

George Mason University  
Department of History

**History 615 005:  
READING SEMINAR IN THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR ERA**

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Mondays, 7:20-10:00

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The American experiment in self-government was scarcely eighty years old when the Civil War threatened to tear the country permanently in two. The massive cataclysm lasted four years, sacrificed nearly 600,000 lives, freed some four million slaves, and touched virtually every American in some manner. It redefined the very political, social, and economic fabric of the country in ways that still reverberate today. The Civil War also sparked a remarkable deluge of historical scholarship that shows no signs of ebbing more than a century and a half later: by one count, writers and historians have produced more than one book for every day since Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House in the spring of 1865. The resulting literature has generated some of the most intense and persistent debates in all of American historiography.

This seminar offers two things. First, it provides an introduction to the vast historiography of the American Civil War. Using some of the most important recent scholarship, the course will help familiarize students with the literature surrounding the war. The class will analyze the history of the sectional conflict from a variety of angles: its roots in the eighteenth century; the influence of African-American chattel slavery; political attempts to resolve the tension in the first half of the nineteenth century; and the military, social, and cultural results of southern secession. A pair of books offer insights into the ways that the war and its fallout affected the postwar Reconstruction and the ways in which the Civil War and American understandings of it continue to shape the political, historical, and cultural discourse today.

Second, the seminar affords an opportunity to practice some of the most important skills of the working historian. Over the course of the semester, each participant will write book reviews, formulate questions about the readings, become expert in one subfield of the literature, write extensively on that subfield, and have an opportunity to help guide the class discussion.

The sesquicentennial of the war offers an ideal opportunity to explore this critical period in American history, since the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of these events has led to so much new and innovative work in the field. Accordingly, the reading list for the semester's seminar discussions prioritizes more recent scholarship; other class assignments afford a chance to explore some of the classic works in the field.

## Reading List

Lacy Ford, *Deliver Us from Evil*  
William Freehling, *The Road to Disunion, Vol. 2: Secessionists Triumphant*  
Edward Ayers, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies*  
George Rable, *Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg!*  
James McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*  
Harry Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation*  
Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*  
Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*  
David Blight, *Race and Reunion*

In addition to the nine works listed above, students will select works from two predetermined lists for the weeks discussing the war's master narrative and President Abraham Lincoln.

## Assignments and Grading

Performance in the course will be determined by a long historiographic essay, two short book reviews, and participation in individual discussion sessions.

Historiographic Essay (due in class April 30): The course's long assignment will be a historiographic essay of about twenty pages that explores and analyzes some subfield within Civil War-era history.

"Historiography" is a term that appears frequently in this business, and it can be a confusing one. For the purposes of this course, think of historiography as the history of scholars' inquiry into a given field or question. A thorough historiography seeks to describe and analyze the record of historical writing on a specific topic: the origins of the field, the debates that have shaped the literature, various scholars' answers to those questions, and the overall effects of the shifting lines of inquiry. The long essay should identify, summarize, and discuss approximately ten of the most important books and articles in a given subfield. A satisfying historiography will analyze how the method, argument, evidence, and conclusions of that subfield have changed over time.

For newcomers, one useful way to conceptualize historiography is to think about what it is *not*. Historiography is not research into a particular episode in the past; it is not a narrative of a specific historical event; it is not a critique of the decisions made by various historical actors. Such topics are historical, rather than historiographic, in nature.

Rather, historiography is the analysis of the ways that scholars have approached a particular field over time, and the manner in which those approaches have evolved. Historiography is argument-driven; it is focused upon scholars' treatment of some topic; it is cognizant that different scholars have produced very different interpretations of the same topic at different moments. Historiography aims to describe and to explain those changes.

For the long essay, each student will choose as an organizing subject some theme related to Civil War history and explore how the literature on that facet has evolved over time. The choice of the subject is up to each individual student. One way to select a topic is to choose one of the books on the reading list and locate it within a broader literature. Most of these works lie at the intersection of a number of different subfields; Lacy Ford's *Deliver Us From Evil*, for example, belongs broadly to the literature of slavery in the antebellum South, as well as to the literature on politics in the Old South, the cultural dimensions of the slavery debate and, the comparative history of nineteenth-century slavery.

After selecting a topic, students will undertake a survey of the most significant work in that field. That work will consist largely of scholarly monographs—works that would, in most other research contexts, appear as *secondary sources* but which are, in the context of historiography, the *primary sources* which support an analysis of the way a subfield has changed over time.

The best historiographies address several different threads as they survey the evolution of ideas across a series of books. What questions does each individual work attempt to answer? How do those questions build upon the work of prior historians? How have other works attempted to answer similar questions? What is the author's thesis? How does that thesis differ from answers other authors have offered? What is each author's method? How does the method relate to the author's argument? How persuasive do you find these arguments? Why? What is the weakest part of each book? Why? What assumptions does each author make? How do those assumptions affect the overall argument? What material is missing? How does the absence of certain evidence or arguments affect the book? And perhaps most importantly, how and why has the field evolved over time?

Surveying a subfield and weaving the answers to these questions into a single, cohesive essay is one of the most challenging tasks that historians face. It is also one of the most important: every meaningful piece of original historical scholarship is built on a solid historiographic foundation. To keep you on track to complete a thorough and well-written essay by the end of the course, each student will submit two short, ungraded assignments during the semester: a one-paragraph statement of the topic you wish to explore in the long essay (due February 6) and an annotated bibliography listing the ten books you intend to include, along with a short justification of each (due February 27.) These brief assignments also offer you a chance to discuss your topic with the professor (and modify it, if necessary) before you get too far along in your research.

**Book Reviews:** In addition to the historiographic essay, each student will prepare two short, 750-word book reviews on two of the course's reading assignments. Each review should follow the standard format for academic book reviews demonstrated in the *Journal of Military History*, the *Journal of American History*, or the *American Historical Review*. The review should briefly introduce the work (its topic, its author, the details of its publication) before analyzing the substance of the author's discussion. What questions does the book seek to address? What is the author's argument? What kind of evidence

does the author employ to support that argument? How effective is the argument? Why? What are the book's chief strengths and weaknesses? Fitting that information into a brief essay is enormously challenging; writing reviews offers class participants practice in synthesis, criticism, and brevity—essential skills for the professional historian. The choice of which two books to review is up to the student; reviews are due in class the day the book is discussed.

**Participation:** Participation in every class discussion is a vital part of an effective seminar. Moreover, the ability to think critically and quickly and to present one's ideas verbally is a prized trait in the historical profession. Effective participation in a graduate seminar comprises several skills: *preparing* for discussion, *contributing* to the give-and-take of an academic conversation, and *listening* effectively to the contributions of others to advance the analysis collaboratively. The weekly discussions offer class participants an opportunity to develop those skills in an encouraging environment. Participation is weighted significantly in the course grade precisely because being prepared to discuss each week's material in a thoughtful manner is so important to professional development.

To aid you in these preparations, students will frequently be asked to bring a short thought, question, or response to the week's reading (specifics will be circulated the week before each discussion) to share at the beginning of the class. In aggregate, these responses will initiate the longer discussion that week and help ensure that every student contributes at least one idea to each discussion.

Final grades will break down as follows:

Long essay, 50%

Book reviews, 15% each (students may submit more than two book reviews; the two highest scores will count towards the final grade)

Participation, 20%

## Class Schedule

January 23: Master Narrative and the Civil War era

One pre-selected work;

James G. Randall, "A Blundering Generation," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 27 (June 1940): 3-28.

January 30: Slavery in the Deep South

Lacy Ford, *Deliver Us from Evil*

February 6: Slavery and the sectional split

William Freehling, *Road to Disunion, Vol. 2: Secessionists Triumphant*  
STATEMENT OF TOPIC DUE

February 13: NO CLASS—War on the Silver Screen Film Festival

February 20: Communities at war

Edward Ayers. *In the Presence of Mine Enemies*

February 27: Writing about battle

George Rable, *Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg!*  
ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE

March 5: Combat motivation

James McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*

March 19: Lincoln

One pre-selected work

March 26: Morality and the war

Harry Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation*

April 2: NO CLASS—Writing day

April 9: Reexamining the Confederacy

Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*

April 16: Death and the war

Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*

April 23: War and memory

David Blight, *Race and Reunion*

April 30: Conclusions

HISTORIOGRAPHY ESSAY DUE