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Civil War

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The Civil War in the United States began in 1861, after decades of simmering tensions between northern and southern states over slavery, states' rights and westward expansion. The election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 caused seven southern states to secede and form the Confederate States of America; four more states soon joined them. The War Between the States, as the Civil War was also known, ended in Confederate surrender in 1865. The conflict was the costliest and deadliest war ever fought on American soil, with some 620,000 of 2.4 million soldiers killed, millions more injured and much of the South left in ruin.

Causes of the Civil War

In the mid-19th century, while the United States was experiencing an era of tremendous growth, a fundamental economic difference existed between the country's northern and southern regions.

In the North, manufacturing and industry was well established, and agriculture was mostly limited to small-scale farms, while the South's economy was based on a system of large-scale farming that depended on the labor of Black enslaved people to grow certain crops, especially cotton and tobacco.

Growing abolitionist sentiment in the North after the 1830s and northern opposition to slavery's extension into the new western territories led many southerners to fear that the existence of slavery in America—and thus the backbone of their economy—was in danger.

Did you know?

Confederate General Thomas Jonathan Jackson earned his famous nickname, "Stonewall," from his steadfast defensive efforts in the First Battle of Bull Run (First Manassas). At Chancellorsville, Jackson was shot by one of his own men, who mistook him for Union cavalry. His arm was amputated, and he died from pneumonia eight days later.

In 1854, the U.S. Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which essentially opened all new territories to slavery by asserting the rule of popular sovereignty over congressional edict. Pro- and anti-slavery forces struggled violently in “Bleeding Kansas,” while opposition to the act in the North led to the formation of the Republican Party, a new political entity based on the principle of opposing slavery’s extension into the western territories. After the Supreme Court’s ruling in the Dred Scott case (1857) confirmed the legality of slavery in the territories, the abolitionist John Brown’s raid at Harper’s Ferry in 1859 convinced more and more southerners that their northern neighbors were bent on the destruction of the “peculiar institution” that sustained them. Abraham Lincoln’s election in November 1860 was the final straw, and within three months seven southern states—South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Texas—had seceded from the United States.

Outbreak of the Civil War (1861)

Even as Lincoln took office in March 1861, Confederate forces threatened the federal-held Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina. On April 12, after Lincoln ordered a fleet to resupply Sumter, Confederate artillery fired the first shots of the Civil War. Sumter’s commander, Major Robert Anderson, surrendered after less than two days of bombardment, leaving the fort in the hands of Confederate forces under Pierre G.T. Beauregard. Four more southern states—Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina and Tennessee—joined the Confederacy after Fort Sumter. Border slave states like Missouri, Kentucky and Maryland did not secede, but there was much Confederate sympathy among their citizens.

Though on the surface the Civil War may have seemed a lopsided conflict, with the 23 states of the Union enjoying an enormous advantage in population, manufacturing (including arms production) and railroad construction, the Confederates had a strong military tradition, along with some of the best soldiers and commanders in the nation. They also had a cause they believed in: preserving their long-held traditions and institutions, chief among these being slavery.

In the First Battle of Bull Run (known in the South as First Manassas) on July 21, 1861, 35,000 Confederate soldiers under the command of Thomas Jonathan “Stonewall” Jackson forced a greater number of Union forces (or Federals) to retreat towards Washington, D.C., dashing any hopes of a quick Union victory and leading Lincoln to call for 500,000 more recruits. In fact, both sides’ initial call for troops had to be widened after it became clear that the war would not be a limited or short conflict.

The Civil War in Virginia (1862)

George B. McClellan—who replaced the aging General Winfield Scott as supreme commander of the Union Army after the first months of the war—was beloved by his troops, but his reluctance to advance frustrated Lincoln. In the spring of 1862, McClellan finally led his Army of the Potomac up the peninsula between the York and James Rivers, capturing Yorktown on May 4. The combined forces of Robert E. Lee and Jackson successfully drove back McClellan’s army in the Seven Days’ Battles (June 25-July 1), and a cautious McClellan called for yet more reinforcements in order to move against Richmond. Lincoln refused, and instead withdrew the Army of the Potomac to Washington. By mid-1862, McClellan had been replaced as Union general-in-chief by Henry W. Halleck, though he remained in command of the Army of the Potomac.

Lee then moved his troops northwards and split his men, sending Jackson to meet Pope’s forces near Manassas, while Lee himself moved separately with the second half of the army. On August 29, Union troops led by John Pope struck Jackson’s forces in the Second Battle of Bull Run (Second Manassas). The next day, Lee hit the Federal left flank with a massive assault, driving Pope’s men back towards Washington. On the heels of his victory at Manassas, Lee began the first Confederate invasion of the North. Despite contradictory orders from Lincoln and Halleck, McClellan was able to reorganize his army and strike at Lee on September 14 in Maryland, driving the Confederates back to a defensive position along Antietam Creek, near Sharpsburg.

On September 17, the Army of the Potomac hit Lee's forces (reinforced by Jackson's) in what became the war's bloodiest single day of fighting. Total casualties at the Battle of Antietam (also known as the Battle of Sharpsburg) numbered 12,410 of some 69,000 troops on the Union side, and 13,724 of around 52,000 for the Confederates. The Union victory at Antietam would prove decisive, as it halted the Confederate advance in Maryland and forced Lee to retreat into Virginia. Still, McClellan's failure to pursue his advantage earned him the scorn of Lincoln and Halleck, who removed him from command in favor of Ambrose E. Burnside. Burnside's assault on Lee's troops near Fredericksburg on December 13 ended in heavy Union casualties and a Confederate victory; he was promptly replaced by Joseph "Fighting Joe" Hooker, and both armies settled into winter quarters across the Rappahannock River from each other.

After the Emancipation Proclamation (1863-4)

Lincoln had used the occasion of the Union victory at Antietam to issue a preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, which freed all enslaved people in the rebellious states after January 1, 1863. He justified his decision as a wartime measure, and did not go so far as to free the enslaved people in the border states loyal to the Union. Still, the Emancipation Proclamation deprived the Confederacy of the bulk of its labor forces and put international public opinion strongly on the Union side. Some 186,000 Black Civil War soldiers would join the Union Army by the time the war ended in 1865, and 38,000 lost their lives.

In the spring of 1863, Hooker's plans for a Union offensive were thwarted by a surprise attack by the bulk of Lee's forces on May 1, whereupon Hooker pulled his men back to Chancellorsville. The Confederates gained a costly victory in the Battle of Chancellorsville, suffering 13,000 casualties (around 22 percent of their troops); the Union lost 17,000 men (15 percent). Lee launched another invasion of the North in June, attacking Union forces commanded by General George Meade on July 1 near Gettysburg, in southern Pennsylvania. Over three days of fierce fighting, the Confederates were unable to push through the Union center, and suffered casualties of close to 60 percent.

Meade failed to counterattack, however, and Lee's remaining forces were able to escape into Virginia, ending the last Confederate invasion of the North. Also in July 1863, Union forces under Ulysses S. Grant took Vicksburg (Mississippi) in the Siege of Vicksburg, a victory that would prove to be the turning point of the war in the western theater. After a Confederate victory at Chickamauga Creek, Georgia, just south of Chattanooga,

Tennessee, in September, Lincoln expanded Grant's command, and he led a reinforced Federal army (including two corps from the Army of the Potomac) to victory in the Battle of Chattanooga in late November.

Toward a Union Victory (1864-65)

In March 1864, Lincoln put Grant in supreme command of the Union armies, replacing Halleck. Leaving William Tecumseh Sherman in control in the West, Grant headed to Washington, where he led the Army of the Potomac towards Lee's troops in northern Virginia. Despite heavy Union casualties in the Battle of the Wilderness and at Spotsylvania (both May 1864), at Cold Harbor (early June) and the key rail center of Petersburg (June), Grant pursued a strategy of attrition, putting Petersburg under siege for the next nine months.

Sherman outmaneuvered Confederate forces to take Atlanta by September, after which he and some 60,000 Union troops began the famous "March to the Sea," devastating Georgia on the way to capturing Savannah on December 21. Columbia and Charleston, South Carolina, fell to Sherman's men by mid-February, and Jefferson Davis belatedly handed over the supreme command to Lee, with the Confederate war effort on its last legs. Sherman pressed on through North Carolina, capturing Fayetteville, Bentonville, Goldsboro and Raleigh by mid-April.

Meanwhile, exhausted by the Union siege of Petersburg and Richmond, Lee's forces made a last attempt at resistance, attacking and captured the Federal-controlled Fort Stedman on March 25. An immediate counterattack reversed the victory, however, and on the night of April 2-3 Lee's forces evacuated Richmond. For most of the next week, Grant and Meade pursued the Confederates along the Appomattox River, finally exhausting their possibilities for escape. Grant accepted Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House on April 9. On the eve of victory, the Union lost its great leader: The actor and Confederate sympathizer John Wilkes Booth assassinated President Lincoln at Ford's Theatre in Washington on April 14. Sherman received Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston's surrender at Durham Station, North Carolina on April 26, effectively ending the Civil War.

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