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Death and the Civil War

by Joe Escobar - Saturday, March 4, 2017, 11:08 PM

This thread is for discussions on the Death and the Civil War topic.
To make your POSTS, click the reply link in this, MY post. To reply to another student's post, be sure to click the reply link within in THEIR post.

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The meaning of "modern war"

by Josh Myhre - Wednesday, March 8, 2017, 9:12 AM

I thought this documentary really helped to drive home the meaning of the civil war as the first “modern war.” This is something that (Ken) Burns talks about in episode 1, and it’s also something that McPherson discusses. But this documentary really helped to drive it home – that this is one of the first wars, with modern weaponry and all its destructiveness, that is really a war between *populations* (about 16:00 in). For some reason, the way this is phrased in Death and the Civil War really made sense to me. Maybe it just took this very particular focus on the meaning of death to drive the point home. The statistics they list are staggering – that 2.5% of the population died during the course of the war (6:30), and that if we had a similar death rate in a war today that would entail 7 million deaths (7:00). These numbers are mind boggling. I kind of identified with the Stephen Colbert anecdote from the Atlantic article. Prior to this course all I really understood (at a deep level) about the civil war was that slavery ended, and people nowadays are really into re-enactments. People seem to have fun with it now. The civil war was definitely what one would call a “bummer.” I feel that I now have a pretty good understanding of what is meant by “the first modern war,” as well as a better understanding of all the death and suffering that a modern war entails.

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The Civil War and the decline of Christianity in America

by Josh Myhre - Wednesday, March 8, 2017, 9:38 AM

This documentary made me think about possible links between the civil war and the decline of religion in America. This post might ramble a bit, but bear with me.

In Death and the Civil War, at about 10:00 in, Mark Schantz discusses how the relationship between citizen and government shifts due to the civil war – for possibly the first time, the question of what a government owes to the particular bodies that constitute it comes up. Schantz notes that citizenship becomes predicated on a willingness to lay down one’s life for the good of the country. This reminded me of the Crusades of the middle ages – but in the civil war, it’s not directly for the glory of God that one fights, but for the glory of the country. In turn, the glory of the country can mirror the glory of God (manifest destiny, freedom, and all that good stuff). There’s plenty of religious talk throughout the civil war (e.g., when Lincoln says “I’d like to have God on my side, but I must have Kentucky”), but it’s also the case that both sides believe they’re fighting congruently with God, that God will back them up. God certainly plays a big motivating role in this war, but in the end the role of God is a wash – both sides claim it. The war is really about the meaning of the union.

I’m not a Christian, but as I understand it the notion of providence (planning for eternity) is central to almost every Christian faith. The documentary discusses this at about the 11:30 mark, when it starts to discuss the role of the “Good Death” in pre-civil war Anglo societies – you must live well to die well, and a good death (partially) ensures a good spot in heaven, where eventually your loved ones can come and find

you. The modern nature of this war entailed that very few of the excessively large number of deaths could be considered “good deaths.” At Shiloh, the thousands upon thousands of dead were left to rot in a field, becoming either manure or food for wild hogs (16:00). These men lived well, giving their life in service of (god and) country. But they did not die what was thought to be a good Christian death. In terms of Christianity, their death was almost meaningless. In terms of the state and citizenship, their death had complete meaning.

So in this sense, the civil war represents a pretty substantial counter-example to the prevailing Christian notions of the meaning, place and ritual of death. The fact that so many bodies were unidentified, and many not even removed from the field, made for many, many “meaningless” deaths. But these deaths helped to preserve the union, helped to solidify the existence of the state. Families of dead soldiers had a difficult time finding religious meaning in the death of loved ones, but could take solace in the meaning of death *for* the state. In the wake of the civil war, 2.5% of the population was dead. The remaining population had to find some way to make sense of this death, and the easiest explanation was that they died to defend the union. This opens up, in a way, what death *can* mean for the individual. For the first time, in the history of our country at least, we as a population had to find meaning for a very large number of deaths, and we located this meaning in the secular institution of the meaning of the government. In some regards, the idea of the state supplants the role of God – the state is that intangible thing which exists above us yet is not separate from us, and it is that which gives me, the individual, meaning. The United States remained heavily Christian for another 100 years, and one could argue that today the majority of the country is still Christian. However, it’s also the case that the country has become vastly more atheistic/agnostic. I think the death of the civil war played a very large role in sowing the seeds of America’s “de-christianing.” For the first time in our history, a very large part of the American population couldn’t find God when they needed it most.

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Finding Good in Death

by Timothy Lucas - Wednesday, March 8, 2017, 4:51 PM

Ric Burns gives us a focused view of something that is a persistent theme throughout the Civil War series. You can easily characterize the different experiences between North and South, but both sides experienced death on a scale the United States had not seen and was not prepared for. While the North had the infrastructure to create and support field hospitals and sanitary commissions, the South had little resources to care for the wounded and dying, and both sides had no system in place to care for the dead or their families, let alone notify them.

Another way to interpret a theme from the Civil War was the death of 2 nations and the birth of a new one. While the Confederacy surrendered and the succeeding states eventually reentered the Union, it would be a different Union then before the war. One

that had abolished the institution of slavery yet would continue to struggle with issues of race and equality; one that went to war not understanding the scale of destruction that it would be forced to deal with, but created dog tags for soldier identification, techniques for proper burial and holidays for national recognition of the fallen, yet to this day would struggle with service to veterans and their families.

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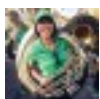


Re: Finding Good in Death

by Zachary Embree - Sunday, March 12, 2017, 11:41 PM

When trying to find something good in the suffering the war caused I think the series has done a decent job of portraying that while getting there may have been terrible something stronger was forged from that suffering. The latest segment shows how our nation really came to accept the idea of a free land that the everyman can rise to great heights in. Despite huge differences we managed to reforge a country that would only grow more open and diverse as time passed. In a sense much of the national identity that we have today was born in the aftermath of the Civil War.

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Emotional Perspective

by Aimee Chow - Wednesday, March 8, 2017, 8:23 PM

Ric Burns' series, *Death and the Civil War*, opens a new perspective that I enjoyed. As the prompt mentions, this documentary is more detailed in the death aspect of war, more than all sources we've encountered so far. The documentary did a good overview on everything we've covered in the course. *Death and the Civil War* provides a more emotional side. Considering that Ric Burns' series is more recent than his brother's, audiences can reflect the impact this war had in our country. Personally, I connected more with this 30 minute clip versus a 1 hour episode. Mark Schantz's quote on how sacrifice played a major part of this war stood out to me. Schantz says, "Certainly, as we think about the obligation of citizens to the state and what the state owes its citizens...what do governments owe to their bodies, the bodies that make them up?" When we look back on the war, people overlook the sacrifices that were made. As I mentioned, this series provides more emotion, which could be beneficial for people to connect. The "then-and-now" article was interesting. I didn't realize how the Civil War could impact our soldiers today. There are major improvements in soldier care and how it's handled. We honor our servicemen more than we did back then, such as Memorial Day or Veterans Day. I believe the government is doing much better now than it was during the late 1800s.

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**Unprepared**

by Lillith Ka'at - Wednesday, March 8, 2017, 10:10 PM

Death and the Civil War was very interesting! Obviously we've already learned just how many deaths there were, but to actually have a piece that focuses on how that affected people outside of the battles was fascinating. Since, like the documentary essentially explains, a lot of views of death were revolutionized during the civil war, and we're living in the aftermath of that, it can be hard to imagine how jarring it was for people who survived the losses. Not just in the way that we emotionally dealt with death - people dying in their homes, surrounded by family transitioning very suddenly into people dying on a battlefield without any recognition or ceremony... But also in how we just straight up didn't have systems in place for retrieving and identifying the bodies.

The concept of not having those systems in place, the concept of all those dead bodies just laying there, anonymous, after the battles were done, is heartbreaking in how different it is from what we're used to, today. Just hearing a lot of numbers and strategies and generals and battles can sort of make your eyes glaze over, even for someone who's more interested in the topic. It's hard to feel anything but numb over statistics. But focusing on the actual scenarios and the way it changed the culture of death is very humanizing. The stark and sudden difference between people dying in their homes, in warmth and love, versus in battle, away from home and alone, brings much more weight to it all. And the lack of systems in place due to lack of necessity prior to all this just show how unprepared our society was, how dramatically huge the losses were compared to anything we'd gone through. It brings focus to how heavily this touched our society as a whole.

I think this came up in a response to someone on a previous forum, but it reminds me of the idea that ghost stories largely came about and became popular during the civil war. That ghost stories were another coping method for families who never got to give a proper good-bye or even hear the fate of their loved ones. So that sort of subject is very interesting to me.

It's hard for me to say what we've lost in the decline in religious devotion. I'm not religious and wasn't raised by, or really even around people who are religious. It's hard for me to look at what we've just been assigned - videos and articles about how bad things were then compared to now - and say we've "lost" something in modern culture. A list of improvements is tough to read as a loss. The reading lists so many important things we've gained - preventative steps for decomposing bodies during transportation, dog tags, federal services, systems for notifying next of kin and dog tags for identifying bodies, etc. So in comparison, we're doing well. And, personally, I'm happy if there are fewer people who feel religiously compelled to run off to war and kill or be killed.

It's hard for me to make any comparisons on the federal government's changes any further than just regurgitating the lists from the reading. Working with what class has provided me, what I've got to run on is: the improvements listed in our reading, which seem good, and I guess the fact that there sure are a whole lot of homeless veterans out there. So... Things have definitely improved...! But that doesn't mean they're perfect.

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Re: Unprepared

by Timothy Lucas - Thursday, March 9, 2017, 1:37 PM

"It's hard for me to say what we've lost in the decline in religious devotion. I'm not religious and wasn't raised by, or really even around people who are religious. It's hard for me to look at what we've just been assigned - videos and articles about how bad things were then compared to now - and say we've "lost" something in modern culture. A list of improvements is tough to read as a loss."

I can certainly relate to that upbringing and I found this part of the question strange and difficult to answer as I don't see a decline in 'religious devotion' in this country (I read that between the lines as a decline in Christianity) as a completely bad thing. Yes community is good, be as spiritual as you want, everyone needs something to believe in...I think we all get that.

What this part of the question makes me think of especially in the context of what you are saying is that the, "good death" was one where you were surrounded by your family, in your home in the most dignified way possible as dictated by Victorian Christian values. In a war where people on both sides called it Holy, that gets called into question when people are falling by the thousands and likely to either bleed out or die from an easily treatable infection and left to rot with the people who sent you to that death having no idea how to deal with you now.

It boggles the mind to think of such a disaster now. I may be completely missing the mark here but if government taking responsibility for what they helped to create removes a bit of our faith and dependence on religion no matter what flavor it is I don't see that as a bad thing, especially if it gives us an extra moment of pause before we allow such a disaster to occur.

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Re: Unprepared

by Lillith Ka'at - Friday, March 10, 2017, 10:54 PM

Yeah, I definitely agree with that last point. I would much rather we have systems in place, even though they may somehow be viewed as taking away from religious influence, if it's something that's *helpful* for *real* situations. Like... Not liking the religious implications of something doesn't change that it's a thing that's happening, so. We need to be prepared for it.

Besides, I would hope we aren't fighting religious wars and that our government that puts us in wars is separated from church. (Ha.)

Or maybe stop fighting wars for stupid reasons... But not to be Edgy™ - but that's probably not happening any time soon.

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Re: Unprepared

by Timothy Lucas - Sunday, March 12, 2017, 9:42 PM

It's like these people didn't grow up watching M*A*S*H...Double olive in my extra dry martini with Hawkeye to the meatball surgeon awesomeness for the rescue!...

It might be a funny or ironic thing where we are talking about a religious decline as our elected-exalted ...is putting in place persons who never attended public school, is the brother of Blackwater paramilitary crusader guy....and ya. This is my last term, last interaction in an academic forum. Keep up the modern day Crusade yall.

They will withhold my diploma until I can pay the roughly \$1000 including late fees for this term. Feel great knowing they will allow a person deemed mentally not worthy of reciving funding yet allowed to attend and incur the costs of higher learning.

Saul Goodman.....I was 31 when I stumbled into adult GED classes so I could have the privilege of attending college.

Matters not much....I gave up on transfer degree and silly dream to study law. I will still walk past an apartment every day going to class or as long as my bus pass is active... that has a Confederate battle flag in their window.

I am far detached from my meternal family from Iowa whom I would assume fought in the Civil War as Northerners and a Grandfather who helped liberate concentration camps in Europe that mirrored Andersonville.

Granted I signed several papers, but in custody of the Snohomish County jail, I worked not only as an inmate worker, but off sight at a flower nursery....don't tell me slavery isn't alive and well. A person willing to work

for nothing for the privilege of working....is our future. Good luck with the wage slave thing...aka working wage...aka minimum wage...aka survival wage...I'm out.

Tim

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Re: Unprepared

by Josh Myhre - Friday, March 10, 2017, 7:04 AM

"Things have definitely improved...! But that doesn't mean they're perfect." You definitely said it with this line. Things are better on paper. Obviously things like medical care and body identification have improved with time. The VA exists to help out veterans, the GI bill means post-military life is well taken care of, and there's extensive psychiatric and medicinal help awaiting you when you get out. But at the same time, things are certainly not perfect. Although the VA was created to help veterans, it gets bogged down in bureaucracy and corruption. Despite this large network of resources that exists, there's still so many that fall through the cracks. There's swaths of homeless veterans from our wars in the middle east that cannot get access to any kind of medical care, and have had their lives shattered by PTSD. The same still holds true from Vietnam. To tell a tale of the two sides of this coin, both my brothers are in the military. One of them plans to stay in for life because he feels so strongly connected to the community, and feels so well taken care of. He feels no incentive to leave, because he's serving his country and the country in return serves him. My other brother has been out for a little while, and can't seem to get access to the most basic of services, including mental health care, which should be the most basic and easily obtainable post-military service. No matter what he does, he can't seem to get past the bureaucratic bullshit. The military is doing it's best to just forget about him. He's not homeless or anything, but he was expecting at least *slightly* better treatment for giving up a substantial chunk of his young adulthood and risking his life for the country. It's shameful.

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Re: Unprepared

by Lillith Ka'at - Friday, March 10, 2017, 11:02 PM

Some more change for your coin purse: I'm Vietnamese, actually! My grandmother was brought here as a very young *child*, because a ~*~ *heroic American soldier*~*~ wanted an eleven year old wife. Woo!

--Which, obviously, doesn't negate how messed up conditions are for veterans or mean that they don't need work... Just some fun flavor facts, I guess.

Anyway, I think a lot of people tend to say, "well, it's not as bad as it could be, so we aren't allowed to complain anymore." (See: any "millennial" issue, all the ~isms, etc.) But the fact is that systems that are meant to help people just *aren't*, on a very wide scale.

It's appalling that mental health care is difficult for anyone ex military to get. It's appalling that mental health care is difficult for anyone to get in general, but that is a subject I could talk about for ten years straight, so I'll spare you. I guess my thoughts are just: it's messed up how little the government cares about very many people. So it makes it kind of *extra* messed up that they can't even get their butts together for their own military members.

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Re: Unprepared

by Aimee Chow - Sunday, March 12, 2017, 8:32 PM

There is always room for improvement. Clearly, we've come a long way since the Civil War. Personally, I view the greatest improvements were the dog tags and veterans assistance programs. We take much better care of our veterans, but maybe not as well as Josh mentioned in his post, which is upsetting. I wasn't of aware how religion plays into the Civil War until this clip. Families who had faith were sure that the afterlife was waiting if their loved ones passed away. However, I think it could also be just the perspective of "dying with honor" and not having to do anything with religion. Either way, I believe religion impacted the number of soldiers that were about ready to face death.

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Death and Religion

by Spencer Kellar - Wednesday, March 8, 2017, 11:48 PM

I've spoken quite a bit about the Ken Burns documentary and its ability to connect by providing the human element to the Civil War. Ric Burns is able to do that to an even greater extent in the 30-minute clip we were provided, as it's obviously the focus of the film.

I'm glad to see religion covered in "Death and the Civil War." It's an important part of American culture, but was largely absent from Ken Burns' documentary as well as James McPherson's book if I recall correctly. But as Ric Burns and company make clear, religion played its role. Especially when looking at how soldiers and civilians alike perceived death, and how that perception was altered by the massive number

of casualties the Civil War produced. I know that when I was reading about the relentless warfare being waged in the Wilderness, I wondered what the soldiers must have been thinking were as the bodies piled up and no order for retreat would come. Thanks to Ric Burns' film, I have a clearer idea. Give Ric credit, and give credit to Drew G. Faust as well; this is the most emotional piece of film I've watched in this class.

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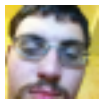


Re: Death and Religion

by Aimee Chow - Sunday, March 12, 2017, 8:13 PM

I also greatly appreciate how this clip was able to connect on a greater level emotionally than Ken Burns' documentary, and only in 30 minutes! The number of casualties just proves that no one was prepared or predicted that some of the battles such as Antietam or Crater would be as deadly as it was. I didn't think religion would have an effect on the number of lives that were sacrificed until we watched this clip. If anything, religion impacted the number of soldiers that were willing to fight. Their faith allowed them to go in strong and face death, since they were certain about the afterlife.

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Civil WarVeteran Care

by Zachary Embree - Wednesday, March 8, 2017, 11:57 PM

When you compare the care that modern day veterans get to the efforts that the government undertook it is impossible to notice the vast difference. However besides simple advances in medical care I think one of the major differences is that the nation has had much longer to tackle the issue. The Civil War was a for the time a conflict of unprecedented scale, which left the government scrambling to heal a broken nation. For many issues that would crop up this was the first time the government had every had to tackle anything like this. In light of this I think much of the problems they had providing care makes a bit more sense. For example, today we have the organization and resources to give a soldier that has suffered the loss of limb months of physical therapy and psychiatric help. The latter being a serious issue that the government does a much better job of addressing. Unfortunately for the veterans of the Civil War that field was not as developed, many of the victims of what we now know as PTSD would be sent to hospitals instead with "acute mania."(National Geographic)

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Re: Civil WarVeteran Care

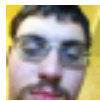


by Josh Myhre - Friday, March 10, 2017, 7:23 AM

I think it gets underplayed how important it was that *all* parties involved (save a few solitary voices, like Sherman's) thought the war would be quick and bloodless. Lincoln's first call for troops was only for a 90-day enlistment. In retrospect, this looks absurd. I think if anyone at a top level position had understood the magnitude of what they were taking on, *somebody* would have said "hey, we should probably have a system for identifying bodies!" Almost nobody understood the scale of the destruction that was to follow. But a military learns from every war it participates in. I feel like every war the US gets involved in, *someone* can always be heard saying "we've never done anything like this." I think 150 years from now, people will be looking back at the veteran support system of today and say "can you believe they were doing this? How could they not understand that you need to X?!"

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Re: Civil WarVeteran Care

by Zachary Embree - Sunday, March 12, 2017, 11:09 PM

I definitely agree on that. Over the course of the war I think one of the reasons both sides kept at it was that they held onto the idea of "one more successful battle". After each battle we see in the Ken Burns series how people declared the war won or lost after each victory or defeat. Every time they seem to underestimate the other side and assume a quick end to the war is in sight, if only they can get in one more victory. It seemed like only when the war reaches 1864 does each side embrace the idea that victory can only come when the opposite side was battered completely into submission.

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War Should Be a Downer

by Timothy Lucas - Thursday, March 9, 2017, 1:05 PM

The Atlantic article is an interesting take on the Civil War series, and commentary on war and the American population in general. Opening with...

"...Stephen Colbert laments, "You are beginning to make the Civil War sound like a downer." While it garnered a good laugh from the audience, the comment betrays an important aspect of how Americans have remembered the Civil War and the kinds of narratives that are celebrated."

We don't know if he is saying this as Colbert the character or Colbert the person. Either way this demonstrates the attitude of most people when it comes to matters of history and the narratives around them. This stuff is so terrible sometimes that people can only cope with it and learn through humor, which may work once and a while, but I couldn't imagine sitting through almost 10 hours of whacky history guy in the place of a Burns style series. If a couple jokes during a monologue gets someone interested in learning about this stuff or conveys a little known or unpopular narrative, that is a good thing but certainly cannot replace serious study of these matters.

"The airing of this important program comes not just on the same week as the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Antietam -- the single bloodiest day in American history -- but at the end of two costly and controversial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan."

Speaking of narratives, I almost had to grab a cup of water so I could do a spit take when I read this. At the time when this was being written in 2012 that was certainly what was being said in some ways, but hopefully we all cringed a little reading that in 2017.

"The Civil War continues to be marketed and even interpreted through a language of reconciliation, which makes it difficult to acknowledge that it was a bloody civil war in which even the dead continued to divide Americans for years to come."

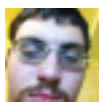
That may be his if not most peoples general feelings about the Civil War. Before and during this class I would not consider the affair any thing less than tragic. Tens of thousands of people dying in a day mostly for what we would now consider as easily treatable wounds or infection is absolutely horrifying when you consider at the very base was a struggle over an economic system and a social order. But he is certainly right about a continued divide to this day over monuments and the display of the Confederate battle flag to say nothing of matters concerning race, worker rights, civic access and criminal justice.

"Despite these shortcomings, this film deserves a wide audience. Colbert's reference to the Civil War as a "downer" underscores the extent to which our collective memory has glossed over the horrors of war."

Getting our history and our narratives from entertainers should be taken with a large amount of scrutiny even if it does interest an otherwise non engaged person. While there are not the vast numbers of Americans directly involved in war today that there was in the Civil War, we have several ways to further remove most of us from war such as the fact that it is not fought on our soil and is not against fellow Americans. Those two factors alone are enough to allow an audience to laugh when someone laments at the fact that war should be something we are not made happy by and not always something to be proud of.

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Re: War Should Be a Downer



by Zachary Embree - Sunday, March 12, 2017, 11:49 PM

I personally liked how the series made sure to impress upon the audience just what a terrible and messy thing war is, despite being for a good cause. That kind of message is one I find lacking when learning about later wars the US was involved in, primary among them World War 2. Many of the sources I find tend to gloss over just how much the people suffered and payed for the glorious victories that we learn about. But in this series each battle is not presented as the focus, merely the end result of of a long chain of cultural and political pressures. Burns does not glory the last desperate charges, merely explains what happened and lists the costs in lives lost.

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Picking up the pieces

by Zachary Embree - Sunday, March 12, 2017, 11:23 PM

One thing I think the US lost in the decades following the civil war and the wane of religious effects on the populace was that in the end, we are all people. In the end of the civil war both the Union and the Confederacy had to reconcile their differences and forge a better future for themselves. Today it seems so many groups are unwilling to call a halt to their differences and work for the betterment of their members, even of they do not get everything they want. I think that many people today could learn a lesson from how we managed to overcome one of the most bloody wars in history and lift the nation into a world power.

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From generals to civilians

by Zachary Embree - Sunday, March 12, 2017, 11:33 PM

One thing that I have gotten a better understanding of during this documentary is the views and beliefs of the people involved rather than modern day historians. Burns did a excellent job of showing just how the entire country North and South felt about the war as it progressed. We listen to the personal thoughts of General Lee and then how the populace reacts to his choices. From the top of the leadership to the average soldier every side is presented. I felt empathy for these people because I knew what they thought and how they felt as the world went crazy around them, instead of only seeing the legends history has made them into. Making the audience fell involved in what happened way before them I think should be the goal of any historian, and this series pulled it off very nicely.

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**Re: From generals to civilians**

by Spencer Kellar - Sunday, March 12, 2017, 11:45 PM

Great point. So often when we study wars, the soldiers become statistics. That's not done as a slight, of course. It's astonishing when you hear the number of casualties that were caused by each battle during the Civil War. That's one way to present a battle, I suppose. But it only takes one individual's death, an individual with a backstory or letter read aloud by the narrator, to have as great of an impact on a viewer. Like I said before, this documentary does it better than any I have seen previously.

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[Death and the Civil War](#) ►

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