June 2015

To my Alumni College Civil War “students”:

I look forward to meeting you all at Bread Loaf this August and exploring with you the history of America’s greatest civil conflict. I teach a course on the Civil War & Reconstruction every year at Middlebury, but in this short course for Alumni College, we will focus only on the war years and will take a special interest in perspectives of “the people.” I recognize that you will come to the course with a range of understanding and viewpoints. Some of you may not have tackled this topic since high school; others may be history buffs who have read deeply about the war for decades. Whatever exposure you have had to the subject, I hope you will bring your knowledge and your enthusiasm to our discussions. I would like to be able to share new insights with you, but I also fully expect to learn from you and from our collective explorations of this struggle and the diverse circumstances it created for Americans at the time.

Students often come to history, especially the history of their own country, with lots of assumptions. This is certainly the case with the history of the American Civil War. Though our time together will be short, we will test and perhaps demystify your assumptions by examining the causes of the conflict, the connection between secession and the outbreak of war, the major strategies of each side as the conflict evolved, and the most substantial issues that developed not only for the military but for civilians on the homefront. We will pay closer attention to the social, political, and economic dynamics of the conflict than the details of battlefield maneuvers. And, wherever possible, we will use the words of real Americans as our basis for analysis, discussion, and greater understanding.

I hope to expose you to the wartime predicaments of Americans from all walks of life, but it would help to begin with someone who is relatively well-known to everyone: Abraham Lincoln. I have used Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief, a study by acclaimed historian James McPherson, with much success over the years. If you would like to prepare in some way for our August weekend, I suggest that you check out Tried by War from your local library or buy your own copy. Here is the link to it on Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/Tried-War-Abraham-Lincoln-Commander/dp/0143116142/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1434123750&sr=8-1&keywords=tried+by+war. I recommend reading Tried by War with an eye for the big picture. What surprises you about what Lincoln faced in this narrative? What issues loomed large in his role as head of the military as well as head of the Republican Party and the country? Don’t sweat the small stuff; the numerous details are less important than your bigger, take-away impressions.

I look forward to our discussions at Bread Loaf. Until then, Happy Summer to you.

Amy Morsman
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