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## Point/Counterpoint: Blanks Fired

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# Point/Counterpoint: Blanks Fired

## **Abstract**

The following post is part of a series meant to conduct and spark a friendly philosophical discussion of broadly visible themes. It is not our intent to single out any one group or person, and by no means should the points expressed herein be regarded as any kind of attack on either the reenacting community or academia. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial

## **Disciplines**

History | Military 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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### Point/Counterpoint: Blanks Fired

October 3, 2014

*by Bryan Caswell '15 and Heather Clancy '15*

The following post is part of a series meant to conduct and spark a friendly philosophical discussion of broadly visible themes. It is not our intent to single out any one group or person, and by no means should the points expressed herein be regarded as any kind of attack on either the reenacting community or academia.



**Bryan:** No matter your major, minor, or focus here at Gettysburg College, there are two phenomena virtually everyone is guaranteed to experience before their tenure ends: ghost tours and Civil War reenactors. As a resident of the Civil War Theme House, I have had more opportunity than most to observe this unique facet of Civil War memory. I myself do not reenact, and living in such close proximity to what is known by its participants as 'the hobby' has engendered a number of questions and reservations to ponder.

**Heather:** Having lived in California for six years before coming to college, I was largely unfamiliar with the world of reenacting as I entered my freshman year. Now as I enter my senior year at Gettysburg College, I am the Civilian Coordinator for the campus's reenacting unit, the Pennsylvania College Guard/26th Pennsylvania Emergency Militia Regiment, and have found myself more involved in the hobby than I would have ever expected.

**Bryan:** The lion's share of my reservations concerning Civil War reenacting involves that specific aspect of the hobby known as battle reenactments. To be clear, these concerns have not been generated by 'farby' or otherwise inappropriate reenactors, but by various concepts of reenacting as a whole. For the most part I have no objections to living history encampments, those attempts by the reenacting community to educate the public on the subjects of soldier and civilian life as well as the material culture of the nineteenth century. These encampments invite the public to interact with reenactors in

a period setting, many times with the aid of an historical interpreter. I generally find these activities to be admirable, assisting those who learn visually to better understand some of the key aspects of American society during the Civil War.

**Heather:** Perhaps we should proceed by first defining the distinction between living history and reenacting more clearly. Although there are competing voices on how to best divide the two interpretive fields, one common understanding is that living history acts more explicitly as an educational tool to inform the public, whereas reenacting's draw is often—but not always—that of the personal experience of the individual who is reenacting. Particularly during battle reenactments, interaction between reenactors (participants) and the public (spectators) is kept to a minimum, in large part out of a concern for the safety of both groups.

**Bryan:** Let's talk about the role of the public in these battle reenactments. You've referred to them as spectators, and while some reenactments do not pander to an audience, many more turn into large spectacles, complete with bleachers, concession stands, and souvenir stalls. Yet these spectators are not watching a sporting event but rather men playacting at war, a war in which over 750,000 people lost their lives. How appropriate is this transformation of war into a spectator sport?

**Heather:** It is largely accepted by public historians that there is a demand by the American public—and indeed in any society—for experienced history, which is to say for a platform by which the public can insert itself into scholarly interpretation as closely as possible. For many, Civil War reenacting has come to function as an example of experienced history. In the bleachers of a battlefield reenactment, the public is the closest that it is every likely to be to a physical representation of Civil War combat. As a result, many spectators revel in the chance that battle reenactments provide for a more immediate interaction with their nation's complex history.

The question of the moral ambiguity of battle reenactments is a crucial one, though. For a conflict largely defined by its bloodshed, the eager consumption of Civil War history by the American public can be somewhat off-putting. To what extent does battle reenacting cease to function as an interpretive tool and begin to exist purely as a form of vulgar entertainment? It is not unheard of at battle reenactments for spectators to seat themselves as supporters of two competing "teams," and even to cheer for their respective teams as would better fit a sports rivalry than the bloodiest conflict in American history.

**Bryan:** Exactly! You've hit the nail on the head. To this admittedly uninitiated writer, it would seem that such a carnival atmosphere trivializes the history portrayed thereby, presenting what some have even gone so far as to call a disrespectful farce of events that claimed men's lives. This hobby remains incredibly popular, however, and the attitudes of the reenactors themselves are virtually never anything but reverent towards the history they're portraying. Why do so many Americans embrace this apparently contradictory lifestyle?

**Heather:** In my experience, it seems that many reenactors are drawn to the hobby for much the same reason as spectators, i.e. in the pursuit of tangible experienced history. Reenacting provides a vehicle for personal interaction with an otherwise intangible history, especially for those who have not had the opportunity to conduct research in a formal academic setting. There exists a fascinating if troubling paradox between what could be referred to as a Cult of Honor—the obligation felt by many reenactors, both military and civilian, to pay respectful homage to the individuals whom they portray—and the decidedly flippant depiction of combat found at most battle reenactments.

**Bryan:** I've noticed that 'Cult of Honor' myself, and I have observed that for its most fervent adherents this veneration encompasses an endless pursuit of historical accuracy and a 'genuine' moment of experience. Yet here too another reservation raises its head, for just as historians can never hope to capture a perfectly accurate narrative of the past, so too can reenactors never hope to experience one of the genuine moments. No matter how real a certain experience feels, our world has become inextricably divorced from that of the nineteenth century. At the most basic level, no reenactor will ever experience the fear of mortality that actual Civil War soldiers experienced and that colored their every action. Similarly we cannot separate ourselves from those modern conventions which color our every action: school, work, family, world events. This pursuit of accuracy is ultimately doomed to fall short in the area of greatest import.

**Heather:** It is because of this foundational ineffectuality that I myself sometimes feel reticent in regard to my participation in the world of reenacting. One would expect the portrayal of civilians to be less fraught with interpretive stumbling blocks than battle reenacting, but even here the push and pull between the struggle for authenticity and the objective of historical interpretation is omnipresent. At times, interpretation as a hobby can seem like a thankless endeavor, and yet it can offer so much in the way of personal connection to the history. In a lot of ways, when it comes to the question of reenacting's role in historical interpretation all I have are questions to which there are no recognizable answers. But then perhaps that lack of conclusion is itself a resolution.

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