Standard 8-4.5: Civil War Military Strategies

The outbreak of the Civil War was the conclusion to the decades-long series of regional issues that threatened American unity and South Carolina’s identity as one of the United States. To understand how South Carolina came to be at the center of this conflict, you will be able to compare the military strategies of the North and the South during the Civil war and the fulfillment of these strategies in South Carolina and in the South as a whole, including the attack of Fort Sumter, the Union blockade of Charleston and other ports, the early capture of Port Royal, and the development of the Hunley submarine; the exploits of Robert Smalls; and General William T. Sherman’s march through the state.

The four-part military strategy of the North was to (1) **blockade** Southern ports to cut off supplies from Europe, (2) to break the Confederacy in two at the Mississippi River, (3) to destroy the transportation and communication systems of the Confederacy thus crippling morale and (4) to attack the Confederate capital at **Richmond**. The Southern strategy was to fight a defensive war, using supplies from Europe gained from the sale of cotton, until Northern forces tired of the war. This was also called “King Cotton Diplomacy.”

Though most of the fighting of the Civil War took place in northern Virginia and along the Mississippi River, there were many important events that took place in South Carolina. The first shots of the war were fired by the Confederacy on **Fort Sumter**, after they prevented the Union from resupplying the fort. The first major setback for the Confederate Army was the capture of areas surrounding **Port Royal Sound** along the coast near **Hilton Head** by Union troops. These areas remained under Union control throughout the Civil War. The Union used Port Royal as a base to attack Charleston.
The Union strategy was to prevent ships from importing (bringing goods in) or exporting (bringing goods out) from South Carolina ports. The Confederacy initially withheld its chief cash crop from the European markets to increase the demand for it and thus gain allies willing to assist in the war effort in order to obtain their product. This King Cotton Diplomacy strategy ultimately failed because as the blockade became more effective, Europe found new cotton suppliers in Egypt. The purpose of the war changed with the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, which declared slaves in areas controlled by the South as free. This created a boost in Northern morale.

Despite the efforts of blockade runners and the use of a new technology, the submarine Hunley, South Carolina was devastated by the blockade that kept the Confederate Army from receiving supplies. Union forces laid siege to, or surrounded, Charleston, attacking from Port Royal. During this campaign, the 54th Massachusetts (a unit of African American soldiers) led the Union charge on Fort Wagner at the mouth of Charleston Harbor.

Robert Smalls, a twenty-three year old slave who was the pilot of a Confederate ship, his wife and children escaped to a Union ship engaged in the blockade. While the white crew was on shore, Smalls navigated the harbor and gave the appropriate signals to all of the Confederate forts he passed. He then reached the Union blockade line where he surrendered the ship. Smalls provided the Union with valuable information about the fortifications around Charleston. After the Civil War, Smalls served as an officer in the South Carolina militia and as a state legislator. Smalls also helped draft a new constitution of South Carolina and served five terms as a Congressman from the state.

Union General William Sherman marched into South Carolina, after his capture of Atlanta, as part of his march-to-the-sea campaign. Sherman’s goal was to make total war, bringing the war home to civilians to convince the South to surrender. This had a direct impact on the civilians in South Carolina, destroying homes, plantations, railroads and towns along the way. The current state house, at the time
still under construction, was shelled with cannon balls. Although there is some controversy over who started the fire, the capital city of Columbia burned. Sherman wanted to convince South Carolina to surrender since it was the first state to secede from the Union.

Section Review

1) What was the North’s military strategy?

2) What was the South’s military strategy?

3) Where were the first shots of the Civil War fired?

4) Why is the battle of Port Royal a significant Confederate loss?

5) What happened to Robert Smalls after the Civil War ended?

6) What was the March to the Sea campaign?

7) Define “total war.”

8) Why did Sherman want to attack Columbia, South Carolina?