

The Union and Confederacy

The Union had many advantages over the Confederacy. The North had a larger population than the South. The Union also had an industrial economy, whereas the Confederacy had an economy based on agriculture. The Union had most of the natural resources, like coal, iron, and gold, and also a well-developed rail system. Most of the financial centers were in the North, which made borrowing money to fight the war difficult for the South. The Union had a small navy, but the Confederacy had to resort to using private ships because it had no naval vessels. While some believed the South had the better officers, the North had twice as many soldiers.

Yankees and Rebels, Blue and Gray

“Yankee” and “Rebel” are nicknames that the Northerners and Southerners gave each other shortly after the start of the Civil War. The Northerners were called “Yankees” and the Southerners, “Rebels.” Sometimes these nicknames were shortened even further to “Yanks” and “Rebs.”

At the beginning of the war, each soldier wore whatever uniform he had from his state’s militia, so soldiers were wearing uniforms that didn’t match. For example, some uniforms were blue or gray, while others were black or red. As the war dragged on, that changed. The soldiers of the Union Army wore blue uniforms and the soldiers of the Confederate Army wore gray. Today, that’s how many people remember the two sides—the North wore blue, and the South wore gray.

First Battle of Bull Run

Neither side—North or South—had a realistic view of what it would take to fight the war in terms of time and resources. Each side thought the war would be short and easily won. The outcome of the first engagement of the war greatly bolstered Confederate confidence and jolted the Union into a realization of how hard it would be to defeat the South.

The first battle was fought in July along Bull Run Creek near Manassas Junction, Virginia, just 20 miles from Washington. Many civilians rode out from Washington thinking to spend an interesting afternoon watching the Confederates get a good thrashing. Some even brought picnics to eat while they watched the confrontation. Instead, the Confederates fought tenaciously and ulti-

mately overwhelmed the Union forces, who retreated willy-nilly back to Washington. It was anything but an orderly retreat as the raw troops sprinted back to safety, leaving the civilians to hurry back as best they could. Fortunately for the Union, the surprised and elated Confederates, who were also untrained, disorganized, and exhausted, were not in a position to press their advantage and pursue the fleeing soldiers.

The Battle of Bull Run is also known as the Battle of Manassas. The Confederates often named battles according to nearby towns. The Union troops often referred to them according to nearby geographical features, like rivers and creeks.

Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee

Although the Union had the advantage because of the size of its army, both sides had excellent leadership. The start of the war went badly for the Union, both on the western front along the Mississippi and in the east. Union generals in the east had opportunities to strike at the Confederate army, but the generals often hesitated. Lincoln became particularly upset with General George McClellan. After McClellan hesitated to attack several times, Lincoln relieved him of his command.

The first victories for the Union came in 1862 under General Ulysses S. Grant. Grant captured Fort Donelson in Tennessee. When the Confederates in the fort inquired about terms of surrender, Grant replied that no terms but “unconditional surrender” would be accepted. People began to refer to him as “Unconditional Surrender” Grant.

In the same year, Admiral Farragut scored a major victory for the Union when his squadron of ships defeated the Confederate defenses in New Orleans and took the city. This victory secured the lower Mississippi River for the Union and was a major blow to the Confederacy. Another turning point in the war occurred in 1863, when Grant defeated the Confederate troops in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Grant’s victories there and in Tennessee gave the Union control of the Mississippi River, split the Confederacy, and effectively ended the war in the west. Union control of the Mississippi River cut off the flow of much-needed supplies and reinforcements from Texas and Arkansas to the rest of the Confederacy. In 1864, Lincoln consolidated command of all the Union armies under Grant.

Grant moved to the eastern front and began a long, punishing attack on the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia, a force led by Robert E. Lee. By April 1865 Grant’s men had worn down and defeated the Confederates. Grant accepted Lee’s surrender in the little town of Appomattox Court House, Virginia. Grant went on to become the eighteenth president of the United States in 1872.

Grant and Lee are often compared, as they had lived two strikingly different lives prior to becoming rival generals in the last years of the Civil War. Grant was born on a small Ohio farm, whereas Robert E. Lee was born on a large plantation in northern Virginia. (Lee’s plantation was seized by Union forces and became the site of Arlington National Cemetery.) Grant was a mediocre student at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and had an undistinguished military career before the Civil War. He had failed in business and was rumored to be a heavy drinker. Lee also graduated from West Point but was at the top of his class. He

had a highly successful military career. He served with distinction in the Mexican-American War, was superintendent of West Point for a period in the 1850s, and was in command of the troops at Harpers Ferry that captured John Brown.

At the beginning of the war, Lincoln asked Lee to assume command of the Union forces, but Lee refused out of loyalty to his home state, Virginia. He instead accepted a command in the Confederate army. Lee scored a number of important victories, but faced with dwindling resources, his army was unable to withstand the larger, better-equipped Union army.