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Guest Post: John Rambo fights the Civil War

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Abstract

Today we offer another of our “Guest Post Wednesday” extras, with some meditations on Rambo from Aaron Urbanski. Yeah, we’re not kidding... Rambo. Aaron is a graduate of the GMU American History Masters program and alumnus Ranger of the NPS. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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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."

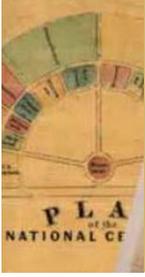
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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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WEDNESDAY, JULY 11, 2012

Today we offer another of our "Guest Post Wednesday" extras, with some meditations on Rambo from Aaron Urbanski. Yeah, we're not kidding... Rambo. Aaron is a graduate of the GMU American History Masters program and alumnus Ranger of the NPS.

For me, Sunday evenings are typically a nice time to relax, reflect on the weekend that was, and ponder the week ahead. This past Sunday, I participated in none of those activities. I was distracted, distraught, and, due to the late hour I ultimately found myself still awake, a bit disheveled. Rambo 4 was on television. Now, one does not typically watch Rambo 1, 2, 3, or 4 if he or she is looking to discover some profound, eye-opening message or theme. I was largely distracted, as anyone who watches a Rambo film surely is, by the over-the-top violence and profanity. I am not knocking the Rambo series in any way here. But what ultimately made me distraught as I watched the a large number of arrows fly and throats opened was the fact that I was trying to figure out the meaning of it all. Can John Rambo teach us something about quantifying history?

According to [one online source](#), the time at which the first person is killed in Rambo 4 is 3:22. After that, the number of people killed per minute until the end of the film (not including the credits) is 3.04. So, basically, three people die each minute in Rambo 4. These are some pretty good stats. Hats off to the person who discovered them.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8n1hKQULa9Y&feature=player_embedded

Rambo looks something like this
(**note: not to scale**)

Math is fun. It can be applied to an abundance of situations to make them seem more interesting. Want some more Rambo stats? In Rambo 3, the number of bad guys killed by Rambo with his shirt off is 45. This is one less than Rambo 2. I suppose he preferred to be clothed in Rambo 4, because the number of people he kills without his shirt on is 0. Math is also hard and oftentimes quite frustrating. Once the numbers get large, decimal points are thrown in, and we have to begin rounding, we get further away from the true answers to mathematical equations. This plays out time and again in American history. John Rudy touches at this a bit in his post, "[Dead is Dead: Why 20% Doesn't Matter](#)". How do we conceptualize vast statistics about an event that happened 150 years ago? In other words, what do the numbers of dead on a battlefield mean to visitors of an American historical site? How can we get true meaning from math?

Suppose an interpreter tells a visitor 5,000 men lost their lives during a particular battle of the

American Civil War. This is a graphic, harrowing number. Can it ever be an exact number? No. We can never know exactly how many individuals lost their lives on any given Civil War battlefield. Nothing can pinpoint that sort of precise statistic. The numbers get more real and vivid, however, when we begin to learn the individual stories of the men who comprise that group of 5,000, just like John suggested in his April post. These numbers start to get easier to work with when an interpreter helps visitors find true value in statistics. We are able to move from Rambo numbers to meaningful numbers. Each of the men that make up that group of 5,000 matter. Each person who hears that number is going to find meaning in each individual story in a different way. So, if one person discovers 5,000 different meanings, then 30 people on an interpretive program will discover 150,000 meanings. Is my math right here? That is an astounding number of meanings. Math is fun.

Now, we can't expect 150,000 meanings to ever be reached on an interpretive program, thanks to limitations of time and energy. But it's rather impressive to see the power of numbers play out on any American historical site. Heck, we don't need a battlefield to find meaning in the Civil War. The metrorail system in Washington, DC, is the second busiest rapid transit system in the US, after the subway in New York. According to metro sources, there were 215.3 million trips taken during the year 2008. In March of 2012, more than 760,000 people rode the metro each day. There are 86 stations in the DC metro system. One of those stations has the name "African American Civil War Memorial". I don't know exactly how many people look at a metro map each day and see the name of the stop, or even get off at that stop and see the modest memorial it is named for. But based on metro's calculations I've listed above, it's safe to say a large number of people in and around DC each day are reminded that African Americans played a part in the Civil War that deserves to be memorialized.

If we could more accurately pinpoint that number, though, would the value of this kind of memorialization increase? What do most people do in the morning as they wait for their preferred mode of public transportation to whisk them away to their jobs? Some catch up on a book, a good number probably listen to music, and even more stare into space with glazed eyes that read "why do I have to be awake this early?". Can we offer them a few moments of something else to do?

What if it was determined on average 6,000 individuals enter the metro station that has "African American Civil War Memorial" in its title per day. What if some sort of sign, gesture, or notion was presented to each person as he or she waited for a train to arrive, reminding him or her why the station holds the name it does? Can this be done? Would something like this be an effective way to help individuals find meaning in their surroundings during something so routine as a commute to work? That is another huge batch of meanings waiting to be brewed. And these are meanings that catch people off guard, meanings found during an activity they have to do each day.

So in the end, let's not forget the importance of numbers when we strive to share history with others.

Because one day I'd like to know how many times any famous Civil War leader committed a gallant, Rambo-style act. While shirtless.