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**Keith D. Dickson**

Professor Emeritus of military  
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**by Keith D. Dickson**  
Professor Emeritus of Military Studies,  
National Defense University

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## **American Civil War For Dummies® , 2nd Edition**

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# Introduction

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It is interesting that for over 150 years, in times of controversy, public discourse has always turned to the Civil War. Everyone, it seems, is compelled to return to the war to highlight some aspect of an argument. This should not be surprising because the Civil War created the modern United States and defined the people who called themselves Americans. The war was a fundamental watershed in our history — marked by a staggering cost of 620,000 Union and Confederate casualties and 50,000 civilian deaths — defining both who we are as a nation and who we are as Americans. It is therefore natural that we continue to return to the war as a starting point for any discussion today about what America is and what America means.

The Civil War is still very much with us for a number of reasons. America's Civil War has epic dimensions, equal to Homer's *Iliad* or Virgil's *Aeneid*. Like any great epic, it has all the elements of tragedy and pathos; it has immortal heroes who control the destinies of nations. There are great battles on land and sea that stir deep emotions. The experiences of Army of the Potomac, the Army of Northern Virginia, the Army of the Cumberland, and the Army of the Tennessee marching across a vast landscape, each composed of free and self-reliant Americans joined together to strive in a common cause, surpasses Xenophon's account of the Greek army in *Anabasis*.

This was a war that consumed the vital energies of an entire continent. We are still very much aware of the human dimension of the war: The passions, the sorrows, the hopes, joys, and despair are ingrained in the American collective memory and are still relived as we

venture back in time. The political dimension drove every aspect of the war and served as the ultimate arbiter of victory or defeat. It was highly complex, forcing political leaders to make exceptionally difficult decisions and to take extraordinary risks. Like all political enterprises, it had its knaves and fools as well as its more noble proponents. The military dimension included supplying the armies, providing the manpower to fill the ranks, and identifying a strategy that would ensure victory. The economic dimension involved retooling existing industries to support war production, inventing new methods, and applying innovative solutions. The diplomatic dimension was a critical battleground in itself as both the Union and the Confederacy sought to engage the European powers, with the Confederacy seeking recognition and military intervention that would assure independence, while the Union sought to deter and dissuade the temptations of any European power to intervene.

Many books have been written about each of these dimensions, but it is the whole story that continues to attract us and continues to fascinate us. Once you enter into the subject, you are suddenly surrounded with all of its various aspects, all of its emotional power, and all of its often opaque meaning. Trying to sort the story out — to make it meaningful and worthwhile in answering important questions in our own time — is the purpose of this book. By telling the story as completely and succinctly as possible, while keeping everything in perspective, will help you, the reader, to gain a fuller understanding of this critical event in our history and attain a more complete perspective on the larger meaning of past events that continue to shape our destinies as Americans.

# *About This Book*

The average person with more than a passing interest in the war has no place to go to gain a broad, general understanding of this crucial period in our history.

This book is intended to meet the needs of the average reader who wants to be informed without being overwhelmed with details. This book is directed toward several types of readers:

- » **First**, the person who desires accurate, easily accessible information about the major events and issues of the Civil War without encountering intimidating historical narrative or ponderous military interpretation
- » **Second**, the person who may want a refresher on the major events of the war, but who does not want to struggle through the tomes of scholars or arcane minutiae of Civil War fanatics
- » **Third**, those who are looking for a fun, how-to approach to exploring Civil War battlefields to learn more about the events directly by visiting these sites in order to enhance their appreciation and understanding of the events that took place there

The past appears remote and inaccessible to most people. The main message of this book is that history is most emphatically neither remote nor inaccessible! Politics, passions, and conflict (both armed and ideological) have always marked U.S. history. You will find similarities to the current day in the events of the past. In this way, history in the proper context can connect you to the past.

History doesn't have to be boring or intimidating. Everyone who hates history books will say that they are nothing more than dry lists of names and places and dates and jargon. That's true enough, in most cases, if you only look that far. Although this is a different kind of history book, it does follow certain conventions found in most history books. This one, like most, is arranged chronologically. Like most history books, too, it tells a story, which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. What is *different* about this book is that you can start wherever you like. You don't need to slog through the whole thing from beginning to end to understand what is going on. It is organized so that you, the reader, have maximum flexibility to pick and choose what you want to know. You can jump in at any point and still keep up with the story or select a topic to read in a chapter that interests you. Wherever necessary, terms will be defined for you, or referenced elsewhere for a detailed explanation. Obviously, names, dates, and places are here too, but they are located where you can refer to them if you need to or find them easily if you want.

## ***What Not to Read***

Throughout the book you will find text in shaded boxes. These are the nice-to-know, gee whiz!, how about that? bits of information that many Civil War enthusiasts know. These offerings will help make you knowledgeable in conversation and mark you as someone who is not a complete novice.

## ***Foolish Assumptions***

What is assumed about this book is that it is easy to read and will hold your interest enough to generate some

thinking on your own.

## *Icons Used in this Book*

You will find five icons scattered throughout the chapters. These little pictures next to the text get your attention and point you to useful information:



- » **KEY PLAYERS** **Key Players:** Seems obvious, but to help you along, some individuals will be highlighted for their actions or decisions. It will work both ways: Some individuals will be singled out for good reasons, others for not so good reasons.



- » **REMEMBER** **Remember:** A key fact that is worth paying attention to for better understanding or some additional interesting details.



- » **TECHNICAL STUFF** **Technical Stuff:** These are military terms you may not be familiar with.



- » **TIP** **Tip:** This relates to battlefield visits and points out a good idea or the best way to do something to make your visit more enjoyable and useful.



TURNING  
POINT

**Turning Point:** A turning point is a particularly important action that creates significant changes in the outcome of an event. Watch how the cumulative effects of these turning points shape the outcome of the Civil War.

## ***Beyond the Book***

You will have free access to the Cheat Sheet by going to the website [Dummies.com](http://Dummies.com) and typing in “American Civil War Cheat Sheet” in the search box. It will have loads of facts and general information to help you prepare for travel to a battlefield or, because everyone has an opinion or point of view about the Civil War, it will give you a quick checklist to engage in a discussion about various aspects of the war.

## ***Where to Go from Here***

The book itself covers a span of about 15 years, from 1850 to 1865. That time span may seem short, especially for a history book, but these 15 years were as important as any in American history. To help you understand *why*, the book is organized into seven parts, each dealing with a major theme of the war. The chapters within the parts are organized to take you through the major events of the Civil War, highlighting important facts and points of interest. Each chapter will acquaint you with words and ideas that are important to the entire story. At the end of each section, you’ll find a summary of major points (just to make sure you didn’t miss anything important, or if

you skipped through a few chapters) to help you along.  
There is so much to learn — enjoy the journey!

## **Part 1**

# **The War and Its Causes**

## **IN THIS PART ...**

Get a handle on the conditions that were shaping the United States and causing trouble.

Figure out what a civil war is.

War! War! War! So much goes into starting one.

# Chapter 1

## How Did the War Happen?

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### IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Taking a look at the big picture
  - » Defining a “civil war”
  - » Understanding the distinction between North and South
  - » Exploring the issues
- 

Since the founding of the United States, different sections of the country had interests and priorities that competed with the interests and priorities of other sections. These conflicts had always been resolved through politics (usually some form of congressional dealmaking).

However, beginning in the 1850s, the political process for resolving these disputes became less and less effective. The differences between sections of the country were so great at that time that the survival of the union of states was in danger. Peace depended upon compromise and conciliation between congressional leaders representing each section. This chapter examines the sectional differences between the North and South that led to such a dangerous situation and provides some background to the controversies that led to the Civil War.

# *The Big Picture: War and Politics*

Wars have many causes. No one should ever forget that wars are fought for political reasons and objectives. Essentially, people or nations go to war to protect a vital interest, to defend territory from an aggressor, or to achieve a moral purpose (such as defending the innocent and punishing an evil). The Civil War included all of these rationales. Each side used all three justifications for fighting the other during the four years of war. And, interestingly enough, each side had a strong, valid, substantial reason for doing so.

## *What's a civil war?*



TECHNICAL  
STUFF

You hear the word *civil* in such terms as *civil rights*, *civilian*, and *civil liberty*. All are related to the concept of a common citizen, a member of society, and a state. So, a *civil war* is a war between citizens representing different groups or sections of the same country. Civil wars are unique in the history of war and usually are quite difficult to start. People have to be pretty angry and threatened to take this kind of drastic step. But when issues of survival are at stake between the opposing groups, violence can escalate quickly. After it does start, though, a civil war is quite bloody, often extreme, and very hard to end.

## *The setting: 1850-1860*

To understand the causes of the Civil War, you must be aware of some important events in American history —