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Remarks of John A. Carver, Jr., Under Secretary of the Interior, at  
Dedication of the Perryville Battle Field Museum, Kentucky, October 9, 1965

What Will Future Historians Say?

The battle which was fought here one hundred and three years ago yesterday was one of the most confused in a confusing war. Though it was the farthest advance of the Confederacy in the West, and a turning point of sorts, it is not remembered with the Virginia campaigns which have accounted for so much of history's attention.

What comes through to me about Perryville is that it is almost a matrix of a terrible internal struggle that went on in the minds and hearts of the men of Kentucky. I am attracted to the irony of Kentucky in those sad days. Lincoln and Jeff Davis were born not so far from here; here we truly feel it as a "strange, sad war."

Mistakes were consistent. One is almost forced to wonder whether the schizophrenia forced upon Kentuckians by the War did not, subconsciously take control of both sides alike.

How else explain General Buell falling from the horse? What Fate permitted Confederate Polk to order Federal Colonel Shyrock of the 87th Indiana to cease firing upon Polk's troops--and get away unscathed?

Braxton Bragg achieved eventually his measure of fame, but not for his loss of Kentucky at Perryville. The luckless Buell, who did not know until four in the afternoon that his troops were engaged, might have kept his command, if the wind had changed.

It was hot and dry, and the troops were looking for water, not a fight. All in all, it was ambiguous, perplexing.

It saw Kentucky kept in the Union, and perhaps deserves to be known as the Gettysburg of the West, but more than a century later we ponder and wonder.

Does our observance, this memorial event, shed light, or furnish insight? The events of this day have required dedicated time and effort, willingly given. Something beside our passion for pageantry must motivate us.

Each age sees itself differently than history sees it. And perspective is necessary, not only to judge history but to judge historians. Herodotus himself was immediately criticized for inaccuracy and bias. Medieval church history is clouded by the partisan character of its period. Parson Weem's folklore long influenced our view of a national hero. Even the renowned Beveridge colored the development of a young nation with a materialistic tinge. Schlesinger, unchallenged in his interpretation of Andrew Jackson and Franklin Roosevelt, cannot escape unscathed, nor can Sorensen, as they interpret men with whom they daily talked and worked.

Historians who write about their own time have such special vulnerability. Others still living have differing memories and perspectives and old history seems more authentic. Particularly for those of us nurtured upon history books, Life magazine seems much too evanescent. For us old history is fact, the present is here; it isn't yet history.

Distortions that distract from total perspective take various forms. Did the Civil War Centennial observances contribute the right kind of perspective on that fratricidal horror? How much were we diverted in our understanding of these grim events by a commitment to the mythology of the heroics of warfare?

Arnold Toynbee reduced a theory of history to the basic equation: how has this come out of that?

Should we not have marked along with Perryville and Harpers Ferry and Gettysburg and Vicksburg and Bull Run and the rest, also that decade of strife and agony that led to the Civil War? The debates that made for the Missouri Compromise might have a familiar ring, if recreated in "Hear it now." Should we not, now that we have run the course of the Centennial of the War, also try to define by centennial observances the struggle for unity and the national sanity that followed Lincoln's death?

Perhaps, indeed, we are doing just that.

What historian can say that right then, on that day, at that time of the afternoon, in that tent or room, the Nation was again united?

Pageantry has its own dimension and meaning. Pageantry in perspective gives us opportunity to savor the fleeting moments of yesterday's present--sort of instant history. By concentrating our time and efforts on pageantry we must not shut out opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the course of this historical present of which we are a part.

We may fail to find our perspective in the current of each day's efforts but we never cease trying. Will history see today's struggles as we see them?

We are not unaware that we live in an era which will as surely be the focus of history's attention as the bloody events here a hundred years ago.

Baker v. Carr and Brown v. the Board of Education are in the history books surely as Dred Scott.

The War on Poverty, now in its opening skirmish stage will have a place in history. Will 1965 be viewed as marking the opening of a grand and revolutionary assault on the condition of poverty? Or will the effort be likened to the Crusades as noble but futile?

If someday America commemorates the Perryvilles and the Gettysburgs of the social struggles of our era, the marchers in that pageant may sense again.

-- How it was when the country caught the spirit of the President's words at Ann Arbor, Michigan, when he outlined the goals of a Great Society.

-- How it was when the goals of equal opportunity crystallized the national conscience in a drive to overcome now the accumulated deficit in human freedom which has been an unpaid obligation for more than 100 years.

-- How it was when the total machinery of all levels of government began to not only alleviate the pain and misery of poverty and hunger but also sought to erase the roots of poverty and starvation from the face of this nation and the world.

-- How it was when the Nation embarked on a massive new war against ignorance and disease.

-- How it was really when, under the leadership of the President and the Congress, the Nation put a whole new set of goals before it to protect, preserve and restore the historic and natural beauties for they were in danger of being lost for all time.

The objects of an historian's interests in the breakthrough that have been made in what Secretary Stewart Udall calls conservation's "Quiet Crisis" will provide impressive continuity to the great efforts which stirred the Nation in the days of Teddy Roosevelt and the New Deal.

Historians, I say, will mark 1965 for the birth of a new consciousness and commitment to beauty. A new awareness of the issue which President Johnson stated so clearly when he observed that "For once the battle is lost, once our natural splendor is destroyed, it can never be recaptured. And once men can no longer walk with beauty or wonder at nature, his spirit will wither and his sustenance be wasted."

The centennial years for the national parks of the recent past--Cape Cod, Pt. Reyes, Assateague, Delaware Water Gap, and all the other parks and recreation areas which have been added in our time to assure for the future the availability of these irreplaceable assets should be as full as the last few years have been with the Civil War.

Historians will see that this generation began to look upon the waste products of our affluence as potential economic assets which must be put to work. Five million junked auto bodies added each year to the national blight will under the pressure of research become a new resource. Other great achievements to preserve our seashores, to conserve our water, and to reverse the process and actions which contaminate our environment--all of these are the stuff of which future history is made.

One of the lessons of Perryville, it seems to me, was stated by President Kennedy in a stirring paragraph of his inaugural address.

In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility--I welcome it. I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation.

We are history. And what we do now will determine whether the historians of the next century will look back on what we did with a sense of frustration and ambiguity--like we must do as we look back on the Battle of Perryville--or whether the events of which we are a part were the decisive milestones that mark firm steps on the road to a better world.

If we are more fortunate than the men who fought here, we can decide.