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8-30-2012

## Facts, Damned Lies and Statistics: A 55 Year Stumbling Block

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Rudy, John M., "Facts, Damned Lies and Statistics: A 55 Year Stumbling Block" (2012). *Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public*. 117.  
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# Facts, Damned Lies and Statistics: A 55 Year Stumbling Block

## Abstract

I have to admit something: when it comes to interpretation, I'm making this all up as I go along. I don't have some magical cache of best practices stored up, waiting to deposit them week after week in posts here on the blog. Most of what I know about interpretation I've stumbled upon, either in the thoughts of others shamelessly stolen and added to my toolbox or as rough experiments based on my so-called common sense. [excerpt]

## Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Clemson Report, National Park Service

## 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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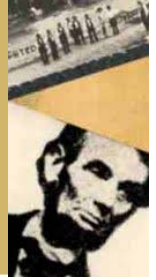
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# Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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## Facts, Damned Lies and Statistics: A 55 Year Stumbling Block

**THURSDAY, AUGUST 30, 2012**

I have to admit something: when it comes to interpretation, I'm making this all up as I go along. I don't have some magical cache of best practices stored up, waiting to deposit them week after week in posts here on the blog. Most of what I know about interpretation I've stumbled upon, either in the thoughts of others shamelessly stolen and added to my toolbox or as rough experiments based on my so-called common sense.

Sometimes it's far more instructive to find out what I shouldn't do as I frantically grope in the darkness trying to discover what I should do. If I line enough of those bad choices and other possibilities off of my list, eventually I'll hit on a formula that works.

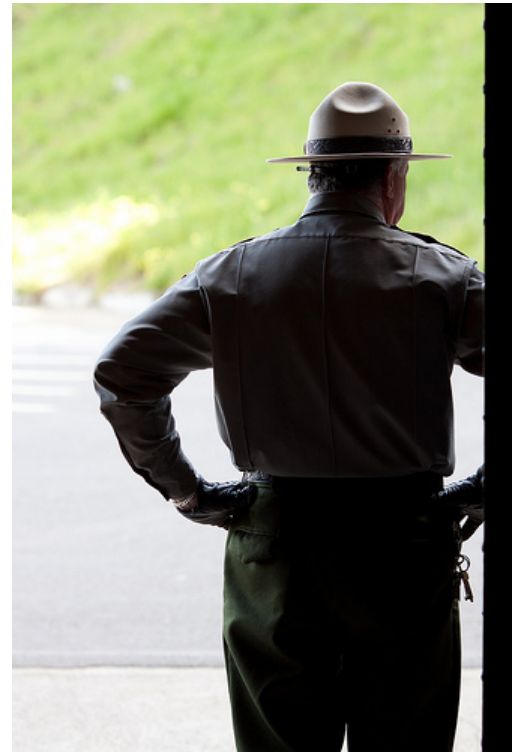
As Thomas Alva Edison likely did not say in relation to the light bulb, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."

Researchers from Clemson University and Virginia Tech recently [released a groundbreaking report](#) on what makes good interpretation into great interpretation. Reviewers attended over 350 live programs in National Parks. The report is exhaustive as well as exhausting. I'm not one for statistics, so the meat of the report lies in the discussion and conclusions on pages 35-42.

What separates the mildly effective from the wildly effective? A large slew of things. But two major correlations were strong and loud in the data.

Visitors react poorly to "walking encyclopedias," who set out in their programs to impart facts rather than help visitors find a desire to learn themselves.

People don't like smart-ass know-it-alls. Back in college, I was the target of a Facebook hate-group: "The John Rudy is Smarter Than Me Fan Club." I am not making this up. The course was Slavery and the Atlantic World, and the slacker students in the back of the class didn't like the fact that I did my best to intelligently comment and ask meaningful questions each class period. So they lashed out.



Why does an interpreter head out the door each day? Is it to impart wisdom or offer moments for reflection? / CC Tito Perez

I *was* a smart-ass know-it-all. I didn't deserve a hate group, but I *was* a certifiable ass. I wanted to prove that I knew my stuff, and force that newly acquired knowledge down the throats of anyone within earshot. I was cocky, brash and snide. If someone didn't care, I intended to flog them mercilessly *into caring*.



Let's bury "Walking Encyclopedias" and "boring" in a common grave. / CC Cheryl Colan

That doesn't work. It just doesn't. Ask me, I know that from experience. You cannot will someone to care. You cannot browbeat them into caring.

So why are we trying to do that out in the field with visitors? The Clemson/Virginia Tech report classed 75% of park rangers as "walking encyclopedias," as human fact-fountains spewing a "large volume of facts," at visitors. We had a derogatory term for that back in Harpers Ferry; it's called, "the firehose." You spray dumbfounded visitors with every single fact you know about this or that. They smile and nod, walking away neither having learned any of what you intended to teach

them nor caring about the place any more than they did before.

Facts. They are *not* the goal. They should never be the goal. They are the building blocks *toward* a goal. If you're setting out on a program to educate the visitor, to teach them, to impart knowledge from on high as a human fount of pure factual sputum sprayed across an adoring mass of visitors, you're also setting out to fail.

Facts are simply a means to an end, not an end in and of themselves. Facts lined up in a row, with intentional pacing, organization and choice can help visitors along to the *real* goal of interpretation. That's the goal that hasn't changed since the godfather of the craft Freeman Tilden penned it back in 1957:

***"The chief aim of Interpretation is not instruction, but provocation."***

55 years later and we're *still* screwing that one up royally.