinished Business: African Americans and the Civil War Centennial," in *Legacy of Disunion: The Enduring Significance of the American Civil War*, ed. Susan-Mary Grant and Peter J. Parish, (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 48-64.

⁹ For other analyses of the Civil War Centennial, see Robert G. Hartje, *Bicentennial USA: Pathways to Celebration* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1973), 60-93; Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 590-610; John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 206-26; Richard M. Fried, *The Russians are Coming! The Russians are Coming! Pageantry and Patriotism in Cold War America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 119-37; Robert Cook, "(Un)Furl That Banner: The Response of White Southerners to the Civil War Centennial of 1961-1965," in *The Journal of Southern History* 68:4 (November 2002), 879-912.

contingency of men to participate in the reenactment. The groups that made the centennial commemoration and reenactment possible, then, represented many different segments and strata of society, all coming together in service of the same agenda.

An emphasis on unity permeated the Manassas event. In 1960, President Eisenhower sent a letter to the Manassas Centennial Corporation that reiterated his previously expressed thoughts about the Centennial. He noted his approval of the Manassas event, arguing that it would, "... serve to remind all Americans of the bonds which now unite us." The publication of Eisenhower's letter on the front page of the program, which was handed out to all of the 100,000 or so Manassas attendees, made the theme of the event clear to all. Eisenhower was particularly enthusiastic about the plans to reenact the battle; a few months prior to the Manassas event, he hosted one of the participating units at his Gettysburg farm, inspecting them and observing a drill demonstration.¹⁰

To maintain the unity theme, event organizers bent over backwards to treat the South and North as absolute equals. For example, the script provided to reenactment participants explained that Manassas was where "35,000 untried men under Union General Irwin McDowell matched their raw courage against 34,000 equally courageous but untested Southerners." The event program made a similar assertion: "On this field the guns of Ricketts and Griffin thundered the courage that would be the Union army's in battles yet to come, and Southern boys showed a determination that indicated the war would be more than a three months' affair."¹¹

Of course, the most powerful statement of the organizers' message was the reenactment itself. Reenactments inherently promote the message that North and South were not essentially different, by eliminating the political, economic, and social differences between the two sides. This reduced the combat to the soldiers' commonalities: their bravery and their willingness to sacrifice. However, the Manassas reenactment went even further than this in linking Johnny Reb and Billy Yank. In the real battle, the defeated Federals turned tail and fled back towards Washington, D.C. However, the reenactment concluded with Northerners and Southerners joining together in the middle of the battlefield, singing "God Bless

¹⁰ Dwight D. Eisenhower to Manassas Centennial Commission, August 10, 1960, Records of the Manassas Centennial Commission (henceforth RMCC), Manassas National Battlefield.

¹¹ Francis F. Wilshin and David Thompson, "Script for the Reenactment of the Battle of First Manassas," RMCC, Manassas National Battlefield. Manassas Centennial Program, RMCC, Manassas National Battlefield.

America.”¹²

While the Manassas event organizers worked to promote unity, they also strove to silence any mention of race. They were successful in this, for one of the most notable aspects of the event was the total absence of people of color. The Manassas reenactment was a large and well-attended event, and very well documented. The organizing committee carefully preserved the paperwork that it generated. Newspapers from across the country covered the event. The National Park Service paid several filmmakers to document the reenactment, hoping to use the footage as an interpretive aid. Throughout all of these different documentary sources, African Americans are either invisible or entirely absent. References to emancipation, civil rights, or slavery are absent in all documents in the National Park Service’s files on the Manassas Centennial Commemoration. No speech or letter raised these issues. Newspapers from both Northern and Southern towns ignored race. No African-Americans are discernable in the film footage of the reenactment, despite the thousands of spectators or participants.

Naturally, nothing could have pleased Southern partisans more than downplaying the race issue in the Civil War. However, the Southern perspective also pervaded the event in other, more subtle ways. To begin with, Manassas is the Southern name for the battle, and organizers were careful to use it exclusively, and to avoid using the Northern name, Bull Run. Additionally, the origination stories of Manassas as the place where “The Rebel Yell was born” and “Stonewall Jackson earned his name,” stories which are essential elements of Southern mythology, were repeated ad infinitum—in advertisements for the event, in the script for the reenactment, in the program, among other sources. To take yet another example, several different internal memoranda, press releases, and other official documents created by the event’s planners refer to the “gallantry” of the soldiers.¹³ ‘Gallant’ is not a word that occurs much in everyday usage, but it perfectly encapsulates Southerners’ view of the Confederate soldiers as latter-day chevaliers. With this in mind, the repeated use of the word in official correspondence indicates clearly the depth to which the Southern perspective had permeated minds of the individuals staging the reenactment.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ For examples, see J. Leonard Volz, “Reenactment of the Battle of First Manassas,” RMCC, Manassas National Battlefield; Manassas; Francis F. Wilshin and David Thompson, “Script for the Reenactment of the Battle of First Manassas,” RMCC, Manassas National Battlefield; Manassas Centennial Program, RMCC, Manassas National Battlefield.

Interlude

Karl Betts was thrilled with the Manassas event. He boasted that it had drawn, "The greatest audience ever to witness an outdoor spectacle in America." He was particularly pleased that the South had gotten its due at the event, reportedly even boasting that the Confederacy may not have won the war, but it surely was going to win the Centennial.¹⁴

Others shared Betts' enthusiasm. The Manassas Centennial Commission received letters expressing satisfaction with the reenactment from across the nation: from Massachusetts and Georgia, from Maine and Mississippi, from Minnesota and South Carolina. Teachers, parents, authors, politicians and career military men all gave positive feedback. That the event had an essentially Southern character was confirmed when letters from the Sons of Confederate Veterans and United Daughters of the Confederacy arrived, commenting on how much their members had enjoyed the celebration.¹⁵

Indeed, so positive was the response that other states scrambled to organize their own reenactments. Plans for events were soon underway in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Tennessee, and a host of other states. Members of the Vermont Civil War Centennial Commission gloated that they were the only New England state to see action during the Civil War, and promptly organized a reenactment of their "battle," even though it was only a small skirmish involving Confederate troops that had crossed the border from Canada. Members of the Florida Civil War Centennial Commission complained that no battles had taken place in their state, and that the primary military presence during the Civil War had been blockaders. "The destruction of Jacksonville...and the capture of Pensacola and its forts are events not easily re-enacted, to say the least," remarked one Florida Centennial Commission member sadly. There is no way to be certain exactly how many reenactment were held between 1961 and 1965, but it was at least one hundred, most of them very well attended.¹⁶

¹⁴ Betts speech, 7 August, 1961, RCWCC, Box 31, National Archives. Karl Betts, "The Civil War and Our Unity," *America* 107:42 (Nov. 10, 1962), 1048.

¹⁵ See, for representative examples, John Andrews to James C. Fry, July 24, 1961; Jackie Mumbower to Manassas Centennial Corporation, July 24, 1961; Gloria Scorboria to Manassas Centennial Corporation, July 25, 1961; Fritz S. Updike to James C. Fry, July 25, 1961; Robert L. Henderson to James C. Fry, August 1, 1961; Lucy Fitzhugh Kurtz to Francis F. Wilson, September 12, 1961. All of these letters can be found in the RMCC, Manassas National Battlefield.

¹⁶ The skirmish in Vermont is known generally as the raid on St. Alban's, and occurred on October 19, 1864. Adam G. Adams, "Activities and Accomplishments, Florida Civil War Commission," April 8, 1963, RCWCC, Box 74, National Archives, quoted in Fried, *The*

The popularity of the reenactments as a means of commemorating the war reflected Americans' ongoing taste for historical pageantry. Large-scale, visual presentations had consistently been a part of Civil War commemoration, dating back to the war itself, and the Grand Review of the Army of the Potomac in May of 1865. Veterans' encampments, which often attracted thousands of veterans in full uniform, are another example. The historical parades organized by the American Pageant Association in the 1910s and 1920s are yet another manifestation of this phenomenon.¹⁷

Despite this historical precedent, not to mention the popular response, not all Americans were happy with the Manassas reenactment. Many critics suggested that reenactments were not an appropriate way to commemorate the centennial. The Manassas event was "The Civil War with popcorn," sniffed the *Nation*. Other journals concurred, describing the event as a "shabby circus," and "grisly pantomime." One reporter even expressed his hope that the reenactors would begin using live rounds, so that the country would "be free of one of the sicker elements," of the population.¹⁸

Professional historians agreed with this assessment. Bruce Catton, for example, felt that the reenactments made light of "the appalling bloodshed of this most sanguinary conflict." John Hope Franklin wondered, "Why is it that a mature, somewhat sophisticated, and indisputably powerful nation would subject itself to ridicule before the entire world with the vulgar reenactment of the Battle of Bull Run?"¹⁹

The National Park Service was also in the chorus of naysayers. In a report on the Manassas event, Regional Director Leonard J. Volz remarked on the "Coney Island" atmosphere of the reenactment, and advised against slowing any further reenactments on National Park Service grounds, writing:

[I]t is suggested that the Reenactment of the Battle of First Manassas be considered an exception to our policy regarding reenactments and that we firmly adhere to the policy hereafter. I don't think any battle reenactment can be conducted, no matter how well intentioned, that won't finally appear as a "show" or

Russians Are Coming!, 134.

¹⁷ For a study of Americans' taste for pageantry, and a detailed discussion of the pageants of the early twentieth century, see David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990). Fried also addresses the issue at length in *The Russians are Coming!*.

¹⁸ *The Nation*, 30 January, 1960; *Holiday*, July 1961; *New York Times*, 29 July, 1961; *Richmond Post-Dispatch*, 26 July, 1961.2

¹⁹ *Richmond News-Leader*, 2 May, 1961. Franklin, "A Century of Civil War Observance," 104.

celebration rather than an appropriate commemoration of a solemn event in our history.²⁰

Ultimately, Volz had his way. Most future reenactments were not held on NPS grounds, with the 1962 Antietam event and the 1963 Gettysburg event as the only exceptions.

Of course, as controversial as the form of the Manassas commemoration was, its message was even more problematic: African-American leaders joined with white Northern and Southern liberals to express their dismay at the extent to which the Centennial celebrations, particularly Manassas, ignored slavery and race. African-American activist A. Philip Randolph asserted, "There is no doubt that this whole Civil War Centennial commemoration is a stupendous brain-washing exercise to make the Civil War leaders of the South on a par with the Civil War leaders of the North, and to strike a blow against men of color and human dignity." Jesse Lemisch, a white leftist, described the centennial as a, "surrender to the South." Meanwhile, African-American scholar and civil rights activist Lawrence Reddick called for the gathering and burning of Confederate, in order to expose, "the Confederate myth for the unhistorical romance much of it is."²¹

Reddick was not the only one to see the Manassas event as a call to action. By mid-1961, African-American leaders throughout the country were working to keep the South from dominating the Centennial. African Americans sought to integrate themselves into future centennial commemorations, even holding their own commemorative events, most notably a well-attended rally at Abraham Lincoln's tomb in 1962. The African-American leadership also urged President John F. Kennedy to issue a second Emancipation Proclamation on the centennial of the first. Kennedy, having depended on Southern votes in order to take office, declined the proposal.

Karl Betts had believed that race issues could be muted during the centennial celebrations, predicting in 1959 that, "any possible complications resulting from the integration problem will soon disappear." This statement rings with a tragic misunderstanding of the time, for by the conclusion of the Manassas event, his downfall was already underway, and it was entirely due to an "integration problem." The process actually began a couple of months before the Manassas reenactment, and appropriately enough, the city where

²⁰ J. Leonard Volz, "Suggested Guidelines for Large Scale Special Events, Based Upon Reenactment of First Manassas Experience," August 11, 1961, RMCC, Manassas National Battlefield.

²¹ A. Philip Randolph to Howard N. Meyer, July 13, 1961, Bayard Rustin Papers, reel 2, A. Philip Randolph Institute, quoted in Cook, "(Un)Furl That Banner," 897. *The Nation*, May 22, 1961. *New York Times*, 23 April, 1961.

the remaking of the Civil War Centennial Commission started was Charleston, South Carolina.²²

Each year, beginning in 1958, the National Civil War Centennial Commission held a national assembly at which all of the state commissions, and various other local groups, gathered to discuss their plans. To maintain a geographic balance, the site of the meeting alternated between a Northern and Southern location each year. The 1961 meeting was scheduled for Charleston in April, in order to coincide with the 100th anniversary of Fort Sumter.

As representatives from the various Civil War organizations began to make their travel arrangements for the meeting at Charleston, it came to light that Betts had chosen a segregated hotel for the meeting, and that the handful of African-American delegates to the National Assembly would not be allowed to stay there. Such an oversight might have been forgiven, if it had been promptly rectified. However, Betts refused to take any action at all to correct the problem, arguing that it was beyond his control. Outraged, several state delegations threatened a boycott of the Assembly. Ultimately, President Kennedy intervened, arranging for the use of a local military base in place of the segregated hotel.

Although a crisis had been averted, Betts' and Grant's days of leading the Civil War Centennial were numbered. The Manassas Centennial event added fuel to the fire, and a number of skeletons from Grant's closet fanned the flames. In the late 1940s, he had worked with Washington, D.C. businessmen to secure the passage of segregation ordinances. In 1959, as commander in chief of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, Grant had allowed an article to be included in the organization's newsletter that argued that Jewish financiers had helped cause the Civil War.²³

Finally, on August 30, 1961, the members of the Civil War Centennial Commission required Grant to convene an emergency meeting. After a brief debate, Betts was ordered to submit his resignation. Shortly thereafter, Grant also resigned. Officially, Grant attributed the departure to his wife's ill health, but the truth was that he was angry about Betts' removal, and also concerned that Congress might soon remove him as well. Following Grant's departure, the Kennedy administration purged the rest of the committee of any other members with similar racial politics.²⁴

In short order, Grant and Betts were replaced by the historians Allan Nevins and James I. Robertson, Jr., respectively. In a statement released shortly after assuming the chair of the National Centennial Commission, Nevins made

²² Karl Betts to Wint Smith, February 6, 1959, RCWCC, Box 71, National Archives.

²³ *The Washington Post*, 20 June, 1959. Kammen, *Mystic Chords*, 592.

²⁴ Interview with James I. Robertson, Jr., July 3, 2003.

clear that while he appreciated the importance of promoting national unity, there were other issues that demanded attention:

Southerners died for what they believed a just cause. A host of white Northerners died for what they held a sacred duty; a host of Negroes died, many in the uniform of the United States, for the achievement of freedom and human equality. We must honor them all.²⁵

Nevins and Robertson also had different priorities in the commemoration of the Centennial. They immediately poured their energies and their funds into a series of scholarly projects — publishing the papers of Jefferson Davis and Ulysses S. Grant, and commissioning a series of books addressing the impact of the Civil War on various facets of American life, including religion, the economy, government, and race relations.²⁶

Nevins and Robertson were also willing to support certain types of commemorative ceremonies, but reenactments were not among them. Nevins felt that the Manassas event had a “carnival atmosphere,” and had been “an affront to good taste.” He wrote, “If the National Commission tries to reenact [another] battle...My dead body will be the first found on the field.” Robertson agreed, remarking that, “we feel that reenactments possess too much celebrative spirit and too little commemorative reverence. The soldier playing mocks the dead.” By no means did the reenactments stop, but they no longer had the support of the Centennial Commission.²⁷

And so, there were big changes in the National Centennial Commission between the Manassas and Gettysburg events. Even bigger changes were happening across the nation. Between July of 1961, and July of 1963, the Civil Rights movement took several leaps forward. The “freedom rides” into the South began. Several students at North Carolina A&T refused to vacate the “whites only” seats at a Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro. Martin Luther King, Jr., organized the Southern Christian Leadership conference and began staging demonstrations. Governor George Wallace denied African-American students attempting to enroll at the University of Alabama.

When the centennial commemoration was finally held at Gettysburg, the nation’s political climate was substantially different than the one in which the Manassas

²⁵ Allan Nevins, RCWCC, Box 97, National Archives.

²⁶ In addition to the RCWCC at the National Archives, information and commentary on these projects can be found in Nevins’ personal papers, found at the Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.

²⁷ Nevins quotes taken from *The Civil War Centennial: A Report to the Congress* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968), 14, 45. Robertson quoted in Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 215.

commemoration had been held. Where the Manassas event had focused on one particular interpretation of what the war had really been about, the Gettysburg event saw participants doing battle over three different interpretations.²⁸

Gettysburg, 1963

On June 28, 1963, the residents of Gettysburg received what was perhaps their first indication of what was to come, with the publication of the *Gettysburg Times*' centennial commemorative issue. Included in the issue were letters from the current governor of each of the states who had sent troops to fight at Gettysburg. Many of the letters raised civil rights questions, typical of these was the submission from Edmund Brown of California, who wrote:

In observing the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, it might be well to remind ourselves that peace between the races has not been secured and that all of us share the responsibility to fulfill the promise of this country's founding pledge that "all men" will receive equal treatment under the law.²⁹

Several other governors, notably Harold Hughes of Iowa and John Chafee of Rhode Island, seconded Brown's sentiments.

The civil rights question resounded repeatedly as the centennial celebration got underway. On July 1, the speakers included Assistant Secretary of the Interior John A. Carver, Jr. In his remarks, Carver focused almost entirely on civil rights, saying:

We search for peaceful solution to the civil rights issues of 1963. Peaceful solutions have been found in many areas of this subject, principally through the high principles, the vision and the dedication of constitutional guarantees enunciated by an enlightened judiciary and by far-ranging executive action to assure that these guarantees are not denied, through artifice or legalistic sleight of hand. The president has now called for a new dedication to the equality under law which Lincoln defined as the purpose behind a bloody struggle a century ago. It is time for the Congress to respond—to give positive expression to the ideals for which men fought in the past...³⁰

²⁸ It should be clear that the Gettysburg centennial commemoration was staged by the Gettysburg Centennial Commission, and received only minimal guidance from the National Centennial Commission. This made it possible for the reenactment to be staged.

²⁹ *Gettysburg Times*, 28 June, 1963.

³⁰ Louis M. Simon, *Gettysburg 1963: An Account of the Centennial Commemoration* (Harrisburg, Pa.: W. S. Ray, State Printer 1964), 32-33.

Pennsylvania governor William Scranton immediately followed Carver on the speaker's platform. Scranton also addressed civil rights, emphasizing the importance of "driving prejudice out of the human heart at least as rapidly as we are learning to drive men into outer space."³¹

John Carver's speech was particularly important. As an assistant cabinet secretary, Carver was implicitly speaking on behalf of the Kennedy administration. Kennedy had largely distanced himself from the civil rights question during the centennial events of 1961. He had solved the Charleston hotel incident through a compromise, rather than by insisting upon desegregation. In 1962, Kennedy declined to issue a "Second Emancipation Proclamation" and he backed out of an invitation to speak at the ceremonies commemorating the original one. For a member of the Kennedy administration to explicitly call on Congress to pass civil rights legislation in July of 1963 indicates an abrupt and significant reversal of policy. Kennedy was a shrewd politician, constantly mindful of his narrow victory in the 1960 presidential election. He would not have allowed Carver to make a civil rights speech if he did not believe that support for the civil rights movement had become mainstream.

Of course, Carver was not the only person to deliver a speech on the civil rights question. On July 2, 1963, roughly 5,000 people attended a mass held at the Gettysburg Peace Memorial. Officiating at the mass was Notre Dame president Reverend Father Theodore M. Hesburgh, who condemned "The appalling death of freedom for millions of Negro Americans, today, in voting, in employment, in housing, in education, in public accommodations and in administration of justice." On July 4, several political leaders made speeches at the battlefield monuments for their states. In an address at the New Jersey monument, Governor Richard J. Hughes expressed his belief that the United States was "...witnessing an historic movement of the Negro in America, the emergence of their spirit of self-reliance." Meanwhile, speaking at the Florida monument, Representative Sam M. Gibbons warned of the danger of America's leadership ending up in the hands of "racial extremists."³²

Gibbons' remarks about racial extremists were delivered with one person in mind, and his entire audience knew it. Shortly before the Gettysburg centennial, segregationist Alabama governor George Wallace had made clear his intentions to run for the presidency in 1964. As he came under attack, Wallace's commitment to segregation deepened. In his governor's letter to the *Gettysburg Times*, Wallace gave his own interpretation of the meaning of what the Civil War. He expressed concerns about the interference of the federal

³¹ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

³² *Gettysburg Times*, 3 July, 1963. *Gettysburg Times*, 5 July, 1963. *Ibid.*

government in the affairs of state governments, what he called “destructive centralization.” Wallace did not let it stand at that. He decided to appear in person at Gettysburg to deliver a speech in which he defended his actions in denying black students the opportunity to enroll at the University of Alabama. Calling the decision to desegregate Alabama’s schools “silly” and “absurd”, Wallace explained that he taken the actions he had in order to “protect local government.”³³

Other Southern leaders may not have shared Wallace’s willingness to go to a northern city to condemn civil rights, but several took their letters to the *Gettysburg Times* as an opportunity to advance the Southern perspective. Mississippi governor Ross Barnett, for example, wrote that, “We believe all Americans should recognize legitimate differences in problems of the states, and leave to the states the powers originally authorized by the United States Constitution. It is essential to our progress and security that state sovereignty be maintained...”³⁴

The Gettysburg reenactment also included a number of celebrations to honor the Confederacy. The best attended was held at the monument to North Carolina troops, located at the east end of the battlefield. Several thousand people waving Confederate battle flags gathered at the monument to adorn it with wreaths and flowers and to hear speeches from prominent North Carolinians. North Carolina State Senator Hector McLean was the keynote speaker, and in his remarks he argued that, “the great victory of the men who followed General Lee came after they had met what the world called defeat.”³⁵

The attitude of Southern leaders at Gettysburg reflects a radical change in their approach, even more substantial than that of the Kennedy administration. Emphasizing national unity and downplaying civil rights, as Southerners did between 1890 and 1960, is one thing. Retreating into a states’ rights interpretation, however, represents a jump back in time of more than a hundred years, to the days of John C. Calhoun. The Civil War had settled this question, and such a move was clearly an act of desperation in the face of an onslaught of civil rights advances. The incorporation of the Confederate battle flag into state flags, a move taken by the Georgia Legislature in 1956, the South Carolina legislature in 1962, and the Oklahoma legislature in 1966, was another such symptom.³⁶

³³ *Gettysburg Times*, 28 June, 1963. *Gettysburg Times*, 1 July, 1963.

³⁴ *Gettysburg Times*, 28 June, 1963.

³⁵ McLean was chosen because his father, A.J. McLean, was governor of North Carolina when the monument was first dedicated. His remarks were printed in the *Gettysburg Times*, 5 July, 1963.

³⁶ Numerous books have been written on the Confederate Flag in the twentieth century,

Even in the face of increased militancy from both civil rights activists and Southern reactionaries, a unity-oriented interpretation of the war was still in evidence at Gettysburg. Indications of this sort of thinking were ubiquitous in the official materials, down to the most minute details. Robert E. Lee, for example, is lionized throughout the Gettysburg memorial program, which advises readers that, "Lee is no longer Southern, he belongs to all of us." Describing the reenactment of the third day's battle and how it will differ from the actual battle, the memorial program says, "This time 1,000 men will join in brotherhood and devotion to the Stars and Stripes."³⁷

Indeed, the utter lack of subtlety employed by the Gettysburg organizers, presumably a product of the extent to which the unity message was under attack, was the primary difference between the ceremonies at Manassas. Unlike the earlier Manassas committee, the organizers of the Gettysburg event went so far as to chose an official theme – "Strength through Unity." In honor of this theme, the organizing committee commissioned a commemorative poem by James Van Alen, and included it in the memorial program. Van Alen, a direct descendant of a Union general, chose George Pickett's July 3 charge as his subject:

That distillate of bravery, which the world would shortly know
As "Pickett's Charge" relentlessly was brewing to a boil.
On Cemetery Ridge's smooth approaches soon would flow
The best blood in America, to darken the red soil!

The year was eighteen sixty-three, the day July the third,
And the armies of the Stars and Stripes and Stars and Bars were met.
The scorching sun had reached its peak, no breeze the treetops stirred,
The air was quivering with the heat, the troops were bathed in sweat.

For two full days before, from dawn till dark those flags had flown
Above sons of America locked fast in mortal strife,
Each fighting for a principle, the height of courage shown,
The North to save the Union and the South its way of life...

Americans of North and South may justly think with pride
Forever on the way both Blue and Grey fought on that day,

some more polemical than others. Two of the more balanced are Peter Applebome, *Dixie Rising: How the South Is Shaping American Values, Politics, and Culture* (Fort Washington, Penn.: Harvest Books, 1997) and Robert E. Bonner, *Colors and Blood: Flag Passions of the Confederate South* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002).
³⁷ Reenactment script, Records of the Gettysburg Centennial Commission (henceforth RGCC), Gettysburg National Battlefield.

From start until the bitter end their courage never died,
Our nation's loss such bravery had so high a price to pay.³⁸

The fifty-seven stanzas of the poem, from which this is only a brief excerpt, was accompanied by illustrations, and filled 15 pages of the program.

Many of the political leaders who were asked to provide their thoughts on the Centennial focused on the theme of brotherhood and unity. In their letters to the *Gettysburg Times*, Carl Sanders of Georgia, John Reed of Maine, and J. Millard Tawes of Maryland, among others, addressed this issue. The comments of Orval Faubus of Arkansas are representative:

We all learned a costly and tragic lesson in that conflict between brothers one hundred years ago. We learned that our one great nation under God is, in fact, indivisible, and that we must remain united if we are to endure as a nation in this world of turmoil and external dissension.³⁹

A number of speeches also focused on the necessity of unity, most notably one delivered by the omnipresent Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was a resident of Gettysburg in his retirement. When asked to speak during the commemoration, he was more than willing, and he was named the keynote speaker for July 2. In explaining the need for unity in his address, Eisenhower reiterated his belief that all Americans that the nation had to join together in order to survive the “external threats posed by Communistic dictatorship.”⁴⁰

Of course, as at Manassas, the reenactors themselves provided the most powerful symbolic statement of unity. As at Manassas, the soldiers joined together after the battle to sing a patriotic song, this time the Star Spangled Banner. Interestingly enough, however, even many of the reenactors did not buy the message. For example, Confederate “Blackhat Brigade” reenactor Ross Kimmel says:

[S]ome centennial events bore an uncomfortable similarity to white resistance. Many times I thought that a lot of the people I saw portraying Confederates at centennial events were there because there were no Klan events to go to that weekend. To be honest, we Blackhats were not among the most enlightened white people at the time, but we certainly had no ulterior motives as white supremacists. I am afraid some Confederate reenactors did.

³⁸ Gettysburg Centennial Program, RGCC, Gettysburg National Battlefield.

³⁹ *Gettysburg Times*, 28 June, 1963.

⁴⁰ *Gettysburg Times*, 1 July, 1963.

By the end of the centennial, I personally had come to believe in the fundamental justice of the civil rights movement. In fact, I quit my parents' country club because the club's no-blacks policy prevented the black mayor of Washington, Walter Washington, from speaking there.⁴¹

Kimmel's experience is a testament to the extent to which the civil rights oriented interpretation of the Civil War had penetrated mainstream thinking.

Conclusion

The Gettysburg event was the last of the large-scale reenactments. In part, because people had grown a little weary of them. The opposition of the National Park Service and Civil War Centennial Commission was also partly to blame. However, the most important factor was that Southern state commissions sponsored most of the events, and the Union successes in 1864 and 1865 meant that in 1964 and 1965 held fewer anniversaries that Southerners cared to commemorate. In the end, the development of the centennial mirrored the war itself in another more significant way: Just as the Civil War became a war for civil rights between 1861 and 1863, the centennial became a battle for civil rights between 1961 and 1963. The most important legacy of the Civil War centennial was the re-politicization of the Civil War.

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⁴¹ Ross M. Kimmel, "Confessions of a Blackhat: Recollections of a Skirmisher During the Civil War Centennial," in *Camp Chase Gazette* 26:10 (September 1999), 42-43.