

Unit 14 - The Civil War

Focus Questions

1. What different strategies did the Union and Confederacy adopt in waging the Civil War, and how did the war affect economic and social life for different regions and populations?
2. What factors contributed to the tide of war turning in the Union's favor in 1863 and 1864?
3. Why did Abraham Lincoln issue the Emancipation Proclamation, and what impact did that document have on the war?

Key Terms

Fort Sumter
Border states
"Contrabands"
Robert E. Lee

Emancipation Proclamation
Battle of Antietam
New York City draft riots
March to the Sea

Introduction



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

The American Civil War, the bloodiest war 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.

14.1 – The Confederate States of America

Following the 1860 election Confederates quickly shed their American identity and adopted a new Confederate nationalism based on several ideals, especially 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."² 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 southerners 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.³ Thus for the original seven Confederate states (and the four that would subsequently join), slavery's existence was the essential core of the fledgling 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.⁴ Black southerners, most of whom were



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.

slaves, overwhelmingly supported the Union, often running away from plantations and forcing the Union army to reckon with slavery.⁵

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.⁶

The seven seceding states met in Montgomery, Alabama on February 4 to organize a new

nation known as the Confederate States of America, or the Confederacy. Delegates at that convention 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, and 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 as he arrived in Washington for his inauguration on March 4, 1861.

14.2 – The Attack on Fort Sumter and Second Wave of Secession

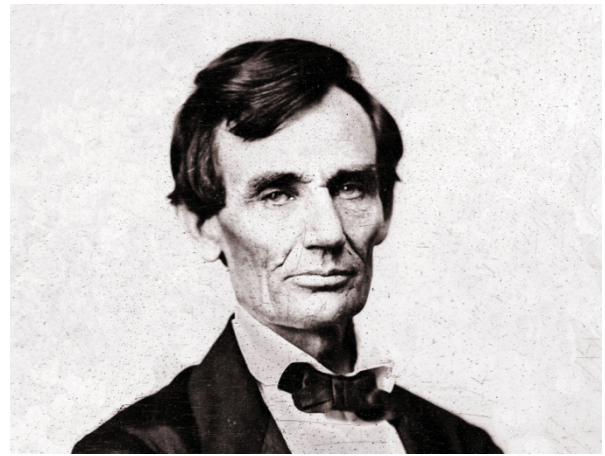
In his inaugural address, Lincoln declared secession “legally void.”⁷ While he did not intend to invade southern states, he would use force to maintain possession of federal property located within seceded states. Attention quickly shifted to the federal installation of the newly-constructed **Fort Sumter** in Charleston, South Carolina. The fort had been occupied since December and was in need of supplies, which Lincoln intended to provide. South Carolina called for the U.S. soldiers to evacuate the fort, but commanding officer Major Robert Anderson refused. On April 12, 1861, Confederate Brigadier General P. G. T. Beauregard fired on the fort. After nearly thirty-two hours of shelling, Anderson surrendered the destroyed fort on April 13 and the Union troops evacuated. 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 states in the Upper South to join the Confederacy. In total, eleven states would renounce their allegiance to the United States: seven following Lincoln's election, and four after his proclamation of rebellion and call for troops. 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.

Following Fort Sumter, 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 while ground troops would enter the interior. Like an anaconda snake, the Union planned to surround and squeeze the Confederacy.

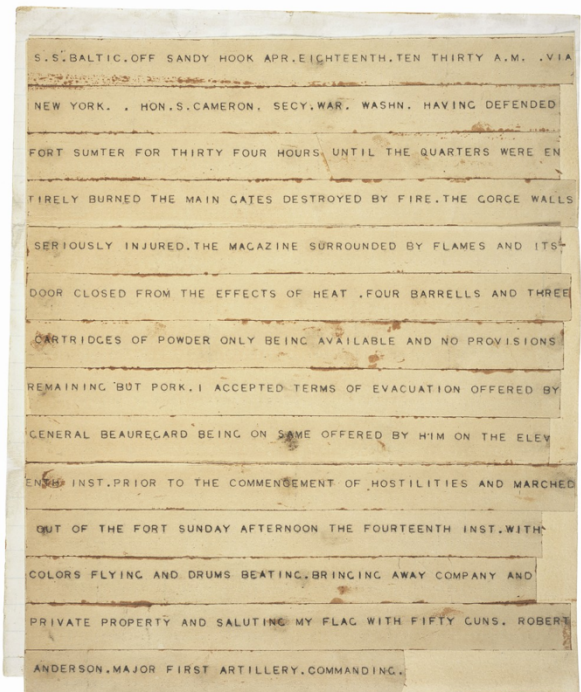
The **border states** of Delaware, Maryland, Missouri, and Kentucky maintained geographic, social, political, and economic connections to both the North and the South. All four were immediately critical to the outcome of the conflict. Abraham Lincoln famously quipped, "I think to lose Kentucky is nearly the same as to lose the whole game."⁸ Lincoln and his military advisors realized that the loss of the border states could mean a significant decrease in Union resources and a threat to the capital in Washington, D.C. 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, and Russia closely followed events across the Atlantic Ocean. If the democratic experiment within the United States failed, many democratic activists in Europe wondered whether hope existed 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.



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

Below: "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, 1780's-1917; Record Group 94. National Archives.



14.3 – Race and Strategic Considerations

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



Winfield Scott's Anaconda Plan meant 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, while poorly drawn, clearly depicts 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.

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 seize them as he did to seize enemy horses or cannons.¹¹ 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. As soon as slaves escaped to Union lines, their slaveholders' claims were considered null and void; however, such individuals were not immediately considered free citizens 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.

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 centers of freedom for those fleeing slavery. "The Camp of the Contrabands on the Banks of the Mississippi, Fort Pickering, Memphis, Tenn.," 1862. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.



implored the Lincoln administration to serve in the army and navy.⁹ 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 individuals 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 increasingly difficult to avoid the issue.¹⁰

In May 1861, General Benjamin F. Butler went over his superiors' heads and began accepting fugitive slaves who came to

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 and impractical. 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 reject 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 [First Battle of Bull Run](#), near Manassas, Virginia in July of 1861. While not particularly deadly, the Confederate victory at that encounter 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, with unprecedented and unexpected casualty rates.



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.

14.4 – Government and Dissent on the Union Homefront

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 (also known as the Morrill Act), and the Pacific Railroad Act.¹² The federal government also began moving toward a more nationally controlled monetary system and the creation of banks with national characteristics and regulations. Such acts proved instrumental in the expansion and protection of the federal government and industry.

The Civil War destroyed and then transformed the American economy. In 1859 and 1860, wealthy southern planters were flush after producing record cotton crops. Southern prosperity relied on over four million African American slaves to grow and harvest cotton along with a number of other staple crops across the region. Cotton fed the textile mills of America and Europe and brought great wealth to the region. On the eve of war, the American South enjoyed more per capita wealth than any other slave economy in the New World. To their masters, slaves constituted their most valuable assets, worth roughly \$3 billion.¹³ Yet this wealth obscured the gains in infrastructure, industrial production, and financial markets that occurred north of the [Mason-Dixon Line](#), a fact that the war would unmask for all to see.

In contrast to the slave South, northerners praised their region as a land of free labor, populated by farmers, merchants, and wage laborers. It was also home to a robust market economy. By 1860, northerners could buy clothing made in a New England factory, or light their homes with kerosene oil from Pennsylvania. The Midwest produced seas of grain that fed the country, with enough left over for export to Europe. Farther west, mining and agriculture were the mainstays of life. Along with the textile mills, shoe factories, and iron foundries, the firms that produced McCormick's wheat harvesters and Colt's firearms displayed the technical advances of northern manufacturers. Their goods crisscrossed the country on the North's growing railroad network. An extensive network of banks and financial markets helped aggregate capital that could be reinvested into further growth.

The Civil War, like all wars, interrupted the rhythms of commercial life by destroying lives and property. This was especially true in the South. From 1861 onward, the Confederate government struggled to find the guns, food, and supplies needed to field an army. Southerners did make astonishing gains in industrial production during this time, but it was never enough. The Union's blockade of the Atlantic prevented the Confederacy from financing the war with cotton sales to Europe. To pay their troops and keep the economy alive, the Confederate Congress turned to printing paper money that quickly sank in value and led to rapid inflation. In many cases, Confederate officials dispensed with taxes paid in cash and simply impressed the food and materials needed from their citizens. Perhaps most striking of all, in the vast agricultural wealth of the South, many southerners struggled to find enough to eat.

The war also pushed the U.S. government to take unprecedented steps. Congress raised tariffs and passed the first national income tax in 1862. In late 1861, Congress created the nation's first [fiat currency](#), the greenback dollar. At first, the expansion of the greenbacks and the rapid rise in government spending created an uptick in business in 1862 and 1863. As the war dragged on, inflation also hit the North. Workers demanded higher wages to pay rents and buy necessities, while the business community groaned under their growing tax burden. The United States, however, never embarked on a policy of impressment for food and supplies. The factories and farms of the North successfully supplied Union troops, while the federal government, with some adjustments, found the means to pay for war. None of this is to suggest that the North's superior ability to supply its war machine made the outcome of the war inevitable. Any account of the war must consider the tangled web of politics, battles, and economics that occurred between 1861 and 1865.

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.

Elsewhere, the North produced widespread displays of unity. Sanitary fairs originated in the Old Northwest and raised millions of dollars for Union soldiers. The fairs also encouraged national unity within the North—something that became more important as the war dragged on and casualties continued to mount. The northern homefront was complicated: economic prosperity and overt displays of loyalty contrasted with dissent, and sometimes, violence.

14.5 – Life in the Military

While Washington buzzed with political activity, military life consisted of relative monotony punctuated by brief periods of horror. The close proximity of thousands of men bred disease and lice infestations. Daily life for a Civil War soldier was based on 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. Neither side could consistently provide supplies for their soldiers, so it was not uncommon, though officially forbidden, for common soldiers to trade with their enemy. Confederate soldiers prized northern newspapers and coffee, which Northerners were glad to exchange for southern tobacco. Supply shortages and poor sanitation were synonymous with Civil War armies.

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.¹⁴ 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, a few women who disguised themselves as men to enlist, and even some families, 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 debating societies, composed music and sang songs, wrestled, raced horses, boxed, and played sports.

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, such as “Lorena,” “Home, Sweet Home,” and “Just Before the Battle, Mother.” Dances held in camps offered another way to enjoy music. Since there were often few women nearby, male 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 with the words “John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave.” Written as a Union anthem praising John Brown’s actions at Harper’s Ferry and 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 of “John Brown’s Body,” further implying Union success. The themes of popular songs changed over the course of the war, as feelings of inevitable victory alternated with feelings of terror and despair over the immense cost in human lives.¹⁵

14.6 – Theaters of War



New and more destructive warfare technology emerged during this time that utilized 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.

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 Confederates 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.¹⁶

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 Confederate forces fought for control of the rivers, since the Mississippi River and its tributaries were key components of the Union's Anaconda Plan. One of the deadliest of these clashes occurred along the Tennessee River at the Battle of Shiloh on April 6–7, 1862. This battle, lasting only two days, was the costliest single battle in American history up to that point. The Union victory shocked both the Union and the Confederacy in the face of that battle's approximately twenty-three thousand casualties, a number that exceeded casualties from all of the United States' previous wars combined.¹⁷ The subsequent capture of New Orleans by Union forces proved a heavy blow to the Confederacy and capped an 1862 spring of success in the Western Theater.

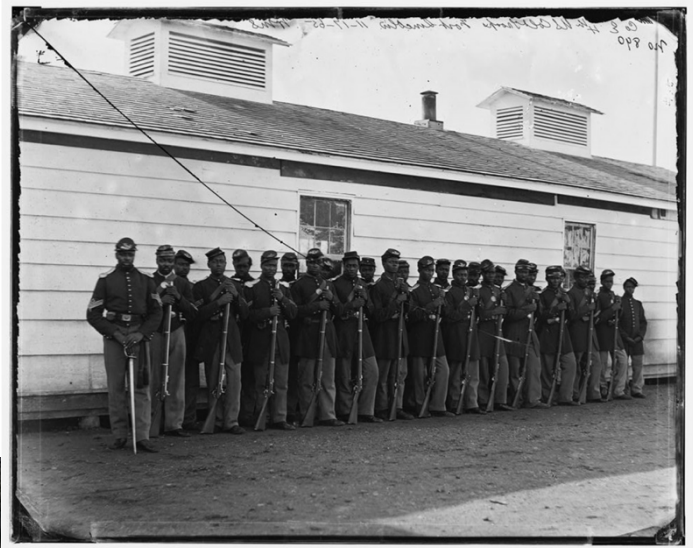
The Union and Confederate navies helped or hindered army movements around the many marine environments of the southern United States. Each navy employed the latest technology to outmatch the other. The Confederate navy, led by Stephen Russell Mallory, had the unenviable task of constructing a fleet from scratch and trying to fend off a vastly better equipped Union navy. Led by Gideon Welles of Connecticut, the Union navy successfully implemented General-in-Chief Winfield Scott's Anaconda Plan. The future of naval warfare also emerged in the spring of 1862 as two famous "ironclad" warships fought a duel at Hampton Roads, Virginia. The age of the wooden sail was ending, and naval warfare would be fundamentally altered.

14.07 The Emancipation Proclamation

While advances in naval technology ruled the seas, African Americans on the ground were complicating Union war aims to an even greater degree. By the summer of 1862, the actions of black Americans were pushing the Union toward a full-blown war of emancipation.¹⁸ Following the First Confiscation Act, in April 1862, Congress abolished the

institution of slavery in the District of Columbia. In July 1862, Congress passed the Second Confiscation Act, effectively emancipating slaves that came under Union control. Word traveled fast among enslaved people, and this legislation led to even more runaways making their way into Union lines. Abraham Lincoln's thinking began to evolve, and by the summer of 1862 he proposed the first iteration first floated the idea of an **Emancipation Proclamation** to members of his cabinet. While his cabinet supported such an idea, secretary of state William Seward insisted that Lincoln wait for a "decisive" Union victory so the proclamation would not appear too desperate a measure on the part of a failing government.

The creation of black regiments was another kind of innovation during the Civil War. Northern free blacks and newly freed slaves joined together under the leadership of white officers to fight for the Union cause. This novelty was not only beneficial for the Union war effort; it also showed the Confederacy that the Union sought to destroy the foundational institution (slavery) upon which their nation was built. William Morris Smith, [District of Columbia. Company E, 4th U.S. Colored Infantry, at Fort Lincoln], between 1863 and 1866. Library of Congress.



This African American family dressed in their finest clothes (including a USCT uniform) for this photograph, projecting respectability and dignity that was at odds with the southern perception of black Americans. [Unidentified African American soldier in Union uniform with wife and two daughters], between 1863 and 1865. Library of Congress.

This decisive moment that prompted the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation occurred in the fall of 1862 along Antietam Creek in Maryland. Emboldened by their success in the previous spring and summer, Lee and Confederate president Jefferson Davis planned to win a decisive victory in Union territory and end the war. On September 17, 1862, McClellan's and Lee's forces collided at the **Battle of Antietam** near the town of Sharpsburg. This battle was the first major battle of the Civil War to occur on Union soil. It remains the bloodiest single day in American history: over twenty thousand soldiers were killed, wounded, or missing.

Despite the Confederate withdrawal and the high death toll, the Battle of Antietam was not a decisive Union victory. It did, however, result in enough of a victory for Lincoln to proclaim that:

On the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.¹⁹

Justifying the Proclamation as a “fit and necessary war measure” taken as Commander-in-Chief, Lincoln specified that this statement would only apply to slaves in areas still under Confederate control on January 1, 1863. Significant exemptions to the Emancipation Proclamation, including the border states and parts of other states in the Confederacy already under Union control, were clearly indicated. A far cry from a universal end to slavery, the Emancipation Proclamation nevertheless proved vital, shifting the war’s aims from simple union to emancipation. Lincoln and his cabinet hoped that stripping the Confederacy of its labor force would not only debilitate the southern economy but also weaken Confederate morale. Furthermore, the Battle of Antietam and the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation all but ensured that the Confederacy would not be recognized by European powers. Nevertheless, the war continued as the effective date for emancipation drew nearer. Union and Confederate forces clashed again at Fredericksburg, Virginia in December 1862, a Confederate victory that resulted in staggering Union casualties.

14.8 – African Americans in the Civil War

Black Servicemen in the Union

As Union armies penetrated deeper into the Confederacy, politicians and generals came to understand the necessity and benefit of enlisting black men in the army and navy. Although a few commanders began forming black units in 1862, such as Massachusetts abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s First South Carolina Volunteers (the first regiment of black soldiers), widespread enlistment did not occur until the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect on January 1, 1863. “And I further declare and make known,” Lincoln’s proclamation read, “that such persons of suitable condition, will be received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service.”²⁰

The language describing black enlistment indicated Lincoln’s implicit desire to segregate African American troops from the main campaigning armies of white soldiers. “I believe it is a resource which, if vigorously applied now, will soon close the contest. It works doubly, weakening the enemy and strengthening us,” Lincoln remarked in August 1863 about black soldiering.²¹ Although more than 180,000 black men (10 percent of the Union army) served during the war, the majority of United States Colored Troops (USCT) remained stationed behind the lines as garrison forces, often laboring and performing noncombat roles.

Black soldiers in the Union army endured rampant discrimination and earned less pay than white soldiers, while also facing the possibility of being murdered or sold into slavery if captured. James Henry Gooding, a black corporal in the famed 54th Massachusetts Volunteers, wrote to Abraham Lincoln in September 1863, questioning why he and his fellow volunteers were paid less than white men. Gooding argued that because he and his brethren were born in the United States and selflessly left their private lives to enter the army, they should be treated “as American SOLDIERS, not as menial hirelings.”²²

African American soldiers defied the inequality of military service and used their positions in the army to reshape society, North and South. The majority of the USCT had once been enslaved, and their presence as armed, blue-clad soldiers sent shock waves throughout the Confederacy. To their friends and families, African American soldiers symbolized the embodiment of liberation and the destruction of slavery. To white southerners, they represented the utter disruption of the Old South's racial and social hierarchy. As members of armies of occupation, black soldiers wielded martial authority in towns and plantations. At the end of the war, as a black soldier marched by a cluster of Confederate prisoners, he noticed his former slaveholder among the group. "Hello, massa," the soldier exclaimed, "bottom rail on top dis time!"²³



"Two Brothers in Arms." Library of Congress.

The majority of the USCT occupied the South by performing garrison duty. Other black soldiers performed admirably on the battlefield, shattering white myths that docile, cowardly black men would fold in the maelstrom of war. Black troops fought in more than four hundred battles and skirmishes, including Milliken's Bend and Port Hudson, Louisiana; Fort Wagner, South Carolina; Nashville; and the final campaigns to capture Richmond, Virginia. Fifteen black soldiers received the Medal of Honor, the highest honor bestowed for military heroism. Through their voluntarism, service, battlefield contributions, and even death, black soldiers laid their claims for citizenship. "Once let a black man get upon his person the brass letters U.S." Frederick Douglass, the great black abolitionist, proclaimed, "and there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship."²⁴

Confederate Slaves

Many slaves accompanied their slaveholders in the Confederate army, but not to fight for their cause. They served as "camp servants," cooking meals, raising tents, and carrying supplies. The Confederacy also impressed slaves to perform manual labor. There are three important points to make about these "Confederate" slaves. First, their labor was almost always coerced. Second, people are complicated and have varying, often contradictory loyalties. A slave could hope in general that the Confederacy would lose but at the same time be concerned for the safety of his slaveholder and the Confederate soldiers he saw on a daily basis. Finally, white Confederates did not see African Americans as their equals, much less as soldiers. There was never any doubt that black laborers and camp servants were property.

Though historians disagree on the matter, it is a stretch to claim that not a single African American ever fired a gun for the Confederacy; a camp servant whose slaveholder died in battle might well pick up his dead owner's gun and continue firing, if for no other reason than to protect himself. But if and when this occurred, it would have been on an

informal basis. The Confederate government did, in an act of desperation, pass a law in March 1865 allowing for the enlistment of black soldiers, but only a few dozen African Americans (mostly Richmond hospital workers) had enlisted by the war's end.

14.9 – Turning the Tide

As 1863 dawned, Lee's Army of Northern Virginia continued its offensive strategy in the East. One of the war's major battles occurred near the village of Chancellorsville, Virginia, between April 30 and May 6, 1863. While the Battle of Chancellorsville was an outstanding Confederate victory, it also resulted in heavy casualties and the mortal wounding of Confederate major general "Stonewall" Jackson, who was killed by friendly fire. In spite of Jackson's death, Lee continued his offensive against federal forces and invaded Pennsylvania in the summer of 1863. During the three-day battle (July 1–3) at Gettysburg, heavy casualties crippled both sides. Yet the devastating July 3 infantry assault on the Union center, also known as Pickett's Charge, caused Lee to retreat from Pennsylvania. The Gettysburg Campaign was Lee's final northern incursion and the Battle of Gettysburg remains the bloodiest battle of the war, and in American history, with fifty-one thousand casualties.

Concurrently in the West, Union forces continued their movement along the Mississippi River and its tributaries. Grant launched his campaign against Vicksburg, Mississippi, in the winter of 1862. Known as the "Gibraltar of the West," Vicksburg was the last holdout in the West, and its seizure would enable uninhibited travel for Union forces along the Mississippi River. Grant's Vicksburg Campaign, which lasted until July 4, 1863, ended with the city's surrender. The fall of Vicksburg split the Confederacy in two.

Despite Union successes in the summer of 1863, discontent over the war simmered across the North. This was particularly true in the wake of the Enrollment Act—the first effort at a draft among the northern populace during the Civil War. Working-class northerners were especially angry that the wealthy could pay \$300 for substitutes, sparing themselves from the carnage of war. "A rich man's war, but a poor man's fight," was a popular refrain.²⁵ The Emancipation Proclamation convinced many immigrants in northern cities that freed people would soon take their jobs, and many poor whites in the North resented being drafted to fight and die in a horrific war to end slavery when black men were exempted from the draft. These economic and racial anxieties culminated in the **New York City Draft Riots** in July 1863. Over the span of four days, white rioters killed some 120 citizens, including the lynching of at least



Pennsylvania Light Artillery, Battery B, Petersburg, Virginia. Photograph by Timothy H. O'Sullivan, 1864. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

eleven free black New Yorkers. Property damage totaled in the millions, including the complete destruction of more than fifty properties—most notably that of the Colored Orphan Asylum, which was set ablaze with its young residents inside. It was the largest civil disturbance to date in the United States (aside from the war itself) and was only halted when Union soldiers, some of whom came directly from the battlefield at Gettysburg, were deployed to put down the rioters by force.

A similar situation played out in the Confederacy. The Confederate Congress passed its first conscription act in the spring of 1862, a full year before its northern counterpart. Military service was required from all able-bodied males between ages eighteen and thirty-five (eventually extended to forty-five). Notable class exemptions likewise existed in the Confederacy: those who owned twenty or more slaves could escape the draft. Popular discontent reached a boiling point in 1863. Through that spring, for instance, consistent food shortages led to “bread riots” in several Confederate cities, most notably Richmond, Virginia, and the Georgia cities of Augusta, Macon, and Columbus. Confederates waged a multifront struggle against Union incursion, internal dissent, and economic scarcity on the homefront.

Military strategy shifted in 1864 towards an emphasis on “hard war,” focused on destroying civilian as well as military resources and populations. The new tactics evolved slowly, as restraint toward southern civilians and property ultimately gave way to a concerted effort to demoralize the South and destroy the southern economy. Grant’s successes at Vicksburg and Chattanooga, Tennessee (November 1863), and Meade’s cautious pursuit of Lee after Gettysburg prompted Lincoln to promote Grant to general-in-chief of the Union army in early 1864. This change in command resulted in some of the bloodiest battles of the Eastern Theater. Grant’s Overland Campaign, including the Battle of the Wilderness, the Battle of Cold Harbor, and the siege of Petersburg, demonstrated Grant’s willingness to tirelessly attack the ever-dwindling Army of Northern Virginia. By June 1864, Grant’s army surrounded the Confederate city of Petersburg, Virginia. Siege operations cut off Confederate forces and supplies from the capital of Richmond. Meanwhile, out west, Union armies under the command of William Tecumseh Sherman implemented “hard war” strategies and slowly made their way through central Tennessee and northern Georgia, capturing the vital rail hub of Atlanta in September 1864.

14.10 – Women’s Roles in the Civil War

American women from a variety of social and racial backgrounds provided crucial support both for the Union and the Confederacy. In the North, many women rose to take pivotal leadership roles in the sanitary fairs—a clear contribution to the northern war effort. Women also took on key roles within hospitals both North and South. The publisher’s notice for *Nurse and Spy in the Union Army* states, “In the opinion of many, it is the privilege of woman to minister to the sick and soothe the sorrowing—and in the present crisis of our country’s history, to aid our brothers



Thomas Nast, “Our Heroines, United States Sanitary Commission,” in *Harper’s Weekly*, April 9, 1864. Cushing/Whitney Medical Library at Yale University.

to the extent of her capacity.”²⁶ Mary Chesnut wrote, “Every woman in the house is ready to rush into the [Florence Nightingale](#) business.”²⁷ However, she indicated that after she visited the hospital, “I can never again shut out of view the sights that I saw there of human misery. I sit thinking, shut my eyes, and see it all.”²⁸ Hospital conditions were often so bad that many volunteer nurses quit soon after beginning. Kate Cumming volunteered as a nurse shortly after the war began. She, and other volunteers, traveled with the Army of Tennessee. However, all but one of the women who volunteered with Cumming quit within a week. In the North, the conditions in hospitals were somewhat superior. This was partly due to the organizational skills of women like Dorothea Dix, who was the Union’s Superintendent for Army Nurses. Additionally, many women were members of the United States Sanitary Commission and helped to staff and supply medical facilities in the North.

For some women, the best way to support their cause was spying on the enemy. When the war broke out, Rose O’Neal Greenhow was living in

Washington, D.C., where she traveled in high social circles, gathering information for her Confederate contact. Suspecting Greenhow of espionage, [Allan Pinkerton](#) placed her under surveillance, instigated a raid on her house to gather evidence, and then placed her under house arrest, after which she was incarcerated in Old Capitol Prison. Upon her release, she was sent, under guard, to Baltimore, Maryland. From there Greenhow went to Europe to attempt to bring support to the Confederacy. Failing in her efforts, Greenhow decided to return to America, boarding the blockade runner *Condor*, which ran aground near Wilmington, North Carolina. Subsequently, she drowned after her lifeboat capsized in a storm.

Greenhow gave her life for the Confederate cause, while Elizabeth “Crazy Bet” Van Lew sacrificed her social standing for the Union. Van Lew was from a prominent Richmond, Virginia, family and spied on the Confederacy, leading to her being “held in contempt & scorn by the narrow minded men and women of my city for my loyalty.”²⁹ Indeed, when General Ulysses Grant took control of Richmond, he placed a special guard on Van Lew. In addition to her espionage activities, Van Lew also worked as a nurse to Union prisoners in Libby Prison.

For pro-Confederate southern women, there were more opportunities to show their scorn for the enemy. Some women in New Orleans took demonstrations to the level of dumping their [chamber pots](#) onto the heads of unsuspecting federal soldiers who stood underneath their balconies, leading to Benjamin Butler’s infamous General Order Number 28, which arrested all rebellious women as prostitutes. But Confederate women also led mobs to protest food shortages and rampant inflation within the Confederate South. Exerting their own political control, women dramatically impacted the war through violent actions in these cases, as well as constant petitions to governors for aid and the release of husbands from military service. One of these women wrote a letter to North Carolina governor Zebulon Vance, saying, “Especially for the sake of suffering women and children, do try and stop this cruel war.”³⁰



Pauline Cushman was an American actress and a wartime spy. Using her guile to fraternize with Confederate officers, Cushman snuck military plans and drawings to Union officials in her shoes. She was caught, tried, and sentenced to death, but was apparently saved days before her execution by the occupation of her native New Orleans by Union forces. Whether as spies, nurses, or textile workers, women were essential to the Union war effort. “Pauline Cushman,” c. 1855-1865. Library of Congress.

14.11 – Civil War Medicine

Disease haunted both the Union and Confederate armies and accounted for more the majority of all Civil War casualties. The overwhelming majority of Civil War soldiers came from rural areas, where less exposure to diseases meant soldiers lacked immunities. Vaccines for diseases such as smallpox were largely unavailable to those outside cities or towns. Despite the common nineteenth-century tendency to see city men as weak or soft, soldiers from urban environments tended to succumb to fewer diseases than their rural counterparts. Tuberculosis, measles, rheumatism, typhoid, malaria, and smallpox spread almost unchecked among the armies. Sometimes as many as half of the men in a company could be too sick to report for duty.

At the time of the Civil War, medical theories and practices in the United States varied widely but aimed almost exclusively to treat patients rather than prevent outbreaks of disease. There was no universally recognized germ theory, and many soldiers and medical practitioners engaged in habits--of food preparation, personal hygiene, and drinking unclean water--that we would consider unsanitary today.³¹ Diarrhea and dysentery were common and especially dangerous, as Civil War soldiers could not understand the value of replacing fluids as they were lost. As such, men affected by these conditions would weaken and become unable to fight or march, and as they became dehydrated their immune system became less effective, inviting other infections to attack the body. Many soldiers attempted to cure themselves by concocting their own elixirs and medicines using various plants and minerals found in woods or fields. Through trial and error soldiers began to protect themselves from some of the more preventable sources of infection. For instance, around 1862 both armies began to dig latrines rather than rely on the local waterways to carry human waste. Burying human and animal excrement also cut down on exposure to diseases considerably.

Action in both theaters during 1864 caused even more casualties and furthered the devastation of the Civil War, overwhelming medics and field hospital facilities. As America's first modern conflict, the Civil War illuminated the limitations in outmoded military protocols and procedures for medical services, including emergency evacuation and ambulance systems, medical triage, and the availability of surgical intervention. If a soldier was wounded in the torso, throat, or head, there was little surgeons could do to treat the injury beyond removing shrapnel. Invasive procedures to repair damaged organs or stem blood loss invariably resulted in death. Luckily for soldiers, only approximately one in six combat wounds were to one of those parts. A majority of combat wounds occurred to limbs, but new types of firearms and ammunition made such injuries more destructive to human tissue than those from older weapons. In many cases, the lethal threat of sepsis or a [gangrene](#) infection was more pressing than concerns about saving limbs, and many military surgeons treated such wounds by amputation. A soldier had the highest chance of survival if a limb was removed within forty-eight hours of injury. A skilled surgeon could amputate a limb in three to five minutes from start to finish. While the lack of germ theory again caused several unsafe practices, such as using the same tools on multiple patients, wiping hands on filthy gowns, or placing hands in communal buckets of water, there is evidence that amputation offered the best chance of survival. Of the nearly 30,000 documented amputations performed by U.S. military practitioners during the Civil War, more than 21,000 patients reportedly survived their procedures.

It is a common misconception that amputations were routinely performed without anesthesia and against a patient's wishes. Since the 1830s, Americans understood the benefits of gases like nitrous oxide and ether in easing pain. Chloroform and opium were also used to either render a patient unconscious or to dull pain during surgical and dental procedures. Also, surgeons would not amputate without the patient's consent, even in emergency situations. In the Union army alone, 2.8 million ounces of opium and over 5.2 million opium pills were administered. In 1862, William



Amputations were a common form of treatment during the war. While it saved the lives of some soldiers, it was extremely painful and resulted in death in many cases. It also produced the first community of war veterans without limbs in American history. "Amputation being performed in a hospital tent, Gettysburg," July 1863. National Archives and Records Administration.

Alexander Hammon was appointed Surgeon General for the United States. He sought to regulate dosages and manage supplies of available medicines, both to prevent overdosing and to ensure that an ample supply remained for the next engagement. However, his guidelines tended to apply only to the regular federal army, which frequently had inadequate supplies to overwhelmed field hospitals and camps. Furthermore, most Union soldiers were in volunteer units and organized at the state level. Their surgeons often ignored posted limits on medicines, or worse, experimented with their own concoctions made from local flora.

It is difficult to study medical

experiences for the Confederacy because government officials destroyed many of their medical records toward the end of the war. However, based on other kinds of evidence, we can posit that Confederate soldiers experienced even more shortcomings and inconsistencies in medical supply and treatment, particularly as the war raged on.

14.12 – Death and Mourning

Death came in many forms for Civil War soldiers; disease, prisons, bullets, even lightning and bee stings that took lives slowly or suddenly. Before the war, a wife expected to sit at her husband's bed, holding his hand, and ministering to him after a long, fulfilling life. This type of death, "the Good Death," changed during the Civil War as so many men died far from home, among strangers.³² Casualty reporting was inconsistent, so a woman was often at the mercy of the men who fought alongside her husband to learn not only the details of his death but even that the death had occurred. "Now I'm a widow. Ah! That mournful word. Little the world think of the agony it contains!" wrote Sally Randle Perry in her diary.³³ After her husband's death at Sharpsburg, Sally received the label she would share with more than 200,000 other women. The death of a husband and loss of financial, physical, and emotional support could shatter lives. It also had the perverse power to free women from bad marriages and open doors to financial and psychological independence.

Widows had an important role to play in Civil War cultures. The ideal widow wore black, mourned for a minimum of two and a half years, resigned herself to God's will, focused on her children, devoted herself to her husband's memory, and brought his body home for burial at any cost. Many tried, but not all widows were able to live up to the ideal. Many were unable to purchase proper mourning garb. Black silk dresses, heavy veils, and other features of antebellum mourning were expensive and in short supply. Because most of these women were in their childbearing years, the war created an unprecedented number of widows who were pregnant or still breastfeeding infants. In a time when the average woman gave birth to eight to ten

children in her lifetime, it is perhaps not surprising that the Civil War created so many widows who were also young mothers with little time to observe formal mourning procedures. Widowhood permeated American society but, in the end, it was up to each widow to navigate her own grief as she joined the ranks of sisters, mothers, cousins, girlfriends, and communities in mourning.³⁴

"Mourning Women Among the Richmond Ruins, April 1865,"
in Francis Trevelyan Miller and Robert S. Lanier, *The Photographic History of the Civil War: Thousands of Scenes Photographed 1861-65, with Text by Many Special Authorities* (New York: Review of Reviews Co., 1880).
Wikimedia.



14.13 – The Election of 1864 and End of the War

By the fall of 1864, military and social events played against the backdrop of the presidential contest. While the war raged on, the election featured a transformed electorate. Three new states (West Virginia, Nevada, and Kansas) had been added to the Union since 1860, while the eleven states of the Confederacy did not participate in the election. Lincoln and his new vice-presidential nominee, Andrew Johnson (a Democrat from Tennessee who remained loyal to the Union), ran on the National Union Party ticket. Lincoln's main competition came from his former commander, General George B. McClellan. Though McClellan himself was a "War Democrat," the official platform of the Democratic Party in 1864 revolved around negotiating an immediate end to the Civil War. McClellan's vice-presidential nominee was George H. Pendleton of Ohio—a well-known "Peace Democrat."

On Election Day—November 8, 1864—Lincoln and McClellan each needed 117 electoral votes (out of a possible 233) to win the presidency. For much of the 1864 campaign season, Lincoln downplayed his chances of reelection and McClellan assumed that large numbers of Union soldiers would grant him support. However, thanks in large part to William Sherman's capture of Atlanta on September 2, 1864, and overwhelming support from Union troops, Lincoln won the



With crowds of people filling every inch of ground around the U.S. Capitol, President Lincoln delivered his inaugural address on March 4, 1865. Alexander Gardner, "Lincoln's Second Inaugural," c. 1910-1920 (from a photograph taken in 1865). Wikimedia.

election easily. Additionally, Lincoln received support from more radical Republican factions and members of the Radical Democracy Party that demanded the end of slavery. In the popular vote, Lincoln defeated McClellan, 55.1 percent to 44.9 percent. In the Electoral College, Lincoln's victory was even more pronounced: 212 to 21. Lincoln won twenty-two states, and McClellan only carried three: New Jersey, Delaware, and Kentucky.³⁵

In the wake of his reelection, Abraham Lincoln delivered his second inaugural address on March 4, 1865, in which he concluded:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.³⁶

The years 1864 and 1865 were the very definition of “hard war.” Incredibly deadly for both sides, the Union campaigns in both the West and the East destroyed Confederate infrastructure and demonstrated the efficacy of the Union's strategy. Following up on the successful capture of Atlanta, William Sherman conducted his **March to the Sea** in the fall of 1864, arriving in Savannah with time to capture it and deliver it as a Christmas present for Abraham Lincoln. Sherman's path of destruction took on an even more destructive tone as he moved into the heart of the Confederacy in South Carolina in early 1865. The burning of Columbia, South Carolina's capital, and subsequent capture of Charleston brought the hard hand of war to the birthplace of secession. With Grant's dogged pursuit of the Army of Northern Virginia, Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox Court House on April 9, 1865, effectively ending major Confederate military operations.



Union soldiers pose in front of the Appomattox Court House after Lee's surrender in April 1865. Wikimedia.

14.14 – The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln

On the evening of Friday, April 14, 1865, President Lincoln attended the performance of the comedy *Our American Cousin* at Ford's Theatre in Washington with his wife and several friends. Shortly after 10:00pm, as the president laughed and enjoyed the final moments of the play, actor John Wilkes Booth entered the president's theatre box and shot Lincoln in the back of the head. The president slumped forward, immediately unconscious, while Booth vaulted over the balcony onto the stage, shouted "*Sic semper tyrannis!*" and escaped via a back stage door, fracturing his leg in the process. Lincoln was hurried across the street to Petersen's Boarding House, where he died of his wounds several hours later, early in the morning on April 15. Booth, aided in his plot and escape by several co-conspirators, fled through southern Maryland and was caught on April 26 at Garrett's Farm in Virginia, where he was shot and killed while resisting arrest.

Lincoln's death—the first assassination of a sitting President in American history—sent shock waves throughout the vulnerable nation. The day after his death, Easter Sunday, saw churches across the Union filled to capacity with mourners united in their grief. Stunned soldiers in army camps gathered together in prayer to try and absorb the horrific news. Heavy sorrow swept through communities of freedpeople across the South. Even the most eloquent Americans, including Frederick Douglass, were at a loss for words to express their despair.³⁷ At the same time, a government trying to recover from a horrific and unprecedented war now looked to a new executive, Andrew Johnson, for guidance. The *New York Times* described the new President as “a man of courage, of sound judgment and of a patriotism which has stood the test of the most terrible trials. His sympathies are with the people, and all his action will be for their good.”³⁸ Overall, though, the assassination of Lincoln united Americans in confusion as well as sadness: what would happen next?

“The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln,” Currier & Ives, c. 1865. Wikimedia.



14.15 – Conclusion

As battlefields fell silent in 1865, the question of secession had been answered, slavery had been eradicated, and America was once again territorially united. But in many ways, the conclusion of the Civil War created more questions than answers. How would the nation become one again? Who was responsible for rebuilding the South? What role would African Americans occupy in this society? Northern and southern soldiers returned home with broken bodies, broken spirits, and broken minds. Plantation owners had land but not labor. Recently freed African Americans had their labor but no land. Former slaves faced a world of possibilities—legal marriage, family reunions, employment, and fresh starts—but also a racist world of bitterness, violence, and limited opportunity. The war may have been over, but the battles for the peace were just beginning. Lincoln's sudden, violent death just days after Robert E. Lee's

surrender shocked an already grieving nation, and the transfer of power to Vice President Andrew Johnson--a southern Democrat--raised even more pressing questions about the nation's direction after the war.

To ensure the permanent legal end of slavery, Republicans drafted the Thirteenth Amendment during the war. Yet the end of legal slavery did not mean the end of racial injustice. During the war, ex-slaves were often segregated into disease-ridden contraband camps. After the war, the Republican Reconstruction program of guaranteeing black rights succumbed to persistent racism and southern white violence. Long after 1865, most black southerners continued to labor on plantations, albeit as nominally free tenants or sharecroppers, while facing public segregation and voting discrimination. The effects of slavery would endure long after emancipation.

14.16 – Reference Material

This chapter was edited by Angela Esco Elder and David Thomson, with content contributions by Thomas Balcerski, William Black, Dea Boster, Frank Cirillo, Matthew C. Hulbert, Andrew F. Lang, John Riley, Angela Riotto, Gregory N. Stern, David Thomson, Ann Tucker, and Rebecca Zimmer.

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