In his inaugural address, Lincoln declared secession "legally void." While he did not intend to invade Southern states, he would use force to maintain possession of federal property within seceded states. Attention quickly shifted to the federal installation of Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina. The fort was in need of supplies, and Lincoln intended to resupply it. South Carolina called for U.S. soldiers to evacuate the fort. Commanding officer Major Robert Anderson refused. On April 12, 1861, Confederate Brigadier General P. G. T. Beauregard fired on the fort. Anderson surrendered on April 13th and the Union troops evacuated. In response to the attack, President Abraham Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to serve three months to suppress the rebellion. The American Civil War had begun.

The assault on Fort Sumter and subsequent call for troops provoked several Upper South states to join the Confederacy. In total, eleven states renounced their allegiance to the United States. The new Confederate nation was predicated on the institution of slavery and the promotion of any and all interests that reinforced that objective. Some southerners couched their defense of slavery as a preservation of states’ rights. But in order to protect slavery, the Confederate constitution left even less power to the states than the United States constitution, an irony not lost on many.

While Lincoln, his cabinet, and the War Department devised strategies to defeat the rebel insurrection, black Americans quickly forced the issue of slavery as a primary issue in the debate. As early as 1861, black Americans implored the Lincoln administration to serve in the army and navy. Lincoln initially waged a conservative, limited war. He believed that the presence of African American troops would threaten the loyalty of slaveholding border states, and white volunteers might refuse to serve alongside black men. However, army commanders could not ignore the growing populations of formerly enslaved people who escaped to freedom behind Union army lines. These former enslaved people took a proactive stance early in the war and forced the federal government to act. As the number of refugees ballooned,
Lincoln and Congress found it harder to avoid the issue.

In May 1861, General Benjamin F. Butler went over his superiors’ heads and began accepting fugitive slaves who came to Fortress Monroe in Virginia. In order to avoid the issue of the slaves’ freedom, Butler reasoned that runaway slaves were “contraband of war,” and he had as much a right to seize them as he did to seize enemy horses or cannons. Later that summer Congress affirmed Butler’s policy in the First Confiscation Act. The act left “contrabands,” as these runaways were called, in a state of limbo. Once a slave escaped to Union lines, her master’s claim was nullified. She was not, however, a free citizen of the United States. Runaways lived in “contraband camps,” where disease and malnutrition were rampant. Women and men were required to perform the drudgework of war: raising fortifications, cooking meals, and laying railroad tracks. Still, life as a contraband offered a potential path to freedom, and thousands of slaves seized the opportunity.

Fugitive slaves posed a dilemma for the Union military. Soldiers were forbidden to interfere with slavery or assist runaways, but many soldiers found such a policy unchristian. Even those indifferent to slavery were reluctant to turn away potential laborers or help the enemy by returning his property. Also, fugitive slaves could provide useful information on the local terrain and the movements of Confederate troops. Union officers became particularly reluctant to turn away fugitive slaves when Confederate commanders began forcing slaves to work on fortifications. Every slave who escaped to Union lines was a loss to the Confederate war effort. (2)

Runaway slaves fording the Rappahannock River in Virginia and into Union Army lines. Taken in August 1862. Figure 9–3: Fugitive African Americans fording the Rappahannock by Timothy O’Sullivan is in the Public Domain.
The title of this political cartoon is "The (Fort) Monroe Doctrine. “Fort” is placed in parentheses, an allusion to President James Monroe’s famous Monroe Doctrine, which prohibited European interference and colonialism in the Americas starting in 1823. (1) Figure 9–4: Fort Monroe doctrine cartoon by Unknown is in the Public Domain.

Despite the growing number of runaway slaves in Union Army camps, the Confederate Army won decisive battles against the Union during the summer of 1861, most notably at the Battle of Bull Run in July. The loss at Bull Run ruined Northern morale and destroyed any lingering hope that the war would be brief, relatively bloodless, and an inevitable Union victory. In response, Northern abolitionists, black and white, demanded that Republican congressmen, and the Lincoln Administration, make emancipation a primary war aim. “The result of [Bull Run] was a fearful blow,” wrote one abolitionist, but “I think it may prove the means of rousing this stupid country to the extent & difficulty of the work it has to do.” Frederick Douglass argued that a Confederate war for the defense of slavery must be met with a Union war for its destruction. (1)

To fight against slaveholders, without fighting against slavery, is but a half-hearted business, and paralyzes the hands engaged in it … Fire must be met with water…. War for the destruction of liberty must be met with the war for the destruction of slavery. (McPherson, “Battle Cry” 354) (1)

This decisive moment that prompted the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation would occur in the fall of 1862 along Antietam creek in Maryland. Emboldened by their success in the previous spring and summer, Lee and Confederate President Jefferson Davis planned to win a decisive victory in Union territory and end the war. On September 17, 1862, McClellan and Lee’s forces collided at the Battle of Antietam near the town of Sharpsburg. This battle was the first major battle of the Civil War to occur on Union soil. It remains the bloodiest single day in American history with over 20,000 soldiers killed, wounded, or missing in just twelve hours.
Despite the Confederate withdrawal and the high death toll, the Battle of Antietam was not a decisive Union victory. It did, however, result in enough of a victory for Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed slaves in areas under Confederate control. There were significant exemptions to the Emancipation Proclamation including the border states, and parts of other states in the Confederacy. A far cry from a universal end to slavery, the Emancipation Proclamation nevertheless proved vital shifting the war aims from simple union to Emancipation. Framing it as a war measure, Lincoln and his Cabinet hoped that stripping the Confederacy of their labor force would not only debilitate the Southern economy, but also weaken Confederate morale. Furthermore, the Battle of Antietam and the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation all but ensured that the Confederacy would not be recognized by European powers. Nevertheless, Confederates continued fighting. Union and Confederate forces clashed again at Fredericksburg, Virginia in December 1862. This Confederate victory resulted in staggering Union casualties. (2)