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On Leadership. Exploring Leadership in the News with Steven Pearlstein and Raju Narisetti

Gettysburg lessons reverberate in a modern world

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To paraphrase, "a day on the Gettysburg battlefield beats any day in the seminar room." Of course for our U.S. Army War College trip, the seminar room was the battlefield. Over the years, I have been privileged to observe several student groups of senior military officers vicariously experience the great national contest of wills that was our American Civil War. It is advantageous for our students that that contest came to be realized in central Pennsylvania.

I am not sure what students expected after a night of reading about the strategic setting of the campaign and then taking the 45-minute morning bus ride from Carlisle to Gettysburg. History buffs in the class may have had unbridled anticipation while the rest of the students may have dreaded a day in the hot sun hearing about a battle that occurred nearly a century and a half ago. The questions in many student minds may have been, "What can this battle teach me?" and "How is this useful to me in the current operating environment?"

From the first stop on the battlefield, the focus was not on the tactics and dry, sterile facts of unit names, locations, and size (which can be overwhelming in a hurry). The historian talked about the people in command of the formations on the field, their personalities, critical events in their lives, and their relationships with other key leaders both on and off the field. The historian engaged students to think about the challenges, stresses, and myriad other factors that would influence the decisions of the day. Proceeding from one historical position to another, it became clear that those tactical events would have operational and strategic effects for our nation.

The measure of the long day came at our final stop on Cemetery Hill where we gathered at the base of the statue of Union General Winfield Scott Hancock. As the historian provided the soliloquy to wrap up the day, I looked around at the group of students as they nodded their heads in reflection of what happened on that battlefield over the three days. Perhaps they thought of the enduring themes of leadership, and, maybe even, considered lessons that could be useful in future conflicts.

That would have been enough, but then I spied two students seated on the ground in the cooler shadow of the statue. That in of itself was unremarkable except that they

were two international fellows. Both officers were from different faith groups (one Jewish one Muslim) and this scene would have been implausible, apart from being USAWC students this year. These international fellows were from nations that have a long history of conflict (both internal and external) and have been the focus of international attention for many years. It would have been informative to hear how they viewed a civil war that lasted a mere four years and was the only challenge to the existence of a nation since its founding.

But there on an American battlefield and in an educational setting, seeing those two groups of students--American and international--I envisioned hope. Maybe it lies in studying and extracting the lessons of the past to provide promise for the future.

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