

American Civil War

The American Civil War was a civil war fought in the United States from 1861 to 1865 between the northern states loyal to the Union and the 7 southern states that had seceded from the Union to form the Confederate States of America.

The American Civil War was a result of disputes between the northern and southern states of America over slavery, westward expansion and rights of the state.

The article about the American Civil War is relevant for the UPSC Mains GS 1 segment of the exam.

What were the factors that led to the American Civil War?

The benefits of the Industrial Revolution was making its way towards the North American continent in the latter half of the 19th century. The era of tremendous growth in the United States brought with it its own share of benefits and drawbacks. The most obvious drawback being the economic disparity between the northern and southern regions of the United States.

The North was industrialised and agriculture was limited to small farms, while the south was a primarily an agrarian region that depended on African slave labour maintain and grow crops such as cotton and tobacco

By the 1830s there was a rise in anti-slavery movements in the north which even extended into the newly acquired western territories of the United States. The southern states saw this as a major threat to their livelihood which was largely dependent on the practice of slavery.

In 1854, the Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed by the United States Congress. The act allowed slavery in the newly acquired territories through the assertion of popular sovereignty. In a series of conflicts termed as 'Bleeding Kansas' pro-slavery and anti-slavery clashed violently between each other over the implementation of the new act.

The opposition of the new act was led by the Republican Party, a new political party formed to oppose the spread of slavery in the western regions for the United States. The Dred Scott case in 1857 was a landmark decision by the U.S Supreme Court which effectively confirmed the legality of slavery in the territories. Following this, there was a raid at Harper's Ferry in 1859 by John Brown a fervent abolitionist. Although he was caught and executed for his actions, the southerners now firmly believed that their northern brethren were adamant in destroying their livelihood.

The final straw came when the republican candidate Abraham Lincoln was elected as President of the United States in November 1860. Within three months of his election, 7 states seceded from the United States. These 7 states would go on to form the Confederate States of America.

The outbreak of the American Civil War

The Civil War in America began with the newly formed Confederate army attacking the Union-held Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina in April 1861. After taking the oath of office in March of that year, Lincoln ordered that Fort Sumter be supplied by the Union fleet on April 12.

Despite the effort, Fort Sumter fell to the Confederate forces on 13 April. After the victory at Fort Sumter, four more southern states joined the Confederacy - Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina and Tennessee. Even though border southern states like Missouri, Kentucky and Maryland did not join the Confederacy, there was much anti-Union sentiment amongst its populace.

Although the 23 states had the advantage of population, military production and technological advancement, the Confederate states evened the odds with their strong military tradition and fielding the best soldiers and commanders of the time. The Union troops were merely conscripts forced to fight in the Union army with little pay while the southerners were enthusiastic volunteers who believed they were fighting to preserve their tradition and institution.

The First Battle of Bull Run fought on July 21, 1861, was a Confederate Army under Thomas Jonathan 'Stonewall' Jackson inflicted heavy casualties on the Union Forces, prompting them to retreat towards Washington D.C. Now fully aware that both sides were in for the long haul, calls were made to bring in more troops to be drafted into their respective armies.

After the debacle at Bull Run, General Winfield Scott was replaced as supreme commander of the Union Army by George B McClellan. Although beloved by his troops, Lincoln chastised him for his overly cautious approach to war. In the spring of 1862, McClellan led his Army to capture Yorktown on May 4. However, a Confederate Army managed to drive him back during the Seven Days Battles (June 25 - July 1). McClellan's request for reinforcements was denied by Lincoln and in mid-1862 he was replaced as general-in-chief by Henry W. Halleck, although McClellan remained commander of the Army of the Potomac

Confederate General Robert E. Lee moved his army to engage the Union Army in the second battle of the Bull Run on August 29, 1862. Lee emerged victorious over the northern army and even invaded northern territories following his victory. However, McClellan was able to reorganise his army and strike at Lee on September 14 at Maryland. The attack drove the Confederate forces towards a defensive position along Antietam Creek near Sharpsburg.

The Battle of Sharpsburg on September 17 was the bloodiest battle in the Civil war which led to fatalities of 69,000 on the Union Side and 52,000 on the Confederate side. Despite the heavy losses, the Union army emerged victorious forcing the Confederate forces to retreat to Virginia.

But McClellan did not follow up on his victory to pursue the retreating Confederate forces. Earning the scorn of Lincoln for his inaction, he was replaced by Ambrose E. Burnside. Burnside's campaign near Fredericksburg on December 13 ended in Union defeat at Lee's hands. He was promptly replaced by Joseph Hooker

The Emancipation Proclamation

President Lincoln used the victory at Sharpsburg to issue the Emancipation Proclamation that freed all the slaves in the rebellious states after January 1, 1863. The proclamation was a measure that deprived the Confederacy of their labour force, bringing their economy to the brink of ruin. The freed slaves, numbering up to 186,000, would bolster the ranks of the Union army.

The costly Confederate victory at Chancellorsville in the spring of 1863 gave way to a northward campaign towards Washington D.C. Lee would attack Union forces on July 1 near Gettysburg, southern Pennsylvania. The battle saw heavy Confederate casualties and forced Lee to retreat back to Virginia, ending the final Confederate intrusion of the north. The turning point in the western theatre of the American Civil War came when Union forces under Ulysses S. Grant took Vicksburg in Mississippi in July. A Confederate victory at Chattanooga, Tennessee, in September, prompted Lincoln to extend Grant's command and his reinforced army took Chattanooga in November 1863.

Union Victory and End of the American Civil War

President Lincoln made Ulysses S. Grant the supreme commander of the Union Armies in March 1864. Taking command Grant led an invasion of the south. He headed towards Lee's forces in Virginia. Grant pursued a strategy of attrition despite taking heavy casualties during the Battles of the Wilderness and Spotsylvania in May 1864. He besieged the key rail centre at Petersburg in June for nine months.

One of Grant's commanders, William Tecumseh Sherman, outflanked Confederate forces to overrun Atlanta in September. South Carolina fell to Sherman by mid-February of 1865. He followed up on his victory by capturing the Confederate towns of such as Goldsboro by mid-April

Robert Lee made a last-ditch effort to salvage the Confederate war effort by attacking Union-held Fort Stedman on March 25. The victory was reversed by a counter-attack of the Union Army.

In the following week's Lee's remaining Confederate forces were pursued along the Appomattox River by the Union Army. Left with no avenues of escape, the Confederate Army finally surrendered to the Union Army on April 9. But Lincoln would not be there to witness the surrender. He was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth whose loyalties laid with the Confederacy on April 14. The surrender of the Confederacy would instead be received by General Sherman at North Carolina on April 26, 1865. The American Civil War was over.

