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Dead is Dead: Why 20% Doesn't Matter

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Abstract

Over at Cosmic America, Keith Harris beat me to the punch on this one. But Jake can attest to the fact that, since the "news" of the revision of [Civil War dead up by 130,000](#) broke, I have been grumbling on and off.

Keywords

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Disciplines

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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."

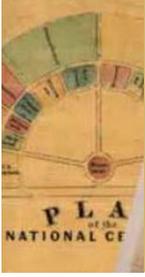
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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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Dead is Dead: Why 20% Doesn't Matter

THURSDAY, APRIL 12, 2012

Over at Cosmic America, Keith Harris [beat me to the punch](#) on this one. But Jake can attest to the fact that, since the ["news" of the revision of Civil War dead up by 130,000](#) broke, I have been grumbling on and off.

I have this philosophical challenge that I call the McDouble Problem. It was born of a conversation between myself and a few of my college friends when I noted to my close, personal economics geek that I can't understand the national debt. "What is 4 trillion dollars?" I asked, "It's an imaginary number. I can't visualize 4 trillion anything."



This is what "one" looks like.
/ CC Like_the_Grand_Canyon

I can imagine a dollar, because I can visualize one McDouble, the \$1 cheeseburger at the millions of ubiquitous McDonald's fast-food joints dotting America. I can imagine \$10, because I can visualize 10 McDoubles lined up in a row. I can imagine \$100, because I can imagine 10 rows of 10 McDoubles. I can even begin to imagine \$1,000, because I can imagine 10 layers of 10 rows of 10 McDoubles each, all stacked into a giant cheeseburger cube.

But after that, things become fuzzy. 1,000 anything is where my powers of estimation begin to wane.

Numbers are really tough to grasp when they start getting to astronomical heights. Penn Jillette (of & Teller fame) has [a good \(and somewhat vulgar / NSFW\) description](#) of how he personally conceptualizes numbers. My and my friends' economics conversation ended up creating an imaginary mile long cube of McDoubles in a hypothetical Delaware (no sales tax) with no gravity.

Don't worry, we're not headed to our own private Delaware today.

David Hacker, an historian at Binghamton University, has shifted our estimate of the number of Civil War dead up by about 130,000 corpses. My chief question, the most dangerous in all of the historical world: So What?

What do 130,000 corpses look like? I can't visualize that number. The concept of 130,000 dead bodies is completely unfathomable in my mind. So what's the difference between the old and new numbers? 620,000 dead in my mind is just as imaginary as 750,000 dead. Haven't those dead already been dead for 150 years? This new calculation changed nothing.

None of those raw numbers work in my mind. You can say, "750,000 Americans died in the Civil War, more than all other American wars combined up through Korea." The silent response inside my head is, "meh."

It's not that I don't care. Look through our back catalogue. I have nothing but care for the dead of the war. I recoil at the concept of wholesale bloodshed and state-sponsored destruction of human life.

I just am not moved by a statistic. It doesn't ring within my heart.

So what does?

We've quoted Freeman Tilden's *Interpreting Our Heritage* here

before, but I think it is applicable and bears repeating here:

...Americans are not descendants of a regiment; we are sprung from men and women."



His young face speaks louder than any statistic can. / PD LOC

One body, one single man or woman and their personal struggle brings the war home to me.

In the town where I live, that body could be Amos Humiston clutching a photo of his three darling children as he breathes his last, never to kiss their sleeping heads again.

It could be my great-grand uncle, who more than likely was atomized by friendly fire as he and his comrades desperately retreated through the valley of death at the base of Little Round Top teaching those watching from their perches above, "how to die like soldiers."

It could be the screaming agony of a wounded Zouave, unable to drag himself from the former-refuge of the burning Sherfy Barn as red-hot embers and flaming beams tumble down on his prostrate body.

It could be Lt. Colonel Waller Patton, mortally wounded and unable to lay down, the only thing keeping him alive for the last lingering days of his life the support of a nurse's back sitting on the floor behind him as a makeshift human chair.

So 20% more people died in the Civil War than we thought a few months ago. That doesn't change the fact that people, individual Americans with hopes, dreams, fears and loves died. The route to understanding that number is not found simply in shouting it from the rooftops.

No. The route to understanding comes through in finding one man and helping me understand his struggle, his suffering, his death. Because once I understand that one man, I can begin to feel the weight of 750,000 times his individual suffering.