

History Debates: Was the Civil War a Just War?

Unit Overview and Schedule

First, Why Is This Even A Question?

The Civil War was a monumental event that directly led to the end of legal slavery in the United States. Some people may wonder, “how can it not be a just war?” Some may think it almost sacrilegious to pose such a question.

But upon closer look, we’ll see that there are actually many layers to this topic and issues that need to be discussed.

First and foremost, what is a just war? Is it something to be judged after the fact, based on the results of the war? How much do intentions behind the war play a role in judging whether the war is just? What about methods used during the war? Do ends justify the means?

How did the Civil War begin and how was it waged?

These are just some of the questions that we’ll address in this unit.

Introduction and Overview:

War has been a constant reality throughout history. Even today, though we consider ourselves living in a civilized society, communication can break down and lead to the devastation of war. Is there ever a time when the plague of war is justifiable?

The American Civil War ultimately resulted in the end of legal slavery in the United States. As the deadliest war in American history, where more American lives were lost than in the American Revolution and both World Wars combined, it came at an expensive cost. Was it unavoidable? Considering the results, was it justifiable?

In this unit, we will explore deep questions surrounding the just war theory. We’ll use it as a criteria to research, ponder, and debate the American Civil War.

Though we are debating, the goal is not necessarily to come up with a straightforward answer but to explore and discuss deep philosophical and historical questions that are still very much relevant today.

We will be learning the history of the just war theory. We will also research and take a deeper look at the causes, war methods, and results of the American Civil War. Students will hone their research skills, communication skills, and critical thinking skills in the process.

Proposed Schedule

The Civil War is a vast and complicated subject. It is impossible to cover everything within the scope of this unit. Therefore, topics will be focused on helping students have a meaningful and focused debate on the Civil War using the just war criteria. The topics listed below are also just a starting point, and the list can change. At the beginning of the unit, the class will have a discussion and will generate their own list of topics that students think will need to be studied in order to answer the question "Was the Civil War a just war?"

Below is a rough breakdown and proposed schedule of the class.
It is based on a class frequency of twice per week for about an hour per class.

Week 1: Introduction to Just War

Introductions; class brainstorm and discussion of what constitutes a just war; history and different versions of just war theory; reach a class consensus on just war criteria

Week 2: Introduce Debate Format and Set Purpose for Learning and Research

Give general overview of debate format; review just war theory; assess and review what students know about the Civil War; brainstorm and identify areas of interest and topics within the Civil War that would be relevant for the debate; lesson on how to evaluate and analyze primary, secondary, and online sources; assign and break into research groups (not debate groups)

*Students will be in two different groups during the unit: a research group and a debate group. In the research groups, students do not yet know their assigned side for the debate. The focus is to conduct unbiased research while anticipating potential angles for debate. When it is time for debates, students will be regrouped to better circulate the different ideas and information from the research groups.

Weeks 3-9: Each class will begin with a short history lesson on a Civil War topic to give students background information. Then they will have time to meet with their groups to do further research and analysis.

Mini Lesson Topics

Week 3: The State of the Union Before the War

The development of sectionalism; the role of expansion; federal vs state government; the development and evolution of the political parties

Week 4: American Slavery, Abolition Movements, the Republican Party

A closer look at slave life; major abolition movements; the founding of the Republican party

Week 5: Immediate Causes of the Civil War

The Election of 1860; secession; attitudes towards war; advantages and disadvantages of both sides, Fort Sumter

Week 6: Major Events and Battles of the Civil War

First Bull Run, Fort Donelson, Shiloh, Antietam, Gettysburg, Vicksburg, Atlanta, etc.; Mapping out pivotal battles and examining chances of success, methods, and casualties

Week 7: A Deeper Look into Lincoln and Other Leaders of the War

War time draft; freedom of the press; Lincoln's leadership and stance on slavery; Lee, Grant, Sherman war methods and treatment of soldiers and civilians

Week 8: Emancipation Proclamation

Political and war strategy; long term impact; slavery during the war

Week 9: The End of the War

Lee's surrender; treatment of soldiers and slaves; short term and long term effects

Weeks 10-11: Debate Assignments and Planning

Explain debate format and judging; lesson on meaningful and productive debates and submitting evidence for the whole group; assign debate groups; work in debate groups: strategize and refine research

3 Student Groups: Affirmative, Negative, Judges

Week 12: Debate and Reflection

Debate Structure:

Round 1: Opening Statements (about 5 minutes each)

Work Time (about 10 minutes)

Round 2: Each group speaks for about 5-7 minutes each

Work Time (about 10 minutes)

Round 3: Each group speaks for about 5-7 minutes each

Work Time (about 10 minutes)

Closing Arguments (about 5 minutes each)

Judge deliberations, Debate results, and final discussion/reflection