

Department of History  
University of Wisconsin-Madison  
History 901: The Civil War and Reconstruction  
Semester II, 1990-91  
Mr. Sewell

STUDY QUESTIONS

Week 2: The Peculiar Institution

What are the distinctive features of the United States slave system vis a vis other slave systems?

Why were there so few slave insurrections in the American South?

What constraints, if any, did slavery place upon the psychological development of slaves?

In granting slaves "agency," does Blassingame belittle the oppression of slavery?

Week 3: Slavery and Southern Whites

Historians often argue whether the Old South's society was "aristocratic" or "democratic." What does Oakes think? Where do you stand? Why?

What role does Oakes concede to paternalism in the slave system of the Old South?

What gave slaveholders so powerful a position in Southern society? Where did power reside within the slaveholding class?

How does The Ruling Race help us to understand the South's decision to secede in 1860-61?

Week 4: The Crusade Against Slavery

Why were the abolitionists so unpopular? Was it because they were "radical"?

Why did it take a civil war to destroy slavery in the United States and not, for example, in the British empire?

What do the successes and failures of the antislavery movement reveal about American society in the mid-nineteenth century?

How and why did abolitionism change between the 1820s and 1850s?

What is abolitionism's relationship to other nineteenth century reform movements?

Week 5: The Fragmentation and Realignment of Parties

What was it that destroyed the Second American Party System, and why did that system collapse first in the South?

What was the significance of the slavery in the territories issue? Was it major or minor, real or symbolic?

Does Holt exaggerate the influence of republicanism in the 1850s?

Where does Holt fit in the historiography of the coming of the Civil War?

Week 6: The South and Secession

What are the strengths and weaknesses of Channing's thesis for an understanding of the Civil War? How does his interpretation differ from Michael Holt's explanation of secession?

Was secession a Slave Power conspiracy or was it a mass movement?

Were the fears of South Carolinians real or paranoid?

Why was South Carolina the first state to secede?

Week 7: The Confederacy

What made Confederate nationalism so weak? Was the Confederacy a "Lost Cause" from the start?

Did the Confederate South "sell its soul" in its desperate bid for independence?

Did the Confederates defeat themselves or were they overwhelmed by a stronger foe?

Was the Confederacy's military strategy well adapted to its needs and circumstances?

Week 8: The Travail of the Planter Class

Were planters conservatives, revolutionaries, or some combination of the two?

What was the nature and extent of planter influence, and how did it change?

Was the Civil War a chasm between two Souths, or a temporary disruption followed by a restoration of old ways?

What does the experience of the Civil War reveal about slavery? About Reconstruction?

Week 9: Lincoln, Grant, and the Concept of Total War

What was "modern" about the Civil War?

How do you evaluate Lincoln's performance as commander-in-chief? Why did it take him so long to find capable generals?

What was the Union's grand strategy and how did it evolve?

Is Williams' judgment of Northern generals sound? Is he unduly critical of McClellan and unduly praiseful of Grant?

Was there a turning point in the Civil War?

Week 10: The Northern Home Front

What were the individual costs of the war to Northern civilians? How did the war intrude on community life, and vice versa?

Paludan thinks the war's positive effects outweighed its terrible human costs. Do you agree?

Did the vision of a good society the North fought to defend in fact survive the Civil War?

What were the principal divisions in Northern society during the Civil War, and how did they effect the Union's war effort?

Week 11: Wartime Reconstruction

What effect did the experience of the Civil War have on Northern and Southern attitudes toward Reconstruction?

How and why did Lincoln's plan of Reconstruction differ from that of Congress?

What does the history of Lincoln's plan for Louisiana reveal about the limits of the possible?

Does Cox overstate Lincoln's leadership in the quest for black freedom?

Was Lincoln "impelled to emancipation and civil rights for freedmen by the irresistible logic of a deeply rooted belief," or was he merely a shrewd politician seeking what was best for himself and his party?

Week 12: Confederate Reconstruction

What were the most salient characteristics of the leaders of the early postwar South?

To what extent were white Southerners responsible for the failure of presidential Reconstruction?

Does Carter understate the persistence of prewar attitudes and the stubborn resistance of Southern whites to change of any sort?

Were the freedmen simply victims during the early postwar years?

Weeks 13 and 14: "Radical" Reconstruction

How radical was "Radical" Reconstruction

What role did African-Americans play in Reconstruction? Does Foner exaggerate black agency?

Did the Republicans misplay their hand in the postwar South?

How and to what extent did class conflict influence the course of Reconstruction?

Does Foner's text justify his conclusion that "Reconstruction can only be judged a failure"?

Week 15: Carpetbaggers and Scalawags

Why did Tourgee choose the title, A Fool's Errand? Is it apt?

What is your assessment of this novel as an historical source?

What plan of Reconstruction did Tourgee favor? Would it have worked?

How does Tourgee's picture of Reconstruction compare to that of Eric Foner?