Basic US History

Unit 5 – The Civil War

Civil War Battles, 1863-65

**Vicksburg Falls**

In April 1862, Admiral David G. Farragut captured New Orleans and secured control of the Mississippi River delta for the Union. Later that year, General Ulysses S. Grant seized control as far south as Memphis after his victory at Shiloh. There remained, however, one major Confederate stronghold on the river - Vicksburg, Mississippi. “Vicksburg is the key,” Lincoln said. “The war can never be brought to a close until that key is in our pocket.” If Grant could take Vicksburg, the Confederacy would be cut in two.

In May 1863, Grant launched two assaults on Vicksburg, but the city’s defenders repulsed both attacks. Grant decided that the only way to take the city was to put it under siege. The siege of Vicksburg lasted for six weeks, with Confederate troops and the city’s residents facing near starvation. On July 4, 1863, the Confederate commander at Vicksburg surrendered. The Union victory had cut the Confederacy in two.

**Grant Becomes General in Chief**

By the spring of 1864, Lincoln had reorganized the military leadership in the West, placing Grant in overall command. Grant had accomplished two crucial objectives for the Union. His capture of Vicksburg had given the Union control of the Mississippi River, while his victory at Chattanooga had secured eastern Tennessee and cleared the way for an invasion of Georgia.

Lincoln rewarded Grant by appointing him general in chief of the Union forces and promoting him to lieutenant general, a rank no one had held since George Washington. Grant then headed east to join the Army of the Potomac, leaving Sherman in command of the western Union forces. W hen the president met Grant in March 1864, he told him, “I wish to express in this way my entire satisfaction with what you have done. . . . The particulars of your plan I neither know nor seek to know.” The president had finally found a general he trusted to win the war.

**From the Wilderness to Cold Harbor**

In the spring of 1864, the most successful general of the Union army faced the most renowned Confederate commander. Ulysses S. Grant put his most trusted subordinate, William Tecumseh Sherman, in charge of operations in the West. He then headed to Washington, D.C., to take command of the Union troops facing Robert E. Lee.

The first battle of Grant’s campaign erupted in May in the Wilderness, a densely forested area near Fredericksburg, Virginia. Intense fighting lasted two days, continuing even after the woods caught fire. Despite suffering heavy casualties, Grant attacked again near Spotsylvania Courthouse. The two armies battled for 11 days, often in bloody hand-to-hand combat.

Unlike past campaigns, in which several weeks of reinforcing and resupplying followed battles, warfare now continued without pause. Savage combat, advances and retreats, and the digging of defensive trenches filled most days and nights.

Unable to break Lee’s lines at Spotsylvania, Grant headed toward Cold Harbor, a strategic crossroads northeast of Richmond. Grant decided to launch an all-out assault at Cold Harbor. The attack cost his army 7,000 casualties, compared to 1,500 for Confederate forces.

**Farragut Attacks Mobile**

While Grant fought Lee, General Sherman marched his army from Chattanooga toward Atlanta, and the Union navy prepared to seal the last major port on the Gulf of Mexico east of the Mississippi—Mobile, Alabama.

On August 5, 1864, Admiral Farragut took 18 ships past the three Confederate forts defending Mobile Bay. As the fleet headed into the bay, a mine—which in the 1860s was called a torpedo—blew up a Union ship. The explosion brought the fleet to a halt, right in front of a fort’s guns. “Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead !” cried Farragut, whose ship led the way through the minefield.

After getting past the Confederate forts, Farragut’s ships destroyed a Confederate fleet defending Mobile Bay. Although Farragut did not capture Mobile, he did seal off the bay. Blockade runners moving goods in and out of the Deep South could no longer use any port east of Texas.

**Sherman’s March to the Sea**

In late August 1864, Sherman sent his troops south around Atlanta to cut the roads and railways leading into the city. After occupying Atlanta, Sherman proposed to march across Georgia. He ordered all civilians to leave Atlanta. To end the war, he believed, he had no choice but to “make old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war.” Sherman then ordered his troops to destroy everything of military value, including mills, factories, railroads, and warehouses. The fires intended to destroy these structures quickly spread, burning down large portions of the city.

On November 15, 1864, Sherman began his March to the Sea. His troops cut a path of destruction through Georgia that was, in places, 60 miles (97 km) wide. They ransacked houses, burned crops, and killed cattle. By December 21, 1864, they had reached the coast and seized the city of Savannah. After reaching the sea, Sherman turned his troops north and headed into South Carolina. As the troops marched north, they pillaged and burned many towns, including Columbia, the state capital. Sherman’s march demoralized Southerners.

When Sherman and Grant began their campaigns in the spring of 1864, Lincoln knew that his own reelection depended on their success. He did not know, however, that the war was nearly over. Only a few months later, the Confederacy was on the verge of collapse.

**The Election of 1864**

To challenge Lincoln in 1864, the Democrats nominated General George B. McClellan. Knowing the country was growing weary of the war, McClellan pledged to negotiate a cease-fire if the Confederacy agreed to rejoin the Union as part of the negotiations. However, the capture of Atlanta came just in time to revitalize Northern support for the war and for Lincoln, who won reelection with 55 percent of the popular vote. Lincoln viewed his reelection as a mandate to end slavery permanently by amending the Constitution. On January 31, 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment, banning slavery in the United States, narrowly passed the House of Representatives and was sent to the states for ratification.

**Surrender**

On April 1, 1865, Union troops led by Sheridan cut the last railroad line into Petersburg at the Battle of Five Forks. The following night, Lee’s troops withdrew from their positions near the city and raced west. Lee’s desperate attempt to escape Grant’s forces failed when Sheridan’s cavalry got ahead of Lee’s troops and blocked the road at Appomattox Courthouse. When his troops failed to break through, Lee sadly observed, “[T]here is nothing left for me to do but go and see General Grant, and I would rather die a thousand deaths.” With his battered troops surrounded and outnumbered, Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox Courthouse on April 9, 1865.

Grant’s generous terms of surrender guaranteed that the United States would not prosecute Confederate soldiers for treason. When Grant agreed to let Confederate soldiers take their horses home “to put in a crop to carry themselves and their families through the next winter,” Lee thanked him, adding that the kindness would “do much toward conciliating our people.”

**Lincoln’s Assassination**

With the war over, Lincoln described his plan to restore the Southern states to the Union. In the speech, he mentioned including African Americans in Southern state governments. One listener, the actor John Wilkes Booth, sneered to a friend, “That is the last speech he will ever make.”

The president’s advisers repeatedly warned him not to appear unescorted in public. Nevertheless, on the evening of April 14, 1865, Lincoln went to Ford’s Theatre with his wife to see a play. During the third act, Booth slipped quietly behind him and shot the president in the back of the head. Lincoln’s death shocked the nation.

**Aftermath of the Civil War**

The North’s victory in the Civil War strengthened the power of the federal government over the states. It also transformed American society by finally ending the enslavement of millions of African Americans. At the same time, it left the South socially and economically devastated. Following the war, many questions remained unresolved. Americans from the North and the South tried to answer these questions in the years following the Civil War— an era known as Reconstruction.

Find the following terms in the text; highlight or underline the term and then write its definition in the margin next to it:

**subordinate pillaged mandate**

1. Why was Vicksburg an important victory for the Union forces?

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2. What did General Grant do to earn Lincoln’s trust in guiding the Union forces?

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3. Why did Lincoln believe that his reelection was a mandate to end slavery?

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4. Do you think armies should treat civilians differently from soldiers during a war? Why?

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5. What do you think life was like in the South at the conclusion of the Civil War (how do you think people felt)?

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