

22.8 Appomattox: Total War Brings an End

During the first years of the war, Lincoln had searched for a commander who was willing to fight the Confederates. The president finally found the leader he needed in General Grant. Grant's views on war were quite straightforward: "The art of war is simple enough. Find out where your enemy is. Get at him as soon as you can. Strike him as hard and as often as you can, and keep moving on."

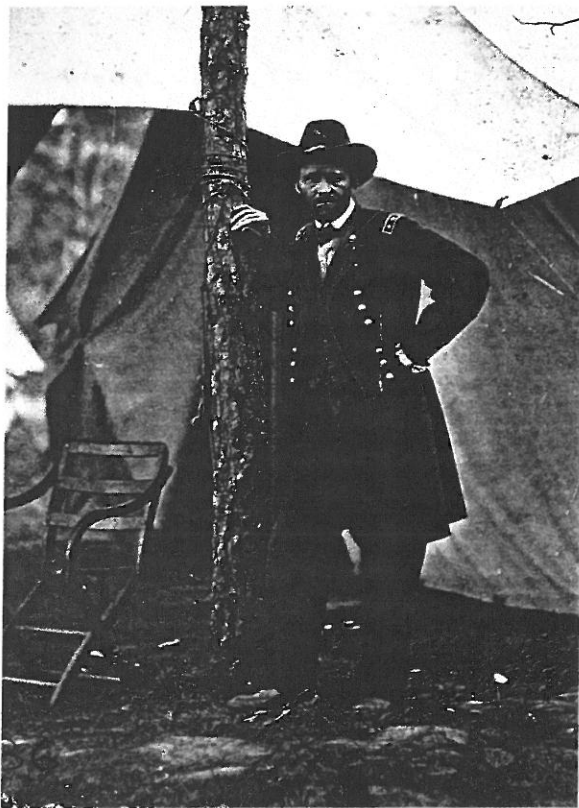
Using this strategy, Grant mapped out a plan for ending the war. He would lead a large force against Lee to capture Richmond. At the same time, General William Tecumseh Sherman would lead a second army into Georgia to take Atlanta.

On to Richmond In May 1864, Grant invaded Virginia with a force of more than 100,000 men. They met Lee's army of 60,000 in a dense forest known as "The Wilderness." In two days of fierce fighting, Grant lost 18,000 men. Despite these heavy losses, Grant would not retreat. "I propose to fight it out along this line," he said, "if it takes all summer." He followed Lee's army to Cold Harbor, where he lost 7,000 men in 15 minutes of fighting.

By the time the two forces reached Petersburg, a railroad center 20 miles south of Richmond, Grant's losses almost equaled Lee's entire army. But he was able to reinforce his army with fresh troops. Lee, who had also suffered heavy losses, could not.

Total War Grant believed in total war—war on the enemy's will to fight and its ability to support an army. With his army tied down in northern Virginia, Grant ordered General Philip Sheridan to wage total war in Virginia's grain-rich Shenandoah Valley. "Let that valley be so left that crows flying over it will have to carry their rations long with them," ordered Grant.

In May 1864, General Sherman left Tennessee for Georgia with orders to inflict "all the damage you can against their war resources." In September, he reached Atlanta, the South's most important rail and manufacturing center. His army set the city ablaze.



In 1864, Lincoln gave command of all Union forces to Ulysses S. Grant. Grant believed in using his larger army to wear down the enemy regardless of the casualties that his own forces suffered.

The Reelection of Lincoln Any hope of victory for the South lay in the defeat of President Lincoln in the election of 1864. The northern Democrats nominated General George McClellan to run against Lincoln. Knowing that the North was weary of war, McClellan urged an immediate end to the conflict.

Lincoln doubted he would be reelected. Grant seemed stuck in northern Virginia, and there was no end in sight to the appalling bloodletting. Luckily for the president, Sheridan's destruction of the Shenandoah Valley and Sherman's capture of Atlanta came just in time to rescue his campaign. These victories changed northern views of Lincoln and his prospects for ending the war. In November, Lincoln was reelected.

Sherman's March Through Georgia After burning Atlanta, Sherman marched his army toward Savannah, promising to "make Georgia howl." His purpose was to destroy the last untouched supply base for the Confederacy.

As they marched through Georgia, Sherman's troops destroyed everything they found of value. Fields were trampled or burned. Houses were ransacked (robbed). Hay and food supplies were burned. Roads were lined with dead horses, hogs, and cattle that his troops could not eat or carry away. Everything useful in a 60-mile-wide path was destroyed.

In December 1864, Sherman captured Savannah, Georgia. From there, he turned north and destroyed all opposition in the Carolinas. Marching 425 miles in 50 days, he reached Raleigh, North Carolina, by March 1865. There he waited for Grant's final attack on Richmond.

The End at Appomattox For nine months, Grant's forces battered Lee's army at Petersburg, the gateway to Richmond. On April 1, 1865, the Union forces finally broke through Confederate lines to capture the city. Two days later, Union troops marched into Richmond.

Grant's soldiers moved quickly to surround Lee's army. Lee told his officers, "There is nothing left for me to do but go and see General Grant, and I would rather die a thousand deaths."

On April 9, 1865, General Lee, in full dress uniform, arrived at Wilmer McLean's house in the village of Appomattox Courthouse. He was there to surrender his army to General Grant. The Union general met him in a mud-splattered and crumpled uniform.

Grant's terms of surrender were generous. Confederate soldiers could go home if they promised to fight no longer. They could take with them their own horses and mules, which they would need for spring plowing. Officers could keep their swords and weapons. Grant also ordered that food be sent to Lee's half-starved men. Lee accepted the terms.

As Lee returned to his headquarters, Union troops began to shoot their guns and cheer wildly. Grant told them to stop celebrating. "The war is over," he said, "the rebels are our countrymen again."

General Sherman, a believer in total war, cut a path of destruction through Georgia. The photograph below shows the burned ruins of Atlanta.





General Lee surrendered to General Grant at Appomattox Courthouse in Virginia. Grant was generous to Lee's soldiers, sending food to the troops and allowing them to keep their horses and mules.

"Touched by Fire" No one who fought in the Civil War would ever forget the intensity of the experience. "In our youths," wrote Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., "our hearts were touched by fire."

The nation, too, had been touched by fire. Many compared the Civil War to a great furnace that burned away one country and forged a new one in its place. In this new country, neither slavery nor the right to secession had any place. Just as Lincoln had said, the Union was a single whole, not a collection of sovereign states. Before the war, Americans tended to say "the United States *are*." After the war, they said "the United States *is*."

These momentous changes came at a horrifying cost. Billions of dollars had been spent on the conflict. Almost every family had lost a member or a friend. More than 620,000 Union and Confederate soldiers lay dead. Thousands more came home missing an arm or a leg. It would take generations for the South to recover from the environmental destruction wrought by the war. Croplands lay in ruins. Two fifths of the South's livestock had been destroyed.

Many historians have called the Civil War the first truly modern war. It was the first war to reflect the technology of the Industrial Revolution: railroads, the telegraph, armored ships, more accurate and destructive weaponry. It also introduced "total war"—war between whole societies, not just uniformed armies.

As devastating as it was, the Civil War left many issues unsettled. The old society of the South had been destroyed, but the memory of it lingered. Thousands of white southerners clung to a romantic picture of the pre-war South. Decaying plantation houses became shrines. In the years to come, many in the South would try to re-create their vanished way of life. Secession and slavery were gone, but conflicts over states' rights and the status of African Americans would continue long into the future.