

American Government & Politics: A Christian Worldview.
Historical Spin Room (30–35 Minutes)

TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS

Goal

Students practice identifying how historical evidence can be twisted by rewriting real quotes to make them appear to support the “war to end slavery” narrative. This builds critical thinking about how historians and media can selectively present or reinterpret evidence.

Note: Answers will vary on these rewrites, so let students be sneakily creative, helping them to see how some historians and authors use certain tactics to explain away facts!

Instructions

1. There are two pages of quotes for students to spin, so print both, front to back if possible! (Of course, you may print/use just the first page of three quotes if you wish, but if you use both pages, tell students not to turn the page over until instructed.)
2. You can have students work as individuals or in pairs/small groups.
3. Read the instructions together as a class.
4. Students complete Part A (rewriting three quotes) in 10–12 minutes.
5. Review Part A as a class (ask volunteers from each group, or each student, to offer their rewrites).
6. Students complete Part B (explaining away three quotes) in 10–12 minutes.
7. Review Part B as a class (ask volunteers from each group, or each student, to offer their rewrites).

Debrief Questions

- Which spin tactic do you think is most common in textbooks or popular history? Why?
- If you were a student who only heard the “spun” versions of these quotes, what would you believe about the North/South War?
- How can you protect yourself from this kind of historical distortion?
- Can you give examples of how news today is “spun” by the news media?

American Government & Politics: A Christian Worldview. Historical Spin Room

You work for a public relations firm hired by a powerful interest group that wants to prove the North/South War was fought to end slavery. Unfortunately, the historical record is full of quotes that say the opposite. Your job is to take these inconvenient quotes and “spin” them—rewrite or explain them away so that a casual reader will think they support the “war to end slavery” narrative.

You do not need to lie outright. You just need to omit key words, add context that changes the meaning, or “reinterpret” what the speaker really meant.

Part A: Rewrite the Quote (three quotes, 10–12 minutes)

For each quote below, write a “spin” that makes it sound like the speaker was really fighting to end slavery. You may add words, remove words, or change the emphasis. Then explain your spin tactic.

Quote 1: Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address, 1861 – “I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the states where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so.”

Your rewritten/spun version (1–2 sentences):

What did you change or emphasize to make it sound pro-emancipation?

Quote 2: Crittenden-Johnson Resolutions, U.S. Congress (Republican majority), 1861 – “[T]his war is not prosecuted upon our part in any spirit of oppression...nor purpose of overthrowing or interfering with the rights or established institutions [slavery] of those states...”

Your rewritten/spun version (1–2 sentences):

What did you change or emphasize to make it sound pro-emancipation?

Quote 3: Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address, 1861 – “I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the states where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so.”

Your rewritten/spun version (1–2 sentences):

What did you change or emphasize to make it sound pro-emancipation?

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Part B: Explain It Away (three quotes, 10–12 minutes)

For each quote below, you cannot rewrite it. Instead, you must provide a “context” or “explanation” that makes it seem like the speaker didn’t really mean what he said, or that he was just being strategic, or that he secretly wanted to end slavery all along.

Quote 1: Abraham Lincoln, in 1858 – [W]hen they [slave owners] remind us of their constitutional rights, I acknowledge them, not grudgingly, but fully and fairly; and I would give them any legislation for the reclaiming of their fugitives [helping to return their runaway slaves]....

Your explanation (2–3 sentences) that makes this quote seem consistent with Lincoln’s common status as the “Great Emancipator”:

Quote 2: Charles Dickens, English author, writing on the North/South War – “It is a war of tariffs...undoubtedly...slavery as its cause being a false issue and a Northern pretext....Union means...millions a year lost to the South; secession means the loss of the same millions to the North. The love of money is the root of this, as of many other evils....[T]he quarrel...is...solely a fiscal quarrel.”

Your explanation (2–3 sentences) that makes this quote seem less damaging to the “war to end slavery” narrative:

Quote 3: Abraham Lincoln to Union General John Adams Dix, after the *New York World* and the *Journal of Commerce* wrote critical articles of him (Lincoln) – “You will take possession by military force, of the printing establishments of the *New York World* and *Journal of Commerce*...and prohibit any further publication thereof...you are therefore commanded forthwith [immediately] to arrest and imprison...the editors, proprietors, and publishers of the aforesaid newspapers.”

Your spin (2–3 sentences) that explains away Lincoln’s violation of the newspaper editors’ rights to (a) freedom of the press and (b) due process of law, with a fair, speedy, public trial: