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Understanding the Civil War and Its Place in the American Mind

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Understanding the Civil War and Its Place in the American Mind

Abstract

Perhaps it is because I have spent so much time with people for whom the Civil War is a life choice, but I confess, there are times when I wonder if we—myself included—sometimes get carried away by our fierce and noble passion for the past. The Civil War is, of course, incredibly important both in its own right and in the long context of American history. But I do wonder if an overly-zealous fascination with the Civil War, especially if it becomes too single-minded, can distract us from other important moments in history, as well as from other types of worthy understandings from other fields of study.

[excerpt]

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Disciplines

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Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Understanding the Civil War and Its Place in the American Mind

By *Kevin Lavery '16*

Perhaps it is because I have spent so much time with people for whom the Civil War is a life choice, but I confess, there are times when I wonder if we—myself included—sometimes get carried away by our fierce and noble passion for the past. The Civil War is, of course, incredibly important both in its own right and in the long context of American history. But I do wonder if an overly-zealous fascination with the Civil War, especially if it becomes too single-minded, can distract us from other important moments in history, as well as from other types of worthy understandings from other fields of study.

Many people have probably seen that [video where college students are unable to say who won the Civil War](#). A frequent joke among Gettysburg College students is that a surprising number of people in other parts of the country can't even identify the state where the Battle of Gettysburg was fought. Adequate money cannot be found to preserve historical artifacts, or even to fund social studies education programs. As seriously concerning of those examples are, I'm not willing to criticize those who lack the rich conception of history that I am fortunate to have developed during my time at Gettysburg. I can't hold anything against someone who doesn't know as much as I think they should know about the Civil War, not when there are so many things in this world worth knowing.



Photograph by the author.

That's especially true when I consider how much foundational information about other fields I do not have. As a history major, I can talk at length about the value of history and the Civil War's important legacy. What I can't do is conduct a psychology experiment, assist with research in a cancer lab, write a gender analysis of Shakespeare, or any of the other equally worthy accomplishments of my peers in other majors. I also can't dance, act, or sing, and I wouldn't know where to start if I had to fix my car. As far as I'm concerned, many of the people who don't know much about the Civil War haven't seen a reason to do so, being preoccupied with other valuable knowledge and their own areas of interest.

I believe that this problem is particularly acute when it comes to the Civil War. Many of us are keen to share our fascination with the war, but it can be hard to offer a satisfying answer to why it matters compared to the knowledge and priorities of other fields, especially when Civil War buffs get tangled up in minutiae. The events, objects, and people of the Civil War held significance beyond themselves to the people who lived through them, and we should understand them in a similar way. The tactics and outcomes of individual battles matter, but they matter most when treated in the greater context of the war. The war itself matters most when contextualized as a key moment in American history. American history matters the most when treated as one strand of human history. No historic event should be treated as a singular moment inherently more important than other types of knowledge. Moreover, it is not merely enough to have knowledge about the Civil War; one must be able to understand that history.

That's why it was such a blessing to have been able to study the Civil War at a liberal arts institution like Gettysburg College—not because of the battlefield next door (although of course it's an excellent learning tool)—but because our professors here encourage us to value all kinds of learning. Sure, there are plenty of jokes about historians who can't do math, but (joking aside) math is incredibly important, maybe even for historians. Just look at the excellent work of [Joseph Glaathaar in the field of quantitative history](#), whose work has helped get a stronger sense of what could before only be described qualitatively. Likewise, an understanding of science gives historians a better sense of how technology and medicine have affected human history, just as a working knowledge of period literature can help contextualize a society's culture. Reading primary sources will always be the key skill of the adept historian, but there are many ways for this skill to be complemented and enhanced if knowledge can be viewed more broadly. For historians and history-buffs alike, the interconnectedness of knowledge and the legitimacy of multiple disciplinary perspectives is essential both to the best possible understanding of the past as well as to conceptualizing how others view our interest in the Civil War.

So too is it important to remember that the Civil War is not an isolated, unique moment in history. I have a friend who has often reminded me that many of the tactics, technologies, and medical protocols of the war were first developed abroad, particularly during the Crimean War. Unlike at many other colleges, the Gettysburg College history department does not require students to specialize in a certain field or region; on the contrary, we are required to take classes in several different content areas. This allows students to glean a sense of how world history is interconnected, how every culture is unique in its own way, and how historical methods can be employed across geographic or chronological fields to encourage a more robust discipline.

Good history should mean more than a good story. Preservation should mean more than just preserving an artifact. Landscape restoration should mean more than just saving 'Hallowed Ground.' All of this is empty if it does not help people to better understand the past and the past's modern implications. Two all-encompassing questions *must* be answered in any good history: *Why did it happen as it did? Why does it matter?*

In this era of crippling budget cuts, we must continue to assert why the work we are doing matters and not assume those who see other priorities are simply ignorant or indifferent to history. Likewise, as interests decline in the humanities, we must not become frustrated and cynical toward those who are drawn to other paths of study, each path intellectually enriching and significant in their own ways. Rather, those who are interested in history in general and especially those focused on the Civil War must continue to connect with colleagues and public audiences to show how our background is one that they would find worth exploring as a complement to their own interests.

This is my final post for the *Gettysburg Compiler*, and in closing I'd like to say what a pleasure it has been to have had the opportunity to get to bat around these musings on the philosophy of history, share my research, and practice writing for a public audience. Thank you to all of our devoted

readers; I hope you will continue to enjoy the *Compiler* for years to come. And to all of you professional, aspiring, and amateur historians out there, please remember that the work you are doing is essential to understanding our world, but so too is the work of others in other fields. Before history and the humanities can be restored to their proper place of honor (and their rightful funding and attention), those of us with an interest in history must first recognize that we do not have an exclusive claim to being a worthy discipline. In doing so, we may find the quality of our own work improved by what we have learned from others.



Photograph by the author.

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