

Of Gods, Generals, and the Civil War in American Mentality

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Gods and Generals was released to much fanfare after the smashing success of Gettysburg, the excellent movie to which Gods and Generals serves as a prequel. Alas, it failed to be an awesome epic like its predecessor, attempting to cover too much history in too little time. However, the movie is not a waste because its coverage of the early parts of the Civil War allows it to provide an interesting look at the way the Civil War still has a hold on America, over 140 years after that conflict started. The way states rights and slavery are dealt with, the focus on the battles, the primarily Southern perspective, and the religious overtones of the movie make for a very typical Civil War movie that promotes the Lost Cause idea.

The states' rights argument makes its presence felt immediately. Robert E. Lee refuses to accept command of the Union army in the opening scene because of his belief that the state, not the country, is one's home and this continues as characters are introduced and go off to fight. This seems to be the prevalent opinion these days as slavery, once considered the primary cause of the war, slips further as an issue. At the Olustee reenactment, it seemed an almost unanimous opinion among the reenactments that the war was fought over the right of states to leave the Union. The South felt they had the right to leave when they disagreed with the Federal government while the North felt they did not have the right to leave and enforced that belief with military might. The movie takes states' rights to a surprising extreme, almost never mentioning the Confederacy as a whole (especially in the early part of the movie). Instead they talk of Virginia and how they are defending Virginia.

Given the focus on states' rights it is not surprised that the issue of slavery is barely a part of the movie. Only mentioned at a few points, it is an issue that seems tacked on as an afterthought and only cared about by a few people. There are only two adult black characters and only one is a slave. Both want freedom for their people despite not giving any mention of mistreatment as a reason. No

plantations are shown. Stonewall Jackson offers the idea that the South would likely free the slaves after the war anyway. Not only are the Confederates are not presented in a negative light for their holding of slaves, neither are the Union forces portrayed as noble for attempting to free them. Only Joshua Chamberlain seems concerned about the slaves and he is a philosophy professor. Interestingly enough, Chamberlain seems to share an opinion with Barbara Fields (from Ken Burns' The Civil War) in that he feels the terrible war is worthwhile if emancipation is the ultimate outcome.¹ Like the focus on states' rights as the cause, this seems in line with the opinions of the Olustee reenactors as well. The idea of states' rights being a far bigger factor than slavery is especially strong in the South. I think it is telling that the two major figures behind the movie are Southerners: writer Jeff Shaara was raised in Florida and executive producer Ted Turner is an Atlanta billionaire. Turner shows his sympathies in the movie with a cameo as a Confederate officer of whom he is a descendant.

While the early focus is on states' rights (and the lack of slavery as an issue), the movie soon leaves those ideas behind for its core. After the initial secession and call to arms, the movie becomes almost completely focused on the soldiers and battles. A large portion of the movie features the brave, but suicidal attacks by the Union against Confederate positions at the Battle of Fredericksburg. In another earlier scene, the Confederate generals explain the arrangement of their forces in detail. This is very reminiscent of the National Parks Service and their heavy focus on the who and the how of the war rather than the why.² Military tactics, brilliant battle scenes, and the noble acts of the soldiers on both sides including their respect for one another are the focus of the film. There are a number of shots of the battlefield strewn with dead soldiers, a reminder for all the glory and bravery of the men there was also a very terrible cost. Like Abram Ryan's "The Conquered Banner", Gods and Generals does not want any to forget the glory nor the gore.

The heavy Southern focus of the movie also serves to play up another common theme in Civil War mentality: the gallantry of the Confederate generals. Robert E. Lee is the wise, noble grandfatherly figure fighting for his beloved home state. Stonewall Jackson is deeply religious, loves his troops, is cool under fire, outwits the Yankees repeatedly, and befriends small children. J.E.B. Stuart is introduced in dashing cavalier style in a display of his excellent horsemanship. Lee, Jackson, and the rest all get to deliver all their famous lines. From start to finish, the Confederate commanders easily out-think and whip their Northern counterparts. It is not coincidence that the three battles shown (Bull Run, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville) are all clear cut Confederate wins while Antietam, a marginal Union victory, goes unmentioned. Gods and Generals proves to be a somewhat redundant title as the generals (at least the Southern ones) are gods among men.

God is not absent in his more traditional form either. On the contrary, the incredibly pious Stonewall Jackson is the primary character of the movie. He uses the Bible for battle reports, damns the Yankees, and claims to be calm under fire because the Lord has already decided when he will die and there is nothing he can do about it. At times, he seems an almost divine force. Stonewall serves as a microcosm of the larger conflict that had heavy religious undertones on both sides. This was evident in much poetry about the war such as Bernard Covert's poem "Can I Go Dearest Mother!" in which God is mentioned directly five times and alluded to several more. Jackson is a holy man fighting the evil that is tyrannical rule.

In the end, Gods and Generals is nothing revolutionary, but instead is yet another example of the Lost Cause idea that remains in American mentality today. The focus on Stonewall Jackson is the pinnacle of this. His death after being shot by his own troops at the height of his success is the ultimate 'defeated victory' which helped cause "the South succumbed to flukish misfortune."³ Gods and Generals

is a great example of pro-Confederate cinematography: a focus on states' rights over slavery and idolization of Southern leaders. Nor can you forget the fact that the only universally deplorable act of the movie – the looting of Fredericksburg – is committed by Union troops en-masse after Jackson, the icon of the Confederate cause, earlier in the movie states that the South would never invade and tyrannize another people. A quote on Ken Burns' famous Civil War documentary also magnificently sums up Gods and Generals as well: “the film also cultivates the customary sympathy for the Confederate people, if not their cause.”⁴ The Lost Cause remains alive and well in American mentality and this film has only served to aid that.

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¹ Jim Cullen. The Civil War in Popular Culture: A Reusable Past (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 12.

² Andrew Curry. "Who Won the Civil War? A New Fight to Reshape the Nation's History". (U.S. News & World Report September 30, 2002), 58.

³ Tony Horwitz. Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War (New York: Random House, 1998), 172.

⁴ Cullen, 32.