Directions: As you read the following editorial, highlight or circle five words that you are unfamiliar with and provide a definition or synonym of each in the margin. Then answer the questions on the accompanying worksheet.

The Truth of ‘Black Lives Matter’

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD, SEPT. 3, 2015

The Republican Party and its acolytes in the news media are trying to demonize the protest movement that has sprung up in response to the all-too-common police killings of unarmed African-Americans across the country. The intent of the campaign . . . is to cast the phrase “Black Lives Matter” as an inflammatory or even hateful anti-white expression that has no legitimate place in a civil rights campaign.

Former Gov. Mike Huckabee of Arkansas crystallized this view when he said the other week that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., were he alive today, would be “appalled” by the movement’s focus on the skin color of the unarmed people who are disproportionately killed in encounters with the police. This argument betrays a disturbing indifference to or at best a profound ignorance of history in general and of the civil rights movement in particular. From the very beginning, the movement focused unapologetically on bringing an end to state-sanctioned violence against African-Americans and to acts of racial terror very much like the one that took nine lives at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C., in June.

The civil rights movement was intended to make Congress and Americans confront the fact that African-Americans were being killed with impunity for offenses like trying to vote and had the right to life and to equal protection under the law. The movement sought a cross-racial appeal, but at every step of the way used expressly racial terms to describe the death and destruction that was visited upon black people because they were black.

Even in the early 20th century, civil rights groups documented cases in which African-Americans died horrible deaths after being turned away from hospitals reserved for whites, or were lynched — which meant being hanged, burned or dismembered — in front of enormous crowds that had gathered to enjoy the sight.

The Charleston church massacre has eerie parallels to the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala. — the most heinous act of that period — which occurred at the height of the early civil rights movement. Four black girls were murdered that Sunday. When Dr. King eulogized them, he did
not shy away from the fact that the dead had been killed because they were black, by monstrous men whose leaders fed them “the stale bread of hatred and the spoiled meat of racism.” He said that the dead “have something to say” to a complacent federal government that cut back-room deals with Southern Dixiecrats, as well as to “every Negro who has passively accepted the evil system of segregation and who has stood on the sidelines in a mighty struggle for justice.” Shock over the bombing pushed Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act the following year.

During this same period, freedom riders and voting rights activists led by the young John Lewis offered themselves up to be beaten nearly to death, week after week, day after day, in the South so that the country would witness Jim Crow brutality and meaningfully respond to it. This grisly method succeeded in Selma, Ala., in 1965 when scenes of troopers bludgeoning voting rights demonstrators compelled a previously hesitant Congress to acknowledge that black people deserved full citizenship, too, and to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Along the way, there was never a doubt as to what the struggle was about: securing citizenship rights for black people who had long been denied them.

The “Black Lives Matter” movement focuses on the fact that black citizens have long been far more likely than whites to die at the hands of the police, and is of a piece with this history. Demonstrators who chant the phrase are making the same declaration that voting rights and civil rights activists made a half-century ago. They are not asserting that black lives are more precious than white lives. They are underlining an indisputable fact — that the lives of black citizens in this country historically have not mattered, and have been discounted and devalued. People who are unacquainted with this history are understandably uncomfortable with the language of the movement. But politicians who know better and seek to strip this issue of its racial content and context are acting in bad faith. They are trying to cover up an unpleasant truth and asking the country to collude with them.