

HST 209: American History: Civil War W17 (Escobar 31664)

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Petersburg
by Joe Escobar - Saturday, February 25, 2017, 8:19 PM

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Romanticizing the south
by Stanley Cates - Wednesday, March 1, 2017, 12:34 PM

I must admit that when I read the description of the documentary that we were to view as “Pro-southern, confederate-friendly” I went into it with a bit of a chip on my shoulder. It astounds me that even in the late 20th century, when the documentaries we’ve used in this class were made, tensions over the war can still be present; yet here I am, chip on my shoulder all the same.

Clearly, and with clear intent, the documentary in question up-played the shortcomings of Union commanders. Not to say that what they said wasn’t true, but the way in which they framed it was telling of a bias. Describing Union command mistakes as “inevitable”, in the first portion of the documentary making sure to make a point that Grant was no closer to Richmond than McClellan had been. Admittedly they did eventually, but perhaps sheepishly, describe that Grant refused to retreat like McClellan had made a habit of. At one point the message was almost a taunt: “Grant had the confederates outnumbered by 25 to 1 and yet union generals failed to demonstrate alertness and alacrity in carrying out orders. “Perhaps; but that statement fails to take into consideration that Grant was on the offensive rather than the defensive, nor does it account for topography. Of course, some topography was discussed later, but the initial presentation with no context was still that the Union army was tantamount to a bumbling fool. By extension this statement also glorifies the southern army, perhaps with reason, but still doesn’t do justice to the fact that it’s a considerable tactical advantage to be on the defensive as opposed to the offensive of virtually any military endeavor.

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Southern Praise

by Kamron Bratlie - Wednesday, March 1, 2017, 11:01 PM

The documentary did a decent job, with the little knowledge of Petersburg that I already have. This was very much one sided to the Confederates as stated in the forum materials. While there is some time given to the logistical aspects of the Petersburg Campaign, much of it was spent on the thoughts and actions of the generals. This is no doubt important, however, the filmmakers seemed to point out the many flaws of the union generals and glorify the actions of the Southern generals. Even though Ken Burns touched on union failures in his documentary, there were also those of the Confederates mentioned.

I did find the portion explaining the tunnel/explosion interesting and found this way of presenting it the most memorable between the other sources.

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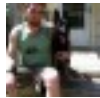


Re: Southern Praise

by Stanley Cates - Friday, March 3, 2017, 3:47 PM

I'm glad I'm not the only one that found it to be really biased. Speaking in reference to that bias; did it seem malicious at all to you? Or did it just seem like perhaps a little bit of confederate glorification is what these men were raised with having been from the south themselves and so they simply have a natural bias instilled in them? Clearly these are educated men given their professorship titles so we must consider their views are significant. I noted in my post that I had discovered my own bias that I wasn't even fully aware of; have you evaluated any such bias? Does it seem as though looking at the south as the proverbial "bad guys" might suddenly not be the way to go about it?

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Re: Southern Praise

by Nicholas Esser - Friday, March 3, 2017, 7:36 PM

I wouldn't say that there was any malicious intent, but the bias perspective was obvious. The historians in this sample of the documentary were determined to introduce the southern generals to the audience by their triumphs big or small, while introducing the northern generals with whatever failure or negative character traits they could find. In the defense of the historians in this documentary, most of the introductory information both positive (for the south) or negative (for the north) were backed up by the other sources we've studied. However, their rhetoric used can be highly misleading when presented this way. I think it all boils down to the documentary filming for a specific audience, and to entertain that specific audience they must present the facts that way. I suppose this is fine if the facts are based on some reality, and let the audience find out about the actual successes of north generals elsewhere.

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Re: Southern Praise

by Stanley Cates - Saturday, March 4, 2017, 2:14 PM

Your comment about filming for a specific audience intrigues me. Does that mean that other material written and/or filmed about the civil war may have also been written to entertain a northern audience? I mean, who wants to read a book or watch a documentary about how their great grandfather was on the bad guys' side? Your own words raise more questions: "However, their rhetoric used can be highly misleading when presented this way." Can it though? Or is our perception of being misled just a byproduct of our own cultural bias?

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Re: Southern Praise

by Nicholas Esser - Sunday, March 5, 2017, 2:19 PM

To be successful in almost all genres, you must know the audience you're presenting to. Of course there is material that favors the north and vilifies the south! Perhaps it's even easier to find said material. My point is that to be true to history, when introducing generals for example, one could note equivalent achievements, not aim to flatter one side and degrade another. History gets muddy when you start labeling good guys and bad guys, however tempting it may be. People from the dawn of time have had to look back at the actions of their forefathers and judge them to be sensible or not. Don't get me wrong, I believe this source to be beneficial as I love to dive into all points of view to be skeptical. My remark was that to achieve the highest historically accurate portrayal to an audience, its often necessary to remove a tunnel vision point of view and present to an audience that is simply hungry for the whole history, if plausible, in time and budget (which I'm aware is not always the case).

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Re: Southern Praise

by Stanley Cates - Sunday, March 5, 2017, 3:11 PM

But shouldn't historians be more concerned with giving an objective truth than appeasing an audience?

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Re: Southern Praise

by Nicholas Esser - Sunday, March 5, 2017, 7:00 PM

That is the point I was trying to make and I believe they should. If historians pick sides of good guys and bad guys, they do themselves a disservice as the lines are often blurry. I feel the more impartial the better understanding we can have.

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Re: Southern Praise

by Kamron Bratlie - Sunday, March 5, 2017, 3:47 PM

I can only imagine that these men in the documentary have been brought up with a certain admiration for the South and its many colorful generals. Naturally, this bias is going to be present. Knowing that, I am able to see past their slight jabs at the Union. As for the South being looked at as the "proverbial bad guys," I can see where a more pro-southern look at things can slightly shift ones perspective on the war as a whole. However, the Confederacy lost.

To future generations, especially some of ourselves being descendants of the Union side, the South will always been seen as the bad guy no matter how many sympathetic perspectives we encounter. That being said, I am obviously biased to the North and have been since the start of this class.

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Re: Southern Praise

by Jacob Micheli - Sunday, March 5, 2017, 11:18 PM

The film really hammered home the failings of Union generals. It did of course glorify the South and their officers. I keep thinking maybe the film wasn't as biased as it appears to be. I'm reminded of that old saying "It's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game". Maybe the film (and Southerners) look at the war from that angle. Maybe whether they lost is unimportant. Perhaps the real victory was fighting a losing war from the start. Maybe thats the key to understanding Southern friendly films like this one.

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The Crater of Petersburg

by Nicholas Esser - Wednesday, March 1, 2017, 11:01 PM

In any source that is specific to, or focused on, a single topic, the reader is almost certainly going to gain a firm understanding of even the little details of a given event. One of the first specific details I was glad to have was pertaining to the crater of Petersburg. McPherson writes "In conception it bid fair to become the most brilliant strokes of the war; in execution, it became a tragic fiasco." McPherson is assumedly referring to the tragedy of James Ledlie's division, or even the fact that it was his division rushing the breach and not Burnside's (another topic I am eager to return to). The fiasco that is not mentioned by either Burns or McPherson is the failure to detonate the mine, leading to Sgt. Reese of the 48th Pennsylvania volunteering to enter the mine to fix the fuse while also successfully returning to safety. These tactics

used in the Civil War fascinated me and I was happy to dive a bit more in depth on the operation. I can understand Burns not finding the time in his series, but I wonder why this small bit of information was kept from McPherson's account.

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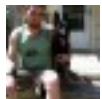


Re: The Crater of Petersburg

by Stanley Cates - Friday, March 3, 2017, 3:56 PM

It does seem a little strange that given McPherson's apparent knack for including excruciating amounts of details regarding battles and tactics that he didn't spend more time covering the crater. Perhaps he'll revisit the topic in a later chapter? Maybe at the time of his writing the crater was an over-covered topic? At any rate, I also enjoyed the added detail of this scenario. However, at first glance I thought that perhaps the speaker in the documentary was simply giving credit where credit is due regarding a brilliant and original tactic; but then afterward I wondered if they were simply building up the prestige of the Union army to then make tearing it down all the more dramatic, glorifying the south by extension. What do you think?

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Re: The Crater of Petersburg

by Nicholas Esser - Sunday, March 5, 2017, 2:32 PM

You're probably hitting the nail on the head, though it is much more subtle than the dramatic music that plays almost exclusively during the telling of Confederate tragedies. Nevertheless, the more you address or concede sides of opposition, the more you base your own creation in logic, no matter the intentions.

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Worthwhile!

by Aimee Chow - Wednesday, March 1, 2017, 11:53 PM

After looking over this week's sources, I was pretty overwhelmed. I watched the video clip last, and couldn't keep track of all the information. After all, it was a very detailed log of the Petersburg campaign. The Petersburg Campaign was a strategic "siege". The way the documentary presented the campaign was definitely superior compared to the text and Burns' episode.

The unique perspective, although harsh, I found in the documentary was how anti-North and pro-Southern it was. This is shown within the first couple of minutes of the documentary. James Robertson Jr. tells us the following, "Grant was convinced if he applied constant pressure everywhere, the forces of General R. E. Lee would collapse...he who attempts to defend everything, end up defending nothing." I thought this was a strong opinion on Grant's efforts, considering that most sources we've looked at so far have praised for him for his strategic plans. Talking about the two generals, Robertson mentions that "Grant was stoop and slouchy...he spent more time chewing on a cigar than talking." I'm unsure if his goal was to create Grant as a stuck-up individual or if he was degrading him.

In my opinion, I think this documentary helped me understand Petersburg and the events that happened over the course of 9 months. It emphasized on the strategy of the war, which was helpful. To be honest, I haven't finished the reading yet, but if we were to compare the sources itself, McPherson's text had me all over. The mixture of Petersburg and the politics of the war made it difficult to pinpoint what the focus was this week. Burns' episode lined up with the documentary's information, which was helpful to understand what was accurate. I found this when both sources described the battle of the Crater and even though brief in the episode, Petersburg. Overall, I think that this narrow focus on Petersburg was worthwhile. It wasn't all about who won and lost what battles, but whose strategy was most efficient and successful. Grant's approval to construct a tunnel from the Union to the Confederate line and fill gun powders in them was smart, but ended in a mess and resulted in the battle of the Crater. Clearly, this is one of the more "better in the head" ideas, but didn't result well. I would recommend this documentary to gain another perspective on the war in 1864.

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Re: Worthwhile!

by Stanley Cates - Friday, March 3, 2017, 4:09 PM

I think you're right about McPherson being all over the place. To his credit, there is an exhausting amount of information to cover, but I think it was helpful to see it actually played out in front of me consecutively. Seems like McPherson likes to jump around, with method and purpose to be sure, but jump around nonetheless, and sometimes that simply doesn't work for people. I asked another person in here about their take on the Pro-southern bias, and as it seems you picked up on it heavily as well I was curious about your thoughts regarding whether these might simply be an extension of cultural bias?

As for the idea of Grant being degraded I also have to side of the affirmative. I think they were very subtle, and maybe not so much as a sheer degrading portrayal so much as to gently place him below the sophistication of Lee. Almost as though they mean to put Grant down, but if they're not careful in the way that they do it it will reflect poorly on their own character.

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Re: Worthwhile!

by Aimee Chow - Sunday, March 5, 2017, 5:57 PM

This definitely is an extension of cultural bias. I feel like bias will always be there when you read any history source. You could say that these historians grew up in the south, if that makes any difference. Also, I believe this documentary was made in Virginia, which already provides evidence of why it was Southern-friendly. I still respect the historians opinions and insight. Growing up, since elementary school, I was taught to associate the Confederacy with "evil" because of slavery. However, I do appreciate this documentary and its perspective. Even though it was a confederate loss, we can all learn something on how this war affected not only southern states, but its army men and generals. I would be interested in watching the rest of the series to see how heavy it is on the Confederate side of the war.

I'm curious though, do you think this was geared towards a specific audience, or just another documentary with a different point of view? (I know this is a last minute response, but I am interested in hearing your thoughts about this.)

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The importance of Petersburg

by Jacob Micheli - Saturday, March 4, 2017, 11:57 PM

This was absolutely a worthwhile task. Not only for historical purposes but for gaining a different perspective. I enjoyed how this film focused on the Southern side of the war. Watching the Blue Ridge special was a clear indication of contrast between Burns and the former. Having a well rounded perspective is important. Thats what makes this task so enjoyable. Being able to experience history from the losing side. This wasn't just another Union victory but the beginning of the end. With the help of the "Dictator" and the largest concentration of African American troops- Petersburg was an important historical even. The emphasis on this single campaign is legitamate.

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Is focusing on Petersburg a worthwhile task?

by Randi Carlton - Sunday, March 5, 2017, 8:04 PM

I definitely think yes, as it is the moment of a turning point and some payoff for all of Grant's pursuit of Lee and the uniqueness in his leadership in never giving up his attempts to flank him. Finally, he decides to do something different and does something seemingly impossible; builds a bridge across the James river, the longest bridge made during the war, and crosses all of his men without being noticed. The battle is unique in that it was not a standard siege since Petersburg was not surrounded or cut off from supplies, but the affects were similar to a siege nonetheless as the Confederates could not get out and time would dwindle their supplies. Petersburg is also of interest in how, despite his great advantage upon arriving on the scene (Union outnumbering Confederate 25 to 1) Grant still stumbled and his generals were not focused or coordinated and time was wasted until Lee showed up. This highlights that even with the ingenuity and unwillingness to give up that Grant showed in his leadership style, this could not combat tiredness and poor coordination among generals who were not in line with and on the same page as Grant.

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A Blue Ridge Production

by Jacob Micheli - Sunday, March 5, 2017, 10:56 PM

I don't think the documentary really added. I would say it complimented more than anything. Ken Burns did a good job covering major battles big and small. He also skillfully gave a well rounded report of commanders on both sides. He certainly covered Robert E. Lee as much as Grant. His recount of battles won and lost were also very thorough and complex. However, the topic of soldier quality went to Burns and the Union and Blue Ridge to the South. James McPherson on the other hand covered every topic and then some. He remains unchallenged even by Ken Burns. I will say the Blue Ridge production did introduce a different perspective not conveyed by Burns or McPherson. It was passionate, informative and predictable. An easy to watch film with a lively spirit.

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