

A Brief Overview of the American Civil War



The Civil War resolved a fundamental question left unresolved by the Revolution of 1776-1783 : Whether this nation, born of a declaration that all men were created with an equal right to liberty, would continue to exist as the largest slaveholding country in the world.

Northern victory in the war preserved the United States as one nation and ended the institution of slavery that had divided the country from its beginning. But these achievements came at the cost of 625,000 lives--nearly as many American soldiers as died in all the other wars in which this country has fought combined. The American Civil War was the largest and most destructive conflict in the Western world between the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 and the onset of World War I in 1914.

The Civil War started because of uncompromising differences between the free and slave states over the power of the national government to prohibit slavery in the territories that had not yet become states.

When Abraham Lincoln won election in 1860 on a platform pledging to keep slavery out of the territories, seven slave states in the deep South seceded and formed a new nation, the Confederate States of America. The incoming Lincoln administration and most of the Northern people refused to recognize the legitimacy of secession.

Four more slave states seceded and joined the Confederacy. By the end of 1861 nearly a million armed men confronted each other along a line stretching 1200 miles from Virginia to Missouri. But the real fighting began in 1862.

By 1864 the original Northern goal of a limited war to restore the Union had given way to a new strategy of "total war" to destroy the Old South and its basic institution of slavery and to give the restored Union a "new birth of freedom," as President Lincoln put it in his address at Gettysburg.

By the spring of 1865 all the principal Confederate armies surrendered, and when Union cavalry captured the fleeing Confederate President Jefferson Davis in Georgia on May 10, 1865, resistance collapsed and the war ended.

The long, painful process of rebuilding a united nation free of slavery began.

Adapted from DR. JAMES MCPHERSON's article : A DEFINING TIME IN OUR NATION'S HISTORY
(Source : <http://www.civilwar.org/education/history/civil-war-overview/>)