



1-14-2014

## For Gods' Sake, Copy-edit that Textbook on the Wall

John M. Rudy  
*Gettysburg College*

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

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

**Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.**

---

Rudy, John M., "For Gods' Sake, Copy-edit that Textbook on the Wall" (2014). *Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public*. 59.

<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/interpretcw/59>

This open access blog post 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](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

# For Gods' Sake, Copy-edit that Textbook on the Wall

## Abstract

So, my social streams flooded on Monday [with an article from the Denver Business Journal](#), a weekly Colorado publication with a circulation rate of about 16,000 issues. The internet is an amazingly powerful force for magnification. It can make a rant from one irate museum goer with very-close-to-nil circulation seem like a meaningful and broadly held opinion. [*excerpt*]

## Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, historical museums

## 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."

## Creative Commons License

Creative

Commons

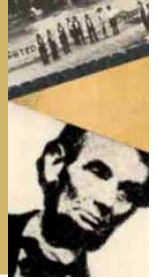
This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

License

# Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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



## For Gods' Sake, Copy-edit that Textbook on the Wall

Tuesday, JANUARY 14, 2014



The Stuka in Question. / [CC nathanm](#)

So, my social streams flooded on Monday [with an article from the Denver Business Journal](#), a weekly Colorado publication with a circulation rate of about 16,000 issues. The internet is an amazingly powerful force for magnification. It can make a rant from one irate museum goer with very-close-to-nil circulation seem like a meaningful and broadly held opinion.

In his ramshackle screed, and there's very little else it could be called, David Sneed, owner of a fence construction company in Denver, rants about the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry.

But after all that waiting, most visitors didn't even notice the Stuka... because they were too busy smashing their pudgy hands against a filthy red button to hear the T-Rex roar.

I understand on one level Sneed's frustration. From a few photos I've gleaned online, the main transportation hall where the Stuka hangs seems to have little in the way of interpretation or context, the German dive-bomber hanging awkwardly beside a Boeing 727's fuselage and a steam locomotive.

The problem is much the same as I have with the Enola Gay's current berth at the Smithsonian's Udvar-Hazy Center in Chantilly, VA, where, stacked like cord-wood atop other planes of the World War II era, it loses all context and meaning. I much prefer (unlike the members of the VFW) the 1995 exhibition and its original script delving into what that plane did for and to the world.

Likewise, there the Stuka hangs mute. It, as far as I can tell, doesn't tell its own story very well.

OK, so Sneed has a point. The Stuka isn't all that striking.

But that's about the only point he has which is sustainable for the future of public history. A sustainable future requires one key thing: helping everyone find a reason to care about the past. Everyone needs an access point. And access points which work for the largest percentage of

"everyone," which, in the terms of interpretation, strike toward the universal, are the best investment.

What would Sneed replace the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry's interactive weather and dinosaur exhibits with? "I want a museum that bores the children and scares the old people," Sneed muses, "Learning takes time and effort; it's boring; and kids should know that from conception."

Learning is not painful. It's not boring.

It can be boring. It can be torturous. It can be a process of pouring facts over the stifled and cuffed captive, like water over the nose and mouth of a victim of water-boarding.

And God knows I've been in plenty of exhibits where that's the case. I call them, as do many of my colleagues, a textbook-on-a-wall. They're those exhibits which stretch on interminably, taking literally hours to read ever bit of text. The designers decided that every fact, every detail, every nugget of minutiae needed to be printed on a panel somewhere and slapped on the wall. And once you've already paid your admission (or ridden the Metro for an hour), you feel almost honor-bound to bang your head against each and every panel until blood trickles from your furrowed and overstuffed brow.

This is Sneed's answer to the accessible museum: make it torturous for everyone. And what will that yield?

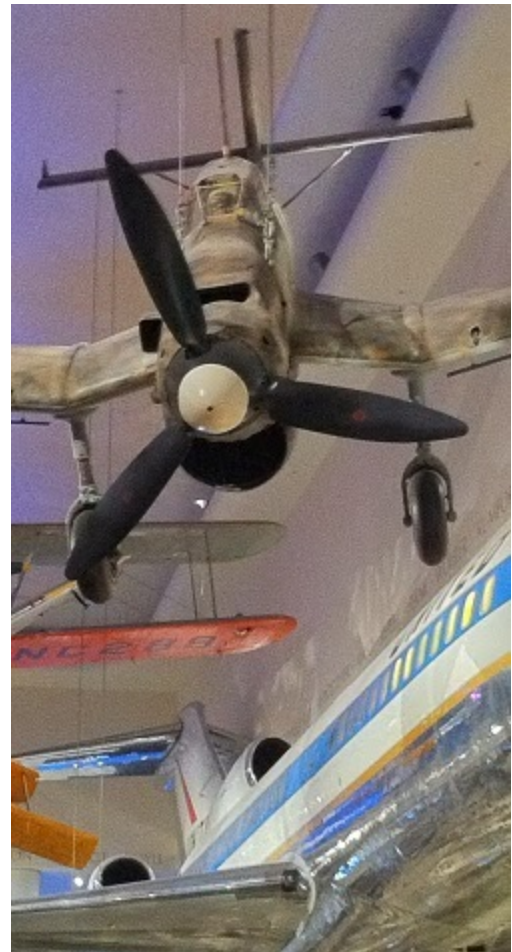
No one will go.

When I say, "no one," I specifically mean, "not everyone."

Museums and historic sites are tasked with being relevant to everyone, not simply the already interested. If we preach to the choir, the choir can never grow.

So what is my answer? I want a museum that scares the old people, scares the young people, scares the middle aged. That's something that happens from visceral experience, not exhibit text. I want a museum that helps everyone understand the fear of a Stuka, not because of a textbook's worth of text, but from the object's placement, from the way it's lit, from the soundtrack playing alongside it.

I want a museum that makes people laugh like a soldier reading a comic in Playboy in the rice patties of Vietnam, just before a firefight erupts. But old, young and middle laugh at different things. The important learning moment is not getting the specific joke in that 1960s era magazine, but feeling



If this Stuka had an audio track, and dramatic lighting, and a bright red button to push putting that frightening diving prop into action, *then* it might strike fear into *everyone's* heart.

/ [C.C.H. Michael Miley](#)

that tough-to-replicate feeling of giggling in the midst of abject terror. So make them laugh, then shock them. Give them the feeling. But an exhibit panel doesn't do that, whether it's a 4th grader or a 80-year-old reading it. Experience does that.

In short, museums need to become more experiential, not less. Learning is not something we suffer through. We, as a species, have learned best from experience since the first man discovered fire. No matter that his wife told him, "hot," he only learned when he singed his own fingers.

Damning museums for trying buttons and sound effects is not productive. Lauding them and pushing them to do better is.

A thumbnail example: when my mother and I first visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington, I was barely old enough to go through the exhibits (back when they had an age limit). I remember getting in the elevator, dimly lit with heavy, riveted walls. She leaned into me and with real, palpable fear in her voice whispered, "it's a gas chamber," as the attendant pushed us into the elevator and it rumbled up.

It was that moment the holocaust became real to her. The text we read for the next three hours was unnecessary.

Intentionally wanting history to be boring is elitist and antithetical to what our profession is meant to do: unearth the past to make the present a better place.

-----

(And before some pedant comes along, yes, I know the difference between copy editing and general editing. But I also know what makes a catchier title, and something with four syllables rings better than two.)