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"Thoughts on Teaching and the Importance of Understanding History"

By Gary W. Gallagher

Remarks accepting

The Philip Merrill Award
for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education

with

Tributes from
John L. Nau III
Melvyn P. Leffler
Susan Welch
Thomas M. Rollins

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The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) is an independent non-profit educational organization committed to academic freedom, excellence, and accountability. Launched in 1995, ACTA has a network of alumni and trustees from over 1,100 colleges and universities, including over 15,000 current board members. The quarterly newsletter, *Inside Academe,* reaches nearly 13,000 readers. ACTA receives no government or university funding and is supported through the generosity of individuals and foundations.

"Thoughts About Teaching and the Importance of Understanding History"

by Gary W. Gallagher

I am deeply honored by my selection to receive this year's Philip Merrill Award. I am especially touched by the presence tonight of so many dear friends and colleagues, who collectively have done much to make me a better scholar and teacher.

Anne Neal very gently urged me not to transgress the boundary of 20 minutes for my remarks tonight. I promise not to do so. Because I am in a room filled with people who keep track of how the liberal arts fare in American education, I see no need to allocate any of my time to recent trends or predictions—apart from observing that studies and analysis in the press run the gamut from guardedly optimistic to Cassandra-like.

Winning the Merrill Award has prompted me to think seriously about teaching—for the first time, I am somewhat embarrassed to admit. I have never taken a course on pedagogy, never been mentored in a systematic way about teaching at any stage of my career. I have spent my professional life in the world of research universities, an environment where scholarship and publishing, far more than

effectiveness in the classroom, usually loom largest in deciding things such as tenure and promotion. It is a culture where the notion that one can be either a good scholar or a good teacher, but perhaps not both, too often lingers.

I find that notion completely wrong-headed. Scholarship and effectiveness in communicating ideas in the classroom, as well as to an audience beyond the academy, are inextricably linked. Success in the classroom and in public forums rests to a significant degree on the process, and the excitement, of bringing material and insights derived from research into lectures and other programs for students and lay groups. The process keeps courses fresh, imparting an organic quality that yields continuing dividends. It has been my experience that superior scholars often make superior teachers, and I have no doubt that the pool of those who are good at both things is deep enough to fill most positions at colleges and universities.

I want to spend the rest of my time tonight on a mostly positive note. I'll begin by saying that I am fortunate to work in an endlessly fascinating field. No part of our history is more consequential than the era of the Civil War. Indeed, anyone who has not come to terms with that seismic conflict—its origins, its progress, and its impact—has absolutely no chance of understanding the larger story of the United States.

The mid-19th century offers a profusion of dramatic events, compelling personalities, unlikely political and social twists and turns, and by far the most disruptive military event in our history. As a society and a people, Americans of the period grappled with

elemental questions. Would the Union forged by the Revolutionary generation be scuttled because part of the electorate did not like the outcome of the presidential election of 1860? Would the institution of slavery, which had mocked the soaring language of our foundational documents for the republic's entire history, be eliminated? Would the relative power of the central government and the states and localities be reoriented in a fundamental way? And most important by far, would the nation emerge intact, positioned to become an economic and military colossus that would wield unmatched power as the 20th century unfolded? Confederate victory in the war, something surely possible though few Americans appreciate that fact now, would have altered the trajectory of 20th century world history. What richer bounty of material could a teacher seek? I believe it takes an act of will to make this subject boring. It is possible, alas, but to do so roughly compares to being handed the keys to a Lamborghini and then driving it around a shopping center parking lot at 15 miles an hour.

I find a real hunger for substantive engagement with the Civil War among undergraduate and graduate students, lay audiences, and groups of high school and middle school teachers with whom I work every year. I teach my Civil War survey at eight in the morning, which helps attract the most serious students. It is not necessary to try to entertain these various constituencies with bells and whistles, quite the contrary. I am something of a Luddite when it comes to technology—no PowerPoint, no links to the Internet, not even slides or overheads. Chalk and a blackboard suffice, and I try to engage listeners as directly as possible, having them focus on my words and drawing them into

the subject through as much interaction as possible. Taking one of my courses, I tell students, is almost an anthropological experience in a time of smart classrooms. Most of all, I attempt to promote a sense of collective enterprise wherein participants read and write a great deal and fuse synthesis and analysis in their oral and written arguments.

All my classes and other presentations combine attention to both history and historical memory. I push students to master what actually happened (I believe something actually happened in the past; history is not merely, as some would have it, a series of artificial constructions), while also showing that successive generations remember historical events and personalities in starkly different ways. Memory often trumps reality, I emphasize, because people act on what they perceive to be the truth, however flawed that perception. For my Civil War-related classes, I have splendid materials at hand to illustrate the power of memory. Students view films (always outside class time) to gauge how Hollywood has interpreted the past, writing papers that compare celluloid treatments to assigned readings and my lectures. I also conduct optional tours of various battlefields and other historic sites, where we discuss how, and why, Americans have created conflicting versions of what transpired.

I believe narrative, chronology, and biography are essential to forging a true understanding of the past. I realize these are unfashionable tools in many quarters today, but I have seen the confusion that results from purely thematic or theoretical approaches to history—most notably those devoid of human beings. Far too many students, even very bright ones, arrive in college with a hopeless

muddle of information about American history. An affirmation of this sad fact came a few months ago when one of my students provided a link to something called Lunch Scholars on YouTube. It offered a series of interviews with high school students, several of whom responded to this question: "In what war did the U.S. gain its independence?" The most common answer: "The Civil War." (The Korean War got one vote as well.) Chronology in history not only matters, it is an essential beginning point. The bombardment of Fort Sumter followed the secession of the lower South, which had occurred as a result of Abraham Lincoln's election. These events did not unfold in that order by chance.

Most students enroll in classes to learn something about a *subject*, and they typically resent being held hostage to harangues regarding contemporary politics. I find this very encouraging. We all have our political views, but we should strive to check them at the classroom door. For example, how I vote has nothing to do with my attempt to explain why men from New Hampshire or Wisconsin or Iowa, who were at absolutely no risk from Confederate military forces, voluntarily would don blue uniforms and risk their lives to save the Union. If students cannot account for such enlistments by the end of my class on the Civil War, I will have failed miserably. Injecting my own political views into the process would only get in the way. I find it very heartening when, at the close of almost every semester, students come up and say they have not been able to tell whether I am a Democrat or a Republican. "Now that the semester is over," they ask, "will you tell us?" I say no, that my politics have nothing to do with the class or with my relationship with them.

I'll close by observing that a gratifying number of my students come to understand why we—all of us, as American citizens—should care about our history. We should care because an understanding of history is vital in a democratic republic that functions best with the type of informed citizenry the founding generation believed necessary for any successful experiment in self-government.

Ignorance about the American past gets in the way of fruitful public debate about current issues of surpassing importance. This ignorance affects what passes for discussion of politics and other issues on the 24-hour news channels, on the Internet, and in newspapers. A shrill tone often predominates in all of these settings, frequently set up by "analysis" that is strikingly uninformed. The "news" emerges from a world of hyperbolic froth, where everything reported is the worst, the biggest, the best, unprecedented in its implications. I think there must be a course somewhere titled "Hyperbole 101," and perhaps another titled "The Long Reach of History: From Last Thursday to Today." I say this because the grasp of history, as it exists in much of the media, typically extends back approximately a week. The media often engage the world in much the fashion of little Labrador puppies. Every day brings a fresh adventure in discovery untethered to any longer perspective that might add welcome context and buffering.

Political discussion suffers especially from a lack of historical framing. The handling of immigration, for example, betrays little appreciation for the fact that we have engaged in similar public debates throughout our history—or that the vitriol characteristic of those debates makes the current ones seem tame. Often lost is awareness that

percentages of foreign-born residents are not remarkably high right now. In 1861, as the loyal states prepared to go to war to suppress the Confederate rebellion and restore the Union, almost one-third of all the military-age males in the country had been born outside the United States. For the entire period between 1860 and 1920, the percentage of foreign-born residents exceeded that of today.

Neither are we unusually divided politically in the early 21st century—though you would never know it if you habitually watch Fox News or MSNBC, read blogs, or even tune in to the more mainstream networks or consult flagship newspapers. Rants about how divided we are do not help set the stage for rational consideration of problems facing our nation. A leitmotif in coverage of the 2008 presidential election and of subsequent political campaigns and wrangles in Washington and the hinterlands suggests that we are witnessing a unique breakdown of national civility, and that criticisms of the president—whether George W. Bush or Barack Obama—have reached new levels of intensity. The only way to argue these things is to know nothing about previous American political history. I strongly suspect that Abraham Lincoln, or John Adams or many other presidents for that matter, would find political criticism directed toward our recent presidents rather mild. As for our never having been so divided, historians of the Civil War can counter with at least one obvious example that puts the lie to that idea.

My point is simply that if we, as a people, had a more certain sense of our history, we would be in a better position to know that almost nothing is new, that we have overcome immense problems in the past, and that we almost certainly will do so again.

One last thing I try to impress on my students is the value of finding a profession that stirs passionate interest over the long term. I have had the great good fortune to teach at Penn State University and the University of Virginia, to earn my living lecturing and writing about the Civil War. I still look forward to every class period, even those that begin at eight o'clock in the morning. I have access to a great library, superior students, major historic sites, and a campus in Charlottesville that exudes history. Because of the wide popularity of my field, I have the opportunity to reach people beyond academia. I would not trade jobs with anyone in the United States—and am well aware of how few people can say that and mean it.

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The following are tributes given in honor of Gary Gallagher at the presentation of the Philip Merrill Award on November 8, 2013.

John L. Nau III

President and CEO of Silver Eagle Distributors; Vice Chairman, National Parks Foundation Board of Directors; Chairman Emeritus, Civil War Trust; and Chairman of the Board, Nau Center for Texas Cultural Heritage

It is an honor to be a part of this special evening to recognize the unique qualities, attributes and character of a great educator—Dr. Gary Gallagher. His contribution to the advancement of liberal arts education and his dynamic teaching of American history make him a worthy recipient of this distinguished award. His knowledge, enthusiasm and love of mid-19th century American history are apparent in every lecture he gives, every book he writes and every classroom tape he records.

Just like Bruce Catton introduced a new generation to the events of the Civil War through his written word, today Gary Gallagher continues to bring that period of our history to life through the written word and each time he enters a classroom or walks a battlefield and begins to tell the story of our past.

My perspective is a bit different from the others who are sharing comments this evening. As the initiator of the Nau Professorship in the History of the American Civil War at the University of Virginia, I have the privilege of having my name associated with Dr. Gary Gallagher and his many accomplishments. A connection I am extremely grateful and honored to have, because even I get praise for Gary's outstanding efforts in the classroom.

Gary is the epitome of a great educator. He expands his classroom teaching by always taking more to his lecture class than just his planned programs. He is a motivator.

He makes history come alive with his extraordinary ability to connect with an audience in a way that allows you to step back in time. His engaging manner guides you through the lives and events of key periods in our American history.

I have first-hand knowledge of the significant impact he makes on students as I have had the opportunity to join Gary on one of the Civil War battlefield tours he hosts for students. He conducts these tours on his own time and students participate in the tours on their own time. I joined him for a tour of Antietam early on a Saturday morning, and I was part of a group of 30 or more students and their families. His enthusiasm and knowledge paint a picture and create a sense of purpose for the events that occurred on the hallowed ground. The experience is like no other, for his descriptions make the battlefield come to life. His love of history and ability to connect with people are gifts that we are all fortunate he is able to share with us. The power to connect the past in this unique way causes reflection and inspiration. At the end of the tour, I had parents stop and tell me what an impact Gary Gallagher has made on their child—as a teacher, mentor and friend.

Gary's tours of Civil War battlefields are lessons in leadership and decision-making, and I would be remiss not to mention Gary's impact on my business. His battlefield tours are great lessons for college students, and they are great lessons in corporate leadership. Silver Eagle Distributor's management team are better leaders and decision-makers because of the knowledge they have gained from Gary Gallagher and his battlefield tours.

Tonight we recognize one of America's great historians and exceptional educators—a person who works each day teaching the next generation about the events of our rich history.

This year's Philip Merrill Award recipient is an extraordinary individual with a great talent for teaching American history.

Congratulations, Gary.

Melvyn P. Leffler

Edward Stettinius Professor of American History, University of Virginia; faculty fellow, Governing America in a Global Era program

It is really a great pleasure for me to be here tonight to express appreciation for and admiration of Gary's contributions to perpetuating the values of the liberal arts broadly defined, to our understanding of American history, and to higher education.

I have known Gary since the late 1990s when I was dean of the faculty and worked hard to lure Gary to the University of Virginia. Since then, he has enriched the university community by his astonishing productivity as an historian, the superior quality of his books and articles, the standards of excellence he insists upon from colleagues and students, the visibility he has achieved as one of the nation's outstanding historians of the Civil War, and the contributions he has made to public understanding of the Civil War and its mixed legacies in popular memory and public discourse.

I, too, am an historian of war, diplomacy, and decision-making. I look upon Gary's writings about the Civil War as exemplary models of historical scholarship. His books, articles, and essays vividly illuminate the interactions of war and society, of popular will and high level decision-making. In riveting descriptions of battlefronts and homefronts and in evocative illuminations of death, destruction, and heroism, he depicts how military events shape all aspects of civil society as well as economic and political decision-making. He integrates commanders and soldiers, political leaders and individual citizens, and offers us an integrated understanding of human agency and economic and social structures. His deep scholarship and lucid prose engage readers, inspire inquiry, and generate lively debate.

But Gary has done more than enrich our understanding of the Civil War through books and articles. He has illuminated how images, stories, and rhetoric shape our collective memory and influence our public discourse. He portrays how individuals embody many forms of personal identity, and how these identities evolve in dynamic circumstances, often shaped by events no individual can control but, in turn, empowering individuals to shape public life. By examining films, monuments, portraits, and artifacts, he beautifully illuminates how public understanding of history evolves and changes, yet his scholarship reminds us that there is an objectivity, however elusive, that we must pursue.

At the University of Virginia, Gary's courses have captured the imagination of students. He schedules one of his lecture courses for eight a.m. to test the seriousness of students' commitment, and he attracts 150-200 students. And not because Gary is an easy grader; indeed he is known for his rigor, high standards, and contempt for fluff. He forces students to think deeply, to grapple with evidence, and to appreciate the complexity of human behavior. This is what the liberal arts are all about.

In his 10 or 12 books, in his scores of edited volumes, and in his renowned public lectures, Gary has shown that American history is alive and well. He has demonstrated that serious scholars can attract a huge following from a public more eager than we think to interrogate the interweaving of culture, politics, and strategy and from a public wanting to grasp how values and principles have shaped personal identity, national memory, and public policy.

Gary, thanks for all your terrific scholarly work and intellectual contributions—and for enriching our lives at the University of Virginia and around the country.

Susan Welch

Dean, College of the Liberal Arts and professor of political science, Pennsylvania State University

I am certainly delighted to be here to celebrate the amazing accomplishments of Gary Gallagher.

When I came to Penn State as the new dean in 1991, Gary was head of the department of history, a very good head I might add. But it was Gary's passion for teaching—anywhere, anytime, and any student—that impressed me the most.

At Penn State, Gary was a fantastic classroom teacher in classes on the Civil War at all levels from freshman to graduate seminars. Students loved him, and his classes had the reputation of being rigorous as well as enjoyable. Visiting a battlefield with Gary was a high point of many of our undergraduates' education, and many of his students developed a lifelong interest in the Civil War.

Adults find him to be an equally fabulous teacher. He is a frequent speaker at Civil War roundtables and events around the country. His course on the Civil War has been a fixture of The Teaching Company's Great Courses for years. At Penn State, he inspired many of our alumni to share his passion for the Civil War and the Civil War Era. Walking the battlefield with Gary is just as inspiring for alums as for undergraduates. Through it, he not only makes battles come alive, but his students, adult or traditional, learn so much about the politics of the era and the causes for which each side fought. Gary's passion for teaching and for Civil War events and ideas inspire his students: they develop new ways of thinking about key historical events and ideas that shaped our country; the idea of union and the struggles for freedom that continue today. That inspiration led to the development of a center on the Civil War era at Penn State, a center that Gary initiated and that,

with the leadership of Bill Blair, one of Gary's Ph.D. students, has since developed into one of the premier centers of its kind nationally.

Of course, not everything in the battlefield tours worked smoothly. As we were standing on Little Round Top at Gettysburg, Gary, the professional historian, once insisted on telling one of our group, who had a Ph.D. in meteorology, that of course it wasn't going to rain during our time there. Just a few minutes later, we were all scrambling for cover on Little Round Top as the skies let loose. Then, on another occasion, Gary the historian, assured the group that of course those cattle whose field we had gone into were not going to pay any attention to us. A few minutes later, he assured us again that the reason the cattle were walking toward us had nothing to do with us. And yet a few minutes later, we were running as fast as 50-, 60-, and 70-year-old legs could run to get away from, if not a charging herd, at least a threatening one.

Fortunately, tonight, we are not honoring Gary for his meteorology or agricultural skills, but for his contributions to liberal arts education. I can think of no more deserving candidate for this award. He has brought the Civil War alive to students in his classrooms, graduate students whom he has mentored, and to a national audience of adults. Through his passion for teaching, he has inspired thousands of others to learn beyond the classroom.

Thomas M. Rollins
Founder, The Teaching Company

There are college professors, and then there are college professors. Gary Gallagher is in the latter category.

I'm Tom Rollins, and from 1990 to 2006 I founded and ran The Teaching Company, which produces the Great Courses, non-credit courses taught by the country's best lecturers. For us, a professor's teaching must be so good that people will not only enjoy it, but must enjoy it so much that they will want to take another course. Customers who rate a course a 9 or 10 on a 10-point scale are roughly twice as likely to buy again as those who give it a 7 or an 8 on that scale. So we became very scientific about finding excellence before courses ever reached our customers.

Over the past two decades, the company has developed very rigorous, data-rich recruiting and screening procedures to find professors who can produce "extreme" customer satisfaction.

Once a professor passed through our gauntlet of reviews, we began course production. Even then, it's possible that we may have missed something, that professors won't make the grade once they begin the often arduous process of recording a full course.

At that point, I'd often use some far less scientific methods to make sure we had made the right choice. One of my private clues that we'd found an exceptional teacher was that the course producer, the person in charge of all aspects of making the course, would come from the studio every day to tell me we had a big success on our hands. Andreas Burgstaller was Gary's producer, and he did just that every day. More than a decade later, Andy still recalls Gary as his favorite professor—relaxed and amiable, combining a perfect mix of comprehensive coverage, riveting detail, insightful stories, and a great flair for drama

and humor. All of which was wholly unscripted—Gary used a single page outline for each lecture.

My other clue that we had hit it big with Gary was when, as happened rarely, the camera crew would tell me that the course was great. They loved Gary's lectures. We actually had to stop recording and start over during Gary's lecture when he introduced General Winfield Scott, hero of the Mexican War and architect of the Union's successful Anaconda plan to win the war. By the time of the Civil War, the aged Scott weighed in at over 300 pounds and could only be set on horseback with winches and pulleys, and some poor nag underneath had to bear him for a show before the troops. The camera people laughed so hard during Gary's telling of the story that the tripod-mounted cameras shook like that nag and we had to begin again.

Our other highly scientific test was the parking lot phenomenon. We loved our courses, and many of us listened to them to and from work. One morning I pulled in but stayed in my car for another 10 minutes. When I got out, a colleague who'd seen me asked, "Who was it?" and I said "Gallagher on Shiloh." "Oh yeah." Even though you know how the story ends, a master analyst and storyteller makes it as fresh as spring rain.

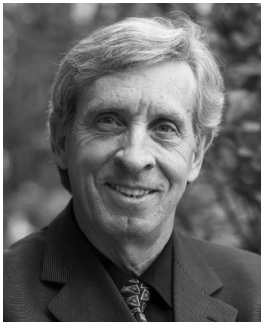
Since we published that course, over 100,000 people have watched and listened to Gary's lectures, told others about it, and have begun or deepened their understanding of American History, the Civil War, and the leaders of the southern army with Gary. They didn't do it for course credit, or for a certificate, or for a grade: they did it because they'd found a great teacher and scholar who is pretty close to perfect at what he does. One customer wrote: "If Gallagher taught a course on coloring with crayons, I'd consider taking it. He's that good!"

I mentioned that 10-point scale. With thousands of customers surveyed, Gary receives a 9 or 10 from over 90% of those who take his course; 96% say that they would strongly recommend his courses to a friend. Only a handful of professors in more than two decades have ever produced such enthusiastic ratings.

I began my company with an ideal in mind—that there are great professors and teachers for whom the distance from average is a quantum leap; a difference of kind, not degree. They are so good that we remember them decades later. I didn't know when I began if they'd be tweedy or hip, ivy or state, but I knew they were out there. I spent decades of my life looking for them, and for me and thousands of our customers, Gary Gallagher is an idea come true.

He's also a huge Bruce Springsteen fan, so forgive me "Boss," if I borrow and bend a lyric: Gary, "You're the one."

Gary W. Gallagher



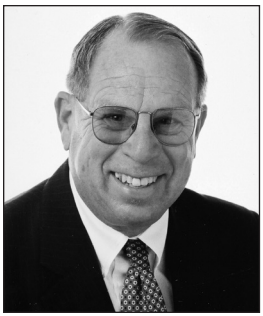
"It is impossible to understand the United States without coming to terms with the Civil War, which makes it a challenge and a delight to teach." So says Dr. Gary W. Gallagher, ACTA's 2013 Philip Merrill award recipient—the John L. Nau III Professor in the History of the American Civil War at the University of Virginia and one of the country's leading historians.

Professor Gallagher has received many awards for his research, writing, and teaching, including the Laney Prize for the best book on the Civil War; the William Woods Hassler Award for contributions to Civil War studies; the Lincoln Prize; the Fletcher Pratt Award for the best nonfiction book on the Civil War; and the Cavaliers' Distinguished Teaching Professorship for 2010-12, the highest teaching award given by the University of Virginia. His lectures are among the most popular offered by The Great Courses (formerly The Teaching Company). A UVA student said it best: "Far and away the best professor I've ever had. ... You will feel like your previous understanding of the U.S. was insufficient by any definition!"

Professor Gallagher is the author or editor of more than 30 books, including *Lee and His Generals in War and Memory* (Louisiana State University Press, 1998), *The Union War* (Harvard University Press, 2011), and *Becoming Confederates: Paths to a New National Loyalty* (University of Georgia Press, 2013). As the founder and first president of the Association for the Preservation of Civil War Sites (an organization with more than 12,500 members representing all 50 states) and a former member of the Board of Directors of the Civil War Trust, he has been a strong advocate for historic preservation.

He earned his B.A. from Adams State College of Colorado and M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin.

The Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education



ACTA is most pleased to be presenting the ninth annual Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education. The awarding of this prize, made with the advice of a distinguished selection committee, advances ACTA's long-term goal to promote and encourage a strong liberal arts education.

The Merrill Award offers a unique tribute to those dedicated to the transmission of the great ideas and central values of our civilization and is presented to inspire others and provide public acknowledgment of the value of their endeavors. Past recipients of the award are Robert P. George, the McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence and founder and director of the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton University (2005); Harvey C. Mansfield, William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Government at Harvard University (2006); Gertrude Himmelfarb, Professor Emeritus of History at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York (2007); Donald Kagan, Sterling Professor of Classics and History at Yale University (2008); Robert "KC" Johnson, Professor of History at Brooklyn College and The Graduate Center of the City University of New York (2009); Benno C. Schmidt, Jr., Chairman, Board of Trustees of the City University of New York (2010); historian David McCullough (2011); and Thomas M. Rollins, founder of The Teaching Company (2012).

The prize is named in honor of Philip Merrill, who served as a trustee of Cornell University, the University of Maryland Foundation, the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, the Aspen Institute, and the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. Mr. Merrill was also a founding member of ACTA's National Council.

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