

# “Gods and Generals”

The stage for war is set, and the bullets—and prayers—start flying. That’s right: “Gods and Generals” features more divine petitioning than any Hollywood product in recent memory.

Clocking in at over 3 ½ hours, the new Civil War drama from Ted Turner Pictures is actually the prequel to 1993’s “Gettysburg.” The new movie, based on the novel by Jeff Shaara, covers the beginning of the war up until that famed battle.

Over 3 ½ hours. That’s a long time, even with the needed 12-minute intermission.

There’s nothing wrong in theory with a long movie, but any film premised on dramatic action should hold the viewer’s attention. “Gods and Generals,” however, had me looking at my watch a few times—even during battle scenes.

The news isn’t all grim, though.

For starters, the movie stars Robert Duvall as General Robert E. Lee. Audiences meet him early, as director Ron Maxwell shows then Col. Robert E. Lee turn down the offer of major general in the U.S. Army, saying he has no greater duty than to his home in Virginia. That’s April 1861.

Action then shifts to the Virginia Military Institute in Lexington, Va., where we meet then Major Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson (Stephen Lang), educating students amid talk of war.

But it’s also at VMI that we first encounter some of the odd staging that also hampered “Gettysburg.” Here and at several other moments in the film, “Gods and Generals” indeed feels more like a staged re-enactment and less like a major motion picture.

Nevertheless, Lee accepts command of Virginia’s citizen army from the Virginia House of Delegates (look for a cameo by former Texas Sen. Phil Gramm) and the wheels of war start turning. Virginians proclaim they won’t tolerate being

invaded, and states' rights are brought to the foreground.

The main Union character is Col. Joshua Chamberlain, once again played by Jeff Daniels. He leaves his teaching post at Maine's Bowdoin College, much to the angst of his wife, portrayed by Mira Sorvino. Their one and only scene together is engaging and important, and it's a shame that the film didn't re-allot its time to give them more.

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Stonewall Jackson prays with his wife before he leaves for the war. He prays before the first battle of Bull Run. He prays with his African American cook, Jim Lewis (Frankie Faison), that slavery will be eradicated. He prays almost without ceasing.

And not only does he pray, he reads the Bible. At one point, he says, "We should look to the Bible" for the reality of war, for it is full of such. He also enjoys reading about biblical battles and is pleased that Joshua, in his battle with the Amalekites, "traces victory to the right source"—God.

When the Rebs find some of their deserters, Jackson remarks that he regards "the sin of desertion as a sin against the army of the Lord."

He is also pleased to hear that one of his artillery divisions has named its four canons Mathew, Mark, Luke and John. Jackson says he's sure they'll "spread the gospel" whenever they encounter the enemy.

Such examples of Jackson's religious fervor go on and on. He speaks of God in one breath and military maneuvers in another. His faith that God's plan will be enacted allows him to maintain an even temperament in victory and defeat, life and death.

And Jackson goes through a lot. The movie is framed around three main battles:

the first Bull Run, Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville. For the most part, the battle scenes are impressive, if too long. The Rebel assault on the Union camp at Chancellorsville is particularly well done, with acting, music and rhythm all contributing to a polished sequence.

The best scene in the film, however, involves no dialogue or shooting. It's a simple shot of a Reb meeting a Yank to share a pipe and a cup of coffee. Its few seconds are the most poignant of the film.

"Gods and Generals" will no doubt interest Civil War buffs. The movie, however, will play better on cable television and DVD—in viewing installments—instead of in the theater.

As a theatrical release, it doesn't leave you wanting more. As a historical lesson, it should.

*Cliff Vaughn is associate director for EthicsDaily.com.*

Visit the movie's official [Web site](#).

**MPAA Rating: PG-13 for sustained battle sequences**

**Director: Ronald F. Maxwell**

**Writer: Ronald F. Maxwell (based on the book by Jeff Shaara)**

**Cast: Lt. Col. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain: Jeff Daniels; Gen. "Stonewall" Jackson: Stephen Lang; Gen. Robert E. Lee: Robert Duvall; Tom Chamberlain: C. Thomas Howell; Martha: Donzaleigh Abernathy.**