



6-2016

Relevance, Resonance, and Historiography: Interpreting the Lives and Experiences of Civil War Soldiers

Peter S. Carmichael
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/cwifac>

 Part of the [Military History Commons](#), [Public History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Carmichael, Peter S. "Relevance, Resonance, and Historiography: Interpreting the Lives and Experiences of Civil War Soldiers." *Civil War History* 62, 2 (June 2016). 169-185.

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: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/cwifac/17>

This open access article 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.

Relevance, Resonance, and Historiography: Interpreting the Lives and Experiences of Civil War Soldiers

Abstract

Carmichael shares his experiences of portraying Corporal Bobby Fields at Appomattox Court House National Historical Park in the summer of 1985. He uses Fields as a conduit to explore the scholarship pertaining to the common soldier of the Civil War and how material culture can provide a new window into understanding of making the battlefield come alive for visitors.

Keywords

living history, reenactment, material culture, national park service

Disciplines

Military History | Public History | United States History

Wearing the Union Blue, the National Park Service's Green and Gray, and the Academy's Tweed: The Interpretive styles of Civil War Soldier Historiography

In the summer of 1985, as a nineteen-year-old undergraduate history major from Indiana, I headed to Appomattox Court House National Historical Park, where I assumed the identity of Robert Fields, a corporal in the 188th Pennsylvania Infantry. After years of reenacting and living history did not prepare me for the imaginative world of first person interpretation. As soon as I entered the village as Corporal Fields, I stepped back into the summer of 1865, greeting visitors as if they were weary time travelers eager to see where Robert E. Lee had surrendered to U. S. Grant. At times I felt as if I were on the set of a hokey Twilight Zone episode. But in most instances visitors played along, staying in period, hoping to hear an “authentic” voice from the past. A few took their roles a little too seriously, and a day did not pass that I was not called damn Yankee. One of my colleagues, who portrayed the civilian Mr. Peers, had grown period muttonchops so that he might better look the part. They were bushy and thick, and proved to be irresistible to one visitor who pulled on Mr. Peers's facial hair to see if it was real. Another visitor told me that I would burn in hell for my role in turning the South into a wasteland. Even though the comments were ridiculously absurd, it did not take long before the charade of first person interpretation began to feel a little too personal. An alarming number of visitors thought they could find historical redemption for the white South by publicly humiliating Corporal Fields. I was getting weary, and it did not help that every day, as sweat streamed down my face, I was asked if I was hot in a wool uniform. A continuous

barrage of Lost Cause inspired insults made it increasingly difficult to repress thoughts of turning Virginia's Southside railroad into Sherman neckties

With just a few weeks left in the summer, first person interpretation seemed nothing more than cheap theater. Was I not trivializing the Appomattox story by encouraging visitors to dream their way into the past? At the time I thought I had little choice but to sacrifice comprehensiveness, depth, and originality for superficial stories exulting the former Rebels for putting down their guns and becoming my countrymen again. My message was historically flawed and I nearly let my frustrations blind me to ways historical imagination primes people to explore the past. Visitors want to reach back in time to feel, hear, smell, touch, and taste what it was like to be in the ranks of Civil War armies. What did it mean to experience the war at a deeply visceral level is a question that cannot be easily dismissed, whether one is a public or academic historian. Some reenactors believe they have the answer through their living history encampments and mock battles, but no historian can recreate on paper or reproduce in performance the authentic sensations of the past. General audiences often believe they can feel the truth through the actual object or artifact. The tendency to conflate touch with knowledge is troubling. Picking up a Springfield musket and donning a kepi does not bring comprehension or deep understanding. Nonetheless, the public's sincere desire for a sensory experience opens a portal into a serious study of material culture and the soldier experience.¹

¹ Scholarship on material culture and the experience of the Civil War soldiers is in its infancy. Foundational work on this subject include: Michael DeGruccio, "Letting the War Slip through Our Hands: Material Culture and the Weakness of Words in the Civil War Era, in *Weirding the War: Stories from the Civil War's Ragged Edges* Ed. Stephen Berry (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2011), 15-35; Megan Kate Nelson, *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2012), esp. 103-59. For a summary of secondary scholarship on the Civil War soldier

When I was portraying Billy Fields in 1985 there was virtually nothing instructive on Civil War material culture, except for the path-breaking work of Bell I. Wiley.² I consequently just showed audiences the accouterments of war and explained how they functioned. But my visitors then and our audiences today need to understand that Civil War soldiers assigned a wide range of meanings to their equipment within a broader sensory landscape. In other words, when material culture is combined with the senses of touch, smell, sound, and taste with our audiences are immersed in the total war experience that engulfed the rank-and-file. “It is increasingly apparent,” writes Mark Smith, the leading historian of Civil War sensory studies, “that virtually any period from the past can be understood in a more textured fashion by trying to uncover (not recover) the sensory experience of people at the time.”³ Bringing together studies of material culture and sensory history invigorates battlefield interpretation, and opens new scholarly questions beyond the tired inquiry of soldier motivation. The things they carried, the words they wrote, and the touch, smell, and sounds of being in the ranks--when considered together have the greatest potential in helping our diverse audience see that

experience, see Lorien Foote, “Soldiers,” in *A Companion to the U.S. Civil War*. ed. Aaron Sheehan-Dean (Malden, Mass.: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), Vol. 2: 114-31.

² Bell I. Wiley’s path-breaking *The Life of Johnny* and *The Life of Billy Yank*, published in 1943 in 1952 respectively, towered over the field for a generation. Although Wiley’s work was interpretively thin, and at times nothing more than a glowing tribute to the men in blue and gray, historians either refused or ignored his work. This inexplicable lull ended in 1986 with Joseph T. Glatthaar’s *The March to the Sea and Beyond: Sherman’s Troops in the Savannah and Carolinas* (New York: New York University Press, 1986). Glatthaar cleared the scholarly horizons of the romantic haze left by Wiley’s two volumes, opening a vista for historians to see Civil War soldiers as thinking men who were deeply ideological, highly motivated, and reflective about their experiences in the field. A surge in soldier studies followed Glatthaar’s path-breaking work in the 1980s and 1990s. Of the many fine books, Gerald Linderman’s *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1987); Earl J. Hess’s *Liberty, Virtue, and Progress: Northerners and Their War for the Union* (New York: New York University Press, 1988); Reid Mitchell’s *Civil War Soldiers: Their Expectations and Their Experiences*, (New York: Viking, 1988); and James M. McPherson’s *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* are especially important for the questions they raised about the inner world of Civil War soldiers.

³ Mark M. Smith, *The Smell of Battle, The Taste of Siege: A Sensory History of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Civil War soldiers existed in a radically different world as ours, and that consequently, they were not stoic men of valor. In the face of adversity soldiers could feel many conflicting things at once--apathy, outrage, patriotism, and ambivalence--toward cause, comrades, and those in power while as they struggled to survive a remorseless war of death and destruction.

While battlefield interpreters are at the point of the historian phalanx, meeting people at the earliest stage of discovery, academics typically engage more seasoned audiences in the classroom or through publications. This critical difference in audience should not obscure our common goal in explaining the historical particularities of life in Civil War armies. The heightened desire for contemporary relevancy can be an impediment to teaching people to think historically. More than ever there is a temptation to universalize the soldier experience.⁴ With veterans returning home today with minds in disarray and bodies broken, Americans seek historical references, and we have been too quick to make analogies with the Civil War. Our desire to encourage empathy for soldiers in the past and in the present can easily lead to sloppy thinking about timeless generalizations about the impact of violence.⁵ Seeking refuge in alcohol, for instance, has always been a favorite pastime of soldiers, particularly when recreating in camp, but it also served as a source of liquid courage in battle. It is not enough for us to advance the conclusion that soldiers turned to booze because soldiers will be soldiers, or that they

⁴ On Civil War soldiers as psychiatric casualties and how battlefield trauma was understood, see Eric T. Dean, Jr., "We will all be lost and destroyed:" Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and the Civil War," in *Civil War History*, vol. 37, no. 2 (1991):138-53.

⁵ Some of the best work on returning Civil War veterans includes: James Martyn, *Sing Not War: The Lives of Union 7 Confederate Veterans in Gilded Age America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Brian Craig Miller, *Empty Sleeves: Amputation in the Civil War South* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2015); Jeffrey W. McClurken, *Take Care of their Living: Reconstructing Confederate Veteran Families in Virginia* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 2009).

simply wanted to numb themselves from the emotional and physical pain of living in a world of relentless violence. Such timeless assertions reveal little in the end. Drinking cultures constantly evolve, and they tell us a great deal about power relations within very specific settings at the very specific times of war. Alcohol fueled violent rampages among comrades who are often idealized by the public as a noble band of brothers. This idealized view of soldiers cannot withstand the admissions of the men themselves, who wrote appalling accounts of fellow soldiers getting ridiculously drunk under fire.⁶ The allowance made for intoxicated officers in both armies is truly astounding, and something that would never go unpunished in today's armed forces. Although the written sources are both compelling and damning, why not show visitors or a class of a students a period whiskey bottle (empty of course). I wish my character Bobby Fields had not taken the temperance oath, but if I had carried a flask in my knapsack, I could have used it to discuss fear in battle, morality and conviviality in the ranks, relations with civilians, violence in camp, and the privileges of rank. Objects--used in conjunction with firsthand accounts and read with an understanding that historical experiences are primarily sensory—have incredible potential to draw our battlefield visitors and students into the distinctive realm of life in Civil War armies.⁷

More than any other inquiry, Corporal Bobby Fields probably received the most questions about what it was like to be in battle and to shoot at the enemy. The ensuing awkwardness was palatable. Pretending to have been in combat was embarrassing, since my closest experience to being under fire was when my step-brother shot his bee bee gun

⁶ On violence, discipline, and punishment in Civil War armies, see Steven J. Ramold, *Baring the Iron Hand: Discipline in the Union Army* (DeKalb: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010); Lorien Foote, *The Gentlemen and the Roughs: Violence, Honor, an Manhood in the Union Army* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

7

at me. At the time, I thought my only available source was soldier letters. Their accounts, I discovered, were rarely romantic scripts of martial triumph, but awful confessions of terror, blood lust, and mourning, countering the popular idea that Civil War soldiers masked the dark side of combat. Yet the soldiers themselves often admitted that words were insufficient when trying to describe the cacophony of shells exploding, the shrieks of horses dying, and the cries of wounded comrades begging for mercy. I related anecdotes to visitors as if I were spinning a tale that only a hardened veteran would know. The tape of my performance does not lie. An acting union card was never going to be in my future. I needed props, but it never dawned on me to use a reproduction bayonet as a teaching tool. Union and Confederate soldiers wrote of the visual spectacle of thousands of men marching in long lines of battle, their bayonets glistening in the sun, which induced awe and fear in the ranks. Such soldier reactions reveal an often-neglected emotional history of enlisted men. Above all else, I missed an opportunity of integrating cultural and gender history with the study of Civil War tactics. The bayonet can again serve as a useful point of departure for discussion. It was a symbol of untamed power for those in the ranks, but the men discovered that it was virtually ineffectual on the battlefield, since the rifled weapon generally kept opposing battle lines from engaging in hand-to-hand combat. Overturning the misconception of how soldiers fought as they did in Hollywood movies also challenges the popular perception that the Civil War generation was not of this world, but from a golden era when duty and courage coursed through the blood of ordinary men. Historians have succeeded in overturning the facile notion that Civil War soldiers were born without fear. Plenty of men faltered under fire, unable to endure the terror of humans shooting each other down. The bayonet points to

cowardice, serving as a visual reminder of the role of coercion, since file closers used their edged weapons to keep men facing to the front. This example also alerts general audiences to the fact that Civil War soldiers did not possess an unlimited supply of courage.⁸

Despite its virtual irrelevance in combat, the bayonet never lost its cultural power among the troops as a symbol of willed behavior in battle. The interpretive programs of battlefield historians are perceived at times for reinforcing the daring exploits of individual soldiers. The high drama plays well with audiences, who want to find strength in the values of honor and duty, which some believe are in decline today. To some academics, battlefield programs that celebrate soldier heroics seems like a glorification of war that stems from a deeper failure to appreciate how ideas of male honor committed Civil War soldiers to reckless aggression. Both sides are talking past each other. Earl T Hess's work on Civil War tactics, and Gerald Linderman and Frances M. Clarke's studies on masculinity and Victorian culture would help interpreters and academics integrate cultural, gender, and military history in the classroom and in the battlefield.⁹ Every Civil War veteran knew that ideas about manhood, patriotism, comradeship, devotion to family, and hatred for the enemy could inspire but not control how a man fought. The ground truths of war--the actual collision of weaponry, tactics, training, and generalship--

⁸ A superb example of the integration of cultural and tactical military history can be found in Lesley J. Gordon, *A Broken Regiment: The 16th Connecticut's Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014).

⁹ Earl J. Hess, *Civil War Infantry Tactics: Training, Combat, and Small-Unit Effectiveness* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015); Gerald Linderman's *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1987); Frances M. Clarke, *War Stories: Suffering and Sacrifice in the Civil War North* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

almost always trumped culture in determining what was possible under fire.¹⁰ The early war promise of “death before dishonor” was not the battle cry of a frenzied zealot seeking martyrdom. Nor did such militant rhetoric inspire heroic gestures that appear to us as foolhardy acts of self-annihilation. The actual mechanics of Civil War combat usually offered individuals a realistic chance of living out dreams of individual bravery without dooming them to futility. Dreams of courageous action, inspired in part by a militant manliness, could be lived out under most tactical circumstances, even when facing massed firepower. Even the classic frontal attacks witnessed at Cold Harbor on June 2, 1864, and the battle of Franklin on November 30, 1864—widely seen as the epitome of battlefield futility and blind courage—achieved a degree of tactical success.

Not once during my twelve-year National Park Service seasonal career did I use material objects in my walking tours, missing an opportunity to show how an object possesses a wide range of meanings to different historical actors. The sheer weight of a reproduction artillery shell attests to the lethality of war, and to the fact that cannon were weapons of horrible destruction, not just centerpieces for family photographs or jungle gyms for children. Using a reproduction shell also raises questions about war production, the challenge of logistics, the deafening sounds of war, and medical care, since these missiles sliced and shredded bodies, leaving men either maimed or left with grotesque wounds. Implements of killing are not the only the only source of material culture. A soldier’s sewing kit, for instance, offers rich interpretive possibilities in understanding the cultural life of soldiers as well as their day-to-day struggles to get by in the ranks. That enlisted men called their sewing kit a housewife suggests the importance of domesticity

¹⁰ On the face of a Civil War battle, see D. Scott Hartwig’s superb piece, “‘It’s All Smoke and Dust and Noise:’ The Face of Battle at Gettysburg,” in *Battle: Nature and Consequences of Civil War Combat*, ed. Kent Gramm (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009), 12-66.

as the basis of soldier identity, a vital theme in gender history that is too often overlooked with battlefield visitors. The necessity of having a housewife could also open a discussion about soldier self-care in the army, which Kathryn Shively Meier has recently explored in *Nature's Civil War: Common Soldiers and the Environment in 1862 Virginia*.¹¹

Although academic Civil War historians have been slow to embrace material culture, public historians have been in the lead, moving beyond the show-and-tell approach of material culture in their living history demonstrations. The National Park Service's David Larsen's "Gun talk," which can be found on You Tube, is a brilliant example of telling big stories through a single piece of material culture. I would be hard pressed to find a more gifted interpreter.¹²

Throughout my twelve years as a National Park Service seasonal I rarely violated the maxim of being sight specific in my tours. My eyes, and the visitors' eyes as a result, were always locked on the physical and cultural landscape. Context was almost superficial in my presentations. When I led walking tours in front of Marye's Heights at Fredericksburg, I kept my interpretation focused on the Sunken Lane and stonewall. I barely mentioned the political circumstances surrounding the Union offensive, nor did I point to the town, which was in plain view of the heights, and was looted by Northern soldiers. The news of its destruction figured prominently in the Confederate propaganda campaign that followed the battle. I was merely following the orders of the park's chief historian, who instructed seasonal interpreters in 1986 that mentioning anything that the visitor could not see would turn an evocative historical site into a sterile classroom. What

¹¹ Kathryn Shively Meier, *Nature's Civil War: Common Soldiers and the Environment in 1862 Virginia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

¹² David Larsen, "Gun Talk," See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vU-1fjEcyoE>. Accessed on May 24, 2015

a lost opportunity to utilize visual culture as a way to connect the experience of battle to broader interpretive themes about the war, including issues relating to the home front. I did use a wartime photograph of the Sunken Lane, taken in May 1863, showing canteens, blankets, scraps of paper, accouterments, and rifles with bayonets fixed littering the ground. The centerpiece of the photo is a slain Confederate. He was shot in the head, and blood had gushed out of his mouth and nose before washing down a face frozen in death and looking to the heavens. I gathered my group, had them stand where the photographer in 1863 had set up his tripod and camera, and I then asked my visitors to juxtapose the wartime print with the terrain today. In that instant people made a powerful connection to place, a feeling that they were stepping back in time, but had they actually learned anything from this exercise? In retrospect, I would say that I failed in enhancing their understanding of the war. The “then and now” approach to studying Civil War photography is wildly popular today, but it is an interpretive strategy that keeps the visitor’s focus on location as if they were standing on a sacred and magical spot, a veritable font of knowledge. I should have reminded my audiences that historic images are not completely transparent windows into the past. As the historian Allen Trachtenberg wisely notes, historic photographs are seductive and deceptive, giving us the false confidence to believe that we can know and see simultaneously.¹³ I wished I had asked visitors to think about what was taking place in the frame before and after the picture was taken, to imagine what the troops were doing as the fighting erupted, and how they reacted when comrades started falling. Did some stop shooting? Did they give him comfort and pray over the man who ultimately died and later was captured in rigor

¹³ Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History—Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989).

mortis by the photographer in the agony of death? What were the thoughts of the soldiers who retreated from the sunken lane, leaving their dying friends to the enemy? How did the families of the fallen soldier learn of his death? All of these questions—when used in conjunction with photographs—can facilitate important discussions about the dynamic links between soldiers at the front and civilians at home. These conversations, moreover, do not distract visitors from ground that they stand upon. If anything, broadening the context deepens the historical meaning of the interpretive experience.

My walking tours, especially early in my career, were generally in alignment with the 1980s NPS party line, which amounted to a curious mixture of Lost Cause romanticism and national reconciliation.¹⁴ Civil War soldiers appeared in my programs as men of iron duty, charging to their death without any higher ideological purpose. I depicted soldiers as casualties of self-serving politicians whose ambitions and acute stupidity resulted in a needless sacrifice of life. At the end of my walk along Fredericksburg's Sunken Road, for instance, where Confederates shot down more than 10,000 Union attackers on December 13, 1862, I almost never mentioned the high ideals and sentimental culture that infused their suffering with deep meaning. The causes of Union and emancipation, elemental to why Northern soldiers fought, were sidebar discussions at best. I finished by discussion of the Army of the Potomac with a comparison to Vietnam. I explained the spirited Confederate defense at Fredericksburg as an instinctive desire to protect home and hearth. Vengeance never intruded into the storyline, despite the pillaging of the town by Union troops, which enraged Lee's

¹⁴ On the impact of the Lost Cause and reconciliation on Civil War battlefield interpretation, see David W. Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory and the American Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).

veterans, who rejoiced when they shot down the “hated Yankees” in a series of futile frontal charges.

My storyline centered on the victimization of Union soldiers and the spirit of brotherhood that subsequently uplifted both armies after the close of the battle. I concluded my talk with the likely apocryphal story of South Carolinian Richard Kirkland, who, upon hearing the desperate cries of the Union wounded, gathered some canteens and on his own accord jumped over the stone wall to give water to the suffering Union wounded below. For his valorous act, Kirkland was given the name the Angel of Marye’s Heights, and in 1965 a monument honoring him was unveiled next to the famous stone wall. Audiences embraced my story of Union soldiers betrayed by their government, needlessly dying because of bungling generals, and they especially enjoyed hearing about enemy combatants who ultimately came together as brotherly comrades. Even when war reached the height of futility, as it had at Fredericksburg, I reassured my audiences that Civil War Americans found their true heroic selves through organized killing. Although I essentially parroted the park’s approved themes, this hard fact does not diminish my complicity in propagating an official message that pandered to the emotional wants of my audience, rather than engaging their intellectual needs.

Just as I was finishing my seasonal career at Richmond National Military Park in the late 1990s, a propitious shift occurred roughly at the same time in Civil War soldier scholarship and in the NPS’s interpretive philosophy. Largely because of the work of James M. McPherson, who demonstrated that Civil War soldiers on both sides were deeply ideological, highly political, and intensely patriotic, no one could claim with the slightest degree of persuasiveness that Johnny Reb and Billy Yank were mere instruments

of conniving politicians and inept generals. Modern day cynicism about government numbed audiences to the idea that historical actors actually had faith in their institutions and were willing to risk their ideas for the nation-state. I knew that I had to help visitors gain altitude when studying the battlefield as a historic landscape, that it had to be not just a killing ground where we scrutinized tactics and admired heroism, but a political arena where men hurled themselves against the enemy for both cause and comrades. Trying to share this perspective with visitors at Cold Harbor--where Grant suffered horrendous losses on June 3, 1864—proved maddening more often than not. Everyone wanted to see where the “Butcher” callously slaughtered his men. Thankfully, I was no longer shackled by my former Appomattox persona of Bobby Fields. I was able to ask visitors to consider a moment in time when a man, in anticipating his own death, decided how he would carry himself during what he imagined was going to be his final hours of his life. Rather than lecture visitors about soldier motivation, I surrendered intellectual authority by creating a less formal and more conversational format with visitors, an approach that was becoming in vogue in the NPS. Unpacking the conflicted and contradictory thoughts of soldiers before the fatal charge at Cold Harbor almost always turned into a lively conversation with visitors. We focused on the pre-dawn hours of June 3 as a compressed moment in time, when there was a collision of forces both visible and invisible, ranging from coercion to comradeship, and including high ideas as well as a manly honor and a sense of duty. Many visitors enjoyed becoming their own historians, trying to see the world through the eyes of a soldier, with all of its constraints and opportunities. Writing one’s name on a piece of paper and pinning it to a sack coat could no longer be reduced to a mechanical act of a listless soldier condemned to death.

The layers of history that converged on Grant's soldiers when they essentially signed their own "death certificates" helped audiences appreciate what Karl Marx famously argued so long ago. People do make history, as common soldiers proved during the Civil War, but Marx also reminds us that circumstances of the moment are not always of people's making. Getting this across to visitors—without attributing it to Marx—sharpened their historical thinking.

The striking contrast between my walking tours at Fredericksburg and Cold Harbor reflected the profound changes that occurred in NPS Civil War interpretation during the course of my time there. The reverberations have been felt for more than twenty years. Pinpointing the origins of this seismic shift is difficult to say, but a 1998 Nashville gathering of Civil War park superintendents played a crucial role in pushing the issue of Civil War interpretation, in content as well as in form to the top of the NPS agenda. If the history of Civil War sites was not broadened the NPS officials in Nashville feared that their parks would only appeal to a narrow segment of the American people--white, male, and over the age of 50. In less than a generation they predicted a slow demise to irrelevance. They insisted, moreover, that the NPS had an obligation to convey the contested meanings and the political legacy of the Civil War. Usually governmental self-studies have a brief and unmemorable life before heading to the shredder, but the Nashville declaration--entitled "Holding the High Ground"--was truly transformative. Battlefield sites had always presented the stories of "who shot whom and where," but thanks to the "Holding the High Ground" initiative, NPS historians were asked to contextualize those stories within the important historical issues of "why were they shooting?" and "why did it matter?" Not all interpreters were receptive to this

philosophical approach, and there are still a few unfortunate holdouts.¹⁵ Some non-NPS critics have condemned this initiative for diminishing the sacrifices and valor of Civil War soldiers, even suggesting that the federal government should relinquish control of the battlefields, but those criticisms are now faint and growing fainter, and thankfully so. In the end, “Holding the High Ground” spurred important collaborative relationships between academics and professional historians, especially between the NPS and the Organization of American Historians. These professional exchanges have helped usher in sweeping interpretive changes and innovative programming that left its mark on the Civil War 150th, which will be remembered for its intellectual fearlessness in challenging Americans to conceive of the war as a revolutionary struggle for Union and emancipation, not as a low-intensity conflict between American brothers.¹⁶

The challenge ahead is how to make Civil War battlefields places of relevance without losing the emotional resonance that people crave from historic sites. Opening an inquiry into the plight of American veterans today is important and admirable, but if we want our audiences to understand how wars change men and women, then we cannot sacrifice historical context by making superficial diagnoses of Civil War soldiers as victims of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome.¹⁷ Our conversations with the public must carefully examine the distinct ways that Civil War Americans understood killing and

¹⁵ On the reaction of one Civil War National Park to “Holding the High Ground, see Elizabeth A. Getz, “Looking to the High Ground: Historians at the Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park Respond to FY-2000.” MA thesis., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, of North Carolina 2003.

¹⁶ For an overview of the “Holding the High Ground” initiative, see Robert K. Sutton, “Holding the High Ground: Interpreting the Civil War in National Parks Volume” in *George Wright Forum* 25, no. 3 (2008) accessed May 24, 2015. <http://www.georgewright.org/253sutton.pdf>.

¹⁷ ¹⁷ On the historiographical debate over the psychological impact of combat, see Eric T. Dean, “The Awful Shock and Rage of Battle:” Rethinking the Meaning and Consequences of Combat in the Civil War,” in *Battle: The Nature and Consequences of Civil War Combat*, ed. Kent Gramm (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2008), 92-109.

death, and they were quite different from our medical knowledge and culture today. Unfortunately, a recent shift in Civil War historiography—referred to by some as the dark turn or new revisionism—often suffers from presentism that appears as a desperate attempt to connect with contemporary affairs. Some historians believe that the new revisionism has promise to represent a more realistic image of the conflict. The ugliness of war can be conveyed, however, without advancing a political agenda. NPS historians are doing just that--largely out of necessity---since they are muzzled as federal employees when it comes to commenting on contemporary issues. Nonetheless they have not been shy in showing visitors how different groups of soldiers experience and remember the inhumanity of war. The battlefield walks at Petersburg's Crater and Richmond's Fort Gilmer put the massacre of black troops at the center of the story. At Gettysburg, interpreters reenact the Court Martial of a Union officer charged with cowardice. At the Chickamauga visitor center, historians have designed exhibits explaining how returning Union veterans extolled their own martial heroism through their reunions on the battlefield, and the dedication of their monuments.¹⁸

I am also concerned about the implications of the public's desire to connect with the past as it was originally experienced, to feel their history in an immediate and emotional way. At some public history sites interpretive programs are aimed at recovering the real war, by lining up kids in battle formations, handing them toy guns, and then asking them to charge across the battlefield. We have museum experiences that are intended to recreate the feel of combat, with puffs of air blowing by visitors' heads as

¹⁸ For a summary of the dark turn in Civil War historiography, see Yael A. Sternhell, "Revisionism Reinvented? The Antiwar Turn in Civil War Scholarship," in *The Journal of the Civil War Era* (3, no. 2 (June, 2013), 239-56.

if bullets were whizzing by and the ground actually rumbling to simulate the killing fields of the Civil War.

Our sincere efforts to connect with our public, to spark an interest through experiential learning, to give them the sensations of war, cannot come at the cost of mystifying combat, which I believe is the unintentional result of trying to recover the “real war” for our visitors, our students, and our readers. I would add that in making war stories comprehensible, both in the classroom and on the battlefield, we have imbued violence with too much intentionality and purpose. Take, for instance, the current NPS framing devices of “New Birth of Freedom” and “From Civil War to Civil Rights.” Both place the bloodletting of the Civil War on a trajectory of human progress and freedom, a predictable democratic future that most Civil War Americans could never have envisioned at the time. Moreover, the ambiguity and messiness of the historical moment is lost, and the master narrative of the Civil War as an inevitable triumph of a democracy remains unquestioned, an argument point put forth by Edward Ayers in his immensely important 1998 essay “Worrying about the Civil War. New methodologies in cultural history and the cynicism produced by two Middle Eastern wars has inspired a new generation of historians, often called new revisionists, to answer Ayers’s call.”¹⁹

The cohort of scholars who fall under the new revisionist camp deserve praise for stripping away the romantic veneer of war, but they go too far in their sweeping depictions of veterans as mentally fractured men who returned to a civilian society that both feared and loathed them. The powerful anti-war influence in the historiography is largely responsible for the distorted portrait of Civil War veterans as a lost generation.

¹⁹ Edward L. Ayers, “Worrying about the Civil War,” Ayers, *What Caused the Civil War? Reflections on the South and Southern History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), 103-30.

Such exaggerated claims generally tell us more about the political perspective of the ivory tower than it does about opinions of Civil War America. I am concerned, moreover, that new-revisionism is causing us to lose touch with the very idealism that enabled soldiers to mentally and emotionally absorb the shock of war. The indisputable fact is that the vast majority of Civil War soldiers were not disillusioned, nor were they forgotten by the societies that sent them off to kill in 1861. The preservation of the Union and the destruction of slavery justified the awful slaughter to the wartime populace, and they continued to commemorate those sacrifices until the last veteran passed. We feel dissonance between the war's means and its outcome in ways that did not register with Northerners or Southerners at the time. Yet, if we insist on portraying Civil War soldiers as either depressed or deranged, we then risk losing the crucial realities of the Civil War, and quite likely much of our popular audiences who want to find strength in their histories, rather than history lessons used to point out the moral failings of the United States as a world power today.

How do we engage civic issues at Civil War parks and in the classroom *without going beyond the battlefield* or showing our own political agendas? As a field, we continue to insist that public historians listen to their audiences, that they need to share authority, but when it comes to military history sites public historians have been told by academics to subordinate visitor needs that center on a deep interest in knowing “who shot whom and where.” So how do we tap our visitors’ passionate interests in traditional military history, when we all recognize the limitations of focusing on strategy and tactics in isolation? I think we need to create gaming situations that place visitors in the wheelhouse of war and thus enable them to have the joy of discovery through choosing

their own adventure. My gaming blueprint would largely pivot around what if scenarios, giving the visitor a chance to make different command decisions within a very specific social, political, and cultural context. This promises to satisfy the visitors' craving for knowing what happened on the ground, but a sophisticated gaming experience will also give them altitude on the battle so that they will explore the nature of war from a range of perspectives while considering the political and human costs of warfare.

A visitor, for instance, could assume the character of an officer in Davis's Mississippi brigade during the Gettysburg Campaign. He or she would follow the unit to site-specific locations where they would be "transported back" to the ground level of war. At Cashtown, an area used as a staging area for Lee's army on the first day of the battle, the visitor would be presented with a difficult command decision. Three enlisted men--upon returning from a foraging mission--escort an African American into camp. The black man protests that he has always been a free man. The soldiers want to enslave him on the spot, arguing that the officers have their own "body servants" to tend to their every need, and that they have a right as white men to "carry" their own slaves in the ranks. To make an informed decision, the visitor (as an officer) would need to know about Lee's policy toward African Americans (both slave and free) in Pennsylvania, the honor-bound temperament of Southern enlisted men, the racial attitudes of Confederate soldiers, and the potential dangers of having an unknown black man in the unit. Each decision would have a different impact on the military effectiveness of the brigade. The overriding goal of the game is to maximize the brigade's combat efficiency. In guiding visitors around the battlefield through a gaming scenario, he or she would have to know more than strategy and tactics. They could only excel at this game by standing in the shoes of a

range of historical figures who experienced the same historical space at the same historical moment, but made very different meanings of those same events.

For those who say that the call of civic engagement risks alienating our audiences, it is important to remember that historians during the Centennial offered a similar defense for not dealing with race and slavery, claiming that such matters were too controversial, too political, and too divisive for an American public that was marching in lock step with Cold War politics. Although it is deeply gratifying to see how the 150th commemorations have trumped the Centennial's celebration of reunion at the expense of race, I fear that we leave our own distinct legacy of omission if we do not challenge our public to face their own role in perpetuating a romanticized American militarism. This mystification of state sanctioned killing, allowing people to retreat into a fantasy world in which war becomes a spectator sport, blinding us to our civic responsibilities to both the nation and the world as the United States confronts a dark and quite possibly an inescapable future of unending global conflict.

