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James McPherson Worries About History Without Letters

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Yesterday, historian [James McPherson](#) was interviewed on NPR's "[Weekend Edition, Sunday](#)" program about why soldiers fight. His book, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War*, is a classic model of using primary sources to revisit historical questions. In the interview, McPherson, a history professor at [Princeton University](#), made the interesting point that his work, along with that of other historians, is largely based in the reading and analysis of letters. Viewers of Ken Burns' classic series on the Civil War will instantly recall the power of those letters to and from soldiers read as part of the narrative. McPherson wondered aloud if future historians will be able to document our own times, now that personal letters have largely been replaced by e-mails and telephone calls.

James M. McPherson served as president of the [American Historical Association](#) in 2003. The association provides a helpful [bibliography](#) of McPherson's voluminous writings.

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