Bestselling Author Jeff Shaara Shares Lessons for the Future from America’s Past

By
Carrie Abner [1]
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When New York Times bestselling author Jeff Shaara was 12 years old, he took a short walk with his father in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, that would begin a lifetime journey into history.

While the pair walked the battlefield grounds, Shaara’s father, Michael Shaara, narrated the events that took place there 200 years prior. Toward the end of their walk, Shaara said he looked up at his father, who was weeping at the solemnity of the historic events that happened where they stood.

Inspired in part by that day in Gettysburg, Michael Shaara went on to write The Killer Angels, the Civil War novel that won the 1975 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Jeff Shaara followed in his father’s footsteps, telling the story of our nation’s history through novels about the American Revolution, such as The Glorious Cause and Rise to Rebellion, and the Civil War, such as Gods and Generals and The Last Full Measure.

Shaara was the keynote speaker at the 2016 CSG National Conference opening session on Friday, Dec. 9, in Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia.

Though our nation’s founding often seems distant to us today, Shaara told attendees, if you take a closer look at the events that changed our history, you discover some of the very notions and sentiments that exist in today’s political environment.

“The notion of uncertainty and fear and all the things you read on Facebook,” said Shaara, “I think about when that’s happened before and I realize, it’s happened before a lot.”

He pointed to the very beginning of America and the Continental Congress. In looking back to the moment when George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton and others gathered in Philadelphia to decide on the future of our government, it is easy to assume the founding fathers knew how the story would ultimately turn out.
“What those guys did sitting in Independence Hall, they put their neck in the noose of King George III,” said Shaara. “These guys were the ringleaders of a rebellion,” who had no idea if their efforts would lead to independence or, rather, to their deaths.

“There was no foregone conclusion” on how the Revolution would end, said Shaara.

The same lesson holds true in the Civil War, where fear and uncertainty were felt universally by leaders on both sides.

“No one knew what the future would hold,” said Shaara. “Abraham Lincoln didn’t know what the future would hold.”

The Battle of Shiloh shows just how quickly the course of history can change. Confederate Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston’s decision to launch a surprise attack on Union troops led by Ulysses S. Grant in Tennessee could have been the end of Grant’s career, said Shaara. Confederate troops had early success in the battle, surprising Grant’s army and pushing the Union forces back. But Johnston suffered a fatal gunshot wound in one of the battle’s final offenses; in his wake, Shaara recalled, Gen. Robert E. Lee emerged.

“That’s how history changed at Shiloh,” Shaara said.

For today’s leaders, facing similar fears and uncertainties, Shaara said, history provides some important lessons.

“You are all related to history in some way,” said Shaara. “It’s the whole idea of where we came from as a nation, it’s our future. We can be fearful, we can be intimidated, we can be angry ... But the fact of the matter is there is a future; it’s going to happen. And it’s up to us to make it what we want it to be.”

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