Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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I Like Ike's Memorial: Who Owns a Legacy?

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Abstract
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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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In 1963, former president Dwight D. Eisenhower spoke in the cemetery at Gettysburg to help celebrate the centennial of Lincoln's Address. His own speech was somewhat lackluster, largely skirting the issue of the war's legacy in the racially charged aftermath of freedom summer.

When Eisenhower was introduced, he was billed not as "President Eisenhower" or as "Gettysburg citizen Eisenhower," but as he preferred to be introduced: "General Eisenhower." This quirk of naming seems quite insignificant, but offers a deep look into how Eisenhower viewed himself. Dwight Eisenhower saw his own greatest achievement as his career leading the allied forces to victory against Adolph Hitler's impenetrable Fortress Europe.

But who really cares what Ike thought?

Seriously. Who decides what gets remembered of a person's legacy? Does that person have a dictatorship over what their life meant? Does their family? With a public person like Dwight Eisenhower, who gets to decide what his life meant?

The Eisenhower family has lodged a formal objection with the commission planning a monument to honor Eisenhower and his meaning in America. Their chief beef is, according to Ike's Granddaughter Anne, that architect Frank Gehry, "has missed the message here." Honor to Eisenhower, "is not being done in this current design. Or ... it is being done in such a small scale in relation to the memorial that it is dwarfed."

The memorial will emphasize Eisenhower's humble roots in Abilene, Kansas, with a statue of the future President as a boy, marveling at his deeds yet to come. The concept is intriguing, asking the viewer to contemplate that Ike was not always the towering image of president or general, but rode a bike and camped with his friends like many young boys do still today. The memorial will also include, according to the AP, "additional sculpture elements [which] depict Eisenhower as general and president."

But a lack of focus on what his family sees as the essence of his life is not the sole complaint. Susan Eisenhower, another of the President's grandchildren, takes umbrage...
with contemporary architect Gehry's entire design. According to the AP's account, Susan admitted that her grandfather was, "bewildered by modern art."

Who is a memorial made for? Is it built to be aesthetically pleasing to its subject, to reflect their view of their own legacy? Would Lincoln feel at home in the colossal marble palace which bears his likeness? How would Washington react to the one minute interpretive moment in the elevator of his giant pinnacle? Would FDR appreciate the subtle story told through water that is his memorial along the tidal basin?

Memorials are not built for the dead. The dead cannot walk around them to enjoy them and learn from them. But likewise they aren't created to resonate with the future. Memorials are distinctly products of the present, and should be designed to resonate with the people of the present. A memorial helps today's men and women understand, feel, appreciate and contemplate. But what the Eisenhower family appears to desire is not a monument reflecting that which might resonate with a modern audience, but instead that which would have resonated with the General himself and the people of his generation. Instead of Gehry's design, focused on the raw humanity of Eisenhower, the President's descendents seem to be looking for something akin to a majestic bronze statue astride a horse (or Sherman tank). But majesty doesn’t necessarily resonate with a modern audience. Today, Americans crave humanity in our historical figures, seeing the dark and light, the right and wrong, the human and the godlike.

If Eisenhower wandered around the model of his memorial with Frank Gehry, he might be befuddled. The modern art might not resonate with his soul and his heart. But his soul and heart are long gone. Gehry is setting out to help a different generation, a modern generation, resonate with Eisenhower's different meanings.

All monuments are cultural products, produced at a moment in time to speak to the self-same moment in time. Once you master that idiosyncrasy of meaning, the hidden code inside every pillar of granite and bronze slowly unfolds itself. Monuments don’t always lie per say, but they do only tell the stories that are needed at the moment they're erected.

See more images of Gehry's proposed monument design at the Eisenhower Memorial Commission's website.