

# Civil War and Class Conflict

“Class conflict?” many students ask, “What does the Civil War have to do with class conflict?” Indeed, among the thousands of books that dissect the Civil War from almost every angle, most fail to examine what was happening *within* the divided nations during the four years the two sides waged war upon one another. Traditional texts unravel the causes and consequences of the war, the military battles, and the multiple tragedies of the conflict without looking at what Howard Zinn calls “The other Civil War”—the class conflict fought by the poor who lived in the industrializing North and by those who lived in the impoverished rural South.

By including the voices of class resistance, a more complete story emerges about the lives of ordinary Americans in the period 1861–1865. More importantly, their voices highlight the continuous thread of class conflict that arose in colonial America, became a permanent part of the political, economic, and social fabric of post-Revolutionary America, played a powerful role in the shaping of nineteenth and twentieth century America, and continues to influence the lives of Americans in the twenty-first century.

## Document-Based Questions

### AN EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT OF THE FLOUR RIOT

1. The event recorded here occurred twenty-four years before the Civil War. What warning signs would the reader have about how class tensions in New York City might eventually erupt into greater violence?
2. According to the eyewitness, what are the major grievances of “the mob in Dey Street”? Who were “the infatuated multitude” participating in the riot?
3. Why you think the eyewitness presents an unsympathetic portrayal of the rioters? What are your sympathies? Do you think the rioters had a “just” cause? Were their actions justifiable? Explain.

### HINTON ROWAN HELPER

1. Why do you think Hinton Rowan Helper's book, *The Impending Crisis of the South*, was banned by some southern states?
2. How does this statement illustrate Helper's critique of class conflict in the pre-Civil War South: "The lords of the lash are not only absolute masters of the blacks, who are bought and sold, and driven about like so many cattle, but they are also the oracles and arbiters of all non-slaveholding whites, whose freedom is merely nominal, and whose unparalleled illiteracy and degradation is purposely and fiendishly perpetuated"?
3. How could it benefit slave owners to claim that "the free States are quite sterile and unproductive, and that they are mainly dependent on us for bread-stuffs and other provisions" and that "our Northern brethren . . . are dependent on us for the necessities of life"? Was this true? Explain.

### "MECHANIC"

1. How do the words of this unknown writer echo those of Helper?
2. What were the promises made by the Confederacy to the ordinary people before the war? How does the author believe they are being ignored?
3. Do you think the author provides enough evidence to support his statement that "the poor soldiers . . . are fighting the rich man's fight"?

### JOEL TYLER HEADLEY

1. What were the grievances of the draft resisters? Do you think they were legitimate? Why, or why not?
2. Joel Headley variously describes the draft resisters as "gangs," a "wild, savage, and heterogeneous-looking mass," and a "heterogeneously weaponed army." How do his words shape his story? How do you think he might define the word "gang"? How does his description of gangs compare and contrast with the contemporary understanding of urban gangs?
3. At one point in his account, Headley notes that the rioters sent "terror into the hearts" of families who were in a building that was set on fire. In the 1860s, how, when, and by whom might a riot be considered an act of terrorism?

**FOUR DOCUMENTS BY DISAFFECTED SOUTHERNERS**

1. What are the common wartime grievances in these four documents? Do they differ between women and men?
2. Do you think the actions of the bread rioters in Savannah are more acceptable during times of war than they would be in during times of peacetime poverty? How and why?
3. Who are the “truly worthy deserving poor” written about in the News editorial about the bread rioters? Who do you think the author might describe as the unworthy, undeserving poor? How is this distinction an example of class division in Southern society?
4. How is the “To Go, or Not To Go” document similar to the “To Be, or Not To Be” soliloquy in William Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet*? Why do you think the author made this comparison? Is it effective? How would you answer his question, “Would patriotism pay my debts, when dead”? What do you think he decides to do—or not to do?
5. How are the “wants” of the women in Miller County similar to the needs of the women of Savannah?
6. What grievances does the author in the *Columbus Sun* editorial harbor toward “men of wealth”?

**J. A. DACUS**

1. What does J. A. Dacus believe to be the “potent cause of the Great Strikes”?
2. What was the International Association of Workingmen? Why did it “cause so much anxiety to the governments of Europe”?
3. Knowing that you would have to face government reprisals—arrest, injury, or even death—would you have supported the railroad strike? Why, or why not?

### Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 10, “Civil War and Class Conflict”

After reading Chapter 10 in *Voices*, students should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points therein. Following are four possible main points.

1. Between 1861 and 1865, the United States experienced not only a Civil War between the northern and southern states, but also class conflict between the rich and the poor on both sides of the conflict.
2. Many poor in America saw the Civil War as a rich man's battle but a poor man's fight.
3. Temporary unity during the Civil War was artificially created by politicians who enforced the shaky truce with military might.
4. When the Civil War was over, the class and racial divisions that had long been a part of the American landscape reemerged in new forms.

### Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 10, “Civil War and Class Conflict,” and in *A People's History*, Chapter 10, “The Other Civil War”

If your students are also reading *A People's History*, they should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points in Chapter 10 in both books. Following are four additional points to be stressed when *Voices* and *A People's History* are used together.

5. Prior to the Civil War, many Americans were disenfranchised and disillusioned with a system in which they believed they had little social, political, or economic stake.
6. During this era, big business sought to achieve economic stability by decreasing competition, organizing business interests, and moving toward monopoly.
7. Before, during, and after the Civil War, the working men and women of America resisted exploitation by organizing and carrying out strikes.

8. Congressional and federal court actions during this period supported the growth of largely unregulated capitalistic development at the expense of working men and women.

### General-Discussion Questions for *Voices*

While the following questions are designed for classroom discussion about all the voices read in Chapter 10, they can also be rewritten and included as evaluation tools.

1. What are the similarities among these voices? How might those in the upper class have responded to these voices?
2. How could there be, as Helper states, “white victims of slavery”? Who were these victims?
3. What is an oligarchy? Can you find other sources in this chapter or elsewhere that may support Helper’s belief that a “slave-driving oligarchy” ruled the South? What role did such an oligarchy play in bringing the South into the Civil War? What role did it play in southern class conflict?
4. Do you think that such incidents as the Flour Riot of 1837 were typical within large cities in pre-Civil War America? Explain.
5. During the Civil War, men on both sides of the conflict were able to buy their way out of the draft. What are the implications of this practice? How do you think this contributed to class divisions throughout the war?
6. What evidence of class and racial conflict do you hear in these voices?
7. What “growing costs of the war” were ordinary people forced to shoulder? Do you think you might lift your voice in or commit your actions to the cause of resistance if you were forced to assume such wartime costs? How and why?
8. Several of these entries saw speculators as practitioners of “extortion.” How do they define speculation? Do you believe speculators were extortionists? How and why?
9. What social conflicts remained after the end of the Civil War?
10. How are the problems of the railroad workers in 1877 similar to the grievances expressed by those who resisted during the Civil War?

11. How did the voices in this chapter reinforce any of the five themes listed in “Main Points in *Voices*”?
12. Which of the voices in this chapter did you find most powerful? Least powerful? How and why?

### General-Discussion Questions for *Voices* and *A People's History*

These general-discussion questions are additional questions for students who have read Chapter 10 in both books. For all questions, discussion must focus on ways the materials in both chapters help students formulate and articulate their answers.

13. What is the significance of the title in Chapter 10 of *A People's History*, “The Other Civil War”? How do the entries in Chapter 10 of *Voices* reinforce the significance of the title?
14. How do the grievances expressed by the farmers in the Anti-Renters movement echo those expressed by the resisters you read about in Chapter 10 in *Voices*?
15. “Mechanic” decries the fact that equality is denied ordinary Southerners in the Confederacy through “disenfranchisement.” Dorr’s Rebellion in Rhode Island was also a response to disenfranchisement. How were people throughout the Union and the Confederacy disenfranchised? How could lawmakers justify such laws?
16. Do you think the violent actions of any resisters you read about in these chapters were justifiable given their circumstances? How and why? Do you think it is ever justifiable to use violence to change unjust laws? If so, in what circumstances?
17. How did the federal and state governments help corporations during the period described in Chapter 10?
18. What common grievances did workers share throughout the period described in Chapter 10? Do workers continue to have any of these grievances today?
19. On page 226 of *A People's History*, historian David Montgomery is quoted as noting that class conflicts in nineteenth-century America “were as fierce

as any known to the industrial world.” What evidence can you find in the readings to support this claim?

20. How does Howard Zinn account for the huge increase in strikes and labor organizing during the Civil War?
21. What was the role of women in labor reform? What were their accomplishments? What impediments did they face that were both similar to and different from those faced by men in the labor movement?
22. How was the emergence of the two-party system an “ingenious mode of control,” as Howard Zinn asserts?
23. How did big business during this era attempt to achieve economic stability? Was it successful? Explain.
24. How did the economic crisis of 1857 contribute to class conflict? To the outbreak of the Civil War?
25. How was the Civil War “one of the first instances in the world of modern warfare”?
26. How and why did Marxism become more attractive to some of the working men and women in the period before, during, and immediately after the Civil War?

## Evaluation Tools

### SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS

These assignments can be adapted to meet any classroom need—homework, short- or long-term research projects, individual or group work. The end product should be flexible, depending on teacher interest and student abilities—papers, journals, oral reports, visual aides, and the like.

1. While watching the movie *The Gangs of New York*, pay particularly close attention to its portrayal of the New York Draft Riots of 1863. Then using information from Chapter 10 as well as other sources at your disposal, answer the following: How does the film’s interpretation of the riots compare and contrast with what you have read? Why did some Irish people get

so caught up in the riots? Who were the primary victims of the riots? How was this both a class and a race riot? Why do you think most traditional textbooks do not discuss the Draft Riots?

2. Find out more about Hinton Rowan Helper and his book, *The Impending Crisis in the South* (Reprint Services Corp., 1857). What was his background? Was he a Southerner or Northerner? Republican or Democrat? What was his purpose in writing the book? How was it received in the North? Did he receive *any* acclaim in the South for his book? How accurate was his research? How accurate were his predictions?
3. Learn more about urban riots that occurred before, during, and immediately after the Civil War. In what cities were they most prevalent? How were the riots similar and dissimilar? In what ways are these riots that took place over 140 years ago similar to and different from urban riots in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries?
4. Discover more about the labor movement that arose during and immediately after the Civil War. How and why did it arise? What were the goals and achievements of labor activists? Failures? How powerful were the unions? Why do you think the government was so threatened by the growth of unions? How did the government work to defeat the power of the unions? Did much public sympathy exist for labor strikes? How and why?
5. Examine a traditional history book's treatment of labor struggles in 1877. How does it compare and contrast with the descriptions in *A People's History* and the documents in *Voices*?
6. Explore the origins and evolution of the patroonship system in the Hudson River Valley. How did the system exacerbate class tensions? What were the immediate causes of the Anti-Renter movement? What were its short- and long-term consequences? What was the cause of its demise? Do you think such movements still exist in the United States? Explain.
7. Research the origin and growth of the Molly Maguires. Who were its members? What were their goals and accomplishments? Why were they such a threat to mine owners? What led to their demise? How were they similar to and different from other labor movements during the time?
8. Find out more about the Supreme Court case *Luther v. Borden*. How does this decision establish what Howard Zinn claims was the "essentially conservative



nature of the Supreme Court”? What portions of the actual decision reinforce this conservative nature? What are some other ways in which Congress and the courts during this period support and promote the capitalist development of the nation—usually at the expense of the working man and woman?

9. Examine the role and prevalence of disease in the rapidly urbanizing areas of the United States prior to and during the Civil War. What diseases were most common? Most deadly? Why were they so difficult to contain? What did the medical community know about the diseases? How was the spread and treatment of disease another example of class conflict?

### SUGGESTED ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Support or refute Howard Zinn’s primary contention in this/these chapter(s) that the class conflict that had been brewing in the United States since its inception did not disappear during the Civil War.
2. Some historians have argued that the Civil War was the rich man’s battle but the poor man’s fight. How does what you read in this/these chapter(s) support that argument? What is your position? Explain.
3. In his account, Headley notes that the rioters sent “terror into the hearts” of families who were in a building that was set on fire. In Dacus’ account of the 1877 railroad strike, he mentions unions that “caused a thrill of astonishment and terror to fall upon the urban populations of the country.” In the late nineteenth century, how, when, and by whom might a riot or strike be considered an act of terrorism? Would these same considerations apply in the twenty-first century? Explain.
4. How did learning about the voices of resistance before, during, and after the Civil War give you a more complete and balanced understanding of the years between 1861 and 1877?
5. In the years before the Civil War, the famous orator Daniel Webster wrote, “The great object of government is the protection of property at home, and respect and renown abroad.” How do you think the ordinary authors of the documents in Chapter 10 of *Voices* might have responded to this statement? How does this “great object” of the mid-nineteenth century compare and contrast with the “great object” of the United States government today?

6. In your opinion, why did the federal government take the owners' side during labor disputes?
7. Howard Zinn quotes the historian David Montgomery as writing that in reality, the class conflicts of nineteenth-century United States "were as fierce as any known to the industrial world." Support or refute this statement.
8. What voices of resistance in Chapter 10 in both *Voices* and *A People's History* were of most interest to you? How and why? Which did you find most compelling and why? Least compelling?
9. Using examples from both chapters, support or refute this statement: "on the eve of the Civil War it was money and profit, not the movement against slavery, that was uppermost in the priorities of the men who ran the country" (*People's History*, p. 220).
10. How do the voices and information in these two chapters improve your understanding of how American was affected by the Civil War? What information was especially useful? How and why?
11. Explain how the voices and events in these two chapters illustrate Howard Zinn's statement, "Jackson was the first President to master the liberal rhetoric—to speak for the common man." Do you agree or disagree with his statement? Do you think this political innovation benefited the working men and women of America? Explain.

### SIMULATIONS AND OTHER CREATIVE APPROACHES

1. Stage a town-hall meeting that takes place in New York shortly after the Flour Riot of 1837. Invite a panel of four eyewitnesses to attend and to discuss their role in the riot and their perception of liberty: one of the persons in the mob who was arrested; one of the shop owners whose property was destroyed; a police officer at the scene of the crime; and the mayor of New York City. Allow each to explain their perspective to the audience in three to five minutes. When the panelists are finished, the audience can make comments and ask questions.
2. Design a creative cover and dust jacket for a book you have been hired to write on the topics included in "The Other Civil War." What will be the title of your new book? On the jacket, you need to write a brief description

of your book's contents. Remember, you want to sell this book—you need to make the book's cover inviting and the narrative intriguing so that the reader will want to buy and read your book!

3. Write a new Declaration of Independence for the centennial celebration of 1876. Write it from the perspective of an African American, a working man or woman in the industrial North, a recently arrived immigrant, or a poor white farmer in the rural South.
4. Write a letter home to your family in Ireland that describes your voyage to America in 1845, your reception upon arrival, and your life in the city during the ten years you have been in the United States.