**Designing an Argument-Based Course:**

**Debating American History**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Although history instruction has grown richer and more varied over the past few decades, many college-level history teachers remain wedded to the coverage model that emphasizes the transmission of knowledge from professor to student, largely through the use of textbooks and lectures that “cover” huge swaths of history. The implied rationale supporting the coverage model is that students must master a wide array of facts, narratives, and concepts in order to have the necessary background both to be effective citizens and to study history at a more advanced level—something that few students actually undertake. Although coverage-based courses afford the opportunity for students to encounter a wide-range of materials, often including primary sources, the imperative to cover an expansive body of material dominates these courses, and the main assessment technique, whether implemented through objective exams, written exams, or papers, is to require students to identify or reproduce authorized knowledge.

Unfortunately, the coverage model has been falling short of its own goals since its very inception in the late nineteenth century. Educators and policy-makers have been lamenting the historical ignorance of American youth for at least a century, as Stanford professor of education Sam Wineburg has documented. A test of basic historical knowledge administered to fifteen hundred Texas students at the primary, secondary, and college level in 1915–16, for instance, produced what its architects considered to be appalling results. Three decades later, a headline in the *New York Times* proclaimed, “Ignorance of U.S. History Shown by College Freshmen.” In 2010, that same publication declared that “history is American students’ worst subject,” basing this judgment on yet another round of abysmal standardized test scores.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Not only has the coverage model achieved disappointing results by its own standards, but it also has proven ineffective at helping students learn how to think historically, which has long been a stated goal of history education. As Lendol Calder argued in a seminal 2006 article, the coverage model works to “cover up” or “conceal” the nature of historical thinking.[[2]](#footnote-2) The eloquent lecture or the unified textbook narrative tends to reinforce the idea that historical knowledge consists of a relatively straightforward description of the past. These typical methods of covering content hide from students not only the process of historical research—the discovery and interpretation of sources—but also the ongoing and evolving discussions among historians about historical meaning. In short, the coverage model impedes historical thinking by obscuring the fact that history is a complex, interpretative, and argumentative discourse.

Over the past century, historians have episodically criticized the coverage model and have occasionally offered alternatives. More frequently, college-level history instructors have struggled to integrate exercises and activities that encourage meaningful historical thinking into courses that remain organized primarily around coverage. In recent years, however, a growing group of scholars within the discipline of history have mounted a systematic research-based challenge to the coverage model itself. Out of this scholarly challenge to coverage have emerged a variety of new approaches to historical pedagogy that place the development of historical thinking at the center of course design. Among the most promising of these is the “argument-based” model.[[3]](#footnote-3)

*Debating American History* provides instructors with the materials to transition an existing course into the argument-based model or to design an argument-based course from scratch. It should be stressed that *Debating American History* is not a pre-packaged “course in a box.” Rather, like any textbook package, *Debating American History* requires instructors to carefully choose, organize, and introduce readings to students, and it leaves ample room for supplementary materials and flexibility regarding student exercises (both within the classroom and without) and assessment activities—all of which will reflect the scholarly and pedagogical priorities and judgments of individual instructors. We recommend that instructors using *Debating American History* select the sources in each module that will be accessible and manageable for their particular students. It is our hope that by providing a body of materials that have been specifically designed to support argument-based courses, historians who wish to move in this direction will be inspired and encouraged to do so.

***Designing an Argument-Based Course***

In an argument-based course, students learn to argue about history by actually doing it. By arguing about history in the ways that historians do, at an introductory level, students learn to think historically. Argument-based courses introduce students to rival positions on important historical questions and then ask them to evaluate the relative merits of these positions and to develop persuasive positions of their own on the basis of historical evidence. In doing so, students come to understand the contested nature of historical discourse while recognizing that a reasoned position is not a matter of mere opinion but rather that it must rest upon verifiable information about the human past. Argument-based courses eschew any attempt to provide comprehensive coverage and instead ask students to think deeply about a smaller number of important historical questions.

In addition to learning to think historically, students will benefit from an argument-based course because of the content-oriented learning goals that will be included to reflect the academic priorities of individual instructors and the curricular emphases of departments and campuses. Content-oriented learning goals will guide instructors in determining the choice of questions about which students will be asked to argue. In the process of arguing about the selected questions, students will develop significant content knowledge in those areas emphasized in the course design.

Among the most common objections to applying the argument-based model to the introductory history course is that incoming college students lack the base of factual knowledge necessary to engage in more sophisticated forms of historical thinking. As Lendol Calder and Sam Wineburg have pointed out, however, the “facts first” assumption upon which this critique rests is at odds with the actual working of the human brain. Contrary to the facts first assumption, human beings do not collect facts in the manner of a homeowner who collects furniture in an attic for later use. On the contrary, human knowledge develops in the context of questions and problems. By emphasizing content knowledge as an end in itself, Calder maintains, the coverage model leaves students with neither an understanding of the discipline of history nor a base of historical knowledge. He thus concludes that “coverage-oriented surveys,” which are “[b]uilt on wobbly, lay theories of human cognition…must share in the blame for Americans’ deplorable ignorance of history.” The coverage model, Wineburg argues, has never achieved its purported goal of encouraging cultural literacy because it simply cannot do so: “A sober look at a century of history testing provides no evidence for the ‘gradual disintegration of cultural memory’ or a ‘*growing* historical ignorance.’ The only thing growing seems to be our amnesia of past ignorance.” Wineburg concludes: “Students could master and retain the piles of information contained in 1917 or 1943 textbooks no better than they can retain what fills today’s gargantuan tomes.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

The true barrier to historical thinking among students is not an absence of content knowledge but a lack of prior exposure to more sophisticated ways of approaching the discipline. The argument-based model provides a framework in which the skills and habits of mind associated with historical thinking can be fostered and developed. In the process, students will also develop a body of content knowledge. This knowledge, admittedly, will not be nearly as broad as that which the coverage model vainly seeks to foster. The coverage model has rarely actually fostered the broad and enduring content knowledge that it promises students, however.

While there is no single, correct way to structure an argument-based course, such courses do share a number of defining characteristics that drive course design:

1. Argument-based courses are organized around significant historical questions about which historians themselves disagree.

Argument-based courses are, first and foremost, question-driven courses in which “big” historical questions (rather than simply topics or themes) provide the overall organizational structure. A “big” historical question is one about which reasonable people (including historians) disagree and that has broad academic, intellectual, or cultural implications. Within these very broad parameters, the types of questions around which a course may be organized can vary greatly. The number of “big” questions addressed, however, must be relatively limited in number (perhaps 3–5 over the course of semester), so that students can pursue the questions in depth. Each question becomes the central focus of a roughly 3–4 week course unit. Within these very broad parameters, the types of questions around which a course may be organized can vary greatly. It is possible, for instance, to take a deep theoretical or ideological dispute within the field (such as the nature of modern industrial capitalism or the role of race in U.S. History, for instance) and use it as the organizing frame for the entire course. Each course unit would then center on a more tightly focused topic and question that relates to the overarching course theme. Instructors can also, however, eschew the overarching issue and instead focus on a series of particular questions within the field that may have no necessary relationship to each other. In any case, the questions should reflect legitimate disputes within the discipline of history while simultaneously engaging the curiosity and interest of students.

1. Argument-based courses systematically introduce students to rival positions about which they must make informed judgments.

Argument-based courses do not simply pose significant questions about which historians may disagree; they also systematically expose students to rival scholarly positions about which they must form judgments. Through repeated discussion of rival positions on a series of big questions, students see historical debate modeled in a way that shatters any expectation that historical knowledge is clear-cut and revealed by authority. Students thus must engage, consider, and ultimately evaluate the merits of a variety of perspectives. Students should encounter rival positions for each big question of the course and should do so near the beginning of each course unit—before exploring the body of information and evidence that will form the basis of their judgments. This way, when students do encounter the unit’s historical content, they will do so with a clear understanding of the purpose to which that information and evidence will be put.

1. Argument-based courses ask students to judge the relative merits of rival positions on basis of historical evidence.

To participate in historical argument, students must come see historical argument as more than a matter of mere opinion. For this to happen, students must learn to employ evidence as the basis for evaluating historical claims. Through being repeatedly asked to judge the relative merits of rival positions on the basis of evidence, students come to see the relationship between historical evidence and historical assertions. Students can present these judgments through a wide range of activities—papers, in-class essays, short answer exercises, in-class debates, oral presentations, etc.—depending upon the pedagogical judgment of the instructor and the specifics of the classroom environment (class size, academic preparation of students, etc.). Regardless of the nature of the exercise, however, students must be held to the expectation that their judgments will be based upon evidence and that this evidence must be explained and analyzed. Mere opinion is insufficient.

1. Argument-based courses require students to develop their own positions for which they must argue on the basis of historical evidence.

In an argument-based course, the ultimate aspiration should be for students to bring their own voices to bear on historical discourse in a way that is thoroughly grounded in historical evidence. Students must therefore have the opportunity to argue for their own positions. Such positions may parallel or synthesize those of the scholars they have engaged with in the course or they may be original. In either case, though, students must be held to disciplinary standards of evidence. As is true among practicing historians, students will arrive at different conclusions. The goal, however, is for these varied conclusions to be grounded in a shared understanding of the nature of historical evidence and the role of evidence in shaping thoughtful understandings of the human past.

***Challenges of the Argument-Based Model***

A successful argument-based course must help students unlearn their preconceptions regarding the nature of historical study while systematically fostering the development of a set of skills and habits of mind necessary to participate effectively in historical argumentation. As Sam Wineburg points out, historical thinking is an “unnatural act” that challenges our common sense assumptions about the nature of truth. Peter Lee has found that young people’s first encounters with history are shaped by the assumption that the past is given—a useful assumption in daily life, particularly in light of the strong moral distinction between “telling the truth” and “telling lies.” Lee thus concludes that historical thinking (with its emphasis on the constructed nature of historical knowledge) is “counter-intuitive,” not just for high school students but perhaps also for many adults. Wineburg reaches similar conclusions in a study that contrasted how high school students and professional historians approach historical documents.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Relatively few students will enter college with formal educational experiences that challenge their common sense beliefs about history. On the contrary, many will arrive with prior experiences that reinforce the assumption that the study of history is primarily about the mastery and reproduction of an authorized body of knowledge. The expectation that students in the course will argue and be evaluated on their ability to argue must be made explicit from day one. The tasks that students are asked to complete in the course must require them to develop the skills of historical argumentation and must be assessed according to how successfully these skills are applied. In other words, students must be asked to argue about history, and assessment must be based on their ability to argue effectively and persuasively on the basis of evidence, rather than on their ability to master and reproduce an authorized body of knowledge or sanctioned interpretation of history.

Because an argument-based course will be at odds with many students preconceptions regarding the nature of historical study, such courses must be designed developmentally. Students cannot simply be instructed to argue about history. Rather, they must be guided in a way that allows them to gain an understanding of the nature of historical argument and to develop the skills necessary to argue effectively. Students must engage in exercises where they practice the skills associated with historical argumentation, they must receive constructive feedback regarding their progress in developing these skills, and they must then apply these skills on major course assignments. In addition to serving as a content expert, in an argument-based course an instructor also acts as coach who guides students through the process of learning to argue about history.

The skills that students must master to engage successfully in historical argument include:

* Identifying and summarizing the thesis and argument of a piece of secondary literature—including the ability to identify and contrast the key differences in rival positions.
* Contextualizing and interpreting evidence from sources with awareness of the perspective of the source.
* Using the available historical evidence as a basis to judge the relative persuasiveness of rival position on important historical questions.
* Formulating a thesis that provides a clear and direct answer to an important historical question.
* Constructing a coherent argument for one’s thesis and presenting that argument in a clear and well-organized fashion.
* Presenting evidence to make a case for one’s own position.

Research suggests that the greatest developmental challenge for students learning to participate in historical argument is to understand the relationship between general assertions and concrete historical evidence. In a classic study of cognitive development among undergraduates, William Perry found that most students enter college assuming that truth is clear-cut and revealed by authority. Relatively early in their college careers, Perry determined, students come to accept that knowledge is often subject to rival truth claims, but they tend to view such disagreements as matters of mere opinion. Perry found his subjects quite resistant to abandoning this view and to embrace the need for truth claims to be justified on the basis of disciplinary criteria of judgment. In fact, Perry found that most of his sample (made of mostly male Harvard students) graduated from college comfortably viewing truth claims and expressions of opinion as essentially the same thing. The implications of Perry’s work for argument-based historical study are profound. To see history as a contested discourse, students may require little more than to be exposed to rival historical perspectives. More challenging will be to persuade students that such disagreements are not a matter of mere opinion and that historical claims (including their own) must be judged on the basis of logic and evidence. It is not sufficient to simply tell students that they must cite evidence, nor is it enough to merely explain how to do it. Rather, instructors must foster a process of developmental change in which students themselves come to understand the nature of historical argument and the role of evidence within it. For this to happen, we must task students with making judgments regarding the relative merits of rival positions, and we must require students to systematically apply evidence when making these judgments.[[6]](#footnote-6)

***Pedagogical Considerations for Large-Enrollment Courses***

One of the points in favor of the coverage model is that it can be deployed quite efficiently and conveniently in large-enrollment courses, where the dominant mode of instruction is typically lecture. Admittedly, the argument-based model does pose some special challenges for courses that enroll more than thirty or forty students. First, instructors of larger classes may find it more difficult than in smaller classes to provide students with adequate opportunities to practice thinking historically (with feedback). Second, the evaluation of student learning may be more labor intensive under the argument-based model than the coverage model, especially given that the former is unlikely to rely much on objective exams that can be machine scored. While these challenges are significant, they can be addressed in part through structured small group activities, including everything from simple think-pair-share exercises, to small group discussions, to more elaborate debates or “jigsaw” exercises. Also, most “survey” courses probably already include writing, so adding written assessments will not necessarily add to the grading burden. As with any evaluation scheme, instructors need to decide how to focus their energy.

General suggestions:

* Assign brief, low-stakes writing exercises to help students prepare for class. (These can be graded on a simple scale or on good-faith completion.)
* Create in-class assignments that allow students to work in small groups to develop their abilities to think historically.
* Use written exam prompts and formats that minimize opportunities for extraneous words and get quickly to the point. In order words, minimize the “fluff.” See the “For and Against” Essay format below.
* Grade efficiently using a rubric, and provide some feedback collectively in class, using examples.

***Using the Modules***

The modules in *Debating American History* are designed to be used flexibly. As you adapt the modules for use with your students, consider these basic strategies:

* Adopt three or four modules for a fourteen- or fifteen-week course (or accelerated course equivalent). This approach will allow you three to five weeks per unit of your course.
* Choose modules that allow for a rough chronological progression. The course will range across early or modern American history, while also allowing for an in-depth exploration of your chosen topics.
* Organize each unit around the module’s “big question” or around a variation of the big question of your own design.
* Plan lectures and activities to introduce each new module and to connect it to any previous modules or course units.
* Start the unit by giving the students a couple of class days to read and discuss “The Big Question” and “Historians’ Conversations” essays. Make sure that students understand the positions presented in the “Historians’ Conversations” essays and how those positions differ.
* For introductory-level students, carefully pick and choose among the materials from the “Debating the Question” resources. These materials are designed to be used selectively. Choose those materials that will work best with your students and your course design and assign no more than your students can effectively work with in the time allotted for the unit. You should, of course, feel free to supplement these sources with other materials.
* If you are working with more advanced students, consider giving them the freedom to explore some or all of the “Debating the Question” resources on their own. If they are writing an essay, you may wish to encourage them to use the “Additional Resources” section to find more primary and secondary sources.
* Use class time primarily as an opportunity to guide students through the process of asking historical questions, analyzing historical arguments, and interpreting primary documents. Each module includes a list of suggested activities and assignments to help make the classroom an active-learning environment.
* Use classroom (or online) discussion and formative writing assignments to prepare students for a final cumulative assessment for each unit in which they take a position on the “Big Question” (or some variation of it) and argue for that position with evidence drawn from the “Debating the Question” materials.
* For the formative writing assignments, focus feedback on student progress toward mastering such key skills as summarizing an author’s position and using evidence to evaluate the merits of rival positions.
* For the unit’s final cumulative assessment, focus feedback on the degree to which students engage successfully in historical argumentation rather than the extent to which students have mastered an authorized body of knowledge or instructor-sanctioned interpretations.
* These suggestions are best carried out through an integrated plan, as suggested by the examples below:

*Sample Essential Questions, Discussions, Assignments, and Exam Prompts for a Unit on the English Colonization of the Chesapeake Bay Region.*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Essential Questions | Class Discussion Topics | Formative Writing Assignment Prompts | Exam Prompts |
| How did the Powhatan Indians respond to the arrival of the English to the Chesapeake Bay region?  How were the English able to secure control over the Powhatan homelands? | What kind of relationship did Chief Powhatan establish with the English during the first decade after their arrival?  What happened between John Smith and Pocahontas? Did she actually rescue him?  Why didn’t the Powhatans wage all-out war against the English when they had the chance? | Did Pocahontas help her people? How or how not? | Critique this statement:  It was inevitable that the English would take away the Powhatan’s homelands. |

*Sample Essential Questions, Discussions, Assignments, and Exam Prompts for a Unit on the Constitution.*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Essential Questions | Class Discussion Topics | Formative Writing Assignment Prompts | Exam Prompts |
| How democratic was the U.S. Constitution? | How democratic was the U.S. Constitution? (Students evaluate multiple perspectives based upon primary documents, including the U.S. Constitution itself.) | What aspects of the U.S. Constitution were democratic? What aspects were not? What did Alexander Hamilton and James Madison consider to be the main flaws of the Articles of Confederation? How did they propose to remedy these flaws? | Critique this statement:  The U.S. Constitution of 1787 was fundamentally democratic. |

These examples are not meant to give an exhaustive account of the possibilities for a module, but they do suggest how the instructor can identify several essential questions related to the module’s big question and use them to structure classroom activities, writing assignments, and exam prompts in larger course in which it is not feasible for students to write a series of formal essays.

***Sample Course Assignments***

In-Class Exercises

* Have students work in small groups to write one paragraph summaries of the arguments presented in the “Historians’ Conversations” section. As students gain proficiency, summaries can identify and distinguish between the thesis and the evidence offered to support the thesis.
* Have students work in small groups, each of which is assigned a source or set of sources from the “Debating the Question” section and asked to prepare a short oral presentation sharing the conclusions they might draw from the source or sources on the unit’s big question.
* Conduct an in-class debate with students divided into teams, each of which must make an evidence-based case for preferring one of the positions presented in the “Historians’ Conversations” section over the others. (Alternatively, choose one position and assign the teams to the task of arguing for or against.)
* For large-enrollment classes: Have students complete the summary or comparative exercises suggested above in small groups. Use the classroom whiteboard to aggregate conclusions drawn by the groups. Each group sends a representative to the white board to add to a list of key interpretations or arguments or to vote on a ranking for the persuasiveness of each of the “Historians’ Conversations” essays. Use these whiteboards as the basis for a whole-class discussion.

Formative Assessments

* Write a one paragraph summary of the argument presented in each essay in the “Historians’ Conversations” section.
* Write a one to two paragraph analysis of a source in the “Debating the Question” section that evaluates what the source adds to our understanding of the unit’s big question.
* For large-enrollment classes: Have students bring one of the paragraph assignments above to class. Ask them to share and discuss their paragraphs in small groups. If the paragraphs are submitted electronically before class, the instructor can also select one or two examples to talk through and evaluate. Collect paragraphs and give a small amount of credit for good-faith completion.

Cumulative Unit Assessments

* Ask students in a paper or an essay exam to contrast the rival positions on the unit’s big question and then make a case for the position they find most persuasive on the basis of evidence drawn from the “Debating the Question” materials.
* For large-enrollment classes, see the “For and Against” essay format below. Additionally, use short-answer questions that focus less on factual recall and more on students’ abilities to contextualize and analyze primary documents, to interpret and evaluate secondary arguments, and to explain key historical developments related to the module topic. For example:
  + Identify and briefly explain two reasons that African slavery became increasingly common in late-17th century Virginia.
  + What did James Madison mean in *The Federalist,* No. 10, when he wrote: “In the extent and proper structure of the Union, therefore, we behold a republican remedy for the diseases most incident to republican government”?
  + Give one example each of how the Jim Crow system included both formal laws and informal etiquette.
  + What did presidential candidate Richard Nixon mean by the phrase “law and order” in his 1968 campaign?

***Sample Grading Rubric***

The ability to take a position on a question and argue for it is the central skill of the discipline of history. In this course, you will put this skill into practice in a series of argumentative essays. The goal of an argumentative essay is to provide a persuasive answer to an important question. An argumentative essay presents its main point (the "thesis") and then makes a case for that point with a well-organized argument and specific evidence.

Your essays will be graded on three criteria:

1. The thesis—Does the essay have a clear and effective thesis? Is it clearly stated? (Unless you have a good reason not to, the thesis should be stated in the introduction.)

2. Clarity and Organization—Does the essay provide a well-organized argument in support of the thesis? Is the point of each paragraph clear? Is the relationship between each paragraph and the thesis clear?

3. Evidence—Does the body of the essay provide sufficient evidence to make a persuasive case for each assertion? Is each source (primary and secondary) properly introduced and contextualized?

***Grading***

1. An "A" Paper—Is strong in all three areas.

2. A "B" Paper—Has a clear and effective thesis, but is weak in either evidence or organization.

3. A "C" Paper—a) Lacks a clear and effective thesis; b) is weak in both evidence and organization; or c) has a serious weakness in any one of the three areas.

A paper that fails to meet the minimum expectations for the assignment will receive a grade of D or F.

***“For and Against” Essay (Efficient cumulative unit writing assignment for large-enrollment classes)***

The brief “For and Against” essay assignment allows students to develop, and instructors to evaluate, their ability to critique a historical claim using evidence. The exam prompt includes a statement that makes a historical claim. It is important that the claim be at least somewhat problematic and arguable. Generally, this means that an expert historian would be able to find some historical value in the statement but would also be able to criticize and qualify it. Here are a couple of examples:

* The Powhatan Indians rather quickly accepted the English settlement at Jamestown.
* Pioneers who settled the Great Plains were “on their own” out there.
* The United States engaged in the “Cold War” primarily through non-military means that helped promote democracy around the world.

Students are instructed to write just two paragraphs—one in support of the statement, and one in opposition to the statement—and they are expected to provide and explain specific evidence for both sides of the argument. To make grading reasonable, the entire response must fit on one side of either a letter- or legal-sized page.

Ideally, students will have a chance to practice this exam format through a formative writing assignment, done either inside or outside of class. Rather than providing individualized feedback, however, the instructor can go over sample responses in class.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Recommended Instructions for “For and Against” Essays:

* Use the available space to write two separate paragraphs labeled “For” and “Against.” Write paragraphs (not lists) in complete sentences.
* One paragraph should provide the best evidence that you can give FOR, or in support of, the statement. The other paragraph should provide the best evidence that you can give AGAINST the statement. (The order does not matter.)
* Include only accurate historical evidence. Do not exaggerate the facts or use sarcasm.
* Keep counter-factual speculation to a minimum: it is fine to speculate briefly about how things might have happened differently, but limit it to 1–2 brief sentences.
* Explain how the evidence you present supports or undermines the statement. Insofar as possible, write a coherent paragraph for each side. (In other words, try to connect your various points together.)
* Be as detailed as you can in space provided, making reference to specific historians, people, places, and historical documents if possible. It is fine to bring in additional information not covered in the course, but must also draw thoroughly on course materials.

**THE CAUSES OF THE CIVIL WAR**

In a political culture that has long stressed American exceptionalism, the Civil War stands as a stark reminder that the United States has not been immune to the types of destructive conflicts that have torn asunder other nations. Between 1861 and 1865, roughly 700,000 Americans perished, a figure greater than that of all other the wars in the country’s history combined. The war left the United States a profoundly different place than it has been in 1860. The institution of slavery was abolished, the federal government exerted novel and unprecedented forms of authority, and a new and expansive type of American nationalism, exemplified by Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, took shape. The question of why a conflict of such scale and impact erupted in the United States has naturally attracted tremendous scholarly attention.

Few students will be aware of the scholarly debate over the causes of the Civil War. They may, however, have encountered a parallel controversy within the broader culture over the reasons for the war. This debate, which first took shape almost immediately upon the war’s conclusion, offers two contradictory explanations of what the war was fought for: 1) The Civil War was a conflict over slavery, or 2) the Civil War was a conflict over state’s rights. This controversy is closely bound up with contemporary discourse on race and has most recently come to public consciousness in the context of the debate over the symbolic meaning of the Confederate flag. For these reasons, a surprising number of students, particularly those who live in or have a connection to the American South, may have an awareness of this historical controversy. Student interest in this cultural controversy can be leveraged to generate engagement with the scholarly debate over the causes of the Civil War, and contrast between the scholarly debate and the broader cultural controversy can be used to highlight the distinction between simplistic and sophisticated historical arguments.

The position essays in this unit reflect two overlapping areas of contention among historians who study the Civil War, the first of which is the degree to which the political disagreements that erupted into war in 1861 reflected deeper cultural differences between North and South. The first essay provides an ethno-cultural explanation of the American Civil War, maintaining that by 1860 the United States was home to two divergent and increasingly incompatible cultures, a traditional agrarian South and a modernizing North. These two cultures, the first position argues, were inevitably bound to come into conflict. The second essay rejects the ethno-cultural explanation and instead points to deeply-rooted conflicts of material interests, particularly interests related to the institution of slavery, as the underlying cause of the war. While focusing specifically on the American Civil War, the first two position essays reflect a broader debate on nationalism among historians like Anthony Smith who emphasizes the ethno-cultural roots of the modern nation-state and others, such as Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson, who point to its material and institutional foundations.

Layered on top of this first debate is a longstanding controversy over the question of whether sectional disagreements, regardless of their source, were in fact irreconcilable. For the so-called Civil War “revisionists” who wrote in the first half of the twentieth century, the Civil War was in fact avoidable. In 1940, for instance, James G. Randall argued that it was the arrogance and thoughtlessness of a “blundering generation” of national leaders that plunged the United States into a needless and unnecessary war. The third position essay in this unit, while also downplaying the irrepressible nature of the sectional conflict, takes a different approach. Building upon the work of Michael Holt, the final position essay maintains that it was changes in the structure of American political institutions (most especially the political parties) that made it increasingly difficult for political leaders to find mutually acceptable compromises to sectional disagreements. In this view, the Civil War was less the product of deep and fundamental cultural differences or clashes of sectional interests than it was the result of institutional failure.

Given the complex sequence of events that led to the eruption of armed conflict in 1860s, it may be helpful to subdivide the question of the war’s causes along the lines originally suggested by Howard K. Beale:

* Why did national politics polarize along sectional lines in the 1850s?
* Why did the southern states secede?
* Why did Lincoln employ force to combat secession?

Leading students through a systematic evidence-based exploration of these three questions will position them to make informed judgments regarding the relative merits of the perspectives offered in the position essays. Doing so will require them to set aside a simplistic choice between a “slavery” and a “states’ rights” explanation and can provide a powerful lesson in the complexity of historical causation.

***Suggestions for Setting Module Context***

As an introduction to the module, consider asking students to explore the merits of the “slavery” versus “state’s rights” explanations for the war. Provide students with a small selection of relevant documents and ask them to look for evidence for and against each of the two positions. Documents from the “Debating the Question” section of the module that would be useful for this purpose are Lincoln’s December 22, 1860 letter to Alexander Stephens, his First Inaugural Address, his August 22 letter to Horace Greely, and Alexander Stephens’s “Cornerstone Speech.” This can be supplemented by a brief excerpt from the introduction to Stephens’s *A Constitutional View of the War Between the States* (1868), a work in which the author, in contrast to the “Cornerstone Speech,” minimizes the institution of slavery as a cause of the war. Working with documents that contain contradictory and ambiguous evidence will impress upon students the complexities of the question of the war’s causes. Making visible the limitation of the simplistic “slavery” versus “state’s rights” framing of the question also provides a context for presenting the more sophisticated approach to the issue offered by the position essays.

While students do not need an encyclopedic knowledge of the sectional conflict and the secession crisis, a basic understanding of these topics is necessary to work with the materials in the “Debating the Question” section and to evaluate the merits of the positions presenting in “Historian’s Conversations.” The basics of the slavery extension issue, including the outlines of the free soil, southern rights, and popular sovereignty positions can be provided via lecture. The same is true of the basic chronology of the secession crisis. If students are working with the Sumner case study, a brief explanation of the Kansas controversy will be necessary, for instance. It is important to remember, however, that students need just enough detail to work with the materials and to judge the positions. Too much detail may be a distraction.

***Suggested Exercises and Assessments***

**Summary:** After students have read the Historians' Conversations essays, ask them to write a one paragraph summary of each argument in which they illustrate the main point of each essay with material from the text. After struggling with this task individually, have students work together in class in small groups to draft a one paragraph summary of each position.

Alternatively, have each group write a one paragraph summary of one of the three position essays. Have each group present their summary orally and ask the other groups to identify the ways in which their assigned position is similar to or different from the position being presented. This will help highlight the key points of contention among the three essays: 1) What was it *exactly* that brought North and South into conflict; 2) To what extent were sectional differences truly irreconcilable?

**Argument Analysis:** Ask students to write a brief essay in which they summarize the main argument and the evidence supporting it for one of the essays. For a more challenging assignment, ask the students to summarize the argument and evidence for each essay and to compare. In class, small groups of students could create a chart with three columns to compare the opposing arguments and their evidence.

**Primary Source Analysis:** Give students the choice of several primary sources. Ask them to write a paragraph in which they answer the questions in the "Drawing Conclusions" section (or otherwise draw their own conclusions about the source). Ask students to bring their writing to class to enhance class discussion.

**Jigsaw:** Break the class into small groups. Have each group focus on one of the document subsets in the “Debating the Question” section. Ask each group to identify evidence (if any) in their assigned document subset for each of the three positions. Then create mixed groups comprised of one individual from each of the original groups. Have each member of the mixed groups present the finding of their original group.

**Cumulative Essay:** This assessment could be adapted for either an in-class exam or an out-of-class, formal essay, depending on the size of the class and the preferences of the instructor. Ask students to write a response to the module’s Big Question (or some variation of) by doing the following:

* Summarizing and contrasting the arguments presented in the three essays in the Historians’ Conversations section
* Explaining which position they find more persuasive and why, making a case for their chosen position with evidence drawn from the unit materials. (It may be worth pointing out to students that there may be merit to all three positions and that the question is really asking them to weigh the relative importance of cultural differences, interest conflicts, and changes in political party structure in the coming of the war.)

Alternatively, provide students with a problematic historical claim for them to argue for and against (see the "For and Against" assessment in "Designing an Argument-Based Course"). For example: "By 1860, cultural differences between North and South made war virtually inevitable.”

# CONFLICT AND ACCOMMODATION

# IN COLONIAL NEW MEXICO

The Spanish colonization of the Southwest touches on several topics that will be unfamiliar to many U.S. history instructors and most students. Traditionally, U.S. history coverage privileges the British colonies during the colonial period, and then moves westward with national expansion during the 19th century. This means that the Spanish colonies play little role in the colonial narrative, and if New Mexico makes any appearance, it is not until the U.S. acquired the territory in 1848. Textbooks now make more of an effort to incorporate non-British colonial history, but instructors and students may have had little exposure to these changes. If the instructor seeks more historical context, the first place to look is scholarship related to the Spanish borderlands. David J. Weber’s *The* *Spanish Frontier in North America* is an accessible survey.[[8]](#footnote-8) For students, it can also be helpful when introducing this unit to draw comparison to simultaneous events in the more familiar Eastern seaboard context. At the time of the first Spanish forays into New Mexico, there were no permanent colonies in the East (although Coronado’s 1540–1542 expedition coincides with Hernando de Soto’s invasion of the Southeast as well as Jacques Cartier’s third attempt to colonize Canada). When Oñate founded the colony of New Mexico in 1598, the Spanish colony of La Florida was already over thirty years old, while the English colony of Virginia would not be founded until 1607, and the French colony of Quebec in 1608. It is valuable to help students understand that American history hardly began with the Pilgrims in 1620—the continent was full of native people, and Spain had well-established colonies on both sides of it. Alan Taylor’s *American Colonies* does an excellent job of recounting the full range of colonial history across the entire continent.[[9]](#footnote-9)

While students may bring little detailed knowledge of this subject, they are vulnerable to certain stereotypes and preconceived notions that instructors may need to reckon with. Today, students are less likely to hold consciously negative views of Indians than they are to fall prey to myths of native simplicity, victimhood, and disappearance. Scholars have broken down such beliefs into several discrete myths. In *The Myth of the Noble Savage,* Ter Ellingson explores the various ways that Europeans and Americans projected their ideas about civilization and wildness onto Native people, using claims about Indian innocence, goodness, or nobility to critique elements of Euro-American culture.[[10]](#footnote-10) A classic contemporary manifestation of this myth is what Shepard Krech III dubbed “the ecological Indian,” famously exemplified by the “crying Indian” in the 1970s anti-pollution advertisements (portrayed by a Sicilian-American actor, appropriately enough).[[11]](#footnote-11) The “noble” part of this myth originally sat uneasily alongside the “savage” part, but the positive, romanticized image of Indians became more prevalent in the 20th century, as Americans came to believe that Indians would soon disappear utterly, a trope that scholars often call the “declension narrative.” As historian Robert Berkholder put it, “If Whites regarded the Indian as a threat to life and morals when alive, they regarded him with nostalgia upon his demise—or when the threat was safely past.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Because of such myths, students often hold sympathetic, if condescending, attitudes towards Native people. These are frequently complemented by universally negative attitudes towards colonists, particularly Spaniards, who are often seen as greedy, violent, religious fanatics. Joseph P. Sánchez offers a brief description and history of the so-called “black legend” of Spanish cruelty in his essay, “The Spanish Black Legend: Origins of Anti-Hispanic Stereotypes.”[[13]](#footnote-13) For students, then, Indians are often lumped together as simple people, with no concept of property, who were passively victimized by the cruel and greedy Spaniards. Instructors may find it useful to familiarize themselves with these myths, and also to make them explicit to students, so that they can become aware of the historical origins of their own biases.

Instructors who are particularly interested in connecting the past to the present will find ample opportunities with this material. As the controversy over the Oñate statue demonstrated, the history of Spanish colonialism and the Pueblo Revolt still hold meaning for Pueblos and Hispanos today. In *A Forest of Time,* Peter Nabokov provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding some different ways that Native people approach the past.[[14]](#footnote-14) This can be compared to the scholarly historical method to understand how, at a deep level, the concept of “history” is both subjective and culturally relative. Vine Deloria Jr.’s humorous essay, “Anthropologists and Other Friends,” in *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto,* offers a pointed critique of the fraught relationship between scholars and Native people.[[15]](#footnote-15) Both of these texts complement the film *Surviving Columbus: The Story of the Pueblo People* in helping students and instructors work closely with how contemporary Pueblo people interact with their colonial past.[[16]](#footnote-16)

## Suggested Classroom Activities

**Score the Essays**: Students can create a matrix or table to assign scores to the two essays in the Historians’ Conversations. Instructions can provide topics or themes on which to evaluate the essays, or students can be asked to identify their own criteria. This can help them understand how the essays’ arguments are constructed, how to compare their arguments, and how to then evaluate which essay they think makes the stronger case.

**Pueblo Revolt Jigsaw Activity:** Before students have read the primary sources related to the Pueblo Revolt, distribute copies of individual sources to single students or groups of students. Have students read their sources individually or discuss them in groups who have been assigned the same source. Gradually assemble the students into larger groups with a growing array of sources. At each step, ask them to attempt to describe and interpret the event. This exercise will help them experience the limits of each individual author and source, and the value in assembling diverse sources for critical analysis and understanding of historical events.

**Why Haven’t I Heard of This Before?:** For most students, this historical content will be unfamiliar. A discussion of why this is so can provide an opportunity to reflect on how history is constructed, what is considered important and what is not, and what the effects of these choices are. To extend this conversation, examine high school U.S. history textbooks to see what they have to say about the colonial Southwest.

**Secondary Source Comparison:** Students generally understand the concept of bias as a pejorative concept. To add nuance to this understanding, compare high-quality secondary sources to help them see how different interpretations can result from different sources, methods, and questions, rather than simply “an agenda.” Use the brief excerpts from Kessel and Folsom in Appendix A for a straightforward comparison of two different interpretations of the same event. Call students’ attention to the differences in tone and language, the points of emphasis, the small differences in detail, and the cumulative sense of the event. Alternatively, David J. Weber’s *What Caused the Pueblo Revolt of 1680?* contains essays well suited to this activity.[[17]](#footnote-17)

## Suggested Exercises and Assessments

**Primary Source Analysis:** Ask students to practice close reading with the Spanish records of the Pueblo Revolt—texts that are moderately challenging to read (due to the occasional archaic language and unfamiliar terminology) while offering rich interpretative problems. The students should demonstrate their ability to recognize not only the biases of the Spaniards, but also the gaps in their knowledge that cloud their understanding. Just as important is that the Indian informants present great reliability problems, as they have complex and hidden motivations, and are being interrogated by the Spaniards, under duress, about events of which they may or may not possess full knowledge.

**Encyclopedia Entry + Primary Source:** Students can collaborate on condensing the unit into a 250-word encyclopedia entry on colonial New Mexico, as well as identifying a single primary source that provides a valuable illustration of an important theme. This assignment provides them with an opportunity to summarize and paraphrase, as well as evaluating the sources and themes to decide which is the most significant.

**Design a Monument:** The controversy over the Oñate monument reveals the contested nature of history, memory, and commemoration. Assign students the task of designing a historical monument based on the content of this unit. What events or people should be commemorated? What are the different political constituencies who are likely to have an opinion on the monument? What form should the monument take? What text should accompany the monument? How would they introduce and explain the monument to the public? Some students would even be inclined to construct a model or even a full-sized mockup of the monument.

**Was the Pueblo Revolt a Success?:** As an essay or an in-class debate, this exercise requires students to determine the potential motivations and outcomes of the Pueblo Revolt and evaluate the event from the perspective of the historical Pueblo people. Their answers depend on what they think the event was intended to accomplish, what it did or did not accomplish, and what were the priorities and values of the participants. This provides practice in argumentation, the use of historical evidence, and the consideration of alternative viewpoints. To make this assignment rigorous, it is essential that students supply specific historical evidence to defend their claims. For this reason, an in-class debate should be preceded by sufficient preparation time.

# *Appendix A: Secondary Source Comparison Texts*

Kessell, John L. *Kiva, Cross, and Crown: The Pecos Indians and New Mexico, 1540–1840.* Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1979.

Folsom, Franklin. *Indian Uprising on the Rio Grande: The Pueblo Revolt of 1680.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996.

**DEMOCRACY AND THE US CONSTITUTION**

Given the cynicism characteristic of contemporary American political culture, engaging student interest in political history can be a challenge. To capture their interest, students must see that what is truly at stake in politics are the questions of who holds power of government and how that power is used to alter people’s lives in profound ways. The scholarly debate over the U.S. Constitution and the motives of those who created it, though daunting for undergraduate students to take on, can be a powerful tool for raising these fundamental questions.

When Charles Beard published *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* in 1913, it was his hope that his work would raise the question of the degree to which the country’s constitutional order either promoted or restricted democratic self-rule. Beard argued that architects of the Constitution, far from being disinterested statesmen intent on constructing a democratic republic, were in fact representatives of the newly independent nation’s economic elite who designed a constitutional order that would protect the financial interests of that class by concentrating power in new federal institutions that were shielded from popular politics. While a number of Beard’s particular claims were not able to withstand systematic scrutiny, the issues he raised continued to largely define the scholarly debate over the Constitution for more than a half of a century. Forrest McDonald’s 1958 work, *We the People: The Economic Origins of the Constitution*, was intended to serve as a definitive repudiation of the Beard’s position. And yet, just over twenty years later, when the American Enterprise Institute published a collection of scholarly essays entitled *How Democratic Is the Constitution?*, the collected works focused largely on the merits, or lack thereof, of the Beardian view.

While those inspired by Beard argued vociferously with his critics over the degree to which the U.S. Constitution enshrined the rule of an economic oligarchy, neither camp paid much attention to the racial and gender hierarchies that characterized post-revolutionary America. Both the Beardians and their critics assumed that the commitment of the founders to democratic self-rule could be measured by the extent to which their Constitution established political equality among free men. In the wake of the racial and gender liberation movements of the 1960s, however, this position became increasingly untenable. Edmund Morgan’s 1975 classic, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*, helped blaze the trail for new views of the nation’s founding. In his 1956 work, *The Birth of the Republic*, Morgan had portrayed the adoption of the United States Constitution as a triumph of the principle of human equality for which the American revolutionaries had fought. In *American Slavery, American Freedom*, by contrast, Morgan argued the institution of slavery shaped the revolutionary generation’s understanding of concepts like freedom and equality in fundamental ways and that the American conception of democracy had presumed the inherent inferiority of Africans. In a similar vein, feminist scholars began to investigate the patriarchal assumptions imbedded in the American conception of democracy. The title of Dana D. Nelson’s, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* captured well this new perspective. Newer scholars argued that far from institutionalizing the principle of human equality, and despite its gender and race neutral language, the Constitution presumed the subordination of women and the enslaved while institutionalizing a republic of white men.

The position essays contained in “Democracy and the U.S. Constitution” reflect this century-old scholarly debate. The first two essays present the celebratory view of the Constitution and the Beardian critique in their classic forms. The third position essay places issues of race and gender at the center. The questions raised by the essays are challenging, as they require students to make connections between abstract concepts (such as democracy and equality) and the practical workings of specific political institutions. The essays also insist that students examine these questions in the context of the specific social and economic conditions of the post-revolutionary United States. An instructor will need to work closely with students to provide them with the knowledge and to help them develop the conceptual tools necessary to successfully engage the issues raised by the position essays. But the rewards may be great, as these issues strike at the heart of our understanding of the meaning of democratic self-rule.

***Suggestions for Setting Module Context***

To appreciate the importance of the scholarly debate on the Constitution, it is helpful for students to understand that the Constitution was controversial even in its own time and that the scholarly debate sparked by the publication of Beard’s *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* parallels the contemporary debate between Federalists and Anti-Federalists in important ways. This could be accomplished by a lecture presenting the political struggle over ratification. The anti-federalist documents contained in the “Debating the Question” section could also be used for this purpose, most particularly the “Essay by Montezuma” and “The Political Creed of Every Federalist,” which are the two most accessible of the Anti-Federalist documents provided.

For students to fully understand the argument of the third position essay (“A Republic of Propertied Men: The Constitution in Historical Context”) it may be necessary to spend some class time exploring the structure of the pre-industrial household and the way it shaped understandings of “freedom” and “equality.” Readings such as Paul E. Johnson’s “The Modernization of Mayo Greenleaf Patch: Land, Family, and Marginality in New England, 1766-1818,” *The New England Quarterly* 55 (December 1982): 488-516, may be helpful with this task.

In order to evaluate the merits of the three positions, students will need to gain a detailed understanding of the key provisions of the U.S. Constitution itself. One way to do this is to have students work in small groups to identify (by article and section) the location of the key provisions of the Constitution and then translate the technical language of these provisions into common English.

***Suggested Exercises and Assessments***

**Summary:** After students have read the Historians' Conversations essays, ask them to write a one paragraph summary of each argument in which they illustrate the main point of each essay with material from the text. After struggling with this task individually, have students work together in class in small groups to draft a one paragraph summary of each position.

Alternatively, have each group write a one paragraph summary of one of the three position essays. Have each group present their summary orally and ask the other groups to identify the ways in which their assigned position is similar to or different from the position being presented. This will help highlight the key points of contention among the three essays: 1) *Who* was primarily responsible for emancipation; 2) *What* was Lincoln’s primary motivation?

**Argument Analysis:** Ask students to write a brief essay in which they summarize the main argument and the evidence supporting it for one of the essays. For a more challenging assignment, ask the students to summarize the argument and evidence for each essay and to compare. In class, small groups of students could create a chart with three columns to compare the opposing arguments and their evidence.

**Primary Source Analysis:** Give students the choice of several primary sources. Ask them to write a paragraph in which they answer the questions in the "Drawing Conclusions" section (or otherwise draw their own conclusions about the source). Ask students to bring their writing to class to enhance class discussion.

**Jigsaw:** Break the class into small groups. Have each group focus on one of the document subsets in the “Debating the Question” section. Ask each group to identify evidence (if any) in their assigned document subset for each of the three positions. Then create mixed groups comprised of one individual from each of the original groups. Have each member of the mixed groups present the finding of their original group.

**Cumulative Essay:** This assessment could be adapted for either an in-class exam or an out-of-class, formal essay, depending on the size of the class and the preferences of the instructor. Ask students to write a response to the module’s Big Question (or some variation of) by doing the following:

* Summarizing and contrasting the arguments presented in the three essays in the Historians’ Conversations section
* Explaining which position they find more persuasive and why, making a case for their chosen position with evidence drawn from the unit materials. (It may be worth pointing out to students that the United States Constitution, as originally drafted and amended by the Bill of Rights, has both democratic and anti-democratic elements, and that the question is really asking them to weigh the relative importance the two.)

Alternatively, provide students with a problematic historical claim for them to argue for and against (see the "For and Against" assessment in "Designing an Argument-Based Course"). For example: "The architects of the United States Constitution were motivated by a desire to limit or influence ordinary people in politics and government.”

**EMANCIPATION AND THE END OF SLAVERY**

The liberation of nearly four million men, women, and children from the bonds of slavery amidst an epic civil war was a fundamental turning point in the history of the United States. Emancipation was transformative for those who lived through it and (perhaps uniquely in American history) marked a moment of revolutionary change that produced a rapid and radical restructuring of basic social institutions. Few topics equal its potential to engage students in deep and meaningful historical thinking.

Over the past several decades, emancipation has been the subject of a spirited debate among historians. Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, scholars associated with the Freedman and Southern Society Project at the University of Maryland, under the leadership of Ira Berlin, launched a critique of top-down accounts of the end of slavery. Instead, these historians began to articulate an alternative analysis that placed enslaved people themselves at the center of emancipation’s arrival. Hearkening back to the work of W.E.B. DuBois, who in his classic *Black Reconstruction in America* had spoken of a “general strike” through which enslaved workers helped to win the Civil War by transferring their labor from the “Confederate planter to the Northern invader,” Berlin and his associates offered compelling evidence of how, from the earliest moments of the war, the enslaved pressed the issue of emancipation by escaping to Union lines, by offering their services to the war effort, and by demonstrating their essential humanity. Painting a portrait of a reactive Abraham Lincoln, Berlin proclaimed the enslaved to be the “prime movers” in the drama of emancipation. The response from traditionalists, led by James M. McPherson, was swift. While accepting that the role of slaves had been underappreciated, McPherson rejected the portrait of a passive Lincoln and insisted that the president was deserving of his historical moniker as the “Great Emancipator.” This debate was carried out with a high degree of thoughtfulness and sophistication, and it helped to inspire a rising generation of historians to produce new work of exceptional quality on the question of emancipation.

The question of “who freed the slaves” can be highly engaging to students on multiple levels. The “fact” that Lincoln freed the slaves will be almost universally known by students. Subjecting this prior knowledge to historical debate will engage the curiosity and interest of many. For others, the possibility that individuals suffering under the bonds of slavery may have been the driving force of their own liberation will be intriguing. And the question of the relative importance of moral principles versus political and military expediency in Lincoln’s decision-making will complicate students’ understanding of a mythic American figure.

The emancipation issue also provides a window into one of the great debates of the modern historical profession— who makes history? For most of the twentieth century, historians emphasized the role of the prominent and powerful (the so-called “great men”) in the making of history. Since the 1960s, with the growth of interest in social history and the emergence of new fields like African American History and Women’s History, scholars have placed greater emphasis on the role of ordinary people in the shaping of our world. While today’s historians generally welcome the insights of the “new” history (which is no longer so new), the field continues to wrestle with the relative weight that should be placed on history from the bottom up versus history from the top down. The emancipation debate places this broader question front and center. After all, if the enslaved (who are often assumed to be utterly without power) were, in fact, the prime movers in their own liberation, the implications for the ability of ordinary people to shape the course of history are profound.

The emancipation debate also highlights the importance of remaining open-minded and confronting biases. Students may have strong feelings about which version of the emancipation story they *want* to be true. For some, the more traditional top-down accounts may be comforting in an uncertain world. For others, the bottom-up approach may provide an inspiring story of the power of ordinary people. Regardless of their predilections, students should be challenged to follow the evidence, even if it leads them to unsettling conclusions.

***Suggestions for Setting Module Context***

To appreciate the importance of the scholarly debate on emancipation, students must understand how unexpected slavery’s rapid demise during the Civil War was. At the outbreak of hostilities in 1861, few anticipated that the conflict might result in the abolition of slavery. (Frederick Douglass, who understood exactly how the war would undermine the authority of slave owners, was a notable exception.) It is equally important to disabuse students of prior images of Abraham Lincoln as a saint-like figure and for student to understand Lincoln as a practical politician. Some methods for achieving these goals are:

* A lecture emphasizing Lincoln’s longstanding opposition to immediate abolition and his insistence during the first year and a half of the war that his sole aim was to preserve the union.
* An examination of Lincoln’s public statements in the 1850s on matters of race and slavery. This could be accomplished through analysis of print documents. Alternatively, use a video of a re-enactment of the 1858 Charleston debate between Lincoln and Senator Stephen Douglas (available at <https://www.c-span.org/video/?59823-1/lincolndouglas-charleston-debate>). The debate opens with a statement from Lincoln in which the future president endorses policies of white supremacy. Place the video in context (a hard-fought political campaign in which Douglas was accusing Lincoln of being a closet abolitionist) and ask students what conclusions we might draw from it. Why would Lincoln say such things? Do these statements necessarily reflect his private views on race and slavery?

It is also important for students to understand that while anti-slavery sentiment was widespread in the North, abolitionism at the time of the Civil War was very much a minority movement— it was possible (and even common) to dislike the institution of slavery while opposing emancipation and even holding racist views.

* After providing background on the Emancipation Proclamation, but before students read the positions essays, have students brainstorm possible explanations for Lincoln’s decision to make abolition a union war aim. This exercise will help students think through the multiple factors that may have influenced Lincoln’s decision making.

***Suggested Exercises and Assessments***

**Summary:** After students have read the Historians' Conversations essays, ask them to write a one paragraph summary of each argument in which they illustrate the main point of each essay with material from the text. After struggling with this task individually, have students work together in class in small groups to draft a one paragraph summary of each position.

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**Argument Analysis:** Ask students to write a brief essay in which they summarize the main argument and the evidence supporting it for one of the essays. For a more challenging assignment, ask the students to summarize the argument and evidence for each essay and to compare. In class, small groups of students could create a chart with three columns to compare the opposing arguments and their evidence.

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**Jigsaw:** Break the class into small groups. Have each group focus on one of the document subsets in the “Debating the Question” section. Ask each group to identify evidence (if any) in their assigned document subset for each of the three positions. Then create mixed groups comprised of one individual from each of the original groups. Have each member of the mixed groups present the finding of their original group.

**Cumulative Essay:** This assessment could be adapted for either an in-class exam or an out-of-class, formal essay, depending on the size of the class and the preferences of the instructor. Ask students to write a response to the module’s Big Question (or some variation of) by doing the following:

* Summarizing and contrasting the arguments presented in the three essays in the Historians’ Conversations section
* Explaining which position they find more persuasive and why, making a case for their chosen position with evidence drawn from the unit materials. (It may be worth pointing out to students that this question is really asking them to weigh the relative importance of three factors: 1) The actions taken by slaves; 2) Lincoln’s anti-slavery principles; 3) The military benefits of emancipation.)

Alternatively, provide students with a problematic historical claim for them to argue for and against (see the "For and Against" assessment in "Designing an Argument-Based Course"). For example: "Slaves were the primary drivers of the emancipation issue during the Civil War.”

**INDUSTRIALIZATION AND SOCIAL**

**CONFLICT IN THE GILDED AGE**

While students may bring little detailed knowledge of industrialization and its discontents with them into the university classroom, images of the industrial revolution hold a powerful place in American culture and are sure to influence student preconceptions. Some may have read *The Jungle*,Upton Sinclair’s famed exposé of industrial immigrant life, or have seen such Hollywood dramatizations as *Gangs of New York*. But even if they have not, they are likely aware of the dark and dangerous workplaces of industrializing America, the widespread employment of child labor, and the harsh conditions of daily life. Most students, however, are likely unaware of the scale and scope of mass protest and of the tumultuous social upheavals that characterized the age of industrialization. And even should they have some awareness of the era’s bitter labor conflicts, the agrarian protest movements of the time may be totally alien to their experience.

Providing students with knowledge of the social and political turmoil that accompanied industrialization in the United States, however, may not, in and of itself, lead students to consider the implications of these disorders or to question underlying assumptions regarding the history of the United States. Despite the cynicism and pessimism that pervades contemporary political culture, narratives of technological progress retain a powerful hold in the American imagination. The horrific images of early industrial workplaces may serve to simply reconfirm unarticulated assumptions regarding technological and social progress. The same goes for dramatic tales of the battles between workers and employers or between farmers and the railroad monopolies.

This module is designed to problematize the social and political conflicts that accompanied industrialization by challenging students to search for their underlying causes. The goal is not to overturn narratives of progress, but simply to render such narratives visible and make them subject to historical debate. The introductory essay poses a deceptively simple question—Why was industrialization in the late nineteenth century accompanied by such great social and political turmoil? The essays in the Historians’ Conversations section present two very different answers to this question. The first essay argues that the bitter conflicts of the period were a result of the massive inequalities of wealth and power produced by the industrial revolution. The second essay, while not denying these inequalities, emphasizes the anxieties associated with the transition from an agrarian to an urban-industrial way of life.

One theme that runs through the module is the newness and unfamiliarity of the emerging industrial order and the breathtaking speed with which it came to be. Was it the very novelty of the urban-industrial way of life that produced the turmoil of the age? If so, then narratives of social and technological progress can remain intact. If, by contrast, the upheavals of industrializing America were a product of deep structural inequalities within the emerging industrial order, then narratives of progress would, at the very least, need to be revised. Framed in this way, the big question of this module may resonate deeply with today’s students and encourage reflection on the daily challenges and experiences that they may be facing living in today’s uncertain times.

***Suggestions for Setting Module Context***

* It is important for students to understand the scale and scope of social disorder during the late nineteenth-century. The documentary film *1877: The Grand Army of Starvation* (an account of the 1877 nationwide railroad strike) from the American Social History Project (and narrated by James Earl Jones) conveys this quite effectively through the examination of a single case study.
* To make sense of the era’s strikes and lockouts and the reasons they so often ended in violent confrontation, students will need to understand the process of collective bargaining, particularly in an environment in which employers were under no legal obligation to recognize or negotiate with unions. This can be accomplished by a simple role play. Have your students play the role of workers in an industrial enterprise with you as the owner/manager. Ask the students to: 1) develop a list of concerns and proposed solutions; 2) select a negotiating committee to present the concerns and proposed solutions to you, the owner/manager; and 3) strategize tactics that they might employ if the negotiation does not go well. When the negotiating committee presents their statement, interrupt them and explain that while you are happy to talk to any employee as an individual, you do not negotiate with unions. If the negotiating committee persists, fire them. Ask the class how they will respond. If they choose to strike, inform them that you will be hiring new workers. Ask them how they will prevent the new workers from entering the worksite. If they chose to blockade the workplace, inform them that you are calling in law enforcement to gain access to your property, and ask them what they think the likely result will be. (Interestingly, students almost always react to this role play in ways that parallel the behavior of workers in late nineteenth-century labor disputes, with similar results.)
* Employ a similar role play to help students understand the concerns of farmers in the South and West in the 1880s and 1890s. Explain to the students the economics of commercial farming and how it differs from more subsistence-oriented farming, particularly the reliance on railroads to reach markets and on borrowing from banks or local merchants to finance annual operations. Add to the equation falling wheat and cotton prices and ask students to come up with ideas for how, working with their neighbors, they might improve their economic situation. Ask them what steps the government might take to help improve their situation if voluntary cooperative action among farmers proves insufficient.

***Suggested Exercises and Assessments***

**Summary:** After students have read both of the Historians' Conversations essays, ask them to write a one paragraph summary of each argument in which they illustrate the main point of each essay with material from the text. After struggling with this task individually, have students work together in class in small groups to draft a one paragraph summary of each position.

**Argument Analysis:** Ask students to write a brief essay in which they summarize the main argument and the evidence supporting it for one of the essays. For a more challenging assignment, ask the students to summarize the argument and evidence for both essays and to compare the two. In class, small groups of students could create a chart with two columns to compare the opposing arguments and their evidence.

**Primary Source Analysis:** Give students the choice of several primary sources. Ask them to write a paragraph in which they answer the questions in the "Drawing Conclusions" section (or otherwise draw their own conclusions about the source). Ask students to bring their writing to class to enhance class discussion.

**Document Pairings:** In order to analyze the underlying causes of social conflicts, it important to appreciate the perspectives of the various parties in the dispute. Certain documents can be effectively paired for this purpose:

* The “Except from the International Harvester Brochure” with the poem “In the Factory”
* “Samuel Gompers on the Issue of Strikes” and/or the “Platform of the Knights of Labor” and the “Declaration of Principles of the New York Central Labor Union” with Andrew Carnegie, “An Employer’s View of the Labor Question.”
* “The Omaha Platform” and/or “Populist Letters to the *Colfax Chronicle*” with William Allen White, “What’s the Matter with Kansas”

Have students work together in small groups to contrast the views expressed in these document pairings.

**Case Study Analysis:** Ask students to read two or more of the case studies and have them look for common patterns that would help explain the underlying causes of the social conflicts of the age of industrialization. Have them present their conclusions in a brief writing assignment, which could be as short as a single paragraph. Require them to include evidence drawn from the case studies.

**Cumulative Essay:** This assessment could be adapted for either an in-class exam or an out-of-class, formal essay, depending on the size of the class and the preferences of the instructor. Ask students to write a response to the module’s Big Question (or some variation of) by doing the following:

* Summarizing and contrasting the arguments presented in the two essays in the Historians’ Conversations section
* Explaining which position they find more persuasive and why, making a case for their chosen position with evidence drawn from the unit materials.

Alternatively, provide students with a problematic historical claim for them to argue for and against (see the "For and Against" assessment in "Designing an Argument-Based Course"). For example: "The labor conflicts of the late nineteenth century were a product of irreconcilable differences between workers and business owners.”

**THE POWHATANS AND THE ENGLISH**

**IN THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY CHESAPEAKE**

This module provides an engaging means of grappling with the English colonization of North American during the seventeenth century. It has the advantage of dealing (in part) with a historical figure, Pocahontas, who is likely familiar to most students, largely because of Disney's 1995 animated film*.* The sanitized history popularized by Disney means that students are primed to have their inaccurate historical knowledge and assumptions challenged, which makes for a memorable learning experience.

Regardless of whether students have seen *Pocahontas*, they likely have some prior knowledge about seventeenth-century America that you will need to address, because it may be of questionable accuracy. Showing a brief clip from the Disney film could be an effective way to start a discussion with your students of what they think they know not only about Pocahontas but about John Smith, John Rolfe, Powhatan, Jamestown, and the Virginia Colony.

As noted in the introduction to the module, the Powhatans were hardly naive about power. Werowance Powhatan can be described as a warlord who used a well-calculated combination of diplomacy, intimidation, and force to establish his chiefdom in the Chesapeake region. Tsenacommacah was not an idyllic, peaceful paradise prior to the arrival of the English in 1607. Not only was there inter-tribal conflict in the region, but Spanish and English wayfarers had intruded, and perhaps there was additional contact along the coast as well. It is worth discussing early in the unit what knowledge the Powhatans and the English had of each other. While the Powhatans (and their neighbors) had experienced prior encounters with Europeans, the English had an illustrated book regarding the region just south of the Chesapeake, Thomas Hariot’s, *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1588), which very much shaped their expectations and plans.

The Big Question for this module provides students with an opportunity to understand that the English conquest of the Powhatans was not easy, immediate, or total. Instead, the Powhatans used negotiation and warfare, struggling over the course of several decades to retain as much of their land and sovereignty as they could. Although the sources regarding the perspectives of the Powhatan people are quite limited, the Big Question asks students to wrestle with the authentic conundrum that the Powhatans faced with the arrival of the English on their shores. What were they to make of these ill-mannered strangers who were, by turns, both highly vulnerable and incredibly powerful?

***Suggestions for Setting Module Context***

* You could begin the module using the context provided in the introduction and the two pre-1607 primary sources (Richard Hakluyt's *Discourse* and the illustration from Thomas Hariot’s, *A Briefe and True Report*), or if time permits you could spend a day or two exploring pre-contact North American and the pre-1600 history of colonization.
* Assign and discuss Neal Salisbury, "The Indians' Old World: Native Americans and the Coming of Europeans," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, Vol. 53, No. 3, 435–458. Guiding students through the analysis of the argument and evidence of this classic article can help develop their skills for reading secondary sources while also learning about pre-contact America.
* Give a brief lecture about the pre-1607 European exploration and colonization of North America. Include some discussion of the English ambitions in America (with possible reference to Richard Hakluyt's *Discourse on Planting*.

***Suggested Classroom Activities***

**Images of Pocahontas:** Show and discuss the depictions of Pocahontas in the United States Capitol. Use this as an opportunity to have students reflect on what they already know about Pocahontas. Start out by seeing what they can decipher about the images without any context. Photographs available at:

* <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/INDART/relief1.jpg>
* <http://aoc.gov/art/historic-rotunda-paintings/baptism-pocahontas>
* <http://www.aoc.gov/capitol-hill/frieze-american-history/captain-smith-and-pocahontas>

**What did the English know?:** Show and discuss "Artistic Depiction of a Native Village South of the Chesapeake Bay." Use this as part of a discussion of English knowledge and expectations for their 1607 settlement. Consider supplementing this image with other images from Thomas Hariot's book, which are widely available online. See: http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/hariot/menu.html

**Who had the upper hand?:** Divide the class in half and ask them to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of the Powhatans and the English, as they encountered each other in 1607 and then as Jamestown and the Virginia Colony developed over time. Working in small groups, one half of the class could try to make the case that the English had the upper hand, while the other half of the class could make the opposite argument. Or, each small group could decide which side to argue. Factors to consider could include:

* knowledge and experiences
* expectations and motivations
* material resources (land, food, shelter, etc.)
* technology and weaponry
* alliances
* leadership
* personnel

This exercise could be done twice: once focused on the period of initial contact, and once focused on the period after Pocahontas married John Rolfe. (Or, both timeframes could be considered simultaneously, by different small groups.) The small groups could share their conclusions for a whole class discussion by making lists on a classroom white board or a virtual equivalent.

**Did Pocahontas help her people?:** Divide the class into small groups and assign each group a different perspective (such as Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, John Smith, and John Rolfe). It is fine for more than one group to consider a particular perspective. Ask each group to answer this question from their assigned perspective. When reporting out to the whole class, they should introduce each perspective and provide specific evidence to support their conclusions.

***Suggested Exercises and Assessments***

**Argument Analysis:** After the students have read both of the Historians' Conversations essays, ask them to write a brief essay in which they summarize the main argument and the evidence supporting it for one of the essays. For a more challenging assignment, ask the students to summarize the argument and evidence for both essays and to compare the two. In class, small groups of students could create a chart with two columns to compare the opposing arguments and their evidence.

**Primary Source Analysis:** Give students the choice of several primary sources. Ask them to write a paragraph in which they answer the questions in the "Drawing Conclusions" section (or otherwise draw their own conclusions about the source). Ask students to bring their writing to class to enhance class discussion.

**Case Study Analysis:** Ask students to read the materials for one of the case studies and to write an essay (which could be as brief as a single paragraph, especially for large-enrollment classes) in which they either summarize the opposing positions or choose one position and argue for it. For example, students could take a position regarding Pocahontas's alleged rescue of John Smith.

**Cumulative Essay:** This assessment could be adapted for either an in-class exam or an out-of-class, formal essay, depending on the size of the class and the preferences of the instructor. Ask students to write a response to the module's Big Question (or some variation thereof). Alternatively, provide students with a problematic historical claim for them to argue for and against (see the "For and Against" assessment in "Designing an Argument-Based Course"). For example: "Pocahontas played a major role in the downfall of her people and the loss of their homelands."

***Expanding the Unit***

The English colonization of Virginia was a complex process that offers a number opportunities to explore early American history. Especially if this module will be the only foray you make into the colonial period, you might consider adding a day or two to the unit to consider the historical relationship between the English conquest of the Chesapeake, the dispossession and diminishment of the Powhatans, and the rise of African slavery. While English indentured servants performed much of the labor for tobacco production during the first three-quarters of the seventeenth century, this period did see the introduction of chattel slavery to mainland North America, and it set the stage for landowners in Virginia to turn increasingly to enslaved Africans as a source of labor. One possible reading to use to make a transition between this module on the early colonial period and a module on the eighteenth century or the American Revolution is Edmund Morgan's classic essay, "Slavery and Freedom: The American Paradox," *Journal of American History* 59 (June, 1972): 5–29.

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1. Sam Wineburg, “Crazy for History,” *Journal of American History* 90 (March 2004), 1402-1403; Sam Dillon, “U.S. Students Remain Poor at History, Tests Show,” *New York Times,* June 14, 2011. Accessed online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/15/education/15history.html?emc=eta1&pagewanted=print>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lendol Calder, “Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey,” *Journal of American History* 92 (March 2006): 1358–70. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a history of the coverage model and challenges to it, see Joel M. Sipress and David J. Voelker, “The End of the History Survey Course: The Rise and Fall of the Coverage Model,” *Journal of American History* 97 (March 2011): 1050–1066. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Lendol Calder, “Uncoverage,” 1362; Wineburg, “Crazy for History,” 1413. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*; Peter Lee, “Understanding History,” in Peter Seixas, ed. *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 134; Sam Wineburg, “On the Reading of Historical Texts: Notes On the Breach Between School and Academy,” in *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, 63-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. William G. Perry, Jr., *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970). For a summary of Perry's model that discusses its practical application in the classroom, see Craig E. Nelson, "On the Persistence of Unicorns: The Trade-Off between Content and Critical Thinking Revisited," in Bernice A. Pescosolido and Ronald Amizade, eds., *The Social Worlds of Higher Education" Handbook for Teaching in a New Century* (Boston: Pine Forge Press, 1999), 168-184. Joel Sipress, “Why Students Don’t Get Evidence and What We Can Do About It,”; Nelson, “Persistence,” 171–73. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For more detail about the “For and Against” exam tool, see David J. Voelker, “Assessing Student Understanding in Introductory Courses: A Sample Strategy,” *History Teacher* 41 (August 2008): 505–18. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America* (New York: Penguin, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Terry Jay Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Robert Berkholder, *The* *White Man’s Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978),29. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Joseph P. Sánchez, “The Spanish Black Legend: Origins of Anti-Hispanic Stereotypes” ([Albuquerque]: Spanish Colonial Research Center, 1990), https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951p00841464o;view=1up;seq=3. An older but more detailed treatment is Benjamin Keen, “The Black Legend Revisited: Assumptions and Realities,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 49, no. 4 (November 1969): 703–19. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Peter Nabokov, *A Forest of Time: American Indian Ways of History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). It should be noted that Peter Nabokov faced considerable criticism from Acoma Pueblo people for his book *How the World Moves: The Odyssey of an American Indian Family* (New York: Viking, 2015). See https://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/news/dont-buy-this-book-acoma-pueblo-vs-peter-nabokov-when-the-sacred-is-made-profane/. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Vine Deloria, Jr. *Custer Died for Your Sins; an Indian Manifesto* (New York: Macmillan, 1969). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Diane Reyna, dir., *Surviving Columbus: The Story of the Pueblo People* (KNME and the Institute of American Indian Arts, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. David, J. Weber, ed., *What Caused the Pueblo Revolt of 1680?* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)