

# Commentary: How we talk about the Civil War matters

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Sen. John Kennedy, R-La., boasted during [his speech](#) at the recent CPAC gathering: “Like every other culture in the history of humanity, America caught the disease of slavery ... but we beat it back.”

This sentiment is similar to what several Christian acquaintances of mine have mentioned in conversations about the Civil War over the last few years. They contend we should think of this conflict as essentially a war of liberation and that America was exceptional in fighting to secure the freedom of Black slaves.

One of these acquaintances even wondered why, given this moral crusade, the Civil War was not a more prominent part of Black History Month commemorations.

## Result or motive

Let’s unpack this question.

The Civil War was intertwined with the history of race and slavery. Therefore, it indeed is important for the story of Black Americans. It led directly to the Emancipation Proclamation, and it paved the way for the Reconstruction amendments that, among other advances, made slavery illegal.

The nuances of this assertion, however, are not so much speaking to the question of what *resulted* from the war, but rather to the *motivations* for going to war. Was liberation the intent? The answer to this is complicated,

and we need to remember the North and South were not even fighting with the same goals in mind.

## North or South

Slavery, or more specifically, the question of its expansion, had become a key part of the growing rift between North and South in the decades prior to the war. If we look at the [words of Confederate leaders](#), it is clear secession was motivated by a desire to preserve the South's racial hierarchy and the freedom to own other human beings.

If our gaze is to the South, then not only was the Civil War not a war of liberation, it was in fact a war for just the opposite. For many Americans then, including many Christians, slavery was not a disease to be eradicated, but rather an economic benefit to be preserved at all costs.

But this begs the real question: What about the North? Though Abraham Lincoln personally hated and opposed slavery's expansion into territories where its legality had not yet been decided, we know his overarching motivation for sending federal armies into the South was to preserve the Union, not liberate slaves where the practice already existed.

As late as August 1862, well into the course of the war, Lincoln famously [wrote to Horace Greely](#) and explained he would fight to preserve the Union whether this resulted in liberation or not. Neither were rank-and-file federal troops [predominantly motivated](#) by the moral cause of liberating slaves.

Emancipation figured into the war only after Lincoln's famous [proclamation](#). For Lincoln, as well as many soldiers, shifting the purposes of the war to include emancipation was as much a tactical move as it was a moral decision.

# Responding to current calls

I have a hunch these talking points are not really about debating the fine points of the Civil War as much as they are a response to the rising calls for white Americans to reckon with the past. These calls can create cognitive dissonance for us as Christians, especially if we think of America as exceptional because of its Christian heritage.

It may ease that dissonance if slavery is thought of merely as a moral disease caught like a cold, rather than a product of collective and intentional choices. The same can be said for narratives that create the impression Civil War soldiers, the majority of whom were white, were warriors on a crusade intent on liberating Black slaves.

As we conclude Black History Month, it seems especially appropriate to consider how we talk about historical events like the Civil War. God calls us to speak honestly about the past, which is to include “warts and all” in our narratives, as a former church history professor of mine was fond of saying.

Even beyond the responsibility of truth telling, nuancing historical narratives in a way that privileges the concerns and feelings of white Americans robs our Black sisters and brothers of the honor we should be extending to them. This awareness also would be more in harmony with the spirit and original intentions of this month’s commemorations.

## Who we consider matters

Rather than focusing on the motivations of white policy makers, officers or soldiers, we might highlight individuals such as Dred Scott and his family, whose efforts to secure freedom shortly before the Civil War, though unsuccessful, went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

We might focus on the Black influencers who lobbied the Lincoln

administration to include Black soldiers in the Union Army and then learn from the stories of the thousands of soldiers who joined the ranks when this became a reality.

We could follow the journey of Black refugees who fled Southern plantations during the war and made it to Union lines only to languish as wartime “contraband.”

We might consider other slaves forced to accompany their owners into the Confederate Army to serve not as soldiers, but as “camp servants.”

Reflection might include the multiple visits Frederick Douglass made to the White House, where he spoke his mind in meetings with President Lincoln. All of this would be just a start.

The question of how we talk about the past and how historical events are commemorated on occasions such as Black History Month matters for us as Christians. Certain narratives might assuage our dissonance but nevertheless may be misleading, romanticized or simply gloss over complexity.

Let us be discerning as we seek to do justice and walk humbly through our nation’s history.

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