

HIST 3104: The Civil War Era  
Mid-Term Exam Comments

1. *How did slaves create lives that were meaningful to them? Why did most non-slave owners support the institution of slavery.* First: answer both parts of the question.

Part 1: Acceptable approaches: creating and caring for families; resistance to slavery/owners (not by running away or rebelling—that would be trying to leave slavery behind, not creating meaningful lives); religion (focus on Old rather than the New Testament); sense of community; taking pride in work or controlling nature of work.

--Don't provide general history of slavery or description of slave life; answer must be shaped by the question.

--Don't try to cover all possible ideas; answers often become a list. Establish two or three with specific examples.

--Some mistakes that appeared more than once: slaves were generally NOT Catholic; Slave codes might be OK, but stress the protections they provided for slaves rather than limitations on slaves; slaves you're writing about overwhelmingly did NOT come from Africa.

Part 2: You're talking about non-slaveowners in the South. Most productive approach: economic interests (relationship with plantations, possibility of owning slave, leasing slaves), racial hierarchy (even the poorest whites were better than a slave). Other possibilities: political reasons for supporting slavery, perhaps Positive Good theory, although this would work better in the racial hierarchy answer.

--This should be less about how they justified slavery than it is about how they benefitted from slavery.

2. *Historians have often debated whether the Civil War was the result of "irreconcilable differences" or the inability of a "blundering generation" of politicians to find a way to compromise their differences and keep the Union together. . . . Choose a side and show why you believe the war was inevitable or avoidable.* Do not simply provide history of sectional conflict; the extent to which you did that is the extent to which you didn't answer the question. Also, don't speculate; connect your argument to very specific issues and events.

--If you choose "irreconcilable," you must show fundamental disagreements and issues that dated back to the beginning and would have led to war no matter what. Most successful answers focused on economic differences and differences over slavery, with either rooted in constitutional issues that led to

--If you chose "blundering generation," then you need to show how emotions (Harpers Ferry) or pure principle (possibility of taking slaves into territory unfriendly to plantation economy) trumped common sense and compromise.

--Generally, the former requires you to describe basic differences; the latter rather superficial and even cynical decisions.

Common mistakes:

--Belief in a "Slave Power Conspiracy" is most convincing if used in the blundering generation argument.

--Declaration of Independence is not a legal document; it's a symbol, kind of a mission statement for the US. It does not establish a government, but separates the US from the British government.

--If you're going to mention Constitution issues in this context, the fugitive slave clause should definitely play a part.

--Watch details, chronology, relationships between ideas.

--The same information can be used in either answer, so you need to be very clear in how you construct your answers. As I said in the papers: be **PRECISE**.