

Course Description and Syllabus, Graduate Course

January, 2012

Abraham Lincoln, the Crisis of the Union, and The Coming of the Civil War

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History 9305

The autumn of 2010 marked the sesquicentennial of Lincoln's election to the Presidency. In a short time, the Civil War sesquicentennial will engulf the Americans and all those whose business it is to study them. It may thus be propitious for a specialist in nineteenth century American politics and society to offer a graduate course designed, in part, to address these grand events.

One problem, however, will in fact be time. A single term is not much. Thus, emphasis will necessarily be placed on the selection of an essay topic, together with the completion of a polished and finely crafted essay which, with appropriate revision, might qualify for publication. Indeed, the completion of a respectable paper – and its successful defense in class – must therefore, stand as the course's primary objective.

Nonetheless, it would be irresponsible to ignore altogether the rich modern literature which informs our subjects.

At present, however, I am prepared to specify only four texts, which I'm sure that we shall read:

Michael Lind, What Lincoln Believed: The Values and Convictions of America's Greatest President (New York, 2004).

Stephanie McCurry, Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South (Cambridge, Mass., 2010).

William W. Freehling and Craig M. Simpson, eds., Showdown in Virginia: The 1861 Convention and the Fate of the Union (Charlottesville, Va., 2010).

Jordan, Winthrop D., Tumult and Silence at Second Creek: An Inquiry into a Civil War Slave Conspiracy. Revised Edition (Baton Rouge, La., 2000).

History 9305 Course Reader (Extracts from the work of William W. Freehling, James L. Huston, and John Ashworth).

TENTATIVE THIRTEEN WEEK SYLLABUS

Weeks 1 – 5:

Meetings in class and individual conferences; Choice of subjects [One session will be devoted to a library “Tour” with special attention to the relevant sources, to be conducted by Liz Mantz]. Reading the titles listed above.

Week 6:

Perhaps a brief review essay.

Weeks 7-9:

Presentation of topics and their evaluation in class.

Weeks – 10 – 13:

Threads and Themes. Final evaluation of the prescribed readings and their possible integration with the Research Topics. Presentation and defence of “early drafts”.

Submission of Papers:

On or about April 15, 2012.

Grading Scheme:

Presentation of Subjects, Commentary on the readings and the work of other students: 40%

Research paper: 60%

Time & Location:

This course will meet from 2:30 to 4:30 p.m., on Tuesdays, in Lawson Hall, Room 1218.

My office is in Room 1208, in Lawson Hall. My email is: csimpso1@uwo.ca. I tend to be available through much of Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons, when not in class.

Statement on Academic Offences:

The statement: “Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf

ESSAY TOPICS

Here is a list of potentially (I trust) challenging and intriguing essay topics, which to my way of thinking, currently rest at the cutting edge of modern scholarship. Of course, others may come to mind.

Was John Brown “insane”? (This is, in my opinion, the crucial, embedded question in all modern historiography on Brown. Just as it may be in all literature relating to modern terrorists and terrorism.)

Was Lincoln a demagogue? (That is, was there any plausible justification for Lincoln’s claims, made repeatedly between 1858 and 1860, that – absent interventions by the Republican party – slavery, primarily by way of judicial decision, would be nationalized and thus re-instated in the free states?)

Which compromise proposal during Secession Winter came closest to adoption, and Why?

What, precisely, was the reaction of those powerful advocates of women’s rights, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, to Lincoln and the crisis of the Union? Did they view with equanimity, the call to defer the objects of their own struggles, so that other priorities might be addressed?

Was Southern slave and gang-based agriculture more “efficient” than Northern free and wage-based farming?

Why was it that Clara Barton – legendary Civil War nurse and foundress of the American Red Cross – suffered no fewer than three “nervous breakdowns”? With what effect? (Incidentally, exactly the same question could be asked about Catherine Beecher.)

Was Mary Todd Lincoln in fact the spendthrift and embarrassment so many of the modern Lincoln scholars have made her out to be? Was she responsible for much of Lincoln’s unhappiness?

If African-Americans were treated so badly by the American military during the Civil War, why did so many of them choose to enlist?

Why was it that significant numbers of Western Virginia delegates left the Virginia State Convention in April, 1861, and proceeded to organize the new state of West Virginia?

What, really, was the policy of William H. Seward during Secession Winter?

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