Uniforms of Conflict

The Civil War and Standardized Sizing · 1861–1865

Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

> **Content note:** This chapter includes accounts of people killed, injured, or held captive. Preview this story before class: The Spread of 'Shoddy'.

GUIDING QUESTION

Did the Civil War's demand for uniforms modernize American industry, or did it mainly reward profiteers?

PART 1

Before you read

1. Read the guiding question. Write down what you already know, or think you know, about it.

2. Predict one way your answer might change after reading the sources.

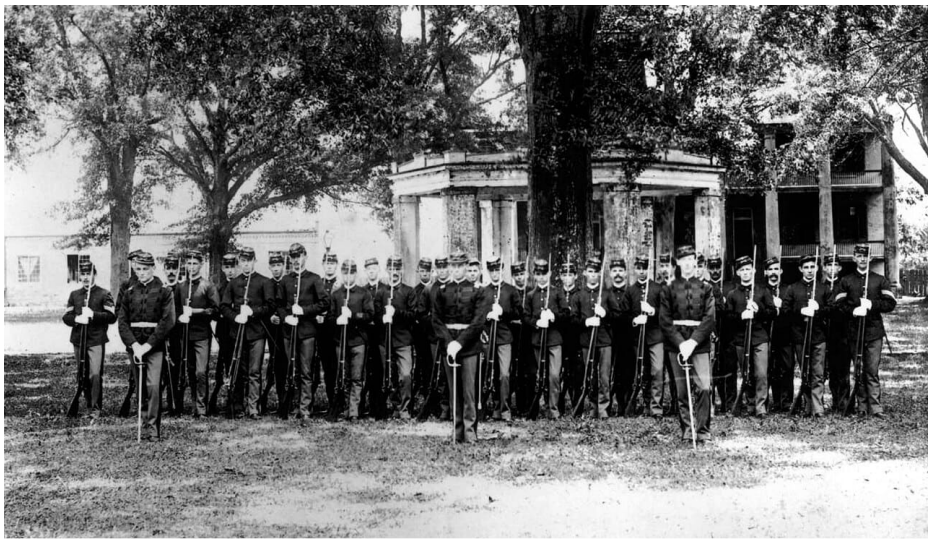
PART 2

Read

The Civil War demanded the first true mass production of apparel in American history. To clothe more than two million Union soldiers, the industry adopted a new language of fit—and gave a new word to the language of fraud.

The Union's need for uniforms created a sudden, colossal demand for ready-made clothing. To make garments in volume, the Quartermaster's Department specified uniforms in a small set of numbered sizes, graded by breast and waist measurements, so that contractors could cut thousands of identical pieces; historians of government contracting credit the war with spreading standard men's sizes into postwar civilian clothing. The U.S. Sanitary Commission, meanwhile, measured thousands of soldiers in detail and compiled the heights and ages of more than a million volunteers. The same urgency that encouraged

standardized fit also invited fraud: contractors sold the government cloth made of reworked rags, and 'shoddy'—an old woolen-trade term—became a national byword for cheap goods and profiteers.



Union soldiers in standardized uniform during the occupation of Baton Rouge. Andrew D. Lytle, Union soldiers in formation, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Andrew D. Lytle Collection, Louisiana State University Libraries Special Collections. Public domain.

PART 3

Timeline

For each event, write one sentence on why it mattered.

1861

The Brooks Brothers Contract

In April, New York State contracts with Brooks Brothers for 12,000 uniforms; complaints about cloth and fit lead to an investigation, and the firm replaces 2,350 suits at its own expense.

1861

The Quartermaster's Mandate

As volunteers pour in, the Quartermaster's Department contracts for uniforms in numbered sizes, pushing clothing makers toward mass production.

1863

The Sanitary Commission Survey

The U.S. Sanitary Commission begins measuring soldiers' bodies; by war's end it has detailed measurements for nearly 24,000 men.

1865

Ready-Made Survives the Peace

Manufacturers turn wartime capacity and sizing practices to the civilian menswear market.

PART 4

Key terms

Write the letter of the matching definition beside each term.

_____ **Shoddy**

_____ **Quartermaster**

_____ **Ready-made clothing**

_____ **Anthropometry**

_____ **Depot**

A. Garments produced in standard sizes ahead of time rather than sewn to fit an individual customer.

B. The scientific measurement of the human body, such as height, chest, and limb length.

C. A military storehouse where supplies are collected, made, or distributed.

D. The military officer or department responsible for supplying troops with clothing, food, shelter, and equipment.

E. Cheap cloth made from shredded, reused wool that fell apart quickly; the word came to mean any poor-quality goods sold for profit.

PART 5

Primary source workshop

These excerpts are quoted word for word, including the spelling and language of their time.

DOCUMENT A

Annual Report of the Quartermaster General for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1865

Montgomery C. Meigs, 1865

> At the commencement of the war the department had but one depot for the supply of clothing and equipage, the Schuylkill arsenal, at Philadelphia. This was organized for the equipment of an army of 13,000 men. ... Eight or ten thousand work-people were employed in Philadelphia in the manufacture of clothing and equipage. ... Contracts were made for the supply of clothing ready-made. The manufacturers of the loyal States were urged to turn their machinery upon army goods. The clothing merchants who had, before the war, supplied the southern markets, made contracts with the department for the supply of army clothing, and in a few months the industry and manufacturing power of the country were turned into the new channel ...

Context: Meigs ran the Union army's supply system throughout the war. His report shows how a department built for a 13,000-man army mobilized private factories and thousands of seamstresses to clothe more than two million soldiers.

Source: Montgomery C. Meigs, Quartermaster General. Annual Reports of the War Department: Report of the Secretary of War, 1865. Government Printing Office (via Internet Archive). 1865-. https://archive.org/details/annualreportswa57deptgoog

Historical context

What was happening when and where this was created?

Intended audience

Who was meant to read, hear, or see it?

Purpose

Why was it created? What did its creator want to happen?

Point of view

Whose perspective does it show, and whose is missing?

DOCUMENT B

Investigations in the Military and Anthropological Statistics of American Soldiers

Benjamin Apthorp Gould, for the U.S. Sanitary Commission, 1869

> The andrometer is said to have been originally devised by a tailor in Edinburgh, named McDonald, who used it to determine the proper size for soldiers' clothing, for which he had undertaken a considerable contract with the military authorities. ... It enables the total height, breadth of neck, of shoulders, and of pelvis, the length of legs and height to the knee to be measured with greater accuracy and rapidity than otherwise would be possible ... Instruments of this kind were constructed for the Sanitary Commission in 1863, at the office of the U. S. Coast Survey ...

Context: Gould, an astronomer, led the Sanitary Commission's effort to measure Union soldiers' bodies. His survey studied soldiers' health and physique. The Army's uniforms were already cut in four numbered sizes, and historians credit that contracting practice, rather than the survey, with spreading standard men's sizes into the postwar ready-to-wear trade.

Source: Benjamin Apthorp Gould. Investigations in the Military and Anthropological Statistics of American Soldiers. Hurd and Houghton for the U.S. Sanitary Commission (via Internet Archive). 1869-. https://archive.org/details/investigationsi00goulgoog

Historical context
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Corroborate
Compare "Annual Report of the Quartermaster General for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1865" (Montgomery C. Meigs, 1865) with "Investigations in the Military and Anthropological Statistics of American Soldiers" (Benjamin Apthorp Gould, for the U.S. Sanitary Commission, 1869). Where do they agree, where do they differ, and what might explain the differences?

PART 6

Discuss

1. According to Meigs, how did the Quartermaster's Department solve the army's clothing shortage after 1861?

2. Meigs wrote this as an official report at the war's end. What problems, such as the early "shoddy" uniform scandals, might a quartermaster general have reason to downplay?

3. Gould describes an instrument first designed to size soldiers' clothing. The Sanitary Commission measured 23,785 men, while the Army already issued uniforms in four numbered sizes. What could a survey like Gould's reveal about soldiers' bodies, and what can it not prove about where ready-made clothing sizes came from?

4. Clothing sizes today vary widely from brand to brand. Should there be a national standard for clothing sizes, like the numbered sizes the Army used for uniforms in the 1860s? Argue your position.

PART 7

Write: claim, evidence, reasoning

Answer the guiding question in one paragraph, using the documents and the reading.

Claim	Answers the guiding question directly in one or two sentences.
Evidence	Cites at least two primary sources by name and at least one fact from the reading.
Reasoning	Explains how each piece of evidence supports the claim.
Sourcing	Notes at least one limitation of a source: who made it, when, and why.

PART 8

Exit ticket

1. In one sentence, how would you answer the guiding question now?

2. What piece of evidence would most change your mind?

Keep exploring

TRAGEDY

The Spread of 'Shoddy'

War profiteering, recycled rags, and a word that entered everyday speech.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/birth-of-shoddy

INNOVATION

Measuring the Union Army

How wartime measurement shaped ready-made sizing—and what the myth of 'S, M, L' gets wrong.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/anthropometric-survey

IMPACT

Uniforms and the Black Soldier

When the right to wear blue was an argument for citizenship.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/uniforms-and-citizenship

Places: Georgia

SOURCES AND CREDITS

The Civil War to 1880 (A History of Government Contracting). George Washington University Law School. https://scholarship.law.gwu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=history_gov_contracting&filename=8&type=additional

Benjamin Apthorp Gould. Investigations in the Military and Anthropological Statistics of American Soldiers. U.S. Sanitary Commission / Hurd and Houghton. 1869-. https://darwin-online.org.uk/converted/pdf/1869_Gould_soldiers_CUL-DAR.LIB.228.pdf

Communication from the Governor transmitting the report of the Board of State Officers named in the act of April 16, 1861. State of New York (via HathiTrust). 1862. http://hdl.handle.net/2027/loc.ark:/13960/t0gt60k3r

Image: Andrew D. Lytle, Union soldiers in formation, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Andrew D. Lytle Collection, Louisiana State University Libraries Special Collections. Public domain.

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