

America's Civil War

America's Civil War was a war of antagonistic cultures, in which each side fought to preserve our Revolutionary heritage as that side understood it. It was a war made by men but ascribed to God, in which both sides blended piety and patriotism into a Christian crusade against the other. It was a war of honor, and of savagery, in which a military code came to justify virtually anything, other than rape or wanton murder, if done out of "military necessity." It was a war that cut deeply into the lives of almost every American then alive, but in ways that we often only faintly perceive. It was a war that is exalted as the keystone of American history, yet that many only modestly understand.

One reason for only modestly understanding our Civil War is that our focus is often confined to the facts of the War rather than to the feelings that the War engendered. Yet historian Bruce Catton describes the War as "an event so complex, so deeply based in human emotions, so far reaching in its final effects, that understanding it is likely to be a matter primarily for the emotions rather for the cold analysis of facts. It was an experience that was probably felt more deeply than anything else that ever happened to us. We cannot hope to understand it unless we share in that feeling, simply because the depth and intensity of the feeling are among the war's principal legacies."

Another reason for only modestly understanding our Civil War is that critical aspects of it are often underappreciated. These include, among others, the blatant racism that was prevalent in the North as well as the South, the strategic vision of Ulysses Grant and the excessive casualties accepted by Robert Lee, the intrusive actions of the Confederacy regarding taxation, conscription, and suspension of individual rights, the huge challenge facing Northern armies in attempting to conquer so vast a territory as the American South, the expectation of many, including Abraham Lincoln, that he would lose the 1864 election and thus the War, the actions of Southern blacks during the War, the astonishing growth of the Northern economy and utter devastation of the Southern economy as a result of the War, and the War's effects on civilians as well as on soldiers.

In an attempt to better understand our Civil War, this course will focus on the people, politics and cultures that made the War, on the salient facts of the War, and on the intensity of the feelings experienced by those who lived through the War, those who died within it, and those freed by it.

The course will proceed through lecture and discussion. Each participant may choose the level of engagement with which he or she is comfortable. At the outset of the course a bibliography of recommended books will be available to support further study by any participant who has an interest in doing so. During the course each participant will also receive a series of letters through which the life of a Civil War soldier will be illuminated.

Leader: Robert Nolan is an attorney who has a history degree from the University of Scranton, where he is on the adjunct faculty, and a law degree from Harvard. He has previously presented an Evergreen Forum course on America's Revolutionary War.

Thursdays: 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m., 8 weeks: February 28 through April 18

Location: The Presbyterian Church of Lawrenceville