2. Bull Run: A Great Awakening

In the spring of 1861, President Lincoln and General Winfield Scott planned the Union’s war strategy. Step one was to surround the South by sea to cut off its trade. Step two was to divide the Confederacy into sections to prevent one region from helping another. Step three was to capture Richmond, Virginia, the capital of the Confederacy, and destroy the Confederate government. Journalists called this strategy the Anaconda Plan because it resembled the crushing death grip of an anaconda snake.

Rose Greenhow’s Dilemma Most Northerners believed that the war could be won with a single Union assault on Richmond. In 1861, thousands of volunteers poured into Washington, D.C., shouting, “On to Richmond!” A young widow and Washington social leader named Rose O’Neal Greenhow watched these eager troops carefully.

Greenhow was a strong supporter of the Southern cause and used her friendship with government officials to learn just when and how the Union planned to attack Richmond. Her challenge was to find a way to deliver this information to Confederate leaders without being discovered.

The Battle of Bull Run On a hot July morning, long lines of Union soldiers marched out of Washington heading for Richmond. Their voices could be heard singing and cheering across the countryside. Parties of civilians followed the army in hopes of seeing the end of the rebellion, adding to the excitement.

The troops would not have been so cheerful had they known what awaited them at Manassas, a small town on the way to Richmond. Greenhow had managed to warn Southern military leaders of Union plans by smuggling a coded note to them in a young girl’s curls. Southern troops were waiting for the Union forces as they approached Manassas, and the two armies met at a creek known as Bull Run.

At first, a Union victory looked certain, but Confederate general Thomas Jackson and his regiment of Virginians refused to give up. “Look,” shouted South Carolina general Bernard Bee o his men, “there is Jackson with his Virginians, standing like a stone wall.” Thus inspired by "Stonewall" Jackson’s example, the Confederate lines held firm until reinforcements arrived. Late that afternoon, Jackson urged his men to "yell like furies" as they charged the Union forces. The charge overwhelmed the inexperienced Union troops, who fled in panic back to Washington.

Although the Battle of Bull Run was a stunning victory for the South, it was a shocking defeat for the North. Lincoln and his generals realized that ending the war would not be easy.

Women Support the War Over the next year, both the North and the South worked to build and train large armies. As men went off to war, women took their places on the home front. Wives and mothers supported their families by running farms and businesses, while other women went to work for the first time in factories or found jobs as nurses, teachers, or government workers.

Women also served in the military forces on both sides as messengers, guides, scouts, smugglers, soldiers, and spies. Rose Greenhow was arrested for spying shortly after the Battle of Bull Run, and despite being kept under guard in her Washington home, she managed to continue smuggling military secrets to the Confederates. The following year, Greenhow was allowed to move to the South, where President Jefferson Davis welcomed her as a hero.

Women also volunteered to tend sick and wounded soldiers. Dorothea Dix, who was already well known for her efforts to improve the treatment of the mentally ill, was appointed director of the Union army’s nursing service. Dix insisted that all female nurses be over 30 years old, plain in appearance, physically strong, and willing to do unpleasant work. Her rules were so strict that she became known as “Dragon Dix.”

While most nurses worked in military hospitals, Clara Barton followed Union armies into battle, tending troops where they fell. Later generations would remember Barton as the founder of the American Red Cross, but to the soldiers she cared for during the war, she was “the angel of the battlefield.”

During the Civil War, many women went to work in factories, such as the munitions plant illustrated here. The women replaced men who were away fighting.
3. Antietam: A Bloody Affair

The Battle of Bull Run ended Northerners' hopes for a quick victory. In the months that followed that sobering defeat, the Union began to carry out the Anaconda Plan.

The Anaconda Plan in Action

Step one of the Anaconda Plan was to blockade the South's ports and cut off its trade. In 1861, the Union navy launched the blockade that, by the end of the year, closed off most Southern ports to foreign ships. The South had long exported its cotton to Great Britain and France, so the Confederacy looked to Great Britain to send ships to break through the blockade. The British, however, refused this request, and as a result, the South could not export cotton to Europe or import needed supplies.

Early in 1862, the Union began to put step two of the Anaconda Plan into action. The strategy, which is similar to those used in future wars, was to divide the Confederacy by gaining control of the Mississippi River. In April, Union admiral David Farragut led 46 ships up the Mississippi River to New Orleans. This was the largest American fleet ever assembled, and in the face of such overwhelming force, the city surrendered without firing a shot.

Meanwhile, Union forces headed by General Ulysses S. Grant began moving south toward the Mississippi from Illinois. In 1862, Grant won a series of victories that put Kentucky and much of Tennessee under Union control. A general of remarkable determination, Grant refused to accept any battle outcome other than unconditional, or total, surrender. For this reason, U. S. Grant was known to his men as "Unconditional Surrender" Grant.

Later in 1862, Union general George McClellan sent 100,000 men by ship to capture Richmond. Again, a Union victory seemed certain, but despite being outnumbered, Confederate forces stopped the Union attack in a series of well-fought battles. Once more, Richmond was saved.

The Battle of Antietam

At this point, General Robert E. Lee, the commander of the Confederate forces, did the unexpected. He sent his troops across the Potomac River into Maryland, a slave state that remained in the Union.

By invading Maryland, Lee hoped this show of strength might persuade the state to join the Confederacy. He also hoped that a Confederate victory on Union soil would convince European nations to support the South.

On a crisp September day in 1862, Confederate and Union armies met near the Maryland town of Sharpsburg along Antietam Creek. All day, McClellan's troops pounded Lee's badly outnumbered forces, and the following day, Lee retreated to Virginia.

McClellan claimed Antietam as a Union Victory, but many who fought there viewed the battle as a defeat for both armies. Of the 75,000 Union troops who fought at Antietam, about 2,100 were killed and about 10,300 were wounded or missing. Of the 52,000 Confederates who fought at Antietam, about 2,770 lost their lives, while 11,000 were wounded or missing. In that single day of fighting, more Americans were killed than in the War of 1812 and the Mexican-American War combined. The Battle of Antietam was the bloodiest day of the war.

The New Realities of War

The horrifying death toll at Antietam reflected the new realities of warfare. In past wars, battles had been fought in hand-to-hand combat using bayonets, but improved weapons made killing from a distance much easier during the Civil War. Rifles, which replaced muskets, were accurate over long distances. Improved cannons and artillery also made it easier for armies to attack forces some distance away. As a result, armies could meet, fight, die, and part without either side winning a clear victory.

Medical care was not as advanced as weaponry. Civil War doctors had no understanding of the causes of infections, and surgeons operated in dirty hospital tents with basic instruments. Few bothered to wash their hands between patients, so infections spread rapidly between patients. The hospital death rate was so high that soldiers often refused medical care. An injured Ohio soldier wrote that he chose to return to battle rather than receive treatment from a doctor, "thinking that I had better die by rebel bullets than Union quackery [unskilled medical care]."

As staggering as the battle death tolls were, far more soldiers died of diseases than wounds. Unsanitary conditions in army camps were so bad that about three men died of typhoid, pneumonia, and other diseases for everyone who died in battle. As one soldier observed, "these big battles [are] not as bad as the fever."