

HISTORY 2112
SAMPLE ESSAY ANSWERS
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Below is a range of answers to the following essay question, ranging from high A to low F. Carefully read and compare each answer and my analysis of each to get an idea of how to prepare to answer the essay questions on the actual exams.

Question: Discuss the basics of American government and the United States Constitution and how these things were related to the causes of the Civil War, including both the Confederates' and President Lincoln's views of the Constitution.

This essay is well-organized and clear. I can understand what the student is trying to tell me.

At the very outset the student shows that he has seen the relationship (from the Southern point of view, at least) between 1861 and 1776 by using the word "secede" to describe what happened in 1776.

Here the student goes right down the list of a state's characteristics.

The student has realized that federalism and sovereignty are analytically related and so has dealt with them in the same paragraph. Outstanding analysis!

Examples are always good. Maybe even the student is including examples that I didn't specifically mention in class. This shows that the student is analyzing, not just regurgitating. Excellent!

ANSWER 1

This is an A answer.

In 1776, due to the excess of power in Parliament, the thirteen colonies left, or "seceded from," the British Empire. Thereafter they were afraid that another overly strong central government such as Parliament would emerge to threaten their liberties just as Parliament had. To prevent this, when writing the Constitution, they included not one, but two different systems that were designed to grant the government enough power to govern effectively but to also ensure that it didn't have so much power that it threatened peoples' basic rights to life, liberty, and property. These two systems were federalism and separation of powers.

To understand federalism, we first have to understand the concept of statehood. A state, in international law terms, is a political entity that possess four characteristics: 1) a government, 2) land/territory, and 3) people/population. The fourth characteristic is that this government must be sovereign, which means that it doesn't answer to anyone or anything else. In a federal system, two different governments exercise sovereignty (or at least authority) over the same land and the same people at the same time. For instance, there is federal law passed by Congress or executive orders that are binding in Georgia, such as the federal income tax or Medicare or federal drug laws. But at the same time Georgia gets to make laws regarding contracts, property, marriage, divorce, and wills. The idea behind federalism is that neither government has all the power, and if one of the governments tries to overreach the other government will step in and stop it.

The other system designed to grant and control power a the same time is called separation of powers. This involves the fact that the national government consists of three branches. These are the legislative branch, which makes the laws; the

Again, a nice clear listing of the branches. These aren't clearly listed in the Course Outline; you had to be in class, and study the Constitution chart, to pick up on this.

Excellent comparison of 1861 to 1776!

In the final paragraph the student notes that this discussion is related to the whole subject of Reconstruction (cause and effect) while also realizing that she doesn't need to include that material.

This answer is well-organized and clear, and it not only contains all relevant material from a) the Course Outline, b) other material from the class web page, and c) things I covered in class as well as some of the student's own ideas. Top marks.

57-60 points.

executive branch, which enforces/carries out these laws; and the judicial branch, which interprets the laws or decides what they mean if there is any confusion. Of the power that the national government does have under federalism (which isn't all the power since the states have some of it), none of these branches has all the power. The idea is that if one branch oversteps then the other two will oppose it and keep it from getting out of line.

So if Georgia is a state, does that mean that Georgia is sovereign? Based on the definition of "state" above, you would think so, but this was partly what the Civil War was about. The southern states had slavery before the Civil War, and while this was constitutional, the southern states, with their smaller populations, were losing power in the national government. By 1860 they were afraid that as more free states entered the Union, the time might come when there would be so many the free states that they could force through a constitutional amendment banning slavery even in the southern states. When faced with this danger (in the form of the Republican Abraham Lincoln, who was opposed to slavery and elected president in 1860), the southern states declared that they were sovereign and so could (and did) secede, much as they had done in 1776.

But Lincoln and other Republicans disagreed with the argument that the states were sovereign. They claimed that the Union was just that—a union—and that states couldn't just leave. This disagreement became the flash point for the Civil War, with the southern states banding together to form the Confederate States of America and fighting for their independence (in order to preserve slavery) and Lincoln and the Union fighting to keep the South from leaving. As part of the war effort, Lincoln also declared that the slaves in the rebelling southern states were to be freed.

Ultimately the Union won the war and crushed the Confederacy. This meant that the idea of secession was vanquished, at least for the foreseeable future (so apparently despite their name, the states aren't sovereign), and that slavery was ended. But now that the war was over, how was the South to be restored to its right relationship to the rest of the Union, and how should southern society be reconstructed in such a way as to integrate the freedmen, or former slaves, into the mainstream of American society? This was what Reconstruction was about, and while Lincoln's ideas of "forgive and forget" were very different from those of the Radical Republicans, who were more into the idea of punishing white southerners for the war, that is a topic for another essay.

This is a pretty good answer in that it starts at the beginning of the first section of the Course Outline that's relevant to the question and goes right down the Course Outline until it gets to the end of the last relevant section. It misses little if anything from the Outline.

Why, then, does it only get a B? Two reasons. First, it doesn't include additional material that I introduced in class and on other handouts from the website—for instance, the difference between legislative, executive, and judicial power. (Maybe the student cut class that day?)

Secondly, it doesn't tie the various sections together in the way the A essay did, such as noting that the international law definition of statehood, the concept of state sovereignty, and federalism are all related. You need to think and to analyze as well as memorize and regurgitate.

It also would have been nice to put a segue at the end explaining how all of this led to (in terms of cause and effect) the era of Reconstruction.

51-54 points.

ANSWER 2

This is a B answer.

A state has four characteristics: 1) a sovereign 2) government over 3) land/territory and 4) people/population.

Americans have traditionally viewed strong central government with hostility and suspicion. This is a result of what Parliament did to the colonies during the American Revolution and why America declared its independence from England. Afterwards, when writing the Constitution, Americans came up with not one, but two systems designed to allow the government to govern effectively while with luck preventing it from exercising too much power.

The first of these systems is federalism. This is a system in which two governments exercise control over the same land and the same people at the same time with neither government having all of the power.

The second is separation of powers, in which the power that the national government does have are divided among three branches so no one branch has all of the power. These branches are the legislative, the executive, and the judicial.

Prior to the Civil War, the southern states believed that they were sovereign and that because they had voluntarily joined or created the Union, they could voluntarily leave the Union (secession). They decided to do this (and come together to form a new country called the Confederate States of America) because they feared that the national government would try to pass a constitutional amendment that would end slavery in the southern states.

President Abraham Lincoln was a Republican, and the Republicans were opposed to slavery. He believed that since the states weren't sovereign they couldn't secede and that they were thus still part of the Union. This was why he fought the war—to prevent the southern states from leaving the Union.

As part of the war effort, Lincoln took steps to begin ending slavery. When the north won the war, then, this meant that the United States became politically unified for the first time in history, and that slavery had ended. (It was ended by the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, which was the first of the three Civil War/Reconstruction Amendments.)

ANSWER 3

This is a C answer.

This answer is very good as far as it goes. The problem is that it doesn't go far enough. It is especially good at noting the relationship between federalism and state sovereignty/secession. But beyond that it doesn't discuss or define federalism, and in pursuing the discussion of state sovereignty it fails to go back and say anything at all about separation of powers. So it's missing one major component of the answer altogether and providing a very limited discussion of another major component. It also lacks a cause/effect segue to Reconstruction to show how the subject of this question fits in to the course.

45 points.

A state has for characteristics: territory, population, and a government that is sovereign (i.e., does not answer to anyone else). In the Civil War the southern states declared that as sovereign states they had the right to secede or leave the Union (which is what they did to England in 1776). The reason why they would want to do this in 1860-1861 was because they believed that the other states in the Union were planning to amend the Constitution to end slavery. They believed this because the Republican Party was opposed to slavery and Abraham Lincoln, the president at the time, was Republican. So they seceded and combined to form the Confederate States of America. This was simply an extension of federalism, a system under which the states retain certain power while giving up the rest to the national government.

The problem with this was that Lincoln disagreed that the states were sovereign. In other words, they didn't have the legal right to secede. So when they claimed to have left the Union, Lincoln said that they hadn't. The result was the bloodiest war in our history. During this war Lincoln declared that the slaves in the rebelling states would be freed. When the Union won the war this meant that slavery would finally end via the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865.

There are some correct things in this essay, but not many. The student shows signs of being very confused. To begin with, he gets the two systems of granting and limiting power wrong: instead of federalism and separation of powers, he lists two of the three branches of the national government—the two branches that correspond to something that really doesn't have much to do with the question I asked, namely the two phases of Reconstruction. Thus, not only is his thinking muddled; he has also included material that doesn't go to answering the question I asked.

Additionally, he has left out a discussion of the definition of statehood, as well as a discussion of federalism. Only by a stretch can I even say that he has discussed separation of powers. His answer is vaguely correct, but what's wrong with it outweighs what's right. While technically this is (just barely) a passing essay, the student is in great danger of failing the course if he doesn't improve his performance.

36 points.

ANSWER 4

This is a D answer.

There are two main systems in the Constitution to give power to the government and keep power from the government at the same time. These are the president and the congress. The president enforces the law like with the FBI. The Congress makes the law. In 1861 when the southern states left the Union, the president (Lincoln) decided he would enforce the law which would prevent the southern states from leaving, but the southern states left anyway and founded the Confederate States of America. This led to a war which Lincoln won. This led to Reconstruction in which the question was how the southern states were to be reconstructed after the war. There were two different types of reconstruction. The first type was Presidential Reconstruction in which President Lincoln and then President Johnson would enforce the laws in the South (such as the Ten Percent Plan). The other type was Congressional Reconstruction, in which Congress would make new laws to govern the southern states (such as the Wade-Davis Bill etc.).

This essay has two problems: one of them big and one of them huge.

First (the huge problem): it doesn't answer the question I asked. I asked for a discussion of the basics of American government and the United States Constitution and how these things were related to the causes of the Civil War. This answer starts after the Civil War and moves forward from there.

Second: even if I had asked a question about the Age of Reconstruction, this isn't a very good answer to that question. It leaves a lot out (for instance, Lincoln's Ten Percent Plan, the Black Codes, the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, the McCardle case, the Amnesty Act, and so forth) and gets some things flat wrong (WHICH Civil Rights Act? And Johnson wasn't running in 1866 (which I presume is the election the student is talking about—he doesn't bother to provide me dates (Hello, this is a history class, dates help)), so how could he lose the election? And the way I read it, the student has Johnson being convicted and removed from office by impeachment, which didn't happen.). And who is the "they" in the last sentence? I'm not a mind-reader.

12-15 points.

ANSWER 5

This is an F answer.

Reconstruction broke into Presidential and Congressional. During presidential Lincoln and Johnson wanted to "forgive and forget" but Wade, Davis, and the radicals disagreed. They passed the Wade-Davis Bill, the Freedmen's Bureau as well as the Civil Rights Act and then Johnson lost the election so Congress took charge. Congress passed the first Reconstruction Act and the Tenure Act and ended up impeaching Johnson from office. Meanwhile the South was under the rule of Carpetbaggers, scalawags, and blacks. This is when the Klan appeared until it was stamped out. This situation ended with the Compromise of 1877 when they were thrown out and replaced by the Democrats.

ANSWER 6

This is an F answer.

Does this answer even need comment? You have your choice of questions (if this isn't a makeup exam), and this is the best you've got?

5 points.

The American government has many different states. They got into an argument or debate in 1861-65. The argument meant a war. The states thought one thing and President Lincoln thought another. Charles Sumner was a big radical believer in Social Darwinism. He was a major figure during the reconstruction. Lester Ward was another major figure who disagreed with Sumner. In the War Between the States Lincoln lost (was assassinated) and the states won which is why the reconstruction was needed. It was also called the Industrial Reconstruction and involved Barons such as Carnegie.

ANSWER 7

This is an F answer.

You have had every possible essay question in your possession (along with, on the Course Outline, a lot of the information needed to answer each and every one of those questions) since the very first day of class. Is there any excuse for this?

Zero points.

[nothing in the bluebook but a blank page where an essay is supposed to be]