In November 1863, thousands descended upon the small town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania to commemorate the thousands who had descended upon and fallen upon the fields around the town four months earlier. They came for a ceremony of official culture: the dedication of a national cemetery for thousands of citizen-soldiers of the Union. Famed orator Edward Everett delivered a classical oration recounting the battle and memorializing the dead which would make even Pericles proud, and then Abraham Lincoln delivered his immortal 272 words. In the ostensibly secular but popularly religious society of nineteenth century America, it seemed like the embattled nation had a potential shrine for pilgrimage for its citizens – a national religious site, in the mode of Canterbury Cathedral in England, which similarly was sanctified by death. Southerners were excluded from this initial commemoration, but in his own, little-remembered Gettysburg address on November 18 (the night before the official ceremonies), Secretary of State William Seward proclaimed the administration’s hope that once again there would “be only one country, having only one hope, one ambition, and one destiny.”1 Little did any of the people present in November 1863 know the tremendous role Southerners would play in adopting this sacred field for popular pilgrimages in the years after the war. Nor could those on the stage know the extent to which the hallowed ground of the battlefield – and the memory of the Civil War as a whole – would play a critical part in the struggles of twentieth century America. Lincoln’s renowned speech included the statement: “The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.” It is true that twentieth century Ameri-
cans never forgot what their ancestors did during the Civil War—but the debate over why they did it and how to memorialize it created enduring conflict that echoed the deep-set disagreements of the nation’s population, and resulted in continued battles waged on the old battlefield of Gettysburg—with the fate of the nation at stake.

Several prominent events, persons, and issues could be used to examine the issue of Civil War memory as a reflection of twentieth century politics and culture. The field of Gettysburg alone witnessed prominent speeches and contributions by giants such as Woodrow Wilson, Lyndon Johnson, and George Wallace—not to mention Dwight Eisenhower, who was stationed in Gettysburg during World War I and purchased a farm there upon his return from Europe, which he used as his vacation home while president and retired to after exiting office. The Civil Rights Movement and the debate over the rights of blacks throughout the century (if one dates the Civil Rights Movement purely as an event of the 1950s and 1960s, i.e. Martin Luther King Junior’s contributions) were played out with references to the great national struggle of the 1860s by those in all camps. Leaders of the mid-century press had strong ties back to the Civil War, as Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff did a terrific job of demonstrating in their book, *The Race Beat*.

However, while that book explained the personal connections of editors and reporters to the Civil War generation (typically through lineage), it did little to tie Civil War memory as a theme to the culture at large—or even to policy-makers at the upper levels of government. It also, perhaps, gave the news media too much credit for shaping the mindsets of constituent populations. Historians such as Caroline Janney, author of *Remembering the Civil War*, contend that popular culture pieces are much more critical, particularly films like *Gone with the Wind*—partly because of the large audiences these items of culture can reach, through multiple generations. This paper will
examine all of these elements: speeches, media, and pop culture – but with a particular emphasis on leaders of national prominence. The overall scope will be the full twentieth century, beyond the reach of Janney’s work (which essentially ended with the release of *Gone with the Wind* in 1939) and broader than the timeframe of Roberts/Klibanoff. The focus will be on four popular leaders who represented different times, viewpoints, and issues: Woodrow Wilson, Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson, and George Wallace – all of whom established direct connections to Gettysburg Battlefield and to the legacy of the Civil War.5

By the start of the twentieth century, the Lost Cause narrative of the Civil War was well-established in the American mind. Seeking unity and fraternity between the populations of the North and South – or rather the white populations of the two sections – popular memory focused on the universal courage and devotion of the Civil War generation to their ideals, regardless of allegiance. In order to establish this version of the past, another element of the history needed to be adjusted or ignored entirely: the issue of race. David Blight, in his book *Race and Reunion*, promoted the thesis that one of the most critical parts of memory is what one chooses to leave out or forget. The great national consensus was to forget the issue of race and the fight for black civil rights – thus creating the true tragedy of Reconstruction in the South: the abandonment of the freedmen.

One of the early great tragedies of Civil War memory in the twentieth century was a piece of popular culture: D.W. Griffith’s 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*, based on Thomas Dixon’s 1905 novel *The Clansman*. “Like Dixon’s novels, the motion picture version acknowledged the bravery of both Union and Confederate soldiers...More important, the film highlighted what Griffith considered the atrocities of Reconstruction: the U.S. army unleashed rene-
gade black soldiers on the South [and] black politicians took over southern legislatures.” In the climax of the film, a Ku Klux Klan member saves a pure white Southern lady from being raped by a black man, establishing the Klan as the heroes of society. Not coincidentally, the movie was followed by a rebirth of the Klan, which had been suppressed in the 1870s. It received a further bump in popularity with a supposed endorsement of the film by President Woodrow Wilson: “It is like writing history with lightning, and my only regret is that it is all so terribly true.” While some historians now doubt Wilson ever actually said this, the quote was circulated in press for the film. Historically, the tragedy is that Wilson’s quote could have been all so true, as it is well-known that he was a Southerner and a racist. The public accepted this as the view of the president, and black leaders such W. Munroe Trotter ranted against the president during protests of the film as a result. Trotter was arrested with associates while attempting to enter a theater showing the film in Boston, and the New York Times reported that he was a man “who made what was called an insulting address to President Wilson at the White House not long ago.” Griffith’s film swept through the nation infuriating blacks, inspiring reactionary whites, and possibly striking a chord with the president. Few movies have had such profound impact in the century of film-making since, and even less cause such trouble as this one did by inspiring the Ku Klux Klan to re-emerge.

This was a part of the atmosphere of Woodrow Wilson’s presidency, but certainly not exclusive in illustrating his part in Civil War memory and contemporary society. The semi-centennial of the war occurred from 1911-1915, coinciding with Wilson’s presidency, and it fell to the president to deliver remarks at the fiftieth anniversary celebration at Gettysburg Battlefield. His speech on July 4, 1913, was anything but a resounding success. The New York Times report-
ed, “He was interrupted only once or twice with cheering and that seemed perfunctory.” The Times ran numerous reviews of the speech. One piece on it was written by the widow of the Confederate General James Longstreet; her column was meaningless in its content other than her repeated reference to Wilson as “A Virginia President.” Another piece in the same paper conceded, “If a trifle academic in its argument, and somewhat too guarded in expression greatly to sway the public feeling, it was a good speech.” The speech was “characteristic of his mental habit, and indicative of the mood which now controls him.”

It was a speech fully driven and inspired by the themes of reunion and reconciliation between the whites of North and South. Reflecting his own brand of liberalism, Wilson made strong appeals for Americans to continue to fight to secure the national dream of upward social mobility. “We have harder things to do than were done in the heroic days of war,” Wilson proclaimed. Speaking of himself as the commander of a great host as a comparison to the generals of the war, Wilson stated, “That host is the people themselves…What we strive for is their freedom, their right to lift themselves from day to day and behold the things they have hoped for, and so make way for still better days for those whom they love who are to come after them.” He continued the martial comparisons in describing society: “The recruits are the little children crowding in. The quartermaster’s stores are in the mines and forests and fields, in the shops and factories. Every day something must be done to push the campaign forward.” Some of his exhortations harkened back to the “unfinished work” that Abraham Lincoln alluded to in his Gettysburg Address, but there was a difference. Lincoln’s unfinished work involved fulfilling the promise of the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal” and proving that a democracy could survive; Wilson’s unfinished work (“Do we deem the nation com-
plete and finished?” he asked) centered on this liberal notion of social mobility and economic opportunity for all – or at least for all whites.\textsuperscript{13} Wilson’s speech featured no concrete mention of race – perfectly in keeping with the tradition of reconciliation. In this same tradition, President Wilson also began a custom of the Oval Office sending a wreath to the Confederate memorial at Arlington National Cemetery – a tradition that has continued into the 21st Century, even with the nation’s first African-American president.\textsuperscript{14}

During this time that President Wilson was continuing the reconciliation tradition of Civil War memory and historiography, an army captain named Dwight David Eisenhower came to Gettysburg as part of the army’s new tank corps. The nation was going to war in Europe, and the new technologies of battle were being brought to the old battleground of the Civil War to be tested and familiarized to troops. The young officer developed a great fondness for the historic town and for the old battlefield on which he observed tank maneuvers. He purchased a farm on the outskirts of the town, where he lived with his wife Mamie for the next several decades – while not away on duty – until the time of his death. Eisenhower, of course, rose to supreme commander of the Allies in Europe during World War II, the great victor of Normandy and the drive to Berlin, commander of NATO in Western Europe in the post-war period, and the Republican President of the United States after the election of 1952.\textsuperscript{15}

The farm in Gettysburg served as his unofficial residence – and he frequently brought fascinated foreigners and politicians to the fields for private tours with the most famous soldier alive. His diary rarely detailed the visits to the battlefield he took with men ranging from Field Marshal Montgomery to Nikita Khrushchev, but some of his reflections on World War II revealed his interest in the Battle of Gettysburg, such as comparing his problems with Montgomery in
Europe to General Lee’s issues with General Longstreet at Gettysburg. Gettysburg was also the place he came to in order to convalesce from the health problems that struck him during his time in office. Important decisions were made by the president at Gettysburg, including about the future of his career: “On July 10, at a meeting of legislative leaders at Gettysburg, the president casually remarked that he would campaign vigorously [for re-election].”

Prior to that, there had been curiosity – due to his health – whether he would even run again. After two terms, when it did come time to retire, he could not wait to return to Gettysburg for good. “At Gettysburg a fine house awaited him, rebuilt from the ground up…The prospect of going up to Gettysburg kept him going through the year.”

Deep into Eisenhower’s retirement, the very mention of Gettysburg had clear meaning, particularly for Republicans aspiring to high office. Since Lincoln spoke there in 1863, Gettysburg held a powerful place in the imagination of Americans when thinking of their presidents; the reviews of Wilson’s speech in the New York Times in 1913 conceded that judging his speech was unfair due to the fact: “It is a difficult and disconcerting task for any statesman these days to deliver an address on the battlefield of Gettysburg, especially for any President of the United States.”

Yet now an endorsement from Gettysburg made it clear that a candidate had the bona fides to be president. “The ‘Letter from Gettysburg’ is beginning to have some…mystical value in Republican circles,” the New York Times reported in December 1963. A qualification from Gettysburg was “the essential prerequisite for any serious seeker of the party’s top favor.” The crisis of conservatism was alluded to in this same article from the Times, as it discussed Barry Goldwater. “There is little doubt among party regulars here that the general does oppose the right-wing ascendancy of Senator Goldwater. The ‘Letter from Get-
tysburg’ in the Arizonian’s case was marked by careful circumspec-
tion. And his alarm at the gathering speed of the Goldwater band-
wagon undoubtedly spurred him to start distributing his favors
more widely.”21

However, despite his very strong connection to the field of Get-
tysburg for decades, Ike’s most critical tie to the legacy of the Civil
War came far from the fields where Lee’s invasion of the north was
repulsed in 1863. Eisenhower’s presidency of 1953-1961 involved
critical early steps in the Civil Rights Movement, including the
Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Little Rock Incident following
the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*. In Little
Rock, President Eisenhower felt the need to send troops, including
the 101st Airborne Division, into the Arkansas capital city to en-
force desegregation of the schools. Southern segregationist leaders
did not miss the symbolism of federal troops being deployed into a
southern state by the great general Eisenhower. The *Arkansas Ga-
zette* reported rumors that Governor Faubus was “considering de-
claring martial law to prevent the School Board from obeying the
federal court order.”22 Other newspapers criticized the northern
press as scoundrels in terms reminiscent of the twisted version of
Reconstruction promoted by the Lost Cause — especially as Little
Rock became “a symbol of racial turmoil.”23 These opinions swept
through the South. “In Charleston, Tom Waring had been annoyed
for some time by the coverage, and by the treatment of segregation-
ist editors. With a particular sensitivity that only whites of long
southern lineage could understand … Waring saw the flow of re-
porters into the South as an invasion. ‘There are as many Yankee
reporters dropping off planes and trains as there were carpetbaggers
in the 1860s,’ he had grumbled even before Little Rock.”24 The pres-
ident worked hard to avoid strong statements on the race issue
throughout his presidency, but sending troops in to enforce a feder-
al court ruling was a necessary decision. In his diary, Ike wrote only that he advised Governor Faubus repeatedly to “not necessarily withdraw his national guard troops but just change their orders,” and that “I did not believe it was beneficial to anybody to have a trial of strength between the president and a governor because… there could be only one outcome – that is, the state would lose, and I did not want to see any governor humiliated.”

Unfortunately, the southerners who had the governor’s ear won out, and the event was subsequently seized upon by partisan segregationist southerners for their own purposes after Eisenhower took the necessary action.

Eisenhower exited the presidency just as the centennial of the Civil War began in 1961. Martin Luther King Jr. was leading the fight for African-American Civil Rights from his home-state of Alabama. In the capital of that state, a new face in the national political spotlight was inaugurated governor in 1963: George C. Wallace. Southern segregationists were eager to find a dynamic, personable leader, and “Wallace, by virtually every angle of news coverage, seemed comfortable leading the charge. He was good copy and camera ready. Reporters were drawn to him like biologists are drawn to the unexpected emergence of an old virus they believed had been exterminated.”

The vigor with which he opposed desegregation seemed anachronistic to the northern press, but struck a deep chord with a “ground zero of resistance, at the core of the Deep South, in Alabama and Mississippi.” The states of the upper South had “emerged intact from their own initial experiences with integration” – even Arkansas after the ugliness of Little Rock. However, Wallace proudly led the charge for the reactionary segregationists of the South and racists throughout America – and he did so by alluding back to the Civil War past. He began his inaugural address in Montgomery by reminding everybody that he was standing in the same spot where Jefferson Davis was inaugurated as the Confederate
president. Concluding an angry tirade of a speech, he proclaimed, “I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny. And I say, ‘Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!’”

George Wallace was a force to be reckoned with and proved it through his overwrought and dramatic stand at the door of the University of Alabama and through his violent efforts to suppress Civil Rights marches. Continuing the trend of the politicians examined thus far, Wallace seized on Gettysburg as a setting for his fight. The Centennial featured “persistent efforts by segregationist leaders like Governor George Wallace of Alabama to turn Civil War memory to their own political advantage.” On June 18, 1963, Wallace penned a letter to the *Gettysburg Times* newspaper, in which he celebrated the centennial celebration’s theme of “Peace eternal in a nation united,” which demonstrated the reunion/reconciliation tradition that dominated the Civil War Centennial as a whole. “Originally planned...as an exercise in cold war nationalism, the centennial was soon mired in controversy – much of it generated by the renewed racial and sectional tensions of the era.” Wallace was stoking the fires of those tensions. In his letter, he alluded to the critical importance of checks and balances within the political system, but he meant this to refer to the right of the states of preserve their liberty from an oppressive federal government. “We must do our part to see that we remain a nation united in peace, retaining individual rights and liberties. We must resist regimentation. Individual liberties must be safeguarded, for without freedom and liberty for each of us, we are traveling down the dead-end road of destructive centralization,” he wrote.

In these concluding sentences, he showed the true meaning of his calls for liberty: liberty for a governor and his people to do as they pleased in a decentralized system. He made no mention of race, but his meaning was clear. He further clarified his hope when he
personally travelled to Gettysburg for the official celebration, giving a speech in which he proclaimed “the descendants of both sides of the Civil War will soon be united in a common fight to end the growing power of the central government” and “we will stand for defense of the Constitution.” While there, he proclaimed “I think I am safer here than I am at home. I’ve got political enemies in Alabama, but I haven’t met any here.” Meanwhile, his allies continued to attack the members of the northern press “that promote radicalism in every form, the New Deal, the Fair Deal, Modern Republicanism, and have completely disregarded the right-thinking, sound-thinking people of [the South].”

The governor of Alabama was waging a war of rhetoric steeped in historical memory against the authority of the federal government, and those in the Oval Office could not ignore his challenge. In his term of 1963 to 1967, Wallace squared off against two liberal presidents: the wealthy New Engander John Kennedy and – most galling to Wallace – the Southerner Lyndon Johnson. Both men made their own connections to Gettysburg in 1963, to discuss their perspectives on Civil War memory and the contemporary issues. Unlike in the days of Woodrow Wilson, a liberal could not avoid the race issue in the atmosphere of 1963. Kennedy’s message delivered at Gettysburg on the 100th anniversary of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address proclaimed, “The goals of liberty and freedom, the obligations of keeping ours a government of and for the people are never never -ending.”

Johnson took the cause a step further, and while he was vice-president, he traveled to Gettysburg personally to do it. As the New York Times recounted in November, 1963, “He chose last Memorial Day as the time and Gettysburg as the place for a speech calling upon whites and Negroes to work together toward solution of the race question. He said: ‘One hundred years ago the slave was freed. One
hundred years later the Negro remains in bondage to the color of his skin. The Negro today asks justice.”38 A twenty-first century newspaper recollection stated, “With those two sentences, Johnson accomplished two things. He answered King’s ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail.’ And he signaled where the later Johnson administration might lead.”39 The Kennedy-Johnson administration was the first to openly step out from the reunion/reconciliation theme of Civil War memory. Johnson attacked the tradition of asking black leaders for patience: “The Negro says, ‘Now.’ Others say, ‘Never.’ The voice of responsible Americans – the voice of those who died here and the great man who spoke here – their voices say, ‘Together.’ There is no other way.”40 Six months later, Johnson was president, and he pushed ahead his vision for the Great Society – with new civil rights legislation at the core of his policy agenda.

The liberal vision on race issues that was supported by Kennedy and Johnson marked a shift in Civil War memory – for the purposes of finding a usable past – at the highest level of government. George Wallace and his erroneous nostalgia for an imagined romantic past of the Old South gained sway among reactionary and disgruntled portions of the white population, but could not halt the liberal arc of progress in policy coming from Washington, DC. His vision for a united front against the growth of the federal government never materialized. In fact, Johnson’s presidency resulted in an over-extension of liberalism rather than a constriction or rolling-back of it.41

Just like in Lincoln’s time, the great struggle played itself out on the fields around Gettysburg. The celebrated Southern author William Faulkner wrote in his 1948 novel, Intruder in the Dust, a popular concept of Southern Civil War memory, alluding specifically to Gettysburg: “For every Southern boy fourteen years old, not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant when it’s still not yet two
o’clock on that July afternoon in 1863…and it’s all in balance, it hasn’t happened yet, it hasn’t even begun yet, it not only hasn’t begun yet but there is still time for it not to begin…and that moment doesn’t need even a fourteen-year-old boy to think This time. Maybe this time.” By the 1960s, it was African-Americans who could be saying, “This time. Maybe this time” – as they were repeatedly asked for patience and repeatedly marginalized in both society and Civil War commemoration. Lyndon Johnson came to Gettysburg and proclaimed the future as he saw it for America – just as Lincoln had done a century earlier. They did this on the very field to which Faulkner harkened back all Southern boys, ready to make their charge as their ancestors had. Two months after Johnson’s speech, George Wallace stood ready on the field, prepared to stand in for Jeff Davis or General Lee and lead the Southern horde against the liberal assault on the segregationist way of life. In 1863, it was Abraham Lincoln’s words that set the future course for the divided country, not Lee’s soldiers. In 1963, it was Lyndon Johnson’s words that set the course for the future of the reunited nation, not Wallace’s combativeness. Unfinished work remained for the nation in both cases, but unlike during the interval period – with leaders like the academic Woodrow Wilson or the congenial (though practical) Dwight Eisenhower – the president was committed to fulfilling the promise of the nation’s founding and the ideals of the Declaration of Independence for all citizens. Wilson and Wallace each came to Gettysburg and looked back to the past, Eisenhower came to live in comfort in his present, but Johnson came to point the nation toward the future.

Notes
2 Robert Cook’s history of the Civil War Centennial, Troubled Commemoration (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), noted that “Civil rights
leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Roy Wilkins were hardly less aware than Frederick Douglass of the need to marshal a usable past in the service of contemporary objectives and viewed the centenary of the Emancipation Proclamation as a heaven-sent opportunity to wrest control of the centennial away from southern whites” (14).  

Certainly there were many other prominent people who played roles in shaping and utilizing Civil War memory – not least of whom would probably be black leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Martin Luther King, Jr. For a fine examination of them and others in the larger fight beyond the Oval Office and its hopefuls, David Blight’s Race and Reunion is a superb place to which to turn.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Janney, Remembering, 388.


Ferrell, Diaries, 327. According to a plaque on the campus of Gettysburg College that rests next to a statue of the general, “Here, General Eisenhower wrote 4 volumes of memoirs and was consulted by his own government, foreign dignitaries, aspiring political candidates, authors and students of this and other colleges.”


Ibid.

Ibid.


Roberts and Klibanoff, Race Beat, 373.

Roberts and Klibanoff, Race Beat, 211.

Ferrell, Diaries, 347-348.

Roberts and Klibanoff, Race Beat, 303.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 198. Cook notes that although reunion and reconciliation were the overwhelming themes of the centennial, other politicians such as New Jersey’s governor Richard Hughes extolled the emancipationist theme of Civil War historiography and memory.


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**Joseph Cook** earned his BA in History with a minor in Civil War Era Studies from Gettysburg College in 2009. He is a veteran researcher of the Civil War Institute of Gettysburg, where his work contributed to the 2006 book *The Gettysburg Gospel* by Dr. Gabor Boritt. Currently, Joseph is scheduled to publish an article in a book to be edited by Dr. Peter Carmichael on the subject of cowardice at the Battle of Gettysburg. He is a member of the Organization of American Historians and the Phi Alpha Theta history honor society. In November 2013, Joseph was honored as the author of the top paper at the 21st annual Symposium on the 19th Century Press, the Civil War, and Free Expression -- hosted by the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga; his paper dealt with newspaper coverage of the death of General E.R.S. Canby in the Modoc War. Cook will be completing his MA in History in May 2014, and subsequently pursuing a teaching career.