

The Civil War in 1864

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This summer and fall mark the 150th anniversary of the decisive months of the American Civil War. It was the last period in the four-year struggle where the war could have been won or lost by either side.

The year 1864 began with hopes that the Union might quickly put an end to the slaveholders' rebellion. The course of the war seemed to have shifted against the Confederacy. General Robert E. Lee's second invasion of the North had been defeated at the Battle of Gettysburg on July 1, 2 and 3, 1863. The next day, Independence Day 1863, and 1,000 miles to the southwest, the last important Confederate port on the Mississippi, Vicksburg, fell to General Ulysses S. Grant.

The Emancipation Proclamation had gone into effect on January 1, 1863. This executive order transformed the Union war aims from a struggle to restore the American republic as it was in 1860 before Lincoln's first election had precipitated Southern secession—that is, with slavery intact—to a revolutionary war for the destruction of the southern social order and the liberation of 4.5 million slaves.

Yet whether or not “the proposition that all men are created equal” would “perish from the Earth,” as Lincoln put it in his dedication of the new national cemetery at Gettysburg on November 19, 1863, depended now on the victory of the Union army in the field, and this, in turn, depended upon the willingness of the Union command to fully prosecute the war. Lincoln believed that the North had to wield its advantages in material and manpower by relentlessly pursuing Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, with the aim of exhausting and then destroying it.

He had sought such an objective but had been vexed by the commanders of the North's main fighting force, the Army of the Potomac, again and again. General George McClellan had refused to pursue Lee after the first invasion of the North came to failure in the Battle of Antietam on September 17, 1862. For this McClellan was sacked. But his eventual replacement, George Meade, committed the exact same error a year later in the wake of Gettysburg, allowing Lee to slip unmolested through Pennsylvania and Maryland and across the Potomac to safety in Virginia. The “mistakes” of McClellan and Meade were in fact rooted in their political outlook. Both Democrats, they rejected freeing the slaves and sought a negotiated settlement with the Southern elite.

Now, in Grant, Lincoln thought he had his man. The Union's most successful general, Grant established a reputation early in the fighting's western theater for his aggressiveness, distinguishing himself by the capture of key Confederate forts, his resilience at Shiloh in 1862, and by his readiness to use attacks on slavery as a lever against the South.

Lincoln formed a powerful working bond with Grant, who had left the military and was a clerk in his father's tannery in Galena, Illinois when the war broke out. This rapport came in part, according to Garry Wills, through Grant's “firm grasp of the right words to use in explaining or arguing for a military operation. Lincoln sensed what Grant's later publisher, Mark Twain, did, that the West Pointer who once taught mathematics was a master of expository prose.”

McClellan, on the other hand, had used verbose language that obfuscated the military situation. After writing to Lincoln in July of 1862 of “the Rebel army...in our front, with the purpose of overwhelming us by attacking our positions or reducing us by blocking our river

communications,” and so on, he got to his main point. “It should not be a War looking to the subjugation of the people of any state [...] Neither confiscation of property, political executions of persons, territorial organization of states or forcible abolition of slavery should be contemplated for a moment [...] Military power should not be allowed to interfere with the relations of servitude, either by supporting or impairing the authority of the master; except for repressing disorder as in other cases.”

Grant, in contrast, wrote the following lines to Lincoln in August 1863: “[B]y arming the negro we have added a powerful ally. They will make good soldiers and taking them from the enemy, weaken him in the same proportion they strengthen us. I am therefore most decidedly in favor of pushing this policy to the enlistment of a force sufficient to hold all the South falling into our hands and to aid in capturing more.”

On March 1, 1864, Lincoln made Grant commander of all Union forces, promoting him to lieutenant general, a rank held previously only by George Washington. The two devised a strategy that would exert maximum pressure on the Confederacy. In the West, Grant's trusted subordinate Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman would be tasked with driving down from Tennessee on Atlanta, a key Southern industrial center and railway hub. On the Gulf Coast, Nathaniel Banks was to take Mobile, Alabama, the last major Southern port. In the East, with the massive Army of the Potomac at his disposal, Grant would himself press down on Lee in Virginia.

Grant's Overland Campaign, as this portion of the strategy came to be known, was the bloodiest phase of the Civil War. In a series of flanking and counter-flanking operations in May and June of 1864, the Union and Confederate armies collided repeatedly at the horrific battles of the Wilderness, Spotsylvania Court House, North Anna River, and Cold Harbor.

From a strategic standpoint, Grant very nearly accomplished his aim. At the end of the campaign he had maneuvered Lee's army to Petersburg, the gateway to the Southern capital of Richmond. There the Southern commander dug in, devising a trench system that anticipated the defenses of World War I. But it was clear that Lee could not stretch his lines thinner indefinitely, as he was compelled to do as the Siege of Petersburg dragged on for nine months, until March 1865 when Richmond was finally given up.

From a political standpoint Grant's operation had been less successful, sapping morale in the North and in the ranks. In less than two months the Army of the Potomac had suffered 65,000 casualties, far more than the losses in any previous campaign.

“For thirty days it has been one funeral procession past me,” said Union General Gouverneur K. Warren, “and it has been too much!” Noting the lack of *esprit du corps* in the Union ranks by late summer, historian James McPherson explains, “Little wonder the Army of the Potomac did not fight at Petersburg with ‘the vigor and force’ it had shown in the Wilderness—it was no longer the same army”—such was the casualty toll.

As grim as it was, the Union losses were probably less proportionally than the 35,000 casualties suffered by Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, which also faced far greater difficulty obtaining replacements. The

pressure of the three-front assault was also taking its toll on Dixie: the economic and social crisis in the Confederacy was near a breaking point by the summer of 1864, with desertions, draft resistance, and bread riots spreading.

Such realities could be glossed over by Lincoln's political opponents, who saw only that Lee's army remained in the field, as unbroken as ever. Worse, Sherman had failed to capture Atlanta, suffering a setback at the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain on June 27, 1864.

The northern press allied with the Democratic Party howled "Stop the War!" and dubbed the new army head "Grant the butcher." Even Horace Greeley, the Republican antislavery editor of the *New York Tribune*, who had earlier in the war attacked Lincoln for failing to prosecute the war with enough vigor, now asked that the administration carry on secret armistice negotiations with a Confederate delegation in Canada. "Our bleeding, bankrupt, almost dying country longs for peace," he wrote Lincoln in July. Within the Republican Party, a movement was afoot to replace Lincoln at the head of the ticket with John C. Frémont.

The Democratic Party viciously attacked Emancipation and Lincoln. Their 1864 campaign stands as the most racist in American history. In a forged pamphlet, the term "miscegenation" was coined by New Yorker David Goodman Croly, editor of pro-Democratic *The World*, to promote fears that Lincoln planned to compel interracial unions of freed slaves and white women.

Gathered for their convention in late August 1864, the Democrats nominated none other than George McClellan to run against Lincoln. Their platform called for "immediate efforts...for a cessation of hostilities" and the preservation "of the rights of the States, unimpaired." In other words, a Democratic victory would mean the recognition of the Confederate States of America and the restoration of slavery.

Lincoln refused advice that he rescind Emancipation to save his administration. "No human power can subdue this rebellion without using the Emancipation lever," he said in an interview on August 19. "The world shall know that I will keep my faith to friends and enemies, come what will." What appeared to be coming was defeat. "This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this Administration will not be re-elected," Lincoln said on August 23.

Then on September 2, three days after the Democrats condemned "four years of failure" in their Chicago Platform, the tide of events suddenly turned. After several weeks of siege, Atlanta fell to Sherman, its defenders destroying and lighting ablaze everything of military value before their retreat. The fall of Atlanta lifted morale in the North and in the Union army. Fighting spirit was also galvanized after the discovery of Andersonville prison camp in Georgia, where Sherman's army found some 30,000 emaciated and dying Union prisoners. The inmate death rate in the camp had been 30 percent.

Now the revolutionary character of the Civil War began to be implemented by the army. Whereas McClellan had pledged to preserve the planters' private property, including their slaves, Grant, in unleashing his cavalry commander Philip Sheridan in the summer of 1864 in Virginia, said his aim was to turn "the Shenandoah Valley [into] a barren waste...so that crows flying over for the balance of this season will have to carry their provender with them." Sheridan agreed: "The people must be left with nothing but their eyes to weep with over the war."

Flush with the capture of Atlanta, Sherman proposed to drive through Georgia to the sea. "I can make the march, and make Georgia howl," he promised. Sherman's army tore through Georgia at rate of 12 miles per day, destroying a wide swath of infrastructure and plantations along the way. The Confederate western armies provided only token resistance, as Confederate General John Bell Hood had shattered its remnants in a suicidal attack on Union supply lines in Tennessee.

Sherman's army lived well off the Georgia harvest. "This is probably the most gigantic pleasure excursion ever planned," wrote one officer. By

mid-December Lincoln received a telegram from Sherman: "I beg to present you as a Christmas gift, the city of Savannah, with 150 heavy guns and about 25,000 bales of cotton." From Georgia, Sherman's army wheeled north, beginning a march through the Carolinas—and inflicting particular damage on South Carolina, the cradle of the Confederacy—angling toward Virginia from the south, where Lee already contended with Grant from the north.

Wherever the Union army moved in the South, slaves flocked to it by the thousands, depriving the planter aristocracy of the forced labor upon which it rested. The Emancipation Proclamation was being made flesh. Though no racial egalitarian, Sherman issued as a military tactic his Special Field Orders No. 15, which provided for the confiscation of 400,000 acres of land in South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida and its division into 40-acre parcels for the freed slave families. This was ultimately rescinded. The Civil War, the Second American Revolution, was a bourgeois revolution. The threat to private property had gone as far as it would go with the emancipation of the slaves.

The political high-water mark of the Civil War as revolution may have been reached with the returns of the 1864 election. The Democratic Party had made the election a contest over the freeing of the slaves. The electorate delivered its verdict. Lincoln won all the northern states except for New Jersey and the Union slave states of Delaware and Kentucky. In the army he took over 80 percent of the vote. The Republicans tightened their control over Congress, and could now push for a Constitutional amendment, the Thirteenth, abolishing slavery once and for all throughout the country.

Confederate leaders had pegged their hopes in 1864 on a McClellan victory. With that hope gone, the days of the planter aristocracy were numbered.

Karl Marx wrote to congratulate Lincoln on his reelection on behalf of the International Workingmen's Association (The First International). The letter was received by Charles Francis Adams, US ambassador to Great Britain and the grandson of John Adams.

"If resistance to the Slave Power was the reserved watchword of your first election, the triumphant war cry of your re-election is Death to Slavery," Marx wrote. "When an oligarchy of 300,000 slaveholders dared to inscribe, for the first time in the annals of the world, 'slavery' on the banner of Armed Revolt, when on the very spots where hardly a century ago the idea of one great Democratic Republic had first sprung up, whence the first Declaration of the Rights of Man was issued, and the first impulse given to the European revolution of the eighteenth century...then the working classes of Europe understood at once...their hopes for the future, even their past conquests were at stake in that tremendous conflict on the other side of the Atlantic..."

"The workingmen of Europe feel sure that, as the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class, so the American Antislavery War will do for the working classes. They consider it an earnest of the epoch to come that it fell to the lot of Abraham Lincoln, the single-minded son of the working class, to lead his country through the matchless struggle for the rescue of an enchained race and the reconstruction of a social world."

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