

# GODS AND GENERALS

Directed by Ronald F. Maxwell  
Produced by Ronald F. Maxwell  
Distributed by Warner Brothers Pictures  
Released in 2003

Separating the cause of the South from its defense of slavery is a troublesome thesis. To this day, many thoughtful Southerners attempt it. Defending the Cause is difficult without condoning slavery, but it is not impossible. *Gods and Generals* makes a noble attempt. Slavery is not addressed in any of the opening scenes depicting the indignant Virginians of spring, 1861. Great emphasis is placed on Lincoln's decision to raise an army to quell the tide of secession. To men like Thomas Jackson, the Virginia Commonwealth is sacred ground; invading it is an abomination. Heretofore possessing a neutral, thoughtful perspective on the looming conflict, he is crushed by the President's unconscionable aggression and, taking his cues from the legislature, vows to defend the honor of his people. (On the issue of whether states have the right to secede, whether each state is its own arbiter, the Constitution, unclear at the time of the conflict, became plain as day with the North's victory. The law was interpreted by cannon ball and bayonet.)

One of the ways *Gods and Generals* helps the Confederacy's cause is by offering the perspective of a colonel from Maine. He fights for the cause of union, but with Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation takes comfort knowing he endures the horrid conflict for a greater cause—freedom. This will be no stop-gap measure; the war will settle things fundamentally once and for all.

A very intriguing point the film makes is that the South was considering a more active role for blacks, offering those who would fight their freedom. The North was also pondering the role slavery would play in the conflict. Truly the blacks waited uneasily in the middle of the conflict. In the early days of the war one side was hardly preferable to the other, but with the Emancipation Proclamation all that was changed.

Two black characters, Jim and Martha, provide a carefully composed perspective on the black experience. Jim, a proud Virginian, is the loyal cook to General Jackson. Martha is the house slave of a minor character, a Fredericksburg lady named Jane Beale. Jim wants to help the armies of the South; but he also wants his whole family to enjoy the freedom that he has. Stonewall says he approves of the proposal to grant freedom to any black man who fights. The implication is that he fights just for states' rights, not for the institution of slavery, but the point is left deliberately murky. The filmmakers know (regardless of what Jackson's actual views were) that making a Confederate general look heroic is impossible with a modern audience if, regardless of valor, he condones slavery. They just won't have it.

After the Emancipation Proclamation, Jim stays on helping the Rebels. Go figure.

Martha is the other black character with a balanced temperament. She wishes the boys of the house well, telling them she looks forward to their safe return from the fighting. When her mistress flees in panic, Martha shrewdly stays, knowing her lot will be better than tagging along in the refugee caravan. When Union troops politely seek to plunder, she claims the well-

appointed house as her own. They, embarrassed and confused, beg her pardon. So she protects her mistress's property but also maintains a safe place for her three children to stay.

But soon the house is needed for a Union hospital and she acquiesces (but she doesn't like the idea). No one seems to care where her loyalties lie (and perhaps it doesn't matter). She takes the opportunity to deliver an impromptu address to the commanding officer expressing her desire to be free, and, having served her purpose, is never heard from again, like a great many of the film's multitudinous characters.

This approach to race seems half-hearted, like it had to be addressed because it's a Civil War movie. But the focus of the film is the effect of the war on the men who led the fight. While the film may have a more encompassing mandate, the plot structure is so unwieldy that any other interpretation is fraught with difficulty. It is a film for those who don't mind detail at the expense of context.

If the issues that led to the war could not be handled with the requisite honesty and fairness, the film should, alone, focus on the private lives of the men in the fight. That would have been fair, and that would have been honest. And it also might have been more entertaining.