

150 Years Ago

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 1, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

One hundred and fifty years ago today, a division of troops under the command of Confederate General A. P. Hill was almost to the town of Gettysburg where they hoped to find a supply of shoes. What they found, instead, were two brigades of Union troops under the command of General John Buford. Thus began the three day Battle of Gettysburg.

We like to believe that history is moved primarily by ideas, and if the ideas be noble, all the better. But, sometimes history is moved by men in arms. If, on the second day of battle, the 20th Maine had not held the far left flank of the Union lines, protecting Little Round Top, history would have been different. If Pickett's Charge had succeeded in breaking the center of the Union line on Cemetery Ridge on the third day of battle, history would have been different. We Americans owe the men who fought and died at Gettysburg an enormous debt. After that battle, the outcome of the war was never really in doubt. And, as Shelby Foote has said, the war gave us an "is." Before the war, people said, "The United States are..." but after the war, people said, "The United States is...." In short, the soldiers at Gettysburg gave us a new and different nation from the one declared independent in 1776. It was a nation freed from the sin of slavery. While the fight against racism would continue, even unto our own day, the fight against slavery was won, and it was won decisively on the fields of Gettysburg.

I have walked those fields a dozen times or so, and each time I am reminded of the cost that was paid: The regimental markers list the casualties, and the numbers are as staggering as they are horrific. War is an ugly thing at all times, but it was especially ugly at that time, when the advances in modern medicine had not caught up with the advances in modern weaponry. It is humbling to know that these men walked into battle knowing that death, while not certain, was no less certain than survival. Yet, they marched on. I wonder when I walk up Little Round Top or across the fields between Seminary Ridge and Cemetery Ridge: What would those men think of what we have done with the nation they bequeathed to us? There is much to ponder as you walk the battlefield at Gettysburg. If you have never made the trip, I highly commend it as one of the most-see places in American history, not only because of you can easily see the role geography played in the conduct of the battle, but because the ground upon which you walk is as sacred ground as can be found in these United States. We have our "is." The blood-soaked soil beneath your feet gave it to us.

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