Georgia Studies

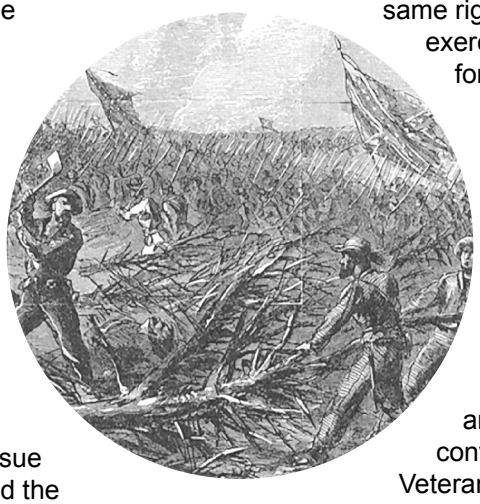
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Printable 13-3: Naming The War of 1861-1865

The war commonly known as the "Civil War" is the only war in American history whose proper name has led to substantial debate. Was it a "Civil War"? A "Rebellion"? A "Second American Revolution"? Or, as some southerners have argued, was it a "War Between the States"? In 1951, noted historian E. Merton Coulter summarized the history of this debate in a *Georgia Historical Quarterly* article titled "A Name for the American War of 1861–1865."

According to Coulter, prior to the outbreak of hostilities, several prominent southerners talked of an approaching "civil war." For example, in May 1860, after the breakup of the Democratic convention, Alexander H. Stephens observed that "we are on the verge of a civil war." In an April 1861 Confederate cabinet meeting at Fort Sumter, Robert Toombs commented, "The firing on that fort will inaugurate a civil war greater than any the world has yet seen. . . ." The April 17, 1861, issue of Richmond's *Daily Dispatch* carried the headline, "Civil War," over its report on the firing on Fort Sumter.



Once the war was under way, the phrase was used less and less in the South, especially since the Confederacy wanted international recognition as an independent and sovereign nation, a status somewhat compromised by reference to a civil war, which would suggest an internal uprising.

Many southerners liked to use the term "Revolution," comparing this fight for independence with that of the American Revolution almost a century earlier. Several writers, in fact, called it the "Second American Revolution."

Other names popular in the South were "War for Southern Independence" and "War for Confederate Independence" and, to a lesser degree, "War of Secession" and "War for Separation." However, as a matter of everyday conversation, most people simply called it "the war."

In the North, the war was commonly called the "Civil War," the "Rebellion," the "Insurrection," and the "War of Secession." An 1862 decision of the U.S. Supreme Court noted, "The present civil war between the United States and the so-called Confederate States, has such character and magnitude as to give the United States the same rights and powers which they might exercise in the case of a national or foreign war."

In the decades after the war, a variety of terms were used when referring to the war. Although some former Confederates had liked the term "War of the Rebellion"—after all, they were called "Rebels" and "Rebs"—many southerners felt the name was inaccurate and insulting. In 1898, the annual convention of the United Confederate Veterans, meeting in Atlanta, passed a resolution "that publishers hereafter use the term 'civil war between the States.'" But one veteran objected to the use of "civil war," since he felt that term suggested that the war had not been fought between two independent nations.

At this point, the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) entered the debate. That fall, the Virginia Division of the UDC adopted a resolution calling for use of the name "War Between the States." The next year, at the UDC's annual convention, a resolution was passed that the Daughters "solemnly record their determination to use every influence, as a body and individually, to expel from the literature of the country and from the daily press the phrase, 'war of the rebellion,' and to have substituted for it the phrase, "war between the States."

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Thus, the name “War Between the States” originated out of a desire to replace “War of the Rebellion,” the more-or-less official name given the war by the U.S. Government. The common alternative—“Civil War”—was less offensive to the UDC, but they were not happy with it either, for to them the term suggested that the Confederacy had not been an independent nation.

But, to some of those believing the southern states had full constitutional authority to withdraw from the Union and then form a new nation, even the term “War Between the States” was inappropriate, for it suggested that the war was fought by individual states, rather than by two nations—the United States and the Confederacy.

In the early decades of this century, the UDC launched a campaign to replace all references to the war of 1861–1865 with the name “War Between the States.” Gradually, the term gained in popularity among southern newspapers, speakers, and politicians. UDC activities were unsuccessful in persuading Congress to officially designate the war by that title, but they were able to force many publishers of secondary school textbooks to use the term out of fear that their books would not be adopted in southern schools.

The campaign for universal usage of “War Between the States” lost steam in the late 1950s as planning for the 100th anniversary of the war of 1861–1865 got under way. Congress created a national Civil War Centennial Commission, and similar state commissions were set up in each of the states planning to celebrate the centennial. By the end of the commemoration, the name “Civil War” was widely used in the South as well as in the North.

Today, most Americans—northern and southern—know the war of 1861–1865 as the Civil War. But, in the South, you will still see and hear references to the War Between the States—a legacy of the debate led by the UDC over the proper name for the war fought by their ancestors.

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