CHAPTER SIXTEEN: THE CIVIL WAR, 1861–1865

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KEY TOPICS
*The social and political changes created by the unprecedented nature and scale of the Civil War
*The major military campaigns of the war
*The central importance of the end of slavery to the war efforts of North and South

AMERICAN COMMUNITIES: MOTHER BICKERDYKE CONNECTS NORTHERN COMMUNITIES TO THEIR BOYS AT WAR  Northern communities, which had sent men to the Union Army, were shocked to learn of the number of deaths due to disease. A Galesberg, Illinois congregation sent Mary Ann Bickerdyke to teach her “boys” basic sanitation and nutrition. “Mother” Bickerdyke’s direct approach antagonized some officers. But her work exposed the need for support services and helped to create the United States Sanitary Commission. Bickerdyke continued to work with soldiers and to raise funds for her cause. The vignette illustrates the irony of a war that split a nation but showed the strength of local communities.

COMMUNITIES MOBILIZE FOR WAR  Neither side was prepared for what lay ahead. Although both Lincoln and Jefferson Davis wanted peace at the time of their inaugurations, a conflict was brewing in Fort Sumter. The Union garrison was low on supplies. Lincoln announced his intention to send food. The Confederacy attacked the fort and the war was on. War was greeted enthusiastically by communities on both sides. Men enlisted and women prepared supplies. Although most slave states had seceded, four strategically important border states (Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, and Delaware) had not. In Maryland, Lincoln cracked down on dissent by declaring martial law and arresting pro-Confederate leaders. In Missouri, guerilla warfare broke out. Kentucky also remained in the Union but sent troops to both sides. The border states choosing to stay in the Union greatly hampered Confederate efforts.

The first Battle of Bull Run shattered both sides’ enthusiastic notions of the war. The Union marched off to the shout of “On to Richmond.” But Confederate resistance drove them back in an uncontrolled retreat. The war would not be a quick and glorious conquest. On paper, the Union seemed to enjoy an overwhelming material advantage, but it would have to fight a war of conquest with untrained troops. Southerners were confident that they had the military leadership, productive capacity, and international demand for cotton on their side.

GOVERNMENTS ORGANIZE FOR WAR  Lincoln faced an awesome task as president, including gaining support from his own party. He quickly took on extra-legal power, expanding the budget, calling up state militias and taking other actions without congressional sanction. He was the first president to act as commander-in-chief, directing military policy, tempered by his intention to seek North-South reconciliation.

The greatest expansion of government came in the War Department, which required unprecedented mobilization. The Union had to find new ways of raising funds. Bond sales in small amounts, new taxes, and printing paper money enabled the government to stay afloat. Democrats protested economic centralization, but free from southern opposition, the Republicans were able to enact their economic programs including a doubling of the tariff, chartering
companies to build a transcontinental railroad, a Homestead Act, and the establishment of land grant colleges. The federal government was permanently strengthened. Lincoln was further challenged by the potential foreign recognition of the Confederacy. Although he was ultimately successful, the Union had to accept a temporary French incursion into Mexico, violating the Monroe Doctrine.

Jefferson Davis needed to forge a nation out of 11 states, but he lacked Lincoln’s political astuteness and skill. He tended to “micro-manage” the war. Davis lost the public confidence needed to build support for the sacrifices required by war. Southern hopes for foreign recognition failed to bring results. Confederate finances were in disarray with runaway inflation. After the initial blush of enthusiasm, the Confederacy turned to a draft that exempted wealthy slaveholders. Although most southern whites felt a loyalty to their states, they lacked a sense of loyalty to the Confederate nation and feared that centralization would destroy the very identity they sought to preserve.

THE FIGHTING THROUGH 1862 The initial northern strategy envisioned squeezing the South like a giant Anaconda snake. Popular clamor for sudden action was tempered by the Bull Run disaster. In spring 1862, the new Union commander of eastern troops, George McClellan, planned a march along Virginia’s James Peninsula toward Richmond. But Robert E. Lee mounted a successful counterattack, driving McClellan back. Davis ordered an invasion of Maryland that was stopped in September at Antietam. A final Union thrust also ended in December at Fredericksburg.

Things went better for the Union in the west. Troops commanded by Ulysses S. Grant captured forts along Tennessee’s river systems and swung south where in April they defeated Confederate troops at Shiloh. Union conquests of Memphis and New Orleans made control of the Mississippi River seem only a matter of time. In the West, sporadic Confederate campaigns, at times aided by relocated Indians, were successfully overcome by federal troops and state militia. Far West, small bands secured the region, though Indian and guerrilla fighting throughout the Missouri area plagued the Union. The Union was aided by its superior navy, which in time tightened its grip over southern blockade-runners and seized several coastal areas. When the Union navy captured Port Royal in South Carolina 10,000 slaves greeted the troops. The Union policy of treating runaway slaves as contraband contributed to the demise of slavery.

THE DEATH OF SLAVERY Lincoln personally hated slavery, but had been initially opposed to actions that would destroy it. At the beginning of the war, the military necessity of holding the Border States and placating staunchly racist northerners made emancipation politically impractical. His decision to emancipate the slaves came out of military necessity. Following the Union victory at Antietam, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Effective January 1, 1863, slaves in the areas under Confederate control were freed. Although no slaves were immediately freed, the act encouraged more slaves to seek freedom. Abolitionists pushed the Republicans to support the Thirteenth Amendment, that permanently outlawed slavery. Lincoln also permitted black troops to be enrolled. They served under white officers, many of whom had been abolitionists. Nearly 200,000 blacks served. They encountered racism on both sides. Until June 1864, they received unequal pay. But they did manage to make a dent in northern white racism as some nondiscriminatory laws were passed.
THE FRONT LINES AND THE HOME FRONT  New firearms technology brought more accurate and, hence, more deadly weapons. Conventional tactics called for massive assaults, that brought huge casualties. Medical ignorance and disease also contributed to heavy casualty rates. Northern women volunteered as nurses and organized their communities through the United States Sanitary commission to help provide relief. Southern women had no comparable organization though thousands volunteered as nurses. Despite these volunteers, most medical support staff continued to be men. Common soldiers who anticipated a short and glorious war instead experience massive, horrendously bloody battles. Desertion, going AWOL, and fraternization with the enemy were common.

The Union home front was wrought with problems. The Democratic Party divided into War Democrats who supported the war effort and Peace Democrats or “Copperheads” who did not. Democrats criticized the centralization of power and the efforts towards emancipation. Copperhead leader Clement Vallandigham urged a negotiated peace and suggested an alliance between western Democrats and Southerners. Lincoln responded by declaring martial law, leading to the arrest of 13,000 people. Lincoln also had to cope with radicals and conservatives within his own party. The war stimulated the northern economy, but not all industries profited. With $1 billion in government contracts, profiteers flourished. For most people the war only brought inflation that outpaced wages. As workers formed unions, manufacturers hired strikebreakers (many of whom were black) thus exacerbating racial tensions. Lower-class whites resented the Union draft, which allowed conscripts to buy their way out for $300. Between July 13 and July 17, 1863, New Yorkers rioted against the draft, killing 105 people.

Southerners saw even greater changes. Class resentments were even greater in the South. High inflation left many destitute. In spring 1865, food riots broke out throughout the South. Desertion rates were high. Slaves were increasingly disobedient and one quarter fled to Union lines. Peace movements sprang up throughout the Confederacy.

THE TIDE TURNS  In May 1863 in the east, Robert E. Lee beat back an army twice his size at Chancellorsville. Lee moved north into Maryland and Pennsylvania, but his offensive was stopped by George Meade at Gettysburg from July 1-3, 1863. He never mounted another offensive. The next day in the west Grant completed his siege of Vicksburg and soon followed up by capturing Chattanooga. Grant’s successes led Lincoln to appoint him general in chief of all Union forces and Grant moved his command to Virginia. With Sherman, he conceived a plan of destroying the fabric of southern life. In Virginia, Grant encouraged slaves to run away while he destroyed anything that could be used by the enemy. After Sherman captured Atlanta, he began his march to the sea destroying everything in his path. Sherman also issued a special order that set aside land for the freed slaves.

Lincoln did not like his own chances for re-election in 1864. His party was divided. The Democrat, General George McClellan was a war hero who proclaimed the war a failure. Sherman’s capture of Atlanta on Sept. 1, 1864, helped turn the tide. Lincoln won 55 percent of the vote and secured a mandate for his policy of unconditional surrender. In the east, Grant hammered Lee into submission—but it took a year and cost thousands of Union lives. To counteract a Union manpower advantage that grew more and more evident, Southerners
contemplated the unthinkable. Several urged freeing slaves and enrolling them in the army. Two regiments of black solders were organized, but never used it was too late. Lee was trapped and surrendered. Davis was soon captured and the war was finally over. Northerners began to celebrate, but Lincoln’s assassination muted their joy.

CONCLUSION A divided people had been forcibly reunited and the nation had been permanently changed. Whether this would bring a just peace remained to be seen.

Lecture Suggestions

1. There are two basic ways of covering the war. One is to try to cover the major events—battles, campaigns, etc. The other is to take a more topical approach. You might do a combination—one or two classes on topics and one or two classes that give the basic narrative.

2. A topical approach that you might take is to look at why the Civil War was so bloody. You might look at the role played by technology. The Civil War was the first war in which the advances of the industrial revolution played a significant role. You might look at the ways both sides had to secure popular support for the war. It was a war between two democratic societies—decisions that secured popular support prolonged the war.

3. Another topical approach is to look at what each side had to do in order to succeed. Given the enormous material advantage the Union had, how did the Confederacy stay in the war for four years? You might discuss the South’s mobilization efforts and rapid industrialization. You might discuss how the Union redefined its war aims from status quo antebellum to a revolution in southern society.

4. Another topical approach is to look at the war from the black vantagepoint. You might examine that although both sides were committed to white supremacy, the Union, unlike the Confederacy, mobilized black troops. Look at how both sides used African Americans and examine their contribution securing their own freedom.

5. If you are inclined to use a narrative approach you might focus on what James McPherson identifies as the three turning points of the war. Antietam and emancipation are the first; Gettysburg, Vicksburg, and Chattanooga are the second; the election of 1864 is the third. Be careful when you discuss the military narrative. Students get lost easily. They are not used to dealing with maps. The temptation is always to give them more detail about battles than they can handle.

Discussion Questions

1. What were the relative advantages of each side?

2. What were the strengths of Abraham Lincoln as a war leader? How was he different from Jefferson Davis?
3. What did the Confederacy need to do in order to win? What did the Union need to do?

4. Why did Lincoln wait nearly two years before freeing the slaves? Why did he finally free them? Do you accept his claim that he did so out of military necessity?

5. What role did blacks play in their own liberation?

6. What were the major military turning points in the war?

7. Why did the Union win?

Out of Class Activity

There are numerous Civil War diaries that are readily available. Students could go through a series of them and come up with presentations on the life of the common civil war soldier. You might divide them up into two groups—Southerners and Northerners—and have each group give a separate report.

If You’re Going to Read One Book on the Subject

It all depends on where you want to go. If you want a good narrative of the events—James McPherson’s Ordeal by Fire (McGraw Hill, 1982, 1992) is the choice. If you want to try a topical approach, William L. Barney’s Flawed Victory (Praeger, 1975) is a gem. Barney has chapters on the nature of the war, what each side had to do to win, the black experience, and the way that the war transformed the Union. It’s a must for a topical look at the war.

Audio Visual Aids

There is an abundance of films on the Civil War—Ken Burns’s multi-part PBS series “The Civil War” is widely available. It covers about 11 hours and individual episodes are appropriate for classrooms.

“Glory,” a feature-film with Matthew Broderick, Denzel Washington, Morgan Freeman, and others. Portrays the Massachusetts 54th—the most famous black regiment. (Color, approx 90 minutes, 1990)