




7-30-2013

## Birthday Party, Cheesecake, Jelly Bean, Boom: The Easy Sesquicentennial Ends

John M. Rudy  
*Gettysburg College*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/interpretcw>

 Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

**Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.**

---

Rudy, John M. "Birthday Party, Cheesecake, Jelly Bean, Boom: The Easy Sesquicentennial Ends." *Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public* (July 30, 2013).

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/interpretcw/11>

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

# Birthday Party, Cheesecake, Jelly Bean, Boom: The Easy Sesquicentennial Ends

## Abstract

There's been a [good deal](#) of [digital ink](#) spilled recently over [whether the sesquicentennial](#) is over. A provocative question can erupt into a torrent of thought.

But those thoughts have been brewing in my mind for a while now, since the whirlwind here in Gettysburg died down to a dull roar from the fever pitch of a few weeks ago. The tourist tide has subsided. The streets are easier to drive.

But most importantly, the press inquiries have died away. Nearly every day of the anniversary week, I had an e-mail or a voice-mail asking me to help a reporter with a project here or there, reporters who were clambering for some way to cover the sesquicentennial from a unique and intriguing angle. It was an amazing feeling, to have my vocation suddenly in the spotlight. [*excerpt*]

## Keywords

CW150, Interp Theory, Rudy, Spotlight

## Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Social History | United States History

## Comments

*Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public* is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

## Creative Commons License

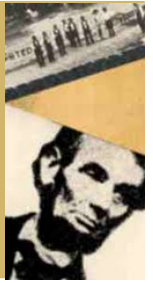


This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

# Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

www.civilwarconnect.com



## Birthday Party, Cheesecake, Jelly Bean, Boom: The Easy Sesquicentennial Ends

**TUESDAY, JULY 30, 2013**

There's been a good deal of digital ink spilled recently over whether the sesquicentennial is over. A provocative question can erupt into a torrent of thought.

But those thoughts have been brewing in my mind for a while now, since the whirlwind here in Gettysburg died down to a dull roar from the fever pitch of a few weeks ago. The tourist tide has subsided. The streets are easier to drive.

But most importantly, the press inquiries have died away. Nearly every day of the anniversary week, I had an e-mail or a voice-mail asking me to help a reporter with a project here or there, reporters who were clambering for some way to cover the sesquicentennial from a unique and intriguing angle. It was an amazing feeling, to have my vocation suddenly in the spotlight.

But that stopped July 4th. The press stopped beating down the doors, stopped calling the college's press contact list. The story was over.

Is the sesquicentennial over? From one perspective, of course not. Brooks is right; there are still two years of war left to fight, to commemorate (hell, even to celebrate if that's your bean). The war is far from over.

But what is over then? Because this sure feels like *over* if ever there were an *over*.

The end of Gettysburg means the spotlight, that powerful beam shone by the collective national attention, is gone. From April of 2011 until now, we in the Civil War community have had the benefit of that bright spotlight of attention, as the whole nation has been (to greater or lesser extents) focused on the war. Media has been seeking out the story. Culture has been



*This brand of sesquicentennial doesn't sell; there's nothing sexy about man's inhumanity to man. But of anything in the war, it's the most important thing to confront.*

buzzing. Hollywood has been filming and premiering.

But the war after Gettysburg morphs into that long, bloody, messy slog across Virginia or Tennessee and Georgia. It changes from prisoner exchanges into prison camps and the bloodiest ground on the American continent. Politics gets ugly, as Peace Democrats make a true, concerted effort (and nearly succeed) at unseating one of modern America's most beloved historical figures. Battles become racialized, as men are massacred in battle not simply because of the color of their uniforms, but because of the color of their skin. The war gets ugly.

And ugly doesn't sell.

So, the Sesquicentennial is over. The era of the media or culture shining a spotlight on us is at an end, for the sheer fact that they know that what that spotlight will show is bound to be ugly.



Glory gets replaced by horror after July 1863. But even 150 years after, is America willing to *choose* to confront Fort Pillow or the Crater?

That spotlight we had was an amazing opportunity to *sell* the relevance of the war in amazing and powerful new ways. We had the opportunity, with little to no effort, to help Americans see the war as relevant to their daily lives, to who they are as a people and to what their nation is today. We can debate whether we squandered that 2-year-spotlight or not, and likely will for decades to come.

But the fact is, the spotlight has likely been doused.

This doesn't mean the commemorations stop.

It simply means the work gets infinitely harder. Where before culture and the media were amplifiers for the message that the Civil War is relevant to the average American, now we're going to need to make our own megaphone. The new messages will be harder to spread; the new audiences harder to draw. But the world can still go on turning if you let it.

As for me, I plan on continuing to keep trying to help Americans, all Americans and not just the folks who already come to our Civil War sites, to find their own personal relevances in these places. That battle just becomes infinitely harder, and the odds seem set against us as the last few days of July fade away.

Sort of like it did for a 87-year-old nation on the brink of collapse 150 years ago.