

“Gouge Notes” – Unit 6: The American Civil War

Secession

During the 1860 election, some Southerners threatened secession pending Lincoln’s victory, even though he promised that while he would forbid the extension of slavery into the territories, he would not interfere with slavery in the South. In December 1860, soon after Lincoln’s victory, a special South Carolina convention voted unanimously for secession. By February 1861, six more Southern states followed suit: Alabama, Mississippi, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas. Delegates from all seven states met to establish the Confederate States of America, and they chose Jefferson Davis as the Confederacy’s first president. Lincoln refused to recognize the confederacy and declared the secession “legally void.” Although he personally favored the gradual emancipation of slaves with compensation given to slave owners, as president, he strove to preserve the Union first and foremost, by whatever means necessary—even if that meant freeing no slaves at all. He once said, “If I could save the Union without freeing any slaves I would do it, and if I could save the Union by freeing all the slaves I would do it.” Lincoln hoped that loyal Unionists in the South would help him overturn secession. However, the nation’s rift only widened in the early months of Lincoln’s presidency. In April 1861, Confederate troops opened fire on the federal army base at Fort Sumter, forcing federal troops to surrender. Lincoln proclaimed the Lower South in rebellion and called for an army to suppress the insurrection. The threat of incoming federal troops prompted Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina to secede and join the Confederacy. Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky, and Missouri, all slave states, remained in the Union. The Confederate attack on federal troops at Fort Sumter sparked the secession of the Upper South and the commitment of the North to war

The Union’s advantages over the South:

- Population size: The North had a population of 22 million (23 states) versus the South’s 9 million (11 states). Northern forces totaled 2,100,000, compared to the South’s paltry 800,000.
- Greater wartime funding: Both the North and South sold war bonds, but the North also instituted an income tax and had more effective tax collection. The Northern economy also fared better during the war, suffering only moderate inflation, while the Southern economy collapsed from severe inflation (prices in the South rose more than 300 percent annually).
- More advanced industry: The North held more than 90 percent of the nation’s industrial plants and could easily produce heavy artillery weapons. The North also had 70 percent of the nation’s railroad tracks and could therefore effectively transport arms and food to distant troops. The South, on the other hand, had to import arms until it could build an industrial base, could not afford supplies, and could not efficiently ship food and equipment to its troops.
- More abundant food resources: Northern agriculture was geared toward grain, whereas the South specialized in the growing of inedible cash crops like cotton, tobacco, and indigo.

The Confederacy’s advantages over the North:

- Geography: The Confederacy was fighting for independence at home, while the Union was entering enemy territory. Whereas the North would have to ship men and supplies long distances and occupy conquered territory, the South could maintain an arc of defense by moving its men around very little.
- Military tradition and morale: The South had a stronger military tradition and more experienced military leaders. During the war, fewer Southern troops defected than Northern troops, suggesting a higher morale among Confederate forces.

The Civil War:

The Civil War began more as a battle over the preservation of the Union than as a battle over slavery. Many felt that the real issue at stake was the question of states’ rights versus federal power—whether states could secede from the Union in protest against federal policy, regardless of whether that policy concerned slavery or another issue, such as tariffs. Slavery was therefore considered the catalyst for the nation’s rupture, but not the primary cause. It was not until Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation that slavery emerged as the central issue at stake. In the East, the Union Army aimed to capture the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia. Most of the early battles ended in stalemate, with both sides suffering devastating losses. After a Southern victory in June 1862, Confederate general Robert E. Lee led his forces on a powerful march northward from Virginia, aiming to break Union lines. What followed, in September 17, 1862, was

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the bloodiest single-day battle in the Civil War: the Battle of Antietam, in which more than 8,000 men died on the field and 18,000 were wounded. Though a strategic draw, the battle proved a Union victory in that Lee halted his Confederate advance northward. Lincoln responded to this victory by issuing the Emancipation Proclamation. General Lee struck northward into Pennsylvania in July 1863, but was again blocked by a strong Union defense. In the three-day Battle of Gettysburg, 90,000 Union soldiers battled 75,000 Confederates and secured a Union victory. The losses were ruinous to both sides: a total of 7,000 soldiers died on the field and 40,000 were wounded. Although fighting would continue for more than a year after the Battle of Gettysburg, the battle proved a decisive victory for the Union, and the war thereafter tilted in the Union’s favor. Later that year, Lincoln delivered his famed Gettysburg Address, in which he portrayed the war as a test of democracy’s strength. In the West, the Union experienced successes much earlier on. Led by General Ulysses S. Grant, the Union secured control of the Mississippi River and moved southward. At the Battle of Shiloh, in April 1862, Grant’s troops were ambushed by Confederates, but Grant proved victorious. Both sides suffered heavy losses, as nearly one-third of the 77,000 men involved were killed.

The Emancipation Proclamation

Early in the war, Union officials were uncertain how to treat Southern slaves who fled to the North or were captured by the army. Lincoln was cautious in his approach to this matter, since the Union contained four slave states and many pro-slavery Democrats. He vaguely supported the policy of confiscation, in which slaves who had worked for the Confederate military were considered captives of war and put to work for the Union army. Each Union loss in the war, however, made emancipation a more attractive recourse, since slave labor drove the Southern economy and allowed the Confederacy to devote more white men to war. Lincoln eventually came to favor emancipation, and only awaited the right moment to announce his decision. After the Union victory at Antietam in September 1862, Lincoln issued the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, declaring all slaves under rebel control free as of January 1, 1863. The final Emancipation Proclamation was issued on January 1. In practice, the Proclamation freed very few slaves because it did not affect the slave states within the Union or the parts of the Confederacy under Union control. But as a political move, it proved decisive and brilliant. The proclamation mobilized the support of European liberals (Great Britain and France had outlawed slavery earlier in the century), and it appeased the Radical Republicans in Congress. Abolishing slavery thus became one of the Union’s primary objectives for war, along with preserving the Union. The Emancipation Proclamation freed all slaves under rebel control on January 1, 1863. Though the practical effect of the proclamation on Southern slaves was slight, it proved a brilliant political move.

Black Soldiers

The Emancipation Proclamation did significantly affect the war by bolstering the Union’s forces. After the Proclamation, the Union began to enlist black soldiers in conquered areas of the South. In all, almost 200,000 blacks enlisted. By the end of the war, black soldiers comprised almost one-tenth of the Union Army. Although blacks were paid less than whites and assigned to less desirable posts, their military service was an important symbol of black citizenship.

Union Victory

In early 1864, Lincoln appointed General Ulysses S. Grant commander of all Union armies. The string of Union victories that followed that summer, especially General William T. Sherman’s victories in Georgia, helped Lincoln win reelection in 1864. Union forces continued to rout the Confederate Army after Lincoln’s reelection, destroying much of Georgia and South Carolina in what is known as Sherman’s March to the Sea: Sherman and his troops first burned Atlanta, and then marched toward the coast, demolishing everything in their way, including railroads and factories. Sherman estimated that his forces ruined \$100 million worth of property. One month after Sherman’s forces conquered Charleston, South Carolina, Grant took the Confederacy capital in Richmond, Virginia. Robert E. Lee’s forces officially surrendered to Grant on April 9, 1865. One month later, Confederacy President Jefferson Davis was captured in Georgia.

Reconstruction

More Americans died in the Civil War than in any other conflict before or since. The war was particularly disastrous for the South, where one in twenty white men were killed or wounded, and the land lay in ruins. After the Union victory, the nation faced the complex tasks of reintegrating the damaged South into the Union and helping heal the nation’s wounds.

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Presidential Reconstruction Under Lincoln

Unlike the Radical Republicans in Congress who wanted to severely punish the Confederate states, Lincoln proposed a more forgiving and flexible plan for Reconstruction. In December 1863, before the war had ended, Lincoln issued the Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction, also known as the “Ten Percent Plan,” which offered pardon to any former Confederates who would take an oath to support the Constitution. This pardon was not extended to officers in the Confederate armed forces above certain ranks, or to those who had resigned Union government posts to aid in the rebellion. When one-tenth of a state’s voting population had taken the oath of loyalty to the Union and established a new government, Lincoln would recognize that government. Lincoln’s plan for Reconstruction, known as the “Ten Percent Plan,” allowed a state to reenter the Union when 10 percent of its voters pledged allegiance to the Union. Radical Republicans in Congress denounced the plan for being too lenient on the South and for not securing any rights for freed slaves. Moreover, these Republicans believed that Congress, not the president, should dictate the terms by which the nation would reunite. In July 1864, Congress proposed its own plan for Reconstruction by passing the Wade-Davis Bill, which declared that each Confederate state would be run by a military governor. After half of each state’s eligible voters took an oath of allegiance to the Union, a state convention could be called to overturn secession and outlaw slavery. Lincoln, however, vetoed the bill by leaving it unsigned for more than ten days after the adjournment of Congress. With Congress and the president in a deadlock over the terms of the Confederate states’ readmission, reconstruction stalled. Radical Republicans opposed Lincoln’s “Ten Percent Plan,” and instead proposed a more stringent and punitive plan calling for military rule of the South. The Radical Republicans in Congress did succeed in dictating some terms of Reconstruction. To help former slaves adjust to their new lives, Congress established the Freedmen’s Bureau, which offered education, employment, economic relief, and legal aid to freed slaves. The Freedmen’s Bureau helped build hospitals and supervised the founding of black schools throughout the South, including Howard University in Washington, D.C., and Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. In addition to the Freedmen’s Bureau, Congress passed the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery. The Amendment was ratified by twenty-seven states in December 1865, though Lincoln did not live to see that day. In April 1865, soon after Lee’s surrender, Lincoln was assassinated by John Wilkes Booth, an actor and supporter of the Confederacy. Vice President Andrew Johnson became president.

Presidential Reconstruction Under Johnson

A Southern Democrat who opposed secession, Johnson had been added to the presidential ticket in 1864 to broaden Lincoln’s support. When Johnson became president, Congress was in recess, so Johnson forged ahead with a slight modification of Lincoln’s Reconstruction plan without facing any opposition from Congress. Under Johnson’s plan, nearly all Southerners would be pardoned who took an oath of allegiance to the Union, with the exception of high-ranking Confederate officials and powerful plantation owners, who would be forever barred from government. His plan further required reconstructed state governments to denounce secession and ratify the Thirteenth Amendment. Even so, Johnson pardoned many powerful ex-Confederates and allowed reconstructed Southern governments to be dominated by pro-slavery forces—by Confederate army officers, plantation owners, and former government officials. Governed by these Confederate forces, many of the “reconstructed” Southern governments refused to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment and further enforced black codes in an attempt to create a subjugated black workforce. Most states outlawed interracial marriage and jury service by blacks, and banned blacks from the right to testify against whites. Most codes also imposed a curfew on blacks and limited their access to public institutions. South Carolina further required licenses for blacks wishing to enter nonagricultural employment. When Radical Republicans attacked the black codes, Johnson defended the codes along with his overall plan for reconstruction. Andrew Johnson presented a weak plan for Reconstruction, liberally pardoning ex-Confederates and allowing reconstructed governments to be dominated by pro-slavery forces, which passed black codes to keep the freedmen subjugated.

Impeachment Crisis

In August 1867, with Congress out of session, Johnson suspended Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and replaced him with Grant. Republicans in Congress refused to approve Johnson’s change, and called for impeachment on the grounds that Johnson had violated the Tenure of Office Act. In truth, Johnson’s violation served as a mere excuse for Congress to launch impeachment proceedings; Congress’s real motivation was to remove a president hostile to Reconstruction. Johnson’s impeachment trial began in March 1868 and lasted nearly three months. Johnson escaped impeachment by one vote but was left effectively powerless. His acquittal set a precedent against impeachment based on political rivalry, lasting until the Clinton impeachment crisis of the late 1990’s.

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Congressional Reconstruction

The Fifteenth Amendment, proposed in 1869 and passed in 1870, guaranteed the right to vote to any citizen regardless of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. The amendment aimed to promote black suffrage in the South, and to guarantee it in the North and West. (Much of the North had not yet extended suffrage to blacks, even though the South had been required to do so by Congress.) The last Southern states awaiting readmission—Texas, Mississippi, and Virginia—were required to ratify the new amendment as a precondition for readmission. Working to undermine the Fifteenth Amendment was the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), founded in 1866 in Tennessee and operating in all Southern states by 1868. The Klan conducted raids to intimidate black voters as part of its campaign to assert white supremacy in the South. Along with these raids, the Klan orchestrated lynchings and floggings of blacks. In May 1870, to counter the Klan’s impairment of black suffrage and to bolster the Fifteenth Amendment, Congress passed the Enforcement Acts of 1870 and 1871, which protected black voters. Congress also passed the Ku Klux Klan Act in 1871 to authorize the president to use federal troops and emergency measures to overthrow the Klan. Although incidences of vigilantism declined, the Klan maintained a strong presence in many areas.

Reconstructed Governments in the New South

Because of the enfranchisement of blacks, the disfranchisement of ex-Confederates, and the influx of Northern opportunists, the Republican Party dominated Reconstruction governments in the South. All Southern Reconstruction constitutions guaranteed universal male suffrage, and Louisiana and South Carolina even opened public schools to blacks. To fund these schools and other new social programs, state governments raised state taxes and accumulated exorbitant debt. Opponents of Reconstruction accused these new governments of being unsound and corrupt—and, indeed, many involved in these new governments did take bribes and exchanged favors for votes. Democrats called the Southern moderates who cooperated with Republicans scalawags, and labeled the Northern opportunists carpetbaggers (an unsavory title meant to suggest that the Northerners came to the South just to gain easy political power and wealth through bribes). Led by Democratic politicians, the Ku Klux Klan attacked and even murdered many of these “scalawags,” “carpetbaggers,” and other political leaders.

The End of Reconstruction

The 1872 split in the Republican Party hastened the collapse of Republican rule in the South. Moderates in Congress pushed through Amnesty Acts allowing almost all ex-Confederate officials to return to politics and hold office. Using tactics such as promising tax cuts and engaging in outright violence and intimidation, Democrats took control of one state after another. Some Republicans gave up and moved back North, while others defected to the Democratic Party. By 1877, Democrats gained enough votes to win state elections in every one of the former Confederate states. Democrats called their return to power Redemption. Once under Democratic control, every state in the South cut expenses, ended social programs, and revised their tax systems to grant relief to landowners. Many blacks migrated northward to escape the discriminatory policies of the Redeemed South. In 1879, 4,000 blacks from Mississippi and Louisiana reached Kansas to settle on land outside the grasp of southern Democrats. In the 1876 presidential election, Republicans nominated the moderate Rutherford B. Hayes, and Democrats nominated Samuel J. Tilden. Although Tilden won the popular vote, Republicans challenged the election returns from South Carolina, Florida, and Louisiana. Republicans still controlled the political machinery in these states, and threw out enough votes to ensure Hayes’s victory. To prevent Democrats from obstructing Hayes’s path to the White House, Republicans promised that in return for the Presidency, Hayes would remove federal troops from South Carolina and Louisiana. After he assumed office, Hayes abided by this so-called Hayes-Tilden Compromise, and removed federal troops from the last two occupied states in the South. By January 1877, Democrats had won control of all Southern state governments and Redemption was complete. Southern governments, under Democratic rule, reemployed laws severely restricting black suffrage and civil rights. Reconstruction was officially over.