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# How to Sap the Romance: America's National Killingfield Parks

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# How to Sap the Romance: America's National Killingfield Parks

## Abstract

"Maybe they should call them Killingfields instead of Battlefields..." [*excerpt*]

## Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, National Park Service, NPS, Military Parks, Battlefields

## Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Military 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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# Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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FRIDAY, MAY 13, 2011

## How to Sap the Romance: America's National Killingfield Parks

"Maybe they should call them Killingfields instead of Battlefields..."

A quick thought experiment for today...

I was at dinner with a professor at Gettysburg College recently (chatting about Civil War memory and the modern philosophical construction of battlefield parks) and the above concept came up. "Battlefield," inherently places the focus of the visitor on the action of war, the romantic image of men and flags and armies marching. Battlefields can become (and often are portrayed as) sterile landscapes where men marched and paraded. Battle happens on Grecian urns. Battle is a bloodless tableau in a dramatic Don Troiani painting. Battle is a soldier from the 74th Penna. Infantry "dying" in granite from an invisible wound while holding his flag aloft just a few hundred yards from where I now sit.

Would calling these places, "Killingfield," shift the focus upon the carnage of war instead of the romance? Would calling these places Killingfields acknowledge the quite obvious fact that the land is still very much a cemetery? Would it help to quash some of the hokey reenactment impulse to flop around like a comical fish in mock death where men actually died in agonizing pain?

The National Park Service's sites at very least have a moratorium on this type of thing, the [blackpowder regulations \[PDF\]](#) dictating that, "opposing lines, the taking of casualties, hand-to-hand combat, or any other form of simulated warfare, are prohibited in all parks. Battle reenactments generate an atmosphere inconsistent with the memorial qualities of battlefields and other military sites placed in the Service's trust." The lack of respect in that type of behavior is (thankfully) curtailed by the Park Service. Still, this does not change the fact that many reenactors dream of marching across battlefields and pretending to shoot at each other on the land where men died. "Wouldn't it be so hardcore?" is the question which pops from many folks' mouths in much the same tone of voice I use when I get ready to watch a new episode of *Doctor Who*: pure excitement. We call that tone a "[squee](#)" 'round here in the blag-o-nets.

"...the brigades are in position behind the rail fence, the guns are laid and ready in the woods and the furred flags are already loosened to break out and Pickett himself with his long oiled ringlets and his hat in one hand probably and his sword in the other looking up the hill waiting for Longstreet to give the word and it's all in the balance, it hasn't happened yet, it hasn't even begun yet...."



CC / by [Michael Noirot](#)

Shelby's all queued up and ready to go.  
Just click play.

If we called these places Killingfields instead of Battlefields, would we still be able to talk about romantic images of flags flapping in the breeze and gallant men marching valiantly and honorably, and keep a straight face the whole while? William Faulkner captured an image of the South's romantic fixation with battlefields in his *Intruder in the Dust*, used by Shelby Foote in a deeply romantic context. Could Foote have used this image as romantically as he does as easily if the place was called a Killingfield? Could he have smirked like that (on "early July day...") if it had been termed a Killingfield?

Imagine a world where we renamed them "Antietam National Killingfield" and "Manassas National Killingfield." Where people hired a Licensed Guide to take them on a Killingfield Tour at Gettysburg. How might that small change in language affect how we think about those places? Interesting thought to ponder...

[EDIT: Scott Manning has a reply/his own reflections at [Historian on the Warpath.](#)]