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Ring the Bells: "Happy 149th Birthday, America!"

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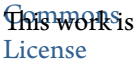
Ring the Bells: "Happy 149th Birthday, America!"

Abstract
Friend of the blog and stalwart DC area historian Aaron Urbanski posted a pithy update to his Facebook wall on Monday, a status update which has infected my brain over the past couple days. The idea is so infectious, so amazingly simple yet profound that I'm shamelessly stealing it and blowing it up to epic proportions. [*excerpt*]

Keywords
CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, July 4th

Disciplines
Cultural History | History | Public 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."

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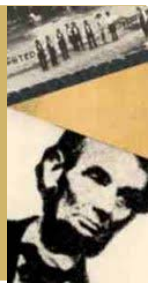
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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

www.civilwarconnect.com



Ring the Bells: "Happy 149th Birthday, America!"

WEDNESDAY, JULY 4, 2012

In honor of the holiday, we've truncated to a one-post Wednesday "extra" this week. We'll flip back to our regularly scheduled programming, already in progress next week. -John



Edwin Forbes' artistic interpretation of the birthpangs of a nation. / PD LOC

Friend of the blog and stalwart DC area historian Aaron Urbanski posted a pithy update to his Facebook wall on Monday, a status update which has infected my brain over the past couple days. The idea is so infectious, so amazingly simple yet profound that I'm shamelessly stealing it and blowing it up to epic proportions.

"Happy 149th Birthday America," Aaron wrote on his wall. Jake and I noticed the comment on our smartphones while we were traipsing across Culp's Hill here in Gettysburg with Tim Smith and Garry Adelman in what I've affectionately come to call, "The Tim and Garry Show," a part of the park's interpretive offerings for the anniversary of the battle of Gettysburg.

Standing on that hill, those words meant something spectacular to me. Aaron was right. This week we celebrate America's birthday, but it has little to do with John Adams, hot Philly attics or fights in the Old Statehouse. America is only one year away from celebrating the Sesquicentennial of its birth.

That's a bold statement, but one that I think can hold up to some argument. The year 1863 defines the modern American's conception of their hopes, dreams and the possibilities which lay at their feet more than 1776 ever did. 1863 is the beginning of the actualization of the American dream. Before 1863, the Declaration penned in Philadelphia was a hollow promise in a nation wallowing in its own contradictory mud. While Jefferson submitted for approval the powerful words that, "all men are created equal," several races and creeds of men, not to mention an entire sex, knew these words rang as hollow as the clatter of chains against a slave ship's wooden gangplank.

But 1863 changed the American nation irrevocably. First, January brought the effective death-knell of slavery, as the war transformed. Every soldier wearing a suit of blue instantly became a freedom fighter, even if his body and soul felt otherwise. Every step of forward progress of the United States armies became a forward step toward fixing the fundamental contradiction of the American founding: in a nation where all men were born with liberty, some men had that freedom cruelly stolen from them in a government supported program of systemic slow-motion murder.



You could think of Culp's Hill like the kicking baby in the stomach, the freedom just itching to be born. / PD LOC

Next, came the dual victories of July 4th, 1863. In the Eastern Theater, Gettysburg forever shoved Lee south of the Mason-Dixon, doomed to fight a war spiraling down a drain with little hope of foreign intervention or crashing military victory against Washington. Lee would grasp at the short straws of political subversion in 1864, but the action proved too little, too late. In the West, with the fall of Vicksburg, the so-called Southern Nation had been successfully bifurcated, Scott's brilliant Anaconda Plan come to fruition with a vengeance. Now the United States army need only keep subdividing the South into smaller and smaller bits, until, as Churchill would phrase a similar struggle 80 years later, the rebellion was, "sponged and purged and, if need be, blasted from the surface of the earth."

But those dual births of Emancipation and Military Dominion could be seen as only conceptions, with the true genius of a new America gestating throughout 1863, until in November the nation we know was born into swaddling, bloodstained clothes in a lowly cemetery in Gettysburg. In just over 200 words we have encapsulated our modern conception of America, where freedom marches forward to ever wider groups.

So, Happy Birthday America.

You're 149 years young and still growing into the promise forged for us in 1863, in a white house in Washington, a battlefield in Gettysburg, a siege in Mississippi and a humble Pennsylvania cemetery.