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## The Clash of Storytelling and History

Ryan M. Nadeau  
*Gettysburg College*

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# The Clash of Storytelling and History

## **Abstract**

One of the most enduring archetypes of heroic storytelling is the triumph of the underdog: a figure who overcomes great and powerful foes due to their innate virtues, the nobility of their goal, or the hubris of their arrogant and highly flawed enemy. Their triumph illustrates the existence of greater forces of fairness, justice, and righteousness in their story world: a world in which they who are truly deserving of victory find it, and they who are unworthy are cast down – a story which has a spotty record at best in the real world. The narrative does not necessarily have to be so grand, either (the casting down of an enemy is completely optional). The enduring narrative of the self-made-man, for instance, follows a similar path: here is a person who has no material advantages to speak of, but is able to rise to the top of society through their own virtue and skill, triumphing against all odds [*excerpt*].

## **Keywords**

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, The Confederate Memorial at Stone Mountain, Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

## **Comments**

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### The Clash of Storytelling and History

October 2, 2015

By Ryan Nadeau '16

One of the most enduring archetypes of heroic storytelling is the triumph of the underdog: a figure who overcomes great and powerful foes due to their innate virtues, the nobility of their goal, or the hubris of their arrogant and highly flawed enemy. Their triumph illustrates the existence of greater forces of fairness, justice, and righteousness in their story world: a world in which they who are truly deserving of victory find it, and they who are unworthy are cast down – a story which has a spotty record at best in the real world. The narrative does not necessarily have to be so grand, either (the casting down of an enemy is completely optional). The enduring narrative of the self-made-man, for instance, follows a similar path: here is a person who has no material advantages to speak of, but is able to rise to the top of society through their own virtue and skill, triumphing against all odds.



*The Confederate Memorial at Stone Mountain, depicting a heroic Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, and Stonewall Jackson: Heroes of the Confederate story, but of history?  
Photography courtesy of Jim Bowen, via Wikimedia Commons. 26 January, 2012.*

As a human society, we love underdogs – from sports teams, to politicians, to businesses, to even something as mundane as a high school debate team. Why? Because their their success makes a good story, and is a hopeful suggestion that there is a force of fairness in the world that will reward those who work for their success. This is why, for instance, sports fans go nuts for a successful low-seed team during NCAA March Madness. The very fact that we call such turns of fortune “Cinderella Stories” reflects our affection for the fairy-tale of the underdog.

Now is perhaps the time to say, however, that real life is not a story by rule. Unlike stories, there is no end to any historical narrative. The repercussions of select events will echo into the future in an unpredictable number of ways—this is the very basis of cause and effect, after all. History does not feature plotlines and arcs that will be wrapped up, nice and tidy, when the story ‘ends.’

It would seem non-controversial to state that we cannot view history in the same way we view stories, using the lenses of archetypes and the satisfaction of certain narratives. And yet, as a society, we constantly seem inspired to do just that.

One of the worst offenders of this sort of cultural history is, of course, former and modern day Confederates and their perpetration of the myth of the Lost Cause—that the Confederacy was the nobler of the two parties of the Civil War, of a higher character than the North but doomed to fail due to the North’s superior brute strength (with the role of slavery either being fully ignored or considered a positive good in Southern society). As modern day historians demonstrate, it is historically simple to dismantle such a narrative. Yet why has Lost Cause ideology survived as long as it has—and even in the face of overwhelming scholarship, continues to endure?

The reason, I would posit, is because of stories. One can talk of political ideologies, yet perhaps just as significantly is the Lost Cause’s legacy of control over the historical narrative. Lost Causes have spun a tale which taps directly into the human desire for good stories. Their tale is told as one of heroism, where the weaker noble figure stands up to the brutish and tyrannical juggernaut—an underdog tale that is sure to pull at our heartstrings. And their defeat, rather than upending the underdog narrative, instead reinforces it, as it taps into the conception of martyrdom, where the hero made a “principled” stand even whilst doomed to fail.

Common wisdom states that “history is written by the victors,” but here I would argue this to be false—history was written instead by the storytellers. They were able to seize control of the historical narrative and write the North into a corner where portraying themselves as the decisive victors would only feed into the idea of the South’s heroic martyrdom, whereas the conception of a less decisive victory would undermine efforts of Southern Reconstruction.

The South lost the war—that much has been clear since 1865. They did, however, win the war of stories and of narratives. Stories are easy to cling to—all seems right in their world, for even in defeat there is purpose and honor, and heroism is real and undisputed. Stories, in that sense, are comforting. But reality is reality. The real world is not a comforting place, and follows no set rules of justice or fairness. An underdog is not always a hero, or necessarily ‘deserving’ of victory. And all that matters to the historical record is the truth—which may come with the admonition that one’s side was not the hero.

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