Curtis M. Kularski
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Sociological Impact of the Civil War

The Civil War is one of the most defining events of American history. The war had a lasting effect on the culture of the country as well as the way the country is perceived. The events of war had a huge impact politically, but what was the impact on the common person? All people in the country were affected in some way or another by the war. The lives of families in both the north and south were disrupted.

On December 20, 1860 the Union began to break, as South Carolina seceded from the Union. As early as December 27 there was a fear of what was to come among the citizens of the United States. The tension between South Carolina and the Union was obvious[1]. On April 12, 1861 the suspicions and fears were confirmed as the problems with the south turned violent. The Confederate attack on Fort Sumpter was the event that would begin changing the lives of citizens of both the United States and Confederate States of America.

Each group of people was affected differently by the war. Many women, on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line were left at home to take care of their children themselves. Many of these women would find themselves as widows by the end of the war[11]. The increased demand of resources in the war left many women wanting luxuries they had access to before the war. Southern women accustomed to dressing in fine dresses made of silk or satin found themselves forced to make their own cloth if they desired new clothing. Items that had come into fashion such as parisals and capes were no longer available to them. Even women of incredible wealth would find that no amount of money they could give to a store would get them some of the items they wanted, they simply were not possible to obtain due to Union blockades[4]. Women of the

time were tasked with taking care of the children and preparing meals. These tasks became increasingly difficult as items not grown on the local farms were nearly impossible to obtain. Substitutions of parched okra or potatoes were often used in place of coffees, and teas were made from native herbs and not imported leaves as the women had become accustomed. Sugar was also scarce in the south, as a substitute some southern women used sorghum, which usually was not well received by children. A more popular substitute was a corn syrup[2]. The effect of this can still be seen today in some southern recipes[6].

Soliders on both sides had the worst conditions of the war. Many men were killed during the war and each battle brought a new potential for death[11]. Conditions of the soldiers were less than sanitary with infections and diseases killing soldiers that bullets and cannon fire did not. The psychological impact of the war for the soldiers was a lot of stress with very little that could be done to relieve it. Confederate Sergent Edwin H. Fay is said to have spent all of his free time working and keeping busy with anything he could, to prevent himself from having enough time to experience stress. For some soldiers, letters from home were an escape from the war and return home in their minds for a few moments. During the war, letters could take three to four weeks to reach their destinations. Some soldiers developed alcohol or other drug habits to sooth the emotional wounds of war[12]. These habits often were an unwelcome surprise to the families waiting for their solider to return[11]. Death changed drastically during the Civil War. Citizens of the United States had been accustomed to being prepared for death. This preparation often included being surrounded by family members and having all arrangements for the family made. During the Civil War men died quickly, without warning when taken down by the enemy. Soldiers tried to adapt by keeping photographs and letters from their family near when they died. For some deaths, families would only know that the soldier had died when they no longer

received letters from them. Soldiers in the Civil War were usually more prepared to die themselves than to kill others, as a result of their religious backgrounds[13].

Farmers and plantation owners had varying experiences during the war. In the south, there was a fear of what would happen if Union troops entered a southern plantation. There were several accounts of Union soldiers burning crops, killing livestock and taking food from plantations. Some plantation owners were hung on the fences of their own plantations[3].

The economic situation in the south made the war difficult and the reconstruction almost intolerable. Farmers who had grown accustomed to having the aid of slaves and a moderate economy had neither luxury during the reconstruction. Many farmers had to rely on sharecropping to make their farms profitable during that time. Sharecropping gave land owners the labor they needed, but also provided work for freedmen[8].

The one group many would expect would only have been affected positively by the war, the slaves, had their own problems thrown upon them by the war. Becoming freedmen relieved many of their servitude to their white masters, but others were left not knowing how to react to the news of being free. Some slaves refused to leave their masters, and others were released into society ignorant of how they should conduct themselves[4]. For slaves who adapted to freedom well, or had a disliking for their masters (the ones who revolted), there was a new life waiting for them if they could escape to the north. Slaves were welcomed into the Union army, and given nearly fair treatment while in service to the army. Many white officers spoke of the integrity and honor of their Negro soldiers[7]. At the beginning of the Civil War, southern slaves saw no end in sight for their servitude, but by the middle of the war they were hearing of a promise of freedom, and finally at the conclusion of the war they were freed[9].

The disunity of the nation left somewhat an identity crisis for some Americans. Not everyone

was in support of the formation of a separate nation, including many foreign governments, some of which refused to acknowledge either nation until the dispute was settled. Illusions of an indestructible union brought shame to many as the world watched the United States tear itself apart of the sake of states' rights (south) and ironically, the solidarity of union (north)[9]. At the end of the war, it was the south who had the disgrace of being a defeated people, appearing much like the survivors of any war; the south had very little money, almost no remaining patriotism for Confederacy, and a large amount of rebuilding to complete. At the conclusion of the war, the country was more split than when the war began, and the reconstruction did little to help[10]. With time the union was mended and the United States was resolved to a whole nation, perhaps more whole than before the war, but some things had forever been changed. The end of slavery brought motivation for more industrialization, and a move away from agricultural enterprises in the south. The Antebellum south was rich with culture and a highly class oriented social system. After the war the south was in ruins and everything had to be rebuilt, from physical structures to the fashion sense of the women[9].

The country was divided during the war. There were struggles on both sides that impacted citizens at the sociological and psychological level. Only a war so close to home could have such a dramatic impact on the nation.

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