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The Civil War

I. Introduction

Collecting Remains of the Dead. Cold Harbor, Virginia. April, 1865. Library of Congress.

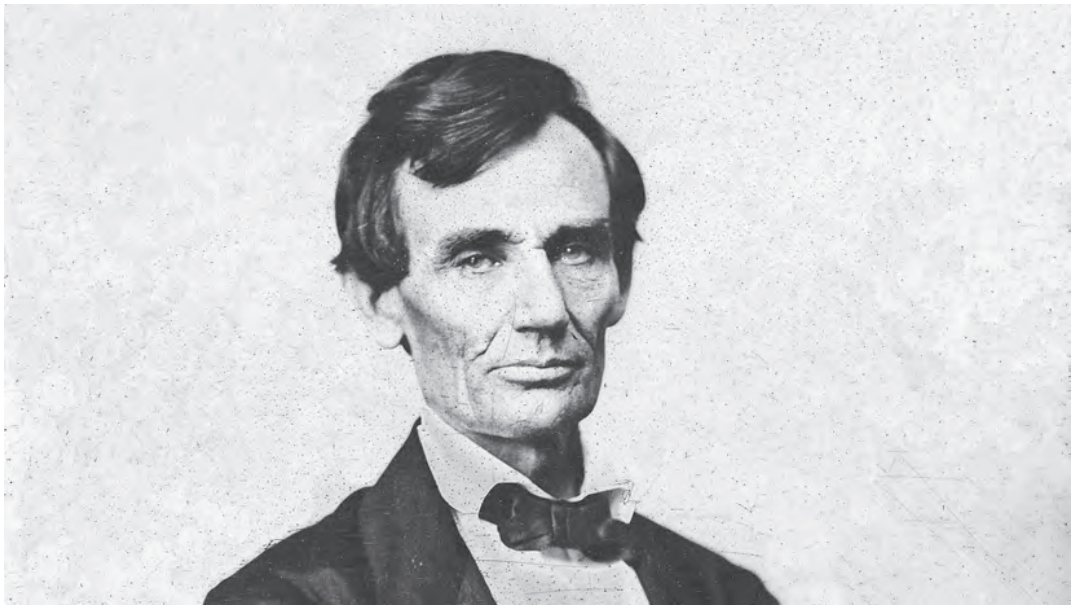
The American Civil War, the bloodiest in the nation's history, resulted in approximately 750,000 deaths.[1] The war touched the life of nearly every American as military mobilization reached levels never seen before or since. Most northern soldiers went to war to preserve the Union, but the war ultimately transformed into a struggle to eradicate slavery. African Americans, both enslaved and free, pressed the issue of emancipation and nurtured this transformation. Simultaneously, women thrust themselves into critical wartime roles while navigating a world without many men of military age. The Civil War was a defining event in the history of the United States and, for the Americans thrust into it, a wrenching one.

II. The Election of 1860 and Secession

The 1860 presidential election was chaotic. In April, the Democratic Party convened in Charleston, South Carolina, the bastion of secessionist thought in the South. The goal was to nominate a candidate for the party ticket, but the party was deeply divided. Northern Democrats pulled for Senator Stephen Douglas, a pro-slavery moderate championing popular sovereignty, while southern Democrats were intent on endorsing someone *other* than Douglas. The parties leaders' refusal to include a pro-slavery platform resulted in southern delegates walking out of the convention, preventing Douglas from gaining the two-thirds majority required for a nomination. The Democrats ended up with two presidential candidates. A subsequent convention in Baltimore nominated Douglas, while southerners nominated the current vice president, John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky, as their presidential candidate. The nation's oldest party had split over differences in policy toward slavery.[2]

Initially, the Republicans were hardly unified around a single candidate themselves. Several leading Republican men vied for their party's nomination. A consensus emerged at the May 1860 convention that the party's nominee would need to carry all the free states—for only in that situation could a Republican nominee potentially win. New York Senator William Seward, a leading contender, was passed over. Seward's pro-immigrant position posed a potential obstacle, particularly in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Abraham Lincoln of Illinois, as a relatively unknown but likable politician, rose from a pool of potential candidates and was selected by the delegates on the third ballot. The electoral landscape was further complicated through the emergence of a fourth candidate, Tennessee's John Bell, heading the Constitutional Union Party. The Constitutional Unionists, composed of former Whigs who teamed up with some southern Democrats, made it their mission to avoid the specter of secession while doing little else to address the issues tearing the country apart.

Abraham Lincoln's nomination proved a great windfall for the Republican Party. Lincoln carried all free states with the exception of New Jersey (which he split with Douglas). Of the voting electorate, 81.2 percent came out to vote—at that point the highest ever for a presidential election. Lincoln received less than 40 percent of the popular vote, but with the field so split, that percentage yielded 180 electoral votes. Lincoln was trailed by Breckinridge with his 72 electoral votes, carrying eleven of the fifteen slave states; Bell came in third with 39 electoral votes; and Douglas came in last, only able to garner 12 electoral votes despite carrying almost 30 percent



Abraham Lincoln, August 13, 1860. Library of Congress.

of the popular vote. Since the Republican platform prohibited the expansion of slavery in future western states, all future Confederate states, with the exception of Virginia, excluded Lincoln's name from their ballots.[3]

The election of Lincoln and the perceived threat to the institution of slavery proved too much for the deep southern states. South Carolina acted almost immediately, calling a convention to declare secession. On December 20, 1860, the South Carolina convention voted unanimously 169–0 to dissolve their union with the United States.[4] The other states across the Deep South quickly followed suit. Mississippi adopted their own resolution on January 9, 1861, Florida followed on January 10, Alabama on January 11, Georgia on January 19, Louisiana on January 26, and Texas on February 1. Texas was the only state to put the issue up for a popular vote, but secession was widely popular throughout the South.

Confederates quickly shed their American identity and adopted a new Confederate nationalism. Confederate nationalism was based on several ideals, foremost among these being slavery. As Confederate vice president Alexander Stephens stated, the Confederacy's "foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery . . . is his natural and normal condition."[5] The election of Lincoln in 1860 demonstrated that the South was politically overwhelmed. Slavery was omnipresent in the prewar South, and it served as the most common frame of reference for unequal power. To a southern man, there was no fate more terrifying than the thought of being reduced to the level of a slave. Religion likewise shaped Confederate nationalism, as southern-

The emblems of nationalism on this currency reveal much about the ideology underpinning the Confederacy: George Washington standing stately in a Roman toga indicates the belief in the South's honorable and aristocratic past; John C. Calhoun's portrait emphasizes the Confederate argument of the importance of states' rights; and, most importantly, the image of African Americans working in fields demonstrates slavery's position as foundational to the Confederacy. A five-dollar and a one-hundred-dollar Confederate States of America interest bearing banknote, c. 1861 and 1862. Wikimedia.

ers believed that the Confederacy was fulfilling God's will. The Confederacy even veered from the American constitution by explicitly invoking Christianity in their founding document. Yet in every case, all rationale for secession could be thoroughly tied to slavery. "Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery—the greatest material interest of the world," proclaimed the Mississippi statement of secession.[6] Thus for the original seven Confederate states (and the four that would subsequently join), slavery's existence was the essential core of the fledging Confederacy.

Not all southerners participated in Confederate nationalism. Unionist southerners, most common in the upcountry where slavery was weakest,

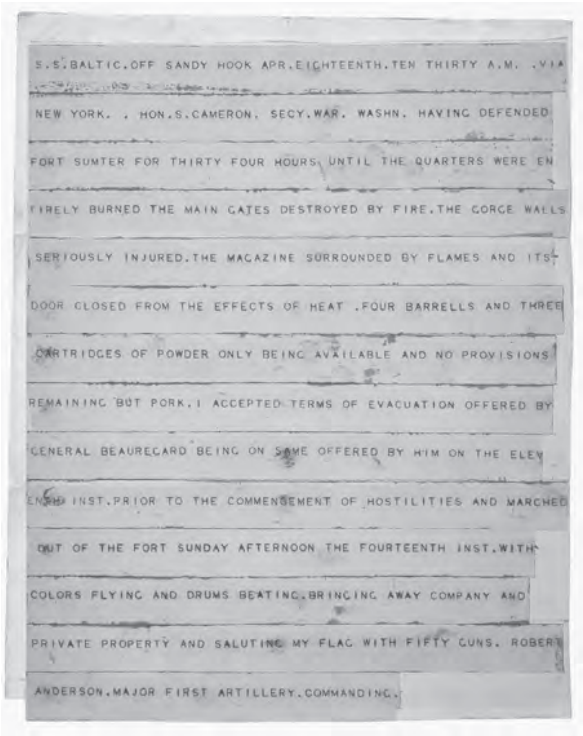
retained their loyalty to the Union. These southerners joined the Union army, that is, the army of the United States of America, and worked to defeat the Confederacy.[7] Black southerners, most of whom were slaves, overwhelmingly supported the Union, often running away from plantations and forcing the Union army to reckon with slavery.[8]

President James Buchanan would not directly address the issue of secession prior to his term's end in early March. Any effort to try to solve the issue therefore fell upon Congress, specifically a Committee of Thirteen including prominent men such as Stephen Douglas, William Seward, Robert Toombs, and John Crittenden. In what became known as "Crittenden's Compromise," Senator Crittenden proposed a series of Constitutional amendments that guaranteed slavery in southern states and territories, denied the federal government interstate slave trade regulatory power, and offered to compensate owners of unrecovered fugitive slaves. The Committee of Thirteen ultimately voted down the measure, and it likewise failed in the full Senate vote (25–23). Reconciliation appeared impossible.[9]

The seven seceding states met in Montgomery, Alabama on February 4 to organize a new nation. The delegates selected Jefferson Davis of Mississippi as president and established a capital in Montgomery, Alabama (it would move to Richmond in May). Whether other states of the Upper South would join the Confederacy remained uncertain. By the early spring of 1861, North Carolina and Tennessee had not held secession conventions, while voters in Virginia, Missouri, and Arkansas initially voted down secession. Despite this temporary boost to the Union, it became abundantly clear that these acts of loyalty in the Upper South were highly conditional and relied on a clear lack of intervention on the part of the federal government. This was the precarious political situation facing Abraham Lincoln following his inauguration on March 4, 1861.

III. A War for Union 1861–1863

In his inaugural address, Lincoln declared secession "legally void."[10] While he did not intend to invade southern states, he would use force to maintain possession of federal property within seceded states. Attention quickly shifted to the federal installation of Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina. The fort was in need of supplies, and Lincoln intended to resupply it. South Carolina called for U.S. soldiers to evacuate the fort. Commanding officer Major Robert Anderson refused. On April 12, 1861, Confederate Brigadier General P. G. T. Beauregard fired on the fort. Anderson surrendered on April 13 and the Union troops evacuated.



S.S.BALTIC.OFF SANDY HOOK APR.EIGHTEENTH.TEN THIRTY A.M. .VIA
NEW YORK. . HON.S.CAMERON. SECY.WAR. WASHN. HAVING DEFENDED
FORT SUMTER FOR THIRTY FOUR HOURS UNTIL THE QUARTERS WERE EN
TIRELY BURNED THE MAIN GATES DESTROYED BY FIRE.THE GORGE WALLS
SERIOUSLY INJURED.THE MAGAZINE SURROUNDED BY FLAMES AND ITS
DOOR CLOSED FROM THE EFFECTS OF HEAT .FOUR BARRELLS AND THREE
CARTRIDGES OF POWDER ONLY BEING AVAILABLE AND NO PROVISIONS
REMAINING BUT PORK.I ACCEPTED TERMS OF EVACUATION OFFERED BY
GENERAL BEAUREGARD BEING ON SAME OFFERED BY HIM ON THE ELEV
ENTH INST.PRIOR TO THE COMMENCEMENT OF HOSTILITIES AND MARCHED
OUT OF THE FORT SUNDAY AFTERNOON THE FOURTEENTH INST.WITH
COLORS FLYING AND DRUMS BEATING.BRINGING AWAY COMPANY AND
PRIVATE PROPERTY AND SALUTING MY FLAG WITH FIFTY GUNS. ROBERT
ANDERSON.MAJOR FIRST ARTILLERY.COMMANDING.

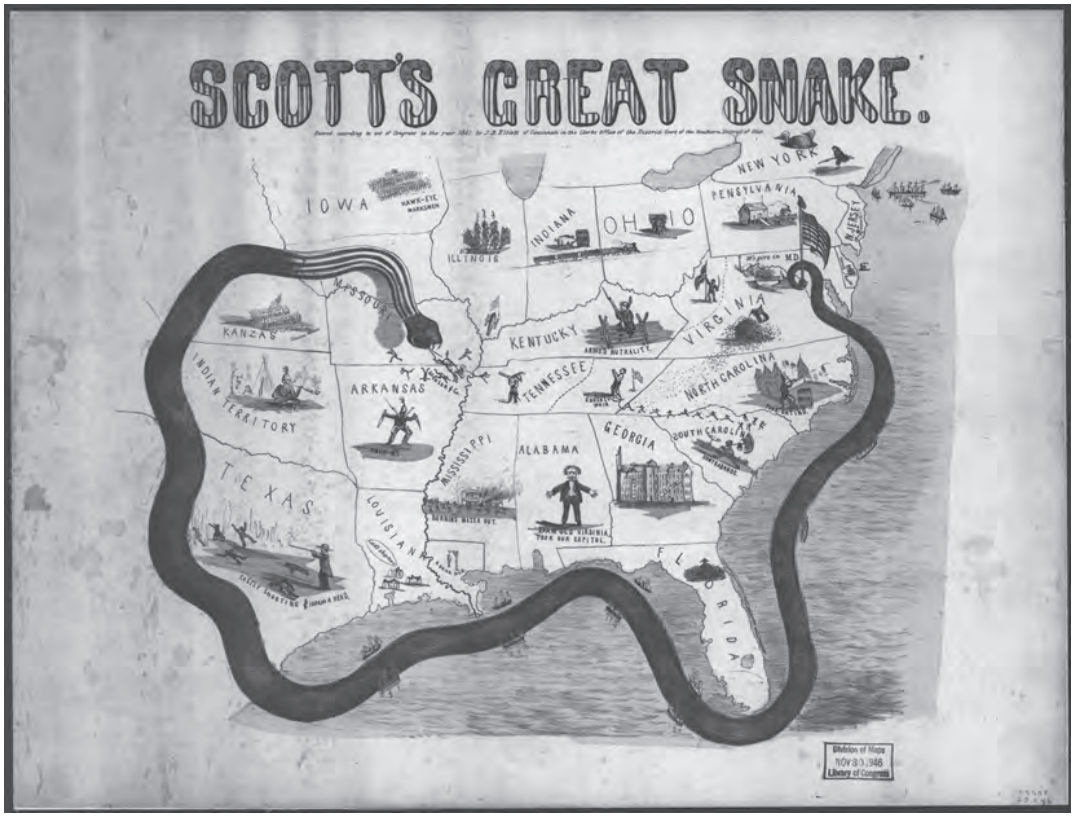
Sent to then–secretary of war Simon Cameron on April 13, 1861, this telegraph announced that after thirty hours of defending Fort Sumter, Major Robert Anderson had accepted the evacuation offered by Confederate General Beauregard. The Union had surrendered Fort Sumter, and the Civil War had officially begun. *Telegram from Maj. Robert Anderson to Hon. Simon Cameron, Secretary, announcing his withdrawal from Fort Sumter*, April 18, 1861; Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780s–1917; Record Group 94. National Archives.

In response to the attack, President Abraham Lincoln called for seventy-five thousand volunteers to serve three months to suppress the rebellion. The American Civil War had begun.

The assault on Fort Sumter and subsequent call for troops provoked several Upper South states to join the Confederacy. In total, eleven states renounced their allegiance to the United States. The new Confederate nation was predicated on the institution of slavery and the promotion of any and all interests that reinforced that objective. Some southerners couched their defense of slavery as a preservation of states' rights. But in order to protect slavery, the Confederate constitution left even less power to the states than the U.S. Constitution, an irony not lost on many.

Shortly after Lincoln's call for troops, the Union adopted General-in-Chief Winfield Scott's Anaconda Plan to suppress the rebellion. This strategy intended to strangle the Confederacy by cutting off access to coastal ports and inland waterways via a naval blockade. Ground troops would enter the interior. Like an anaconda snake, they planned to surround and squeeze the Confederacy.

The border states of Delaware, Maryland, Missouri, and Kentucky maintained geographic, social, political, and economic connections to both the North and the South. All four were immediately critical to the



Winfield Scott's Anaconda Plan sought to slowly squeeze the South dry of its resources, blocking all coastal ports and inland waterways to prevent the importation of goods or the export of cotton. This print illustrates the Union's plan. J. B. Elliott, *Scott's great snake. Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1861*, 1861. Library of Congress.

outcome of the conflict. Abraham Lincoln famously quipped, "I think to lose Kentucky is nearly the same as to lose the whole game."[11] Lincoln and his military advisors realized that the loss of the border states could mean a significant decrease in Union resources and threaten the capital in Washington. Consequently, Lincoln hoped to foster loyalty among their citizens, so Union forces could minimize their occupation. In spite of terrible guerrilla warfare in Missouri and Kentucky, the four border states remained loyal to the Union throughout the war.

Foreign countries, primarily in Europe, also watched the unfolding war with deep interest. The United States represented the greatest example of democratic thought at the time, and individuals from as far afield as Britain, France, Spain, Russia, and beyond closely followed events across the Atlantic Ocean. If the democratic experiment within the United States failed, many democratic activists in Europe wondered what hope might exist for such experiments elsewhere. Conversely, those with close ties to the cotton industry watched with other concerns. War meant the possibility of disrupting the cotton supply, and disruption could have catastrophic ramifications in commercial and financial markets abroad.

While Lincoln, his cabinet, and the War Department devised strategies to defeat the rebel insurrection, black Americans quickly forced the issue of slavery as a primary issue in the debate. As early as 1861, black Americans implored the Lincoln administration to serve in the army and navy.[12] Lincoln initially waged a conservative, limited war. He believed that the presence of African American troops would threaten the loyalty of slaveholding border states, and white volunteers might refuse to serve alongside black men. However, army commanders could not ignore the growing populations of formerly enslaved people who escaped to freedom behind Union army lines. These former enslaved people took a proactive stance early in the war and forced the federal government to act. As the number of refugees ballooned, Lincoln and Congress found it harder to avoid the issue.[13]

In May 1861, General Benjamin F. Butler went over his superiors' heads and began accepting fugitive slaves who came to Fort Monroe in Virginia. In order to avoid the issue of the slaves' freedom, Butler reasoned that runaway slaves were "contraband of war," and he had as much a right to

Enslaved African Americans who took freedom into their own hands and ran to Union lines congregated in what were called contraband camps, which existed alongside Union Army camps. As is evident in the photograph, these were crude, disorganized, and dirty places. But they were still centers of freedom for those fleeing slavery. Contraband camp, Richmond, Virginia, 1865. The Camp of the Contrabands on the Banks of the Mississippi, Fort Pickering, Memphis, Tennessee, 1862. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

seize them as he did to seize enemy horses or cannons.[14] Later that summer Congress affirmed Butler's policy in the First Confiscation Act. The act left "contrabands," as these runaways were called, in a state of limbo. Once a slave escaped to Union lines, her master's claim was nullified. She was not, however, a free citizen of the United States. Runaways lived in "contraband camps," where disease and malnutrition were rampant. Women and men were required to perform the drudge work of war: raising fortifications, cooking meals, and laying railroad tracks. Still, life as a contraband offered a potential path to freedom, and thousands of slaves seized the opportunity.

Fugitive slaves posed a dilemma for the Union military. Soldiers were forbidden to interfere with slavery or assist runaways, but many soldiers found such a policy unchristian. Even those indifferent to slavery were reluctant to turn away potential laborers or help the enemy by returning his property. Also, fugitive slaves could provide useful information on the local terrain and the movements of Confederate troops. Union officers became particularly reluctant to turn away fugitive slaves when Confederate commanders began forcing slaves to work on fortifications. Every slave who escaped to Union lines was a loss to the Confederate war effort.

Any hopes for a brief conflict were eradicated when Union and Confederate forces met at the Battle of Bull Run, near Manassas, Virginia.

Photography captured the horrors of war as never before. Some Civil War photographers arranged the actors in their frames to capture the best picture, even repositioning bodies of dead soldiers for battlefield photos. Alexander Gardner, *[Antietam, Md. Confederate dead by a fence on the Hagerstown road]*, September 1862. Library of Congress.

While not particularly deadly, the Confederate victory proved that the Civil War would be long and costly. Furthermore, in response to the embarrassing Union rout, Lincoln removed Brigadier General Irvin McDowell and promoted Major General George B. McClellan to commander of the newly formed Army of the Potomac. For nearly a year after the First Battle of Bull Run, the Eastern Theater remained relatively silent. Smaller engagements only resulted in a bloody stalemate.

But while the military remained quiet, the same could not be said of Republicans in Washington. The absence of fractious, stalling southerners in Congress allowed Republicans to finally pass the Whig economic package, including the Homestead Act, the Land-Grant College Act (aka the Morrill Act), and the Pacific Railroad Act.[15] The federal government

New and more destructive warfare technology emerged during this time that used discoveries and innovations in other areas of life, like transportation. This photograph shows Robert E. Lee's railroad gun and crew used in the main eastern theater of war at the siege of Petersburg, June 1864–April 1865. *Petersburg, Va. Railroad gun and crew*, between 1864 and 1865. Library of Congress.

also began moving toward a more nationally controlled currency system (the greenback) and the creation of banks with national characteristics. Such acts proved instrumental in the expansion of the federal government and industry.

The Democratic Party, absent its southern leaders, divided into two camps. War Democrats largely stood behind President Lincoln. Peace Democrats—also known as Copperheads—clashed frequently with both War Democrats and Republicans. Copperheads were sympathetic to the Confederacy; they exploited public antiwar sentiment (often the result of a lost battle or mounting casualties) and tried to push President Lincoln to negotiate an immediate peace, regardless of political leverage or bargaining power. Had the Copperheads succeeded in bringing about immediate peace, the Union would have been forced to recognize the Confederacy as a separate and legitimate government and the institution of slavery would have remained intact.

While Washington buzzed with political activity, military life consisted of relative monotony punctuated by brief periods of horror. Daily life for a Civil War soldier was one of routine. A typical day began around six in the morning and involved drill, marching, lunch break, and more drilling followed by policing the camp. Weapon inspection and cleaning followed, perhaps one final drill, dinner, and taps around nine or nine thirty in the evening. Soldiers in both armies grew weary of the routine. Picketing or foraging afforded welcome distractions to the monotony.

Soldiers devised clever ways of dealing with the boredom of camp life. The most common was writing. These were highly literate armies; nine out of every ten Federals and eight out of every ten Confederates could read and write.[16] Letters home served as a tether linking soldiers to their loved ones. Soldiers also read; newspapers were in high demand. News of battles, events in Europe, politics in Washington and Richmond, and local concerns were voraciously sought and traded.

While there were nurses, camp followers, and some women who disguised themselves as men, camp life was overwhelmingly male. Soldiers drank liquor, smoked tobacco, gambled, and swore. Social commentators feared that when these men returned home, with their hard-drinking and irreligious ways, all decency, faith, and temperance would depart. But not all methods of distraction were detrimental. Soldiers also organized debate societies, composed music, sang songs, wrestled, raced horses, boxed, and played sports.

Neither side could consistently provide supplies for their soldiers, so it was not uncommon, though officially forbidden, for common soldiers

to trade with the enemy. Confederate soldiers prized northern newspapers and coffee. Northerners were glad to exchange these for southern tobacco. Supply shortages and poor sanitation were synonymous with Civil War armies. The close proximity of thousands of men bred disease. Lice were soldiers' daily companions.

Music was popular among the soldiers of both armies, creating a diversion from the boredom and horror of the war. As a result, soldiers often sang on fatigue duty and while in camp. Favorite songs often reminded the soldiers of home, including "Lorena," "Home, Sweet Home," and "Just Before the Battle, Mother." Dances held in camp offered another way to enjoy music. Since there were often few women nearby, soldiers would dance with one another.

When the Civil War broke out, one of the most popular songs among soldiers and civilians was "John Brown's Body," which began "John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave." Started as a Union anthem praising John Brown's actions at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, then used by Confederates to vilify Brown, both sides' version of the song stressed that they were on the right side. Eventually the words to Julia Ward Howe's poem "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" were set to the melody, further implying Union success. The themes of popular songs changed over the course of the war, as feelings of inevitable success alternated with feelings of terror and despair.[17]

After an extensive delay on the part of Union commander George McClellan, his 120,000-man Army of the Potomac moved via ship to the peninsula between the York and James Rivers in Virginia. Rather than crossing overland via the former battlefield at Manassas Junction, McClellan attempted to swing around the rebel forces and enter the capital of Richmond before they knew what hit them. McClellan, however, was an overly cautious man who consistently overestimated his adversaries' numbers. This cautious approach played into the Confederates' favor on the outskirts of Richmond. Confederate General Robert E. Lee, recently appointed commander of the Army of Northern Virginia, forced McClellan to retreat from Richmond, and his Peninsular Campaign became a tremendous failure.[18]

Union forces met with little success in the East, but the Western Theater provided hope for the United States. In February 1862, men under Union general Ulysses S. Grant captured Forts Henry and Donelson along the Tennessee River. Fighting in the West greatly differed from that in the East. At the First Battle of Bull Run, for example, two large armies fought for control of the nations' capitals, while in the West, Union and