Life in the Confederate states

By 1864, the enthusiasm with which most white Southerners had welcomed the war was long gone. Life in the South had become hard for many, especially for those who sat directly in the path of Union armies. In November and December 1864, for example, Sherman's forces marched through Georgia, inflicting death and destruction on both civilian and military targets. On 6 December 1864, the city of Milledgeville’s Confederate Union wrote: ‘If an army of Devils, just let loose from the bottomless pit, were to invade the country, they could not be much worse that Sherman’s army.’ Yet even for those communities not directly involved in the fighting, the Civil War affected every aspect of life in the South.

Economic hardship

The people of the South soon experienced economic hardship. The naval blockade by the North had a devastating effect, as the South’s cash crop of raw cotton could not be exported to Britain. Basic foodstuffs such as salt, essential as a preservative, were soon in short supply. By December 1861, a few months into the war, the price of salt in one city in Georgia had risen from 50 cents per sack to $10.

Not everyone in the South suffered from inflation and food shortages straight away. One diary entry for a Christmas Day of 1863 spent in Richmond read: ‘We had for dinner oyster soup besides roast mutton, ham, boned turkey, wild partridge, plum pudding, sauterne, burgundy, sherry and Madeira. There is life in the old land yet!’ The introduction of a 10% tax on all farm products in 1863 did not seem to greatly affect the lifestyles of the well-to-do. Conversely, poor farmers struggled as they found themselves being forced to hand over 10% of their produce.

However, by the end of the war even the rich Southerners were negatively affected. The diary entry of one wealthy Southerner, writing on 23 April 1865, gives an example of this. The family concerned lost its 1000 slaves.

My silver wedding day and I am sure the unhappiest day of my life. One year ago we left Richmond. The Confederacy has double-quicked downhill since then. Now we have burned towns, deserted plantations, deserted villages ... poverty with no future and no hope.

Mary Boykin Chesnut, A Diary from Dixie, 23 April 1865.
Social divisions

At the start of the war, most white Southerners supported the move to independence from the USA. The plantation owners were probably keenest to break away in order to maintain the slavery on which their wealth was based. Most whites were not plantation owners, however, even if they sometimes had one or two slaves. Many whites had no slaves, and farmed alone or in small rural communities. They began to resent the ability of the better-off to escape the deprivations of war.

Conscription caused particular resentment amongst the poorer majority of people, because of the system of substitution that existed until late 1863 (see page 45). It is estimated that at least 50,000 wealthy white Southerners avoided the draft. Class resentments increased as the fighting went on, particularly because the war lasted much longer than anyone expected.

Political divisions

Not all white Southerners supported the Confederacy. Many left the South and joined the Northern army. One estimate puts the figure at 100,000 or more. Every Southern state except South Carolina raised at least one unit in the US Northern army. Many Union supporters remained in the South, their presence dividing and weakening the CSA's war effort.

The slaves

The presence of some 3 million slaves in a population totalling 9 million caused major problems in the South. At the start of the war, the whites refused to accept slaves into their army. While fearful of a slave rebellion, the whites expected their slaves to replace white men away at war on the plantations and farms. There was no rebellion, but historians talk of slaves undertaking what they call a general strike, which did much to weaken the Confederacy.

The slaves also helped the Northern armies succeed. Once Union armies entered Southern states, the slaves became more open in their support for the enemy. They worked as scouts and informers, giving the North a significant advantage as it advanced deep into enemy territory. Around 180,000 African-American soldiers served in the Northern army, making up 10% of the total troops. Around half of these soldiers came from the South. Some slaves (an estimated 65,000) stayed and joined the Southern army.

Democratic politics: North and South

The war between North and South was a new type of conflict. It was a civil war fought within a democratic state. Elections were still held by both sides, and party politics continued in the North throughout the fighting. In the North, the Democrats still contested elections against the governing Republicans. In the 1862 midterm elections, with the war not going well for the North, the Democrats gained many seats in the House of Representatives. The Republicans kept control only because they allied with a smaller party
composed mainly of War Democrats. This was one reason for the continual fighting on the eastern front in the spring of 1864. Lee hoped that the heavy casualties inflicted on the North would harm Lincoln's chances of being re-elected as president.

Lincoln's re-election was by no means certain in 1864. The war was not going well for the North, and its fortunes only began to change with the fall of Atlanta on 3 September, just two months before the election. In July 1864, CSA troops were within 8 km (5 miles) of Washington, DC, catching sight of the White House in the distance. There were groups calling for peace negotiations: the Peace Democrats and a splinter group of Republicans. Relations between Lincoln and the Republican Congress were strained, especially when the president vetoed a bill that would have imposed harsher terms on the CSA at the end of the war.

In the 1864 election, Lincoln stood as the candidate for the National Union Party, a temporary name taken on by the Republicans in order to attract War Democrats who would not vote for the Republican Party. Lincoln won the Electoral College vote by 212 to 21, a clear victory. Just as significant for the future was the Republican triumph in the congressional elections, where 136 of the 193 congressmen were now Republicans. These representatives would play a great part in addressing the problems of transition to peace. Re-elected and successfully inaugurated, Lincoln saw in the end of the war. Lee, with his capital taken and his army surrounded, surrendered to General Grant at Appomattox Court House in April 1865. Tragically, Lincoln had little time to enjoy his victory and plan for post-war peace, as he was assassinated within days.

**Questions**

1. What effects did the Civil War have on civil liberties?

2. 'Wars invariably bring about major social and political change.' How far does an analysis of the American Civil War support this view?