CHAPTER 21

The Furnace of Civil War, 1861–1865

# Focus Questions

1. How successful was McClellan as commander of the Army of the Potomac?

2. What are some of the pivotal battles of the Civil War and what was the outcome of each?

3. What did the Emancipation Proclamation do and how did it affect the Union cause?

4. How successful was Lee as commander of the Confederate army?

5. Once he was put in charge of the entire Union army, how did Grant prosecute the war until its end?

6. What was the political situation as the election of 1864 approached, and how did Lincoln win a reelection?

7. What were the costs of the Civil War?

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** The Civil War, begun as a limited struggle over the Union, eventually became a total war to end slavery and transform the nation.

**Theme:** After several years of seesaw struggle, the Union armies under Ulysses Grant finally wore down the Southern forces under Robert E. Lee and ended the Confederate bid for independence, as well as the institution of slavery.

chapter summary

The Union defeat at Bull Run ended Northern complacency about a quick victory. George McClellan and other early Union generals proved unable to defeat the tactically brilliant Confederate armies under Lee. The Union naval blockade put a slow but devastating economic noose around the South.

The political and diplomatic dimensions of the war quickly became critical. In order to retain the Border States, Lincoln first deemphasized any intention to destroy slavery. But the Battle of Antietam, in 1862, enabled Lincoln to prevent foreign intervention and turn the struggle into a war against slavery. Blacks and abolitionists joined enthusiastically in a war for emancipation, but white resentment in part of the North created political problems for Lincoln.

The Union victories at Vicksburg in the West and Gettysburg in the East finally turned the military tide against the South. Southern resistance remained strong, but the Union victories at Atlanta and Mobile assured Lincoln’s success in the election of 1864 and ended the last Confederate hopes. The war ended the issues of disunion and slavery, but at a tremendous cost to both North and South.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Examine how the different political and military perspectives and respective advantages that the North and the South (see Chapter 20) brought to the war affected their respective strategies. Show why the failure of McClellan’s Peninsular Campaign almost guaranteed a long and bloody struggle.

REFERENCE: James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988).

* Explain why the North won the Civil War and why the South lost. The factors of military strategy, political leadership, and economic resources might be related to key turning points of the war, such as Vicksburg and Gettysburg.

REFERENCES: Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, *How the North Won* (1983); Richard E. Beringer, Herman Hattaway, Archer Jones, and William N. Still Jr., *Why the South Lost the Civil War* (1986).

* Examine the politics of the war, especially the way Lincoln gradually turned it from being strictly a “war to preserve the Union” into a war for black emancipation. Show how Lincoln first kept the war aims limited to appease the Border States but later used the Emancipation Proclamation to strengthen the North’s moral position.

REFERENCE: James M. McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (1982).

* Consider the role of slavery and the race question in the changing politics of the Civil War. The career of Frederick Douglass provides a good window on the racial question during the war.

REFERENCE: David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass’ Civil War* (1989).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Consider the various crucial “What Ifs?” of the Civil War in relation to the possibilities of a) a Confederate victory or negotiated settlement and b) a war that might have preserved the Union but not ended slavery. Critically analyze the text’s assertion that even though Vicksburg and Gettysburg were the decisive military battles of the war, Antietam was probably the political and diplomatic turning point.
* The South had long hoped for international intervention in its fight with the North. If the South had been able to secure international aid, what would have been most beneficial? What did the South need from other nations in order to win the war (or at least force a peace settlement)?
* Compare and contrast the various Union leaders that Lincoln went through (McClellan and Meade specifically) before settling on Grant. (See boxed quote on page 441.)
* Compare Grant and Lee as military leaders. The focus might be on Lee as the greatest of the traditional strategists, whereas Grant represented the new age of total war.
* Use Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address, Gettysburg Address, Emancipation Proclamation, and Second Inaugural Address to examine the changing interpretations that he gave to secession, the Union, and the issue of slavery. (See section Examining the Evidence on page 450.)
* Examine the effects of the use of black soldiers on the Union military effort and on public opinion. (The film *Glory* might be used as a resource and starting point for discussion.) (See boxed quote on page 446.)

# character sketches

## Clement Vallandigham (1820–1871)

Vallandigham was the Copperhead Democratic politician who was convicted of treason and exiled by Lincoln, only to return and continue his peace agitation.

Vallandigham’s family originally came from Virginia, and they romanticized the South as a land of noble social ideals and order. As an Ohio politician and congressman, he was a bitter foe of Republicans and abolitionists. In 1859, he interviewed John Brown in prison and came away convinced that there was a widespread abolitionist conspiracy to bring about a civil war.

He was given direct military orders to stop his calls for resistance to the war before he was arrested, convicted, and exiled to the South. He used a disguise with a false mustache and a pillow to sneak back across the border from Canada in 1864. The government decided not to rearrest him, and he helped push through the peace plank at the 1864 Democratic convention.

**Quote:** “Yes, it is amazing that our people—Americans, proud, boastful, free—should have submitted to usurpation and despotism.… I am a Democrat—for the Constitution, for law, for the Union, for liberty—this is my only crime.” (1863)

REFERENCE: Frank Clement, *Copperheads in the Middle West* (1972).

## Robert E. Lee (1807–1870)

Lee was the son of “Light-Horse Harry” Lee, a cavalry hero of the revolution and a member of the great Lee family of Virginia. When Robert was still a boy, his father sank into debtor’s prison and disgrace, and eventually left the family.

An 1829 graduate of West Point, where he was a distinguished student, the younger Lee married Mary Custis, a great-granddaughter of Martha Washington, and became master of the Custis estate at Arlington. Lee became a military hero in the Mexican War and later commanded the soldiers who captured John Brown at Harpers Ferry in 1859.

Politically a strong Whig, Lee was initially very unsympathetic to secession. He always said, however, that he would follow the decision of his home state regarding secession. When offered the field command of the Union Army, he turned it down, and instead assumed command of Confederate forces.

Lee had only 7,800 fully armed troops left with him when he surrendered at Appomattox. Most of them wept when he rode by them on his horse Traveler to say farewell. After the war, he served as president of Washington College, which was later renamed “Washington and Lee College.”

**Quote:** “After four years of arduous service, marked by unsurpassing courage and fortitude, the Army of Northern Virginia has been compelled to yield to overwhelming numbers and resources.… Feeling that valor and devotion could accomplish nothing that could compensate for the loss that would have attended the continuation of the contest, I have determined to avoid the useless sacrifice of those whose past services have endeared them to their countrymen.” (Farewell Speech to Confederate Troops, 1865)

REFERENCES: Emory Thomas, *Robert E. Lee: A Biography* (1995); George W. Gallagher, *Lee the Soldier* (1996).

## Ulysses S. Grant (1822–1885)

Grant was a national hero as the commanding Union general in the Civil War, but his reputation suffered badly from his two unfortunate terms as president.

Born in a log cabin in Ohio, Grant inherited his mother’s strong, silent, fiercely determined character but not her marked religious bent. Although officially “Hiram Ulysses,” he changed his name to “Ulysses Hiram” at West Point because he was afraid he would be laughed at for his initials “HUG.” Later, a military error substituted “Simpson” for “Hiram,” and he left it that way.

Grant’s drinking bouts in California were partly caused by his having served a horrendous tour of duty in Panama and by his separation from his family. He was totally devoted to his wife, Julia, who often advised him during his years in politics.

After leaving the presidency, he took a grand tour of Europe for two years and lived so lavishly that he was soon poverty-stricken. He completed his memoirs, which are still greatly admired, while dying of cancer of the throat.

**Quote:** “I saw an open field…so covered with dead that it would have been possible to walk across the clearing, in any direction, stepping on dead bodies, without touching a foot on the ground.” (After the Battle of Shiloh, 1862)

REFERENCE: William McFeely, *Grant* (1981).

## Salmon P. Chase (1808–1873)

Chase was Lincoln’s politically ambitious secretary of the treasury.

He made his career as an antislavery lawyer in Ohio. Although he aided many fugitive slaves as Ohio attorney general, Chase was actually fearful of large black migrations to the North and hoped that emancipation would keep blacks in the South.

In the 1860 Republican convention, Chase had forty-nine votes before throwing them to Lincoln. He always considered Lincoln a weak leader and in December 1862, he conspired with some radical Republicans in Congress to try to take control of the cabinet. But Lincoln invited the conspirators into a cabinet meeting, where Chase was forced to express his support of the president.

He wanted the nomination in 1864 but ran the other way when the movement collapsed. After being extremely unhappy as chief justice of the United States, in 1868, he maneuvered for the Democratic nomination. Chase was self-righteous, opinionated, and difficult to get along with.

**Quote:** “I think a man of different qualities from those the President has will be needed for the next four years. I am not anxious to be regarded as that man. I am quite willing to leave [the choice] to the decision of those who think some such man should be chosen.” (Diary, 1864)

REFERENCES: John Niven, *Salmon P. Chase: A Biography* (1995); David Donald, ed., *Inside Lincoln’s Cabinet: The Civil War Diaries of Salmon P. Chase* (1954).

## John Wilkes Booth (1838–1865)

Booth was the prominent Shakespearean actor who assassinated Abraham Lincoln.

Booth’s father was Junius Brutus Booth, one of the most famous actors of his time. Junius Booth eventually went insane, and John Wilkes was always high-strung, moody, and emotionally unstable. Although probably not actually insane, he did experience periods of wild fantasy and irrationality. He would sometimes go into a rage at the sight of cats and occasionally killed them.

The younger Booth was dark, handsome, and always wore a long black cloak. He was especially popular with women and was said to have had numerous affairs. His favorite roles were Hamlet and Macbeth, but he also played popular melodramas.

He had planned to abduct Lincoln as early as 1864. Several of those he gathered for the assassination plot were feebleminded. He visited Lincoln’s box the afternoon before the performance to arrange the assassination. The barn where he hid after fleeing was set on fire by Union soldiers, and Booth then evidently shot himself.

**Quote:** “I am not a murderer. I have done nothing that a soldier on the battlefield would not do. I do not regret what I have done.” (Statement to physician aiding him, April 15, 1865)

REFERENCE: Albert Furstwangler, *Assassin on Stage* (1991).

# questions for class discussion

1. Why did the North win the Civil War? How might the South have won? (See boxed quotes on page 438 and page 453.)

2. Rank the following battles in order of importance and justify the ranking: Antietam, Gettysburg, and Vicksburg.

3. Should the Civil War be seen primarily as a war to save the Union or as a war to free the slaves? Why? What name would you give to the conflict?

4. What role did race and racism play in the Civil War? How did the war itself reflect and affect American attitudes toward race? Why were the black Union soldiers so critical in this regard? What impact did Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation have on the war and society? (See boxed quotes on page 447 and page 451.)

5. How does the popular image of the Civil War compare with the historical reality? Discuss the different perceptions and memories of the war in the North and South (for example, the popular images of Lee or Sherman in the two sections). (See boxed quotes on page 441 and page 443 as well as section Thinking Globally on pages 460-461.)

# CONTENDING VOICES: *CINCINNATI ENQUIRER* VS. ABRAHAM LINCOLN

**Questions for Class Discussion**

1. What did the *Cincinnati Enquirer* claim would be the result of Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation?

2. How did President Lincoln defend his policy?

# varying viewpoints

**Expanding the View**

* T. Harry Williams, *Lincoln and His Generals* (1952).

A view of Northern victory focused on military leadership:

“Fundamentally Grant was superior to Lee because in a modern total war he had a modern mind, and Lee did not. Lee looked to the past in war as the Confederacy did in spirit.… What was realism to Grant was barbarism to Lee. Lee thought of war in the old way as a conflict between armies and refused to view it for what it had become—a struggle between societies. To him, economic war was needless cruelty to civilians. Lee was the last of the great old-fashioned generals, Grant the first of the great moderns.”

* Allan Nevins, *The War for the Union* (1971).

A view of Northern victory focused on political leadership:

“One cardinal deficiency of the Confederacy…lay in the lack of a chief national executive possessing some of the energy, foresight, and firm decision exhibited by those other leaders of a newborn republic at war, Washington, Cromwell, or Masaryk. It is impossible for a student of the great rebellion to avoid comparing the character, talents, and sagacity of Lincoln with the parallel gifts of Jefferson Davis, greatly to the disadvantage of the latter. This broad subject…must always be kept in mind as an essential element of the war.”

* Thomas C. Cochran, “Did the Civil War Retard Industrialization?” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (1961).

A view of the Civil War actually slowed capitalist economic transformation:

“Collectively these statistical estimates support a conclusion that the Civil War retarded American industrial growth.… Economically the effects of war and emancipation over the period 1840 to 1880 were negative.… If factory industry and mechanized transportation be taken as the chief indexes of early industrialism, its spread in the United States was continuous and rapid during the entire nineteenth century.… Few economists would see a major stimulation to economic growth in the events of the Civil War.”

* James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988).

A view of the Civil War as expanding national power and Northern economic dominance:

“The old federal republic in which the national government had rarely touched the average citizen except through the post-office gave way to a more centralized polity that taxed the people directly and created an internal revenue bureau to collect these taxes, drafted men into the army, expanded the jurisdiction of the federal courts, created a national currency and a national banking system, and established the first national agency for social welfare—the Freedmen’s Bureau.… These changes in the federal balance paralleled a radical shift of political power from South to North.… The accession to power of the Republican party, with its ideology of competitive, egalitarian, free-labor capitalism, was a signal to the South that the northern majority had turned irrevocably toward this frightening, revolutionary future. Union victory in the war destroyed the southern vision of America and ensured that the northern vision would become the American vision.”

# Questions for Class Discussion

1. How does Williams alter the usual judgment concerning Lee’s superior military leadership? Does his definition of military leadership differ from the common one?

2. Are the political failings that Nevins sees in Davis similar to the military failings that Williams sees in Lee?

3. How might each of these historians interpret such turning points of the war as the Emancipation Proclamation, Vicksburg, and Gettysburg?