

## Great Books Discussion Questions

### *A Stillness at Appomattox*

1. In several passages, Catton uses visual imagery to evoke a feeling or elicit a response from his readers. He frequently notes the weather conditions or the scenery at a particular time of year before describing a battle or major event during the war. Do you think this technique helps or hinders the narrative? Why or why not? Does Catton's technique help hold the reader's interest, or interfere with the narrative? Does this technique detract in any way from the historical context of the book?
2. Catton often shows the similar fate of the Rebel and Union troops. He notes that both sides face privation, hardship and a general distrust of their leaders (Robert E Lee and Stonewall Jackson being the exceptions). He also seems to indicate that if left to the soldiers, the war might possibly end. Do you think that the enlisted men were more similar than dissimilar? Why or why not? Why do you think the soldiers did not trust their superiors? Was their lack of trust justified? Why did the Rebels revere Robert E Lee and Stonewall Jackson? Do you think that the generals and politicians kept the war going, as many of the common soldiers believed?
3. Rather than concentrate exclusively on battle strategy and tactics, Catton focuses instead on the thoughts and feelings of the everyday soldiers and of the principal players on the Union side of the engagement. Does Catton's focus make the war easier or more difficult to understand? Is there merit in covering the thoughts and feelings of the men involved in the war?
4. Many people believe that history is a collection of facts, dates and statistics. Does Catton write this way? How do Catton's insights into the War color his reporting? As Catton focuses on a particular character in the War, does that focus tend to make the person and the War more immediate and believable?
5. Catton asserts that over the course of the War, the landscape of America changed, and that the changes were brought about by the War itself. One example of the change that was brought about was the perception of blacks by people in the North and South, and by the blacks themselves. He notes that the perception of black enlisted men changed as the War dragged on. This change was noted by the white enlisted men, as well as by the black men who fought in the War. What were some of the changes in the perception of blacks that Catton mentions in the book? Do you agree or disagree with his observations? Why or why not? What other changes did Catton mention that were the result of the War?
6. During the narrative of several battle scenes, Catton implies that despite the best planning possible, the outcome of a battle is sometimes determined more by luck or circumstances than by strategy or tactics. Do you agree or disagree with Catton's assessment? Why or why not?
7. Catton tells the story of a young German immigrant soldier who wrote to his family before he died: "I am a volunteer soldier in the Army of the United States, to fight the rebels of South America for a sacred thing. All of America has to become free and united and the starry banner has to fly again over the new world. Then we also want to have the slaves freed, the trading of human beings must have an end and every slave should be set free and on his own in time. . .Evil of all kinds, thievery, whoring, lying and deception have to be punished here." What is this

“sacred” thing that this young soldier is fighting for? Of all the words that have been used to describe the war, can you think of a better way to define what was involved in winning the war?