How Do You Know Anything About the Civil War?

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Abstract

In the case of something as factually grounded as a war, it is hard to believe that there could be more than one way to view soldiers and battlefields, dates and death tolls. History suggests, however, that our conceptions of war are biased either towards those who write the winner’s textbooks or the loser’s dissenting propaganda. Within our own American borders lie some of the bloodiest battlefields in modern history. Within each of our hearts lies an allegiance to a region as well as a country. Within our sacred documents lies a truth of freedom, whether for the rights of capitalists, governments, or human beings of all races. The American Civil War divided the nation almost 150 years ago, but it still divides our minds when it comes to whose rendition of history we choose to believe.

This unit takes a look at how bias in source material plays a crucial role in deciding how history is written – and thus learned. It uses the Civil War as a focal point for looking at how different sides see the same issue, and it highlights the fact that people, places, and dates only mean something when you contextualize them a certain way. Students will be asked to look at what they know and dissect what it truly means to know in history. They will work with primary sources from both ends of the conflict to discover how politicians, authors, filmmakers, and historians have painted the message behind the Civil War to their advantage. Due to the complex nature of the source material and the assumed basic knowledge of Civil War causes, battles, and outcomes, this unit is intended to be used with middle or high school advanced history students.