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## It's OK to Giggle: Colbert's Gettysburg Address

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# It's OK to Giggle: Colbert's Gettysburg Address

## Abstract

There hasn't been all that much righteous indignation from the lands of historians and the historically inclined public. I'd wager they just haven't noticed. I was a little surprised, to be honest. As soon as I hit play on Stephen Colbert's rendition of the Gettysburg Address, part of Ken Burns' [Learn the Address](#) marketing initiative for his upcoming documentary, I figured the flame war was inevitable. [*excerpt*]

## Keywords

Colbert, Comedy, Gettysburg Address, Language, Rudy

## 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."

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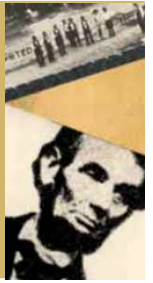
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Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

www.civilwarconnect.com



## It's OK to Giggle: Colbert's Gettysburg Address

[Click here to access video.](#)

Colbert *recites* the Gettysburg Address.

**THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2013**

There hasn't been all that much righteous indignation from the lands of historians and the historically inclined public. I'd wager they just haven't noticed. I was a little surprised, to be honest. As soon as I hit play on Stephen Colbert's rendition of the Gettysburg Address, part of Ken Burns' [Learn the Address](#) marketing initiative for his upcoming documentary, I figured the flame war was inevitable.

Stephen Colbert, donning goofy stovepipe hat and faux-fur beard begins his address intoning like a cross between [Atticus Finch](#) and [Royal Dano](#). Standing on his set, with animated American flag background, swapping between camera 1, 2 and 3, Colbert's audience doesn't quite know how to react.

He is mugging for the camera, shifting intonation in a way the audience can't help but giggle at. He turns and gestures, at one point employs one of my favorite sight gags: hold for laughs too long and check your watch. And at first glance, it seems entirely irreverent. One of the few YouTube commenters asks plaintively, "Why are people laughing?!?" Another demands that Stephen, "have some respect for the men that lost their lives."

Stephen Colbert's reading is unrelentingly complex, though. First you need to realize the raw fact of the matter: this is a man (the actor Colbert), playing a character (the pundit Colbert), playing the character's conception of a character (Lincoln). This is Colbert's imagining of how "Colbert" might imagine Lincoln.

Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is hilariously complex to the modern tongue and ear. The address is ten sentences long, and took the President about two and a half minutes to read, working out to an average of 15 seconds per sentence. That's a huge number. Most of Burns' readings clock in around a minute and a half, meaning Lincoln was far more deliberate than the politicians and famous who seem to be rushing through; sort of like Colbert is.

Lincoln's sentences weave and dart in true 19th century rhetorical fashion. I've never diagrammed the sentences of Lincoln's address (I don't really want to relive middle school), but I'd wager they are a sprawling nightmare of complex appositional tree branches.

Colbert deliberately tumbles through the phrase, "it is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced," which as beautiful as I've always found it, is an amazingly complex and labyrinthine phrase. It's a wonder anyone had enough breath to complete even one of those freight-train long sentences. Colbert lets that feeling through, as he intentionally runs out of breath on, "to which they gave the last full measure of devotion."

All of this is to say one simple thing: Colbert knows what he's saying. He understands its meaning and its message, maybe not fully and completely, but still understanding to a great extent what Lincoln meant.

He's not taking the Gettysburg Address lightly, just playfully.

Stephen Colbert had the good sense to read the Gettysburg Address before he recorded his version and didn't just try to do a cold reading like others in the series. I'm looking at you, [Louis C.K.](#) You shouldn't need Jerry Seinfeld to **brilliantly** explain what the Address means. Just read the damned thing and let it all sink in. The language might be dense, awkward and (as Colbert shows) potentially hilarious to our 21st century ear. But it's not that hard to feel.

It reminds me of those times I was a church lector back in High School. I made it a point to understand my readings. This didn't simply mean looking up the pronunciation of, "Melchisedec." It meant understanding the sentence, feeling the words roll in my mouth and the meaning roll in my mind long before I stood up in church to read those words. I wasn't simply reading cold; I was delivering the readings understood.

Colbert didn't read the Address; he delivered the Address. Delivering something, even in a comic presentation, means inherently you need to understand what it means.

And Colbert knew what it meant. I have no doubt.