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# Point/Counterpoint: Anchoring Historical Memory

Bryan G. Caswell
*Gettysburg College*

Heather L. Clancy '15
*Gettysburg College*

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**Abstract**

Wednesday, November 19, 2014 saw citizens and students of Gettysburg crowd into the Majestic Theater for the fifty-third annual Robert Fortenbaugh Memorial Lecture. The audience listened attentively as Dr. Nina Silber, a renowned historian of the American Civil War, explored the nuanced application of the memory of Abraham Lincoln during the 1930s and '40s, especially as associated with the figure of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. [*excerpt*]

**Keywords**

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**Disciplines**

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# Point/Counterpoint: Anchoring Historical Memory



*November 21, 2014*

*by Bryan Caswell '15 and Heather Clancy '15*

**Bryan:** Wednesday, November 19, 2014 saw citizens and students of Gettysburg crowd into the Majestic Theater for the fifty-third annual Robert Fortenbaugh Memorial Lecture. The audience listened attentively as Dr. Nina Silber, a renowned historian of the American Civil War, explored the nuanced application of the memory of Abraham Lincoln during the 1930s and '40s, especially as associated with the figure of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. A fascinating study of the evolution and utility of the public conception of an historical figure, Dr. Silber's talk made manifest the common adage that each generation is possessed of their own Lincoln. Yet as I sat there in the Majestic pondering the implications of the lecture, I noticed a curious phenomenon. While Lincoln was every bit the pivotal character in Dr. Silber's narrative, nowhere in her discussion could the historical Lincoln be found. The objective of the lecture was of course not to define the historical Lincoln but to explain the Lincoln of the New Deal era, so this absence could be understandable. Even with this concession, however, Silber's strictly tangential references to the historical inspiration for memory continued to give me pause.

**Heather:** Silber's more peripheral use of Civil War history in her exploration of the popular 1930s memory of Lincoln also sparked an initial uncertainty for me. In this particular case, though, I was ultimately reassured by the potential that a tangential discussion of history offers in the ongoing effort to make Civil War memory—and indeed perhaps all historical memory—more widely relevant beyond the confines of an otherwise very specialized subfield. In an area of academic study already so frequently criticized for what many perceive as a lack of pragmatic applications, the opportunity for a more general and interdisciplinary examination of historical memory is crucial.

**Bryan:** This highly relevant application of memory studies to both decades past and, by implication, contemporary issues is of course highly admirable. The lack of a concrete historical foundation upon which to build a study of Lincoln in memory seems to me, however, to be a cautionary tale. It is tempting to forego a discussion of such an apparently basic topic as the historical Lincoln, yet Dr. Silber's lecture itself was founded on the principle of the mutability of Lincoln's perceived identity: memory as a study of the historiography generated by public consciousness, if you will. By no means did this detract from the lecture. Far from it! Yet if one looks closely enough, this focus on memory to the near-exclusion of the historical inspiration can prove treacherous for the field of memory studies. Without a discussion of historical fact and how memory differs from it, these efforts bear the risk of floating off into a sky of theoretical propositions and convoluted, self-evident arguments from which little of substance can be gleaned. It is only with the proper application of historical context that memory studies can be anchored firmly to the ground.

**Heather:** This so-called interpretive anchor strikes me as being a problematic one to define, though. Lincoln himself was a tangle of personal values and political aims, and so attempting to restrict him to any one collection of definite positions is virtually impossible. It is equally impossible to arrive at any definite conclusion regarding the reality of character. There is a tendency among many historians to play fast and loose with historical figures. This is especially the case in regard to titans of popular memory who have been appropriated for public use in so many ways over the decades that what remains of them is less historical reality than an interpretive exoskeleton. In the face of historical vagueness or inconsistency, the knee-jerk reaction is to over-extrapolate, drawing enormously broad conclusions that cannot be directly supported by the primary source material. As historians, we don't have the ability to question historical figures on particular issues and reformulate academic analysis to reflect the resulting developments in information. As a result, the only options are to either settle into noncommittal conclusions or to overextend them based on tenuous suppositions.

**Bryan:** An astute observation, and one that does not solely apply to reaching some kind of historical reality. Memory studies itself is based on a shifting foundation of implicit evidence and that all-too-rare gem of commemorative self-awareness. With a topic as central to one's identity as memory, historians must rely not on explicit evidence but on the shadowy strands of subjects' subconscious motivation. Indeed, not even the discipline of history as a whole is immune from this basic yet crucial methodological challenge, as primary sources so often approach topics of interest obliquely if they are mentioned at all. Perhaps, then, this problem of historical context and responsibility is not an issue unique to memory studies or its application; perhaps it is only a lesson to students of history in general that one must always be cautious in engaging the inner musings of memory and history itself.

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