

Final Exam Essay Question (3-5 pages):
Choose ONE of the following--

1. In 1858 William Seward, the chief architect of the Republican Party, described the political situation in the United States this way: “It is an irrepressible conflict between opposing and enduring forces, and it means that the United States must and will, sooner or later, become either entirely a slave-holding nation or entirely a free-labor nation.” Put simply, a Civil War was inevitable since the South had made it clear that it would fight to defend its way of life.

Based on the history you have studied this semester, is Seward’s statement correct? Was there an “irrepressible conflict” that made the Civil War inevitable? If so, at what point was the conflict inevitable? If not, how might the conflict have been avoided and at what point did the move toward armed conflict take place unnecessarily?

2. In the antebellum period, which side (North or South) did more to exacerbate the sectional divide? Ultimately, which section was responsible for the war and its catastrophic outcome?
3. Was there a single event or series of events that was most responsible for prompting the Civil War? If so, at what point in the 19th century did the sectional crisis cross the point of no return? (yes, this is a reiterated version of question one but perhaps an easier way to think about it)
4. The period we have studied was defined by three generations; the founding fathers (Hamilton, Jefferson, Washington, Madison) who orchestrated the constitutional compromise and created the foundations of our Federal government; a second generation made up of the compromisers, nationalists, and idealists (Clay, Webster, Calhoun, Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and the many members of the Second Great Awakening) who helped usher in an age of democracy, pell-mell expansion, and compromises that kept the union intact; and finally a generation that came of age politically during the 1840’s during the Mexican-American War and the related discussions of American “destiny” (Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, William Seward, Winfield Scott, Zachary Taylor and all those who would lead their respective sections in war: Lee, Longstreet, Meade, and Grant). Arguably, these are the three greatest generations of political leaders in American history. But which was most influential in shaping the identity of the nation? Which did the most to keep the country strong and united? And which, ultimately, deserves the title of the “greatest generation” of American leaders?
5. Let us play the blame game for a moment. The Civil War was, of course, the result of many complex factors. But if you had to blame it on one person in particular, who would it be? Which individual did most to exacerbate the hostility, which led to Civil War? Obviously Southerners would point to Garrison since he was on the leading edge of the abolitionist movement. John Brown, Lincoln, and even Clay would also be possibilities. From a Northern perspective, Calhoun, President Buchanan, and Stephen Douglas all could be blamed. Or you could go for the longer view and blame the Founding Fathers, specifically Jefferson and the Southern founding fathers for never abolishing the system of slavery which many claimed at the time that the nation was founded would disappear gradually over time.