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Civil War Conclusions: What PBS' Freedom Riders Can Teach Us

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Abstract

We often have a deep problem in the Historical community. We that have gone through training and courses in "real" history, who have been trained in the academy don't know how to react when we get into the "public" history world. We step out on battlefields (or [killingfields](#)) and decide we can't trust our audiences to understand our evidence. So, we hit them over the head with a two-by-four of rhetoric. We have this deep impulse to tell people what to think about what they see on our landscapes.

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, PBS, Freedom Riders

Disciplines

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."

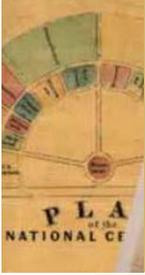
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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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THURSDAY, MAY 19, 2011

Civil War Conclusions: What PBS' *Freedom Riders* can teach us

I am going to have a theoretical conversation with my good friend Mr. Strawman today...



[@KismetNunez](#)
Kismet Nuñez

[#FreedomRiders](#) will remind you why the Confederate Flag is a problem.

[#Remember](#)

16 May via HootSuite

Twitter user [KismetNuñez](#) draws her own distinct connection between the Civil Rights revolution of the 1960s and the banner under which slavery made its last stand in the US.

We often have a deep problem in the Historical community. We that have gone through training and courses in "real" history, who have been trained in the academy don't know how to react when we get into the "public" history world. We step out on battlefields (or [killingfields](#)) and decide we can't trust our audiences to understand our evidence. So, we hit them over the head with a two-by-four of rhetoric. We have this deep impulse to tell people what to think about what they see on our landscapes.

The impulse makes sense. We care about these places. We care about them for specific reasons. So we lay out a brilliant thesis, we build the evidence to support that thesis and then we spring the conclusory trap and tell the audience what they should take away from the resource.

Civil War sites are certainly not alone in this impulse, but they're some of the most typical. I go on tours whenever I visit a battlefield, just as closely watching how an interpreter crafts the tour as much as what they say. Tours are organized, far and wide on Civil War landscapes held by local communities and on the national level, around a thesis statement. "General Phineas P. Humpredink stopped the Federal assault with a charge and turned the tide of the battle."

But that's not a theme, and certainly doesn't speak to a visitor. It's an academic thesis. A theme is far more broad. We should want people to walk away *feeling* a site, not necessarily having been slapped in the face by an encyclopedia's worth of facts. A theme is "human suffering," or "heartache," or "pride," or "sacrifice." It is a human universal: understandable by anyone anywhere.

"But," you argue, "they're not smart enough to get it."

I think you're wrong, Mr. Strawman.

I watched American Experience's documentary *Freedom Riders* on Monday night. As it started, I was browsing Facebook and saw a #hashtag for the documentary: [#FreedomRiders](#)

So I watched in my living room, sitting on my couch alongside a racially diverse crowd of thousands. We cried together. We gasped together. We cheered together. Watching on Twitter was like seeing it in a crowded theatre. It was like following along with a Ranger on an interpretive program on a physical landscape.

But the genius of *Freedom Riders* was its structure. It has no narrator. It has no guiding voice. It is a carefully chosen oral history narrative, without a swift two-by-four of a conclusion.

So, did we get it? Let's judge by the tweets... (after the jump)

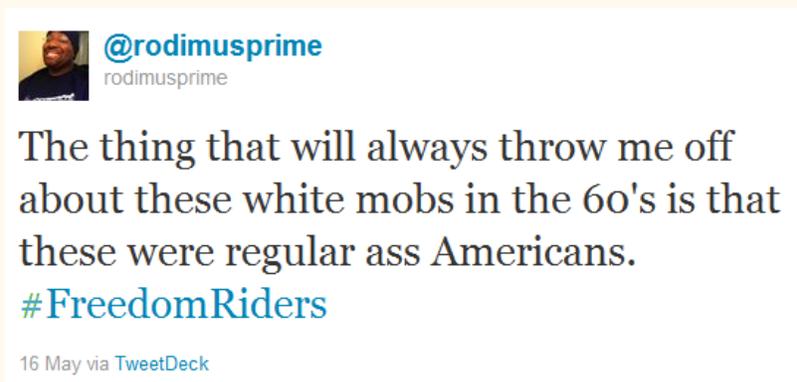
First, watch this video (Warning: strong, but keenly important and unvarnished language):

Watch the [full episode](#). See more [American Experience](#).

In response, @shelviswv posted...



Another user, @rodimusprime posted the following:



@CJCrewsTheGreat saw the documentary (and the student trip mirroring the events of 50 years ago) as a call to action, noting that...



@CJCrewsTheGreat
Collis Crews

We have completed the journey to New Orleans, but there is still a journey to complete to reach a promised land free of hate and violence.

16 May via web

@MrDubya64 was floored by how recently the savagery of the segregated South threatened the lives of students asking for change:



@MrDubya64
Tim White

I have to keep reminding myself only 50 years have passed since then.
#freedomriders

16 May via web

There are thousands (quite literally) of other tweets of people reacting to the presentation. Each took their own meanings. Each drew their own conclusions. And each is valid within the context of their own lives.

What does all of this mean? First, Americans are clamoring for something... *anything* which commemorates the Civil Rights Movement. But there's not much out there being planned. This vacuum is a shame, but is equally an opportunity for the Civil War world.

Secondly, people are making their own connections between the peaceful Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the violent Civil Rights Movement of the 1860s already. They are drawing the lines themselves. If we don't begin offering opportunities for these folks to see their own stories on Civil War landscapes, we take another step toward complete irrelevance in the public consciousness.

So, Mr. Strawman, you can commemorate the Civil War Sesquicentennial acting blissfully ignorant of the deep impacts of that war and the inherent connections with the fiftieth anniversary of the Civil Rights Movement. They're going to make those connections themselves. Why bother, right?

Wouldn't it be better, though, to join that conversation and encourage it? If we don't acknowledge those connections, we risk the public seeing Civil War historians as aloof, disconnected and meaningless.