

The Civil War 1861–1863

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, 1776

These words of Thomas Jefferson started the country on the road to independence. Not all, however, enjoyed this independence. Throughout the formation of the nation’s government, slavery was debated continuously. With no way to settle the debate without tearing apart the fragile Union, the Founding Fathers made a grave decision. They left the issue of slavery to their children and charged future generations with deciding the fate of the “peculiar institution.” Ultimately, the fate of slavery would be decided on the battlefield and cost the lives of more than half a million Americans in the most deadly war in American history. Because the Civil War was fought primarily over the issue of slavery, some historians view it as resolving the last unfinished business of the Constitutional Convention.

The issue of slavery did not rest with the adoption of the United States Constitution. As the nation grew and more states were added, the debate over slavery recurred. As more and more Northern states abolished slavery, many Southern states that relied on slavery became uneasy. Southern states believed if more Northern states were admitted to the Union, the North would gain a majority in Congress and outlaw slavery, which would devastate the economies of the South. Although many Northern states once allowed slavery, now most Northerners viewed slavery as barbaric. This did not stop Northern textile manufacturers, however, from demanding more and more cotton to fuel the mills that supplied the United States and many European countries.



Slavery was not the only conflict between the North and South. The two regions were very different. The North’s economy depended on the production of goods in factories, while the South’s economy was dependent on agriculture. Chief among Southern crops was cotton, commonly known as “white gold.” Another difference between the two regions was their way of life. Northerners tended to

live in cities, while Southerners lived on plantations or smaller farms. City life in the North exposed people to different ideas and cultures. In contrast, Southern life was much more isolated; and people held fast to traditions and customs.

Differences between the North and the South came to a head in 1860 with the election of Abraham Lincoln as President of the United States. Southerners were convinced Lincoln would move against the expansion of slavery. Although Lincoln made assurances several times that he was only interested in stopping the spread of slavery in the West, the South did not trust him. They reiterated their fear that if there were more free states than slave states, the free states would vote to outlaw slavery. With this in mind, seven Southern states seceded, or left, the Union before Lincoln was sworn into office. Soon, the Southern states that left the Union formed an alliance, the Confederate States of America. They selected former Mississippi Senator Jefferson Davis as their president.

The war began on April 12, 1861, when Confederate forces in Charleston, South Carolina, fired on Fort Sumter, a federal military base. The South demanded



the fort's surrender; but Lincoln refused, citing that the Southern states had no right to leave the Union. Lincoln declared that their actions were rebellion against the United States. Upon hearing of the attack, Lincoln began to call for volunteers for the army. Four more Southern states left the Union. With conflict now inevitable, the two sides geared up for war. Both sides believed the war would be quick. However, the grim reality of war would haunt both sides for the

next four years.

The North's strategy for defeating the South was to surround it, cutting the South's trade with European nations. This strategy was the Anaconda Plan; it is similar to a large snake squeezing its prey into submission. The South's strategy was defensive. The Confederacy would defend its territory until the North came to the conclusion that the war could not be won. The South's population was half that of its northern enemy. In addition, most of the factories needed to manufacture weapons and other necessary supplies were located in the North.



Another factor to consider is how each region viewed itself. A Southerner's home was the state in which he lived. On the other hand, a Northerner

identified himself as a citizen of the United States. This mindset was extremely important to the outcome of the war and put the South at a disadvantage. One advantage the South had over the North was the quality of its military officers. The majority of United States military officers came from the South. When hostilities began, most of them returned to the South and took up arms against the Union. In fact, the most experienced officer at the time was Robert E. Lee. President Lincoln even offered Lee command of the entire Union army. Lee refused and stated that he could never take up arms against his home, Virginia.

The first real land battle took place outside of Washington, D.C., when the Union army attacked a Southern position near a small creek named Bull Run. The Confederates quickly defeated the Union army and drove them back to the capital. The Confederacy continued its success in the East with victories at the Seven Days Battle and the Second Battle of Bull Run. The South invaded the North in 1862 in an attempt to press its advantage, but after the bloodiest day of the war in which more than 23,000 were killed or wounded at Antietam, Maryland, the Confederates retreated into Virginia. President Lincoln, waiting for a victory to announce his Emancipation Proclamation, took this opportunity to proclaim that all slaves held in states that had left the Union were now free.

The war in the West went much better for the Union. Victories in Nashville and New Orleans were major setbacks for the South because this cut its access to the Mississippi River. The commander in the West, General Ulysses S. Grant, impressed Lincoln. The president had been looking for a leader who would press the attack against the South and quickly end the war.

Because the war was fought on their land, the Confederates needed help. While Union armies occupied their territory, the Confederate government was unable to provide food and supplies to Confederate soldiers. For this reason in the summer of 1863, General Robert E. Lee, now the commander of the Army of Northern Virginia, decided to invade the North. This invasion, like Antietam, did



not go well for the Confederates. They were defeated during a three-day battle in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Again, the Confederates were forced to retreat and spent the remainder of the war on the defensive. Union forces caught up to Lee's army in southern Virginia at Appomattox Court House. On April 9, 1865, Lee surrendered to General Grant, ending the Civil War.

Only five days later, on April 14, John Wilkes Booth, a Confederate sympathizer assassinated President Abraham Lincoln at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C. Congress acted quickly to pass the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in December 1865, ending slavery in the United States. This act fulfilled the obligation of the children of the nation's founders by taking care of their unfinished business.

The Civil War was the costliest war in American history. More than 365,000 soldiers from the North were killed, and the South lost 260,000 men. Some of these men died in battle, however, many others died from disease. The South's economy was in ruins at the end of the war after the Union army had destroyed many of its cities and large plantations. It would take nearly a hundred years for the South to rebuild its economy.

4. What motivated General Robert E. Lee to invade the North in the summer of 1863?

5. What might have happened if the South had won the Civil War?