

# Civil War at 150: Expect Subdued Salutes, Rising Voices

**A historian foresees more inclusive events and cash-strapped programs.**



A cannon on the U.S. Civil War battlefield at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania (file picture).

Photograph by Michael Melford, National Geographic



Historian Mark Collins Jenkins. Photograph by Mark Thiessen, NGS.

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for [National Geographic News](#)

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**If you thought you just caught a snatch of [a certain plaintive fiddle melody](#) coming from your television, you're probably right.**

**The umpteenth re-air of Ken Burns's seminal documentary on PBS is just one sign that the 150th anniversary of the U.S. Civil War is upon us.**

**And with new voices being heard, hard truths coming to light, and federal and state budget shortfalls forestalling large-scale events, this Civil War anniversary promises to be like none before.**

A century and a half has now passed since April 12, 1861, when the first shells arced through the predawn sky toward Fort Sumter, [South Carolina](#)—the first shots of the Civil War. (See [pictures of the Battle of Fort Sumter](#).)

For the next five years the Civil War sesquicentennial will be commemorated with a barrage of lectures, exhibitions, and symposia at museums and libraries. Reenactors are enlisting for living-history encampments, remembrance days, parades, and "battles." (See [Civil War reenactment pictures](#).)

Schools are planning field trips and lesson plans. Volunteers are out refurbishing historical markers and cleaning battlefields for an expected surge in tourism. (See *National Geographic Traveler* magazine's [top ten U.S. Civil War sites](#).)

Bookshelves too—already groaning with Civil War tomes—should brace for another influx. Month in and month out, major newspapers are tracking the war as if it were unfolding today.

Predictably, the rebellion will be not only televised but also digitized, with, for example, the state of [Virginia](#) imploring citizens to follow [its sesquicentennial effort on Facebook](#). On Twitter, the *Washington Post* is already [tweeting first-person pronouncements from the era in "real time."](#)

Non-Civil War buffs needn't run for cover just yet, though.

Only if you live east of the Mississippi River are you likely to glimpse much of the anniversary hoopla. And even around the battlefields themselves, the sound and the fury will probably be more subdued than the rash of event planning suggests. ([Interactive Map: Battlefields of the Civil War](#).)

The necessary ammunition—money—is in short supply.

(Read ["Civil War Battlefields"](#) in *National Geographic* magazine.)

### **Civil War Plans Wounded in Budget Battles**

In a time of budget shortfalls, legislative funding for sesquicentennial initiatives has been fitful at best.

Virginia and [Pennsylvania](#) are managing to offer full schedules of events, unlike most other states, many faced with sparse coffers. [New York](#), already billions of dollars in the hole, can't spare a single penny to officially honor its 48,000 dead—the longest casualty roll amassed by any northern state.

Even the federal government—which led the charge in mounting the souvenir-strewn centennial observances from 1961 to 1965—seems reluctant to participate this time around. Bills to establish a National Civil War Sesquicentennial Commission, for example, have been stalled in the U.S. Congress.

### **No Civil War Anniversary "Celebrations"**

Organizers aren't just impoverished—they're wary.

The war that divided a nation remains divisive today.

The NAACP, for instance, is 11 years into its tourism boycott of South Carolina, promising not to relax the siege until the Confederate battle flag comes off the statehouse grounds. In the blogosphere, entrenched partisans regularly snipe at each other with ill-mannered fury.

Around the battlefields—now green and mellow and blooming with spring—the cordon of subdivisions and shopping malls is inevitably tightening, even as preservation groups struggle to lock down the few remaining unprotected, undeveloped tracts.

And don't call the Civil War sesquicentennial a celebration. The war cost some 620,000 lives—which, as a percentage of the U.S. population, would equate to nearly *six million* dead today.

"Commemoration" is the word of the day.

### **Anniversary May Offer Varied Perspectives**

Fittingly, event organizers are striving for inclusiveness.

For example, the [Civil War 150 HistoryMobile](#)—a converted tractor-trailer launched by Virginia, once home to the capital of the Confederacy—will "enable visitors to better understand the Civil War in Virginia from multiple viewpoints."

That might be the most interesting thing to emerge from the next few years: a new story, told from as many viewpoints as possible.

"The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present," Lincoln himself proclaimed. "As our case is new, so we must think anew. ..."

Today's historians, with access to a wider range of primary source materials, have been busily seeking out such varied perspectives. Together, they're disentangling the old versions of the story, reexamining those myriad strands, taking up new threads, and weaving a different pattern.

(Related: [Full Coverage of the Civil War Sesquicentennial](#))

Expect women—many now among the front rank of Civil War historians—to figure more prominently in the new histories, not only as witnesses and victims but also as interpreters of the historical record.

Expect a greater emphasis on African Americans too. The emancipation of the slaves and its unfulfilled promise won't be forgotten this time around, as they were during the early-1960s centennial—when the Civil Rights movement offered a stark contrast to whitewashed Civil War remembrances. (See ["African Americans in the Civil War: Equality Earned With Blood."](#))

But don't expect every last Confederate battle flag to be furled, for Southerners remain proud of their military heritage.

Above all, expect what was already a complicated story to become even more contradictory and compelling.

It will be less comfortable as a national myth, less evasive about blighted hopes, and even, perhaps, less heroic. It will be more chaotic, more confusing, more violent, more heartrending—more, that is, like war itself.

*Mark Collins Jenkins, a historian formerly with the National Geographic Society, is co-author of the new book [The Civil War: A Visual History](#).*