

Syllabus for HIST 246: The American Civil War Era

Spring 2009, MWF 10-10:50, SH 305

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Course Description

Walk into any big bookstore like Barnes and Noble or Borders, and you are likely to find an entire bookshelf or more devoted to books about the Civil War. At his inauguration this month, Barack Obama will swear the presidential oath by placing his hand on President Abraham Lincoln's Bible, but it won't be the last you'll hear of Lincoln this year. 2009 marks the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth, and several professional conferences of historians are planned debating Lincoln and his legacy. By some counts, at least 60 books on Lincoln will also be released this year alone! 2009 is also the one-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of John Brown's antislavery raid on Harper's Ferry; a conference marking—and debating—that occasion will also be held this October. The Civil War is still news.

But is there really anything left to say about the Civil War era? Apparently, yes. And the reason why discussion about the war and its era continues is because many historical questions are debatable. Some are more debatable than others, however, and some answers to even the most debatable questions are more defensible than alternatives. This course is an inquiry into some questions about the Civil War era (roughly 1848 to 1876), that remain open to different answers. Using the Civil War as our focal point, we'll also consider, more generally, why questions about the past remain debatable, why addressing questions about the past matters, and how to identify and evaluate the merits of different historical arguments.

Learning Objectives

Your objectives in this course, in ascending order of difficulty, will be ...

- ◆ To recognize the different *kinds* of arguments historians make and identify the assumptions on which those arguments depend.
- ◆ To evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different historical arguments.
- ◆ To take positions on debatable historical questions and support your positions with sound reasoning and evidence.

All of these learning objectives presuppose that many questions about the Civil War era are still debated today. Here are *some* of the debatable questions we'll consider:

What caused the Civil War?

What caused Confederate defeat?

Why did soldiers fight?

What did the Civil War change?

Why and how were slaves emancipated?

What did the Civil War *not* change?

Answers to such questions are not simple, but that doesn't mean they should be left unanswered. My goal is to convince you that proposing answers to such questions (1) matters; (2) is not *just* a "matter of opinion"; and (3) is hard, but rewarding, work.

What to Expect ... and What *Not* Expect

Expect that your attentive attendance in every class will be crucial to your success in the course.

Do not expect this course to be a “blow by blow” history of battles, events, and major figures in the Civil War. (If you would like a detailed but accessible history of the War that amply covers the military narrative, I suggest you consult James McPherson’s *Battle Cry of Freedom*, which is widely available at bookstores.) We will have occasion to talk and read some about military history, but we will also range beyond the Civil War itself.

Expect to do a lot of reading for this course. Five required books are listed below, and we will read and discuss all of them in class. I will supplement these books throughout the semester by assigning short articles and historical documents as additional readings. Additional readings will amount to 30-50 extra pages per week *on average*; that means some weeks there will be less than 30 pages of additional text, while on a few weeks there may be more than 50 pages. Additional readings may not be discussed as fully in class as the books, but completing them is still essential to meeting the course’s learning objectives.

Expect to succeed. My only reason for covering topics in class or assigning reading outside of class will be to assist you in meeting the learning objectives for the course. That means that if you apply yourself to doing the work in this class, you can expect to learn. On the other hand, if you decide you can’t commit to doing all the work or attending class, then don’t expect to learn what the course is designed to teach.

Assignments

Graded assignments have two purposes: to *help* you learn, and to assess—both for your information and mine—*how much* you are learning. These assignments will include:

1. Four Position Papers. You’ll have the opportunity to defend, in writing, your position on four debatable historical questions about the Civil War era. I will distribute the prompt for each paper, along with specific guidelines and criteria for grading, at least one week before each is due. Two of the prompts (the first and the third) will ask you to take positions on issues we have discussed in class. The other two prompts (the second and the fourth) will ask you to apply reasoning skills honed in class to a previously unconsidered issue or debate that I will present to you. Each position paper will receive a numeric grade on the “zero to 4.3” gradepoint scale.
2. Six Brief-and-Debrief Responses to In-Class Discussions. There will be six class days set aside exclusively for discussion of selected readings—one day each for each of the five required books, and one day for a pair of articles on emancipation. Before 10 a.m. on each of these days, you should email me a “briefing” report. It should summarize the major argument or point of the reading(s) and evaluate a specific strength or weakness you found in that argument. Then, after the in-class discussion ends, you will have 24 hours to go to an online “wiki” (whose URL I will distribute) and post some “debriefing” comments on the class discussion, which should contain as many of the following as possible:
 - a. A summary of the most important comment you made in class, if you made one.
 - b. A brief discussion of a comment that *another student* made, in class or online, that you found especially interesting, either because you agreed or disagreed with it.
 - c. A fresh assessment of the book’s strengths and weaknesses in light of our discussion of it.
 - d. When applicable, an answer to any closing question that I might pose at the end of the discussion.

For each brief-and-debrief response you’ll receive a numeric grade on the gradepoint scale, but the debriefing will be weighted more heavily than the briefing.

Grades

As deadlines for each of the above assignments near, the criteria for grading will be discussed and explicitly communicated to you in class. Be aware that these criteria will only be concerned with assessing how well you are meeting the general learning objectives for the course; that is, I won't be grading you on a "curve" in relation to other students' performance. The point of grades is to let each student know where he or she stands in relation to the specific objectives of the assignment and the objectives of the course as a whole. Here's how I'll weigh assignments when calculating your final grade:

Position Paper #1 = 10%

Position Paper #2 = 25%

Position Paper #3 = 20%

Position Paper #4 = 25%

Average of Brief-and-Debrief Reports = 20%

I reserve the right, but am under no obligation, to bump your brief-and-debrief reports higher if your grades on these reports trended steadily upward over the course of the semester. If you are unsatisfied with your performance on one of the position papers, you'll also have the opportunity to write an optional fifth position paper, due by the end of the final examination period. You must inform me by the last day of class *which* position paper you want to replace. If your grade on the optional final paper is higher, it will replace the grade on the paper you specified. If the grade on the optional paper is lower, then the earlier grade will stand.

Honor Code

Unless specific exceptions are explicitly provided to you in writing, the Honor Code applies to all written assignments in this course. My default position is trust, and my basic assumption is that you are in this course because you want to learn. But suspected cases of plagiarism and intellectual dishonesty will be reported to the Honor Council. If you are unclear at any time about what constitutes an Honor Code violation in this course, it is your responsibility to clarify the issue with me before any ambiguous case arises.

A Note on Late Assignments and Missed Discussions

Late assignments (both position papers and brief-and-debrief reports) will be accepted for up to a week after the posted deadline without penalty. But after this week-long grace period ends, late assignments will not be accepted at all.

In addition, due to time constraints, I will not be able to provide much feedback on late assignments (i.e., those turned in during the grace period) and will instead have to give a grade with limited explanation for that grade. So it's in your interest to turn assignments in on time so you can get more feedback from me on how you are doing in the course and how to do better. All papers will get a fair read and an honest assessment, but papers turned in on time will receive the most extensive comments from me about the paper's specific strengths and weaknesses.

If you miss a discussion, you should still turn in the "briefing" part of discussion report, and you should still visit the "wiki" and participate as much as possible in the "debriefing" online. If you will miss a discussion because of an illness or personal emergency, you need to contact me as soon as you know that you will miss the discussion.

Required Books

These books are available for purchase at the Rice University bookstore or on various online stores like Amazon.com, which often have cheaper prices.

1. Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (Vintage, paperback, 2008). ISBN: 978-0307277329
2. ** Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (Vintage, paperback, 2009; or Knopf, hardcover, 2008). ISBN: 978-0375703836
3. Eric Foner, *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and its Legacy* (Louisiana State University Press, paperback, new edition, 2007). ISBN: 978-0807132890
4. Bruce Levine, *Confederate Emancipation: Southern Plans to Free and Arm Slaves during the Civil War* (Oxford, paperback, 2007). ISBN: 978-0195315868
5. Tony Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War* (Vintage, paperback, 1999). ISBN: 978-0679758334

** The paperback version of Faust is supposed to be released on January 6, 2009. The reading will not be assigned until about one month into the semester, so there's time for you to wait and get the cheaper paperback if you want to.

Important Dates

Note: These dates are subject to change to according to the needs of the course, but deadlines for assignments will never be changed to a date *earlier* than indicated here. Names marked in bold indicate days when an in-class discussion will take place, meaning you'll need to "brief-and-debrief" the discussion as described above.

January 19 (Monday): No class; Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday
January 21 (Wednesday): Discussion on **Manning** book
January 30 (Friday): Discussion of two articles by **McPherson and Berlin**
February 6 (Friday): Position Paper #1 Due
February 16 (Monday): Discussion of **Levine** book
February 27 (Friday): Position Paper #2 Due
February 28 – March 8: No class; Spring Break
March 13 (Friday): Discussion of **Foner** book
March 18 (Wednesday): Position Paper #3 Due
March 30 (Monday): Discussion of **Faust** book
April 2-3: No class; Spring Recess
April 6 (Monday): Position Paper #4 Due
April 17 (Friday): Discussion of **Horwitz** book
April 29 (Wednesday): Optional Position Paper #5 Due by 5 p.m.

Note on Disability Support Services

If you have a documented disability that will impact your work in this class, please contact me outside of class to discuss accommodations confidentially. You will also need to contact and register with the Disability Support Services Office in the Ley Student Center, next to the Coffee House.