

# WHAT SO PROUDLY WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

## STUDY GUIDE

Michael Shaara

### “Chamberlain,” (from *The Killer Angels*)

- I. About the Author
- II. Summary
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#### I. About the Author

“Chamberlain” is a chapter from *The Killer Angels*, the Pulitzer Prize–winning historical novel about the Battle of Gettysburg by Michael Shaara (1928–88). Previously a prolific writer of science fiction and sports stories, Shaara was inspired to write the novel after discovering letters written by his great-grandfather, who had been injured at Gettysburg as a member of the Fourth Georgia Infantry, and after personally visiting the battlefield. Shaara’s narrative is organized into four days—June 30, 1863, the day on which Union and Confederate armies move into Gettysburg; and July 1, 2, and 3, the days of the bloodiest battle of the Civil War—and each day’s events are told from the perspective of one of the commanders of the competing armies. Shaara’s chapter “Chamberlain” focuses on Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain (1828–1914), commanding officer of the Twentieth Maine, and his efforts (on June 30) to encourage mutineers to re-join the battle. As Shaara will recount in a later chapter, Chamberlain, his regiment out of ammunition, would lead a bayonet charge against the enemy, enabling the Union army to hold Little Round Top and ultimately to win the battle. Not reported by Shaara are the various honors Chamberlain received: For his leadership at Gettysburg and elsewhere, he was, during the war itself, sequentially promoted, eventually achieving the rank of brigadier general. For his heroism at Little Round Top, he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. And, at the very end of the war, he was given the honor of receiving, at Appomattox, the surrender of the Confederate infantry. After the Civil War, Chamberlain was elected to four terms as governor of Maine, following which he returned to his *alma mater*, Bowdoin College, as its president. He died of the unhealed wounds he incurred during his war years.

#### II. Summary

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Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, commanding officer of the Twentieth Maine, is abruptly awakened early in the morning by his aide, Buster Kilrain, who tells him that he is about to receive as prisoners 120 battle-weary veterans from the old Second Maine, recently disbanded, who refuse to fight. The advance message indicates that the men are to do their duty, and, if they don't, Chamberlain is authorized to shoot them.

Chamberlain faces a dilemma: he lacks the manpower to guard and care for the mutineers, but he knows that, since the mutineers are, like himself, Maine men, shooting them would make it impossible for him to go home. The mutineers arrive shuffling, dusty, dirty, ragged, heads and faces down, clearly weary, hungry, and exhausted. They look, as they have been treated, like men in bondage. Chamberlain is immediately aware of the irony of his situation: "How do you force a man to fight—for freedom?" How, then, to persuade them to do so?

Chamberlain first invites the hungry men to eat. As they do so, he listens to their spokesman, Joseph Bucklin, who presents their grievances: They had signed up to fight with the Second Maine and *only* the Second Maine; they are war-weary and had already done their share (eleven engagements worth); they have been treated like cows and dogs or worse; and (last but not least), because of the "lame-brained *officers* from West Point," they are convinced that the Union cannot win the war. They are therefore more than ready to give up the fighting and go home. As Chamberlain listens, a courier arrives to announce that the Twentieth Maine must ready itself to move out immediately—toward Gettysburg. Now urgently needing a solution for his dilemma, Chamberlain goes directly to speak to the mutineers.

Proceeding slowly, quietly, deliberately, and personally, he addresses the mutineers as the free men he knows them to be, enabling them to think anew about why they—and other civilian volunteers in the Union army—had come to fight, and making it clear to them that whether they fight again is up to them. All but six "reenlist" with his regiment. In the end, we subsequently learn, only three held out.

### III. Thinking about the Text

The historical Chamberlain was, as noted above, a hero at Gettysburg. But in Shaara's rendering of him, he seems more like a mild-mannered professor than a steely warrior and appears to be more sympathetic toward the mutineers than a man in his position is likely to have been. Yet his speech to the mutineers is wonderfully successful, far more



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than he had reason to hope. Thinking carefully about the text may help us understand why. (Note: These page numbers refer to the hardcover text of *What So Proudly We Hail*.)

### A. Shaara's Chamberlain

1. Consider Shaara's description of Chamberlain's looks: "He had a grave, boyish dignity, that clean-eyed, scrubbed-brain, naïve look of the happy professor" (309). What does this mean? Imagine yourself as a war-weary veteran before an officer with such a look. Would you be inclined to take him seriously?
2. Does Chamberlain behave like a professor? Is he more a man of thought or a man of action?

### IN CONVERSATION

*In this conversation, Amy A. Kass and Leon R. Kass discuss Shaara's story with Eliot A. Cohen, Robert E. Osgood Professor of Strategic Studies at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at the Johns Hopkins University.*

**Leon Kass:** There's a description of him that makes him seem somewhat boyish looking: A man of "boyish dignity . . . clean-eyed, scrubbed brain, naïve look of the happy professor." But he's also tall. He's rather picturesque. He is thoughtful, but he is also presented as a man of action. There are complicated things going on in his brain, but he's not, as many professors are, indecisive. He knows what he has to do. And he has a gift for speaking. When he speaks, everybody stops to listen. There's something in his voice that makes people pay attention. This is not just professorial talk. He is a man with authority.

**Amy Kass:** But Shaara goes out of his way to tell us that Chamberlain was a professor of rhetoric, just a year before he gives this speech.

**Eliot Cohen:** Chamberlain is the professor that we professors would all like to be: the philosopher *and* the man of action.

*For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at  
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3. Shaara tells us that Chamberlain “had a gift for [making speeches] . . . when he spoke most men stopped to listen. Fanny [his wife] said that it was something in his voice” (309). What does this mean? Can you recognize it in what he says to the mutineers and how he says it?
4. Look carefully at the scene between Chamberlain and the captain who delivers the prisoners (310). How would you characterize the differences between the two men? What do we learn about Chamberlain from that encounter? From his refusal even to consider shooting the mutineers?
5. Look carefully at the scene between Chamberlain and Bucklin (313-14). What do we learn about Chamberlain from that encounter?
6. Later, as Chamberlain walks to speak to the mutineers, Shaara remarks: “He had a complicated brain and there were things going on back there from time to time that he only dimly understood, so he relied on his instincts, but he was learning all the time” (315). What does this mean? How is it displayed in the Chamberlain you watch and hear?
7. Just before Chamberlain addresses the men, Shaara describes Chamberlain’s “faith” and his reasons for fighting (315). What does this tell you about the man? Why can he not rely on these ideas in speaking to the men?

### B. The Mutineers

1. What are the condition, mood, and attitude of the mutineers as they march into Chamberlain’s camp?
2. What are the basic grievances of the mutineers? Should we sympathize with them?
3. Why do you think Bucklin has such anger at “these goddamned gentlemen, these *officers*”?
4. Imagine yourself as one of the mutineers. What would it take to overcome your refusal to fight? What would it take for you to overcome your antipathy to “these *officers*”?

### IN CONVERSATION

**Amy Kass:** Bucklin, who is speaking on behalf of the 120 men, speaks in the first person. He says, “First of all, I’m tired. I’ve been wounded. I’ve been in eleven



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engagements. We've seen it all." These men are sickened by the way they have been treated; they've been treated like cows or dogs or even slaves, which is why they were in need of liberation. But Bucklin emphasizes that he also just does not think that the Union is going to win the war. And the reason they're not going to win is because of those *officers*, the officers who come from West Point. He has particular animus against the *officers* from West Point.

**Eliot Cohen:** Why do you think that is the case?

**Amy Kass:** You think it's a *class* thing?

**Eliot Cohen:** When I read carefully the excerpts you have in the book, it talks about these *goddamn* gentlemen. So I think it is a class thing.

**Leon Kass:** The book says that Bucklin has been waiting a long time to say this to some officer. And Chamberlain lets him do it and he says, "I get your point." They've been losing. They've been changing generals right and left. The war has been going terribly. And these men have put up with it. They have been in for two years, they've seen everything, and they blame their defeats on their leadership. And this could be aggravated by certain class enmity, but it also could be justified, in a way. Bucklin views the officers as "these idiot guys who go to West Point to study, and yet we're down on the ground getting slaughtered. Show us that we're going to get some leadership, and we might think differently about it."

*For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at  
[www.whatsoproudlywehail.org](http://www.whatsoproudlywehail.org).*

### C. Chamberlain and the Mutineers

1. The bulk of our attention is directed at Chamberlain's speech to the men. But Shaara also lets us watch his actions toward and before them from the time they arrive; his manner, tone, and gestures; and the order in which he proceeds. Look carefully at all aspects of his conduct. How do they strike you, as a reader? How might they have moved you were you among the mutineers?
2. Chamberlain deliberately speaks quietly and slowly, without foul language. Why does he choose this strategy? What is its effect on his hearers?

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### IN CONVERSATION

**Amy Kass:** Chamberlain is under a great deal of pressure. The courier has just come to tell him that the army has to get up and move again. He is reading the men's faces. He is hoping that there could be some connection between them because they are all Maine men. These are not very philosophical or theoretical things. But instinctually, he knows he cannot shoot them. He just knows that, and he is going to make that clear to them at the very beginning of his speech.

**Eliot Cohen:** The first thing that Chamberlain does is that he hears the men out. Well, actually he does two things: He hears them out, and he feeds them a good meal. Even before there is speech on his part, he has undertaken some practical action, which is quite sound in the circumstances.

**Leon Kass:** Actually, before he even feeds them, he liberates them. They come in and they are described like impressed seamen. They are watched over by a foul-mouthed, bellicose captain who has contempt for Maine men, and they're guarded by surly guards. The first thing that Chamberlain does is to dismiss the captain. He dismisses the guards and basically makes the men, in the first instance, like free men, as a preparation for the free choice he is eventually going to give them.

**Amy Kass:** When he speaks, he does so quietly. He is obviously a wonderful teacher of rhetoric because his rhetoric and everything that surrounds it is perfect. He speaks quietly, softly, so they have to gather around and really listen.

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3. Chamberlain's speech divides itself into five distinguishable parts (in ten separated passages of direct quotation, beginning with "I've been talking with Bucklin . . ." [316], and ending with ". . . We have to move out" [318]).
  - a. Addresses their "problem." Promises to do what he can.
  - b. Outlines his orders: he won't shoot them, though he is authorized to do so.
  - c. Describes the situation, and their freedom to choose whether to fight.



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- d. Explains things they should know if they choose to fight (including the regiment's history, the reasons they volunteered, and the reasons they fight).
- e. Concludes (including again their freedom to choose, the importance of the battle, and a personal appeal).

Pausing after each part, consider the following: Why does Chamberlain say what he says? What does he mean? Why does he take up the subjects in the order in which he does? And, finally, imagining yourself as a mutineer, at each turn, ask yourself how you would react.

- 4. Chamberlain appeals to a variety of causes. What is the highest or most fundamental appeal he makes? Is it persuasive to you?
- 5. In general, why do you think Chamberlain's speech was so successful with the men? Would you have been persuaded by it to choose to fight—and very likely die?

### IN CONVERSATION

**Leon Kass:** Shaara gives us what he imagines is going on in Chamberlain's mind and what Chamberlain believes. He believes in the dignity of man. He loves America because it is the land of the individual, where there's no royalty, no aristocracy, and a man can become all that he can be. He also loves America because they are fighting for freedom, not for land; for people, not for territory. That's what he would *like* to say, but he *can't* say it. He says those are tired words.

**Eliot Cohen:** So what does he say? What is the pitch that he does make?

**Leon Kass:** I think that the pitch is brilliant. In the opening speech, he takes the men's grievances seriously, shows them some respect, indicates that he has no intention of shooting them, and says, "Look, whether you want to fight, that's up to you." Basically, he's solved the problem about whether you can force men to fight for freedom by making them free men and saying the choice is theirs.

**Eliot Cohen:** So he is empowering them by giving them choice. But then he makes the case for freedom, he makes an ideological argument. He says that all of

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us enlisted for different reasons: Some men did because they were bored; some because they thought it might be fun; some because they were ashamed. And then Chamberlain launches into a defense of freedom: “No man has to bow. . . .” It is, at least in my reading of it, again this anti-aristocratic argument, where this is a place where no man is born to royalty. Here we judge you by what you do, not by what your father was. Here you can be something.

**Leon Kass:** And then, after the high-pitched speech about ideals and principles, he descends. And that descent is also important. He says, “Look, it’s still the Army, but you’re as free as I can make you. Have a conversation, decide for yourself. You have two choices: You can either get your rifles and come and fight, or you’ll come under guard. In the end, I’ll do what I can for you.” And then, this wonderful pitch: “If we lose this fight, we’re going to lose the war. So if you’ll join us, I’d *personally* be very grateful.” And in the end, he’s trafficking in the kind of trust that he has earned by freeing them, feeding them, taking their grievances seriously, respecting them, speaking to them as fellow Americans, and speaking to the better angels of their nature.

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[www.whatsoproudlywehail.org](http://www.whatsoproudlywehail.org).*

6. Do you think that Chamberlain’s speech would be as effective today? Why or why not?

### IV. Thinking with the Text

Shaara’s “Chamberlain” invites questions about the importance of courage and public-spiritedness, as well as the difficulty in obtaining them. It also raises interesting questions about leadership and about the military in American society.

#### A. Encouraging Courage and Public-Spiritedness

1. What is courage? What makes it so difficult?
2. Winston Churchill called courage “the first of human qualities . . . the quality which guarantees all others.” In what sense might this be true?



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3. How can one get ordinary citizens—especially in a republic dedicated to safeguarding their rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—to risk their lives in the service of the nation?
4. How does one encourage public-spiritedness and sacrifice? How effective can speech be toward this goal? What sorts of speech? By whom? When?
5. How important—and effective—are national ideals for inspiring men to fight? Is there a difference between fighting for your fatherland—for blood and soil (what Chamberlain calls “dirt”)—and fighting for a cause? Does it depend on the cause?

### IN CONVERSATION

**Eliot Cohen:** In the last passage, one thing is interesting. Chamberlain starts by talking about freedom. The way he ends, though, is about how what they are all fighting for in the end is each other. I think that Shaara, who himself had been a soldier, understood that a lot of what motivates people to fight is not ideology, but comrades. What Chamberlain does in this passage is that he combines both. There is a broader case about freedom, about the nature of the United States, and he brings that down to how they are all fighting for each other, which I think is something that is quite often the case independent of the cause that one is fighting for.

**Amy Kass:** I think that’s right. But earlier, in his reflections on America and why it is different to fight for America, Chamberlain appeals to this universal principle that all men are equal and that they are fighting to free human beings—which means, he says, that they are not just fighting for themselves. And fighting for each other would then mean that they are fighting for all men. They are fighting for all humankind.

**Eliot Cohen:** I don’t know. Chamberlain is also very conscious that he is a Maine man. He’s very conscious of the tribal tie.

**Leon Kass:** When Chamberlain bends down to pick up the dirt, he says that this is free dirt all the way to the Pacific. In other words, you begin by taking the Maine men and the Maine ties seriously. These are men who would not fight

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except for Maine men—in fact not even with Maine men altogether, but only with the Second Maine—that’s what they signed up for. Chamberlain is showing them that they belong to a cause that is a national cause—but not merely a national cause, but a universal cause. And the final remark that “We’re fighting for each other” is not, it seems to me, as it is commonly said today, that people in the Army, when you really want to know why they fight, they’re fighting for the guy in the foxhole next to them. It’s not that we’re fighting for ourselves as fellow soldiers, but we’re fighting for each other because of an idea—the idea that all of us have value. I think there is a sense of “We brothers, here” but it’s not “We brothers in battle only.” The decisive sense of the brotherhood here is the brotherhood of man, understood as equally worthy.

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6. Is patriotism—love of country—necessary for the common defense? How can it be instilled in ordinary citizens? How can it be summoned?
7. Should military service—or some other form of national service—be a civic duty? Why or why not?
8. What is the difference between military courage (and military service) and other sorts of courage (and public service)? Which do you regard as most important? Why?

### **B. Leadership and the Military**

1. What are the virtues necessary for leaders in a democratic republic? Are the virtues needed for military leaders different from those of civilian leaders?
2. On the one hand, we Americans want excellent leaders, people whom we can admire and follow. On the other hand, we Americans do not wish to be led, and we do not believe that some people are really better than others. What does this tension imply for leadership in America?
3. Among American leaders, Abraham Lincoln is unsurpassed in inspirational speech that succeeded in blurring the (in this case, enormous) difference between the leader and the led. During the Civil War, on the evening of August 22, 1864, he delivered an address from the White House balcony to



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the men of the 166th Ohio regiment. He began by thanking them for their service to the Union, then continued as follows:

*I almost always feel inclined, when I happen to say anything to soldiers, to impress upon them in a few brief remarks the importance of success in this contest. It is not merely for today, but for all time to come that we should perpetuate for our children's children this great and free government, which we have enjoyed all our lives. I beg you to remember this, not merely for my sake, but for yours. I happen temporarily to occupy this big White House. I am a living witness that any one of your children may look to come here as my father's child has. It is in order that each of you may have through this free government which we have enjoyed, an open field and a fair chance for your industry, enterprise, intelligence; that you may all have equal privileges in the race of life, with all its desirable human aspirations. It is for this the struggle should be maintained, that we may not lose our birthright. . . . The nation is worth fighting for, to secure such an inestimable jewel.*

Compare Lincoln's appeal with that of Chamberlain. What generalizations can you offer regarding successful leadership and the encouragement of courage and public spirit in America?

4. The United States maintains civil control of the military. It also has a volunteer army, comprising mainly citizens who serve only for a short time, who are not and will not become professional soldiers. These citizen-soldiers are, however, ruled by a cadre of professional soldiers whose entire career is spent in uniform. What special challenges of leadership do these arrangements produce?