II. The Civil War: Causes, Conflicts, Consequences

**Jefferson Davis**

Even before the first guns had been fired, representatives for the secessionist states had met in Montgomery, Alabama in February 1861 and formed the Confederate States of America (CSA). It was eventually decided that Richmond, Virginia, would be the capital. Jefferson Davis was elected president.

Davis had represented Mississippi for several terms in the United States Senate and had been the secretary of war under Franklin Pierce. When Mississippi seceded, he had resigned from the Senate. It was his direct order that launched the attack against Fort Sumter.

Davis was a West Point graduate who had gained national fame as a hero in the Mexican-American War. His prestige was an asset to the Confederacy. But as a leader, Davis was high-handed and divisive, feuding throughout the war with Southern governors over military, fiscal, and political affairs.

**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 ult-
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 medico 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
II. The Civil War: Causes, Conflicts, Consequences

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.

**General Stonewall Jackson**

General Thomas Jackson was given the nickname “Stonewall” because of his actions in the First Battle of Bull Run. During the battle, a Confederate soldier noted that Jackson and his men were “standing like a stone wall.” The nickname stuck: for the rest of the war Jackson was known as “Stonewall Jackson.”

Considered by many to be General Lee’s most able general, Jackson orchestrated Confederate victories in the Shenandoah Valley campaign. He led his forces brilliantly at the Second Battle of Bull Run, and at the battles at Antietam and Fredericksburg. He was wounded in 1863 during the battle of Chancellorsville and died eight days later.

**Battle of the USS Monitor and the CSS Virginia**

The Union had a great advantage in the naval war and used its advantage to blockade Confederate ports. But in March 1862, the Confederacy struck back. The CSS Virginia steamed out of its port at Hampton Roads, Virginia, and attacked and sunk several Union ships. The Virginia was no ordinary ship. It had originally been a Union ship called the Merrimack, but the Confederates had plated its sides with iron. Now Union cannonballs bounced harmlessly off its sides.

The Confederates hoped to sail their ironclad ship up the Potomac, sinking Union ships, and possibly even shelling Washington, D.C. The Confederate hopes were short lived, however. The next day a Union ironclad ship called the Monitor steamed out to meet the Virginia. The Monitor had a distinctive design, with a small, rotating turret on top of the main body of the ship. The battle between the two ironclads was a draw, as neither ship was able to harm its adversary. But the Southern threat had been countered, and the era of wooden warships had come to a sudden end.

**Battle of Antietam Creek**

In September 1862, Lee started to move his troops north toward Washington. In a fierce battle, Lee’s forces were driven back at Antietam Creek, Maryland, by a Union army under General George B. McClellan.

Antietam was the bloodiest single-day battle of the war—almost 23,000 men were killed or wounded. More than 8,000 died in a single cornfield. When the day began, the field was full of tall, ripe corn. By the end of the day, cannons, rifles, and charging troops had decimated the corn so that “every stalk of corn in the northern and greater part of the field was cut as closely as could have been done with a knife.”