

A More Perfect Union: The origins and development of the US constitution- year 2
Final Assignment
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Calvin, Matthew. *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War: The Promise and Peril of a Second Haitian Revolution*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

By the start of the Civil War in America many countries around the world had ended the practice of slavery. For some, the process of ending slavery occurred through political action and social movements. For others the process involved violence and revolution. As the debate over the issue of slavery raged in the United States many scholars, politicians and concerned citizens looked to history to help bring about a resolution to the storm that was on the horizon. For both pro-slavery and anti-slavery forces a notable historical example could be found by looking south to the independent nation of Haiti. Just under sixty years prior to the outbreak of war in America the French Colony of Saint-Domingue was torn apart in violent chaos when a slave rebellion escalated to a full scale revolution. The end result after thirteen years of bloody fighting was the creation of the first non slave nation in the western hemisphere. Matthew Calvin, in *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War: The Promise and Peril of a Second Haitian Revolution*, argues that this revolution had a significant impact on the American slavery debate leading up to and during the Civil War.

For readers who are looking for a history of the revolution or a biography of the famous Louverture, Calvin's work will disappoint. The purpose of his work is to examine the impact of Louverture and Haitian Revolution on antebellum America and the great debate over slavery. Because of this, Calvin provides the reader with a succinct plot of the slave revolt and ensuing revolution in his introduction. Although brief, this does not detract from Calvin's narrative but instead provides the reader with just enough information to understand the basics: the massive African slave population on the French Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue rose up against the minority white population and a

very bloody “civil” war ensued. With the background played out, Calvin then examines the historiography of the Haitian Revolution in America during the antebellum period. By the conclusion of chapter one it is clear that there were two distinct views on the Haitian Revolution and its main figure, Toussaint Louverture. One side portrayed the revolution as a heroic cause while the other depicted a murderous mob killing innocent civilians in cold blood.

In slave holding sections of the Caribbean and the southern United States the revolution was a story of “vengeful African slaves committing unspeakable acts of violence against innocent and defenseless white men” (11). Calvin sees this view as a logical step in a society where the fear of a slave revolt gripped the public’s attention. In a society where a minority of whites held a large population of blacks in bondage the greatest fear was of an insurrection. Because of this fear the events in the wealthy French Colony were cast in a sinister light. The history that was told in the southern states of the Haitian Revolution then focused on the sensationalism that can captivate an audience and leave a lasting impression of fear. Calvin cites numerous letters and diary entries where white slave owners wrote of “go(ing) to bed only if armed to the teeth” and being haunted by nightmares about “the dreadful calamities of Saint-Domingue” (18). Because of this fear and of the sensationalist history that emerged in the antebellum south, the story of Louverture and Haiti became a popular anecdote for what was wrong with the abolition movement in America.

The horrific view of the Haitian Revolution is contrasted by what Calvin calls the “heroic” view. For many African Americans the narrative of Louverture and the establishment of a new “free” nation through armed conflict offered a glimpse of hope in an otherwise bleak world. Building upon the ideas of hope, white abolitionists created an anti-slavery icon when they began to write about the “great man” who rose up from bondage and led his people to freedom. To strengthen their arguments many abolitionist publications played up Louverture as a self-educated emancipator who embodied the spirit of the Enlightenment and French and American Revolutions. By the time the Civil War broke out

in America the image of Toussaint Louverture was familiar to many Americans and the story of the Haitian Revolution was well known. The single factor that determined how you interpreted those events was also the most galvanizing issue in Americas short history, slavery.

Calvin breaks his narrative up into three sections following his introduction and historiography of the Haitian Revolution. Part one (chapters two and three) focuses on the period from the Missouri Compromise up until the start of the Civil War. In chapter two Calvin examines the role of Toussaint Louverture as a inspiration for violent abolition. In analyzing the development of the abolition movement Calvin notes a increase in “lectures on Louverture and the Haitian Revolution that set forth an exceedingly militant and subversive take on Haitian history” that coincides with a shift toward more radical abolitionist leaders (41). As abolitionists such as Wendall Phillips and others traveled throughout the northern states giving lectures on Louverture and the successful Haitian slave rebellion some abolitionists began to become attracted to the idea of a violent solution. The most famous of these radical abolitionists was John Brown. The influence of Louverture's leadership in Haiti so inspired Brown that his own son wrote shortly after his fathers death that “only the body of Toussaint L'Overture which sleeps in the tomb; his soul visits the cabins of slaves in the South...proclaiming that the despots of America shall yet know the strength of the toiler's arm, and that he who would be free must himself strike the blow first” (48). Calvin repeatedly cites various primary sources that reinforce the fact that Brown was inspired by the violent insurrection in Haiti. He also notes that upon Browns death the people of Haiti raised roughly twenty thousand dollars for his family and renamed the main street in the capital of Port-au-Prince John Brown Boulevard (53). As the debate over slavery expanded to engulf the political, social and sectional issues in America by 1850 the hope, or fear, of a second Haitian Revolution increased in Americas dialogue over slavery.

The second part of Calvin's narrative (chapters four and five) deal with the influence of the Haitian Revolution in America during the Civil War. In this section Calvin focuses on two distinct

examples where the history of Haiti was used by northerners to articulately argue for the arming of black soldiers and the eventual emancipation of the slaves. Calvin again uses a number of primary sources to emphasize the use of the Saint-Domingue slave revolt story as a example in history of African slaves rising up and fighting for their freedom. By the end of the first year of the Civil War in America this idea was being championed by the great abolitionist Wendell Phillips in a speech which he gave numerous times entitled “Toussaint L'Overture”. Largely because of these lectures and other publications about Louverture, Calvin concludes that by the end of the second year of the war that a “widespread acceptance of the abolitionist narrative of the Haitian Revolution” had developed in the northern states (97). This acceptance of Louverture as a heroic figure allowed abolitionists to press for the emancipation of the slaves and the increased support the Union cause. Calvin clearly and efficiently presents the history of the Haitian Revolution as a corner stone of the abolitionist movements platform in America during the Civil War.

The final section of Calvin's book deals with the impact of the Haitian Revolution on black identity, white southern identity and white northern identity. Calvin states that following in the footsteps of Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian revolutionaries African Americans fighting for freedom in America “perhaps surpassed those (accomplishments) of their predecessors first in Saint-Domingue and then in Haiti, for black soldiers in the Union army avoided partaking in the excesses that accompanied the earlier revolution over slavery” (143). Although the legacy of Louverture may have had a positive impact in the north the traditional view of the “horrors of Saint-Domingue” were reinforced following the conclusion of the war in the south. Because of this Calvin argues that Louverture and the Haitian Revolution legacy increased the call for a white power system that remained in the south long after the conclusion of the war.

Calvin concludes by stating that since the end of the Civil War the narrative of Louverture and of the Haitian Revolution quickly faded from the forefront of American thought. This is largely due to

the fact that Americans now had their own bloody war fought over the issue of slavery that was filled with familiar heroic (and to some nefarious) figures to study when looking to the past for lessons on slavery and revolution.

Overall this is an excellently prepared book. Calvin's extensive research is supplemented by his forty nine pages of endnotes that are filled with both primary and secondary sources. By focusing on both the southern and northern views of Haiti Calvin is able to maintain an unbiased narrative that clearly asserts his thesis. Because the book is focused on a particular aspect of the Civil War Calvin assumes that his audience has a basic background knowledge of the topic. This limits the possible application of the book at the high school level. The book fits into a unique topic that could supplement a teacher's reading or help aid in an upper level research paper that focused on the Abolition movement in America leading up to the Civil War.

I would not recommend this book to a high school student but it did provide me with a much deeper understanding of the influence of Louverture and the Haitian Revolution on the American slavery debate leading up to the Civil War. Because of this I am in the process of adding a brief explanation of the impact of Haiti on the American Civil War to my world curriculum when I teach about Louverture and the Latin American revolutions. In my US I class I will also expand on my abolitionist curriculum by adding a section about Louverture's influence on the American view of a possible slave rebellion. This will add some depth to the abolitionist lectures and allow students to connect to some prior knowledge that they have learned in freshman world history. Additionally when I teach about slavery in the South and the fear of slave insurrections (Nat Turner's rebellion is included in this) I will use some information about how sensationalized accounts of the Haitian Revolution were used to strike fear into southern white slave owners and keep them ever vigilant against any possible slave uprisings.

Ultimately the story of Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian Revolution is a story that should

be told in both world history curriculums and US Civil War history. Calvin clearly demonstrates the connection to the Haitian Revolution as a historical reference point that both pro and anti-slavery activists used to give credibility to their cause. By examining these conflicting viewpoints Calvin proves that history is what you make it. When viewed in a particular context any historical event can be used to either support or attack current political, social and economic issues. When using the actions of Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian Revolution to help understand the American Civil War both factions in America were able to come to a understanding. In America, just like in Haiti, the issue of slavery had sparked a horrific war that included many heroic actions with the end result being the abolishment of the slave system and a cultural, political and social upheaval.