Facing the Myths of the Civil War

Prepare to address the most common myths students and

Myth	Past
The real causes of the Civil War involved state rights, tariffs, cultural differences, and Northern business interests.	Slavery was the central cause of the Civil War. The secession declarations of Confederate States attest to that. For example, the Mississippi Declaration of Secession declares, "Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery—the greatest material interest of the world. Its labor supplies the product which constitutes by far the largest and most important portions of commerce of the earth." All other causes that are frequently cited stem from enslavement.[1]
Most Northerners opposed slavery.	Northern states gradually ended slavery in the late 1700s and early 1800s because it was unprofitable. Still, most Northerners did not care about enslaved people. Bankers, factory owners, and shipowners profited from the expansion of slavery and cotton production. Northern workers feared that the abolition of slavery would lower wages or limit their prospects in the West. Many politicians who fought to end the expansion of slavery, did so to free white settlers from competition with slaveholders and resented being classified as abolitionists.[2]
Lincoln freed the slaves.	Lincoln always believed slavery was wrong. As a presidential candidate, he was committed to ending the expansion of slavery in the West. However, portraying him out of context as the Great Emancipator denies the agency of other historical actors and encourages a misunderstanding of the Emancipation Proclamation.

When the war started, Lincoln was committed to preserving the Union. He assured Southerners that if they returned to the Union he would protect slavery. When U.S officers tried to free enslaved people in Union-occupied regions, Lincoln forced them to cancel their order or fired them.

Many African Americans freed themselves. They'd been doing so even before the Civil War started, coming North when they had the chance, buying their own freedom, and resisting their enslavement with slow-downs, clever deceptions, and other means. As the number of men and women escaping slavery increased and the war dragged on, the U.S. Congress had to take action. It abolished slavery in the District of Columbia, authorized Lincoln to allow Black men to enlist in the Army, and freed enslaved people in areas under military control. Lincoln not only signed these measures into law but also drafted the Emancipation Proclamation which was officially put into effect on January 1, 1863. |

Myth	Past
Lincoln freed the slaves (contd.)	Yet the Emancipation Proclamation only ended slavery where Lincoln had no power to enforce it. For the areas where he did have the power to enforce emancipation—the border states and parts of the South in Union control—he allowed slavery to continue.[3] Still, the Emancipation Proclamation made the abolition of slavery an official war aim for the U.S. Army. Lincoln came to believe that ending slavery was the best way to defeat the Confederacy. The long term effects of the Emancipation Proclamation were nothing short of revolutionary.
Enslaved people were not beaten because they were considered valuable property.	Slaveholders used violence and the threat of it to extract unpaid labor for enormous profits. Still, the wealth generated from slavery for the white elite did not protect slaves from gratuitous violence. Instead, evidence demonstrates just the opposite. Advertisements for runaway slaves that offer a higher reward for the slave's decapitated head than their return alive, the extreme punishment issued to participants of slave rebellions, the use of slave patrols, and the domestic slave trade demonstrate it was only through extreme violence that white society maintained slavery.[4]
Robert E. Lee did not support slavery or own slaves.	Lee supported the Confederacy's defense of slavery and used his army during the Civil War to expand it. Like most white men of his time and place, Lee believed that the white race was superior to all others and his actions demonstrate this.

In 1857, when Lee's wife inherited her indebted father's three estates with 189 enslaved people, Lee tried to delay the implementation of his father-in-law's will which mandated that the enslaved people be freed within 5 years. Lee sold off or hired out several enslaved people, and had at least three of them whipped as punishment for running away.

Finally, during Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania, his army abducted and enslaved hundreds of free Black citizens.[5] |
| Whites in the South did not fight to defend slavery because so few of them owned slaves. | In the South, the American Dream was to own land and slaves. The majority of white Southerners did not own slaves; however, many aspired to do so as a means of making money. They also participated in and actively supported a slave-based society built to enforce white racial supremacy. In some counties, slave patrol duty was mandatory for all able-bodied white men. After 1835, southern post offices confiscated abolitionist literature cutting off Southerners access to alternative views on slavery.[6] Most white Southerners—and many white Northerners—believed that African slavery was sanctioned by the Bible and guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. |

Myth	Past
Thousands of Black soldiers fought for the Confederacy.	Slaveholders and the Confederate government forced Black men, freed and enslaved, to support the Confederate Army by carrying out essential tasks such as building fortifications, cooking, driving wagons, and mining iron or coal. The Emancipation Proclamation was designed to draw this labor force from the South to the North by offering enslaved people their freedom. Only at the end of the War did the Confederacy consider using Black men as soldiers, and even then, without any promise of freedom in exchange for service. The Confederacy surrendered before any Black men fought as Confederate soldiers.[7]
Free states offered Black Americans freedom.	Even after Northern states abolished slavery in the late 1700s and early 1800s, their governments set up laws that limited Black citizenship. By 1856, there were only six states in the U.S. that allowed Black men to vote. Most free states also passed segregation laws. A few midwestern states even banned Black citizens from entering their state. Widespread opposition to the Emancipation Proclamation during the war and the discrimination faced the United States Colored Troops demonstrates that the ideology of white supremacy was engrained in both the North and the South.[8]
All Southerners supported the Confederacy.	About one third of Southerners were enslaved people of African descent and did not support the Confederacy. Although many white Southerners believed their slaves supported the Confederacy (as shown in their letters during their war and memoirs after it), the threat of violence or splitting up families by sale usually explains the actions of enslaved people that may have appeared to their masters as testaments of their loyalty. Furthermore, around 100,000 white Southerners fought for the Union Army. Countless other white Southerners served as spies, served in the Union Navy, or dodged the draft.[9]
The American Civil War was the deadliest conflict of the nineteenth century.	While the Civil War is by far the deadliest conflict in American history, the Taiping Rebellion, a civil war in China from 1850-1864 killed as many as 30 million people, 44 times more people than the American Civil War.[10] The American Civil War killed at least 670,000 people, or about 2% of the entire U.S. population in 1860—equivalent to 6.6 million people today.

Footnotes

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[2] Brian J. Purnell and Jeanne Theoharis, "Jim Crow's northern history proves that white
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[4] Edward E. Baptist, *Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*,
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[6] Frank Reeves, "Confederates' 'Slave Hunt' in North a Military Disgrace," *Pittsburgh Post-
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