

George Mason University  
Department of History

**History 373 001:**  
**THE CIVIL WAR AND RECONSTRUCTION**  
Spring 2024

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Planetary Hall 120

Mondays and Wednesdays, 3:00-4:15

[BlackBoard site](#)

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, cost nearly 750,000 lives and billions of dollars, freed some four million slaves, and touched virtually every American in some way. The conflict, and the Reconstruction that followed it, redefined the very political, social, and economic fabric of the country in ways that still reverberate today.

This course analyzes the history of the American Civil War from its origins in the late eighteenth century to the withdrawal of Federal troops from the south in 1877. The analysis occurs in three modules: “The Impending Crisis,” which deals with the broad eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political, social, and economic issues that led to war, as well as with the specific events that triggered the conflict in 1861; “The War,” which covers a variety of issues intertwined with the military outcome of the war itself—the home fronts, technology, diplomacy, combat motivation, military technology, and grand strategy; and “Reconstruction,” which deals with the issues associated with rebuilding the nation’s political institutions and with re-integrating millions of newly-freed African-Americans, along with the long shadow of the war on American memory.

**Course Goals**

Throughout the semester our focus will be not just on narrative—that is, re-telling the story of the conflict—but also on learning to *think* like historians: exploring issues of cause and effect, analyzing evidence, and presenting arguments in response to the puzzles of the past.

By the end of the course students will be able to:

- identify the causes, course, and effects of the war;
- apply the core skills of historical analysis to a variety of primary source documents;
- formulate arguments in response to complex historical questions and to defend those arguments with evidence, both orally and in writing.

**Reading List**

Allen Guelzo, *Fateful Lightning*  
Digital Primary Source packet (attached)

## Class Schedule and Readings

17 January. Introductions and expectations: What do historians do, exactly?

### Part I: The Impending Crisis

22 January. Studying the Civil War era: Historical thinking and primary sources

24 January. Studying the Civil War era: Cause and effect

Allen Guelzo, *Fateful Lightning*, 3-23

29 January. Slavery, the Constitution, and the rise of abolitionism

*Fateful Lightning*, 23-53

Document A, The Declaration of Independence (Preamble), 1776

Document B, The Constitution of the United States of America, 1787

Document C, The Bill of Rights, 1789

Document D, John C. Calhoun's "Positive Good" speech (excerpt), 1837

31 January. National unity and party collapse

*Fateful Lightning*, 54-83

Document E, William Seward's "Irrepressible Conflict" speech (excerpt), 1858

5 February. Rise of the Republican Party

*Fateful Lightning*, 83-113

Document F, Abraham Lincoln's remarks in the Quincy, IL, debate (excerpt), October 13, 1858

7 February. John Brown's raid

*Fateful Lightning*, 113-137

Document G, John Brown's Final Speech, 1859

Document H, Abraham Lincoln's Cooper Union Address (excerpt), February 27, 1860

12 February. The Election of 1860 and the secession movement

*Fateful Lightning*, 138-156

Document I, Alexander Stephens' "Cornerstone" Speech (excerpt), March 21, 1861

Document J, The Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union, December 24, 1860

**14 February. FIRST MIDTERM EXAM**

### Part II: The War

19 February. Assessing the combatants

*Fateful Lightning*, 156-172

21 February.           Opening moves

*Fateful Lightning*, 186-200,  
Document K, Robert E. Lee to Jefferson Davis, September 3, 1862

26 February.           The changing technology of war

*Fateful Lightning*, 200-213  
Document L, Henry Halleck to Ulysses S. Grant, March 31, 1863

28 February.           The individual experience of war: Raising the armies

Document M, USCT recruiting poster, 1863

4 March—10 March.   SPRING BREAK—NO CLASSES

11 March.             Emancipation

*Fateful Lightning*, 172-185  
Document N, Wendell Phillips' speech at Abingdon, August 1862 (excerpt)  
Document O, "Abe Lincoln's Last Card," *Punch* magazine, October 18, 1862

13 March.             The home fronts

*Fateful Lightning*, 213-231, 278- 313, 356-372  
Document P, Abraham Lincoln to Erasmus Corning and others, (excerpt), June 12, 1863  
Document Q, Dora Miller, Vicksburg diary, 1863

18 March.             The campaigns of 1863

*Fateful Lightning*, 313-356  
Document R, Abraham Lincoln to George Meade, July 14, 1863

20 March.             The individual experience of war: Facing battle

*Fateful Lightning*, 232-277  
Document S, David Beem to wife, July 5, 1863

25 March.             Black Americans and the war effort

*Fateful Lightning*, 373-389  
Document T, Frederick Douglass, "Men of Color, To Arms!" March 2, 1863  
Document U, Abraham Lincoln to James Conkling, August 26, 1863

27 March.             The Union Campaigns of 1864 and the move to total war

*Fateful Lightning*, 418-448  
Document V, Ulysses S. Grant to William T. Sherman, April 4, 1864  
Document W, Ulysses S. Grant to George Meade, April 9, 1864

**1 April.               SECOND MIDTERM**

3 April.                    *Ars Moriendi: Death in the Civil War*  
                              *Fateful Lightning*, 389-417

8 April.                    The Election of 1864 and the end of the war

*Fateful Lightning*, 448-464

Document X, Thomas Nast, "Compromise with the South," *Harper's Weekly*, September 3, 1864

Document Y, Thomas Nast, "The Union Christmas Dinner," *Harper's Weekly*, December 1864

### Part III: Reconstruction

10 April.                    Why the North Won

*Fateful Lightning*, 465-497

Document Z, Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865

15 April.                    The challenges of Reconstruction

Document 1, Frederick Douglass, Speech at the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society (excerpt), April 1865

17 April.                    Political Reconstruction

*Fateful Lightning*, 497-513

Document 2, Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, 1868

22 April.                    African-Americans and Reconstruction

*Fateful Lightning*, 513-536

Document 3, Phillip Sheridan, *Memoir* (excerpt), 1888

29 April.                    The Civil War in popular memory

Document 4, Confederate Soldiers Monument, Texas State Capitol, Austin TX, 1903

**FINAL EXAM: MONDAY, 6 May, 1:30-4:00**

## Grading

Course performance will be determined by two midterms, a cumulative final exam, and your participation in class.

The final grade will break down as follows:

First midterm:	25%
Second midterm:	25%
Final Exam:	40%
Participation:	10%

The grading scale is as follows:

A- 90-93; A 94-100

B- 80-83; B 84-86; B+ 87-89

C- 70-73; C 74-76; C+ 77-79

D 64-66; D+ 67-69

F 50

## Course policies

***Classroom Behavior.*** Active participation in class discussions is a vital part of mastering this set of skills and information. (Individual participation is weighted as one-fifth of the overall grade to reflect its critical importance.) In order to maximize opportunities for every student to participate constructively and to minimize distractions, a few simple guidelines will be observed:

- Be on time
- Be respectful of other opinions and insights from *all* members of the class
- **NO ELECTRONIC DEVICES**—cell phones, smart phones, laptops, and so on. If it runs on electricity and it is not a medical device, switch it off for the duration of class.