

Origins

Although the roots of the American Civil War can be traced back decades, perhaps even centuries, the trigger for the secession of the southern states was the election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency in 1860. For the first time, the presidency was won without any southern votes. This marked what many thought would be a permanent shift of power towards the more populous northern and mid-western states. Lincoln had promised not to try to abolish slavery, but many southerners thought this would be the inevitable result of any attempt to limit it.

South Carolina had long been the most radical of the southern states and was the first to declare its secession from the Union. Shortly after, other states in the deep south followed. Lincoln hoped this was temporary and that unity could be regained. However, the attack on Fort Sumter, a federal fort in Charleston harbour, marked the beginning of the armed conflict.

Early engagements

The first proper battle of the war was at Bull Run, south of Washington DC. Expecting an easy victory, the Union army was instead taken by surprise by the tactical skill of the Confederate generals. The Civil War was not going to be an easy war to win, and was marked by bloody set-piece battles such as Antietam. This battle saw the highest number of casualties in a single day during the war (and US military history), with 22,717 dead, wounded or missing. Antietam forced a Confederate withdrawal from Maryland and gave Lincoln the confidence to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. While almost no enslaved people were freed as a result of this, it made ending slavery an aim of the Union, and encouraged black men to enlist into the Union army.

Union victory

In mid-1863, the tide of war turned decisively in the Union's favour, as its greater industrial capacity and manpower finally began to have an impact. Defeat at Gettysburg in Pennsylvania ended Confederate ambitions to push the war into Union territory. The fall of Vicksburg just a day later split Confederate forces, and handed control of the Mississippi river to the Union.

The south did not give up easily. General Lee in Virginia conducted a war of attrition, which held his forces together until April 1865. In late 1864, Union General Sherman embarked on his 'march to the sea' from Atlanta to Savannah, with the express aim of breaking southern morale. He cut a swathe of destruction through Georgia and South Carolina, burning towns, homes, and crops. As he did so, he was supported by enslaved people who were quick to flee their bondage and join the liberating army. In April 1865, General Lee surrendered the last sizeable Confederate force to General Grant, effectively ending the civil war. The victory for the Union was bittersweet: just 5 days later, Lincoln was assassinated by a Confederate sympathiser while at the theatre.

The American Civil War

The American Civil War is one of the most studied events in US history. This timeline tracks its progression

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1860

1860
6 Nov Abraham Lincoln is elected president
20 Dec South Carolina secedes from the Union

1861

1861
Jan–Feb Deep-south states secede, Confederate States of America founded
12 April Southern forces fire on Fort Sumter
April–May Border states secede
21 July First Battle of Bull Run

1862

1862
17 September Battle of Antietam

1863

1863
1 Jan Emancipation proclamation issued
1–3 July Battle of Gettysburg
4 July Battle of Vicksburg
19 November Gettysburg Address

1864

1864
Sept–Dec Sherman's march to the sea
8 Nov Lincoln re-elected

1865

1865
9 April Surrender of Lee
14 April Lincoln's assassination

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