

The Fog of War History

"The president is concerned that the story the American people are getting about the war is not accurate. What is happening on the ground in the war zone, he fears, is not being correctly reported in the media. In the end, however, history will reveal the truth."

This hypothetical quotation sounds as if it could have come from the press secretary for President George W. Bush, but it could just as easily have come from Lyndon B. Johnson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, or even Abraham Lincoln. The truth is, people on the home front never get an accurate perception of what happens in large-scale conflicts, not in the past and not now. If understanding the war in real time on television is difficult to fathom, then imagine reaching back a dozen decades or more and asking "history" to figure things out.

While the media serve as a filter through which we see the story of modern warfare, a more complex and intricate system of filters has shaped our understanding of past struggles. And perhaps no event in American military history illustrates this better than the battle of Gettysburg in July 1863.

To begin with, our knowledge of this Civil War battle -- the "history" of it -- comes largely from sources other than historians. Indeed, the most influential chronicler of Gettysburg listed among his qualifications the fact that he painted landscape watercolors in Boston's Hyde Park neighborhood before the War Between the States. Though John Badger Bachelder did not serve in any army and was not present at the battle, most of what we know about Gettysburg is a direct or indirect result of his influence.

Prior to the Civil War, Bachelder had tried to collect enough accounts of the Revolutionary War's battle of Bunker Hill to paint an accurate historical depiction, only to find that the passage of years had left memories of the event scattered and contradictory. So when war of an equally important scale broke out again in the United States, he decided to do his research while memories were still fresh.

Within seven days of the battle of Gettysburg, Bachelder was on the field, interviewing wounded soldiers and making topographic sketches. Two months later, he traveled to the war front in Virginia, where he interviewed every officer he could find who had been present at Gettysburg. From this work, he published an intriguing three-dimensional map of the battlefield with lines showing the positions of the units. This enabled him to gain the endorsement of the Union Army commander and to continue to collect firsthand accounts of the battle.

In his dogged piecing together of history, Bachelder became well known among Union soldiers. Not wanting to be left out of his story, they sent their accounts to him, making Bachelder the repository of an enormous cache of eyewitness information and the conduit through which hundreds of soldiers told their stories.

In time, Bachelder became so obsessed with his pursuit of the Gettysburg story that he abandoned painting what he had hoped would be his masterpiece of the battle so that he could devote his energy to creating its definitive illustrated history. By 1880, he had built his reputation to such an extent that the US Congress appropriated \$50,000 to him to publish the history of Gettysburg.

His fame among veterans continued to grow until he was named the

Superintendent of Tablets and Legends for the Gettysburg battlefield, a position that gave him full authority over the location of monuments and even the wording inscribed on each of them. Bachelder assigned names to places on the battlefield and was responsible for the notion that Gettysburg was the "high-water mark of the Confederacy," even creating a large monument to designate it as such.

In the end, however, Bachelder was never able to render his huge wealth of knowledge into an illustrated history. The final product of his endeavor was an eight-volume, 2,000-page summary taken largely from the already published official reports of the battle. Less than 10 percent of this massive work made use of the vast body of knowledge he had collected himself. What he had no doubt learned through years of toil was that the experience of combat is too complicated to fully understand and record.

■

f John Bachelder, who personally interviewed participants on the battlefield, could never decide what the "truth" was, then it is no wonder that others have struggled as well with the notion of "historical record." As a result, what we may perceive as the factual record of our past is actually a collection of stories that may or may not be accurate. Our knowledge of the past too often comes not from some well of historical truth but rather from novels and films by people trained to produce engaging narratives regardless of their historical accuracy.

As sources of Gettysburg history, two novelists and two filmmakers serve as revealing examples of how our perception of the past can be easily distorted. Michael Shaara, an English instructor, dramatized the Gettysburg story in a 1974 novel, *The Killer Angels*, which does not

even pretend to be factual. The work did win the Pulitzer Prize in 1975 -- for fiction.

In 1990, after more than a decade of trying, director Ron Maxwell persuaded media mogul Ted Turner to finance a film version of Shaara's book, but because focus groups thought that a film called *The Killer Angels* must be about biker gangs, the producers changed the film's title to *Gettysburg*. The result, released in 1993, was the second-longest feature film of all time (at 4 1/4 hours, it trailed only *Greed*, a seven-hour film from the silent era) and a box-office flop, grossing less than \$11 million in theaters.

Where *Gettysburg* failed on the silver screen, it more than made up for on cable television. A year after its release, Turner aired the epic on his television network, TNT, to the largest audience ever to watch a drama on cable television. Forty million viewers tuned in to watch Hollywood's version of Shaara's now-classic novel.

In an epilogue to the airing of the movie, Turner filmed a brief piece expressing his thoughts on the epic conflict while woefully misstating the numerical facts, informing his audience that more men died at Gettysburg than in the entire Vietnam War. In fact, only about one-sixth as many men died at Gettysburg, approximately 10,000, and the total of killed, wounded, and missing does not equal, much less surpass, the number of Americans killed in Vietnam. Yet despite the availability of thousands of scholarly works on the subject of Gettysburg, popular voices such as Turner's have done more to shape our knowledge of the story than the army of scholarly historians who produced these works.

Like Shaara, Shelby Foote had little or no formal education in judging

sources and evaluating historical data, yet millions of Americans have learned about the Civil War from his work. An accomplished novelist, Foote forged a popular nonfiction trilogy, *The Civil War: A Narrative*, completed in 1974, and chose not to include any footnotes with which others might build on his efforts. As a result, his work tends to perpetuate myths. On several occasions, for example, Foote has written and spoken on what he considers the true cause of the battle of Gettysburg. It happened, he states, because the Confederate Army went into the Pennsylvania town to raid a well-known shoe factory there. In defiance of readily accessible county records showing that there was no shoe factory, warehouse, or other substantial supply of footwear in Gettysburg at any time in the 1800s, this myth persists among Civil War enthusiasts.

In 1994, Foote released the Gettysburg chapter of his original three-volume work as its own book, titled *Stars in Their Courses*, through which his version of the battle, including the fictitious shoe factory, spreads its influence to an even wider audience.

As the opening of the fifth episode of Ken Burns's celebrated television documentary *The Civil War* fades from black, the viewer sees one of the war's most famous images: three Confederate soldiers standing on the battlefield at Gettysburg. The photo has been romantically described as a symbol of the model Confederate fighting man, upright and stalwart, defiant to the end. The first sounds of this episode come from the voice of Foote, whom Burns chose as his central commentator for the series. Foote describes the photograph in appreciative tones.

However, the date of the photograph, virtually always listed when it appears in print, is July 15, 1863. Assuming the date is accurate, these men were still in Gettysburg 11 days after the Confederate Army had

left the area. Given that the Union Army was quick to send its prisoners to Baltimore, often within a few hours of capture, the Confederates were probably captured after the fighting had ended, meaning they were more likely to be either deserters or shirkers than model soldiers.

An ongoing debate revolves around the idea that modern academia has either ignored the Civil War as a politically incorrect subject or relegated it to stolid tomes. (Noted historian Allan Nevins once caricatured the average academic historian as "Professor Dryasdust.") In 1979, Princeton University professor Lawrence Stone helped reignite the debate when he argued that the majority of the American population is interested in history "but cannot stomach indigestible statistical tables, dry analytical argument, and jargon-ridden prose."

On the other hand, filmmaker Burns, despite his tendency to perpetuate myths and inaccuracies, once told the academic historical community, "I believe you have failed and lost touch absolutely in the communication of history to the public and that it has fallen to the amateur historians, if you will, to try to rescue that history."

Regardless of where on this spectrum of argument one might fall -- with the boring academics or the myth-making amateurs -- our general knowledge of the past is seriously flawed. The way we create our historical record makes this inevitable. Nevertheless, understanding how this process has worked before can tell us a great deal about what we are seeing on the nightly news today and how "history" may someday judge our current events.

Thomas A. Desjardin is a historian with the Maine Department of

Conservation. This article was adapted from These Honored Dead: How the Story of Gettysburg Shaped American Memory, copyright © 2003 by the author. Used by arrangement with Da Capo Press, a member of the Perseus Books Group.

© Copyright 2003 Globe Newspaper Company.