

The Cupola

Scholarship at Gettysburg College

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

Civil War Era Studies

6-25-2013

There is Still Time: Contingency And History

John M. Rudy
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/interpretcw>

 Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#),
and the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Rudy, John M. "There is Still Time: Contingency And History." Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public (June 25, 2013).

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

There is Still Time: Contingency And History

Abstract

"...and it's all in the balance, it hasn't happened yet, it hasn't even begun yet, it not only hasn't begun yet but there is still time for it not to begin against that position and those circumstances which made more men than Garnett and Kemper and Armistead and Wilcox look grave..."

William Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust* has that beautifully evocative passage that anyone worth their salt contemplating a Pickett's Charge program has considered including in their ebb and flow. Faulkner was a master of language, and his passage about, "every Southern boy fourteen years old," is a particularly artful. [excerpt]

Keywords

Contingency, CW150, Gettysburg, Imagination, Rudy

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Military 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."

Creative Commons License

Creative

Commons

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

License



Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

www.civilwarconnect.com



There is Still Time: Contingency And History

TUESDAY, JUNE 25, 2013

...and it's all in the balance, it hasn't happened yet, it hasn't even begun yet, it not only hasn't begun yet but there is still time for it not to begin against that position and those circumstances which made more men than Garnett and Kemper and Armistead and Wilcox look grave...

[Click here to access the video](#)

This *did not* air on WGAL in June of 1863, for obvious reasons.

William Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust* has that beautifully evocative passage that anyone worth their salt contemplating a Pickett's Charge program has considered including in their ebb and flow. Faulkner was a master of language, and his passage about, "every Southern boy fourteen years old," is a particularly artful.

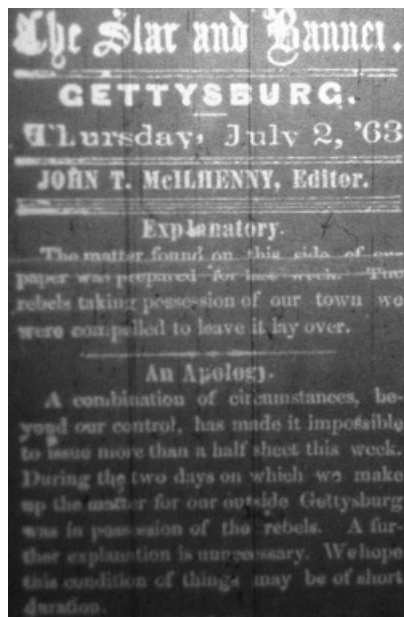
But it points to a particular ability of the child's brain that we seem to lose as we grow. The past is mailable in our minds when we are young. It might be because our imagination is so powerful as children. A stick can become a Springfield Rifle, a pile of branches against a tree trunk can become a fortress, a gust of wind can become a charging line of rebel infantry.

So what happens when we get older? Does our imagination fall to pieces?

We stand at the crossroads of war in late June, 2013, looking backwards 150 years and knowing the outcome. We know that battle is coming to Gettysburg. We know that 50,000 men will be killed, wounded or go missing over the course of three bloody days. We know how the story ends, we've read the last page of the book.

Which is a dangerous place to start from.

The men who splashed across the Potomac into Maryland in June of 1863 didn't know they were headed to Gettysburg. They didn't know they'd repel Confederate forces in a wheatfield, or rampage across some farmer's peach orchard on their way to slaughter Federal infantry. They knew battle might come, but when and where, even if, was up in the air.



John T. McIlhenny didn't know a battle was coming. Otherwise, why even bother laying out July 2nd's newspaper?

A battle at Gettysburg was not a foregone conclusion on June 25th, 1863. The *Star and Banner* boasted in its folds that, "This giving too much credence to mere rumor has done a great deal of mischief." Gettysburg was scared, but it was far from predestined a battle would come to its streets.

Nor was it foreordained on June 26th, when students of Pennsylvania College were stampeded from fields west of their *alma mater* back to the safety of Harrisburg.

June 27th or 28th or 29th? Still not destined. And the people of Gettysburg thought the worst was over. "Although the rebels have come and gone, (so far as our town is concerned,) we may expect to hear all sorts of rumors," the *Star and Banner* wrote in its doomed July 2nd edition, "The big fright seems to be over, but it is natural to expect many little ones to follow." Gettysburg expected to see a few rebel stragglers, but the citizens were cautioned not to, "magnify every little squad into a regiment," and sound a needless alarm.

And on June 30th, with troops looming in the Cashtown Gap and cavalry swarming into Adams County? Sure, it looks like it's all planned ahead of time, but even on the eve of battle, there's nothing certain.

Gettysburg didn't have to happen like it did. It didn't *have* to happen at all. It wasn't advertised. It was a relative surprise.

That doesn't change the fact that it *did* happen. But it needs to color how we envision the campaign. These armies weren't heading toward Gettysburg. They would simply end up there by chance, happenstance and the eventuality of war.