



Letter: Reflections on the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg

Dear Editor:

On the eve of the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, there was a phenomenal program of authors and speakers to set the strategic and cultural context for the events of 1–3 July 1863. I watched a great deal of the program on CSPAN3. A closing segment of the cable broadcast featured callers from across the United States. A California woman remarked there was little to no attendance by African-Americans for the day's commemorative event. She asked "why not?" since the battle and the war led to their freedom from slavery.

As a young boy growing up in Cleveland, Ohio, in the 1960s, I had no awareness of the American Civil War. I did know that I was black in America and there was a difference in how we expected to be treated when visiting our grandparents "down South" in Alabama. I remember watching newscasts of civil rights movements, especially the March on Washington in August 1963. In my mind's eye, I can see clearly the framed photographs of Mahalia Jackson and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on the wall of my grandmother Hazel's sitting room. Sermons in our A.M.E. Zion church placed the stories and principles of the Bible in the context of the black experience in American society. I also remember vividly the inner city turmoil of the Hough Riots of 1966 — it was sparked by an incident that demonstrated the North was not that much different from the South in racial attitudes.

Following the drowning death of my father in 1967, my widowed mother moved her five children to the "suburb" of East Cleveland. I joined the racially diverse student body of Kirk Junior High School in mid-year and had the opportunity to take part in the middle school trip to Washington, D.C., during spring break of 1968. That trip occurred a week after the assassination of Dr. King on April 4, 1968, and was to be my first exposure to the world outside of Cleveland.

Our bus trip departed the following Sunday and the route included a short stop in Central Pennsylvania. The bus wound its way around the open fields of Gettysburg, passing the many monuments, and stopped to let us climb the observation tower on Culp's Hill. To this day, I can't remember what or if our teacher escorts said anything about the battle or the Civil War that had such impact on our nation. From our young student perspective, it was a needed break from a long bus ride that still had a few hours ahead.

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When we arrived at Washington, D.C., we had a full program that included visiting the White House grounds, Smithsonian museums and national monuments to Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln. I remember standing at the foot of the marble chair and statue of Abraham Lincoln and then turning right to read the words of his second inaugural address. I do not remember what words or sections of the speech struck me then, but I made the connection to the fields of Gettysburg and the “I Have a Dream” speech given by Dr. King given on those same steps.

Perhaps it was the section that began: “One-eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest.” Or maybe it was: “He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came.”

When I now visit the monument and read the wall, the resounding words are: “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in.” Part of that work in United States was the signing into law the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Fittingly the law was enacted on July 2 — the anniversary of the second day of the Battle of Gettysburg.

My life has been an interesting journey, and I often reflect on that middle school trip of 1968. Who would have thought the skinny black kid with glasses from Cleveland would have joined the military, graduated from West Point, become a colonel in the U.S. Army, and eventually be on the faculty of the Army War College? In the last capacity, I make frequent trips to both the Gettysburg Battlefield and to our nation’s capital — I openly share my story and its connection to our American history.

Importantly, it is also an American story of education and opportunity that we must convey to others as Lincoln did when he closed the inaugural address with, “to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

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