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Of Causes and Casualties: Safeguarding the Legacy of the American Civil War

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Abstract

750,000 and rising. 2.5 percent of the population. Greater than all other American wars combined. No matter how one describes them, the casualties incurred as a result of the American Civil War are nothing short of astounding. To those who study this devastating conflict, the numbers of the fallen can seem old friends, as the cost of great battles such as Antietam or Gettysburg are burned into memory. Yet is it possible that disproportionate emphasis has been placed on the bloody toll of the Civil War? [*excerpt*]

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Just as death and taxes are certain in life, one can be assured to always find two pieces of information prominently displayed when visiting a Civil War battlefield: who won and the number of total casualties suffered. Indeed, casualty figures are at times placed at the forefront of battlefield interpretation. This focus on the dead and wounded of Civil War battlefields is in most cases completely understandable. The cost of any battle of the Civil War is eye opening and can prove invaluable in both piquing the interest of casual visitors and imparting the significance of a particular battle. The interpretation of some battles even requires a focus on human suffering for its story to be told effectively, such as that of the Bloody Angle at Spotsylvania. Emphasis on dead, dying, and wounded soldiers also impresses visitors with the solemnity of the field and can help combat the perception of a battlefield as an amusing diversion or an open-air playground with cannon.

For a regular visitor, however, this repeated spotlight on casualties can appear at times to create something of a macabre competition between battlefields for recognition. If Antietam is the single bloodiest day in American history, May 3 at Chancellorsville is the second bloodiest; Gettysburg the bloodiest battle in total losses, but Stones River is bloodiest in loss percentage; casualties from Shiloh were greater than all previous American wars combined; the list goes on and on. These superlatives are all factually accurate, of course, but can leave visitors with misguided impressions due to one simple omission: a failure to sufficiently discuss the causes and outcomes of the war.

Though the National Park Service has taken great strides in discarding out-of-date themes and discussing issues beyond the scope of military history, debate still rages about the proper place to talk about the war in general, particularly its causes. Many devoted students of military history argue that only subject matter that directly relates to a certain battlefield should be discussed on that field, and the war's causes can admittedly be difficult to integrate into a tour of battles after 1862. Yet the absence of cause leads naturally to an absence of result, and when left with neither, visitors are deprived of the reason for soldiers' sacrifice. This became apparent to me as I whiled away summer afternoons at Spotsylvania Court House as an NPS intern. As the second battle in Grant's 1864 Overland Campaign, Spotsylvania understandably did not highlight the causes or results of the war, instead focusing on the innovative field fortifications employed by both armies and the horrific combat that occurred as a result. Faced with this information, visitors repeatedly lamented the "needless slaughter" and awful carnage in words that indicated uncertainty of the war's very worth.

I could not have been more shocked. Thirty thousand men watered the fields of Spotsylvania with their blood; over 750,000 Americans became casualties as a result of the war; these are terrible consequences of conflict, yes, but the direct result of that sacrifice was the liberation of millions of fellow human beings and the freedom of countless generations to come. If this legacy is to be protected, if the Civil War is not to join the ranks of "pointless wars" in American memory, the causes and results of the war must be discussed whenever casualties are presented. We owe it to the fallen, that their sacrifice might not be in vain.