Lesson 22

The Civil War

What factors and events influenced the outcome of the Civil War?

Introduction

The Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina, ended months of confusion. The nation was at war, and the time had come to choose sides. For most whites in the South, the choice was obvious. Early in 1861, representatives from six of the seven states that had seceded from the Union met to establish a new nation called the Confederate States of America. Southerners believed that just as the states had once voluntarily joined the Union, they could voluntarily leave it now. The men who fought for the South were proud defenders of Southern independence.

For many Northerners, the choice was just as obvious. "There can be no neutrals in this war, only patriots—or traitors," declared Senator Stephen Douglas after the attack on Fort Sumter. Most Northerners viewed the secession of Southern states as a traitorous act, and as a rebellion against the United States. They marched off to war eager to defend what they viewed as their union, their constitution, and their flag.

Choosing sides was harder for the eight slave states located between the Confederacy and the free states because they had ties to both sides. Four of these states—Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina—joined the Confederacy. The western counties of Virginia, however, remained loyal to the Union. They broke away to form a new state called West Virginia. Although the other four slave states—Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri—stayed in the Union, many of their citizens were sympathetic to the South. These states, along with West Virginia, became known as the "border states."

Americans began to see why a civil war—a conflict between two groups of citizens in one country—is the most painful kind of war. It divided states, families, and friends. In this lesson, you will learn how this "brothers' war" became the most destructive of all American wars.

The Civil War divided Americans into two opposing nations. Union soldiers (left) fought their fellow Americans, Confederate soldiers (right).
The South had geographic advantages as well. To win the war, the North would have to invade and conquer the South, but the sheer size of the South made this a daunting task. The South, in contrast, could win simply by defending its territory until Northerners became tired of fighting.

The South did have an important geographic disadvantage. If the Union gained control of the Mississippi River, it would divide the Confederacy in two.

The South’s main weaknesses were its economy and its transportation systems. The region’s agriculturally based economy could not support a long war, and the South had few factories to produce guns and other military supplies. The Confederacy also faced serious transportation problems because the South lacked the railroads needed to haul troops and supplies over long distances.

Abraham Lincoln Versus Jefferson Davis

The North’s greatest advantage was its newly elected president, Abraham Lincoln. Through even the darkest days of the war, Lincoln never wavered from his belief that the Union was perpetual—never to be broken. Throughout his presidency, Lincoln related the preservation of the Union to the ideals of the American Revolution. In his first inaugural address, he said that the Union was begun by the American Revolution, “matured and continued” by the Declaration of Independence, and affirmed by the Constitution.

At the time of the secession crisis, Jefferson Davis was a U.S. senator from Mississippi. A firm believer in states’ rights, he resigned his seat in the Senate when Mississippi left the Union. Like Lincoln, Davis often spoke of the American Revolution. When Southerners formed their own government, Davis said in his inaugural address, they “merely asserted a right which the Declaration of Independence of 1776 had defined to be inalienable.” He believed the South was fighting for the same freedom cherished by the nation’s founders.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the North

The North began the war with impressive strengths. Its population was about 22 million, compared to the South’s 9 million. Additionally, with about 90 percent of the nation’s manufacturing and most of its banks, the North was both richer and more technologically advanced than the South.

The North had geographic advantages, too. It had more farms than the South to provide food for troops, and its land contained most of the country’s iron, coal, copper, and gold. The North controlled the seas, and its 21,000 miles of railroad track allowed troops and supplies to be transported wherever they were needed.

The North’s greatest weakness was its military leadership. At the start of the war, about one-third of the nation’s military officers resigned and returned to their homes in the South. During much of the war, Lincoln searched for effective generals who could lead the Union to victory.

Strength and Weaknesses of the South

In contrast to the North, the South’s greatest strength was its military leadership. Most of America’s best military officers were Southerners who chose to fight for the Confederacy, which was not an easy decision for many of them. Colonel Robert E. Lee, for example, was not a supporter of either slavery or secession, but he decided that he could not fight against his native Virginia. Lee resigned from the U.S. Army to become commander in chief of the Confederate forces.