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4-14-2011

Hymn to Freedom: Obama's 150th Proclamation

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Rudy, John M., "Hymn to Freedom: Obama's 150th Proclamation" (2011). *Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public*. 210.

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Hymn to Freedom: Obama's 150th Proclamation

Abstract

This post is about the President's proclamation on Tuesday. I was heartily pleased by this action from the White House. It phrasing brings to mind an intellectual fusion not unlike that crafted through Daniel Webster's 1830 pronouncement of, "Liberty and Union, Now and Forever, One and Inseparable." Certainly the 19th century conception of Liberty and our modern conception of the term, as adeptly pointed out in the most recent episode of Backstory with the American History Guys, are not the same. Still, Obama's proclamation keenly joins the two Northern war aims and war outcomes at the hip. "The meaning of freedom and the very soul of our Nation were contested in the hills of Gettysburg and the roads of Antietam, the fields of Manassas and the woods of the Wilderness," the President reflects, adding that the war's outcome ensure that, "We might be tested, but whatever our fate might be, it would be as one Nation." [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Obama

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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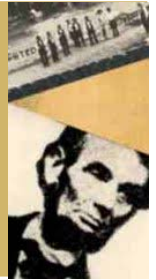
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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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Hymn to Freedom: Obama's 150th Proclamation

THURSDAY, APRIL 14, 2011

It's Thursday, the Civil War is now upon us (at least 150 years ago it was). And the Sesquicentennial, too, has arrived on our doorstep.



I thought that something which hit my Facebook wall late Tuesday night was worthy of comment here, so consider this a bonus post. The second part of my post on the secession of Virginia and the destruction of Harpers Ferry's arsenals will hit on Saturday morning, just as the National Park Service begins [its commemoration of that event \[PDF link\]](#).

But this post is about the [President's proclamation on Tuesday](#). I was heartily pleased by this action from the White House. It

phrasing brings to mind an intellectual fusion not unlike that crafted through Daniel Webster's 1830 pronouncement of, "Liberty and Union, Now and Forever, One and Inseparable." Certainly the 19th century conception of Liberty and our modern conception of the term, as adeptly pointed out in the most recent episode of [Backstory with the American History Guys](#), are not the same. Still, Obama's proclamation keenly joins the two Northern war aims and war outcomes at the hip. "The meaning of freedom and the very soul of our Nation were contested in the hills of Gettysburg and the roads of Antietam, the fields of Manassas and the woods of the Wilderness," the President reflects, adding that the war's outcome ensure that, "We might be tested, but whatever our fate might be, it would be as one Nation."

Liberty in the balance on battlefields and the future of four million in the hands of soldiers' actions are deeply powerful concepts, ones which have the potential to resonate with vast portions of the American populace who have never given a second glance at the war. Seeing the modern fruits and impacts of the Civil War's labor offer Americans to see themselves within the war's events. "What would I have done?" and "How is this place's legacy present in my daily life?" are ultimately the two deepest questions visitors can walk away from an historical site asking themselves.

Obama speaking to tourists at the Lincoln Memorial this Saturday / AP video

Obama's proclamation is not all shining. At points it does feel like Wilson's, "quarrel forgotten," speech at Gettysburg in 1913. The President calls upon, "the legacy of freedom and unity that the Civil War bestowed upon our Nation," as if the struggles for freedom, equality and unity of all the American people are complete (or ever will be). The proclamation seems to eschew the concept of division in reconciliation, instead suggesting that, "when the guns fell silent and the fate of our Nation was secured, blue and gray would unite under one flag and the institution of slavery would be forever abolished from our land." Tying the reconciliation of blue and gray to the freedom of four million is rather audacious, and rather more than a bit ahistorical.

Still, the positives shine through. I am very keen on who Obama explicitly named in his proclamation. The proclamation points to two specific figures: the USCT and Lincoln. "Those who lived in these times -- from the resolute African American soldier volunteering his life for the liberation of his fellow man to the determined President secure in the rightness of his cause," the President notes, "brought a new birth of freedom to a country still mending its divisions." Beyond these two leading men, a smaller cast of extras litters the President's proclamation:

"Though America would struggle to extend equal rights to all our citizens and carry out the letter of our laws after the war, the sacrifices of soldiers, sailors, Marines, abolitionists, and countless other Americans would bring a renewed significance to the liberties established by our Founders."

Did you catch that subtle nod in the middle. "Abolitionists," are viewed by the President not simply as bit players, but as important as the men fighting in the ranks during the conflict's four years. One could read this how they like, whether Obama is lauding the efforts of radicals like John Brown to force the hand of government, the efforts of pious men like Samuel May who packed care packages for Federal troops or angry men like Frederick Douglass who demanded that the war be fought as a moral conflict, and not simply a political one is unclear. Hopefully over the course of the next four years, we'll get clarification on what this simple inclusion means. Hopefully this proclamation is a beginning of Presidential enthusiasm for the 150th, and not the end. Hopefully continued enthusiasm from the White House can help spark enthusiasm from the people. Hopefully...



Is this scene of President Obama at a Civil War related site a first or a last during the 150th? / White House Photo by Pete Souza