



9-29-2011

## "That all men are created equal...": Universal Relevance and the Civil War

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Rudy, John M., ""That all men are created equal...": Universal Relevance and the Civil War" (2011). *Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public*. 176.  
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# "That all men are created equal...": Universal Relevance and the Civil War

## Abstract

One of my favorite movies is *Back to the Future III*. I know that is a terrible choice in some folks' eyes. The response I usually get is an, "ugh!" and a snarl of the lip. Still, I think there is so much going on in that film, from the struggle between fatalism and free will to the themes of love and sacrifice, heartache and heartbreak.

The reason *Back to the Future III* comes up in my mind today, though, is because of a dialogue within the public history world that appears to be heating up, thanks in part to both [Kevin Levin](#) and [Ed Ayers](#) (via [James Loewen](#)). The "Next Interpretive Challenge," of making the Civil War matter to an increasingly disconnected and diverse audience is crucial to the survival of the War's legacy, chiefly the emancipation ethic. [*excerpt*]

## Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Sci-Fi, Back to the Future, Interp Theory

## 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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# Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

[www.civilwarconnect.com](http://www.civilwarconnect.com)



## "That all men are created equal...": Universal Relevance and the Civil War

**THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 2011**

One of my favorite movies is *Back to the Future III*. I know that is a terrible choice in some folks' eyes. The response I usually get is an, "ugh!" and a snarl of the lip. Still, I think there is so much going on in that film, from the struggle between fatalism and free will to the themes of love and sacrifice, heartache and heartbreak.

The reason *Back to the Future III* comes up in my mind today, though, is because of a dialogue within the public history world that appears to be heating up, thanks in part to both [Kevin Levin and Ed Ayers \(via James Loewen\)](#). The "Next Interpretive Challenge," of making the Civil War matter to an increasingly disconnected and diverse audience is crucial to the survival of the War's legacy, chiefly the emancipation ethic.

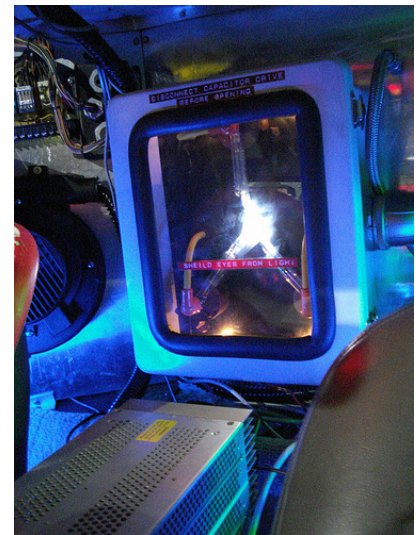
Levin, Ayers and Loewen see the great divide forming between how we service the traditional American audience (i.e. whiter, Anglo-centric audiences who have either a geographic or genealogical affinity for the war) and the new American audience (i.e. more diverse, recent immigrant populations whose ancestors lived thousands of miles from this country during the war). Their answer seems relatively clear: geography and a global view of the war.

This answer made me think of [an exchange](#) between Marty McFly and Doctor Emmett L. Brown on the rim of Clayton Shonash Ravine:

Doc - "You're just not thinking fourth dimensionally."

Marty - "Right, right. I have a real problem with that."

I'm not quite sure that Levin and the rest are thinking fourth dimensionally. They are running under an assumption that the sole barrier standing in the way of relevance for an audience of Pakistani visitors is a matter of geography. They assume that these visitors will instantly find relevance in the Civil War through any connection made between the war and Pakistan. But this forgets the simple fact that 150 years separate the Pakistanis of today from the denizens of the British Indian Empire of the 1860s. The assumption that these visitors (or any visitors) will care about *any event or person* of the past simply because of its geographic location is dangerous.



"Time circuits on...  
Flux Capacitor... fluxing" /  
[CC by Anthony Catalano](#)

Would telling a group of Pakistani tourists about Syed Ameer Ali and the Central National Muhammadan Association quest in the years after the American Civil War to win independence and freedom from oppressive British rule, and the similarities the quest had with the Abolition movement, instantly make a Civil War landscape matter to them? I'm not so sure. And furthermore, can any interpreter *actually* be prepared to offer that kind of relevance to *any* visitor of *any* nationality who wanders into their site at the drop of a hat? Does the inclusion of a shared geography instantly create relevance? Or is there another dimension (the fourth / time) which complicates this problem?

I'm not sure that pure geography is the right route to relevance. Too many things separate any of us, especially those without a blood connection, from the American Civil War. There seems to be a more unified solution to both the third dimensional and fourth dimensional distance which is far simpler: human universals.

No matter who walks into a Civil War site, be they a twelfth generation American or a new immigrant, we are all human. We all have wants and needs. We all have hated. We all have been proud. We all have been disappointed. We all have lost those we love and we all have found new love in others. We all have dreamed. These human universals are far more effective in helping *any audience* to access a site's meanings. It is my firm belief that through the lens of the human universal, we can help people see why these places might matter to them.

Why is the Civil War relevant? Certainly it is not simply because it is an American story (or a Chinese story, or a Canadian story or a Pakistani story). No. **The Civil War is relevant because it is a human story.**



[CC by Jay Bonvouloir](#)

That, as Marty McFly would say, is "heavy."

Thinking about how to bridge both the third dimensional gap and the fourth dimensional gap through human universal relevance, rather than trying in vain to make increasingly tenuous connections to each and every geographic locale, seems a far more fruitful endeavour.

I'll have more musings on the universal power of the human story next week, drifting back into that place where so much of our discussion of this War leads: race.