

TVCWRT Civil War Tutorial, Part VI: Homefront 1864 by Arley McCormick

Every citizen in the throes of aggression are affected by the economy (inflation), manpower (family) absent and government policy. Between January 1861 to January 1865, based on gold price data provided by Richmond Civil War Centennial Committee, inflation grew nearly 700%. Many merchants in the South would take only gold or silver for payment and any change would be a certificate honored only by the merchant. Southern military setbacks affected every major city but none as psychologically as Richmond, Virginia. New Orleans, lost in 1862, struggled economically but remained an active port although with diminishing returns each year as the exports ceased and imports were designated for the Union forces. Nashville's economy prior to war was based on defense industry, cotton, and other perishables, but during the war it existed to support the needs Union forces. Vicksburg, nearly a ghost town after July of 1863, compared to the preceding spring, depended on agriculture from the Mississippi midland. Atlanta, devastated by cannon and fire, after it's capture in late 1864 struggled to sustain a community and industry. But, in Richmond the best news never seemed to be that good.

By the Fall of 1864, Northern ports were thriving. Industry, supporting both defense and domestic consumption was up. The population was moving west even with news of trouble on the frontier with Indian tribes, graft and corruption in the communities supporting the migration west. Railroads were active, being expanded, and produce from Indiana and Illinois were making it to ports along the rivers and New Orleans once again. Immigration filled a portion of the gap caused by Union draft laws but aside from the war news communities, if not thriving, were sustaining their working population although vagrants and widows were struggling.

In the south residents living in the hills, far from the cities, plantations, and large farms prior to the war had depended upon subsistence farming and the small excess were sold in local communities and larger cities. Many suffered because of crop failures, drought, and shortages of everything from salt, sugar, and other staples. Slaves, migrated to the Union lines leaving plantation crops in the field to rot and the absence of able-bodied men created "dirt poor" white families suffering through brutal winters on top of the depredations of the war.

Finally, Confederate desertion rates skyrocketed during the winter of 1864. It could be argued that this final, and fatal, wave of desertions began in November 1864 when Abraham Lincoln won a second term and the hope that a negotiated peace with a Democratic president perished.

Famous Christmas songs like Deck the Halls were modified to reflect the mood of the population:

Burn the house with lots of torches,
Fa la la la la, la la la la.
Tis the season to make marches,
Fa la la la la, la la la la.

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Confederate Government policy, particularly conscription, added drama to the home front as both former soldiers and able young men joined the home guard to search for deserters and send them back to the front. It became an internal war as such. The combination of food shortages in the south and military defeat signaled little hope for winning and no hope of separating from the north. The Unionist population grew yet in the face of all the adversity there remained a defiant, resistant, yet tarnished optimism that their suffering would be rewarded in the end.

In the north internal conflicts began to capture the population's attention aside from the war. There were wage strikes, particularly, in skilled trades where few women were experienced and heavy industry real wages in these trades returned to prewar levels and were poised for post war increases. For unskilled labor inflation was as serious as in the south. And a new concept infiltrated the Conscription policy. The adoption to accommodate conscience objection to fighting as justification to avoid the draft.

Simply, by the end of 1864 the Southern population was suffering from a variety of mishaps not the least of which was battlefield losses and had little to indicate there would be improvement in the future while the Northern population was poised for growth and prosperity. They bickered among themselves to avoid fighting and make more money.