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Summary:

The causes and the legacy of the Civil War are not intuitive for many Americans today, especially for those who live far from the South. *Gettysburg* explores the philosophical, moral, and cultural underpinnings of the events surrounding the famous battle.

Word Count 561

“The Northern states feared that secession would result in numerous tiny, powerless, irrelevant countries. The United States as a nation—and its Constitution—would fail.”

Freedom in Film: *Gettysburg* (1993)

By Kathryn Hickok

“Up, men! And to your posts! And let no man forget today, that you are from Old Virginia!”

—Major General George Pickett

In [Gone with the Wind](#), Rhett Butler grimly tells Scarlett O’Hara that a looming battle soon would “pretty well fix things, one way or the other.” It would take place in “some little town in Pennsylvania called Gettysburg.”

[The 1993 film *Gettysburg*](#) recreates the events surrounding July 1-3, 1863. Unlike many war movies, including Civil War films, *Gettysburg* doesn’t really “take sides.” Instead, the film delves into the minds and hearts of both Northern and Southern combatants, largely through the thoughts and decisions of General Robert E. Lee (Martin Sheen), Major General George Pickett (Stephen Lang), and Union Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain (Jeff Daniels), among many others.

Gettysburg manages to convey understanding of, if not sympathy for, the wide range of motives and issues with which honest people grappled on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line in the 1860s. This approach makes the movie an excellent introduction to both the Civil War and the culture of the Old South for high school and college history students.

Because of the issue of slavery, it can be easy for many 21st-century Americans to relate immediately to the perspective of the North. However, the war was actually much more complicated than a conflict over slavery. [The slavery issue](#) brought deep-seated, decades-long tensions between the agrarian South and the industrial North to a head. The war was also about federalism, sectionalism, federal tax laws and their effects on state economies, and cultural differences between the North and the South.

Many Southerners were loyal to their home states in the same way their grandparents had been loyal to the colonies at the time of the American Revolution. They believed they had the right to declare independence if their states’ legitimate interests were no longer served (or their rights were being abused) by the federal government or by other states, just as the colonies had separated from Britain. As one Southern general put it while musing one evening in the camp, the federal government denying Southern states the right to secede from the Union seemed like a voluntary club refusing to permit people to resign their membership when aggrieved.



Countless surviving letters from Southern soldiers and their families show they believed they were fighting for their homes, freedom, rights, and the sovereignty of their states. On the other hand, the United States was becoming a world power. The Northern states feared that secession would result in numerous tiny, powerless, irrelevant countries. The United States as a nation—and its Constitution—would fail. After the Civil War, the phrase “these United States,” in common parlance in the 1800s, faded. It was replaced by “the United States,” a singular noun, as we say now.

The causes and the legacy of the Civil War are not intuitive for many Americans today, especially for those who live far from the South. Because *Gettysburg* is a long movie, there is enough time and thoughtful dialogue for viewers without much understanding of the history behind the battle to be pulled into the philosophical, moral, and cultural underpinnings of the events. Gorgeous cinematography and a soul-stirring musical score remind viewers that it’s possible to hold in one’s heart both Old Glory and Dixie, and still to miss Old Virginia, 150 years after the war.

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