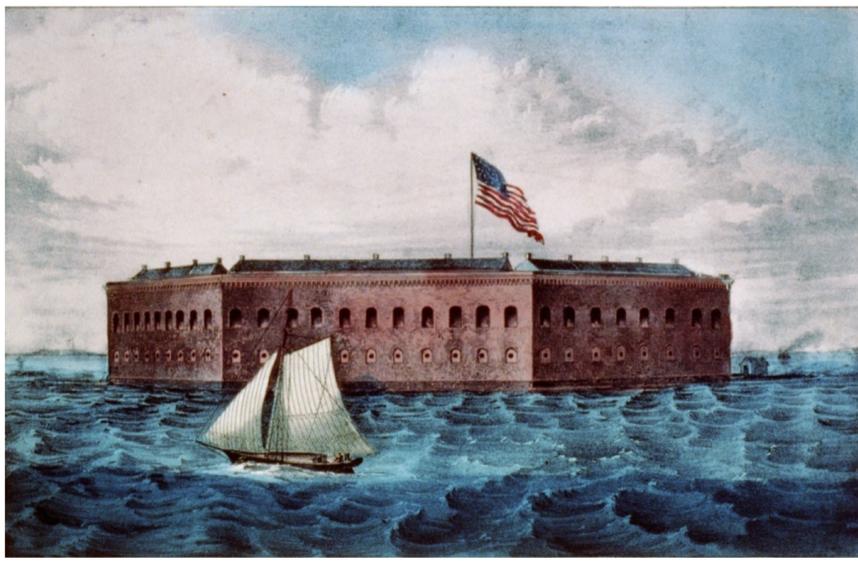




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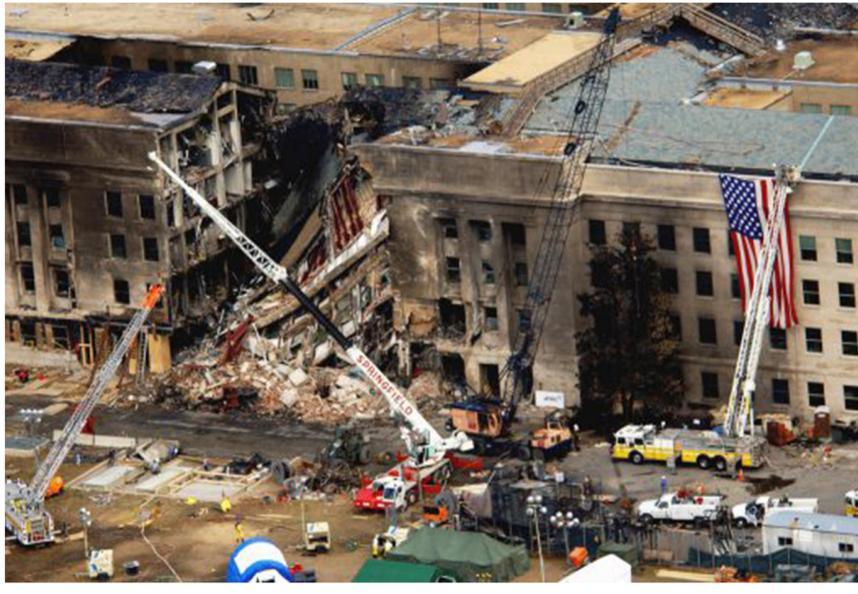
Fort Sumter, by Currier & Ives

Our Greatest Trial: The American Civil War

By Eric Jacobson – December 20, 2019

On April 12, 1861, our great national calamity began with the firing on Fort Sumter outside Charleston, South Carolina. Four and a half years later, after countless battles and the emergence of characters made forever historic, over 620,000 American soldiers were dead. Additionally, the physical and emotional wreckage that had been inflicted on the surviving populace could never be measured. In the spring of 1865, the country began its long national healing, a process that took much time and bridged generations.

We must never forget the importance of what happened at places like Manassas, Vicksburg, Atlanta, Gettysburg, Wilson's Creek, and, of course, Franklin. We can never forget the impact made by the likes of Lee, Sherman, Forrest, Grant, Lincoln, and Davis. We read again and again the words of men such as Watkins and Bierce. We live with the echoes of the Civil War in our daily lives, on the streets we drive in old towns and cities, with the statues and monuments we pass, and in the cemeteries that dot the American landscape. There are the alleged heroes and villains, there are the stories of virtue and wrong, and there are discussions about the proper role of government, from local to state to federal. There is the issue of race and of the ever changing face of America. What does it all mean?



Aerial view of Pentagon devastation on Sept. 11, 2001 | Wikipedia

On December 10, 2001, I was in Washington, D. C., to attend the funeral of my great uncle who had been killed at the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. I accompanied my grandmother, who had lost her baby brother. He had served in Korea and Vietnam and then spent years fighting for benefits for veterans. The night before the service, I walked from my hotel down to the White House. What a surreal scene. From there, I walked to the Lincoln Memorial. It was late, so I was the only one present. As I walked up the steps, I could not help but be struck by the weight of history. A few days later I walked the fields at Gettysburg and had much the same experience as I traversed some of the same ground Confederate soldiers had strode across as they approached the flaming Federal position near what is today known as the Angle. After I returned home, I stood atop Winstead Hill in Franklin and looked down over that great battlefield, made hallowed by the sacrifices of men battling for what they believed to be right. What did it all mean?

The United States of America was forged into the greatest country the world has ever known on the battlefields of the American Civil War. Our path of destiny was forever changed by the events of 1861–1865. We became one true nation as a result. We ceased being an idea and became a reality. Our great national suffering nearly ripped us apart, but in the end it allowed us to flourish and fulfill the promises that only a truly free and thriving democratic republic can offer. Is the great American experience perfect? No, nothing ever is. But there is a reason why people continue to flood to our country. America is unique, and the Civil War, which ultimately preserved the Union, set us on a path to greatness.



Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. | LOC



The Angle, Gettysburg | LOC



Winstead Hill, Franklin | Wikipedia

Here we are 150-plus years after American innocence was shattered, only to be rebuilt and revitalized. But it took time. As Americans grappled with the internal changes wrought by the war, we industrialized our nation, invented electricity, automobiles, airplanes, telephones, defeated Nazism, fought Communism every step of the way, built an interstate highway system, walked on the Moon, introduced the world to the Internet, and yes, we finally got Osama bin Laden. We also finally began to deal with the issues of race, something that took generations to fully confront and brought with it some of the lingering pain from the Civil War.

People ask me all the time why the Civil War is important. Consider this. We survived destroying ourselves and then weathered one threat after another, from economic meltdowns to foreign sneak attacks to domestic rumblings. It is a virtual certainty we would have been unable to handle these pressures had the country been forever fragmented during the Civil War and perhaps further splintered in the years afterward. A political entity once torn, can much more easily be torn again.

A century and a half ago, we stood on the precipice. We endured, and the soldiers from both sides helped to rebuild America. Their legacy is alive in all of us today, even if America became your home long after the guns of the Civil War were silent.



Gettysburg reunion, 1912 | LOC



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