The Civil War marked a defining moment in United States history. Long-simmering tensions reached a critical stage in 1860-1861 when 11 slaveholding states seceded and formed the Confederate States of America. War broke out in April 1861, as the Confederates insisted on their right to leave the Union and the loyal states refused to allow them to go. Four years of fighting claimed almost 1.5 million casualties – including people who were killed, dead from disease, wounded, or taken prisoner – and at least 620,000 died. The war directly affected countless civilians, and freed four million enslaved African-Americans.

The issue of slavery
The battle over slavery set the stage for secession and war. Most men and women at the time would have agreed with President Abraham Lincoln’s assertion in his second inaugural address that slavery “was, somehow, the cause of the war.” Alexander H. Stephens, the Confederacy’s vice president, proclaimed in March 1861 that slavery “was the immediate cause of the late rupture and the present revolution” to establish southern independence.

The framers of the United States Constitution had compromised on the issue of slavery. They created a democratic republic that ensured its citizens’ freedoms while also reassuring the South that individual states would have the power to keep slaves. The paradox of white liberty that rested in part on a foundation of black slavery goes back to the origins of the United States.

Debates over the expansion of slavery into new territories created turmoil in national politics. A major milepost on the way to war was the Supreme Court’s 1857 Dred Scott decision, which said that slaves could not win their freedom simply by crossing into a free state. Around this time, many northern voters came to view the Democratic Party as pro-southern. The Republican Party, which rapidly gained strength in the North after its creation in the mid-1850s, adamantly opposed extending slavery into the territories and won virtually no support in the South.

The secession crisis
The presidential election of 1860 triggered the secession crisis. Lincoln and the victorious Republicans had promised not to interfere with slavery in states where it already existed. Still, they firmly opposed slavery’s spread into any federal territories. Between December 1860 and February 1861, seven Deep South states seceded to avoid what they perceived as a long-term threat to their slaveholding interests. In April, 1861, confederates fired on Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina, setting off the war.

Both sides mobilized on a scale never before seen in American history. Drawing on an 1860 population of just more than 1 million military-age white males, the Confederacy placed between 800,000 and 900,000 men in uniform. The United States put at least 2.1 million men in uniform, about half of its 1860 military-age population. More than 200,000 African-American men also fought for the North.

In 1861, the United States began a naval blockade to stop the flow of goods into southern ports, seized control of the Mississippi River, and attacked the interior of the Confederacy. For most of the war, the Confederate states tried to protect as much of their territory as possible. When circumstances seemed favorable, they launched attacks. The most important of these were the Battles of Antietam and Perryville in 1862 and Gettysburg in 1863.

The Confederacy finally surrendered in the spring of 1865.

Millions affected by the war
The war touched the lives of almost every American. Women worked as nurses (previously a male occupation), as well as government clerks, factory workers, and as members of charitable organizations that assisted soldiers. Thousands ran farms.

No group was more directly affected than the four million slaves, who emerged from the struggle with their freedom. This was made final by the passage of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution in December 1865.

Both sides made use of recent technological advances. Railroads moved hundreds of thousands of soldiers and vast quantities of supplies, and telegraphs allowed both governments to coordinate military movements. Both sides also used the latest military technology, such as the rifle musket and ironclad warships.

Emancipation marked the war’s most revolutionary development. Most white northerners considered the conflict primarily a struggle to hold the Union together, but as fighting dragged on and casualties mounted, Lincoln presented emancipation as a tool that would undermine the Confederacy. Most whites in the North eventually accepted emancipation to help win victory and restore the Union, to punish slaveholders who caused the war, and to prevent slavery-related issues from posing a future threat. Hundreds of thousands of enslaved people in the South fled to Union military lines, putting even more pressure on the government to transform a struggle for Union into one that also would end slavery.

**Human and economic losses**

The cost of the war was appalling. More American soldiers lost their lives than in all other wars combined from the colonial period through the Vietnam War, which ended in 1975. The war brought wide-scale economic destruction to the Confederate states, which lost two-thirds of their wealth, although emancipated slaves accounted for much of this. In contrast, the Northern economy thrived. Between 1860 and 1870, Northern wealth increased by 50 percent, while during that same decade, Southern wealth decreased by 60 percent.

Americans remembered the war in different ways. Most white Northerners recalled a crusade that saved the Union. Black Americans placed freedom at the center of their memories of the conflict. Many Southerners, however, tried to minimize the importance of slavery as a factor during the secession crisis and the war.

**Need some help? Use the following prompt to help you.**

- Write a summary that explains the how people from the Union and the Confederacy might have viewed the war differently.