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 five billion dollars, and freed four million Blacks from bondage. The crisis, the war, and the aftermath that followed touched virtually every nineteenth-century American in some way, and redefined the very political, social, and economic fabric of the country in ways that still reverberate today. The memory of the war continues to affect American politics and identity in ways that are all too visible even in 2022.

This course analyzes the history of the American Civil War era. It begins with its origins in the late eighteenth century, explores the political crisis and the conflict itself, examines the efforts at Reconstruction until the withdrawal of Federal troops from the south in 1877, and considers the way that the memory of the war continues to affect Americans’ understanding of themselves and their nation today.

This is an online, asynchronous course. You will need access to a computer and a reliable internet connection. The course will run through George Mason’s BlackBoard site, and all the material you need to complete the course successfully is organized there.

We will not have any scheduled meetings, in person or virtually. You will be exploring this fascinating period in history by drawing on course readings and on a large pool of primary sources. Narrated slideshows for each module will guide your inquiry, helping you analyze the primary sources and providing you with some questions that will help you make sense of this fascinating and contentious period in American history. And I am always available to schedule a meeting with you to discuss concepts or themes that you would like to explore in more detail.

There is a clear structure built into the course. A series of six numbered modules that explore facets of the Civil War era, from the role of race-based chattel slavery in the nation’s founding to the fighting itself to the long shadow that the war continues to cast more than a century and a half after its conclusion.

Each module begins on a Monday morning and closes on a Friday at 5:00pm. Most are two weeks long; two modules are three weeks long. There is a written assignment due at the end of each module.

This syllabus provides you with all the information you need to complete the course successfully. Take a moment to familiarize yourself with the syllabus, the assignments, readings, and course policies. If you have questions, reach out to me at chamner@gmu.edu. I am more than happy to answer questions via email, phone, or Zoom. Use “HIST 373” as your subject line so my inbox will sort your message to the top.
**COURSE STRUCTURE:** The course is divided into a set of six modules. The syllabus shows exactly what we will cover in each module, the resources available to you, and the assignment you are responsible for in each module.

**HOW TO USE THE SYLLABUS:** Each module block on the syllabus contains all the information you’ll need to complete that module successfully.

The **Title** provides a short description of the material and themes we will cover in the module. The **Dates** show when the Module is scheduled to begin and end. New modules start on Monday mornings and end on Friday evening. Most modules are two weeks long; two are three weeks long.

The **Overview** section show what new information and skills you will master over the course of the module.

**Read** indicates the pages from the course text (Allen Guelzo’s *Fateful Lightning*) that you should read over the course of the module. If there are supplementary readings for a module, they will appear in the module folder. The reading load in this class is identical to the load in a standard face-to-face course.

**Documents** refers to the primary sources documents that we will explore in the module. Copies of each module’s documents appear in that module’s folder. These primary sources come directly from people who lived through and shaped the events we are examining this semester. Primary sources are the raw material that historians use to make their arguments and interpretations about the past.

**View** refers to the PowerPoints you should view in conjunction with the readings and documents. These are narrated slideshows that explore important core themes and concepts using primary sources. The slideshows and the text act as complements. It is important to block out time to read and reflect on both. Most of the slideshows are 10-20 minutes in length. Depending on the module there may be four to eight slideshows. The total amount of time required for the slideshows is based on the time you would spend in class lectures in an in-person class—that is, about two and a half hours per week.

**Assignment** shows the written assignment that is due for each module. **THERE IS AN ASSIGNMENT DUE AT 5:00pm ON THE LAST DAY OF EACH MODULE.**

For each of the six modules you will complete a reflection essay of about 500-750 words on themes and sources covered in that module. Your five highest scores will constitute your final grade; your lowest score will be dropped. The total writing load is identical to what you would complete in a face-to-face class: that is, about 4,000 words over the course of the semester.

**DUE** tells you when the written assignment for that module is due. Written assignments should be submitted via BlackBoard by 5:00pm on the last day of the module. All due dates fall on a Friday.

**THERE IS A REFLECTION ESSAY DUE ON THE LAST DAY OF EACH MODULE.**
WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS: Your written work in the course will take the form of six short (500-750 word) reflection essays. **THERE IS A REFLECTION ESSAY DUE ON THE LAST DAY OF EACH MODULE.** A set of prompts for the reflections will appear in each module folder. These are lower-stakes writing assignments; they are not as in-depth as a fully-developed five-page essay. They provide a chance for you to apply some of the ideas and concepts the module has covered to primary sources and to think hard on some of the difficult questions this era poses. The reflection essays also provide a chance for you to practice writing short think pieces on a variety of topics, a valuable skill that is well worth practicing.

**REFLECTION ESSAYS ARE DUE ON THE LAST DAY OF EACH MODULE AT 5:00pm.**

DUE DATES: Over the course of the semester you will submit six short reflection essays. Your five best scores will count toward your final grade. We will drop your lowest score. Your five best reflection essays will each count as 20% of your final grade.

There are six due dates throughout the semester, corresponding to Modules 1 through 6. Mark them on your calendar now in red ink. Your reflection essays are due at 5:00pm on Fridays.

Module 1:  Friday, February 4  
Module 2:  Friday, February 18  
Module 3:  Friday, March 11  
Module 4:  Friday, April 8  
Module 5:  Friday, April 22  
Module 6:  Friday, May 6  

Remember: **THERE IS A REFLECTION ESSAY DUE ON THE LAST DAY OF EACH MODULE at 5:00pm.**

**NO LATE ASSIGNMENTS WILL BE ACCEPTED. NO EXCEPTIONS.**  
If you have not submitted a reflection essay for a particular module by the due date, you will receive a failing grade of F for that reflection. Your lowest grade of the six reflections will be dropped to calculate your final grade.

**THERE IS NO “EXTRA CREDIT” IN THE COURSE.** The dropped grade is the equivalent of extra credit.

GRADING: Over the course of the semester you will complete six assignments, one per module.  

**THERE IS A REFLECTION ESSAY DUE ON THE LAST DAY OF EACH MODULE at 5pm.**

**NO LATE ASSIGNMENTS WILL BE ACCEPTED. NO EXCEPTIONS.**

The grading scale is as follows:  

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Module 1
Race and slavery in American history
Weeks 1-2
January 24—February 4

Overview
The institution of race-based chattel slavery has a history in the United States older than the country itself. It is one of the most barbaric phenomena in American history, and also one of the most complex and persistent.

This module explores how race-based chattel slavery for Blacks came to be engrained deeply (in both the society and legal system) in a country based on the “self-evident” truth that “all men are created equal” and endowed with “unalienable rights” including “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” It analyzes the debates on the future of the institution during the colonial period, the effects of Black slavery on the entire country in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the various solutions proposed to ease the mounting friction caused by the existence of race-based chattel slavery and its growing concentration in only one geographic region of the country.

By the end of the module you will be able to:
• describe the origins and implications of race-based chattel slavery in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American history;
• identify the legal roots and complexities of the American version of race-based slavery;
• describe the paradoxes at the heart of the American vision of “liberty” at the country’s founding.

Read
Fateful Lightning, Chapter 1 (pages 3-53)

Documents
1a, Preamble to the Declaration of Independence, 1776
1b, The Constitution of the United States of America, 1789
1c, The Bill of Rights, 1789
1d, Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia (excerpt), 1781
1e, John C. Calhoun, “Positive Good” speech (excerpt), 1837
1f, American Slavery As It Is, 1839 (excerpt)

View
Module 1 slideshows

Assignment
Reflection essay 1

DUE: Friday, February 4 at 5:00pm
# Module 2
## The crisis of the 1850s
### Weeks 3-4
February 7—February 18

| **Overview** | The decade of the 1850s witnessed a deepening geographic divide in the United States, driven fundamentally by the disruptive growth of chattel slavery in parts of the nation at the same time it withered in others. The geographic localization of that institution led to a cascade of political, social, and economic battles as different groups of white Americans tried to assert their interests in shaping the future of the country. This module explores the way the American political system struggled to balance competing interests around slavery, the awkward compromises that system produced in its efforts to stave off disaster, and the eventual collapse of the system with the election of 1860 and the secession crisis of 1860-1861. By the end of the module you will be able to:  
• describe the institutions that held the country together despite profound economic and social differences in the first half of the nineteenth century;  
• identify the compromises white politicians from different regions and parties made in an attempt to protect their interests and to avoid dissolution of the Union;  
• explain the emergence and rapid political success of a new anti-slavery part with limited regional appeal;  
• explain how the events of 1859 and 1860 prepared the way for the secession crisis of from December 1860 to spring 1861. |

| **Read** | *Fateful Lightning*, Chapters 2-3 (pages 54-137) |
| **Documents** | 2a, Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July” speech (excerpt), 1852  
2b, John Brown, Final speech (1859)  
2c, William Seward’s “Irrepressible Conflict” speech (excerpt), 1858  
2d, Abraham Lincoln, Cooper Union Address (excerpt), 1860  
2e, “Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union,” 1860  
2f, Alexander Stephens, “Cornerstone” Speech (excerpt), 1861  
2g, Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural address (excerpt), 1861 |

| **View** | Module 2 slideshows |

| **Assignment** | Reflection essay 2 |
| **DUE:** | Friday, February 18 at 5:00pm |
### Module 3

**The Early Years, 1861-1863**

**Weeks 5-7**  
**February 21—March 11**

| **Overview** | Both sides expected the war that began with the bombardment of Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor to be brief and relatively limited in scope. Over the coming months those expectations would be revealed to be painfully and tragically naïve. Within a year and a half a war that the North undertook in order to restore the Union and the federal authority in the seceded states had begun to change into something much more sweeping in scope. This module explores the first two years of the war, as the conflict became larger and more destructive than most had imagined in the years before hostilities began.  
By the end of the module you will be able to:  
• describe both sides’ strategic ideas for winning the war;  
• identify how technological innovations in the decades leading up to the conflict combines to create a new and vastly deadlier form of warfare;  
• explain the factors that led Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation in autumn 1862, and his rationale for doing so; |

| **Read** | *Fateful Lightning*, Chapters 4-7 (pages 138-324) |

| **Documents** | 3a, Robert E. Lee to Jefferson Davis, September 3, 1862  
3b, Wendell Phillips, speech at Abingdon (excerpt), 1862  
3c, Cartoon, “Abe Lincoln’s Last Card,” *Punch* magazine, 1862  
3d, Henry Halleck to Ulysses S. Grant, March 31, 1863  
3e, Abraham Lincoln to Erasmus Corning and others (excerpt), 1863  
3f, Dora Miller, Vicksburg diary, 1863  
3g, David Beem to wife, 1863  
3h, Abraham Lincoln to George Meade, 1863  
3i, Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address, 1863 |

| **View** | Module 3 slideshows |

| **Assignment** | Reflection essay 3 |

| **DUE:** | Friday, March 11 at 5:00pm |
## Module 4

### The later years, 1863-1865

**Weeks 8-10**  
March 21—April 8

| Overview | By the third summer of the war, the conflict had evolved dramatically in scope and intensity from the spring of 1861. This module explores the latter half of the war. It examines the battles at Gettysburg and Vicksburg in July 1863, the savage Overland campaign in 1864, the pivotal election of 1864. And the final surrender of the Confederate armies in the spring and summer of 1865. It examines the role of Presidential war leadership in both the Union and Confederacy, the effects of the war on the increasingly exhausted home fronts, and the impact that nearly 100,000 Black soldiers fighting in Union blue made on the course of the war. It also considers the way the massive national trauma of the war—750,000 young men cut down in the prime of life—affecte the nation’s ideas about death, suffering, and sacrifice. By the end you will be able to:  
• identify the significance of the defeats and Vicksburg and Gettysburg and the Union’s strategy for winning the war in 1864;  
• analyze the impact of the North’s decision to arm Black soldiers on the course of the war;  
• understand the impact of war leadership and the home fronts on the outcome of the war;  
• describe the role of the election of 1864 in determining the outcome of the war;  
• discuss the three-part framework for soldiers’ motivation to endure the fighting;  
• appreciate the ways in which the scale of the destruction challenged the nineteenth-century Americans conception of a “good death” |

| Read | *Fateful Lightning*, Chapters 8-10 (pages 325-464) |

| Documents | 4a, Frederick Douglass, “Men of Color, To Arms!”, 1863  
4b, Abraham Lincoln to James Conkling, 1863  
4c, Ulysses S. Grant to William T. Sherman, 1864  
4d, Ulysses S. Grant to George Meade, 1864  
4e, Thomas Nast, “Compromise with the South,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 1864  
4f, Thomas Nast, “The Union Christmas Dinner,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 1864  
4g, Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural address, 1864 |

| View | Module 4 slideshows |

| Assignment | Reflection essay 4 |

| DUE: | **Friday, April 8 at 5:00pm** |
**Module 5**

**Reconstructing the nation**

**Weeks 11-12**  
April 11—April 22

| **Overview** | This module explores the decade and a half following the surrender at Appomattox Court House, as the reconstituted nation attempted to repair the damage to its social, political, and legal fabric, as well as to repair the physical damage the war left in its wake. It examines the battles between Lincoln’s successor Andrew Johnson and the Republican Congress, the debates over rights and protections for free Blacks that dominated political debate in the 1860s and 1870s, the passage of the momentous Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments to the Constitution, and the withdrawal of Federal troops from the south following the contentious election of 1876. It concludes with the collapse of Reconstruction in the South and the establishment of an apartheid state based on white supremacy in the former Confederacy. 

By the end you will be able to:

- identify the political friction between President Johnson and the Republican congress that slowed Reconstruction legislation and ultimately led to the President’s impeachment;
- describe the significance of major federal Reconstruction legislation, including the Reconstruction Amendments and the Freedmen’s Bureau;
- identify the formal and informal barriers erected to prevent free Blacks from exercising political and economic power and to maintain white supremacy. |

**Read** | *Fateful Lightning*, Chapter 11 and Epilogue (pages 465-536) |

**Documents**

| 5a | Frederick Douglass, Speech at the Annual Meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society (excerpt), April 1865 |
| 5b | 13th Amendment (1865) |
| 5c | 14th Amendment (1868) |
| 5d | 15th Amendment (1870) |
| 5e | Louisiana White League platform (excerpt), 1874 |
| 5f | William Kellogg, Statement on the Coushatta massacre (1875) |
| 5g | Eugene Wellborn, “Election Day in Clinton, Mississippi,” 1875 |
| 5h | Philip Sheridan, *Memoirs* (excerpt), 1888 |

**View** | Module 5 slideshows |

**Assignment** | Reflection essay 5 |

**DUE:** | **Friday, April 22 at 5:00pm** |
### Module 6

**The Civil War in memory**

**Week 13-14**  
**April 25—May 6**

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| The final module module explores the difference between “history” (the events that happened in the past) and “memory” (the deliberate choices that individuals and groups make about what to remember and emphasize about the past, and what to ignore or eliminate). This distinction is subtle but fascinating. It is visible everywhere in the way different groups choose to remember, commemorate, celebrate, or expunge different people and events.  

History and memory are particularly important in the case of understanding the Civil War era. Few events in the American past exert such a powerful influence on contemporary understandings of race, the peoples’ relationship to their government, and the basic principles of the nation itself.  

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, white Southerners created a powerful myth of the “Lost Cause,” recasting the war as a fight over “states’ rights” rather than slavery and portraying the southern defeat as tragic and undeserved. That Lost Cause mythology became an important way that the war was taught in the north as well as the south in the twentieth century, and has fascinating and important implications for how we understand the Civil War era in the twenty-first century.  

By the end you will be able to:  
- define the difference between “history” and “memory”;  
- describe the “Lost Cause” myth, from its roots in the late-nineteenth century to its 21st century incarnation;  
- analyze monuments and memorials erected after the war and interpret the statements those sources make about the nature and outcome of the war. |

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| 6a, Jefferson Davis, *Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* (excerpt), 1881  
6b, Confederate Soldiers Monument, Texas State capitol, 1903  
6c, William Taft, “Cornerstone Laying of the Arlington National Cemetery Confederate Monument,” 1912  
6d, E. H. Carr, “Unveiling of Confederate Monument at the University” speech, 1913  
6e, Confederate Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery, 1914  
D.W. Griffiths, *Birth of a Nation* (1915), South Carolina statehouse scene  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBzDH-Vwzy4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBzDH-Vwzy4) |

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A note on plagiarism. Each assignment completed as part of this course is bound by the University’s Honor Code and its strict rules regarding plagiarism. Plagiarism entails presenting someone else’s words, work, or ideas without proper acknowledgement, or borrowing the sequence of ideas, the arrangement of material, or the pattern of thought of someone else without proper acknowledgment. Whether the source is another historical work, an internet source, a classmate, or your roommate does not matter; failure to cite the source properly constitutes plagiarism, the most serious academic violation one can commit. Students found plagiarizing in this class will fail the course.

These assignments are designed so that it is easier to simply write the essay than to cheat.