4. Gettysburg: A Turning Point

While neither side won the battle of Antietam, it was enough of a victory for Lincoln to take his first steps toward ending slavery. When the Civil War began, Lincoln had resisted pleas from abolitionists to make emancipation, or the freeing of slaves, a reason for fighting the Confederacy. He himself opposed slavery, but the purpose of the war, he said, "is to save the Union, and is not either to save or destroy slavery."

The Emancipation Proclamation  As the war dragged on, Lincoln changed his mind and decided to make abolition a goal of the Union. Lincoln realized that European nations that opposed slavery would never support the side that wanted slavery to continue. Freeing slaves could also deprive the Confederacy of a large part of its workforce.

On January 1, 1863, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. The proclamation, or formal order, declared slaves in all Confederate states to be free. This announcement had little immediate effect on slavery. The Confederate states ignored the document, and slaves living in states loyal to the Union were not affected by the proclamation.

Still, for many in the North, the Emancipation Proclamation changed the war into a crusade for freedom. The Declaration of Independence had said that "all men are created equal," and now the fight was about living up to those words.

The Battle of Gettysburg  In the summer of 1863, Lee felt confident enough to risk another invasion of the North. He hoped to capture a Northern city and help convince the weary North to seek peace.

Union and Confederate troops met on July 1, 1863, west of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The Union troops, about 90,000 strong, were led by newly appointed General George C. Meade. After a brief skirmish, they occupied four miles of high ground along an area known as Cemetery Ridge. About a mile to the west, some 75,000 Confederate troops gathered behind Seminary Ridge.

The following day, the Confederates attempted to find weak spots in the Union position, but the Union lines held firm. On the third day, Lee ordered an all-out attack on the center of the Union line. Cannons filled the air with smoke and thunder. George Pickett led 15,000 Confederate soldiers in a charge across the low ground separating the two forces.

Pickett’s charge marked the northernmost point reached by Southern troops during the war. However, as Confederate troops pressed forward, Union gunners opened heavy fire in their advancing lines. Those men who managed to make their way to Cemetery Ridge were struck down by Union soldiers in hand-to-hand combat.

Although Gettysburg was a victory for the Union, the losses on both sides were staggering. More than 17,500 Union soldiers and 23,000 Confederate troops were killed or wounded in three days of battle. Lee, who lost about a third of his army, withdrew to Virginia. From this point on, he would only wage a defensive war on Southern soil.

Opposition on the Union Home Front  Despite the victory at Gettysburg, Lincoln faced a number of problems on the home front, including opposition to the war itself. A group of Northern Democrats were more interested in restoring peace than in saving the Union or ending slavery. Republicans called these Democrats "Copperheads" after a poisonous snake with that name.

Other Northerners opposed the war because they were sympathetic to the Confederate cause. When a proslavery mob attacked Union soldiers marching through Maryland, Lincoln sent in troops to maintain order. He also used his constitutional power to temporarily suspend the right of habeas corpus. During the national emergency, citizens no longer had the right to appear before a court to face charges, and people who were suspected of disloyalty were jailed without being charged for a crime.

Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address  In 1863, President Lincoln traveled to Gettysburg. Thousands of the men who died there had been buried in a new cemetery. Lincoln was among those invited to speak at the dedication of this new burial ground. The nation would never forget Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address.

The president deliberately spoke of the war in words that echoed the Declaration of Independence. The "great civil war," he said, was testing whether a nation "conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal... can long endure." He spoke of the brave men, "living and dead," who had fought to defend the ideal. "The world... can never forget what they did here." Finally, he called on Americans to remain dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

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On July 3, 1863, General George Pickett led 15,000 Confederate troops in a charge against the Union lines. Row after row of Confederate soldiers fell under a rain of bullets until they finally retreated.
5. Vicksburg: A Besieged City

The Civil War was a war of many technological firsts. It was the first American war to use railroads to move troops and to keep them supplied. It was the first war in which telegraphs were used to communicate with distant armies, and it was the first conflict to be recorded in photographs. It was also the first to see combat between armor-plated steamships.

The Merrimac and the Monitor Early in the war, Union forces withdrew from the navy yard in Norfolk, Virginia, but they left behind a warship named the Merrimac. The Confederacy, which began the war with no navy, covered the wooden Merrimac with iron plates and added a powerful ram to its prow.

In response, the Union navy built its own ironclad ship called the Monitor in less than 100 days. Said to resemble a “cheese box on a raft,” the Monitor had a flat deck and two heavy guns in a revolving turret.

In March 1862, the Merrimac, which the Confederates had renamed the Virginia, steamed into Chesapeake Bay to attack Union ships. With cannonballs harmlessly bouncing off its sides, the iron monster destroyed three wooden ships and threatened the entire Union blockade fleet.

The next morning, the Virginia was met by the Monitor, and the two ironclads exchanged shots for hours before withdrawing. Neither was harmed, but neither could claim victory.

The battle of the Merrimac and the Monitor demonstrated that ironclads were superior to wooden vessels, so both sides started adding ironclads to their navies. The South, however, was never able to build enough ships to end the Union blockade of Southern harbors.

Control of the Mississippi Ironclads were part of the Union's campaign to divide the South by taking control of the Mississippi River. After seizing New Orleans in 1862, Admiral David Farragut moved up the Mississippi to capture the cities of Baton Rouge and Natchez. At the same time, other Union ships gained control of Memphis, Tennessee.

The Union now controlled both ends of the Mississippi, which prevented the South from moving men and supplies up and down the river. However, the North was similarly unable to move along the river, as long as the Confederates continued to control one key location—Vicksburg, Mississippi.

The Siege of Vicksburg Located on a bluff overlooking a hairpin turn in the Mississippi River, the town of Vicksburg was easy to defend and difficult to capture. Whoever held Vicksburg could, with a few well-placed cannons, control movement along the Mississippi. Even Farragut had to admit to fellow officer David Porter that ships “cannot crawl up hills 300 feet high.” An army would be needed to capture Vicksburg.

In May 1863, General Ulysses S. Grant battled his way to Vicksburg with the needed army, and for six weeks, Union gunboats shelled the city from the river while Grant’s army bombarded it from land. Slowly but surely, the Union troops burrowed toward the city in trenches and tunnels.

As shells pounded the city, people in Vicksburg dug caves into the hillsides for protection. To survive, they ate horses, mules, and bread made of corn and dried peas. “It had the properties of Indian rubber,” said one Confederate soldier, “and was worse than leather to digest.”

Love on food and supplies, Vicksburg surrendered on July 4, 1863. The Mississippi was now a Union waterway, and the Confederacy was divided in two.

Problems on the Confederate Home Front As the war raged on, life in the South became grim. Because of the blockade, imported goods disappeared from stores, and what few items were available were extremely expensive.

Unable to sell their tobacco and cotton to the North or to other countries, farmers planted food crops instead. Still, the South was often hungry. Invading Union armies destroyed crops and cut rail lines, making it difficult to transport food and supplies to Southern cities and army camps.

As clothing wore out, Southerners made do with patches and homespun cloth. At the beginning of the war, Mary Boykin Chesnut had written of well-dressed Confederate troops in her journal, but by 1863, she was writing of soldiers dressed in “rags and tags.”

By 1864, Southerners were writing letters like this one to soldiers at the battlefield: “We haven’t got nothing in the house to eat but a little bit o’ meal. I don’t want to you to stop fighting them Yankees… but try and get off and come home and fix us all up some.” Many soldiers found it difficult to resist such pleas, even if going home meant deserting their units.