

On to Richmond!

After meeting and speaking with a wide variety of other Civil War aficionados at our roundtable, at seminars, during social occasions, and while on tours I've concluded there are any number of reasons why people have degrees of interest in the Civil War. Perhaps most commonly someone will have had an ancestor who served, perhaps was even killed during that service. Maybe they've become interested in a hometown unit and want to explore the battlefields where that unit fought. It could be their curiosity was aroused in a high school history class only to be reinvigorated by TV shows, including the Ken Burns special of approximately twenty years ago or something more recent, possibly on the History Channel.

Perhaps there's an attempt to discover or to reaffirm a belief in regional characteristics such as martial devotion, fortitude, and skills coupled with commitment to ideologies or political principles. Maybe they like to study and examine military doctrines such as maneuvers versus engaging in battles, or the application of theories such as concentration in time or place. Maybe they want to appreciate the contributions of technological advances such as railroads, telegraphy, or munitions. Conceivably they merely want to help preserve and maintain the memories and heritage of those who served. And of course the Civil War is a wonderful opportunity to study the effects, good and bad, of leadership, on and off the battlefield.

Some merely want to take in the sights and dimensions of the battlefields. (Did you hear about the woman who asked a tour guide why all the battles were fought on national parks?) And my guess is that there are men who try to experience combat experience vicariously without of course the boredom of camp life, all the marching, exposure to disease or the taking of battlefield casualties. In all probability most Civil War buffs combine two or more of these reasons for their interest in the Civil War.

Anyone reading this article can probably think of other reasons but let me suggest that there are more fundamental reasons to study the Civil War. Beyond

lessons in tactics or strategy, or interest in genealogy or area pride, everyone, including most especially our national leaders should study the Civil War try to learn the war's most important take aways: That national objectives and important strategic decisions must not be predicated upon emotional impulses, especially when those emotions result from false premises or from dynamic, dramatic incidents.

The thrust for secession had been brewing for several decades but finally Lincoln's election ignited a series of secessions from seven Deep South states. The ostensible reason for these secessions was that Lincoln would try to totally abolish slavery when in fact Lincoln never promised or even advocated that abolition. Nevertheless the fire eaters, mostly slaveholding planters, convinced their Southern neighbors that the election of the Kentucky born Lincoln represented the end of Southern culture and economy based upon slavery. Furthermore after Lincoln called for volunteers to end the rebellion, four more Southern states with smaller proportions of slaveholders decided to secede on the basis that they did not want to fight against the brethren. By the end of four years the South's culture was disheveled almost beyond recognition and its economy ruined for all intents and purposes. Paradoxically slavery, the issue that the fire eaters wanted to preserve by seceding, was forever abolished.

After Fort Sumter the hue and cry from the Northern public and press was "On to Richmond!" The political leaders of both sides assumed that a quick battlefield victory would bring an early end to the war.ⁱ From the Union's standpoint, this quick victory would be accomplished by capturing Richmond, Virginia, the new capital of the Confederate States of America. Additionally Richmond was the location of extensive munitions factories as well as being a strategically important rail center. Under the strategic objectives of the Napoleon era – Jomini had stated, "All capitals are strategic points, for the double reason that they are not only centers of communications, but also the seats of power and government"ⁱⁱ --, capture of Richmond would have been a prime objective, and if successful presumably meant a quick end of the Rebellion. Hence 90-day enlistments would suffice with no need to train and develop cavalry.

But now with the advantage of 20-20 hindsight we know it was never going to be that simple or that quick and easy. The emotional impulse to punish those rascals into submission prevailed even in the thinking of the Federals' most able, most experienced military commander, Winfield Scott, resulting in the debacle of First Bull Run. Nevertheless we still hear echoes of "On to Richmond" when commentators and/or politicians argue that a few bombing sorties or deployment of a few combat troops will resolve the latest crisis erupting somewhere in the world. For all its gallantry, or spirited combat, or advancements in tactics, or compelling personalities, the prime lesson of the Civil War, and the most important reason why it should be studied, is that war should never be rationalized, predicated or pursued upon basic, raw emotions, no matter how genuine or heartfelt they may be.

ⁱ Reid, Brian Holden, *America's Civil War – The Operational Battlefield 1861-1863* (2008) New York: Prometheus Books, pp 36-37.

ⁱⁱ Reardon, Carol. *With a Sword in one hand & Jomini in the other – The Problem of Military Thought in the Civil War North* (2012) Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, pg 22.