

Talking Points on Soldier and Civilian Experience

Impact on a Nation:

- Civil War was total war- Americans did not imagine that it would last 4 years and be so consuming and destructive
- Families were divided by pro-Union or pro-confederate sympathies
- Former West Point graduates/friends and Mexican War veterans were pitted against each other as military leaders on either side of the conflict
- Civil War has become known by different names to express popular views- War between the States, War for the Union, War of Southern Aggression, War of Northern Aggression, Second American Revolution, the Brothers' War –
- Historians still argue about main cause- economic sectionalism- profound economic and cultural differences between North and South, slavery- expansion, abolition, issue of states' rights v. national sovereignty
- War resulted in economic boom for northern industry; economic devastation for South, but caused eventual industrial and agricultural diversity which built the region
- Over 600,000 people died, thousands of others wounded or disabled, families devastated by losses, both emotional and financial
- Organizations of veterans or descendants of Civil War veterans, U.S. Government/National Park Service have erected monuments to commemorate or honor sacrifices made by war era individuals
- Debate continues over recognition of Confederate history as important to understand the past v. giving credibility to offensive symbols or causes related to slavery

Soldiering in the Civil War:

- Many soldiers were under 21 yrs. Old. (ex: 2 mil/2.7 mil in Union ranks.) Younger volunteers – 10-13, served in fife & drum ranks. Immigrants would fill ranks of Union army. CSA – considered shameful not to volunteer for service- many older soldiers later in war as casualties mounted. Conscription laws resulted in violence, especially when provisions allowed men to buy their way out of service- hence the “Rich man’s war and the poor man’s fight” saying. Bounties were used as incentives to register, but some individuals collected the bounty and deserted- “bounty jumping.” Overall, men volunteered and fought for numerous causes on both side of the conflict
- Frederick Douglass urged Lincoln to allow the enlistment of black men as a means of hastening blacks’ rights to citizenship. Douglass later met with Lincoln to protest unequal pay (\$10.00 mo. V. \$13.00/mo.) Lincoln justified this practice by stating that it was a means of “smoothing the way” to their employment as soldiers. Black soldiers hoped that serving in the war would aid in abolition of slavery. Douglass wrote “Men of Color to Arms”, urging black men to take charge of their fight for freedom.
- Union saw emancipated or escaped slaves as “contraband” at first, only to be utilized for labor- digging fortifications, cooking, other manual labor, grave digging. Belief was that black soldiers would lack discipline, bravery of skills to

- fight. Over 160,000 black men would eventually fill Union army ranks, distinguishing themselves bravely in battle. Ex: 54th Massachusetts regiment led by Col. Robert G. Shaw. “Colored” troops were led by white officers- had to worry about execution if captured by CSA troops, rather than simply POW status. Treated poorly- much discrimination by fellow white Union soldiers and officers. Some southern blacks- free and slave served in the Confederate army. CSA used slaves mostly for manual labor, or to continue laboring on farms during the war.
- Soldiering was very difficult- poor shelter, cold, heat, dampness, poor diet- (hardtack, coffee, bacon fat, corn meal or flour with worms), long marches in often ill-fitting shoes, boredom, alcoholism, disease from camping for long periods of time in one area with inadequate septic facilities. Furloughs granted allowed interaction with civilians – often a good meal, female companionship. Harsh punishment for desertion- shooting or hanging. Soldiers communicated through letters to home, diaries. Union- far from home and from supply lines, unfamiliar “enemy” territory, less direct cause to fight for; CSA- lack of factories, money, stable government = inadequate supplies, hunger a pervasive issue – often had to scavenge for food, longer service- lack of replacement troops. Prison camps, hospitals were often certain death- most Civil War deaths were caused by disease. Artificial limbs for maimed survivors became huge state expenditures- ex. 20% of Mississippi state rev. spent in 1866.
 - Soldiers served in various units- infantry, artillery, cavalry, rangers who practiced controversial guerilla warfare, and naval ranks. Both sides had aid from foreign soldiers and officers and from Native American units. It was common for regiments to be formed from neighborhoods, especially in the North- devastating to the community when these suffered high or 100% casualty rates. Modern weapons, accurate guns, but antiquated military strategy increased casualties.
 - Clara Barton served as a field hospital nurse and worked to revolutionize battlefield health care as well as to exhume and identify thousands of hastily buried soldiers and attempt to locate the missing through correspondence with living soldiers. Because of bureaucratic issues, she decided to spend her own money and launch an independent crusade to locate missing veterans. Although Congress allotted \$15,000, she spent much of her own money to continue working, processing over 63,000 letters and informing over 22,000 families of missing soldiers. She later founded the American Red Cross. Women’s efforts in the Civil War helped advance the field of nursing in the United States.
 - Civilians in the war – biggest impact on women and children; served in many capacities to aid war effort. Women filled ranks of factory jobs left vacant. On farms, they took over planting, harvesting in addition to all other household tasks. Flags, regimental colors, uniforms and blankets were made by women, sometimes from their own clothing or household supplies. Homes became impromptu battlefield hospitals; women became caretakers of the wounded/dying. Many participated in the Sanitary Commission and Christian Commission as volunteers.

As hungry troops moved through areas and helped themselves to farm stores, mercantile businesses and even personal items of civilians, many women on both sides had to protect families and goods, or aid in feeding the soldiers. As the Civil War raged on, inflation skyrocketed, especially in the South where the Confederate dollar lacked the credibility of the U.S. currency. Scarce food, also a result of the Union coastal blockade made food prices reach unfathomable heights and created a healthy black market which exploited already suffering civilians. Ex: barrel of flour reached \$70.00 in South by 1863. Civilians became creative with staple food items, substituting locally acquired foods for things such as coffee, flour and fruit. The problem of scarcity was exacerbated in the South after Union troops plundered areas, burning crops, killing/stealing livestock, and torching homes, mills, and transportation networks, so that by the end of the Civil War, the South became a land of refugees, both black and white.

- Letters and diaries of civilians reveal terrible losses of family members, alienation from loved ones who are home or away fighting, as well as rich personal memoirs that detail experiences that would seem mundane then, but offer insight into people's perceptions at the time of the war. How did where they live affect their view of the war? What common ground exists in civilian and soldier experiences? How did this culture of suffering, carnage and death affect people of this era and did they become desensitized at all by it as the war dragged on? These are issues for students to reflect upon while reading the narratives