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## Realization: Reflections on the 150th

Bryan G. Caswell  
*Gettysburg College*

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# Realization: Reflections on the 150th

## **Abstract**

Though my own musings have led me to doubt the traditional interpretation of the Battle of Gettysburg's military importance, I still hold Gettysburg to be the greatest battle of the American Civil War, without question worthy and deserving of continued study. In order to reconcile these two points of view I pondered further, attempting to unearth other, less-thought-of reasons for the importance of the Battle of Gettysburg to the course of the American Civil War. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial

## **Disciplines**

History | United States History

## **Comments**

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### Realization: Reflections on the 150th

December 20, 2013

By: Bryan Caswell, '15

Though my own musings have led me to doubt the traditional interpretation of the Battle of Gettysburg's military importance, I still hold Gettysburg to be the greatest battle of the American Civil War, without question worthy and deserving of continued study. In order to reconcile these two points of view I pondered further, attempting to unearth other, less-thought-of reasons for the importance of the Battle of Gettysburg to the course of the American Civil War.

Again my thoughts turned to the summer I spent at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park. As one of my duty stations that summer had been Spotsylvania Court House, the second battle in Ulysses S. Grant's Overland Campaign, I had gained much experience explaining the concepts of this crucial campaign. The most famous aspect of Grant's series of south-east movements in the spring and summer of 1864 is, of course, his unswerving determination to keep moving towards Richmond, no matter the cost. Grant's fearless use of the North's superior manpower and industrial capacity to defeat the waning strength of Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia has become legendary in American history. Yet mention of this war of attrition in the American Civil War only truly begins to rear its head in the context of ending the war with the opening of the Overland Campaign. Though Grant and his generals may have been the first to integrate attrition into their strategies, the attrition of Southern armies began almost as soon as the war started. Though victorious at nearly every battle, Robert E. Lee continually lost a higher percentage of his men than did his opponents, and it is this idea of Confederate losses that brings me back to Gettysburg. It is estimated that, out of a total of approximately 70,000 effective soldiers at the start of the campaign, Lee's army suffered a total of around 23,000 casualties, fully 33% of its force. Among those casualties lurks a second, even more devastating fact. This same percentage of losses was reflected in the Army of Northern Virginia's officer corps, with at least a third of them becoming casualties over the course of those three days in July, 1863. In an army which has, rightly or wrongly, time and again been lauded for its superior leadership, the loss of so much of that leadership can only have been devastating to the continued performance of the army. In light of these figures, could it not be better to think of Gettysburg as one of the greatest disasters for Southern arms not because of the defeat itself, but due to the cost of any battle so bloody, be it a victory or a defeat?



Gettysburg is of course not the only major battle in the Eastern Theater of the war before Grant's Overland Campaign, and the cost of such engagements as Second Bull Run, Antietam, Chancellorsville, and many other all contributed to the eventual collapse of the Confederacy. Considering this, perhaps I have approached the question of Gettysburg's importance in the wrong way. One of the greatest lessons I have learned in the course of my studies in college has been that nothing in history is ever inevitable, and that each event rests upon the shoulders of all that has preceded it. Cannot the American Civil War be considered the same? While certain moments may stand out or appear more prominent than others, those moments could not have happened if it were not for all previous events, and the end of the war was thus the culmination of the occurrence of all those events exactly as they happened. In this context, Gettysburg still retains its importance, but so to do all other battles of the war. Perhaps in the end this is the best manner in which to fulfill Lincoln's charge in his Gettysburg Address; not just to remember what those valiant men did at Gettysburg, but to ensure that no man who gave his life on any of the fields of that war shall have died in vain. Perhaps we should commemorate Gettysburg for no other reason than that it occurred in the manner in which it did: a seminal event, to be sure, but only one indispensable piece out of countless others that make up the grand tapestry of American history.

#### Sources

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#### Image:

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