The following essay challenges the long-held popular view of the Civil War as romantic and glorious. Calling the conflict "a killer war," Oates graphically describes the murderous weaponry that turned Civil War battlefields into slaughter pens, resulting in unbelievable and unprecedented casualties on both sides. But that is only part of this tragic story. Oates concludes that the Civil War wounded the spirit of the nation and left a legacy that fostered sectional bitterness and racial tension for years to come.

There were many reasons for this horrible war, but the existence of slavery in a country dedicated to freedom was the paradox that an entire generation could not resolve without resorting to bloodshed. That the new Confederacy was dedicated to saving slavery, both as a multibillion-dollar labor system and a means of race control, cannot be doubted. The Confederates wrote a constitution that closely resembled the United States Constitution save for one crucial difference: the Confederate document specifically guaranteed slavery and affirmed states' rights. In Savannah, Georgia, rebel vice president Alexander H. Stephens made it unmistakably clear what the Confederacy stood for.

"Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea [from that of equality in the Declaration of Independence]; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery—subordination to the superior race—is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first in the history of the world based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth."

From the outset, this new government was beset with internal problems: it lacked sound money, guns, factories, food, railroads, and harmonious political leadership. Still, with its excellent generals and soldiers, the possibility of foreign intervention, and other advantages, the Confederacy faced better odds in its war for independence than had the American colonies. Why, then, did the Confederacy go down to defeat?

Slavery was not only the major reason for the war; it was ultimately an important factor in explaining the fall of the Confederacy. England, long committed to the concept of free labor, ended its flirtation with the Confederacy after Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation. With this act the president captured the moral offensive, guaranteed European neutrality, and swelled the ranks of the Union Army with African Americans who were now fighting for a cause close to their hearts. The Union's superiority in manufacturing, railroads, financial resources, and even food production also wore down an increasingly divided Confederacy, which found that states' rights eroded the unity it needed in time of war.
Oates describes the final crippling blows as General Sherman’s army “brought total war to the Deep South, contending as he did that modern wars were won by destroying the enemy’s resources as well as his morale.” In the short run, it produced ghastly pictures of ruined cities and destitute people. In the long run, it led to the death of slavery and the transformation of the country from a loose confederation of states into an indivisible nation.

GLOSSARY

ANTITETAM (MARYLAND) Robert E. Lee and George B. McClellan fought to a draw here in the bloodiest single day in American history. The battle ended Lee’s first invasion of the North.

COLD HARBOR (VIRGINIA) The bloodiest hour of the war occurred as Ulysses S. Grant unsuccessfully tried an assault on Lee’s army and lost 10,000 men in an effort to penetrate the rebel’s entrenched defenses.

FREEDMEN’S BUREAU Established by congressional statute in March of 1865, the Bureau of Freedman, Refugees, and Abandoned Lands was supposed to provide food and schools for the former slaves, help them secure jobs, and make certain they received fair wages.

GETTYSBURG (PENNSYLVANIA) Lee’s greatest reversal, in July of 1863, ended his second invasion of the North, best known for George Pickett’s calamitous charge on the third day. Lee suffered such great losses that he could never again mount the offensive.

CONFEDERATE GENERALS:

BEAUREGARD, PIERRE GUSTAVE TOUTANT Led Confederate forces to victory at First Bull Run (or First Manassas), July 1861.

BRAGG, BRAXTON Quarrelsome commander of the Army of Tennessee, the Confederacy’s main army in the western theater; lost the Battle of Perryville and the battles around Chattanooga, October–November 1863.

HOOD, JOHN BELL Led the Army of Tennessee to annihilation in the Battle of Nashville, December 1864.

JACKSON, THOMAS J. “STONEWALL” Defeated three separate Union forces in the Shenandoah Valley, spring 1862; became Lee’s most brilliant divisional and corps commander; famous for his flanking march and attack at Chancellorsville, where he was mortally wounded by his own pickets.

JOHNSTON, ALBERT SIDNEY Many Confederates considered him the best general in the rebel army; commanded the western forces early in the war and was killed in the Battle of Shiloh, Tennessee, April 1862.

JOHNSTON, JOSEPH EGGLERON Preferred to fight on the defensive; commanded the main Confederate Army in Virginia in the first half of 1862; fought against McClellan in the Peninsula campaign; was later sent west to coordinate rebel efforts to defend Vicksburg against Grant; contested Sherman’s advance against Atlanta in 1864 and in the Carolinas in 1865.

LEE, ROBERT E. The best rebel commander; preferred to fight on the offensive; led the Army of Northern Virginia, the Confederacy’s showcase army, from June 1862 to April 1865, when he surrendered to Grant; won the Seven Days Battles before Richmond, the Second Battle of Bull Run, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville against inferior Union generals; promoted to general in chief of all rebel military forces near the end of the war.

PEMBERTON, JOHN Rebel commander who surrendered Vicksburg, July 1865.
UNION GENERALS:

BURNSIDE, AMBROSE E. Inept commander of the Army of the Potomac, 1862–1863, who lost to Lee in the Battle of Fredericksburg, December 1862.

GRANT, ULYSSES S. The North’s best general; captured Forts Henry and Donelson in Tennessee in 1862 and the great river garrison of Vicksburg in 1863; won the battles around Chattanooga in December of that year; became general in chief of all Union forces in 1864, and led the Army of the Potomac against Lee in a series of ferocious engagements around Richmond, finally pinning Lee down in the siege of Petersburg.

HOOKER, JOSEPH Inept commander of the Army of the Potomac who lost to Lee at Chancellorsville, Virginia, May 1863.

MCCLELLAN, GEORGE B. Commander of the Army of the Potomac, 1861–1862; orchestrated the glacial-paced Peninsula campaign against Richmond; was driven back by Lee in the Seven Days Battles and recalled to Washington; led the Potomac Army against Lee at Antietam and might have won the battle had he not been overly cautious; finally sacked by Lincoln on the grounds that the general had “the slows.”

MEADE, GEORGE GORDON Led the Army of the Potomac in the Battle of Gettysburg, July 1863, and remained titular head of that army during Grant’s great offensive against Lee, 1864–1865.

POPE, JOHN Blustering, incompetent commander of the Union’s Army of Virginia; decisively beaten by Lee and Jackson at Second Bull Run (Second Manassas), August 1863.

SHERMAN, WILLIAM TECUMSEH Grant’s subordinate commander in the West, 1862–1863; became the Union’s top general there when Grant was promoted to supreme command; led the Union’s Western Army on its famous march through Georgia and the Carolinas, 1864–1865.

It began with a fanfare of bugles and patriotic oratory, with both sides promising that it would be over in ninety days. From Maine to Texas, volunteers flocked to recruiting centers and marched off to war as young women tossed flowers in their paths. Youths in uniform posed before exploding cameras and sent daguerreotypes of themselves back to their families and sweethearts. They gathered around glowing campfires and spoke in hyperbole about the excitement of battle and what they would do to the enemy when the shooting started. For the volunteers, for civilians in the North and South alike, it was all a picture-book war, a springtime of pomp and pageantry—of fierce drums and blaring bugles, of strutting drum majors and marching bands, of whipping banners and fluttering flags. It was a time when everybody was swept up in the romance of war, in the thrill and dreams of military glory.

What began as a ninety-day lark for both sides swelled instead into a national holocaust, a tornado of blood and wreckage that left scarcely a single family in North or South unscathed. Before it ended, 2.1 million men had gone to war for the Union, nearly 800,000 for the Confederacy. In Dixie, where most of the fighting took place, almost four-fifths of the white men of military age served the Rebel cause, “a levée en masse,” wrote one historian, “made possible only by the existence of slavery.”

There was nothing romantic about this killer war—a brothers’ war, the worst kind of human conflict; it released a primordial fury still not understood. How can the cost of the war be reckoned? In numbers alone, the human devastation was staggering. Some 110,000 Federals and 94,000 Confederates lost their lives in combat or from mortal battle wounds. The injured often wished for a merciful bullet, for

conditions in Civil War hospitals were ghastly. It was a medically ignorant time; both armies suffered from shortages of doctors and nurses; field hospitals were often pungent barns or chicken coops. In one infirmary a reporter found “the maimed, gashed, and dying” crowded together while a surgeon produced “a little heap of human fingers, feet, legs and arms” wherever he worked. After Gettysburg, Union surgeons consumed five days on amputations—more time than it took to fight the battle. Those who survived combat had to contend with an even deadlier foe: disease. Diarrhea, dysentery, “camp fevers” like malaria and typhoid, and other maladies plagued both armies and claimed more lives than the battles did. On the Union side, diarrhea and dysentery alone killed 44,500 men. In round numbers, some 623,000 American servicemen—365,000 Federals and 258,000 Confederates—perished in the Civil War. The Union by itself lost more men than the United States did in World War II. Total Civil War casualties almost equaled the combined losses of all of America’s other wars.

The fighting in the Civil War was savage beyond computation—a savagery made possible by the most murderous arsenal of destruction Americans had ever assembled. There were the versatile 12-pounder napoleons, the workhorse artillery of both armies, whose canister and grapeshot could obliterate entire
lines of advancing infantry. There were the new rifled cannons, macabre guns with flat trajectories and immense firing power. There were the muzzle-loading Springfield and Enfield rifles, which became the basic infantry weapons for both sides; far more accurate than the smoothbores they replaced, the single-shot rifles had an effective range of four hundred yards and could be loaded and fired three or four times a minute. Add to these the breech-loading repeaters, rudimentary machine guns, and ironclad warships introduced during the conflict, and one understands why experts call it the first modern war in which weapons and machines played a decisive role.

Such weapons turned Civil War battles into human slaughter pens. In one day at Antietam, the bloodiest single day in the annals of American warfare, 2,010 Yankees and 2,700 Rebels were killed and 18,440 combatants were wounded, 3,000 of them mortally. More Americans died that one day than in the War of 1812, the Mexican War, and the Spanish-American War put together. The 12,000 Confederate casualties were double those of U.S. forces on D Day.

Losses in the Civil War grew more appalling with every campaign; 23,000 Federals and 28,000 Confederates mowed down or missing at Gettysburg, 64,000 Federals and 32,000 Confederates killed, wounded, or missing in the fighting from the Wilderness to Petersburg in 1864. When ordered to attack entrenched Rebels at Cold Harbor, Virginia, Union troops pinned strips of paper to their coats that gave their names and addresses, so that their bodies could be identified. One doomed Yankee scribbled in his diary: "June 3. Cold Harbor. I was killed." He and 7,000 other Union men were shot dead or wounded in less than an hour of fighting. That was surely the bloodiest hour of combat in all American history.

Gruesome though they are, casualty figures cannot convey what it was like to be in the Civil War. For that we turn to eyewitness accounts, which include some of the most vivid descriptions of the ravages of war ever recorded. Here a Union veteran recalls the horrors of Shiloh:

The ear-piercing and peculiar Rebel yell of the men in gray and answering cheers of the boys in blue rose and fell with the varying tide of battle and, with the hoarse and scarcely distinguishable orders of the officers, the screaming and bursting of shell, the swishing of canister, the roaring of volley firing, the death screams of the stricken and struggling horses and the cries and groans of the wounded formed an indescribable impression which can never be effaced from memory.

A Confederate officer on the Union bombardment of Fredericksburg:

Ten o'clock came, and the hammers of the church clocks were just sounding the last peaceful stroke of the hour, when suddenly, at the signal of a single cannon shot, more than 150 pieces of artillery, including some of the enemy's most ponderous guns, opened their iron mouths with a terrific roar and hurled a tempest of destruction upon the devoted town. The air shook, and the very earth beneath our feet trembled at this deafening cannonade, the heaviest that had ever yet assailed my ears. . . . The bowing of the solid shot, the bursting of the shells, the crashing of the missiles through the thick walls and the dull sound of falling houses united in a dismal concert of doom. Very soon the site of the unhappy town was indicated, even through the fog, by a column of smoke and dust and the flames of burning buildings. . . . About noon the sun, breaking through the clouds, seemed to mock the smoking ruins it revealed.

A Union lieutenant on the second day at Gettysburg:

All along the crest everything was ready. Gun after gun, along the batteries, in rapid succession leaped where it stood and bellowed its canister upon the enemy. They still advanced. The infantry opened fire, and soon the whole crest, artillery and infantry, was one continuous sheet of fire. . . . All senses for the time were dead but the one of sight. The roar of the discharges and the yells of the enemy all passed unheeded, but the impassioned soul was all eyes
The summer and fall of 1863 resulted in Union victories at Gettysburg, Vicksburg, and Chattanooga. This scene depicts Robert E. Lee’s defeat at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, where Union forces were able to take the tactical advantage of defending a position against an advancing and overextended army. (Courtesy of the Ann S. K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library)

and saw all things that the smoke did not hide. How madly the battery men were driving the double charges of canister into those broad-mouthed Napoleon! How rapidly those long blue-coated lines of infantry delivered their fire down the slope! . . . Men were dropping, dead or wounded, on all sides, by scores and by hundreds. Poor mutilated creatures, some with an arm dangling, some with a leg broken by a bullet, were limping and crawling toward the rear. They made no sound of pain but were as silent as if dumb and mute.

A Union war correspondent on the battlefield the night after Pickett’s charge:

I became possessed by a nameless horror. Once I tumbled over two bodies and found my face close to the swollen, bloody features of the man who lay uppermost, judging from the position of other bodies. A shower of grape and canister must have torn the ranks of a regiment into shreds, for 50 or 60 bodies lay there in a row. I came across the corpse of a drummer-boy, his arms still clasped around his drums, his head shattered by a shell. I realized what a price is paid for victories.

Noncombatants paid, too, as the storm uprooted whole communities. Before, during, and after battles, armies of homeless refugees clogged roads and
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byways. "I never saw a more pitiful procession than they made trudging through the deep snow," a Rebel soldier said of refugees from Fredericksburg.

I saw little children tugging along with their doll babies, holding their feet up carefully above the snow, and women so old and feeble that they could carry nothing and could barely hobble themselves. There were women carrying a baby in one arm and its bottle, clothes and covering in the other. Some had a Bible and a toothbrush in one and, a picked chicken and a bag of flour in the other. . . . Where they were going we could not tell, and I doubt if they could.

Another class of refugees suffered even more. These were the fugitive slaves, hundreds of thousands of whom abandoned Rebel homesteads and set out for the nearest Union army. In the embattled Mississippi Valley, where fugitives swamped Union lines, an Ohio chaplain wrote that "their condition was appalling. There were men, women and children in every stage of disease or decrepitude, often nearly naked, with flesh torn by the terrible experiences of their escapes." As Sherman's army marched through Georgia, some twenty-five thousand slaves followed it at one time or another—whole families trying to keep pace with the soldiers, with children tied to their parents by a rope. An Indiana officer noted that slave babies "tumbled from the backs of mules to which they had been told to cling, and were drowned in the swamps while mothers stood by the roadside crying for their lost children." Though most of the blacks fell away, too sick or exhausted to continue, seven thousand toiled after Sherman clear to the sea.

It was Sherman, of course, who brought total war to the Deep South, contending as he did that modern wars were won by destroying the enemy's resources as well as his morale. "We are not only fighting hostile armies," Sherman asserted, "but a hostile people, and must make old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war." That he did, as his army first burned Atlanta—"the workshop of the Confederacy"—while a regimental band played "John Brown's Body." A witness recalled that Yankee soldiers "took up the words wedded to the music, and, high above the roaring flames, above the clash of falling walls, above the fierce crackling of thousands of small-arm cartridges in the burning buildings, rose the triumphant refrain, 'His truth is marching on!'" Then sixty thousand Union troops cut a swath to Savannah 40 miles wide and 220 miles long, visiting war on civilians on a scale unprecedented in America. "We had a gay old campaign," remarked one soldier. "Destroyed all we could eat, stole their niggers, burned their cotton & gins, spilled their sorghum, burned & twisted their R. Roads and raised Hell generally." Sherman estimated the damage at $100 million. Smoldering Georgia was out of the war, her citizens in shock.

Sherman's army now stormed into South Carolina, tearing up railroads, burning down barns, pulverizing fields of corn and cotton, assassinating cows and chickens, wiping out everything that might sustain dwindling Rebel forces. Civilians fled their homes and evacuated their towns before Sherman's relentless columns. Columbia, the state capital, went up in an inferno of smoke, the conflagration started either by Confederates or Union troops. A Northerner wrote that

most of the citizens of Columbia had sons or relations in the Rebel army. Half of them were dead, and in the blackness of this terrible night their fortunes were all lost. Many wandered about wringing their hands and crying; some sat stolid and speechless in the street, watching everything that they had go to destruction. . . . Most of the people of Columbia would have been willing to die that night, then and there. What had they left to live for? This, too, was war.

By now Union forces were smashing up the Confederacy in East and West alike. In the Shenandoah,
Philip Sheridan burned a broad path of devastation clear to the Rapidan River. In northwest Alabama, thirteen thousand Union horsemen launched the biggest and most destructive cavalry raid of the war; they crushed their Rebel opponents and burned and wrecked their way clear into southern Georgia. Such scorched-earth warfare earned Lincoln and his generals undying hatred in Dixie, but it brought them victory; within five months after Sherman began his march to the sea, the war was over.

The North suffered terrible human losses, but at least her economy was booming from war production. The South was not only defeated; she was annihilated. Half her men of military age were dead or wounded, two-fifths of her livestock wiped out, more than half her farm machinery demolished, her major cities in ruins, her railroads and industry desolated, her coastal and river ports out of commission, her commerce paralyzed, two-thirds of her assessed wealth, including billions of dollars in slaves, destroyed. “Have we not fallen on sad, sad times?” sighed a Georgia woman as she surveyed the misery around her. Perhaps Southerners now knew what Lincoln had meant when he vowed to teach them “the folly of being the beginners of war.” Perhaps they could all—as a young Texas veteran expressed it—“fall down in the dust and weep over our great misfortune, our great calamities.”

Across Dixie the physical damage was everywhere in evidence. Near fire-gutted Columbia, sixty-five horses and mules slain by Sherman’s men rotted for six weeks because there were no shovels or other implements with which to bury them. The wreckage in the Tennessee Valley was typical of the dead Confederacy. Here an English traveler found “plantations of which the ruin is for the present total and complete,” and a trail of war visible “in burnt up gin houses, ruined bridges, mills, and factories.” He added, in reference to the vanquished slave-owning class, that “many who were the richest men . . . have disappeared from the scene.”

Few Southerners were more destitute than the former slaves. Owning little more than the skin on their backs, they streamed by the thousands into Union army bivouacs or the nearest towns and cities. The Freedmen’s Bureau set up relief camps and throughout the summer of 1865 distributed 100,000 daily rations to suffering blacks. But the camps were so crowded that epidemics killed a third of the people in them.

Whites were scarcely better off, as roving bands of thieves pillaged defenseless homes and famine and disease plagued the land. An official of the Freedmen’s Bureau reported as “an everyday sight” women and children “begging for bread from door to door.” The bureau gave out thousands of daily rations to whites too (total rations to whites and blacks came to 22 million between 1865 and 1870). Into “the vacuum of chaos and destruction,” as one writer phrased it, came 200,000 occupation troops, who managed to restore some semblance of order to war-ravaged Dixie.

How much did the war cost both sections? Exact figures are hard to come by, especially for the Confederacy. Surviving records indicate that by October 1863 Confederate war expenditures had exceeded $2 billion. By 1879, according to one estimate, Union expenses growing out of the war were more than $6 billion. But these sums excluded the war debts of the states. Adding up estimates of those debts, Union and Confederate war expenses, total property loss, federal pensions to 1917, and interest to the national debt, one historian put the overall cost of the war at about $20 billion.

But this does not count the billions of dollars it took to rebuild the South. Nor does it include losses from reduced Southern production. The South’s economy was so crippled that her per-capita output did not return to the antebellum level for more than fifty years after Appomattox. The South’s per-capita income, 33 percent lower than the North’s in 1860, was 40 percent lower in 1880 and stayed there until the twentieth century.
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But dollars and percentages cannot gauge the full toll of the Civil War. One must look at the photographs to comprehend what it did to the land and the cities: the rubble of Richmond ... the burned-out Gallego Flour Mills there ... the fields of skull and bone ... the maimed bodies of the wounded ... the face of exhaustion in the North ... the visage of defeat in Dixie.

But not even the photographs capture the emotional and psychological scars left by the conflict. Who knows what damage it did to the American spirit? Who can measure the mental anguish and human suffering that continued long after the guns were silent? Who can say how deep the bitterness and humiliation ran in the South, where millions of unrepentant whites embraced the legend of the lost cause and forged a bastion of white supremacy that lasted a century?

In time, though, some of the bitterness faded with the battle flags, and hard-bitten veterans of both armies, many with arms and legs gone, with eyes shot out and faces disfigured, marched in memorial parades and wept at speeches of remembered valor. And so in the veterans’ reunions the war ended as it had begun—in an aura of glory.

But beyond the parades and reunions were grim reminders of what really happened in that war. There were the cemeteries in both sections, quiet fields where soldiers lay in ranks of white gravestones. There were the battlefield parks, with their polished cannons and statues of singular men frozen in marble. Here, if he listens closely, the visitor today can hear the echoes of the war—the rattle of musketry, the deadly whir of grapeshot, the ring of sabers, the shouts. He can almost see colliding lines of infantry and shell-torn flags in the smoke, can almost smell the acrid odor of gunpowder and the stench of death on the wind. The battlefields recall what madness beset Americans from 1861 to 1865 and what the nation paid, and paid dearly, for its survival. At every battle site there ought to be a shrine to those broken and bloodied men, with the inscription “Lord God of hosts, Be with us yet, Lest we forget, Lest we forget. . . .”

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 Reflect on the early days of the Civil War when most viewed combat with feelings of romance and glory. Now compare these visions with the horrors that followed. Do you think that other American wars have witnessed a similar journey from hope to despair as the grim reality of combat became clearer?

2 Describe why the carnage of the Civil War was, in part, the product of medical treatment, disease, and the new weapons of mass destruction.

3 Civilians, both black and white, suffered in the Civil War, unlike any other military event in American history. As you read about the path of destruction that General Sherman carved through Georgia and South Carolina, were you convinced that this was necessary to bring an earlier end to the war?

4 Oates describes how the southern economy was in ruins after the Civil War. Given the physical destruction of the cities and farms, do you think the victorious North should have helped rebuild the South, much like the United States aided in the recovery of Western Europe following World War II?

5 Oates concludes that “dollars and percentages cannot gauge the full toll of the Civil War.” What impact did the war have on sectional tension between the North and South and racial friction between blacks and whites? Have these problems affected the American spirit in the twenty-first century?

6 Evidenced by the tourists who are drawn to the battlefields, the books sold, and even the popular PBS program by Ken Burns, the Civil War remains one of the most haunting and popular topics in American history. Why do you think it continues to interest and fascinate us?