The Civil War Part 2: Crash Course US History #21

Crash Course: U.S. History
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John Green: Hi, I'm John Green, this is CrashCourse US History, and today, we return to, wait, what are we talking about today, Stan? Oh, the Civil War, I can tell, 'cause Lincoln's here. But, this week, we're not going to talk about casualty counts or battles or generals with their heroic and probably fictional dying declarations.

Young John: Mr. Green! Mr. Green! Wait, did that one guy not really say, "Honey bun, how do I look in the face"? Because that was the best part of this whole class.

John: Jeb Stuart did say that, Me-from-the-Past, but it probably wasn't his last words. But anyway, today we're going to try to focus on what's really important. In the end, the really vital stuff isn't like, Pickett's charge or Lee saying "It is well that war is so terrible--otherwise, we would grow too fond of it" or the surrender at the Appomattox Courthouse. That stuff matters, and I don't want to deny it, but the Civil War and way we remember it is still shaping the world today, and that's what I wanna focus on, because it's the stuff that might actually change the way that you think about your own life in your own country, whether it's United States or the green parts of Not-America.

(Intro)

So let's start with one of the big questions historians still ask about the Civil War, did Lincoln free the slaves? The answer, as with so much here on CrashCourse, is yes, and also no. Let's go straight to the Thought Bubble today.

So Lincoln's reputation as the great emancipator rests largely on his emancipation proclamation, an executive order which went into effect on January 1st, 1863. This order ostensibly freed all the slaves in territory currently rebelling against the United States, i.e. in areas where the US government had no authority to free slaves. This is rather like the United States announcing that, from here on out, North Korea would be ruled by Lady Gaga. Sure, it's a great idea, but it's not really your jurisdiction. In areas where the US did have the authority to free slaves--the border states and some of the areas of the Confederacy that had been effectively conquered and occupied by federal troops, those slaves were not freed. So Lincoln didn't free the slaves that he actually had the power to free. Many historians argue that, in fact, slaves freed themselves. How? By running away to Union lines and becoming, quote, contrabands. Because this was a time of war, and slaves were seen as a valuable resource to the enemy, when they escaped and sought refuge with Union troops, Union commanders wouldn't give them back despite fugitive slave laws still being on the books. So many slaves escaped, the argument goes, that Lincoln was basically forced to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, because until he did so, those contraband slaves were still technically property of their southern masters, and the Union generals were breaking American laws by not returning them. The Emancipation Proclamation then had the added bonus of encouraging more slaves to come over to the Union lines, many of whom joined the army, which eventually included about 180,000 former slaves and free black men. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So Lincoln may also have issued the Proclamation in order to shift the focus of the war from Union to slavery to prevent the British from recognizing the Confederacy. Arguably, the Confederacy's best chance to win the Civil War was to get some kind of foreign patron, and Britain was the likeliest choice as it was very dependent on Confederate textiles. But as you'll remember from all those people going to Canada, Britain had already abolished slavery and it was the historic source of abolitionist sentiment, and so it was very shrewd of Lincoln to make the war about slavery. Off-topic, but if I may put on my world historian hat for a moment, thank you, Stan, the fact that the British did not recognize the South had profound effects on the whole world, because it meant that the British shifted their focus to Egypt and India as sources of cotton for their textile mills. All that noted, I think Lincoln does deserve some credit for freeing the slaves, for two reasons.

First, he pushed for the Thirteenth Amendment, which actually ended slavery in the United States, and perhaps more importantly, he continued the war to its conclusion and demanded that the end of slavery and the return of the southern states to the Union be conditions for peace. This may seem obvious today, but in 1864, it wasn't. In fact, there were numerous calls in the North for an end to the war that would allow the South to exist as a separate country and leave slavery intact. Now, of course, the rest of world history indicates that, at some point, slavery would have ended, but by prosecuting the war to its end, Lincoln brought about slavery's end sooner.

But the Civil War didn't just end slavery, if it had gone differently, Me-from-the-Past might have been annoying teachers in a different country from the one in which I now live. I might have needed a passport to visit my parents in North Carolina and slavery might have survived for decades. Brazil didn't fully abolish slavery until 1888. And the South would be covered in green, as part of Non-America, or the North, depending on where you're watching this video, I guess. And the people who lived through the Civil War knew it was momentous. In his famous Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln fostered the idea that the Civil War was a kind of second American revolution, or at least a culmination in reaffirmation of the first one. "From these honored dead, we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion, that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." We tried to hire Daniel Day Lewis for that, but he was unavailable. That phrase "new birth of freedom" had religious significance as well, because it was like the 19th century equivalent to "born again".

So the Civil War was the first modern war in terms of its scale and its destruction, like, others have waged war on civilians to break the spirit of their enemies, Stan, Mongoltage opportunity!

(Mongoltage plays)

But new technologies made this one of the most destructive wars yet recorded, and yes, I know the Tai-Ping rebellion took more lives and that in terms of percentage of population killed the contemporaneous war in Paraguay was worse but bear with me.

Rifles, and towards the end of the Civil war machine guns shifted the way that people fight. It became easier to defend a line, so cavalry charges and huge waves of attacks started to be just... slaughtery, although we take World War I for the rest of the world to figure that out. And the incredible numbers of dead and wounded really changed America's relationship with death itself. Like, Gettysberg's address was given to dedicate a new national cemetery and the Civil War helped to create a culture of meditation on mortality itself that led to cemeteries replacing churchyards as the final resting places for most Americans. And the sight of slaughter and the sheer weight of it had profound existential effects on a generation of American intellectuals from Walt Whitman to Oliver Wendell Holmes.

(06:04) Oh, it's time for the mystery document? The rules here are simple: I guess the mystery document and then usually I am shocked. Oh my gosh, today's mystery document is on an iPad! This appears to be a photograph of wounded soldiers in hospital I'm gonna go ahead and call it as being by Matthew Brady- what?! I already got it? But I didn't get to say the na- oh it's *called* "Wounded Soldiers in Hospital". Thank you for an easy one, Stan.

(06:25) So Matthew Brady was a prolific photographer during the Civil War, though like a lot of prolific people he often took credit for work done by his employees, and Brady really changed the way that people thought about war. He and his staff created some 10.000 images during the Civil War and it was the first time that an event had been photographically documented so thoroughly. By the way, lest you think the unreliability of images begin with Photoshop; many of Brady's photo's were staged. He would move bodies, sometimes soldiers were apparently told to act dead. But of course at the time photographs felt inherently authentic and written accounts of battle could now be accompanied by actual images of fighting and its aftermath.

(07:01) But perhaps the most important impact of the Civil war was the new nation that it created, like the American Civil War fits right in with the global phenomenon of nation-building that was happening. Soon we would have places on the map like Italy and Germany and older places like Greece would be reborn as nation-states and then all of these places would be known to Americans as 'Not America'. But by the way, congratulations to Italy on their recent election of their 732nd Prime Minister in just 180 years of existing. By far the most successful of these new nation states were the ones that embraced industrialization and modern ideas of organization and centralized government. Northern victory in the Civil War meant that the United States would follow the path that the North had laid down: it would become an industrial rather than agrarian nation with a national government, pre-eminent over those with individual states. It would become a nation. And it's not a coincidence that over the course of the 19th century people stopped pluralizing "the United States". They stopped saying "The United States are a great place to live," and began saying "The United States is a great place to live." The Civil War helped singularize what had been until then had been a plural nation. And Abraham Lincoln was the first president to truly expand the power of the executive. He ordered blockades and suspended Habeas Corpus, in addition to emancipating the slaves. But the Republican-dominated congress played a role in this federalization too. Congress passed the Homestead Act in 1862, that encouraged settlement of the West by basically giving away land to anyone who had 18 dollars and was willing to live on it and farm it for five years.

(08:27) Meanwhile the Morrill Land Grand Act financed colleges to offer training in new scientific agricultural techniques, the Department of Agriculture was created to generate statistics and share best practices in farming. Congress also helped unify the country with massive land grants in the Pacific Railway Act of 1862. And during the was the Lincoln Administration gave away 158 million acres to railroads to tie the nation together. Get it? Tie? Railroad ties? The nation tog... I'll get my coat and go.

(08:54) Plus, as you may have noticed: wars are expensive, and in order to finance the Civil War the congress passed the first Progressive Income Tax in American history, as well as floating huge bond issues to the public. And when that wasn't enough the administration began printing federal money on green paper called 'Green Bags'. These, along with notes issued by banks under the National Bank Act of 1863 became the first national currency of the United States.

(09:16) All together the total cost of the war for the Union was 6.7 billion dollars. Interestingly, if in 1860 the Federal Government had purchased every slave and had granted a 40 acre farm to each family the total cost would have been 3.1 billion dollars. But a. it would have been hard to get that bill through congress and b. at the time the federal government had no way to raise that kind of money. The Federal Government also actively promoted the industrial economy that was to become dominant in the United States after the war. In fact industrialization was so healthy that visitors to cities in the north during the Civil War would have been hard-pressed to know that they were even in a war.

(09:51) So ultimately the Civil War was a victory for Alexander Hamilton's vision of what America should be. I mean, Thomas Jefferson could never have imagined the United States that emerged from the Civil War: a government that supported an army of a million men, carried a 2.5 billion dollar national debt, distributed public lands, printed a national currency and collected an array of internal taxes. It sounds like Britain!

So the Civil War wasn't just a victory of North over South or of freedom over slavery. It created the nation that the United States of America has become. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

(10:22) Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Meredith Danko- too far! Our associate producer is Danica Johnson and the show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself, and our graphics team is Thought Café. Every week there's a new caption for the libertage, you can suggest some in the comments, or you can also ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of historians. Thank you for watching and as we say in my home town: don't forget to be awesome.