**History 288 Civil War & Reconstruction**

**Discussion Transcript for Tuesday, March 31, 2020**

**Main Reading: Elizabeth Varon, Armies of Deliverance, chapter 8**

The first section of this chapter covers the Gettysburg campaign in 1863. Please note the use of the word “campaign” there instead of “battle.” What Varon does so well in this chapter is to situate the story of Gettysburg in the larger context of the war in 1863 and to explain in a nutshell the strategic considerations at stake in the Confederate decision to invade Pennsylvania in the summer of 1863.

**Dickinson Connection Challenge**

Tom Forte and Brendan O’Brien both won points in the Dickinson challenge for this reading. Forte noted that JEB Stuart shelled Carlisle on the eve of the Gettysburg battle. O’Brien did even better in noting that Dickinson graduate Richard Beale (Class of 1838) was part of Stuart’s cavalry advance to Carlisle (and actually so was his son –a d they both wrote about the experience which you can read about here: <https://housedivided.dickinson.edu/sites/blogdivided/2010/07/13/the-lives-of-richard-and-george-beale/>). O’Brien also noted that Philip Barton Key, the man shot and killed by Gen. Dan Sickles in 1859) was the nephew of Chief Justice Taney (Class of 1795). He gets two points for all of that.

There were many other possibilities as well, including stories of the college experience during the Confederate infantry occupation at the end of June (Gen. Ewell’s infantry forces held the town briefly and then withdrew to join Lee’s main army at Gettysburg (arriving on the afternoon of the first day); later Stuart’s cavalry showed up and shelled the town on July 1 before withdrawing themselves to join Lee AFTER the battle had already started). You can read some great details about the experience through the eyes of the daughter of the college president at the time here (in a first-rate student Weebly project by Rachel Morgan, ’18): <http://marydillonscarlisle.weebly.com/>

The following are selections from student comments & questions with some responses from Prof. Pinsker

**Lee’s Motivations**

STUDENT COMMENT: Varon compares Lee's aspirations in the summer of 1863 with his motivations to invade the North in the fall of 1862. It seems like pride had taken over and wanted to redeem himself after Antietam, especially after finding out McClellan had found his "lost order" that helped the Union win the battle. However as I was reading the other motivations of Lee, it made me think of our discussion on what the Confederates needed to do to win the war. They needed to simply outlast the Union. However Varon describes the confederates wanting to "live off the fat of the land in enemy territory" and " demoralize Northern civilians". Lee and his army had two victories at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville that can show that their army can hold on if they need to. I wonder if it ever occurred to General Lee or anyone else in the Confederate army that invading the North again was not smart, and not necessary. Varon makes sense of Lee's eagerness to attack the North as she continues the chapter. She explains the growing of the peace Democrats in the North. Lee thought that with a strong victory in enemy territory would change the public opinion. Is it fair that he was going for a knockout punch?

STUDENT COMMENT: One of the really interesting things I read about in this chapter was Lee's thoughts and goals in trying to gain support of Northern Democrats. I thought it was interesting how important he felt that support could be in aiding the Confederates winning the war by forcing the Union to realize that Southern independence was the only way to negotiate peace. However, what surprised me even more in this conversation was Davis' response in wanting to rely on military means and not political means. To me, that seems hypocritical and didn't make sense because the whole war was embedded and pretty much based on politics. It is almost impossible to rely solely on military means. Even in gaining allies, military means alone will not gain allies, but rather military means and a good cause, and the cause usually always has political ties, so I'm not sure what Jefferson Davis meant in saying that he did not want to use political means.

QUESTION: On page 244 Varon talks about Lee and his views toward reaching "peace" with the North. Mainly that Lee wasn't seeking peace, but rather "crushing and telling victories", but that he believed this could change public opinion in the North. Varon writes that Lee believed rumors of peace talks would bring Northerners to the negotiating table. However, Lee cites Confederate independence as a non-negotiable price for peace on behalf of confederates. I found this section a bit confusing or unnecessary. If confederate independence was non-negotiable, did confederates really believe there was any possibility for peace talks with Unionists or for concessions to be made? From what Varon has written I don't get the impression that the Confederacy would even entertain negotiations with the Northerners that led to anything but Confederate freedom, but isn't that synonymous with their victory in the war?

*Answer: These comments and that question are all shrewd reactions to Varon’s very important and sophisticated discussion of Lee’s motivations for the 1863 invasion in chapter 8. “We should neglect no honorable means of dividing and weakening our enemies,” General Lee wrote in a private letter in early June. Varon describes him as being a “voracious” reader of Northern newspapers. This is the key to understanding the intersection between military and political affairs and the reason why our class has been so devoted to dissecting the nuances of public opinion in both North and South. To devise effective strategies in any endeavor requires an understanding of other peoples’ motivations. Military leaders on both sides made political as well as military calculations when they planned their various operations. Lee had a premise in both 1862 and 1863 that military victories in the North would demoralize sections of Northern public opinion and thus would help with his objective of “dividing and weakening” the Lincoln Administration and the Union coalition. There were other motivations (diminish the fighting effectiveness of their enemies, relieve pressure on Virginia, impact European diplomacy, etc.), but the domestic political calculation was as important as any other (and to my way of thinking, the single most important factor of all). To answer the question above directly, yes, Davis and Lee both seemed to believe that they could break the Union will and achieve independence through negotiations, if they were negotiating from a position of strength (i.e. after battlefield victories).*

**First Hand Battle Accounts**

STUDENT COMMENT: For the two armies, Gettysburg seemed like the logical place of concentration for the two armies. Wonderful accounts, such as Sallie Broadhead, who was a schoolteacher and wrote a diary about the campaign of Gettysburg and how the people of Gettysburg were afraid when the Confederates first showed up, wondering where the union soldiers were. She described the southerners with harsh words such as “filthy.” It’s interesting to read the firsthand accounts of the battle as well, as John Haley discussed the atrocities committed by Lee essentially sending his men to death. Interestingly enough, Lee took full responsibility for Gettysburg, a huge defeat for the confederacy and maybe the first major turning point of the war.

QUESTION: I thought it was strange to see a British officer unofficially attached himself with Longstreet and the Confederate forces – was it normal for foreign officials to do this?

*Answer: Foreign military observers did follow the war closely in some cases. They were not “attached” to the armies perhaps as they question implies, i.e., they were not fighting or supporting the troops. Instead, they were observers. In fact, some of the most insightful first-hand accounts of the war come from foreign observers, not only military figures like Freemantle, but also journalists. Always look for published first-hand accounts of the battles you are studying and writing about. Varon does a masterful job in her accounts of various battles, but especially the ones covered in chapter eight, using a wide variety of accounts, from civilians like Sallie Broadhead, soldiers and officers (including from the after-action reports in the Official Records (OR) –don’t overlook in your own research!) and from journalists (though she gets the name of the war’s most important correspondent wrong. It was Samuel Wilkeson (not Wilkerson) who was working for the New York Times in 1863 (not the New York Tribune, which he had quit earlier in the war after a dispute with Horace Greeley). Wilkeson, by the way, came from a family that was originally from Carlisle –another connection—though he was a resident of Buffalo, NY. The point here is that first-hand accounts are gold and you should prioritize finding them in your own work, trying to get the details right, and thinking hard about how to situate them in context. Make sure to look at Varon’s endnotes to see where she got her sources. Whenever you read secondary source accounts and find quotations from particiapnts, make sure to look at their citations to see if the information comes from a published diary, collection of letters, the OR, etc. Then you can see if they are available to you online (and I can certainly help, if needed). You may also, under time pressure, quote primary source accounts from within secondary source accounts. For example, you can borrow a quotation like I did above from General Lee that I found in Varon’s book on p. 243 using a “quoted in” formulation in your footnotes. I describe how to do that appropriately in the handout on footnotes at the course site.*

**Casualty Figures**

STUDENT COMMENT: The chapter then moves on to Gettysburg and discusses how in the beginning Confederate reinforcements had led them to have a 3:2 advantage of the Union army and on the first night the Union troops retreated to the high ground on Cemetery. However, in the following days General Picketts division arrived and led to Picketts charge which resulted in the death of 28,000 Confederate troops. At the same time 54% of the men who were a part of Picketts charge were killed or Union so both sides lost significant amounts of men.

*Answer: This comment includes a common error and one that was partly encouraged by the way authors like Varon use phrases like “losses” on p. 255. The student read that phrase as deaths but Varon explicitly mentions that it was casualties (deaths, wounded, missing and captured). Be careful how you use casualty figures in your battle narratives! Many of the Confederate wounded or missing from Gettysburg returned to combat later in the war; they were not permanent losses. Still, the casualty figures were devastating, but if you are not careful, you can overstate how devastating. Most Confederate men who walked out into Pickett’s charge on July 3 came back alive. The violence was horrible and the tragedies were enormous, but you have to focus on the details to get the statistical summaries correct.*

**What Ifs**

STUDENT COMMENT: I found it interesting that in wrapping up this section on Gettysburg the discussion turns to using Gettysburg to understand Lee as a commander and his strategy. His "disappointment" at the battle not continuing on July 4th shows the confidence Lee had in his troops being able to beat the odds. However, to me it also shows a bit of recklessness. Such an aggressive offensive strategy to keep pursuing Union destruction rather than precise maneuvering seems like a bold choice.

STUDENT COMMENT: As I continue to study this battle, I am starting to think more and more that maybe this battle was not so much a Union victory as it was a Confederate loss. It seems like this battle was the Confederates to lose. There were multiple mistakes made by the Confederate generals at Gettysburg. The first one being JEB Stuarts's decision to continue his raiding ride instead of returning to Lee with the important information that Lee needed in regards to the location and size of the Union army. Lee walked into the Battle of Gettysburg almost blind without intel from Stuart who was supposed to be the eyes and ears of the army. The second mistake on the first day by Ewell is debatable because it is hard to say whether taking the hills on the first day of battle was "practicable." However, it was known either by late that night or early the next morning that they may have been able to take those hills because the extreme left of the Union "fishhook" was unoccupied because that would be where Chamberlain filled in during the early afternoon on the second day. I think Ewell was a new general who did not want to mess up in such a crucial battle that he knew could possibly end the war, at the least it would really shift momentum towards the Confederates, and he was also trying to fill the big shoes of Jackson who was extremely respected by his men.

The mistakes didn't end there though. The next major mistake came by Longstreet very early on the second day. It seems like the attacks on the second day were supposed to commence at dawn before Union reinforcements, like Chamberlain's men, arrived and occupied the hills. However, Longstreet waited to attack for reasons that were not certain in the book. People suspected that it was because he hoped Lee would abort this attack and switch to his plan to retreat from Gettysburg and move to another battlefield of their choosing, but it is not clear if that is why he did it. This slip up allowed for Union reinforcements to arrive, though, which then made the Union's defense position even stronger. I am surprised Varon did not follow up with Longstreet's comments and decisions on the third day, though, in this book because I know Longstreet was criticized for his dispute with Lee about Pickett's charge and his inability to even give the verbal command to commence the attack to Pickett.

However, this leads me to the mistakes on the third day by both Lee and Meade. I have always wondered why Lee decided to proceed with Pickett's charge when he had seen the outcome of Fredericksburg and had even commented on the horrors of war after watching that battle. I don't know if he really believed his men could pull off the attack, or if he knew he was stuck between a rock and a hard place at this point in knowing that he had already lost so many men not just in this battle, but in the entirety of the war that had been going on for over 2 years at that point, and that he was desperate to win a battle that would justify all the loss of life with finally the gaining of actual ground. Meade's decision not to attack Lee during his retreat does not necessarily surprise me because he was new in command and did not want to mess up such a big victory, and I also know weather conditions on the 4th would have made an attack very difficult. However, it does surprise me how little Varon discusses this. She only has one sentence saying how Lincoln was disappointed in Meade for not pursuing Lee on July 4, which I thought was weird because that is usually a major point made because I was always taught that Meade's decision infuriated Lincoln and people in the North who thought that one last attack on Lee on the 4th could have ended the war. I thought Meade eventually even went on trial for his decision not to pursue Lee.

I know this may have been a lot more than needed, but I love discussing the strategic decisions at Gettysburg.

*Answer: These are strong, thoughtful comments about the challenges of interpreting consequences of battles and strategic choices. They are never simple, and all of you would be smart to remain humble as you assess and second-guess the combat participants and their decisions in whichever battles you analyze. In my video tour (available throught the course site), I address these issues directly, but see especially Stop 9 and Stop 13 for my assessments of the turning points and what ifs of the battle. Varon claims in this chapter that John Buford was the great intelligence gatherer for the Union army, but his role was essentially over after July 1st. My argument is that George Sharpe and the new Bureau of Military Information (which Varon briefly highlighted in the previous chapter) provided the decisive intelligence advantage for the Union forces at Gettysburg. You can decide for yourself which factors seem the most pivotal. In my tours at Gettysburg, I also point out that Lee’s premise about the political consequences of a potential Confederate victory at Gettysburg or elsewhere in the North seem misplaced to me –that defeat in Pennsylvania would have hardened Union morale, not broken it. Again, you can decide for yourself.*