

Introduction to the Civil War

“ WE FAILED , BUT IN THE
GOOD PROVIDENCE OF GOD
APPARENT FAILURE OFTEN
PROVES A BLESSING . ”

—*Robert E. Lee*

★ ★ ★

THE CIVIL WAR WAS A COMPLEX conflict that took this nation through its darkest period. The complexity of the Civil War involved every facet of life. The war tore at the heart of all that America stands for. It cut to the very core of the political, economic, and social elements of American life. The argument centered on where ultimate sovereignty lay—whether with the Union or with the individual states. It questioned the economic and social structure basis in slave power and agriculture in the South. The Civil War is remembered as the war that

pitted brother against brother because of the brutal nature of the tensions at work.

In the words of then Secretary of State William H. Seward, the Civil War was the “irrepressible conflict.” It has also been deemed an unnecessary bloodletting brought on by arrogant extremists and blundering politicians. Regardless of opinions, in 1861 the nation faced the very real prospect of a war that could dissolve the union.

Causes of the war were many and had developed over decades, but the immediate spark for the conflict came in consequence of South Carolina’s determination to secede from the Union—a result of Abraham Lincoln’s victory in the 1860 presidential election. South Carolina leaders had been waiting for an event to unite the South against antislavery forces. At a special convention called in South Carolina, a declaration was passed declaring that the United States of America was dissolved.

Causes of the war were many and had developed over decades.

By February 1861, six Southern states had joined South Carolina in seceding. A provisional constitution for the Confederate States of America was adopted that month. The remaining Southern states continued residence with the Union. Less than a month later, on March 4, 1861, Abraham Lincoln was sworn in as president of the United States. In Lincoln’s inaugural address, he refused to recognize the secession; he considered it legally void. He concluded his speech with a plea for restoration of the Union. However, in the South, Lincoln’s plea fell on deaf ears. On April 12, the fighting began when Confederate forces fired on federal troops stationed at Fort Sumter in the Charleston harbor.

As a result, Union troops marched under the command of Major General Irvin McDowell toward the Confederate forces at Manassas, Virginia. The Union was blocked, and the First Battle of Bull Run ensued. The Confederate troops, under the command of General Joseph E. Johnston and Pierre G. T. Beauregard, forced Union troops back to Washington DC. Startled at the loss, and in an attempt to prevent the remaining slave states from leaving the Union, the United States Congress passed the Crittenden-Johnson Resolution on July 25, 1861. It declared that the war was being fought to preserve the Union, not to end slavery.

The war began in earnest in 1862. General Ulysses S. Grant brought the Union its first victory; he captured Fort Henry, Tennessee, on February 6 of that year. However, this victory was short lived. Major General George McClellan, of the Union, reached the gates of Richmond in the spring of 1862 only to be defeated by General Robert E. Lee in the Seven Days' Campaign. After this defeat, McClellan was relieved of command. His successor, John Pope, suffered the same fate when Lee beat him at the Second Battle of Bull Run in August.

Encouraged by Lee's success, the Confederacy invaded the North for the first time. General Lee led fifty-five thousand men of the Army of Northern Virginia across the Potomac into Maryland on September 5. Lincoln then reinstated McClellan, who won a bloody victory at the Battle of Antietam near Sharpsburg, Maryland, on September 17, 1862. Defeated, Lee's army returned to Virginia.

When McClellan failed to follow up on Antietam, Lincoln once again found a replacement: Major General Ambrose Burnside. Burnside suffered a near-immediate defeat at the Battle of Fredericksburg and was replaced by Major General Joseph Hooker. Hooker also proved insufficient to Lee's army and was replaced after the loss of the Battle of Chancellorsville in May 1863.

Lincoln found an able replacement in Major General George Meade, who stopped Lee's invasion of Union-held territory at the Battle of Gettysburg (July 1–3, 1863). General Lee's army suffered twenty-eight thousand casualties and was forced to retreat again to Virginia.

While the Confederate forces had some success in the eastern theater—holding on to their capital—the west was their downfall. Confederate forces were driven from Missouri early in the war, which allowed the Union to maintain possession of that key strategic state.

Nashville, Tennessee, fell to the Union early in 1862. The Mississippi River was opened to Vicksburg and then to Memphis. New Orleans was also captured early in 1862, allowing the Union forces to begin moving up the Mississippi.

The Union's strength increased with the strategic mind of Ulysses S. Grant. His gift was proven with the victories of Fort Donelson; the Battle of Shiloh; Vicksburg, Mississippi; and Chattanooga, Tennessee, where he drove Confederate forces out of Tennessee. Grant understood the concept of total war and realized, along with Lincoln, that only the utter defeat of Confederate forces would bring an end to the war. Grant was given command of all Union armies in 1864.

Union forces in the East attempted to maneuver past Lee and fought several battles during that phase of the eastern campaign: the Battle of the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, and Cold Harbor. An attempt to outflank Lee from the South failed under Generals Benjamin F. Butler and William F. Smith, who were contained in the Bermuda Hundred, a neck of land near the James and Appomattox rivers.

General Grant relentlessly pressed the Army of Northern Virginia under the command of General Lee. Grant pinned the Confederate army in the Siege of Petersburg and, after two failed attempts (under Sigel and Hunter), finally found an able commander,

Philip H. Sheridan, who could clear the threat to Washington DC from the Shenandoah Valley.

Meanwhile, Union general William Tecumseh Sherman marched from Chattanooga to the sea at Savannah, leaving nothing in his wake but destruction and ashes. He stuck to his statement that he gave shortly before beginning his brutal march: “War is cruelty. There is no use trying to reform it. The crueller it is, the sooner it will be over.” When Sherman turned north through South and North Carolina to approach the Virginia lines from the south, it was the end for Lee and the Confederacy.

With Lee’s surrender on April 9, 1865, at Appomattox Courthouse, the Union formally became the victor in the conflict. The last land battle of the war, the Battle of Palmito Ranch, was fought on May 13, 1865, in the far south of Texas and ended with a Confederate victory. However, the victory was meaningless because of Lee’s surrender. All Confederate land forces surrendered by June 1865. Confederate naval units surrendered in November of 1865.

Despite the end of the war, conflict still existed. The post-war Reconstruction Era, headed by Grant, who was eventually elected president, would confront many obstacles, including persistent Southern resistance. Illustrative of the resistance were the “Jim Crow” laws, which essentially legalized racial discrimination. Decades of struggle followed, leading to an appeal for equality and unity in the nation. In a sense, the struggle for “one nation under God” has never ceased.

