Patriotism vs. Nationalism

In his morally obtuse review, movie critic Roger Ebert sneers that the Civil War film *Gods and Generals* "is the kind of movie beloved by people who never go to the movies, because they are primarily interested in something else."

Exactly. It is a film that will earn the grateful favor of people for whom movies, television, and other products of the media cartel's entertainment affiliate detract from the business of real life. Such people prefer to invest their time learning about their ancestors, and teaching that heritage to their children. They will recognize in *Gods and Generals* a bewilderingly faithful depiction of an earlier American society organized around duty to one's family and country, rather than the service of emancipated appetites. In that culture, the Bible defined moral duties, and individual loyalties were rooted in the soil of a particular family and community.

"It's something these Yankees do not understand, will never understand," muses General Robert E. Lee (Robert Duvall) as he gazes upon Fredericksburg from a nearby hill. "Rivers, hills, valleys, fields, even towns — to those people they're just markings on a map from the war office in Washington. To us, they're birthplaces and burial grounds, they're battlefields where our ancestors fought. They're places where we learned to walk, to talk, to pray. They're places where we made friendships and fell in love. They're the incarnation of all our memories and all that we are."

Earlier in the film, as Virginians debate the merits of secession, Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson (Stephen Lang in an astonishing performance) explains that while he believes in the Union, Virginia, his home state, has a "primal claim" on his loyalties: "That's my understanding of patriotism."

To minds synchronized with the rhythms of prime-time television, such scenes must be utterly mystifying. After all, such people might object, what difference does it make where one lives, as long as you have cable television? And isn't "patriotism" measured by one's loyalty to the government, as embodied in the president?

"Patriotism," as men like Lee and Jackson understood, is love of one's *patria*, or fatherland — literally, the land of his fathers. It is not the love of a government, or of philosophical propositions, however sound the government or noble the propositions. While the Confederate cause stemmed from this understanding, it was also shared by many who chose to fight on the Union's behalf. Director Ronald Maxwell illustrated that fact during the opening credits by displaying a montage of regimental flags, both Confederate and Union, each of which symbolized tangible local communities, rather than the centralized abstraction called the "Union."

Secession and Coercion

Following the attack on Fort Sumter in April 1861, the Lincoln administration ordered each state to assemble a quota of volunteer troops to invade and punish the secessionist states of the Deep South. Virginia's quota was eight regiments of troops. In his response, Governor Letcher of Virginia declared:

> The militia of Virginia will not be furnished to the powers at Washington for any such use or purpose as they have in view. Your object is to subjugate the Southern states, and a requisition made upon me for such an object — an object, in my judgment, not within the purview of the Constitution or the [militia] act of 1795 — will not be complied with. You have chosen to inaugurate civil war, and having done so, we will meet it in a spirit as determined as the administration has exhibited toward the South.

Like the other southern states from which Lincoln sought to requisition troops, Virginia did not initially favor secession. But as Letcher's letter illustrated, Virginians equally opposed punishing states that had exercised their right to withdraw from the Union.

That right was explicitly reserved in the ratification acts of Virginia, New York, and Rhode Island, when those states approved the U.S Constitution. The right of secession was recognized at the 1814 Hartford Convention, where New England states opposed to the War of 1812 threatened to withdraw from the Union. As historian Charles Adams observes, "There were secessionist cries from some Northern states over the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act, the whiskey tax, the War of 1812, the admission of Texas, and the Mexican War. The Abolitionist party proposed that the Northern, nonslave states secede from the … Union with the Southern states."

Prior to 1861, Americans in both the North and the South understood that the Union existed among the states, rather than above them. As Virginia jurist Abel P. Upshur summarized in his study *The Federal Government: Its True Nature and Character*:

> The Federal Government is the creature of the States. It is not a party to the Constitution, but the result of it — the creation of that agreement which was made by the States as parties. It is a mere agent, entrusted with limited powers for certain specific objects, which powers are enumerated in the Constitution.

Through secession a state would reclaim the powers it had lent to the federal government. And the option to secede represented the ultimate check on the consolidation of power in Washington, something the Framers of the Constitution strove to prevent. "Too much provision cannot be made against consolidation," warned Federalist Fisher Ames during the Convention of Massachusetts. "The State Governments represent the wishes and feelings, and local interests of the people. They are the safeguard and ornament of the Constitution; they will protract the period of our liberties; they will afford a shelter against the abuse of power, and will be the natural avengers of our violated rights."

This perspective is vividly portrayed in *Gods and Generals*. The film begins on April 20, 1861 — the day that Robert E. Lee turned down command of the Federal Army, and the Virginia convention responded to Lincoln's call for troops by voting overwhelmingly to withdraw from the Union. In explaining his decision, General Lee points out that Virginia would be the first battlefield in the war against the "rebellion." Although he did not support slavery (the chief source of contention between the Deep South's "fire-eaters" and the Lincoln administration), and he believed secession unwise, General Lee would not make war on his home, his "country" of Virginia.

"A Union that can only be maintained by swords and bayonets, and in which strife and civil war are to take the place of brotherly love and kindness, has no charm for me," wrote Lee after resigning from the U.S. Army. In the film, Jackson presents a similar view during an address to new recruits to the Confederate army. Just as he would not permit a Union army to invade Virginia and compel it to join a "Union" held together by force, he would not be party to an invasion of other states for that purpose.

In a very real sense, *Gods and Generals* is an extended study of Jackson's character, the product of Christian stoicism. Convinced that God had numbered his days, and would not deprive him of any of this life's joys allotted to him, Jackson told an aide that he was "as safe in battle as in bed." He was tender and solicitous toward his beloved *esposita*, Mary Anna, haunted by the death of his first wife and daughter during childbirth, and actually fearful that by loving his family so deeply he might be cheating God.

Separated by war from his wife when his daughter is born, Jackson, as depicted in the film, befriends a five-year-old girl while spending the winter of 1862-1863 at the Moss Neck mansion. He is later devastated to learn that scarlet fever has claimed the young girl's life. The tragedy affects him so deeply that he breaks down and cries in front of his men, who are astonished that one so fearsome and ferocious on the battlefield could shed tears over the death of a single child.

For Jackson, in the film as well as in real life, tenderness and ferocity were complementary traits. He understood that as a husband and father, God had given him the duty to find out where trouble was coming from, and to get in its way before it reached his family. This explains why Jackson was determined to annihilate federal troops who invaded Virginia, when those troops were Americans he would otherwise have warmly welcomed as peaceful visitors. It also explains a scene wherein Jackson carries out the execution of three Confederate deserters. If the federal army lost the war, Jackson explains to his adjutant, then Republican war hawks would lose their war profits and maybe an election or two. "But if we lose," Jackson reminded his subordinate, "we will lose our country."

Union Counterpart

In the film, Maine Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain (Jeff Daniels) is used to express the Lincoln administration's perspective: The Union was indissoluble, created by the collective will of the "people" of the states as a vehicle for advancing human equality. Chamberlain was a noble man, a deeply serious Christian and scholar of astonishing breadth who displayed courage and honor on the battlefield on behalf of the truth as he was given wisdom to understand it. While *Gods and Generals* necessarily focuses on the Southern side, it allows Chamberlain to make an eloquent case for the view that constitutional government could not continue to co-exist with the unambiguous evil of human slavery.

Some critics have savaged *Gods and Generals* for supposedly neglecting the issue of slavery, but the film actually does historical justice by consigning the issue to the periphery. In the film, Chamberlain's brother Thomas reacts to news of the "Emancipation Proclamation" by correctly pointing out that most of the Northern enlistees had joined up to save the Union, rather than to fight on behalf of people they derisively called "darkies." Colonel Chamberlain, invoking the war's gruesome body count, insists that the end for which those soldiers died must merit their sacrifice.

While abolishing slavery was obviously the single worthwhile effect of the Civil War, it was never the primary aim of Lincoln's war policy. "My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery," he wrote in a famous 1862 letter to Horace Greeley. "If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union."

The "Union" Lincoln passionately sought to "save" was not the limited federal compact created through the Constitution, but an artifact of his own construction. As Marxist legal scholar George P. Fletcher of Columbia University's School of Law points out in his provocative study *Our Secret Constitution*, Lincoln's objective was to bring about "the consolidation of the United States as a nation in the mid-nineteenth-century European sense of the term." "One year into the war," writes Fletcher, "after a string of Union defeats, Lincoln learned that the old Union could not possibly survive. 'A new one had to be embraced.' And the new Union would have to be based on a new constitutional order."

That new order, Fletcher continues, would be based on the conceit that "the federal government, victorious in warfare, must continue its aggressive intervention in the lives of its citizens." This

revolution would leave constitutional institutions in place, but they would be "recast in new functions" within "a new framework of government, a structure based on values fundamentally different from those that went before." Specifically, Fletcher contends, the informal post-Civil War "constitution" emphasized equality, rather than freedom. The Civil War, he concludes, "established our primary political trilogy: Nationalite, Egalite, et Democratie [Nationalism, Equality, and Democracy]."

Fletcher thus candidly describes the North's victory in the Civil War as the triumph of a totalitarian vision closely akin to that of the murderous French Revolution. He also ironically vindicates the South's claim to be the defenders of the Founders' constitutional vision.

What Was Lost

Patriotism, a love for the land of one's forefathers, motivated the South — particularly the Virginians. The North's nationalist vision was rooted in loyalty to the central government. This view was memorably captured in the properly famous letter of Major Sullivan Ballou of the Second Regiment of the Rhode Island Volunteers. Ballou wrote the letter to his wife Sarah on Bastille Day, July 14th, shortly before receiving orders that sent him to Manassas, where he and 27 of his men were killed in the first major battle of the Civil War.

"If it is necessary that I should fall on the battlefield for my country, I am ready," wrote Major Ballou. "I have no misgivings about, or lack of confidence in, the cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter. I know how strongly American Civilization now leans upon the triumph of the Government."

Writing to General Lee following the war, Lord Acton offered a vastly different perspective. "I deemed that you were fighting the battles of our liberty, our progress, and our civilization," observed the great British scholar, "and I mourn for the stake which was lost at Richmond more deeply than I rejoice over that which was saved at Waterloo."

In his graceful reply, General Lee adverted anew to the constitutional principles undergirding the Southern cause, however imperfectly the South embodied them.

> While I have considered the preservation of the constitutional power of the General Government to be the foundation of our peace and safety at home and abroad, I yet believe that the maintenance of the rights and authority reserved to the states and to the people … [to be] the safeguard to the continuance of a free government.

Lee's assessment of the likely consequences of Northern victory reads uncannily like prophecy: "The consolidation of the states into one vast republic, sure to be aggressive abroad and despotic at home, will be the certain precursor of that ruin which has overwhelmed all those that have preceded it."

Gods and Generals ends after the death of Jackson, months before the Confederate high tide ebbed at Gettysburg (the subject of an earlier film by director Maxwell), and years before Lee's surrender at Appomattox (a scene Maxwell intends to capture in a third film on the last two years of the war). Because *Gods and Generals* vividly portrays the men who tried to prevent the outcome Lee described, the film has earned the hateful scorn of most film critics. This is also the reason why it will be cherished for generations to come by those who want to understand and preserve our constitutional heritage.