



Debatable Issues

Here is a set of debatable issues on topics related to the U.S. Civil War and, in particular, the Reconstruction period following it (1863 – 1877). Students can argue any position in response to the issue proposition or claim: they can agree, disagree, or in some specific way combine the two into a precise position statement that they then argue for.

The A.M.E. Church

The African Methodist Episcopal Church has had a very substantial, and indeed irreplaceable, impact on the advancement of racial equality and justice in the United States.

Black Codes

Because of the widespread adoption by state governments of Black Codes during Reconstruction, the social and political condition of African-Americans was not significantly better in this period than it had been before the Civil War.

Camp Life in the Civil War

The very difficult and unsanitary conditions of camp life for soldiers in the Civil War suggested that the leadership of both the Union and the Confederacy abused and exploited their common troops.



Clara Barton

The International Red Cross, with which Barton is associated, and the American Red Cross, which Barton organized, are humanitarian agencies with entirely no political purposes, relationships, or effects.

Henry Clay

Known as “The Great Compromiser,” Henry Clay’s career in national politics demonstrates in the best possible way that “politics is the art of the possible,” and that political compromise has great importance and value.

Dorothea Dix

Though Dorothea Dix had important achievements in hospital services for Civil War soldiers and in improving prison conditions before and after the Civil War, her greatest and most lasting achievements were in creating new norms and procedures for treating the mentally ill in the U.S.

Frederick Douglas

Frederick Douglas was to Abolitionism what Martin Luther King was to Civil Rights.

Dred – Scott Case

The decision in *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (1857) is by far the most racist in the history of the U.S. Supreme Court.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850

Because the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was widely disobeyed in the North, and because it engendered significant abolitionist backlash, it hurt rather than helped the Southern pro-slavery cause.

The Gettysburg Address

The Gettysburg Address is the single greatest speech by a President in American history.



Ulysses S. Grant

As Commanding General of the Union army, Ulysses S. Grant was a brilliant and heroic military leader.

Hospital and Nursing Care during the Civil War

Care for the sick and injured during the Civil War led to major advances in medicine, leading it into the modern era.

The Impeachment of President Andrew Johnson

The impeachment of President Andrew Johnson in 1868 was entirely unjustified and should never have been attempted in the first place by the Congress.

Abraham Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln deserves his popular epithet ‘The Great Emancipator.’

Lincoln Assassination (and John Wilkes Booth)

Lincoln’s assassination was primarily motivated by racial hatred.

The Minie Ball

The Minie ball caused more human suffering than any other new military technology introduced in the Civil War.

Photography During the Civil War

Photography fundamentally changed the Civil War, and photos of that conflict changed the ways that America would fight wars thereafter.

Prisons During the Civil War

Conditions in prisons during the Civil War, on both sides, were criminally brutal, blatantly inhumane, and deeply immoral.



Slave Trading

The North American slave trade of 1640 – 1865 was primarily an economic system, and only secondarily an institution of racial oppression.

Harriet Beecher Stowe

Despite its undeniable energy it gave to the abolitionist movement, Stowe's classic *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851) contributed as much to racial stereotyping and prejudice in America as it removed, with such caricatures as Uncle Tom himself.

Transcendentalism

“There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till.”
-- Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance” (1841)

All of the most important ideas in Transcendentalism can be found embryonically in this passage from Emerson's most famous essay, “Self-Reliance.”

Sojourner Truth

Sojourner Truth's life and work express the fundamental connectedness of racial equality and women's rights in 19th century American history.

Harriet Tubman

Harriet Tubman exhibited personal courage in her life, but her reputation is vastly exaggerated and more myth than truth.

Nat Turner

The slave rebellion that Nat Turner led in Virginia in August, 1831, ultimately did more good than harm to African-Americans in the United States.



Underground Railroad

Though the Underground Railroad, especially from 1850 – 1860, certainly helped free tens of thousands of individual slaves, it did not make a significant contribution to the abolishment of slavery in the United States.

Washington, D.C.

The Civil War transformed Washington, D.C., from a small, rural town into the major national capital and power-center that it we know it to be today.

Women in the Civil War

Women were a significant and irreplaceable factor in the North winning the Civil War.