

THE BATTLE OF ANTIETAM: AN AUDIOVISUAL INTERPRETATION
FOR CLASSROOM USE

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Introduction

"Antietam: Military Slaughterhouse and Political Turning Point" is a slide-sound program written by James Stevenson and co-produced for classroom use by James Stevenson and John Derden of Emanuel County Junior College. The program is approximately fifty-five minutes in length and, in addition to visuals, it features music, sound effects, and recorded narration. It can be projected in a number of modes, ranging from the use of a cassette deck and slide projector to the coordination of a dissolve unit and two slide projectors.

The program was developed as a response to two of the traditional and fundamental difficulties facing the teacher of the introductory history survey. Those difficulties--how to allocate time to the various segments of a course and how to personalize course content when utilizing audiovisual aids--have always found solutions tailored by each instructor to suit his or her approach to the subject.

Over the years, college history instructors have been frustrated by the fact that material at the end of a course is often given short shrift owing to the press of time, and in the first half of the American history survey sequence that material is, in fact, the Civil War. Typically, teachers on the quarter system find that they have at the most one week in which to discuss the events of the Civil War, which means that time management is of the essence. This program is an attempt to deal expeditiously, yet significantly, with one aspect of the conflict. Rather than undertake to survey in a systematically superficial fashion all of the military operations of the Civil War, we decided to treat one battle of particular importance and to utilize it as a vehicle to illustrate some of the issues and emotions that shaped the war experiences of the common soldier. Adopting this "post hole" technique, then, allows one to accomplish a number of things in a limited time frame.

The other frustration--that of finding audiovisual material that suits one's approach to the subject matter--is also addressed by this program. All teachers are familiar with the difficulties of incorporating outside materials into their courses. We would hope that this program will encourage others

to consider constructing their own audiovisual materials in their areas of interest.

Inspiration-Conceptualization

We were influenced to undertake this project by two works. These were Peter Watkin's filmed docudrama of the Battle of Culloden (1966) and John Keegan's book, The Face of Battle (1976). By concentrating on the tragic and human dimension of combat, those authorities depicted the role which self-preservation, morale, leadership, and tactics played in determining the course of battle and the lives of ordinary soldiers. This perspective and some of the cinematic devices or techniques used by Watkins provided us with a different way of looking at the Battle of Antietam.

Methodology

Using the conceptual framework provided by Watkins and Keegan, we obtained most of our historical information from such secondary sources as: Bruce Catton, Mr. Lincoln's Army (1962); Thomas Connelly, The Marble Man (1977); Shelby Foote, The Civil War: A Narrative, Vol. I, (1958); Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, Grant-Lee edition, (1884-87); Stephen Sears, Landscape Turned Red (1983); and Edward J. Stackpole, From Cedar Mountain to Antietam (1959). While Catton and Foote's accounts supplied us with the dramatic descriptions of combat that Keegan and Watkins had inspired us to search for, Battles and Leaders gave us many of the soldiers' comments that illustrated the human reaction to combat.

Our slides were taken from photographs and drawings we found in over fifty books or magazines. Originally, we attempted to confine our slide selection to only those photos or drawings that derived from the struggle at Antietam, but our fifty-five minute narrative required many more visuals, and we had to adapt combat scenes from other battles and produce a few of our own sketches to supplement the Antietam material. Of course, William A. Frassanito's, Antietam: The Photographic Legacy of America's Bloodiest Day (1978), was a prime source for many of our slides. It was also of great assistance in our two site surveys of the Antietam battlefield. These reconnaissance trips allowed us to take measurements and photographs of vital terrain features which were checked against the written accounts of the battle. We incorporated some of our site survey findings in our final production.

Statistics on unit strengths and casualties at Antietam were garnered from a variety of sources, but Stackpole's figures were frequently used. Since many authorities differ on Civil War

combat statistics, we chose the figures which seemed most reasonable in view of supporting arguments or were accepted by two or more authoritative sources. Confederate troop strength at Burnside's Bridge, for example, was confirmed by the Antietam "Park Technician."

We submitted our script and slide production to the history staff of the Antietam National Battlefield Park for review in September, 1984. They verified its historical accuracy and complimented its interpretive approach. Since the beginning of 1985, we have shown the program to various history societies and Civil War reenactors. Individuals from these groups have sometimes differed with our interpretation, but never with our factual account. Naturally, we expect and welcome all constructive criticism.

Objectives

1) Our principal objective in making this production was to illustrate the tragic aspect of war. By focusing on the human experience of battle, we sought to throw a different light on battlefield conduct.

2) By selecting Antietam as the focus of our analysis, we knew that we could point out specific command blunders and tactical or strategic errors on both sides of the conflict.

3) Through the Battle of Antietam, we expected to demonstrate the destructiveness of modern war as well as the frailty of human flesh.

4) With our interpretation of this significant battle, we intended to show how a single military event can become the focal point of immense historical forces--i.e., how a single battle can capture or crystalize all the pressures making for change in an era.

5) In our conclusion, we wanted to demystify the art of generalship by pointing out the errors, oversights, or blunders of leaders on both sides.

Antietam: Military Slaughterhouse and Political Turning Point

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