

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

A Name for the American Struggle of the 1860's

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The Civil War was the bloodiest experience America has ever endured because both sides were fighting for absolutes. In the North, preservation of the Union was paramount. The South wanted its independence. No room for compromise existed between those two goals. Further, when Abraham Lincoln in 1863 added an end to slavery as the second major war aim—a move that would leave the South economically bankrupt and socially disrupted a negotiated peace between the combatants was out of the question. One side had to conquer, and the other side had to be conquered.

Emotion ran so high, bitterness was so profound that North and South then—and to an extent still—could not even agree on what to call the war. It would take the better part of a century to reduce the title list to 2-3 names. This reflects the deep wounds inevitable when a nation goes to war against itself.

During and after the conflict, the overwhelmingly popular choice of a title was the “Civil War.” It could never become totally acceptable because the definition of a civil war changed from mid-19th Century usage to modern interpretation. In the early 1800s, a civil war was defined as people of the same country fighting each other. Later, “civil war” would be interpreted as people of the same country fighting each other for control of the nation. Certainly the Confederate States of America was not attempting to overthrow the United States. It sought to leave that governmental system and live by different standards of rule. However, in locales such as Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas, Tennessee, and even western Virginia, either definition of a civil war was applicable.

“Civil War” was the most common term used by both sides. Abraham Lincoln and Robert E. Lee called it by that name. Southern newspapers, including the four major dailies in Richmond, used the term. In an 1862 Supreme Court decision, the high tribunal referred to “the Civil War” and gave the title a stamp of officialdom.

Many Southerners were offended by the name. It implied rebellion: a resistance to lawful authority. The eleven states of the Confederacy were so strongly convinced of the constitutionality of their action that they willingly went to war to defend it.

In the postwar period, Southerners developed a counterpoint with the title “War between the States.” Had this term been specifically used to mean one group of states

under a strong central government arraigned to fight another group of states under a strong central government, the title would be accurate. Yet “War between the States” is misleading as well as incorrect.

The title implies that all of the states were at war with each other. In addition, Southern proponents of the theory of state rights preached loudly that the Southern nation was in reality a loose confederation of eleven independent sovereignties. Much more was involved in the conflict than the issue of state power.
