The Civil War, Part I: Crash Course US History #20

Crash Course: U.S. History
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=====Introduction (0:0) =====

Hi, I'm John Green. This is Crash Course U.S. History, and today we come at last to the Civil War: the conflict that, in many ways, created a nation. So here's what you won't be getting today: we will not be describing battles and tactics. If that's your bag, might I suggest Ken Burns or if you prefer books, like a thousand authors. My favorites being James McPherson and Shelby Foote.

And number two, we won't be bashing and/or praising Abraham Lincoln very much, although we do have multiple Lincolns here because we've heard that's good for ratings. I mean, to watch or read certain accounts, you would think the Civil War was a lengthy chess game played by Abraham Lincoln against his cunning opponent, Abraham Lincoln, but of course there were other people involved. We are gonna quote a fair bit of Lincoln though because, you know, that won Tony Kushner an Academy Award nomination.

Three, we won't be claiming that the Civil War was somehow secretly about something other than slavery because that is just so early twentieth century. And, number four, there will not be a lot of jokes today because: ha ha ha ha, 700 thousand people died.

John-from-the-Past: Mr. Green! Mr. Green! Actually, only 680 thousand people died.

Yeah, it depends on how you count, you snivelling little ghoul, but recent estimates are between 680 thousand and 8 hundred thousand total casualties, deadlier for Americans than the American Revolution, World War I, World War II, and Vietnam. Combined.

=====Basic Facts (1:20) =====

So let's start with the basic facts about the American Civil War. 1861 to 1865, which corresponded with the presidency of Abraham Lincoln. The Union (or more colloquially, the North) fought against the forces of the Confederate States of America, or the South. Sometimes people call the Union "the blue" and the Confederates "the grey," but, in fact, the uniforms weren't very uniform. They were all different kinds of color and also, with all that dirt and blood, they were all just brown.

=====The Cause (1:45)=====

Alright, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

You'll notice from this map that not all the states that held slaves were part of the Confederacy. The border states of Kentucky, Missouri, Delaware, and Maryland allowed slavery and never left the United States. All of these border states were critical to the Union. Maryland was north of the nation's capital in Washington D.C. Kentucky controlled the Ohio River. Missouri was the gateway to the west. Delaware actually wasn't that important. So none of that should be particularly controversial, unless you're from Delaware, but the causes of the war, that's another story.

The Civil War was about slavery. Actual historians will back me up on this, like David Goldfield who wrote, "Both northerners and southerners recognized slavery as the immediate cause of the Civil War." Also, Lincoln said in his second Inaugural Address, "One-eighth of the whole population were colored slaves not distributed generally over the union but localized in the southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war."

That said, in comments lots of people will be like, "The war was about agriculture versus industry!" or "the states' rights to protect themselves from the tyranny of a big federal government!" But if it were really about that, the Civil War would've started during the Nullification Crisis in the 1830s when, as I'm sure you'll remember, Andrew Jackson said that South Carolina couldn't declare a federal tariff null in their state. Why didn't that cause the Civil War?

The Confederate government passed the first conscription act in American history, implemented national taxes, created a national currency, and had a government bureaucracy of about seventy thousand people - more than the federal bureaucracy in Washington D.C.

Thanks Thought Bubble.

That said, in the beginning of the war, Lincoln deliberately tried to downplay the slavery angle, arguing that the war was only about preserving the Union. But the war was also about religion, for both sides. As David Goldfield put it, "In protecting the revolutionary ideals, Northerners would preserve God's plan to extend democracy and Christianity across an unbroken continent and around the world. Southerners welcomed a war to create a nation more perfect in its fealty to God than the one that they had left."

But it's also important to remember that regular soldiers often had more prosaic reasons for going off to fight, as you will eventually learn when you are forced to read *The Red Badge of Courage.* Goldfield tells the story of one Alabamian who enlisted only after his girlfriend mailed him a dress and told him he should start wearing it if he wasn't willing to fight. And for northerners, union, religion, and an end to slavery mixed together to form a potent rationale for war. It's summed up nicely by Julia Ward Howe's words to the song that would become famous as "The Battle Hymn of the Republic": "As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free." You thought I was going to sing, but you were wrong.

=====Northern Advantages (4:23)=====

So spoiler alert: the Union won the war, which, in a sense, is unsurprising because they had massive advantages. For starters, they had many more people: approximately 22 million as compared to 9 million in the South, of whom 3.5 million were slaves and therefore unlikely to be sympathetic to the southern cause. Also, the North manufactured more than 90% of all goods in America. Its factories turned out 17 times more textiles than the South, 30 times more shoes and boots, 13 times more iron, and 32 times more firearms. Plus, at the outbreak of the war, the North had 20,000 miles of railroad compared with the South's 10,000.

This made it easier for the union to move its army, which over the course of the war enlisted more than 2,000,000 men compared with 900,000 for the Confederacy. Even Northern agriculture was more productive, taking greater advantage of mechanization than Southern farmers did.

Really the only advantage the South had was better military leaders. Like most of the tactically famous generals of the Civil War - Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, Jeb Stuart, etc. - were Southerners. And also, by the way, they all had great last words. Lee said, "Strike the tent," Stonewall Jackson said, "Let us cross over the river and rest under the shade of those trees", and Jeb Stuart, after being mortally wounded in battle, said to his close friend and lieutenant, "Honey-bun, how do I look in the face?"

Famous Union general Ulysses S. Grant's last word was "water," which isn't nearly so good, but he said that word after having survived the war and getting to be, like, President of the United States and stuff. Right, but anyway this all raises an interesting

question: was the result of the war a foregone conclusion?

=====Southern Thinking (5:53)=====

The Confederacy had to create a nation from scratch and build national unity among people who were committed to the autonomy of their individual home states, so that's a problem. And then there was the issue of overcoming class conflicts, especially when the ruling class was often exempted from actually fighting in the war.

But when you put aside all that nation-building stuff and just focus on the actual fighting of the war, the question of the Union's inevitable win becomes much trickier. Some have argued that all the Confederacy really needed to do was outlast the Northern efforts to bring them back into the Union, like Washington had to do against the British. And the idea was that this war of attrition would eventually wear down Northern resolve, but there were two problems with this theory.

First, the North had such superiority in its resources that it would take a long time to wear down. Secondly, fighting a war of attrition would be costly to the South as well, and their resources would be depleted long before the North's.

=====Mystery Document (6:44)=====

Oh, it's time for the Mystery Document?

The rules here are simple. whoa. That was intense. I try to identify the author of the Mystery Document. If I am right, I do not get shocked, but I am never right because Stan makes it too hard. Alright, let's see what we got today.

"I therefore determined, first, to use the greatest number of troops practicable against the armed force of the enemy, preventing him from using the same force at different seasons and second, to hammer continuously against the armed force of the enemy and his resources, until by mere attrition, there should be nothing left to him but submission."

Okay, so the strategy of attrition was a Confederate strategy, but Stan is a jerk. But it talks about the enemy *and* his resources, which was kinda a Union focus, and, more importantly, it talks about preventing him from using the same force at different seasons – that makes me think it is a Union general, final answer: Ulysses S. Grant!

[Check mark: Correct]

Jjjaa-hoooooo! How d'ya like dem apples?

=====Northern Thinking (7:39)=====

Grant was different from previous Union generals in that he was willing to sustain enormous casualties in pursuit of his goal to wear down the South. Because of this, Grant was often branded a butcher. Like, he was willing to weather incredible losses, including the 52,000 men - 41% of his army – who were injured or killed at the Battles of The Wilderness and Cold Harbor. But his grim determination, not just to defeat, but to destroy his opponent, is what made Grant one of the first truly modern generals, and also the most successful leader the Union found.

So, Grant's brutal strategy, coupled with the vast superiority in Northern resources, suggests that the outcome of the Civil War really was inevitable, but it also points to some of the reasons to be cautious about that conclusion.

First off, it took three years before the Union actually fully adopted Grant's strategy. And between 1861 and 1864, it was possible that Southern victories would eventually force the Union to give in. I mean the Union lost a lot of battles in the first two years, largely due to ineffective general-ing, and nothing saps a nation's motivation for war like losing.

Now, some argue that the North had superior motivation to prosecute the war because they had God on their side and they were against slavery, but that's also pretty problematic. I mean for many men who joined the Federal Army, a war to end slavery had very little appeal, especially poor enlistees who might be afraid that newly freed slaves would compete with them for jobs. Also, while we are correct in considering slavery unjust, southerners who took up arms for the Confederacy saw themselves as engaged in a fight for their own freedom, rather than a fight to protect slavery.

The truth is when it comes to fighting, motivation is a very tricky business, and I'm most comfortable agreeing with James McPherson who argued that motivation waxes and wanes with victory, and that the outcome of the war was contingent on a number of turning points.

=====Turning Points (9:20)=====

And we're just going to discuss two of the most important, July 1863 and August 1864. July 1863 saw two of the most important Union victories in the whole war. In the Western Theater, General Grant laid siege to and captured Vicksburg, Mississippi, thus giving the Federals control of the Lower Mississippi River. I mean by then the North already had New Orleans, which made it pretty much impossible for the Confederates to ship cotton, or anything else, along the Mississippi River.

After that, Grant was able to turn his attention to the east, with the aforementioned hammering of the enemy and their resources. More famously, especially in the eastern part of the United States, the first three days of July 1863 saw the Battle of Gettysburg in Pennsylvania. This was General Lee's furthest major offensive in the North, and had he won the battle, it is likely that panic would have set in in places like Philadelphia and maybe even New York. Actually, panic did overcome New York in draft riots that killed more than 100 people and only ended after troops from Gettysburg were called in. I'm not gonna go in to detail about either of these battles, but they shifted the tide of the war in favor of the North, although, not enough to bring the war to a quick end. Confederate forces would never again threaten a Northern city.

August 1864 saw another turning point that really spelled the doom of the Confederacy. And that was when Union General Sherman took Atlanta. Atlanta was a railroad hub and manufacturing center, but its capture was more significant politically than militarily because it happened close to the election of 1864. And that American election was really the last time that the Confederate states of America could have won the Civil War.

It's easy to forget this, but Lincoln actually had to run for reelection during the Civil War, and by the summer of 1864, the war was pretty unpopular and it looked like Lincoln might lose. The capture of Atlanta changed public opinion about Lincoln, and it meant that his Democratic opponent and former top general George McClellan didn't stand a chance of winning, which was really significant for the war because Lincoln was committed to ending it with a Union victory and McClellan ...mnyeh.

=====Conclusion (11:10)=====

I think it says a lot about American history that in the end the war's outcome was ensured not just by military victories but by a political one. Next week we'll examine the effects of the Civil War and the

enduring questions that have arisen out of it, such as 'who exactly freed the slaves?' But until then, thanks for watching.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller. The script supervisor is Meredith Danko. Our show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself. Our graphics team is Thought Cafe and out associate producer is Danica Johnson, also responsible for felt Abraham Lincoln.

If you wanna suggest captions for the libertage you can do so in comments, where you can also ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of historians. Thanks for watching Crash Course and as we say in my hometown, don't forget to be awesome.