**A Long, Tense Night**

Throughout the long, sleepless night of April 11, 1861, the people of Charleston, South Carolina tensely awaited the outcome of a showdown.

South Carolina had seceded from the United States the previous December, and was demanding the evacuation of US Army troops from all facilities in Charleston harbor. The one remaining US Army garrison, the island fortress of Fort Sumter in the middle of the harbor entrance, refused.

Many weeks passed while federal and local authorities worked hard to negotiate a peaceful solution to the crisis. All the while, a tightening noose of armed troops and warships began to strangle the increasingly besieged federal garrison. When garrison commander Major Robert Anderson informed South Carolina governor Francis Pickens of the approach of federal supply ships in early April, Pickens responded with a final ultimatum: evacuate or be fire upon. Once again, Anderson refused.

At 4:30 a.m. on the morning of April 12, 1861, former US Army Lieutenant James Farley pulled the firing lanyard on a 10-inch mortar in an artillery position at Fort Johnson on shore. The explosion of Farley’s shell, aimed to detonate above Fort Sumter, was the signal to commence firing for the 4003 guns of the shore batteries that surrounded the embattled Fort Sumter.

Two full days of artillery bombardment wore down the defenders little by little, but they returned fire best as they could. Ammunition, food and the troops’ strength finally reached a dangerously low ebb on the afternoon of April 13. Satisfied that his now exhausted and hungry soldiers had resisted as honorably as circumstances allowed, Major Anderson agreed to evacuate them from the now ruined Fort Sumter.

These was the opening shots of the American Civil War, a terrible four-year bloodbath between North and South that killed 620,000 men, wounded 476,000, laid waste to large swathes of the southern United States and sowed seeds of bitterness and political conflict that persist down to the present day.

This conflagration that pitted brother against brother happened because democracy in America failed to peacefully reconcile the tension between governmental power and liberty. Such tension sparked many furious disputes over tariffs, taxes, states’ rights and other issues in the early decades of America’s democratic experiment. None of these issues provoked fury quite like the issue of slavery.

**Slavery: The “Peculiar Institution”**

The first Africans to arrive in British North America were brought to the Jamestown colony in 1619 by Dutch slave traders. Few African slaves came to North America throughout the 17th century because of the tremendous cost of buying slaves and the long distances to the nearest slave markets in the West Indies. British colonials therefore used indentured servants to perform most involuntary labor in America’s early decades.

This changed toward the end of the 17th century for a number of reasons: the growing shift a towards more labor-intensive agriculture, a drop in the price of slaves, the growth of wealth among the planting classes and a decrease in the pool of indentured servants from Europe. As the 18th century progressed, laws regulating unfree African labor made servitude a permanent, inheritable status.

The first rifts among Americans over slavery appeared in the Revolutionary War period. The North, where slaves served more as artisans and craftsmen than as agricultural laborers, had begun to outlaw the institution, partially in response to the rise of politically active abolitionist societies in that region. By 1804, slavery ceased to exist in the northern states altogether. Slavery was now an utterly southern institution.

As long as the fledgling nation remained within its traditional boundaries along the eastern seaboard, the slavery issue ruffled few people’s feathers. When the nation began to grow, Americans raised a troubling question for which no satisfactory answer existed: could slave owners bring the so-called “peculiar institution” with them into new territories?

The first attempt to answer this question, the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, forbade the importation of slavery into the newly-opened lands west of the Northern states, while upholding fugitive slave laws. Later that same year, the US Constitution also upheld fugitive slave laws, while mandating a future end to the slave trade. More troublesome was the document’s Three-Fifths Compromise, which determined that slaves would count as three fifths of a person for the purposes of allotting congressional representation. The compromise, while better than nothing, gave Southerners disproportionate representation and power in national affairs for the next few generations.

**Southern Slave Culture Takes its Final Shape**

Ironically, decreasing profitability of the old cash crops grown with slave labor—tobacco, indigo, rice, etc.—plus an increasing immigration labor in this postwar period was giving rise to talk about slavery’s immanent demise. Eli Whitney’s invention of the cotton gin in 1793 saved the day for the slave economy.

The 50-fold increase in the speed of cotton processing made cotton so spectacularly profitable that it became one of the largest American exports, bar none. In 1790, the United States produced 3,000 bales of cotton. On the eve of the Civil War, that figure had shot to 4,000,000 bales, an expansion aided in large part by the acquisition of lands along the Mississippi River by the Louisiana Purchase of 1803.

More cotton demanded more slave labor, and over the next half century, the southern slave-owning culture became the foundation of southern wealth and power. The planting class worked hard to maintain the shape of southern culture just as it was, right up until 1861. Little dynamic change, whether through immigration, the growth of new cities or new industrial manufacturing, was allowed to come in and stir up the pot.

**Free Labor in the North**

In contrast to the slow, steady, static pace in the world of southern agriculture, early 19th-century northerners were building and making new things at a frenzied pace that got faster with each passing decade. First, they built thousands of miles of roads and canals, and then, tens of thousands of miles of railroad track. All this was to transport the burgeoning fruits of industrial labor from the North’s mushrooming thicket of factories to its rapidly expanding mass consumer markets.

Free labor built the northern industrial economy, yet northern industry also helped make the southern slave economy its great wealth by buying southern cotton and selling it back to the South in the form of mass-produced cotton clothing. In addition, many in the embryonic labor movement cast the rapid transition from independent, home-based production to wage-based factory labor as a form of slavery incompatible with republican democracy itself.

Most northerners were not abolitionists, nonetheless, northerners took pride in their system of free labor. In time, though, they came to see southern slavery as offensive to their concepts of republican liberty in its elevation of a despotic slave-owning class at the expense of a free enterprise available to the masses.

**Tempers Begin to Rise Over Slavery**

The southern concept of republican liberty revolved around deeply cherished rights to own property, which included the right to own slaves. The increasingly strident clamor against slavery among northern abolitionists sounded to southern slave owners like thinly-veiled threats to steal their property—the very foundation of their wealth—by force. This guaranteed that the response of outraged southerners against what they saw as encroachments by the North upon their way of life would grow more and more hostile with each passing crisis.

**The Fight Over Extending Slavery Begins**

The first major dispute over slavery since the 1790s came in 1820 when a successful petition by Missouri to be admitted as a slave state upset the balance of power in Congress between its pro-slavery and anti-slavery blocs. To restore balance, Congress agreed to admit Maine as a free state, and to ban slavery north of the parallel marking Missouri’s southern boundary.

New import tariffs passed in Congress in 1828 raised hackles again. Southerners objected to the disproportionate harm it inflicted on exports of the South’s chief cash crop, cotton. It also deprived the South of cheaper industrial products that they were now forced to buy from the North and from abroad at higher prices. Southerners felt so incensed by what they came to call the Tariff of Abominations that they threatened to declare the law null and void in 1832.

A new tariff law proposed by president Andrew Jackson and passed by Congress later that year failed to mollify the nullificationists, who pressed ahead with a state convention that declared both the tariffs of 1828 and 1832 unconstitutional. South Carolina only backed down after its preparations for military resistance to the law’s enforcement were met with the threat of federal retaliation in kind.

The passing of a compromise tariff satisfactory to South Carolinians in 1833 turned down the heat of public outrage, but the lesson southerners took from the tariff fight had already sunk in. If the North was able and willing to impose its will on the South in the setting of tariff rates, it was able and willing to impose its will on southern rights to own slaves.

**The Mexican War Poisons the Waters**

Up through the late 1840s, Americans had managed to hold their tempers well enough to compromise their way through each latest political crisis over the slavery issue peacefully. The coming of the Mexican War in 1846 marked the beginning of the end of the common ground which had made compromise possible.

Political contention in this period centered around the aggressive expansionism being championed by the Democratic party, the party dominated by the wealthy planter class of the South. Boosters of what came to be called Manifest Destiny asserted a belief that Americans had been given a divine purpose to overspread the North American continent and remake it in the image of American republican democracy.

Hoping to replicate the successful annexation of Texas after its declaration of independence from Mexico by American settlers in 1836, expansionists in Democratic Party circles including President James K. Polk declared war against Mexico. Polk and congressional Democrats’ stated aim was to seize Mexico’s North American territory. Northerners on the other hand feared that southern Democrats had provoked this war of expansion to seize new territories into which it could expand slavery.

In order to block what slavery opponents labeled the “slave power conspiracy,” a coalition of northern Democrats supported by northern Whigs unsuccessfully proposed a ban on slavery in territories annexed from Mexico, the Wilmot Proviso. Voting on the failed measure for the first time split ominously along sectional lines, a marked departure from the usual voting along party lines. Its defeat made slavery the chief issue in the election of 1848, producing such contention among Democrats that it split the party, handing the election to Whig candidate Zachary Taylor.

Southern tempers flared again when President Taylor proposed territorial status for California and its near neighbor New Mexico, accompanied by an extension of the Missouri Compromise line of 1820 to the Pacific. Taylor provoked an even louder outcry when he tried breaking the resulting stalemate by bypassing territorial status and introducing California and New Mexico as free states. Once again, Southerners threatened secession, met by threats of military action from Taylor.

**The Compromise of 1850**

After a six-month debate, Congress produced a political cease-fire agreement, the so-called Compromise of 1850. It received California into the union as a free state, set the boundaries of Texas, banned the slave trade in the District of Columbia, and organized the new territories of New Mexico and Utah under the principle of popular sovereignty, which gave citizens of new territories the right to choose for themselves whether to allow slavery.

Most controversially, the Compromise of 1850 strengthened the fugitive slave law, which placed the burden of proof of free status wholly on defendants, while a white claimant could prove ownership at court with nothing more than an affidavit from a slave-state court or by testimony from white witnesses. The new law also compelled the assistance of federal marshals in reclaiming runaway slaves, with the expense reimbursed by the government.

Many northerners had simply ignored earlier fugitive slave laws. Some, though, gave active aid to the escape network—the underground railroad—set up to help slaves escape northward to freedom, which southerners considered an insult to their honor. Many northern law enforcement officials and citizens now felt insulted in being compelled by the new, more stringent fugitive slave law of 1850 to assist the work of southern slave catchers.

A wave of apprehensions of ex-slaves triggered alarm among African-American communities and abolitionists in northern states. The heightened climate of fear and outrage provoked violent confrontations between slave-catchers and vigilante committees in the early 1850s. Outraged southerners began threatening secession if the disturbances continued.

Luckily, the apprehensions slowed to a trickle, and the furor over the fugitive slave laws simmered down, but tremendous damage had already been done to North-South relations. Northern resentment over the laws remained, and America’s sectional conflict had now reached a point in which violence was now an acceptable response. It would only get worse over the ensuing decade.

**First Blood: the Fight Over Bleeding Kansas**

The war of words at last turned into a shooting war with passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. The act gave these two new territories the rights of popular sovereignty in deciding the slavery issue, even though both territories lay north of the Missouri Compromise line. Nebraska’s entry into the union as a free state was a foregone conclusion, but Kansas sat on the fence. To tip the balance, partisans of both sides of the slavery debate streamed into Kansas from Missouri and Iowa to illegally elect a proslavery territorial legislature. A large number of anti-slavery partisans remained in Kansas, and throughout the next few years, anti-slavery and pro-slavery forces in Kansas fought a vicious guerrilla war against each other, perpetrating a number of notorious, politically-motivated massacres and military attacks on towns with partisan leanings in order to win the ideological fight for their respective sides.

An armed raid on the federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry Virginia on October 16, 1859 by radical abolitionist John Brown to procure weapons for planned slave revolts worsened North-South tensions even more. While northerners came to laud Brown as a martyr for the abolitionist cause, southern slave owners began to entertain the fear that the North might be willing to impose its will on slavery by military incursions against the south.

**The Election of 1860: the Last Straw**

The mood of the country as it prepared for the election season of 1860, then, was one of heightened fear and anger. The choice lay between Democratic stalwart Stephen Douglas, the engineer of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, and a supporter of popular sovereignty, and Abraham Lincoln of the new anti-slavery Republican Party, who opposed the expansion of slavery into the western territories.

Political stakes were very high, as southern Democrats vowed that southern states would secede from the union if a Republican were elected president. The Democrats came to the electoral fight splintered into multiple warring factions. Thanks to Democratic disunity, Lincoln won, a small miracle considering he carried not a single slave state in an election having the second highest voter turnout in American history.

The new president was himself a southerner from the border state of Kentucky, a self-taught country lawyer from humble circumstances and former congressman. Lincoln opposed slavery, and especially its extension into new territories, but he also believed that the federal government had no right to interfere with slavery where it already existed. He was no radical abolitionist.

This distinction was lost on southerners, for whom the election of Abraham Lincoln marked the final end of their forbearance on the slavery issue. Six weeks after the election, on December 20, convention delegates in South Carolina passed an ordinance of secession. Throughout January 1861, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Texas quickly followed suit.

**First Moves: the States Choose Sides**

Secessionists claimed the existence of a legal, moral right to secede based upon the example of their revolutionary forefathers in the 18th century. Like the leaders of the Revolution, southerners saw their action as striking a blow for the sake of liberty against a coercive central government that threatened their rights, particularly their rights to own slaves and transport them wherever they wanted. Northern unionists, reared in the same revolutionary tradition did not deny the right to revolution, but stipulated that revolution must have a just cause. Slavery was not such a just cause, making secession essentially anarchy in their eyes.

Opinion in the North was split between those who preferred to let the South leave peacefully, and those who wanted to restore the union by force. Some even still held out hopes that compromise or strategic inaction could mollify secessionist sentiment in the South.

In December, Kentucky senator John Crittenden introduced legislation intended to defuse the situation. The proposed law’s legal guarantees protected the practice of slavery, particularly in the District of Columbia, and it protected fugitive slave laws. It further offered to extend to the west the Missouri Compromise line with a northern, slave-free zone and a southern zone in which slavery would be legal. Southern senators actually favored this compromise, afterwards known as the Crittenden Compromise, but Republican opposition torpedoed it.

That was the end of compromising for the diehards on both sides. The union was officially broken apart.

Even with the breaking apart of the country now inevitable, questions remained about what which states would join the new breakaway country and who would stay within the United States. Ambivalence about the correct course of action was particularly pronounced among moderates in the South. Not all southerners favored secession, and indeed many went north to fight for the Union during the war. Several slave states on the border between North and South—Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, Missouri, Tennessee, and later, Virginia’s western counties that later became the new state of West Virginia—chose not to secede. Some border states declared loyalty to the union, while others declared neutrality. In some states such as Kentucky, Missouri and Tennessee, divided loyalties at the local level and sparked guerrilla conflict and blood feuds throughout the war, essentially civil wars in miniature that caused bitter wounds that lasted far beyond the war’s end.

This increasingly confusing patchwork of conflicting loyalties in the border states forced President Lincoln to tread very carefully to avoid actions that might provoke moves toward secession. Lincoln chose to leave states with divided sympathies alone to avoid upsetting the delicate political balance.

The president made an exception in the case of Maryland. A border state with strong southern sympathies, Maryland could not be left to choose its own way because it and Virginia boxed in the federal capital, Washington, DC. Marylanders justified the Union government’s concern when Confederate sympathizers rioted against Union troops transiting through Baltimore en route to Washington on April 19, 1861. In response, Lincoln ordered the occupation of the city, the jailing of secessionist sympathizers and the suspension of habeus corpus, the legal tradition guaranteeing suspects the protection of the rule of law.

**The New Confederate Government**

Secession supporters in the Deep South did not wait for unanimous buy-in from their fellow southerners before moving ahead with creating the Confederate States of America. By February 1861, a Confederate convention meeting in Montgomery, Alabama had already drafted a temporary constitution, appointed themselves as a provisional congress, and elected a president, former Mississippi Senator Jefferson Davis, and a vice president, former Georgia congressman Alexander Stephens.

Jefferson Davis, like Lincoln, was born in a log cabin in Kentucky, but the similarities ended there. His family circumstances improved abruptly early in life, affording the young Davis an upbringing worthy of the South’s privileged aristocracy. Careers as a soldier and Mexican War veteran and later congressman, senator and secretary of war all paved the way for leadership at the high level that he unexpectedly attained in 1861.

Davis actually opposed secession, even after South Carolina’s exit from the union in December, and he made numerous public pleas for peace and compromise. Shortly after his inauguration as president of the Confederate States in February, he sent a peace commission to Washington. The president of the US refused to receive them.

**Lincoln Declares His Intentions**

Lincoln entertained no doubts at all about his position on secession. He believed it legally impermissible, and fully intended to meet the situation with military force if no solution was eventually found. Nonetheless, the new president-elect opted to remain silent about the moves to secede by the southern states in the months in between his election in November and his inauguration the following March. The South knew where he stood on the question of slavery, Lincoln believed, plus he was legally unable to act until sworn into office anyway.

Lincoln finally declared his thoughts and intentions towards the new Confederate States in his inaugural address on March 4, 1861. He reaffirmed his intention not to dismantle slavery in states where it already existed. He also unequivocally labeled the secession actions of the southern states to be “the essence of anarchy,” and that he would preserve the union by all means available. This included military action.

He closed his address with a plea to the South to turn back from the path of war. It was too late, though. The die was cast. The South was willing to go to war to protect its way of life. The North was willing to go war to preserve the union.

War was now inevitable.

**First Shots: the War Begins**

The eleven states that eventually constituted the Confederacy came to the war with tremendous disadvantages relative to the 23 states of the Union. The South lagged far behind the North on every scale of measure imaginable, ranging from population (12 million southerners including 4 million slaves versus 22 million free northerners) to factory capacity (20,000 southern factories employing 100,000 workers to the North’s 1,000,000-plus workers) to available financial reserves (the North possessed 81% of the nation’s financial deposits, as well as $56 million in gold bullion). On top of all this, the Confederate States, unlike the already-established United States, would need to secure international recognition as a sovereign nation.

On the other hand, one asset the southern states did possess was the federal property on its soil that the South would need to seize to build a new country—arsenals, mints, forts, court houses, post offices and customs houses. One such federal property devoutly desired by the government of South Carolina was Fort Sumter, a fort defending the entrances to Charleston harbor, one of the last of the southern forts still in federal hands. While representatives from the state government were fruitlessly negotiating the transfer of the fort into southern hands, the blockaded federal garrison at Sumter stood surrounded by artillery batteries on the mainland backed up by thousands of state militiamen.

Lincoln’s decision to attempt to resupply the federal garrison at Sumter proved to be the last straw. On April 12, 1861, southern batteries in Charleston opened fire on the fort. Thirty-three hours later, garrison commander Major Robert Anderson surrendered, and the war was on.

The wheels turned quickly now. Virginia adopted its ordinance of secession, bringing to the new-born Confederacy the largest state population in the South, more industrial capacity, plus the political prestige of its revolutionary heritage accorded by Jefferson, Madison, Washington and other heroes of the revolutionary generation.

It also brought to the Confederacy one of its greatest military leaders, Robert E. Lee. Unwilling to fight in battle against fellow Virginians, Lee resigned his federal commission to assume command of all Virginia forces. Additionally, Virginia now provided the new Confederate States of America with its new capital, Richmond.

Three more southern states—Arkansas, North Carolina and Tennessee—followed Virginia’s lead by seceding in May and June.

Both sides, even the resource-rich North, found themselves ill-prepared to fight a major war with the paltry peacetime forces then at their disposal. At the war’s outset, the US Army had 16,000 men altogether, a third of which went south once the fighting began. In March, the Confederate Congress authorized a callup of 100,000 volunteers, while Lincoln put a call out for 75,000 men after the fall of Fort Sumter.

**The Yankee Blockade**

To buy itself time to train and equip its army for a full-scale invasion of the South, the North decided to strike its first blows at sea. Within a week of the surrender of Fort Sumter, General Winfield Scott, commander-in-chief of the Union army announced the so-called “Anaconda Plan,” a strategic blockade of southern port cities on the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico and along the Mississippi River.

The Yankee naval blockading force would eventually grow large enough to shut down the trade coming in and out of Confederate port cities, but that was a few years in the future, for the US Navy possessed only a pitiful 42 naval ships. Now that war had begun, the US Navy swung into action with a crash shipbuilding and procurement program that swelled, by the end of which its arsenal of ships numbered in the hundreds. What ships the Union navy did have made opening moves to gain control of waterways leading into Virginia, countered by to choke off access to Washington, DC via the Chesapeake Bay and the Potomac River.

**The First Major Battles**

Few significant military engagements outside these small naval actions happened in the opening weeks of the fighting. The lone exception was the Battle of Boonville, a small Union victory in central Missouri on June 17, 1861 that, despite involving barely 3,000 troops altogether, drove pro-secessionist forces from the center of the state for the rest of the war and prevented the secession of Missouri, at least for the time being.

Back in the East, a loud public clamoring for a march on Richmond to put an early end to the rebellion prodded the government into taking its first major crack at the enemy. Lincoln directed an attack on Confederate forces at Manassas Junction, just 30 miles west of Washington in Virginia. Union General Irvin McDowell’s inexperienced troops performed poorly against Confederate General P.G.T. Beauregard’s equally green troops in the clash outside Manassas on July 21, but reinforcements from the Shenandoah Valley commanded by General Joseph E. Johnston, and poor execution of maneuvering by Union commanders tipped the balance of the battle. Routed Union troops fled the battlefield back towards Washington in a panic, handing the South its first decisive tactical victory. Not incidentally, it also postponed for almost a year a Union strike at the Virginia heartland.

Besides handing the South its first major victory of the war, the First Battle of Manassas had a hand in creating one of the Confederacy’s most enduring legends. Late on the morning of the battle, as Union forces walloped Confederate forces in a flanking maneuver that sparked a disorderly retreat, one southern brigade commanded by General Thomas Jackson held its ground. Confederate General Barnard Bee, seeing Jackson and his men make their stand, exclaimed out loud, “There stands Jackson like a stone wall!” From that day on, Jackson was known as “Stonewall.”

Within a week of the battle, Abraham Lincoln signed two bills with a new callup for volunteers, tapping General George McClellan as commander of a new army to be called the Army of the Potomac. McClellan had caught Lincoln’s eye after the general’s small but well-fought victories that summer at Philippi and Rich Mountain in western Virginia. The appointment of what appeared to be a competent commander raised public high hopes for McClellan, who in fairly short order whipped his powerful new army into shape.

The psychological blow of the big loss at Manassas, however, had instilled in northern commanders a sense of military inferiority that would undermine their aggressiveness for months to come. In the fevered imaginations of northern generals, southern forces were always bigger, stronger and more capable, against which contending northern armies would have to be at the pitch of readiness and strength to have a chance of winning. Over the first few years of the war, few northern generals at the very top would feel confident in their own military strength. The result was three years of foot-dragging.

Indeed, procrastination and inaction had become the watchwords of the Army of the Potomac throughout the summer and fall of 1861. Ever complaining about the need for more men and resources, despite his army’s overwhelming numerical superiority over the Confederates units creeping closer towards Washington, an increasingly risk-averse McClellan hesitated to take action.

**The Invasion of Kentucky**

With fighting in Virginia at a lull, events in Kentucky, the home state of President Lincoln, gained the attention of North and South. Like Missouri, Kentucky was a vital border state that the North could not afford to lose. The state gave the Union access to the Midwest’s system of rivers so vital for travel in the West. Whoever controlled the rivers could potentially control the region. Furthermore, the loss of Kentucky would have made the Union’s later campaigns in Tennessee far more difficult.

Though it chose not to secede and join the Confederacy, Kentucky initially declared itself neutral in the opening months of the war. The increasing activities of contending armies at its borders pushed the Kentucky government to elect a pro-Union legislature in August. The seizure of Columbus on the Mississippi in September 1861 by Confederate forces under General Leonidas Polk forced the hand of unionists in the state legislature to request federal assistance to resist the invasion. Commander of the Union’s western armies, General John C. Fremont, sent forces under General Ulysses S. Grant to take Paducah at the mouths of the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers. War had come to Kentucky at last.

**Lee’s Debut at the Helm**

It was at this time that one of the war’s most legendary Southern commanders, General Robert E. Lee, made a rather floundering debut in battle. A sizable body of Union troops commanded by General William Rosecrans had been sent to give support to the pro-Union government of what was to become West Virginia in Wheeling, as well as to protect Pennsylvania and Ohio from Confederate attack. After fighting in the area had cleared it of Confederate forces by July 1861, the Confederate government sent troops to reclaim the region.

An army under Lee’s command confronting a federal force dug in atop Cheat Mountain encountered trouble in September when Union prisoners duped Lee into grossly overestimating the size of the opposing Union contingent. As Lee hesitated, approaching Union reinforcements attacked the Confederate force, and Lee withdrew. Richmond newspapers derided the general as “Granny Lee” for his blunder.

**Missouri Secured for the Union**

Fighting with important consequences again flared up in Missouri throughout the summer and fall with Confederate victories at Wilson’s Creek near Springfield on August 10 and Lexington on September 20. This emboldened the pro-Confederate governor Claiborne Fox Jackson to push through an ordinance of secession in October, but Union victories in Missouri later that month forced Jackson to flee the state, leaving the state safely in federal hands for most of the rest of the war.

The thwarted attempt to bring Missouri into the Confederacy in 1861 was only the beginning of the state’s suffering. Warfare between conventional Union and Confederate forces began to be replaced by a vicious guerrilla conflict between pro-Confederate bushwhackers and pro-Union jayhawkers. Far less restrained than the guerrilla wars of the 1850s, the killing, burning and looting perpetrated throughout Missouri by neighbor against neighbor over the next three and a half years would produce a legacy of bitterness that would last for decades.

**The Riverine War in the West**

As the winter of 1861-1862 waning, an impatient Abraham Lincoln issued General War Order No. 1 on January 27, 1862, which mandated movement by all land and sea forces by February 22. It’s primary target, the ever-cautious McClellan remained unmoved, but in the western theater of operations, the order brought results.

The riverine system that converged on Cairo, Illinois, where the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers came together provided an open road straight into the western reaches of the Confederacy. The route was blocked, however, by Confederate fortifications along the Mississippi. These defenses had recently been put in place by the new senior Confederate commander in the West, General Albert Sidney Johnston, considered by many as the South’s best military leader the South at the time. Johnston also built Forts Donelson and Henry along two other potential invasion routes to the south, the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers. Grant considered the defenses along the Cumberland and Tennessee to be of poor quality, and it was this chink in the South’s armor that he decided to exploit.

Grant, along with troops conveyed by the river boats of Flag Officer Andrew Foote, forced the surrender of Fort Henry after an artillery duel on February 6. Bringing the fight to Fort Donelson on February 11, Grant’s probing attacks and Foote’s bombardment failed at first to reduce southern defenses, but after failing in an attempt to break out, rebel forces surrendered on February 16.

This important victory at Fort Donelson forced Johnston to evacuate both Nashville and Columbus, from which Confederate forces retreated in order to regroup in greater combined force at Corinth, Mississippi. The win also gave Grant a new nickname. During the siege of Fort Donelson, Confederate General Simon Bolivar Buckner sent Grant a message requesting negotations for surrender terms. Grant’s response: nothing but unconditional surrender. Afterwards, the northern press gleefully maintained that Grant’s first two initials U.S. stood for “Unconditional Surrender.”

Grant’s superior, General Henry Halleck ordered Grant to move deeper into Tennessee along the Tennessee River. In early April 1862, a Confederate force under Albert Sidney Johnston and P.G.T. Beauregard attacked Grant’s army at Shiloh along the Tennessee River on April 6, 1862, catching Grant completely unaware.

He had expected Johnston and Beauregard’s troops to stay in Corinth for the time being, and consequently, Grant ordered no defensive entrenchments built, nor did he station pickets or send out cavalry patrols. Only Grant’s calm, dogged leadership and that of his chief subordinate, General William T. Sherman, enabled the Union men to hold their own, sweeping the rebels off the field the next day in a successful surprise counterattack. The victory did not come without cost. This battle was the bloodiest in American history up to that point, producing 24,000 casualties, including the able General Albert Sydney Johnston.

A Union assault commanded by General John Pope on April 7 seized the Confederate river defenses on Island Number 10, which sits in the so-called Kentucky Bend of the Mississippi where Missouri, Kentucky and Tennessee converge. This opened the river to Union forces as far south as Memphis. Another Union naval force under the command of Admiral David Farragut was pushing northward from the mouth of the Mississippi River. New Orleans fell to Farragut’s fleet of river boats on April 25, 1862. Farragut followed up with taking Baton Rouge and Natchez over the next couple of months.

Now the only remaining nut to crack blocking total Union control of the Mississippi was the town of Vicksburg, Mississippi, and it would prove an extremely difficult nut to crack, indeed. Farragut’s initial attempt to reduce the considerable artillery defenses of Vicksburg in late June 1862 was repulsed by Vicksburg’s heavy guns and the fierce attacks of the Confederate ship the CSS *Arkansas.* Farragut retreated in July, leaving the Confederates in control of the Mississippi from Vicksburg down to Port Hudson, Louisiana.

**The Ironclads’ First Fight**

In March of 1862, another series of naval actions took place further to the east that would have truly earthshaking implications for the future of naval warfare. The *CSS* *Virginia* (formerly the USS *Merrimack*), one of the first ironclad vessels in existence, went into combat for the first time on March 6, 1862. Venturing into Hampton Roads, a large body of water near the entrance to the Chesapeake Bay, the *Virginia* sank the *USS Cumberland* and running the wooden frigates the *USS Congress* and the *USS Minnesota* aground.

Three days later on March 9, the Union’s own ironclad, the *USS Monitor*, arrived on the scene to rescue the crippled Union ships. In an inconclusive battle, the *Monitor* and the nearby *Virginia* traded shots for a few hours before the *Virginia* withdrew.

**The Peninsular Campaign Begins**

Fighting in the East on land finally began in earnest in March 1862 when George McClellan finally set off with the Army of the Potomac to engage rebel forces in Virginia. This move was a long time in coming. Some eight months had elapsed since President Lincoln had given McClellan the top job in the Union army. During the long months of waiting, Lincoln, other northern leaders and even the northern public had grown impatient with McClellan’s lack of movement, but it was time for the Army of the Potomac to go.

Instead of taking a straight route overland from Washington to Richmond, McClellan opted for an amphibious landing on the York Peninsula formed by the James and York Rivers to the east of Richmond via the Chesapeake Bay. McClellan hoped to outflank Confederate forces under General Joseph E. Johnston, which was in Manassas where the battle had been fought the previous July. Unfortunately, Johnston had already left Manassas for new positions along the Rappahannock River closer to Richmond. Moving slowly and cautiously, McClellan landed at Yorktown on April 4, and instead of attacking Confederate defenses, whose strength he had overestimated, he settled into a siege, much to the disgust of Abraham Lincoln.

Woefully misinformed about the strength of the Yorktown defenses and Confederate troop strengths, McClellan insisted on softening them up before going on the attack. McClellan’s delay gave Robert E. Lee time to strengthen defenses around Richmond itself.

While the siege of Yorktown was playing out, Stonewall Jackson was leading a series of diversionary raids in the Shenandoah Valley in western Virginia. His superiors were gambling that nervous Union leaders in Washington would jump to the conclusion that Jackson’s raids were a prelude to an attack on Washington, DC and would take troops away from McClellan’s siege force to defend the city. Sure enough, 35,000 men under General Irvin McDowell were detached from McClellan’s command to be added to Washington’s defensive forces. In the meantime, Jackson’s lightning strikes from late March through early June with a small force of 17,000 men tied up 50,000 Union troops and denied McClellan the numbers he needed to attack Richmond.

**Movement Toward Richmond at Last**

Johnston, who had learned of an impending artillery bombardment he believed his troops could not withstand, finally decided in May to evacuate his troops towards Richmond where defenses were stronger. McLellan’s army pursued, clashing with Johnston’s troops at Williamsburg on May 5 and Eltham’s Landing the following day. Though technically Confederate defeats, the battles effectively delayed McClellan’s troops enough to allow Johnston to bring his forces into Richmond’s defenses.

On May 31 and into the following day, Johnston decided to try to exploit the vulnerabilities of McClellan’s positions around the city with a counterstroke against the Union forces. Johnston attacked at the town of Seven Pines and the railroad station of Fair Oaks. Errors on the Confederate side gave Union forces time to reinforce their forces under attack, but Union forces were unable to turn this to their advantage. The battle, which surpassed even the fight at Shiloh as the bloodiest of the war thus far, petered out inconclusively. Robert E. Lee now replaced Johnston as commander of what was now named the Army of Northern Virginia after Johnston was wounded in combat. The southern army now pounded Union forces in a series of six major battles lasting from June 25 through July 1, 1862 called the Seven Days Battles that moved McClellan to retreat from Richmond and back down the York Peninsula from which he had come.

A frustrated Abraham Lincoln, finally giving in to McClellan’s constant demands for reinforcements, sent a newly-organized Army of Virginia under General John Pope south. Pope’s southward-moving army made it only as far as the Rappahannock River before an attacking force under Robert E. Lee forced it to retreat back northward again. Stonewall Jackson, now reunited with Lee after his dash through the Shenandoah Valley, began nipping at the retreating Pope’s heels in series of raids that resulted in the Union being thrashed for a second time in a major battle at Manassas outside Washington on August 29. Fighting continued until September 1, when Union General John Pope retreated back to Washington, handing the South, whose capital federal forces had encircled just weeks before, a great victory.

**A War to End Slavery**

During the battles of 1862, political anti-slavery forces pushing a transformation of the North’s war aims from preserving the Union to abolishing slavery were gathering strength. Republican Party leaders in the North, even moderates, were beginning to conclude that saving the nation could not be done without destroying slavery. One important consequence of this new mood was a law passed in March 1862 forbidding the army from returning escaped slaves to their masters. That same month, Abraham Lincoln unsuccessfully proposed legislation that would offer federal financial aid to any state promising the gradual abolition of slavery. Other abolitionist legislation fared better, such as the July 1862 law mandating confiscation and emancipation of southern slaves who came into the custody of Union troops.

Despite Lincoln’s moves towards emancipation, the president was aware that he needed to tread carefully in achieving his goals. He was all too aware that most Union soldiers were not fighting to end slavery, but to preserve the union. If he pressed too far too fast, Lincoln feared, he might drive away large numbers of potential volunteers for the Union army, or even push the border states into joining the Confederacy, thereby threatening the success of the war effort.

Even still, Lincoln’s had come to believe that the partial emancipation measures enacted so far were inadequate, and that forcible emancipation was now necessary for winning the war. Political dissent from Northern Democrats impelled Lincoln to table the emancipation proclamation he was then drafting in the summer of 1862 until a military victory.

It would be a long wait.

**Lee’s Invasion of the North: Bloody Antietam**

Robert E. Lee now capitalized on his momentum by crossing the Potomac River in an invasion of the North at the head of 60,000 men, with George McClellan in hot pursuit. Though his army was ragged, exhausted and suffering from lack of supplies after the long weeks of fighting, Lee was convinced that the South could not win a war of attrition. Instead, he believed that if the South, by invading the North, could win the respect of the border states, gain international credibility and destroy northern morale, it would have a chance to win. Perhaps, he thought, he could even force the northern government to seek peace negotiations.

After forcing the surrender of the large Union garrison at Harper’s Ferry on September 13, Lee turned towards the town of Sharpsburg, Maryland, where the two armies confronted each other on September 17 at the Battle of Antietam. McClellan came to the battle with one extremely important advantage over Lee, a complete set of Lee’s battle plans, which Union soldiers had found in an abandoned Confederate camp a few days before the battle. Incredibly, McClellan once again overestimated the size of Lee’s forces, interpreting the captured plans as a trap. He chose to make timid probes of Lee’s lines instead of a full-on attack, giving Lee time to establish himself near Sharpsburg.

Of all the bloody days in America’s many wars, this one day produced the most awful carnage in American history: 26,000 killed, wounded or missing. The battle was technically a draw for both sides, yet with Lee turning around to head back to the South, this invasion of the North was repelled.

**The Emancipation Proclamation**

Now Lincoln’s generals had won him the opportunity to release a preliminary version of his anticipated emancipation proclamation. Just five days after bloody Antietam, the president sought and gained cabinet approval for this proclamation, which declared that slaves in all states not returned to the Union by January 1 would be free. None of the rebel states responded. The final Emancipation Proclamation, issued January 1, 1863, decreed all slaves in areas in rebellion against the Union government to be free.

Lincoln was careful not to overreach with this public statement. Rather than a wholesale emancipation, it allowed citizens of occupied southern areas with duly-elected representation in the US Congress, such as Tennessee, western Virginia and a few districts in Louisiana and Virginia, to keep their slaves. Elsewhere in the Union-occupied South, some 20,000 slaves were freed by this historic declaration.

Despite Lincoln’s attempt at caution, southern response was violent. The Confederate government declared that it would execute black soldiers and their white officers when captured. The proclamation was not welcomed across the board in the North either, but it produced a turning point in Union war policy nonetheless. Lincoln had gone to war in 1861 to preserve the Union. To this singular war aim, the Yankee government now added a second one: the destruction of the institution of slavery.

**McClellan Sacked**

One other chief result of the fight at Antietam besides the Emancipation Proclamation was Lincoln’s dismissal of George McClellan from command of the Army of the Potomac on November 7. McClellan had done little in the month following the battle, and had even disobeyed a direct presidential order on October 1 to cross the Potomac and engage the enemy. Finally, on October 26, McClellan began moving south, but so slowly that it gave Lee time to slip in between his army and Richmond. Lincoln finally reached the final pitch of exasperation with his foot-dragging general, and now he picked General Ambrose Burnside to take McClellan’s place.

**The Fighting in the Desert: Arizona and New Mexico**

As the fighting in the East was reaching its crescendo throughout 1862, fighting in the far West and Southwest little noticed in the centers of power far to the East were adding an interesting, though less significant chapter to the progress of the war.

The southwestern corner of what is now the United States had few federal troops in it at the beginning of the war. Confederate Lieutenant Colonel John Baylor decided to take advantage of this weak federal presence with a military thrust through New Mexico Territory from the Rio Grande all the way to California. By July 1862, Baylor felt confident in his grip on the region to proclaim the establishment of the Confederate Territory of Arizona, an area which included all of present-day Arizona and New Mexico.

A Confederate invasion force from Texas under the command of General Henry Hopkins Sibley followed this sweep in the winter of 1861-1862. Sibley’s force scored an initial victory at Fort Union along the Santa Fe Trail on February 21, 1862, but then was sent fleeing back to Texas after a fight at Glorieta Pass in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains on March 26 and 27, 1862.

Baylor’s troops in Confederate Arizona Territory meanwhile were having difficulty holding on to their winnings. Attacks from Apaches and ultimately a Union force from California commanded by Colonel James Carlton dislodged the southerners from the region. A victorious Union attack at Picacho Peak in New Mexico on April 15, 1862 decisively put an end to the Confederate Territory of Arizona.

**Further Moves in Kentucky**

Military actions in the western theater between Appalachia and the Mississippi River continued throughout the second half of 1862 without significant result. An attempted invasion of Kentucky by a Confederate force under General Braxton Bragg that lasted from August to October was repulsed by Union general Don Carlos Buell in a number of small battles throughout the state. A Confederate attempt in Mississippi to block Grant from reinforcing Buell in Kentucky by thrusting towards central Tennessee similarly failed with their defeat at the Battle of Corinth on October 3 and 4. Buell’s replacement, General William Rosecrans, further pushed Bragg’s forces out of central Tennessee after beating him in the Battle of Stones River on December 31.

**Slaughter at Fredericksburg**

Back east, General Ambrose Burnside faced the first major test of command with yet another Union drive towards Richmond. Burnside decided to take on Lee’s army at Fredericksburg across the Rappahannock River. Unfortunately, Ambrose dithered for days after the first Union troops arriving on the scene on November 17, insisting on waiting for pontoon bridges before trying to cross the river. This gave the troops of Confederate General James Longstreet plenty of time for entrenching inside the town. When the Union troops finally threw themselves against the impregnable enemy fortifications on December 13, 1862, the southerners slaughtered them by the thousands. Fourteen charges against the well-defended heights produced 12,700 Union casualties, and in the end, the northerners lost the day. It was one of the worst defeats suffered by the US Army in its history.

Another attempt by Burnside to renew the fight in January 1863 ended in disaster once again when his army bogged down in a rain-soaked, muddy quagmire trying to ford the Rappahannock. That was the last straw. On January 26, 1863, Lincoln replaced Burnside with Joseph Hooker.

**Fighting Joe Hooker Takes the Lead**

Hooker’s ascent to the top of the Army of the Potomac was greeted with excitement by the common soldiers. He worked hard to lift the army’s battered morale by improving the quality of army rations and clothing, prosecuting corrupt quartermaster officers and a shift in tactics stressing cavalry tactics and aerial reconnaissance by balloon. The newfound optimism within the ranks of the Army of the Potomac were not shared by the northern public as a whole, though, as 1863 began. Repeated defeats made many wonder if ultimate victory was even possible.

**Troubles in the South**

Morale in the South had sunk even lower due to the increasing economic hardships. Hyper-inflation, and a variety of shortages were beginning to unravel the southern economy, thanks to the Yankee blockade.

Particular difficult was the shortage of food. Fighting on southern farmland needed for food production only added to critical shortages. By the spring of 1863, the stress of these deprivations provoked food riots throughout the South.

Desertion rates began to soar, because of the growing suspicion among the working class that the war had become less about defending their homes and families from invading Yankee armies and more about protecting the wealth and privilege of the landowning class. Not even the conscription law passed by the Confederate government in April 1862 was able to stem the tide of desertion, which grew to as many as two-thirds of eligible southern draftees near the end of the war.

In contrast to the South’s increasing hardships midway through the war, the North was sitting on the verge of making some game-changing breakthroughs in 1863 that would spell the beginning of the war’s end. Most important among these was capture of Vicksburg, Mississippi.

**Grant Takes Vicksburg**

Ulysses S. Grant returned had tried to take Vicksburg unsuccessfully in 1862 and failed. As 1863 opened, Grant decided it was time to try again.

Grant’s engineers and naval colleagues explored several alternate routes to avoid the guns that faced the heavily-defended riverfront. They tried digging canals around the city in February and March to create a passage for Union gunboats, but heavy rains and flooding forced Grant to abandon the project. Other attempts to dig bypass canals through neighboring swamps, lakes and bayous followed over the next few months.

Land combat operations to clear the way for Union troops through neighboring towns along the Mississippi River successfully allowed the Union land force to converge on the town of Vicksburg. Throughout May, Grant fought a series of engagements with Confederate forces that bottled them up in Vicksburg.

Both sides settled in for a long siege that lasted for the next two months, until on July 4, 1863, when food and supplies had dwindled to dangerously low levels, the people of Vicksburg surrendered the town. The last Confederate fortress downriver at Port Hudson, Louisiana surrendered on July 9, and at last, the Union had opened up the Mississippi River from top to bottom, and the Confederacy was cut in two.

**Lee Wins at Chancellorsville**

Hundreds of miles to the east, a campaign by General Joseph Hooker to maneuver Robert E. Lee into the open for a showdown turned out badly in a crushing defeat at the Virginia crossroads town named Chancellorsville near Fredericksburg in May 1863. Hooker’s plan was to split his force in three, using one part in a diversionary thrust across the Rappahannock, another in a flanking maneuver to Lee’s weaker left and rear and the third kept in reserve at Chancellorsville.

Lee’s cavalry, led by the legendary cavalryman General Jeb Stuart, gained control of roads leading out of Chancellorsville, blinding Hooker to Confederate movements. A spooked Hooker dug in rather than approaching the enemy, giving the initiative to Lee, who responded with a brilliant flanking attack led by Stonewall Jackson that won the day for the southerners, but not without cost. Lee’s star commander, Stonewall Jackson, was killed by friendly fire on May 2.

**Turning Point at Gettysburg**

On June 3, Lee headed North with his army to make a second invasion of the North. Lee was under no illusion that his forces could actually conquer the North, but again, as with his invasion of the North the previous year, he thought applying military pressure force the North to peace negotiations. Additionally, Lee was aware that the fall of Vicksburg in the West was immanent, and when it did, large numbers of Union troops would be sent East. He would need to act fast, if he wanted to have any hope of success.

In response to Lee’s actions, Hooker hatched an idea to bring Lee running back south by making a threatening move towards Richmond. Lincoln vetoed the plan and ordered Hooker to follow Lee. Lee delivered counterpunches to the pursuing Union army that resulted in the first major cavalry engagement of the war at Brandy Station, Virginia on June 5 and a feinting attack on Winchester, Virginia (June 13-15), both Union losses.

At this point, Lee made a critical error in allowing his cavalry commander Jeb Stuart to leave the main body of the Army of Northern Virginia to scout out Hooker’s movements. For ten critical days, Stuart was out of contact with his commander, leaving Lee to stumble blindly into position for a great battle that was to come.

The forward elements of the opposing forces converged on the town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania on July 1. Both armies, Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia and the Army of the Potomac, now commanded by General George Meade in Hooker’s place, were spread out. Lee believed that if he could destroy the bits and pieces of the Union army then streaming towards Gettysburg before it could concentrate itself, his army could win the day.

Union cavalry managed to seize the high ground outside town early in the day on July 1, but Lee’s soldiers pushed them off, sending the federals retreating into town. By day’s end, Union troops had stemmed the earlier rout and gained position on other high ground, as had the Confederates. Rebel forces failed to dislodge Union troops from their positions on the high ground on the second day, moving Lee to order a massive attack on Union positions. On July 3, the last day of the battle, Confederate troops commanded by General George Pickett suffered horrendous casualties in a fruitless frontal attack on Union-held high ground that became known in after years as Pickett’s Charge. The battle lost, Lee and his troops retreated southward. The exhausted Army of the Potomac allowed them to escape, offering no pursuit.

The Battle of Gettysburg and the end of the siege at Vicksburg that ended a day later marked the high point of Confederate fortunes, a turning point in the war. From this point forward, the areas under Confederate control began a relentless, steady shrinkage until the very end. Nonetheless, allowing Lee to escape arguably prolonged the war, which would grind on for another two years.

**Discontentment in the North**

Maddeningly, though, this moment of triumph for the Union was marred by an outbreak of civil unrest behind the lines. The trouble started over the northern conscription law passed in Congress in March 1863, which allowed citizens to evade the draft by hiring a substitute or paying a commutation fee. Low-income draftees, particularly new immigrants who were subject to conscription like native-born Americans, lacked the means to pay these fees. They resented being forced to fight on behalf of African-American slaves, who represented potential low-wage competition for jobs.

Two days after the draft commenced in New York City, July 11, 1863, this resentment flared up into open street violence. After two days of fighting between rioters and federal troops, order was restored again, but riots broke out in other northern states that lasted for days.

The draft riots of 1863 revealed a tremendous ambivalence that many northerners now felt towards their government’s conduct of the war. Many northern Democrats opposed the military response to the rebellion of the South, and advocated a negotiated solution. Supporters of this position, named Peace Democrats, or more disparagingly, Copperheads, opposed both the draft and the Emancipation Proclamation, which they argued diverted the country from its primary task of saving the union.

Copperhead discontent flared briefly with the arrest of Democratic congressman from Ohio, Clement Vallandingham, on May 1, 1863. Ambrose Burnside, whom Lincoln had demoted to commander of the army’s Department of the Ohio, had issued an order declaring the death penalty to secret couriers and correspondents with Confederate agents and recruiters for secret societies. When Vallandingham publicly spit on a copy of the order during a May Day speech in Ohio, he was arrested. The ensuing political firestorm on Vallandingham’s behalf induced President Lincoln to commute the man’s sentence from imprisonment to banishment to the South. After the South refused to take him, Vallandingham retreated to Nova Scotia, from which he embarked on a campaign for governor of Ohio in July 1863.

**Fight at Chattanooga**

Meanwhile, back in the West, Union General William S. Rosecrans’ Army of the Cumberland made moves to take Chattanooga, Tennessee. If Chattanooga fell, it was believed, Knoxville would fall with it, giving the Union control of the eastern half of Tennessee. Chattanooga’s rail lines towards Atlanta, Nashville and Knoxville, its industries and its strongly-defensible position also made the city a valuable military prize. Rosecrans started off his campaign with a series of clever maneuvers that forced his chief opponent Braxton Bragg to fall back on Chattanooga on July 4.

Rosecrans got Bragg to evacuate the city virtually without bloodshed by cutting the railroad lines that allowed supply and communication with Atlanta. When Rosecrans pursued, Bragg managed to turn the tables on him by making a stand alongside southern reinforcements at Chickamauga Creek in northern Georgia on September 20. Bragg’s army beat the federals soundly, sending them flying in chaotic retreat back to Chattanooga, where Bragg’s army laid siege to it for weeks.

In response to the disaster, President Lincoln appointed Ulysses S. Grant to command all operations in the western theater. Once Grant arrived in Chattanooga in late October, plans to drive the rebels out of Chattanooga went into motion. Reinforced by the Union’s Army of the Tennessee commanded by General William Sherman, Grant swept the Confederates from their seemingly impregnable positions on the high ground of outside the city with dramatic assaults at Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge on November 24 and 25. Bragg’s army retreated into Georgia, ending the last Confederate threat to Tennessee and opening the way for an invasion of the Deep South.

**Grant Takes Charge**

The war entered a new phase when Lincoln promoted Grant to supreme command of all armies of the United States on March 9, 1864. Grant was determined to run th war differently than his predecessors had done. Rather than subjugating cities and occupying land, his military objectives would focus on destroying armies, such as the two main rebel armies still in the field: Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia and the Army of Tennessee, now under the command of General Joseph E. Johnston.

Another innovation which Grant introduced was coordination of Union war strategy among all Union armies in all the theaters of combat. Within a couple of months of achieving supreme command, Grant now had a master plan to destroy the two most important remaining Confederate armies using a two-pronged master thrust, one towards Richmond, the other towards Atlanta.

**A Grinding War of Attrition in Virginia**

On May 4, 1864, Grant and the Army of the Potomac headed south to seek a fight with Lee’s army on favorable, open ground. Lee, recognizing that he was badly outnumbered, chose a field of battle that he believed would even the odds that were against him: the thickly tangled forest area in central Virginia named the Wilderness. For two days, May 5 and 6, the two armies bludgeoned each other at close quarters with intense gunfire that produced almost 30,000 casualties and set much of the forest on fire. Late on the second day, the arrival of reinforcements led by Confederate General James Longstreet forced a Union withdrawal.

While the Wilderness was a tactical defeat for the Union, the tremendous losses incurred by the already smaller southern army made it a larger defeat for Lee. Knowing that he could better afford to keep losing large numbers men than Lee could, Grant continued forcing Lee to fight over and over again over the next several days. Starting on May 8 at the critical crossroads of Spotsylvania Courthouse, Grant attempted repeatedly to probe for openings in Lee’s flank, but every time, Lee shifted his position, repelling Grant’s men with heavy losses.

Finally on May 21, Grant disengaged towards the southeast in order to try to turn Lee’s flank again. As Grant continued trying to move southward, the two armies fought a number of minor battles, such as those at the North Anna River (May 24) and Totopotomoy Creek (May 26-30), which proved inconclusive.

Grant made one last attack against strong defensive Confederate positions at Cold Harbor close to Richmond, gambling that Lee’s army would be too exhausted to resist effectively. In thirteen days of fighting May 31-June 12, Grant was unable to break the stalemate, incurring frightful casualties once again.

The Union’s top commander had in fact lost more than 50,000 in killed and wounded in this month of hard fighting. Dismay among leaders back in Washingotn at the appalling casualties earned him a new grim nickname: Grant the Butcher.

By this point, Grant had recognized the futility of continuing frontal assaults against Lee’s army. He turned aside again, but instead of steering a course closer towards Richmond, Grant headed for Petersburg. This important rail junction was vital to the supply of Richmond. Take it, Grant reasoned, and you could starve the Confederate capital into submission. When two initial assaults in June failed, both sides settled into a months-long siege that would last into the spring of 1865.

**The Taking of Mobile Bay**

A few weeks after this, an important development occurred in the Gulf of Mexico: the forging of the final link in the Union blockade with the successful capture of Mobile, Alabama by a northern fleet commanded by Admiral David Farragut. Mobile was the last remaining southern harbor on the Gulf of Mexico, and a tremendous amount of shipping ran in and out of it. Guarding the entrances to Mobile Bay were three forts, three gunboats, the ram the *CSS Tennessee* and a minefield. Farragut successfully ran the gauntlet on August 5, putting all Confederate ships out of commission but the *Tennessee*, which surrendered after being repeatedly rammed. Over the next three weeks, the three forts surrendered, but the city itself would not run up the white flag until the last days of the war.

**Sherman Invades Georgia**

While Grant was occupied at Petersburg, Sherman embarked upon his invasion of Georgia, jumping off from Chattanooga on May 7, 1864. His objectives seemed pretty straightforward: break up Joseph E. Johnston’s army, move into the enemy interior and inflict all damage possible against their war resources. What those constituted war resources certainly included Atlanta’s magnificent network of rail lines that branched out in many directions, making it the chief gateway for rail travel going from South to the West. But General Grant and his subordinate General Sherman shared a far broader definition of war resources that demanded that war be made on not just military targets, but also on civilian populations and their property. America was about to have its first experience with total war.

The first two months of Sherman’s southward trek consisted of a cat and mouse between himself and Johnston, until the chase ground to a halt on the outskirts of Atlanta by late June. Unhappy at Johnston’s failure to repel Sherman, President Jefferson Davis replaced Johnston with General John Bell Hood on July 17, ordering him to drive Sherman off. Hood’s first attempt came in a savage battle at Peachtree Creek north of the city on July 20, but it failed. Over the next few weeks, Hood emerged several times from Atlanta’s heavy defenses to attack, only to be repulsed with heavy losses. Nonetheless, his army remained intact.

Only after Sherman’s forces had cut all the rail lines leading into the city, all the while preventing the arrival of Confederate reinforcements, did Hood realize that he was about to be trapped. On September 1, Hood evacuated Atlanta. Sherman’s troops marched in the next day.

Coming as it did during the very competitive presidential election of 1864, the welcome news of the reduction of Mobile Bay and capture of Atlanta gave President Lincoln the public relations boost he needed to beat his Democratic challenger, former General George McClellan. It arguably may even have helped saved the union, as the Democratic Party platform was calling for peace negotiations with an acknowledged, independent Confederacy, a position that had some support in an increasingly war-weary North as the war neared the end of its fourth war.

**A March to the Sea**

After taking Atlanta, Sherman began to rethink his basic endgame strategy that called for the destruction of southern armies. He proposed to Grant to march away from Hood’s army and instead begin destroying military resources, demoralize the southern populace and position his army to make a final push at Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia from the South as Grant approached from the North. A week after Abraham Lincoln’s successful re-election on November 8, Sherman pushed off again on a march that became known as the March to the Sea. As his army marched inexorably towards their immediate objective, Savannah, his troops initiated a campaign of looting and destruction designed to demonstrate that the Confederate army was helpless to defend southern life and property.

Savannah fell to Sherman on December 22, 1864 without a shot fired, but not before much of the city burned to the ground as a result of an explosion at a Confederate arsenal. He continued into South Carolina over the next couple of months, taking Columbia on February 18 and Charleston later that month.

Meanwhile, Sherman’s former adversary John Bell Hood had marched westward to join forces with General Nathan Bedford Forrest in drawing Sherman away from Atlanta with an attack on Nashville. Hood’s plan went terribly awry when Union general George Thomas attacked on December 15 and 16, and so decisively defeated Hood’s army the southern Army of Tennessee was finished as a fighting force.

**Signs of the End**

Other signs that the end of the war was approaching began to appear in the following weeks. On January 31, 1865, Congress approved the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution that formally abolished slavery after several months of intense politicking by the president and his allies. Only three days later, on February 3, Lincoln met Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens for a peace conference at Hampton Roads in Virginia, but the meeting ended without producing an agreement.

With the end in sight, leaders in the North were now thinking about what peace might bring after four years of bloody conflict. Lincoln reflected on the coming peace in his second inaugural address on March 4, 1865, called for a national reconciliation without vengeance. Still, it was too early to think much on the future. There was still a war to be won.

**The Fever Breaks at Petersburg**

On the Petersburg front, the months of attacks on Lee’s rail supply lines to Richmond were rapidly shrinking his resources. An on Grant’s forces by the Army of Northern Virginia on March 25, 1865 faltered. Fort Stedman, which the federals had built as part of the ring of siege works around Petersburg, fell to a sudden Confederate assault early in the day, but it was just as quickly retaken from the victors, who lacked reinforcements.

This latest southern defeat confirmed the wisdom of a strategy which Grant had been pursuing for several months. Bit by bit, Grant extended his lines further westward in a bid to force the numerically inferior southerners to stretch themselves to the breaking point.

The breaking point came on April 1 when Union General Philip Sheridan confronted Confederate General George Pickett in a battle many call the “Waterloo of the Confederacy.” The railroad junction at Five Forks was crucial to the Confederates as a potential line of escape southward to North Carolina and a supply line. Sheridan crushing victory over Pickett’s force, sent by Lee to protect the junction, set in motion a sudden chain of events that proved the vital breakthrough in the Petersburg sector.

**The Race to Surrender**

On April 2, Grant finally broke through Lee’s exhausted defenses, forcing Lee to evacuate Petersburg, retreating westward. That same day, a panicked Confederate government fled Richmond, which caught on fire after Confederate authorities tried to destroy military resources to keep them out of Union hands. The following day, April 3, Grant captured Petersburg and then Richmond.

Pursuing the Army of Northern Virginia towards Lynchburg, the Army of the Potomac kept hammering away, until an exchange of communications between Grant and Lee convinced the southern commander of the necessity of surrender to avoid further bloodshed. On April 9, the two commanders met in a house near the town of Appomattox Court House. The terms Grant offered Lee were generous: rather than Lee’s men being prosecuted for treason, they would surrender their arms and be allowed to go home in peace, provided they promised not to fight against the United States. Additionally, Grant allowed the distribution of food rations to the starving Confederate soldiers and let them take home their mules and horses to help with the spring planting. At 4 p.m. on April 9, 1865, Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant signed the instrument of surrender.

**Last Gasps of the Confederacy**

While Lee’s surrender still left 75,000 Confederate soldiers in the field, news of the cease-fire in Virginia inspired the remaining Confederate commands to give up the fight: Gen. Joe E. Johnston’s army in North Carolina on April 26, General Richard Taylor in Alabama and General Edmund Kirby Smith near New Orleans, and finally General Stand Watie on June 23, 1865. Small skirmishes continued for a month after the surrender at Appomattox, until the last battle of the war, the Battle of Palmito Ranch on the Rio Grande River in Texas on May 12-13.

**The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln**

The war had now ended, but the man who had led the North to victory would not live to enjoy the victory. While Abraham Lincoln sat watching a play at Ford’s Theater in Washington, DC with his wife Mary on the evening of April 15, 1865, Confederate sympathizer and stage actor John Wilkes Booth shot him in the head. Lincoln died early the next morning.

**Andrew Johnson’s Reconstruction Troubles**

The new president, Lincoln’s vice president Andrew Johnson faced a daunting task of repairing the damage of war. Hundreds of thousands of men were dead, wounded or missing. The South lay in ruins. More difficult still would be the political reintegration of the Confederate states back into the union, and the establishment of basic political rights for the new population of freedmen.

Over the course of his term, Johnson would be blocked by the radicals in his own party from implementing the moderate Reconstruction policy favoring swift, merciful reintegration mandated by his predecessor. After Radical Republicans took control of Congress in the midterm elections of 1866, they gained the power to change the Reconstruction policy more to their liking by removing Confederate officials from positions of power in the southern states and attempting to bolster the rights of the newly-freed slave population.

Pushback from once-again ascendant southern Democrats re-established white supremacy throughout the South in the next decade, and ultimately, most historians consider Reconstruction to have failed at truly reconstructing the South. Reconstruction’s legacy of legal discrimination and segregation really only came with the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and is in the eyes of many still a work in progress.

**The Legacy of the Civil War**

The nation never perfectly reunited, nor did it completely heal the wounds of war. To this day, echoes of the disputes of the Civil War generation still creep into present-day political discourse. One critical difference separates present-day America from the America of that time: the memory of what happened when democracy failed. Time will tell if we have truly learned the bitter lessons of the Civil War…or not.