



3-6-2015

## The End is Near: The Civil War in 1864

Brianna E. Kirk  
*Gettysburg College*

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Kirk, Brianna E., "The End is Near: The Civil War in 1864" (2015). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 87.  
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# The End is Near: The Civil War in 1864

## **Abstract**

In the minds of most Civil War lovers, the year 1864 marks the noticeable shift from a conciliatory war to a hard war. Most view it through the lens of Ulysses S. Grant's Overland Campaign, through William Tecumseh Sherman's March to the Sea, through the successes of the Union Army. After all, the Battle of Gettysburg in July 1863 is seen as the 'high tide of the Confederacy,' marking the falling action point in the war when total Union victory became inevitable. But in actuality, 1864 was just as—if not more—critical to the outcome of the war than the prior three years. The changing character of the war in that year muddled who was actually succeeding, making clear winners and losers unknown. Additionally, Abraham Lincoln's reelection hung in the balance; a presidential change-up would alter the nature of war, especially if George B. McClellan were victorious. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, 1864

## **Disciplines**

History | Military History | United States History

## **Comments**

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### The End is Near: The Civil War in 1864

*March 6, 2015*

*by Brianna Kirk '15*

In the minds of most Civil War lovers, the year 1864 marks the noticeable shift from a conciliatory war to a hard war. Most view it through the lens of Ulysses S. Grant's Overland Campaign, through William Tecumseh Sherman's March to the Sea, through the successes of the Union Army. After all, the Battle of Gettysburg in July 1863 is seen as the 'high tide of the Confederacy,' marking the falling action point in the war when total Union victory became inevitable. But in actuality, 1864 was just as—if not more—critical to the outcome of the war than the prior three years. The changing character of the war in that year muddled who was actually succeeding, making clear winners and losers unknown. Additionally, Abraham Lincoln's reelection hung in the balance; a presidential change-up would alter the nature of war, especially if George B. McClellan were victorious.



The Crater at Petersburg National Battlefield. Photo credit to the author.

For the Union and Confederate armies, 1864 was the year that everything became ambiguous. Victory was not in sight for either army, and fears of fighting a war with an unknown ending seeped through society. No one had anticipated the war would stretch into 1862, much less continue on into 1863 and then 1864. The penultimate year of the

war as we now know it became defined by unparalleled engagements—the burning forests of the Wilderness, the battle at Spotsylvania, the fighting at the Mule Shoe, the entrenchments at Petersburg, the Crater, the slaughter at Cold Harbor. The months of 1864 saw fighting nearly every day, as soldiers in both armies, desperate for that grand victory, fought even harder.



The trenches of Petersburg. Photo credit to the author.

As the war turned from recognizable Confederate victories to the lone Union victory at Gettysburg to the hard fighting of 1864, the end was still in question, with each army having much to gain and lose. The ‘ninety-day war’ once hoped for back in 1861 was entering its fourth year and unprecedented numbers of dead bodies and ruined buildings littered the countryside. The soldiers in blue and gray did not know that the horrors would finally come to an end a few short months into 1865. Neither did the civilians. With 1864 producing no decisive victories for the Union or Confederacy, 1865 did not look too promising, either.



Modern view of the Bloody Angle at Spotsylvania, as seen from behind the Confederate earthworks. Photo credit to the author.

So as April 9, 2015 looms ever so close on the horizon, marking the 150th anniversary of the war's end, meditate over how Americans felt in 1865 as February turned to March. We know now that the end of the war was coming at that time. We know now when things began to fall apart for Robert E. Lee and his army of rebels. We know now that 1864 was the final push, the last full year of war until the North won—hindsight is always 20/20. But I encourage you to not view the final stages of the Civil War in this way. Try not to see it as falling action or inevitable or simply the year that needs to pass before we gain Union victory. Because Civil War Americans did not see it that way, and much was still at stake in March 1865 for the United States of America.

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