

Example of civil war research paper

[Sociology](#), [Slavery](#)



What is the difference between Zinn, Johnson, and the Consensus interpretation of the Civil War? Include an analysis of Abraham Lincoln. What evidence does each use? Critique each one. Which is superior and why?

The main difference between Zinn and Johnson is that their interpretation of the Civil War relates precisely to what is considered to be the central issue of the war, slavery. While both Zinn and Johnson praise the morality of abolitionists, Zinn does not believe that the North was really concerned about the plight of slaves, and instead focuses more on the inequality that had been growing in American society before the war, both North and South.

Zinn describes mass unemployment, poor working conditions, strikes and a lack of rights before the law as among the reasons for the malaise of the American people at the time. Added to this were racial tensions, and the fact that many new arrivals were treated terribly. He documents the harshness of the lives of workers. He is also more intent on documenting just how badly slaves were treated. The actual words of a slave called John Little are used to document the misery of his existence, the physical punishment, and how the slaves would sing and rattle their chains at night in an attempt to find some relief for their situation.

Johnson does not use the recorded words of slaves in his account. He does, however, indicate how the South wanted to expand its influence, and make California a slave state, something the North would not allow. He also talks about slaves and sex, citing an incident where a twenty-two-year-old Abraham Lincoln, visiting New Orleans, witnessed the sale of a young black slave, with no intent made by the seller to mask the reality of the situation.

For me, where Johnson and Zinn differ the most in their interpretation of the Civil War is in their analysis of Lincoln. While Johnson describes with great admiration the great orator and largely self-educated man, the model of American resilience, who was completely convinced of the moral necessity to abolish slavery, Zinn portrays him as a mediator who wanted to progress the advancement of America as a great power in the industrial age, and that an end to slavery was necessary to preserve the union and continue this process.

According to Zinn, both the rich and powerful elite as well as the black slaves had something to gain from abolition, to progress to a new economic era and skilled economy. Lincoln was well aware of this in Zinn's view. Johnson frequently mentions Lincoln's talent as an orator, his philosophical and rational thought. This is not so far from the common perception of him. Popular opinion would find Zinn's portrayal of Lincoln as a cynical ultra-capitalist hard to swallow. Zinn acknowledges that although Lincoln was fighting for the abolition of the slavery of human beings, his policy on what he believed about black people would surprise many. Lincoln suggested that slaves return to Africa, according to Zinn. Again he uses a primary source, Lincoln's words to support his point.

Johnson praises Lincoln's morality whereas Zinn praises his ability to disguise his political and economic agenda, preserving the union and bettering it economically, as morality. Johnson, in outlining the main consequence of the war, states how slavery was abolished but that blacks did not enjoy the same rights as whites, and how the rest of America was too busy with economic advancement to care. Both historians have a lot of common ground to agree

on, with the notable exception of their analyses of Lincoln. Whereas Johnson has a more pragmatic account, seeking to view the Civil War in its context, Zinn comes from a socialist perspective, and is a lot more damning of the ills of American society at large regarding economic and racial inequality. Both want to dispel the common interpretation of the war as simply those in favor of slavery against those opposed. Perhaps Zinn is too quick to say that the social ills and racial inequality in America were mainly a result of economic inequality. Johnson has a slightly more balanced view, for me.

Works Cited

Johnson, Paul. *A History of the American People*. New York, HarperCollins, New, 2003.

Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States: 1492-present*. New York, HarperCollins, 1980.