

Civil War: A Defining Moment in U.S. History

By Gary W. Gallagher, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, adapted by Newsela staff on 12.01.16

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TOP: "The Battle of Antietam," by Kurz & Allison (1878), depicts the fighting at Burnside's Bridge. Courtesy of Wikipedia.

BOTTOM: Scott's great snake. Cartoon map illustrating General Winfield Scott's plan to crush the Confederacy, economically. It is sometimes called the "Anaconda plan." J.B. Elliott, Courtesy of Wikipedia.

The Civil War was fought between the Northern and Southern states over slavery. It started in April 1861, when the Southern states insisted on their right to leave the United States. Four years of fighting followed, claiming over 620,000 lives. The war affected countless people, and freed four million African-American slaves.

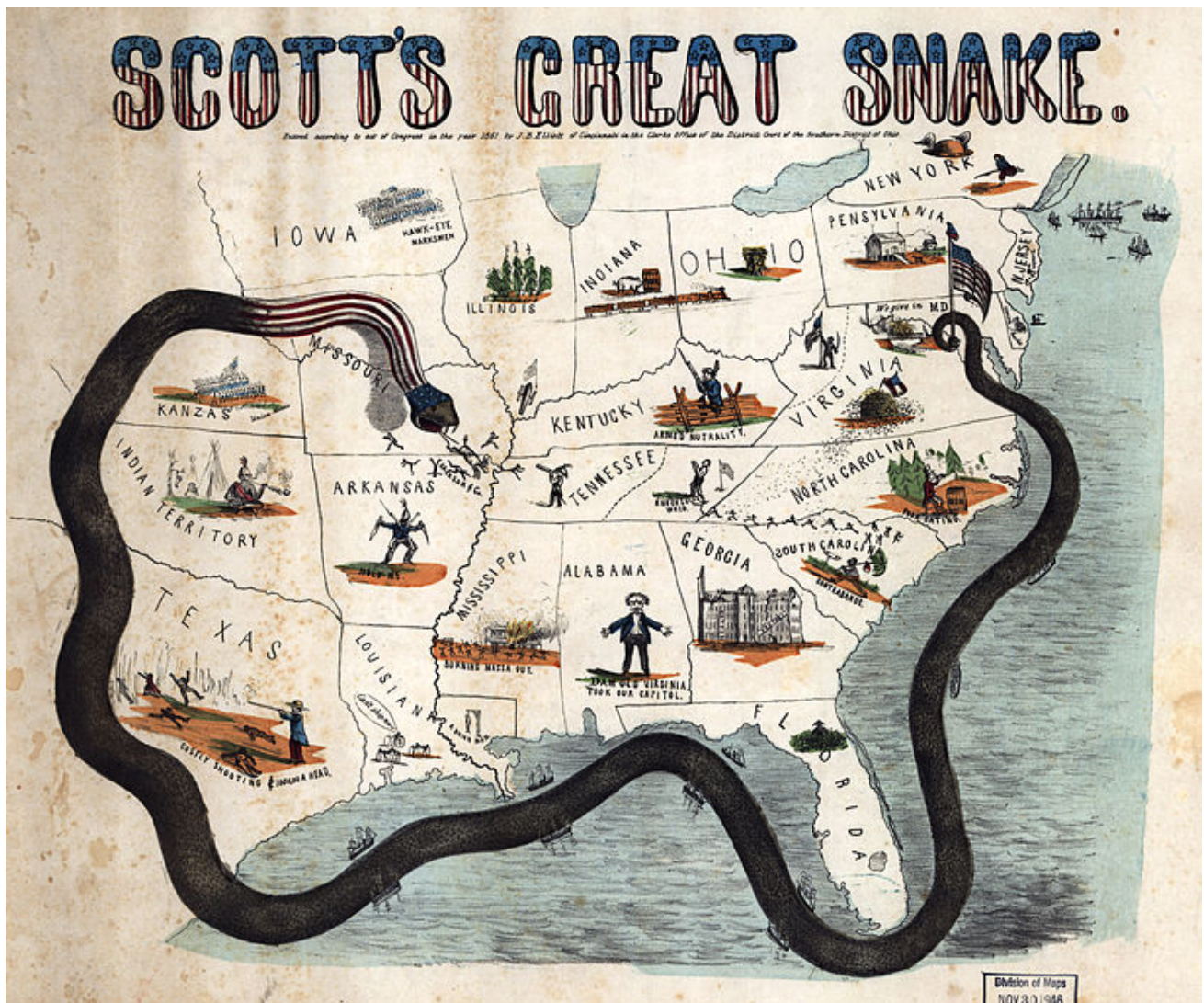
When the founding fathers wrote the Constitution in 1787, they compromised on the issue of slavery. They created a country that gave its citizens many freedoms. However, they also allowed the states to keep their slaves.

Disagreements about slavery

In the years that followed, there were many arguments over slavery. The Northern and Southern states disagreed about whether new states should allow slavery or not.

The road to war began with the election of 1860. Abraham Lincoln was elected president. He had promised to leave slavery alone in states where it already existed. But he was strongly against spreading slavery into new territories in the West. Between December 1860 and February 1861, seven Southern states seceded, or left, the United States. They formed their own country, called the Confederacy, with its own government. The Civil War began in April 1861, when Confederates attacked Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina.

More soldiers fought in the Civil War than ever before in American history. The South had between 800,000 and 900,000 soldiers, while the North had over 2 million.



The Confederacy attacks

Beginning in 1861, the North blocked southern sea ports so the Confederacy could not receive goods. Northern soldiers took control of the Mississippi River and attacked the Confederate states. The Confederacy tried to defend its territory, occasionally launching its own attacks. The most important of these were the 1862 Battle of Antietam and the 1863 Battle of Gettysburg.

The Confederacy finally surrendered in the spring of 1865.

The war touched the lives of almost every American. Before the war, most women stayed at home taking care of their families. But during the war, many of them became nurses, which used to be a job for men. Other women worked in the government and in factories. Thousands of women ran farms.

Both sides used the latest technology. Railroads moved hundreds of thousands of soldiers and huge amounts of supplies. Telegraphs helped both governments communicate with their armies. Both sides also used the latest military inventions, such as the rifle musket and ironclad warships.

Millions of slaves affected by war

No group was more directly affected than the four million slaves, who emerged from the war with their freedom. Most white Northerners did not see slavery as the main cause of the war. They simply wanted to keep the country together. As the fighting dragged on, Lincoln told them that freeing the slaves would help end the war more quickly. In time, white Northerners accepted this. The slaves were officially emancipated, or freed, in December 1865. This was when the U.S. government passed the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, which made it against the law to own slaves.

The cost of the war was huge. More American soldiers lost their lives than in all other wars combined up through 1975. The war destroyed the Confederate states' economy, which relied on slaves to grow crops. On the other hand, the Northern economy did very well.

Americans remembered the war in different ways. Most white Northerners remembered it as a fight to save the Union. Black Americans remembered it as a fight for freedom. Many Southerners celebrated the Confederacy and tried to ignore the fact that slavery was the real cause of the war.

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Quiz

- 1 Which of the following are two main ideas of the article?
 1. *The Northern and Southern states disagreed over whether or not people should have slaves.*
 2. *The Confederacy was formed when Southern states decided not to be a part of the United States.*
 3. *Abraham Lincoln was elected president in 1860 and allowed slavery to remain in Southern states.*
 4. *The Northern states won the Civil War and millions of slaves were awarded their freedom.*

(A) 1 and 3

(B) 2 and 3

(C) 3 and 4

(D) 1 and 4
- 2 Which detail BEST reflects the main goal of the Confederate army?

(A) to move supplies on the railroads

(B) to attack the Northern states

(C) to defend their right to slaves

(D) to try to elect a new president
- 3 Based on the article, why were slaves important to the Southern states?

(A) Slaves helped start the Confederacy.

(B) Slaves helped take care of their families.

(C) Slaves helped grow crops on the farms.

(D) Slaves helped fight in the Civil War.
- 4 What effect did the Civil War have on women?

(A) Women stayed home and took care of their families.

(B) Women started jobs that used to just be for men.

(C) Women helped fight in the war to end slavery.

(D) Women used telegraphs to communicate with men.