The **American Civil War** (1861–1865) was a defining conflict in United States history, fought between the **Union (the North)** and the **Confederacy (the South)**. Rooted in disputes over slavery, states' rights, and economic differences, the war fundamentally reshaped the nation's political, social, and economic landscape.

**Background**

1. **Slavery and Sectionalism**:
   * The primary cause of the Civil War was the institution of **slavery**. The Southern economy relied heavily on enslaved labor for agriculture, especially cotton production.
   * Northern states, increasingly industrialized, opposed the expansion of slavery into new territories, fearing it would threaten free labor and political power.
2. **States' Rights**:
   * Southern leaders argued for **states' rights**, claiming that individual states had the authority to nullify federal laws or secede from the Union.
3. **Political Tensions**:
   * The **Missouri Compromise (1820)**, **Compromise of 1850**, and **Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854)** attempted to address the balance between free and slave states but only deepened divisions.
   * The election of **Abraham Lincoln** in 1860, a Republican opposed to the spread of slavery, was the final straw for many Southern states.
4. **Secession**:
   * Between December 1860 and June 1861, **11 Southern states** seceded from the Union, forming the **Confederate States of America**, led by **Jefferson Davis**.

**The War**

1. **Key Events**:
   * **Fort Sumter (April 1861)**: The war began when Confederate forces fired on the Union garrison in Charleston, South Carolina.
   * **First Battle of Bull Run (1861)**: The first major battle demonstrated the war's potential scale and ferocity.
2. **Major Campaigns**:
   * **Eastern Theater**: Key battles like **Antietam (1862)** and **Gettysburg (1863)** were fought here, focusing on control of Virginia and surrounding areas.
   * **Western Theater**: The Union aimed to control the Mississippi River, with significant victories at **Vicksburg (1863)** and **Chattanooga (1863)**.
   * **Sherman's March to the Sea (1864)**: Union General **William Tecumseh Sherman** waged a campaign of total war, devastating the South's infrastructure.
3. **Technological and Tactical Innovations**:
   * Railroads, the telegraph, and ironclad warships played critical roles.
   * The war introduced trench warfare, rifled muskets, and large-scale mobilization of resources.

**Turning Points**

1. **Emancipation Proclamation (1863)**:
   * Issued by Lincoln after the Battle of Antietam, it declared freedom for enslaved people in Confederate-held territories.
   * This shifted the war's focus to slavery and discouraged European powers from supporting the Confederacy.
2. **Battle of Gettysburg (1863)**:
   * A decisive Union victory that marked the turning point of the war, halting Confederate General **Robert E. Lee**’s invasion of the North.
3. **Siege of Vicksburg (1863)**:
   * Union forces gained control of the Mississippi River, splitting the Confederacy in two.
4. **Appomattox Court House (1865)**:
   * On April 9, 1865, General **Robert E. Lee** surrendered to Union General **Ulysses S. Grant**, effectively ending the war.

**Outcome**

1. **Union Victory**:
   * The Confederacy was defeated, and the seceded states were eventually reintegrated into the Union.
2. **Abolition of Slavery**:
   * The **13th Amendment (1865)** formally abolished slavery in the United States.
3. **Reconstruction (1865–1877)**:
   * The post-war period saw efforts to rebuild the South and integrate formerly enslaved people into society.
   * However, it was marred by racial violence, political struggles, and the rise of discriminatory laws like the **Black Codes** and later **Jim Crow laws**.

**Legacy**

1. **Human Cost**:
   * The Civil War was the deadliest conflict in U.S. history, with an estimated **750,000 deaths** and countless others injured or displaced.
2. **Economic and Social Transformation**:
   * The war ended the agrarian, slave-based economy of the South.
   * It accelerated industrialization and modernization in the North.
3. **National Identity**:
   * The war reaffirmed the United States as a unified nation, but the issues of race and equality continued to plague the country.
4. **Civil Rights Movement**:
   * The Civil War set the stage for later struggles for equality, particularly during the **Civil Rights Movement** of the 20th century.