Early in the war, President Lincoln called for an attack on western Virginia. He believed that an attack at Manassas, so close to Richmond, would discourage secessionists and severely hurt the Confederate ability to fight.

In July 1861, Union General Irwin McDowell led 35,000 troops out of Washington, DC. Irwin divided his troops into two parts: 15,000 were sent to fight 11,000 Confederate troops at Harper’s Ferry, leaving 20,000 Union troops to attack 20,000 Confederate troops at Manassas. This would have been a good plan if McDowell’s troops were experienced, but they weren’t.

The Confederate commander at Manassas was P.T. Beauregard, who had gained fame from his leadership at Fort Sumter. Beauregard had two important advantages at Manassas. First, his spies in Washington learned that McDowell was preparing to attack. Second, McDowell’s inexperienced troops moved slowly in their attack, giving Beauregard significant time to prepare.

Early in the fight, Union troops pushed the South back. These initial victories were cheered on by hundreds of spectators who had travelled to Manassas from Washington. These spectators included reporters and members of the government, as well as average citizens.

As the battle wore on, however, the Confederacy turned the tide. Later the Confederate General Thomas J. Jackson became known as “Stonewall Jackson,” because his men believed he stood “like a stone wall” at the head of his troops in the face of Union attack.

During a critical moment in the fighting, two Union artillery batteries suddenly stopped firing. The batteries mistakenly believed that a regiment dressed in blue uniforms was a Union reinforcement regiment. Stonewall Jackson’s Virginians took advantage of this confusion and ordered a counterattack. This counterattack was the
Bull Run / Manassas (July, 1861)

first time Union troops reported hearing an eerie scream coming from the Confederate line. This scream later became known as the "rebel yell."

Union troops began to retreat and as panic set in, fled back across the Bull Run River towards Washington. Mysteriously, the Confederate troops did not follow and allowed many to fight another day.

The Battle of Bull Run, as the North called it, or Manassas, as the South called it,* was a major victory for the Confederacy, as it kept the Union from going after Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy, for close to a year. It was also a psychological victory for the South, as it inspired their confidence and made clear to the Union that victory over the Confederacy would neither be quick or easy.

*The Union often named their battles after nearby rivers. The Confederacy often named their battles after nearby towns or major roads.
Following another loss at Bull Run in August of 1862, Union forces were on the run, not far from the capital of Washington, DC. The Confederate President Jefferson Davis, and Military General, Robert E. Lee, saw an opportunity to continue their victories by marching to Maryland. Lee crossed the Potomac River with 55,000 men and hoped that the people of Maryland would rise up in support of the Confederate cause. Unfortunately for Lee, there was no popular uprising (revolt.) He next divided up his troops in order to capture a Union military post.

On September 13 in a field near Frederick, Maryland, two Union troops found a copy of Lee’s orders to divide his troops into four parts wrapped around three cigars. Union General McClellan did not move quickly to act upon this advantage, however. He waited almost eighteen hours to begin to move his troops to attack Lee. Lee used this time to reorganize, having learned from a Maryland citizen about the Union’s discovery of his orders.

On September 17, the two forces finally met at Antietam Creek, near Sharpsburg. By the time they fought, the armies were relatively well-matched. The southerners were on the defense and the Union attacked. The fighting was horrible; by the end of the day, 6,000 troops had died, and 17,000 more were wounded. Lee fled with only 30,000 troops, and the Union army did not go after him, probably because of the devastation [destruction] they had seen the day before. Union General McClellan had won a strategic victory at Antietam, but had yet again wasted an opportunity to destroy the Confederate forces once and for all.
In May 1863, the Union suffered an important loss at Chancellorsville. The Confederacy, under the leadership of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, defeated a larger Union force in a bloody and horrific battle. The Confederacy lost 13,000 men at Chancellorsville, including Stonewall Jackson, and the Union lost 11,000. The South’s win at Chancellorsville likely led to overconfidence among the Confederates – they believed that they couldn’t lose.

Confederate General Robert E. Lee then directed his troops north, in order to take advantage of the momentum they’d built from Chancellorsville. He brought together 75,000 men who were well-fed and had high morale. Lee planned to follow Grant’s practice of living off the land and demoralize the Union by defeat in their own territory. At the same time, President Lincoln directed his latest General, George Gordon Meade, to find and destroy Lee’s army.

As the Confederate troops marched north, a division [a group of 17,000 to 21,000 soldiers commanded by General A.P. Hill heard that there was a supply of shoes in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. When they arrived, they did find shoes, as well as two Union brigades [a group of 2,500 to 4,000 soldiers] under the leadership of John Buford. Buford quickly sent for reinforcements [more troops], as he had fewer men and weapons than the Confederate division. For two hours, Buford’s troops held off the larger southern force, until they were reinforced by men from John Reynolds’ tough brigade. By the afternoon of July 1, there were 24,000 Confederate soldiers fighting 20,000 Union troops. Reinforcements continued to arrive from both the Northern and Southern armies.

The battle was at first a stalemate [tie], since the Confederacy had
more men, but the Union had the better position – the high ground from which they could defend and not have to attack. Lee’s trusted subordinate, General Longstreet, argued that the higher ground advantage was simply too much for the Confederate troops to overcome, but Lee continued on and even put Longstreet in charge of attacking Cemetery Ridge. Although they suffered horrendous [terrible] losses, the Union troops continued to use the high ground, pushing back Confederate attacks at the two Round Top hills. Of particular note was the courage of the 20th Maine regiment, commanded by a former professor at Bowdoin College, Joshua Chamberlain. After one-third of his troops were killed, Chamberlain found himself without any ammunition. Instead of surrendering, Chamberlain ordered his troops to fix bayonets and charge against the advancing Confederate troops, who were overwhelmed by Chamberlain and his men, maintaining Union control of Little Round Top.

On July 3rd, 15,000 Confederate troops launched a massive attack across open ground toward the Union defenses. It was a courageous and ultimately doomed effort, as the Union’s territorial advantage [holding the high ground] made the southerners easy targets. Almost half of the southern force was killed in this advance and retreat.

Lee took the loss hard, blaming himself and offering his resignation to the Confederate President Jefferson Davis (Davis refused to accept it). George Meade continued the Union tradition of not taking advantage of southern retreat. What was left of the Confederate forces retreated south without chase from Union troops.

More than 23,000 Union troops died at Gettysburg. The South lost 28,000 men, more than a third of Lee’s army. In addition, the South lost the confidence they had gained at Chancellorsville. Gettysburg, along with Vicksburg, is often seen as the turning point of the war – the beginning of the end for the South.
In the late fall and early winter of 1862, Union General U.S. Grant unsuccessfully campaigned [fought battles] for control of Mississippi, and, in particular, for the capture of Vicksburg, Mississippi. Grant’s efforts were hampered [made more difficult] by Confederate leader Nathan Bedford Forrest, whose cavalry first raided, and then escaped from, Union troops multiple times. In late December, Grant called off his campaign and began to retreat to Tennessee. On his way back, his troops, who did not have access to Union supply lines, were forced to “live off the land,” securing food and supplies however they could from the local countryside during their retreat.

These losses did not sit well with Grant [he didn’t like to lose], so in the spring of 1863, he returned to Mississippi and launched a campaign that would cement [build] his reputation as a feared military leader. First, he marched his men along the Mississippi to a point below Vicksburg. Union gunboats then joined in the plan, sailing down the river in front of the fortified city. On April 30th, his troops crossed the river, near the entrance to the city. Instead of heading north into Vicksburg, Grant then directed his troops east to Jackson, Mississippi, which fell on May 14. Next, Grant and General Sherman took out smaller confederate forces at Champion’s Hill and Black River, leaving Vicksburg the remaining target.
Vicksburg (July 4, 1863)

For the next eighteen days, Grant's troops marched 180 miles, winning five battles and destroying the troops guarding Vicksburg. He then launched a major attack on the city itself, which was pushed back. Finally, Grant ordered a siege of the city – preventing anyone from going in or out and continually launching artillery into the city itself. The people of Vicksburg suffered terribly for six weeks, hoping to hold out for Confederate reinforcements that never came. People were starving, dying of disease and injury. On Independence Day, July 4, 1863, Vicksburg surrendered.

The battle was a major victory for the Union, demonstrated the North's ability to fight without access to supplies, and meant that Mississippi River was now in Union hands.