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On Larsen: Friends, Philosophers and Historians

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On Larsen: Friends, Philosophers and Historians

Abstract

It's been a melancholic week for me. My boss Katie's [blog post on Tuesday](#) set my mind spinning back to a friend we lost two years ago. When the [Civil War Institute noticed some video footage](#) of Larsen that's on YouTube, it only cemented those thoughts into my mind. The video started racing around the blogosphere, and the thoughts percolated. And the words used to describe Dave were daggers to my heart: "National Park Service historian." [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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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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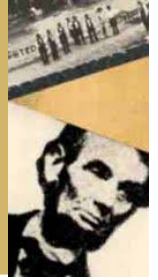
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Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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THURSDAY, JANUARY 10, 2013

It's been a melancholic week for me. My boss Katie's [blog post on Tuesday](#) set my mind spinning back to a friend we lost two years ago. When the [Civil War Institute noticed some video footage](#) of Larsen that's on YouTube, it only cemented those thoughts into my mind. The video started racing around the blogosphere, and the thoughts percolated. And the words used to describe Dave were daggers to my heart: "National Park Service historian."

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TgEOa118j-o&list=PL2B04863E7BC87E07&feature=player_embedded

David's interview from "Discovery 2000" that's been making the rounds lately.

David wasn't an historian, he was an interpreter. I know that distinction isn't clear in the Civil War world, but it should be. David's American University degree was in Philosophy. Yes, he worked his entire life back and forth *with* history. But he was a philosopher first and foremost.

The raw stuff of history *was* wheat and chaff for Larsen, waiting to be separated at the mill. This much an interpreter shares with the historian. Both take the raw material of history, the documents, letters, censuses, notes scribbled in the heat of the moment, and do something with them.

The historian runs all this through the grist mill of the mind, grinding the facts and figures against the wheel and bringing forth massive 50 lb. bags of fine ground flour. The historian captures every viable grain of wheat, leaves behind the chaff and crams the fine flour into the larders of knowledge. That's not a fault, it's simply a definition.

But History is to Interpretation as a fifty pound sack of flour is to a cupcake; they partly comprise the same basic materials, but one takes a lot weirder fine grain control.

The interpreter, the truly skilled interpreter like Larsen, runs that same grist through the mill of the mind and comes out with 50 lb. bags of fine ground flour as well. But the interpreter looks for the one cup in that fifty pounds, the one scoop of flour that will make the perfect cupcake, that will make the most amazing meaning. Then they politely dump the majority of that flour into the hog trough, not to be used for human consumption.

This is a fundamentally different philosophy of research and construction. The Historian amasses the aggregate of the world's knowledge. The Interpreter combs the world's knowledge for one or two amazingly meaningful tastes.

What does this look like? The Interpreter digging through history seeks out resonances, not complete bodies of knowledge. Resonances are the echoes of the past forward into the human soul. So instead of worrying about learning an order of battle or a table of organization, the interpreter's job is to build a small but ever-growing toolkit of meanings and stories, small morsel ready to whip out and build greater meaning in a place.

[*An Interpretive Dialogue*](#), the story of an historian struggling to find meaning, is the heart of David's 2003 book *Meaningful Interpretation*

This is an entirely different research skill set, fundamentally connected to that of the Historian but focused entirely differently.

Tuesday morning, on the way into work, I was listening to WGBH's archived real-time coverage of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. It is an amazing living document; an entire day's radio coverage as reporters try to find the words to describe the momentous scene.

And a few tantalizing pieces stood out.

George Lincoln Rockwell and members of the American Nazi Party were protesting south of the Lincoln Memorial that August day. Major Karl Allen, Rockwell's assistant, was arrested and arraigned for demonstrating without a license. He reported to ERN's Mike Rice that, "the March is instigated by Communist trained people." Even when the Lincoln Memorial was being used as a laboratory for democracy by A. Philip Randolph's march, it was being used as such a laboratory by his opposition.

Rick Lee, reporting national headlines from Boston back to the ERN, read an obituary for W.E.B. DuBois. The famed activist for civil rights in his own era and founding voice of the NAACP, died the day before the March on Washington. DuBois was the Malcolm X of his own struggle for Civil Rights. The Black Civil Rights movement was not a unified front in any decade, but a fractured and piecemeal drive toward true citizenship.

Two tidbits. Your eye begins to search for them automatically, your ear begins hearing them in the chaff that is 15 hours of broadcast coverage of a major American event. They are small resonances with the modern era, many that don't need to be explicitly pointed out. You don't need to say "Westboro Baptist Church" to draw the modern connections. You don't need to hear "Washington gridlock" to think of divided political minds coming together for a greater good.

It is approaching research for a fundamentally different purpose. History aims to chronicle the arch and trends of the past. Interpretation aims to make the present and future better, and just so happens to use history to do that sometimes.

Interpreters are not, cannot be, never should be historians. They carry an historian's toolbox, but they need to approach history in a fundamentally different way.

They need to instead *use those tools of history* like my friend David did. They need to be philosophers. We are sages for a modern era, we are the voices trying to make the world a better place. We don't chronicle the past, we use it to help people find their own lessons within.

The past is the interpreter's and philosopher's paint set and his canvas is the future. At least it was for Larsen.