Class Rationale

The American civil war, which claimed more than 620,000 lives and fundamentally altered the constitutional balance between the central and state governments, rivals the founding itself as the great epic of the American political experience. The meaning we ascribe to this contest affects our very sense of identity and mission as Americans, and so inevitably influences the framing of many of today’s political debates. The civil war is too vast to cover comprehensively in a single college class. But it is possible to further our understanding significantly by reading and discussing the primary source material relating to three areas of unresolved constitutional controversy: nullification & secession, tariffs, and the status of slavery. One measure of our success will be found in the sharpening of our critical reception and appreciation of interpretations of the civil war implicit in contemporary political discussion and in popular films and documentaries.

Requirements, Expectations and Grading

You are to attend every meeting of this class, having read the assigned texts carefully. During class sessions, you will be asked to form small group panels to introduce passages, to raise and to respond to questions, and to write three brief but detailed accounts of what you have learned. These three papers will determine 30% of your final grade, and the in-class panel presentations another 30%. Your contribution to general class discussion will determine 20%, and your citizenship (effort, respect for class mission, and general deportment) another 10%. There will be a comprehensive final exam or final paper determining the remaining 10% of your final grade. Absences may be excused, upon written request made via email by class time of the day of your absence, at your instructor’s sole discretion. In any case, you will be expected to make up any missing work.

Class Schedule

Week 1    Introductions; Perceptions of Slavery, Race, and American Federalism


Week 7-10    Calhoun, *Disquisition on Government*, selections from *A Discourse on the Constitution and Government of the United States, Exposition and Protest*; Jackson’s *Response to Nullification*, Webster’s *Constitution and Union*, Calhoun, *Slavery: A Positive Good*

Week 11-14    *Missouri Compromise*, Lincoln’s *Peoria Speech*, Taney’s *Dred Scott Decision*, Lincoln’s *House Divided*, selections from *Lincoln-Douglas Debates, The Crittenden Compromise, Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address*, So. Carolina, Mississippi, Georgia, & Texas, *Causes of Secession*, Stephens’s *Cornerstone Speech*; view & discuss episode one of Burns’s *Civil War*

Week 14-15    Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address, Emancipation Proclamation, Second Inaugural, and Speech on Reconstruction*, VA, MS, TX, *Black Codes*, view and discuss parts of *Birth of a Nation*