

Memo Regarding OLLI 733 – The Coming of the Civil War (Online, Wednesdays, 11:45-1:15 – 11 sessions)

Class Format:

This SG will be a combination of lectures and discussions. Much of the history we will be talking about has generated controversy over the years, both among historians and among the general public. One of my goals will be to flag some of these controversies for discussions. Class participation will be encouraged.

The Subject Matter of the Class (and the special reading materials for the first few classes):

The bulk of the class will focus on the 15 years or so before the Civil War (from the Mexican War to Fort Sumter), a period of unprecedented and growing division in the country over slavery. For this period, the primary readings will be from James McPherson's "The Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era" (Oxford, 1988), which is a Pulitzer Prize winning study of the entire Civil War Era. We will only be reading up to page 275 (covering the lead up to the War). We will not be covering the War itself.

But before we get to McPherson's book, an examination of the period before the Mexican War would be beneficial. I am planning to devote the first 2-3 classes to a brief overview of the history of slavery (and anti-slavery) in colonial America and the early Republic, so that the class can better understand the background to the events and social/political forces discussed in McPherson.

I will distribute readings for the first class in a few days, covering the issue of slavery in colonial & revolutionary America and in the Constitution. (I will get these to you both by email and by placing the materials on the OLLI website.)

I will send out a second batch of readings, for the second class, in the not-too-distant future.

A Note Regarding the Readings:

This SG will involve a fair amount of reading. I would strongly urge members to try to keep up with the readings to get the most out of the SG. The readings for this SG will be from several sources, so some explanation is in order:

1. The primary book will be James McPherson's "The Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era" (Oxford, 1988). This is widely considered one of the leading books on this subject and was a very popular best seller (at least for a history book) when it came out. Those interested in finding used or library copies should have very little trouble. It is also available as an audio book.
2. Throughout the class, I will be distributing additional materials to supplement the McPherson readings. (I will both email these materials to you and place them on the OLLI website.) Mostly, these will be short excerpts from original primary source materials – important writings, speeches, public documents, poems, etc. -- so that you can get a better "feel" for the period and better understand how the participants experienced these issues.
3. I also listed as a "recommended" book, David Potter's "The Impending Crisis: America Before the Civil War, 1848-1861" (Harper, 1976) (completed and edited by Don Fehrenbacher). **I will not be assigning any parts of this book, although I will be using it (and other books) in preparing classes and may discuss material from it.**

Potter's book covers the same period as McPherson, but in greater depth and detail. Anyone wanting to delve into any aspects of the class in greater detail, or get a slightly different take on the materials, may want to look at Potter. Although it is too long to use as a primary reading, it is an excellent book – also a Pulitzer Prize winner -- that, despite its age, continues to be highly thought of in the field. This book should also be widely available from libraries and used book sources and is available as an audio book.

4. Finally, for those interested, I will be citing other books on many of the subjects we will cover as we cover them. Many of the topics we will be

examining have been the subject of excellent books in recent years. These will, of course, only be for those wanting to explore further reading outside of this study group.

My hope is that in sending this memo I have increased your interest in the Study Group (and not overwhelmed you). My apologies for its length. I look forward to seeing you all soon (at least on Zoom).