Feature Essay

Smithpeters, Jeff
Fall 2003


Mr. Speaker's Spin

What-if tale imagines Confederate victory

What is there to say about Newt Gingrich and William Forstchen's attempt to rewrite the battle of Gettysburg so that the Army of Northern Virginia is victorious? Surely, it's of no surprise that someone of Speaker Gingrich's political persuasion would make a go of it. Republican politicians in recent years have frequently expressed an often self-destructive attachment to the Lost Cause. In 1998, future Attorney General John Ashcroft, in an interview with Southern Partisan magazine said traditionalists must do more to defend Southern patriots like Lee, Jackson and Davis or else be taught that these people were giving their lives, subscribing their sacred fortunes and their honor to some perverted agenda. Ashcroft was not unique in allowing himself to be interviewed by Southern Partisan, nor in the full-throatedness of his endorsement. Ex-Senators Phil Gramm and Jesse Helms, ex-Congressman Dick Armey, and current Senators Trent Lott and Thad Cochrane have all made time for the Partisan and had glowing things to say about Jefferson Davis and dark mutterings about the South's getting a bum rap from history.

If one were to rely on books like Gingrich and Forstchen's Gettysburg, then the conclusion would have to be that the soldiers most assuredly did NOT fight for a perverted agenda. Instead, you'd think they fought for no agenda at all, other than, perhaps, one that included facing battle stoically (and drinking plenty of coffee). Only when Lee happens upon a black cook does any character even think of slavery. And since it is Lee, who was never exactly on record as an enthusiastic defender of slavery and even freed those slaves he and his wife inherited, we are not surprised to read that he hopes this scourge upon our souls
can be addressed with the war's end.

In this novel, though Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain does appear and does think and act as you'd expect, he is never allowed to make a speech or run into an escaped slave. So Gettysburg is certainly in line with typical portrayals by Republican politicians of the Confederate cause as bearing no relation to the perverted agenda of slavery.

However, as a contribution to that obscure but lively subgenre called alternative history, Gettysburg will stand apart, probably for a long time. For one thing it doesn't cheat as much as those other books. The Confederates are not equipped with AK-47s brought to them by time-traveling white South Africans as was the case in Harry Turtledove's dead-serious yet farcical Guns of the South. Notice, though, that I said as much. In Gettysburg, Lee never yells Shazaam! but nonetheless he is suddenly endowed with new powers. First, he has a pushiness that belies his reputation as the preternaturally courteous Southern gent. But at the same time, he acquires a new receptiveness: he listens to and follows General James Longstreet's famous advice to march the army to the southeast and make a dug-in stand. He also is granted a physical stamina that's hard to reconcile with the reports of his having recently suffered a heart attack. Lee in Gettysburg resembles Vince Lombardi more than the Lee in The Killer Angels (aggressive as he was in that novel). Where Lee is given judiciously applied self-assertion and strength, his opponent General George Meade is given indecisiveness and a Henry Halleck-like insistence that everything go through the proper channels. You wonder how the book would have turned out had a more historically faithful Meade been Super-Lee's adversary, but the book is still intriguing.

William Forstchen's military history expertise is much in evidence throughout the book. He has a doctorate from Purdue and has, among other things, written a series of novels in which a Union regiment ends up being caught in some kind of temporal vortex and finds itself on an Earth where humans are slaves to aliens. Though at times the discussions among generals as to which corps is on which road along what creek can bog down the narrative momentum, these points do seem necessary, since the book's primary purpose is to lay out the most imaginatively plausible and fundamentally practical alternative battle of Gettysburg ever committed to print. MacKinlay Kantor's If the South Had Won the Civil War is perhaps the most famous try at this and though it has its strengths, Gettysburg's Tom Clancy-esque explanations of
weaponry, terrain and tactics render Kantor's slim volume a mere abstraction.

If the prospect of seeing Gettysburg unfold differently û and in stunning DVD detail û does not entertain you (and it should), the book has other virtues. The characterization of garrulous Union Corps General and ex-Congressman Dan Sickles is more vivid than we had a right to expect for such an action and strategy-intensive book. No doubt Gingrich was loath to let the opportunity to work with a fellow Machiavellian like Sickles slither away. The few scenes at Lincoln's White House are also delicious in their portrayal of the way the Cabinet-table pecking order gets enforced, no doubt another contribution from the Speaker.

Gettysburg also features many in-jokes that only those who have studied the battle and its aftermath will understand. One of many such episodes comes when Lee bursts into hot temper (a frequent occurrence in the book) at Longstreet for mentioning the feud between him and Ewell's division commander Jubal Early: We are here to win this battle. Everything else, likes, dislikes, vanity and pride are to be left behind. If someone disagrees with that, I will hand them their discharge and they can go home. Here, Lee actually threatens to drum both Early and Longstreet out of the army for their squabbling. And though Early would indeed be fired by Lee later (some time after having his army destroyed by Sheridan in the Shenandoah Valley), he'd be the principal post-war defender of the Marble Man's decision-making at Gettysburg. So much for what Lee would have thought of the vanity and pride neither man left behind.

Those looking for glimpses of Speaker Gingrich's Contract with America in this nineteenth century setting will indeed find them û in wide screen. If the Army of the Potomac fails here, it is almost solely because of the scale of its bureaucracy. The leaner, apparently more mobile and adaptable Army of Northern Virginia can be moved around faster because Lee and only Lee is its commander. He never considers for a moment what President Davis or the Confederate Congress might think of his decision to end the hostilities at Gettysburg after one costly day of fighting to take the army on a long flanking march. Big government is to blame for the misfortunes befalling the bluecoats as Meade insists on regulations and meetings and repeatedly worries what they're thinking in Washington. But a more modern day Republican talking-point arises in the book's depiction of Lee as focused. Such characterizations could have been lifted from any of Bob Woodward or Peggy Noonan's productions written in praise of George W. Bush's approach to war. Yes, ladies and gentleman, here
is your post-Clinton, post-9/11 Lee.

But whatever your own ideology, if you like provocative, well-thought-out speculation on the could-have-beens of Civil War history, Gingrich and Forstchen's *Gettysburg* will reward you and prompt your thinking. Nonetheless, the book's near-denial of the slavery issue and its insistence on scoring some anti-government points should be included in that thought process if it is to admit the complexity of the war, of history itself, and of the age the authors are responding to now.

*Jeff Smithpeters is working on his dissertation on Civil War novels of the late 20th century at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge.*