

The Civil War Summary & Analysis

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Analytic Overview

For four years between 1861 and 1865 the United States engaged in a civil war. Divisions between the free North and the slaveholding South erupted into a full-scale conflict after the election of Abraham Lincoln as president in 1860. Eleven southern states seceded from the Union, collectively turning their back on the idea of a single American nation. Lincoln, who had been in office for only six weeks, declared these acts of secession illegal, and asked Congress for 500,000 soldiers to crush what threatened to be an aggressive rebellion. In April 1861, the first shots were fired and what followed became a national tragedy of unimaginable proportions. More than 600,000 soldiers were killed and millions more wounded; large sections of the South were ravaged by violent battles; and the Union nearly collapsed under determined Confederate forces.

The war itself began hesitantly, but after the Battle of Bull Run (Manassas) in July 1861, it was clear that warfare would last for many months, perhaps even years. Huge battles raged in places such as Fredericksburg, Chickamauga and Shiloh and in Virginia and Tennessee, where 40% of the 10,000 engagements of the war were fought. Winning victory after victory over poorly-led Union forces, Confederate General Robert E. Lee invaded Maryland in September 1862. But there he suffered a major loss at the Battle of Antietam, the bloodiest engagement of the war. The following year, Lee trounced the Union Army at Chancellorsville and invaded Pennsylvania, leading to the climactic Battle of Gettysburg in which 50,000 men were killed or wounded and Lee was forced to retreat to Virginia, never to invade the North again.

In the West, Union General Ulysses S. Grant took the important Confederate town of Vicksburg on the Mississippi River on 4 July 1863, the same day that news of the Union victory at Gettysburg reached Washington. Despite these key victories, the war was still not over. Grant launched his Overland Campaign in 1864 and fought a series of major battles. He hoped to destroy Lee's army by utilizing a strategy of attrition, but the tactic failed. In retaliation Union General William Tecumseh Sherman marched from Atlanta to Savannah, burning the countryside as he went. By the spring of 1865, the South was exhausted, and on April 9, Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox Court House, effectively ending the war.

Though most Americans knew that the central reason behind the war was slavery, it was not until the Battle of Antietam in September 1862 that Lincoln began emancipating the slaves. On January 1, 1863, Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation freeing

all slaves in captured Confederate territory. From that point on, the war officially became one over the issue of slavery. Still, it was not until after the war, in December 1865, that the Thirteenth Amendment was ratified, finally freeing all slaves in America.

Economically, the war was a boon for the North and a disaster for the South. The North began the war with several advantages: more men, more money, more industrial power, and an extensive railroad system. And by the end of the war, the North continued to dominate economically, while the ravaged South struggled to recover economically and psychologically from the devastation of the war. In addition to losing many of its young men, sons, husbands, fathers, and friends to the conflict, the southern planter aristocracy was crushed in the war, and never regained its political power.

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