Prelude to War

On the surface, at least, the United States was riding a wave of prosperity in the 1850s. The nation's harvests of food and raw materials were big and getting bigger. Manufactured goods were carried across the land on finished railroads, nearly 30,000 miles of them.

A Divided Economy. Still the country had a crack in it, and that crack was widening. Though economic times were good at mid-century, some parts of the nation were doing better than others. The industrial North grew more rapidly than the South during the 1850s. The South relied on agriculture and was growing at a slower pace.

Southerners were forced to buy all their manufactured goods from the North and had no choice but to accept low Northern prices for their plantation crops. Many Southerners resented this unequal partnership.

Slavery. The issues over trade were nothing compared to the disagreement over slavery. Slavery had been thriving since the seventeenth century. Though the North no longer relied upon slaves for labor, the South still did.

While only a minority of Southerners were plantation and slave owners, most white Southerners felt it was their natural right to hold slaves. Attacks on slavery struck at their pride in Southern traditions and institutions, at their way of life. They deeply resented Northerners having a say in how they should live and conduct their businesses.

While the North idealized John Brown and his antislavery beliefs, the South saw him as a murderer and terrorist.

Numerous Southerners also feared their slaves, many of whom had been treated mercilessly. There were 4 million slaves held in the South—nearly half the number of the total white population. In 1831, a slave in Virginia, Nat Turner, had led a local slave rebellion. Fifty-seven white people, as well as hundreds of blacks, had been killed. Southern whites were not only resistant to the idea of abolition, they were terrified by it.

Most Northerners felt that enslaving other human beings was morally wrong and evil. Abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, Wendell Phillips, and Harriet Tubman were active and persuasive. Clergy and people of conscience spoke out on the terrible treatment of blacks. Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison put it simply: "Slavery," he said, "is sin."

States' Rights vs. Federal Rights. At the core of the debate on slavery was another, even broader issue. Do the states themselves have the last say on the laws that they live under or does the federal government? The nation faced this issue head-on when the country debated whether new territories in the West should be open to the slave trade. In 1820, the Missouri Compromise allowed slavery in that state. But it prohibited slavery west of the Mississippi above Missouri's southern border. This law, after much conflict, was repealed in 1854.

In 1854, the new Kansas-Nebraska Act permitted the voters in each territory to choose whether they would enter the Union as a free or slave state. Armed men from both sides flooded into Kansas territory to influence the vote. One of those arriving was John Brown, a self-ordained preacher with a feverish hatred of slavery.

Bleeding Kansas. The vote, meant to settle the slavery issue for Kansas, settled nothing. The election was rigged, and the two sides formed rival state governments. Fighting erupted. In one particularly ugly raid in May 1856, a Southern mob sacked and burned the town of Lawrence, Kansas.

This was too much for John Brown. With a small band of followers, he murdered five proslavery settlers along Kansas' Pottawatomie Creek. In retaliation, Brown's son was killed by proslavery men. "Bleeding Kansas" was the first thin tap in the river of blood to come.

Dred Scott Decision. In 1857, the Supreme Court ruled against Dred Scott, a slave who had petitioned the Court for his freedom. Scott argued that when his master had taken him to the free territory of Wisconsin, he (Scott) had become a free man.

The Court found instead that Scott, as a black slave, was not a citizen and could not sue. It also maintained that because Scott was his owner's property, he could not be freed by a move to a free territory.

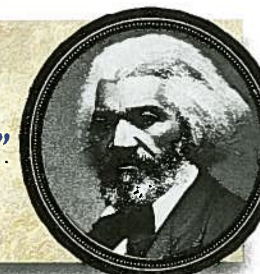
Most important, the Supreme Court ruled that Congress had no right to ban slavery anywhere. The Court declared that banning slavery would result in the taking of property without due process of law.

Northerners considered secession treason, an illegal move that would destroy the Union.

The South felt that its arguments for slavery had been proven right by the Court. But the case just widened the gulf between the states. Militia companies began to spring up in cities both North and South. War was in the air.

Raid on Harpers Ferry. John Brown had waged a fiery war against the slaves' chains in Kansas. Now he brought his crusade to Harpers Ferry, (now West) Virginia. Brown hoped to seize the rifles in the town's federal armory. With them he would rouse the slaves in Virginia and begin a general uprising.

> *"...above your national, tumultuous joy, I hear the mournful wail of millions."*
> *—Frederick Douglass*



On the night of October 16, 1859, Brown grabbed the federal armory and arsenal and the local firehouse, too. His planned uprising, though, was a disaster. Only two slaves braved their masters' rage to join Brown. U.S. Marines killed or captured more than half of Brown's force of twenty-one men. The rest fled for their lives.

Brown was quickly tried for treason and sente
to hang. During the trial, his courage and outsp
condemnation of slavery won admiration in the N
Brown's raid, however, fed Southern fears of a ge
slave uprising. The North's sympathy for this aboli
ist also worried Southerners. Many were convinced
it was just a matter of time before Northerners f
the issue over slavery.

Search for a Compromise. Abraham Lincoln
elected president in 1860. He had lost every state b
the Mason-Dixon line (the traditional line dividing S
from North). With Lincoln's election, Southerners
felt that their cause was lost.

However, Lincoln was determined to avoid a
between the states. When he entered office in 186
tried to assure the South that a middle ground cou
found between abolitionist and proslavery forces.

The issue though, was too much even for Lin
political skills. In December 1860, South Carolina p
out of the Union. More states would follow, formin
Confederate States of America.

Lincoln had wanted to resolve the conflict bet
the states slowly and without bloodshed. Sla
though, was an institution that had to be destroyed
just dismantled. After two centuries, it was d
implanted in this country. Its uprooting would be vi
and bloodfilled, rattling the body—and soul—of the
divided nation.

FIRST FIGHTS

As more Southern states left the Union in January 1861, they took over federal property within their borders. Forts and weapons were among the first things to be seized.

SUMTER SURROUNDED. Most federal posts across the South gave up quickly. Southern militia commanders allowed Union soldiers to return home unharmed. But Union commanders in a few key Southern ports refused to give up without orders. One of these was Major Robert Anderson. He and sixty soldiers held a heavy brick fort in Charleston Harbor called Fort Sumter.

As winter turned to spring, Anderson's men were getting worried. They knew they were surrounded and couldn't help noticing the new rows of cannons facing the fort from the harbor. The threat was clear: If Anderson didn't get going and fast, the South Carolina militia would force him out.

Anderson had other problems as well. He was running out of food and short of ammunition. Some well-placed Confederate cannon shots had already turned back a Union ship filled with supplies and 200 reinforcements.

Meanwhile, the South got its own president. Former U.S. Senator and Secretary of War Jefferson Davis was elected to lead the seceding states, which called themselves the Confederate States of America. On February 18, 1861, Davis took office while spectators sang "Dixie," the new Southern anthem.

LINCOLN TAKES OFFICE. In Washington, the new president was to take office on March 4. Death threats had been made against Lincoln, so the president-elect from Illinois sneaked into the capital on a train just before the inauguration.

The War Between the States had not yet begun. In his inaugural speech Lincoln still offered hope that bloodshed could be avoided: "Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection."

SUMTER ATTACKED. Nevertheless, just after he took office, Lincoln sent reinforcements to Fort Sumter. When word came to the Confederates that relief for Fort Sumter was on the way, Davis decided to act. He ordered the commander in Charleston, Brigadier General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard, to demand that the Federals leave Fort Sumter or else.

Anderson, in reply, hinted to the Confederates that he would have to leave Sumter by April 15 due to lack of supplies. On the other hand, if help came in time, he might just stay and fight.

This was too much for the Confederates; they sent a short reply: "...we have the honor to notify you that [the General] will open the fire of his batteries on Fort Sumter in one hour."

At 4:30 A.M. on April 12 the Confederates fired the first shot of the Civil War. Huge cannonballs and exploding shells blasted the fort and set it on fire. A day and a half later, Anderson hung out a white flag. For all the noise

CIVIL WAR SPIES

Though codes and ciphers were used during the Civil War, most spying was done by amateurs. Some of the most valuable spies were women. They were less likely than men to be suspected and, if caught, less likely to be hung. Among them was a Confederate widow, Rose Greenhow. Greenhow was Southern by birth, and when war broke out she made no secret of her Confederate sympathies.

Living in Washington, Greenhow extracted important information about troop movements from friendly Union officers. In the first months of the war, she helped tip off General Beauregard to the Federal march to Manassas. As a result, Southern reinforcements arrived in the nick of time.

Because of her social standing, Union authorities were reluctant to arrest her. Still, Greenhow's spying proved so relentless, they had to do something. She was put under house arrest, but amazingly, continued to send out messages. The widow simply stuffed the information into her daughter's shoes.

Finally exiled to the South, Greenhow eventually went to England and wrote a book about her experiences. It made her famous in Europe and increased sympathy for the Confederate cause.

She left England abruptly in August 1864, perhaps carrying a secret message for Jefferson Davis. Off the North Carolina coast, her blockade runner, the *Condor*, ran aground. With a Union picket boat closing in, Greenhow again faced the prospect of arrest and prison. Along with several others, she tried to escape in a small boat. The tiny craft capsized in heavy seas. Rose Greenhow, weighed down by her sodden clothes, drowned.

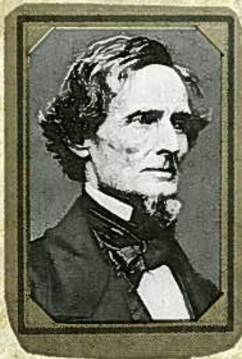
Union troops train at their camp near Washington, D.C. Bull Run swept away hopes for a short, bloodless war.

and firepower, little blood was shed. One man (Union) and one horse (Confederate) were the only casualties.

CONFRONTATION AT MANASSAS. The war was on. Thousands of volunteers streamed into Washington, answering Lincoln's call for recruits. The Union had few experienced generals (most Southern officers had already resigned), but Lincoln found a likely commander in Irvin McDowell. McDowell knew his green troops were not nearly ready to fight. Luckily for the Union army, the spring saw no major battles.

"Your little army…has met the grand army of the enemy and routed it.... We have taught them a lesson in their invasion of the sacred soil of Virginia."

—Jefferson Davis



Ready or not, McDowell's army moved south from Washington in mid-July. The 35,000 Union soldiers formed the largest fighting force ever seen on the continent. Their aim was to cut the rail lines at Manassas, Virginia, and march on Richmond, the Confederate capital.

General Beauregard, the winner at Fort Sumter, moved up to block the Union army. He had gotten news of the invasion from a Confederate spy in Washington (see sidebar). Beauregard's troops, like McDowell's, were inexperienced. Still, the Southern soldiers were convinced that each could whip a dozen Yankees. Both sides thought the war would be over in no time.

BATTLE AT BULL RUN. The Confederates formed their line along Bull Run Creek. On the morning of July 21, as picnicking spectators eagerly watched, McDowell sent his forces across the stream. The confident Yankees sang as they marched to attack: "We'll hang Jeff Davis from a sour apple tree." They smashed into the Confederate positions on the left, driving the Rebels back.

The center of the Southern line, however, had not panicked. A Virginia brigade led by Thomas J. Jackson had been sent up to help hold the Rebel position. And they were holding it—the Union could not move them. One besieged officer shouted to his troops to look at Jackson's fresh Virginians, standing "like a stone wall!" The name stuck; Jackson became "Stonewall" forever.

In the late afternoon, Confederate General Beauregard counterattacked, ordering his men to charge, yelling like furies. Confederate reinforcements bolstered the attack, and the terrified Union army fell to pieces. Terrified spectators and panicked soldiers ran from the bloody field, "skedaddling back to Washington."

Battle for the Rivers

"Whatever nation gets...control of the Ohio, Mississippi, and Missouri Rivers," wrote Union General William Tecumseh Sherman, "will control the continent." Through the winter and spring of 1862, ironclad gunboats and mud-caked troops fought for control of these Western rivers that ran deep into Confederate territory.

Fort Henry. In February 1862, a squat and ugly fleet of Union gunboats led by Commodore Andrew Foote steamed up the Tennessee River, heading for Rebel-occupied Fort Henry. The plan was to capture the Tennessee fort in a combined attack from land and water, and then take Fort Donelson, twelve miles east on the Cumberland River.

At Fort Henry, Union troops led by Ulysses S. Grant went ashore and marched toward the fort's earthen ramparts. But the soldiers bogged down in the muddy road already flooded from spring runoff. Waiting on the river, Foote grew impatient at the army's slow crawl. He decided to pound the fort from the water.

Foote's fleet steamed upstream to nearly point-blank range of the fort and opened fire. Huge, solid shot plowed gaping holes in Fort Henry's walls, wrecking the Rebel guns. With the rising river flooding in and only four guns firing, the fort's commander ran up the white flag. Union army troops never even made it into the battle.

To Donelson. Most of the Confederates from Fort Henry escaped overland to Fort Donelson, reinforcing the troops already there. Grant's army followed, and the Union gunboats chugged up the Cumberland River, intending to attack again from the water. Grant's troops quickly sealed the Rebels inside the fort and waited for the gunboats to begin shelling them out.

Foote's ships moved within close range of Fort Donelson. But unlike Fort Henry, Donelson was built high on a bluff. When the gunboats fired, their cannonballs failed to hit their mark. Meanwhile, Confederate guns hammered away, cracking gunboat timbers and wrecking Yankee cannons. With two vessels crippled and the rest damaged, the fleet retreated downriver. Grant's army was left to take Donelson alone.

The Confederate garrison was in a tight spot. Though equal in number to the Union forces, the Rebels were trapped against the river. At dawn, under Confederate General Gideon Pillow, they tried for a breakout. In a battle that bloodied the snow all morning, the troops cut an escape route through the Union lines to Nashville. But just before noon, Pillow lost his nerve and pulled back most of his men.

Pillow's hesitation was Grant's opportunity. Union troops counterattacked and broke the Confederate lines, trapping the Rebels for good. General Buckner, left in

DAVID G. FARRAGUT

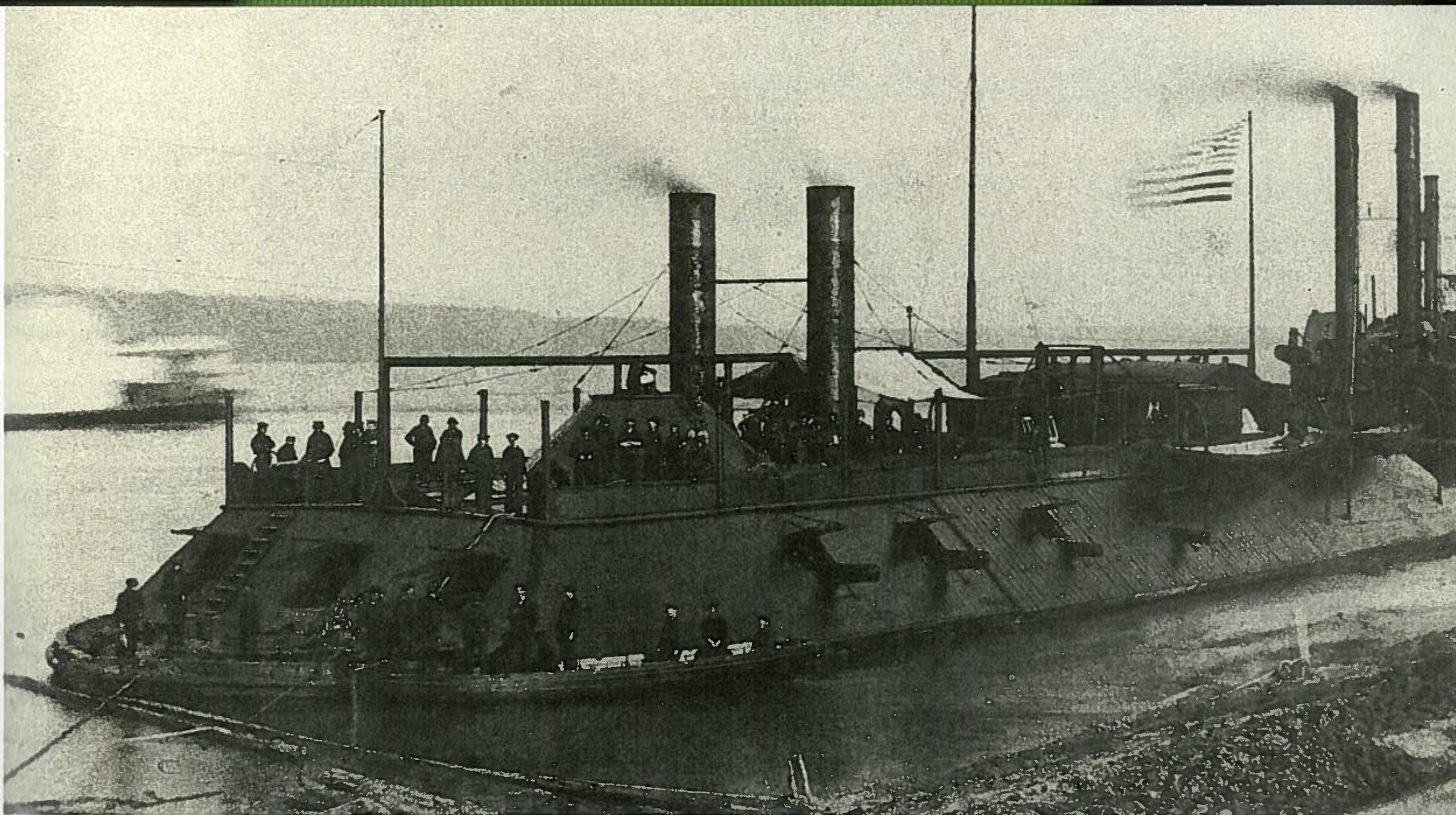
David G. Farragut joined the navy in 1810 at the age of nine; in the War of 1812 he was put in command of a captured British ship when only a twelve-year-old midshipman.

Before the Civil War he had lived in Virginia with his Southern wife, but when war broke out he had no doubt about which side he was on. "Mind what I tell you," he said to his rebellious neighbors. "You fellows will catch the devil before you get through with this business."

Capturing New Orleans in 1862 made Farragut a naval hero. Still, though he was already sixty, the triumph over the Southern port wasn't his last stroke of genius. In 1864, Farragut went after Mobile, Alabama, one of the last Confederate ports still open to blockade runners. In his flagship, the *Hartford*, Farragut led his fleet into the mouth of the bay at dawn on August 5, 1864.

Frail and desperately seasick, the Union commander had himself tied to the rigging of his ship as the fleet sailed single file past the blazing guns of Fort Morgan. Soon after the attack began, disaster struck. Farragut's lead ironclad, the *Tecumseh*, strayed out of the channel, struck a Rebel torpedo (mine), and plunged to the bottom. The *Brooklyn*, next in line, halted to avoid the torpedoes. This slowed all the Union ships right in front of Fort Morgan, whose guns blasted the *Hartford*'s deck, covering it with blood and slaughter. Farragut hesitated a moment, then shouted, "Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead!"

The *Brooklyn* scraped through the minefield and led the fleet into Mobile Bay. Later that morning, Farragut's ships pounded the Rebel ironclad *Tennessee* into surrender, ending the battle. Farragut, like Grant, believed that he could minimize battle losses by mounting an aggressive attack. His decisiveness made him the most successful naval officer of the war.



Ironclad gunboats helped force open the western rivers. Their invention rendered wooden ships obsolete.

charge when Pillow fled, had no choice but to surrender. A friend of Grant's before the war, Buckner expected generous surrender terms. He didn't get them. Grant demanded "unconditional and immediate surrender." His hard line earned him the nickname "Unconditional Surrender" Grant.

Tennessee's capital, Nashville, soon fell to the advancing Union forces. With that Southern jewel in their pocket and the control of the Western rivers, the Federal armies could now move south.

THE VITAL MISSISSIPPI. In the spring of 1862, while the bloodiest battle in the West was raging at Shiloh in Tennessee, Union Admiral David G. Farragut (see sidebar) led a daring campaign to seize New Orleans, the South's largest city and busiest port. Farragut's gamble was part of the Union effort to take control of the Mississippi River and split the Confederacy in two.

To apply even more pressure, the Union Navy had been gradually blockading the Southern Gulf coast, cutting off trade and military supplies.

To reach the city, Farragut's ships had to get by two Confederate strongholds, Forts Jackson and St. Philip, seventy-five miles east of the city. The forts stood on either side of the Mississippi, and a heavy chain barrier stretched across the river between them. "Nothing afloat could pass the forts," a New Orleans resident remembered, and "Nothing that walked could get through our swamps."

Farragut thought he could first shell the forts, then push past the crippled defenses with his powerful fleet. On April 18, mortar schooners opened fire on Fort Jackson, blasting the brick walls for the next five days. But little serious damage was done, and most of the Confederate guns still growled defiance. On April 23, Farragut decided to run past the forts, whatever the cost.

At 2 A.M. on April 24, Farragut's ships headed past the forts in the dark. Three nights before, two Federal gunboats had cut a gap in the chain barrier. The lead ship got through the gap before the Confederates spotted the fleet, but soon the night exploded with cannon shells. Burning rafts floated downriver, sent by Rebels to set the Federal ships ablaze.

Fighting the Mississippi current, Union warships steamed with agonizing slowness beneath the forts, firing as they went. But clouds of gun smoke spoiled the aim of the Rebel gunners. Only after the fleet made it through the barrier did a Union vessel go down. By dawn almost all of Farragut's ships had passed the forts.

A CITY SURRENDERS. When Farragut arrived at New Orleans the next day, the city was at the mercy of his cannons. With Union troops arriving just behind Farragut, the city surrendered on May 1. The gate to the Mississippi, the Confederacy's largest trade route, was closed.

Union forces continued to press up and down the river, still trying to divide the Confederacy in two. Farragut headed north but couldn't crush the powerful Rebel guns at Vicksburg, Mississippi. He was forced to return to New Orleans. Union General Grant would soon grasp again for Vicksburg's valuable Mississippi port.