



Defining Moments: The Civil War

By George Grant, Michael Swift

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The Civil War—like all civil wars—was divisive, costly, and savage. More Americans died in this war than in World War I and World War II combined. Brother was pitted against brother and neighbor against neighbor. There are no civilians in a civil war and both sides' scorched earth policies meant that there were significant noncombatant casualties.

The Civil War was a defining moment in the history of the United States. It showed that the fragile union of colonies on the eastern seaboard of America, a disparate people in a rugged land, would not be allowed to break up, that it was indivisible and would remain a nation. Indeed, within a century of the Civil War, the United States would be the strongest nation on earth. The war also showed the world that the anathema of slavery would not be allowed to continue, that America was free and would be a champion of freedom. But although these high-minded principles played their part in the justification for war, they were not the main reason for it. The underlying causes of the war were the economic and societal differences between the industrial North, crowded with immigrants, pushing the westward boundaries of the country, and the Southern states, whose static society was based on plantations run by slave labor. The Civil War pitted two ways of life against each other: both sides were fighting for survival, knowing that the winner would take all.

Defining Moments: The Civil War looks at the key events of the war, explaining them with contemporary material—photographs, maps, documents, and illustrations.

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Defining Moments: The Civil War By George Grant, Michael Swift Bibliography

- Rank: #2937459 in eBooks
- Published on: 2011-05-31
- Released on: 2011-05-31
- Format: Kindle eBook

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