

“Have To” History: The American Civil War (Part One, 1861 – 1863)

Stuff You Don't Really Want To Know (But For Some Reason Have To)

Three Big Things:

1. The North had more of everything except capable military leadership. They also weren't fighting to defend their home states, their farms or families, or their overly-romanticized “way of life.” Despite Lincoln's best efforts, the North kept finding ways to lose for most of the first half of the war.



2. Both sides assumed the war would be brief and glorious. Except for a few experienced military men who remembered the Mexican-American War, troops on both sides went in “green” – inexperienced and ignorant of what they were getting into. Many were excited by the chance to fight. Once they'd “seen the elephant,” however, that enthusiasm was quickly tempered.

3. July 1863 was the turning point of the Civil War. From that month forward, the outcome was inevitable – the South was going to lose. The fact that they prolonged it as long as they did was either noble or especially tragic, given the extensive damage it was necessary to inflict before they surrendered.

The Civil War is one of those topics so extensively studied and discussed that it's easy to get lost in any one of a hundred directions. This list is nowhere *near* comprehensive and every event or issue addressed easily deserves its own “Have To” entry. For that matter, most have been the subject of too many legit publications to tally.

But if your goal is to fake your way through a class discussion or pretend you're pulling your weight as part of a group project of some sort, here are some basics you simply *must* know, in roughly chronological order.

The “Anaconda Plan” (Early 1861) – As it became clear that war was looming, General Winfield Scott, hero of the Mexican-American War and the highest-ranking officer in the Union Army, proposed a simple strategy. The North had more people, more boats, and more resources in general. Its army was full of untrained soldiers (as was the South's) and armed conflict would mean great loss of life on both sides. So, he argued, the U.S. should use its navy to essentially ‘blockade’ the South – control the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico, then seize control of the Mississippi River. Starve them out. The plan was mocked, as was Scott, for such an unmanly approach to warfare. A political cartoon satirizing the idea showed a giant snake wrapped around the South, about to squeeze – hence, “anaconda.”

As it turned out, the war was won largely by taking control of the Mississippi, cutting off the South, and starving them out of action. Scott didn't get to gloat long, however – he died less than a year after the war ended.

The Border States (Delaware, Maryland, Missouri, and Kentucky) – Between Lincoln's election (November 1860) and his inauguration (March 1861), Seven southern states (all slave states) seceded to form the Confederacy. Four more joined them after hostilities erupted, leaving eighteen northern (and far western) free states loyal to the Union. Four ‘Border States’ with slavery remained in the Union as well. Lincoln took unusual measures to assure their loyalty, including martial law, suspending *habeas corpus*, stationing troops in problem areas, and other possibly unconstitutional steps. Historians still debate this part today; you should utilize furrowed brows and feign deep concern over whether this was the right call on Lincoln's part if given the opportunity.

Copperheads – Name given to Northerners who were against the war, led by Northern Democrats (“The Peace Party”). They criticized the draft, abolitionists, and Lincoln's “despotic” rule for destroying values of America. Copperhead newspapers even called on Union troops to desert.

Republicans first used the term “Copperheads” as criticism, claiming the Dems were full of venom and struck without warning. The “Peace” Democrats embraced the label and reframed it as a reference to the copper “head” of Liberty, which they cut out of the large one-cent coins in use at the time and wore as badges of honor.

President Lincoln had many of the leaders and newspaper owners arrested and held without trial, claiming it was necessary to violate a small part of the Constitution to save the nation. (See above.)

Cotton Diplomacy / “King Cotton” – The South believed Europe needed their cotton and would trade for weapons, food, medicine, etc. They also wanted England and France to recognize the C.S.A. as an independent nation. They pushed the issue by refusing to ship cotton overseas when the war began, not realizing Europe had plenty already stored and other countries producing it closer to home. Europe didn’t appreciate the attempted manipulation, and the South was stuck with lots and lots of cotton and not enough food or ammunition.

Battle of Fort Sumter (April 1861) – First shots of the war. Union fort off the coast of South Carolina. Whereas most military property in the South was essentially abandoned between Lincoln’s election and his inauguration, Anderson held his ground. On April 12th, before dawn, Confederate forces on the beach opened fire, which Anderson returned. By early afternoon, the fighting was over, with exactly zero deaths on either side.

The first fatalities came about as a result of malfunctioning weaponry during a ceremonial flag salute as part of Anderson’s surrender. Some say this battle foreshadowed just how weird the rest of the war was going to be – but not how bloodless.

First Bull Run (July 1861) – The first ground battle of the war. Both sides were wildly optimistic about the war, each expecting to easily whip the other and be home by Christmas. Union troops “marched” from Washington, D.C., to Richmond, Virginia, with little discipline or organization along the way. Once the actual fighting started, though, both sides did much better than expected despite being “green.”

The North seemed to be gaining the advantage and was pushing back the South until three things happened:

- (1) “Stonewall” Jackson earned his nickname by holding critical defensive lines via force of personality and borderline sociopathic conviction in the divine will.
- (2) The first recorded instance of the “Rebel Yell” was used in conjunction with Southern charges, scaring the bejeebies out of Union troops and inspiring reenactors and inebriated rednecks for generations to come.
- (3) Southern reinforcements arrived by train (while the Union received none). Clearly, they hadn’t read the section in your textbook explaining what a massive advantage the North had because of their technology and railroads. Confederate forces turn back the Union and essentially chase them all the way back to D.C.

Traditional interpretation says after First Bull Run, the North realized the war would be difficult and began preparing in earnest while the South swelled with overconfidence. In reality, it was more complicated than that – the South’s confidence carried them through the next two years while the North’s fear of repeating their opening humiliation crippled them almost to the point of losing the war. But we’re not really doing subtlety here, so...

George B. McClellan – Commander of Union Army for most of the first two years. Vain and insecure at the same time, he despised Lincoln. The average soldier loved him, and he was gifted at organizing, training, supplying, preparing, even fighting when forced. Perpetually convinced that he was outgunned, outmanned, outnumbered – but never out-planned. I can’t work in these conditions! It’s not paranoia if they’re really out to undercut and blame you! (Except that they weren’t – it was him.)

Lincoln finally canned him after Antietam, which was technically a Union victory despite McClellan’s bizarre... *everything*. He later ran against Lincoln as the Democratic candidate for President in 1864. Ulysses S. Grant called McClellan “one of the great mysteries of the war.”

Old Tactics / Old Medicine / New Technology – Napoleonic tactics (like “line up and charge!”) were still considered both honorable and effective, despite improved weaponry making such tactics essentially suicidal. Weapons were improving – things like bullet-shaped bullets, rifled barrels, and exploding shells made for more accurate and more extensive life-removal. Medicine was still primitive and largely ineffective; more soldiers died from infection and disease than from being shot, stabbed, or blown up.

If you want to sound particularly thoughtful, question in the hearing of your instructor why both sides would continue utilizing outdated tactics for so long despite the lessons of the Revolution. Suggest that sociology, psychology, or perhaps our unwillingness to actually *learn* from history when it matters most, all came into play. If you get stuck, stroke your chin and look troubled. You’re on your own from there.

Battle of Shiloh / Ulysses S. Grant (April 1862) - While McClellan was frustrating Lincoln in the East, Grant began working towards control of the Mississippi River in the West. At Ft. Henry / Ft. Donelson, he earned the nickname “Unconditional Surrender” Grant for his unwillingness to compromise with the enemy and becomes a “hero” back home. Briefly.

At Shiloh, Grant is caught unprepared and driven back to near-defeat by the end of the first day of fighting. Despite massive casualties, he counter-attacks the next day and regains the ground lost. The number of dead and wounded far surpasses anything else seen in the war so far. The public is horrified and began calling on Lincoln to replace Grant. The President responds that “I can’t spare this man; he fights.”

The Draft / Draft Riots – In April of 1862, the C.S.A. enacted the first military draft in American history. Many found being forced to fight for states’ rights and individual liberty to be someone paradoxical and resisted. Vocally.

The U.S.A. instituted a draft of their own in March of 1863, and it was nearly as unpopular as in the South. The Union, however, was already fighting for the right to make you do what they thought was right, so at least it seemed less hypocritical. Still, there’s a whole “freedom vs. security” discussion to be had if the opportunity presents itself, limited only by your ability to produce comparable examples of this same tension throughout American history. It might even get you out of whatever work you’re supposed to do that day as your instructor seizes on this “teachable moment.”

Both sides had provisions by which the wealthy could buy their way out of serving or hire a substitute to fight in their place, fueling further resentment and class antagonisms. Riots broke out across the North, most notably in New York in July of 1863, leaving many dead and feeding the narrative that perhaps it would be best to just let the South leave after all and get back to whatever “normal” would look like now.

Robert E. Lee – Leader of Confederate forces and the most-loved man in the South (and more loved than anyone in the North). Lee wasn’t a big fan of slavery and didn’t support secession. Lincoln offered him command of the Union army, but he wouldn’t take up arms against Virginia. A devout Christian who took responsibility for the loss at Gettysburg and tried to fight with integrity and honor, Lee represented everything the South wanted to believe about itself in terms of honor and ideals.

That’s part of what makes debates over his statues in the 21st century so emotionally loaded – he was the real deal in terms of an old-school gentleman who did what he thought was right, and in the most noble ways. It’s just that in *this* case that meant killing hundreds of thousands of Americans in order to destroy the Union and maintain the enslavement of an entire race of people. So, you know... complicated. (History teachers almost always love it when you acknowledge or pretend to discover complexities in history, so feel free to milk this one.)

Battle of Antietam (September 1862) – Robert E. Lee invaded the North (1 of 2). He was trying to move the destruction of war out of South and put more pressure on the North to leave them alone. (To win, the North had to WIN; the South merely needed to NOT LOSE.) Union soldiers found a copy of Lee’s covert plans wrapped around

some cigars in an abandoned rebel camp, and McClellan declared he NOW had what he needed to defeat Lee and end the war! Except that he was still McClellan and dithered while Lee – realizing his plans had been compromised – prepared for battle.

The result was the single bloodiest day of the entire Civil War, but technically a Union victory. McClellan failed to pursue Lee's defeated forces, prompting his dismissal by Lincoln. Antietam nevertheless gave Lincoln the victory he needed to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. He also issued a call for African American troops, leading to the formation of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry.

The Emancipation Proclamation (January 1st, 1863) – Formulated in 1862 and released after the Union “victory” at Antietam, this document freed slaves in areas remaining in rebellion against the Union while maintaining slavery in states loyal to the Union – effectively applying only to areas where it could not be enforced.

The Proclamation nevertheless finalized the transition of the Civil War from one largely focused on preserving the Union to a war to end slavery and promote more of an “all men are created” vibe despite racial disparities. It received mixed reactions at home (even in the North) but eliminated any danger of direct European support for the south, lest European nations be perceived as fighting to support slavery.

Gettysburg & Vicksburg (July 1863) – Lee invaded the North (2 of 2) and clashed with Union forces at Gettysburg. This 3-day battle culminated with “Pickett’s Charge” uphill against entrenched Union troops. Losses were massive, especially for the South. After Gettysburg, the war was effectively lost for the secesh (despite dragging out 2 more years). The best-known film about this battle, appropriately titled *Gettysburg* (1993), is unique for being the only war movie which feels roughly the same length as the multi-day battle it recreates.

Meanwhile, in the West, Grant had laid siege to Vicksburg – both the city and Confederate forces stationed there. After more than a month, they surrendered in early July. The civilian population had faced starvation, disease, etc. (‘total war’). This completed Union control of the Mississippi River (as per the much-maligned ‘Anaconda Plan’).

Finally, it’s in July of 1863 that the Massachusetts 54th made their dramatic (but suicidal) assault on Ft. Wagner (the climactic scene in *Glory*). It was a massive military loss, but a hugely important symbolic moment for Black Americans and how they were perceived by the population at large. Their valor led to the use of an additional 180,000 black troops in the remainder of the war.

You Want To Sound REALLY Smart? {Extra Stuff}

General Grant had Ft. Donelson, commanded by a General Buckner who happened to be a former friend of Grant’s and who’d helped him out considerably in years past, surrounded and without hope of escape. Gen. Buckner sent down a note asking for his terms of surrender, expecting something fairly chivalrous and gracious – especially considering their past relationship. Grant’s response quickly became legendary:

SIR: Yours of this date, proposing armistice and appointment of commissioners to settle terms of capitulation, is just received. No terms except unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted. I propose to move immediately upon your works.

I am, sir, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

U.S. GRANT, Brigadier-General, Commanding.

In addition to making Grant a hero back home, and earning him his nickname, the phrase “I propose to move immediately upon your works” became something of a catchphrase for a wide variety of scenarios – including, apparently, young men attempting to strike just the right amount of “naughty, but clever” in their time alone with young ladies. There’s no clear tally of how often this approach was successful.