The United States in 1860 was a nation deeply divided. The Northern states had developed a thriving industrial economy powered by factories, railroads, and wage labor. Cities like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia buzzed with commerce and manufacturing. Immigrants flooded northern ports seeking factory jobs, swelling the population and creating a diverse, growing workforce.

The Southern states followed a different path. Their economy depended almost entirely on agriculture, particularly cotton, tobacco, and rice grown on vast plantations. This plantation system relied on the forced labor of enslaved African Americans, and Southern leaders fiercely defended both their way of life and the institution of slavery.

When Abraham Lincoln, a Republican who opposed the spread of slavery, won the presidential election of 1860, Southern states began to leave the Union. South Carolina was the first to secede in December 1860, followed quickly by six more states. Together they formed the Confederate States of America, with Jefferson Davis as their president.

Despite its agricultural wealth, the Confederacy faced serious challenges. The South had fewer miles of railroad, fewer factories, and a smaller population than the North. The Union had approximately 22 million people compared to about 9 million in the Confederate states – and nearly 4 million of those Southerners were enslaved people who had no reason to support the Confederate cause.

Yet the South had real advantages too. Confederate soldiers were fighting on home territory, defending their farms and families. Many of the best military officers in the United States Army resigned their commissions to fight for the South. General Robert E. Lee, widely regarded as the finest soldier in the army, chose Virginia over the Union. The South hoped that their military leadership, combined with European support, would win the war quickly.

As spring turned to summer in 1861, both sides mobilized for a conflict they expected to last only a few months. Few could imagine that the war would drag on for four terrible years, consuming over 600,000 lives

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