

First Writing Assignment
History 119, The Civil War and Reconstruction Era, 1848-1877
Professor Blight
Spring 2008

Please choose one of the following options and write a 1250-1500-word analysis (please include word count with your paper). Papers are to be double-spaced and are due no later than the beginning of lecture, in class, Thursday, February 21.

1. Well after the Civil War Frederick Douglass remarked that the conflict between North and South had long been one of “ideas... of civilization vs. barbarism... a battle between men of thought as well as action.” William Harper, however, a proslavery thinker writing in 1838, said that “the institution of slavery is the principal cause of civilization.” What were the conflicting world-views, ideas, or visions of “civilization” at stake in the dialogue between proslavery southerners and increasingly antislavery northerners in the years from 1830 to 1860? What arguments characterized the evolving proslavery defense in the South and the developing antislavery coalition among Northerners? In your judgment, what was really at stake in this debate? In developing your critical analysis of proslavery and antislavery thought, draw upon key primary sources, especially those in the Gienapp collection. Douglass’s *Narrative*, Levine’s *Half Slave, Half Free*, and Dew’s *Apostles of Disunion*, as well as lectures, will also prove valuable as background and context for your arguments.
2. Consider the following two quotations and write an interpretive essay on the question: What caused the American Civil War?

“Our country is a theatre, which exhibits, in full operation, two radically different political systems; the one resting on the basis of servile or slave labor, the other on the basis of voluntary labor of freemen... It [the slavery controversy] is an irrepressible conflict between opposing and enduring forces, and it means that the United States must and will, sooner or later, become either entirely a slaveholding nation, or entirely a free-labor nation.”

- William H. Seward, October, 1858

“If one word or phrase were selected to account for the war, that word would not be slavery, or state-rights, or diverse civilizations. It would have to be such a word as fanaticism (on both sides), or misunderstanding or perhaps politics... It was a needless war, a repressible conflict... indeed, thus was the generation misled in its unctuous fury.”

- James G. Randall, “The Blundering Generation,” 1940

In these two passages, the one from the heart of the controversy in 1858 and the other the interpretation of a historian in 1940, you have quite diverse conceptions of what was at the root of the causes of the Civil War. In your analysis, rely on Levine, Douglass, Dew, the Lincoln readings, lectures, and especially the primary documents in Gienapp to make your case. In developing your argument, you may wish to think of long-term and immediate causes of the war.

Late policy: Paper grades will be reduced by 1/3 (A to A-; A- to B+ etc.) for each 24-hour deadline missed. Your first deadline is Thursday, February 21, 10:30 AM with a drop-off at the entrance to lecture. If you miss this deadline, please contact your TF immediately to arrange a drop-off location for your paper. A Dean’s Excuse will allow you to reset this clock.

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