Content Reading Guide: The Civil War Begins

Prior to the election of 1860, there was massive disunity in the USA. The North was less dependent on slavery due to an industrial economy. The South asserted they needed slavery due to having an agrarian economy dependent on harvesting crops. The South feared the federal government would attempt to overpower the state governments and eventually abolish slavery. After Abraham Lincoln was elected, South Carolina was the first state to leave the union by seceding in December of 1860. The other Southern states soon joined them and formed the Confederate States of America.

On March 4, 1861, Abraham Lincoln was sworn in as President. Lincoln came at night to D.C. for the protection of his safety. He claimed there would be no conflict unless the South provoked the North to fight. The President did not initially take office to destroy slavery. His abolitionist sentiment developed and evolved over time.

There were many reasons why the North would not let the South leave the Union. The national debt was jointly held by the states. If the South left, the North would be left with all the debt. The South provided crops and other goods for the factories of the North. Also, the South made money off other nations by selling cotton. The North would lose this revenue for taxes and other economic purposes.

On April 12, 1861, South Carolina attempted to take Fort Sumter in Charleston. Yet, the North controlled this fort. The fighting started over this fortress. This was not a dramatic start to the Civil War. None of the Union soldiers died and the South only had one casualty. The Northern Union had many advantages in the Civil War. They had more people (called the law of attrition), industrialization, and better railroads. The Southern advantages included “home field advantage” in their region, skilled arms men, talented generals, and the profitable cash crop of cotton.

The North had three goals to accomplish to end the conflict. FIRST, the North wanted to blockade Southern ports to deprive the South of outside goods and profitable trade. SECOND, the Union wanted to control the Mississippi River to “split the South” and control the trade and travel of the body of water. THIRD, the North wanted to capture Richmond, VA, which was the capital of the Confederate States of America.