

THE

SEVEN-DAY

SCHOLAR

The

Civil War

EXPLORING HISTORY ONE WEEK AT A TIME

DENNIS GAFFNEY AND
PETER GAFFNEY

THE BITTER END

WEEK 49

THE DEATHWATCH

Charles A. Leale, the first doctor who reached Lincoln, found him being held up by Mary, his eyes closed and his head bowed on his chest. Leale first thought the president was dead. He searched for the wound and found “the perfectly smooth opening made by the ball,” and removed the blood clot there. Then he performed artificial respiration, which produced feeble breathing and a heartbeat. Men then carried Lincoln out of the crowded theater, and someone suggested they bring him to the White House, but Leale thought the jostling would kill him. When they carried the president into the street, a man called out, “Bring him in here, bring him in here!” The president was laid down in a room in the back of a boardinghouse, on a bed too short for his body.

The doctors removed his clothes to search for other bullet holes and noticed Lincoln’s strong chest and muscular arms, evidence that the legend of the man’s strength was true. His body was cold, so they brought in hot-water bottles and heated blankets, and they spread a warm mustard paste over his body. Mary became hysterical, repeatedly kissing her husband’s face and begging him to speak to her. She was led away to the front parlor.

Those gathered knew it was a deathwatch. At one point, the doctors tried to remove the bullet with long needles, but it was too deep for them to reach. Robert Lincoln, the president’s oldest son, broke down when he saw his father in the bed, but then regained control. When his mother began to keel, Robert said, “Mother, please put your trust in God and all will be well.” Before a three a.m. visit by Mary, the men covered the bloody pillow with a clean white napkin. Politicians and friends came and went until seven twenty-two a.m., when Lincoln exhaled one last time.

Reverend Phineas Gurley gave a brief prayer. “God,” he asked, “please accept this good man,

Abraham Lincoln, into the kingdom of heaven.” The men in the room whispered, “Amen.” “Now,” Secretary of War Edwin Stanton said, “he belongs to the ages.”

DAVIS, STILL DEFIANT, IS CAUGHT

On the afternoon of May 2, 1865, Confederate President Jefferson Davis convened what he called a “council of war” in Abeville, South Carolina, attended by his secretary of war John C. Breckinridge, his friend Major General Braxton Bragg, and a handful of brigade commanders. General Joseph E. Johnston had surrendered his Army of Tennessee a week before, and General Lee had surrendered two weeks before that. Union troops were now hunting Davis, who was being escorted by an elite group of tattered Rebels.

“It is time,” Davis told the men, “that we adopt some definite plan upon which the further prosecution of our struggle shall be conducted.” Davis hoped to join Lieutenant General Richard Taylor in Alabama, not knowing that Taylor had surrendered that same day. The gathered men were dumbstruck, and told Davis that the Southern people were broken and hungry and unable to continue. They said that after Davis was ushered to safety, the soldiers expected to go home. Davis then acknowledged what he’d refused to accept for months. “All indeed is lost,” he said, and stumbled away.

Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles recalled what Lincoln said he wanted to do with captured Confederate leaders. “ ‘Frighten them out of the country, open the gates, let down the bars, scare them off,’ said [Lincoln], throwing up his hands as if scaring sheep. ‘Enough lives have been sacrificed. We must extinguish our resentments if we expect harmony and union.’ ” President Andrew Johnson had set a much harsher tone. “Treason is a crime,” he said, “and the crime must be punished.” Davis was falsely accused as a conspirator in Lincoln’s assassination and a \$100,000 reward was offered for his capture.

The Fourth Michigan and First Wisconsin surrounded Davis before dawn on May 10, 1865, near Irwinsville, Georgia, where Davis had come to meet his wife, Varina, and their children, also in flight. Davis considered trying to escape, but Varina pleaded for him to surrender. “God’s will be done,” he muttered.

Davis was imprisoned in Fort Monroe, Virginia, and put in shackles. After a public outcry, the shackles were removed a week later.

In 1866, Davis was indicted for treason, but he was never brought to trial, the government perhaps wishing to avoid questions over the legality of secession. Charges against Davis were dropped on December 25, 1868. Years later, Davis said, “Tell the world I only loved America.”

THE *SHENANDOAH* FIRES THE WAR'S LAST SHOT— TWO MONTHS AFTER LEE SURRENDERS

The last shot in the Civil War was not fired by soldiers in Virginia or Texas, but by sailors on a Confederate ship named the *Shenandoah*. To do damage to the Union cause, Lieutenant James Waddell, the ship's captain, was ordered in the fall of 1864 to go after "the great American whaling fleet, a source of abundant wealth of our enemies" and a supplier of oil that lubricated the daunting Union war machine.

During its tenure as a raider, the ship traveled south around Africa and then across the Indian Ocean, around Australia, and then north into the Pacific. The *Shenandoah* did most of its damage after it reached the Bering Sea on June 16, 1865. In six days, the ship's crew burned twenty-four New England whaling vessels. That same month, a captured sailor told Waddell that Richmond had fallen, that General Robert E. Lee had surrendered, and that President Abraham Lincoln had been assassinated. Disbelieving, the men continued to August 2, when other sailors confirmed the news.

"We now have no country, no flag, no home," wrote one of the ship's officers. To dock at a U.S. port meant they'd be tried as pirates, as they attacked U.S. ships after the war's end, and that would subject them to imprisonment and hangings. So they decided to sail 9,000 miles to Liverpool, England, without stopping at port. In a little over a year, the *Shenandoah* had captured thirty-eight ships and taken more than a thousand prisoners.

British leaders, who had sympathies for the Confederacy and perhaps pitied the men's fate, let them go. After the war, the U.S. government demanded monetary compensation from Britain for their covert role in supporting the *Shenandoah* and the Confederate Navy, thereby damaging the U.S. commercial shipping and whaling industry. In 1872, after an international commission decided the case in favor of the U.S., Britain paid \$16 million in damages for losses caused by the *Alabama*, the *Shenandoah*, and the *Florida*. The settlement was considered a milestone in peaceful settlements of international disputes and a step forward for the international rule of law.

WAR—"THE SHIELD OF THE OPPRESSED" OR SIMPLY "HELL"?

At the Battle of Antietam, one of the wounded that Clara Barton treated was a young woman who was dressed in a Union uniform. The girl, named Mary, had cut her hair short and come to the front disguised as a man to find a Lieutenant Harry Barnard of the Third Wisconsin, with whom she had fallen in love during the war. At Antietam, she had been shot in the neck and was terrified she would

die. Barton comforted her and fetched a surgeon, who removed the bullet.

Soon after that battle, Barton was serving in a hospital caring for the wounded at Antietam, and she came across a distraught wounded soldier with a card at the head of his bed that read "H.B., 3rd Wisconsin." It was Harry Barnard, Mary's love.

When he was told his arm would have to be amputated, he resisted, delirious from fever and the pain, and called out, "No, no, I want Mary." Barton knew where Mary was and brought her to Barnard. Mary convinced him to have his arm removed. As Barton told the story, he was sedated, his arm was amputated, and when he awoke, Mary was by his side, his "wildness" abated.

After the war, Barnard would tell his children: "War is the scourge of tyrants, the shield of the oppressed, the nursing of brave men and lofty deeds; the theatre where heroes enact melodramas on the worlds' stage to the thunderous music of bursting artillery."

Barton emerged from the war with a far less romantic view. "Men have worshiped war," she asserted, "till it has cost a million times more than the whole world is worth, poured out the best blood and crushed the fairest forms the good God has ever created.—Deck it as you will, war is—'Hell.' . . . All through and through, thought, and act, body and soul—I hate it. . . . Only the desire to soften some of its hardships and allay some of its miseries ever induced me, and I presume all the other women who have taken similar steps, to dare its pestilence and unholy breath."

ROBERT E. LEE'S HOME IS TURNED INTO A GRAVEYARD

When Virginia seceded from the Union, Robert E. Lee and his wife, Mary, were living in a mansion on an 1,100-acre Virginia estate called Arlington, which overlooked the Potomac and Washington, DC. It had been built for Mary's father, George Washington Parke Custis, who was George Washington's adopted grandson. Lee left the property to serve in the Confederate Army, and Mary fled before federal troops crossed the river and occupied the estate.

In 1863, the Union government confiscated the estate for nonpayment of \$92.07 in taxes. Mary had been unwilling to cross Union lines and pay in person, and the government refused to accept payment from her agent. At a public sale on January 11, 1864, the property was purchased by a tax commissioner for "government use, for war, military, charitable and educational purposes."

Meanwhile, the U.S. government gave 1,100 freed slaves land on the estate to farm, and they became part of a model community for freed slaves, called Freedman's Village. On June 15, 1864, with Washington-area cemeteries rapidly filling, Montgomery Meigs, the Union's quartermaster general and a former aide to Lee, used parts of the estate as a cemetery, intending to make the house uninhabitable if the Lee family ever wanted to return. A burial vault for the remains of eighteen

hundred Bull Run soldiers was built under the estate's former rose garden.

Robert and Mary Lee quietly investigated reclaiming Arlington, but no action was taken before Mary died in 1873. But in 1877, their oldest son, George Washington Custis Lee, sued the federal government, claiming the property had been confiscated illegally. In 1882, by a five-to-four margin, the Supreme Court gave it back to him. What to do with an estate whose ground was filled with corpses? George Lee sold it back to the government for \$150,000. Eventually, 250,000 soldiers would be buried in what became Arlington National Cemetery.

CORNELIA MCDONALD AGAIN FINDS A WAY TO SURVIVE

"Getting food was the great difficulty," wrote Cornelia McDonald, a Virginia war widow, during the last year of the war. "What I earned by teaching [drawing] supplied little more than bread, beans and a little fat bacon, which last was nearly all consumed by the servant. The breakfast was bread and water, except the cup of coffee for me, which I believe I would have died without. The dinner was bean soup and bread, of which I never ate a particle. . . . The children ate it, and if they did not enjoy it, did not complain. Supper we had none, for there was not bread to spare for a third meal."

The war ended, but the family's privations did not. The pantry was barren. No money remained for the rent. "I felt that God had forsaken us, and I wished, oh! I wished that He would at one blow sweep me and mine from the earth. There seemed no place on it for us, no room for us to live."

McDonald had scalded her foot badly with a pot of boiling water during the summer and had to give up teaching her drawing classes. In October, she went for a walk to the cemetery, fearful of another winter about to blow in. There, she bumped into a friend, who said, "What can be the matter, you look so dreadfully?" She held McDonald's hands and begged her to explain.

"We are starving, I and my children," McDonald said. The woman replied, "Comfort yourself. I meant to have come and told you that help is coming for you." A relief fund had been created for widows and orphans of Confederate soldiers, and McDonald was to receive \$100. "I went to bed that night," wrote McDonald, "with a happy heart and a thankful one."

In the same month, McDonald was offered a \$300 loan from a woman who had received an inheritance from her brother, killed at Chickamauga. "I accepted it," McDonald remembered, "and with a light and happy heart set about making provision for the winter."

SOLDIERS STAND IN FRONT OF ROBERT E. LEE'S FORMER HOME

This photo, taken in 1864, shows Union soldiers, including African Americans, in front of the Custis-Lee Mansion, or Arlington House, Robert E. Lee's former home.

WHY DID THE NORTH WIN— OR THE SOUTH LOSE?

WEEK 50

THE LOST CAUSE—THE SOUTHERN VIEW

Napoleon once said that God was on the side of the heaviest battalions, and the common wisdom is that Lady Victory, if not God, went with the superior forces—men, munitions, and money—of the North. This theory is part of a larger framing of the war held by many Southerners, called the Lost Cause, which holds that Confederates lost because of the overwhelming odds against them.

In an 1872 address on Robert E. Lee, Confederate General Jubal A. Early said, “General Lee had not been conquered in battle . . . [H]e surrendered . . . the mere ghost of the Army of Northern Virginia, which had been gradually worn down by the combined agencies of numbers, steam-power, railroads, mechanism, and all the resources of physical science.” Early was echoing Lee himself, who told his soldiers at Appomattox that he had been compelled to surrender by the enemy’s “overwhelming numbers and resources.”

In population, the twenty-three states in the Union had a five-to-two advantage over the eleven states in the Confederacy, a larger advantage if the slave population, accounting for a third of the Confederacy’s population, is subtracted. Northerners also had a three-to-one advantage in wealth. “The important fact remains demonstrated,” President Lincoln said in his annual message to Congress in December 1864, “that we have *more* men *now* than we had when the war *began*; that we are not exhausted, nor in the process of exhaustion; that we are *gaining* strength, and may, if need be, maintain the contest indefinitely.” President Davis couldn’t make such claims.

But historians have noted that outmanned and outgunned armies—the Davids in history—sometimes fell Goliaths. Might other factors have contributed to the Southern defeat?

DID THE SOUTH LOSE THE WAR BECAUSE OF INTERNAL DIVISIONS?

Did the South sow the seeds of its own demise? The argument that internal conflicts sapped the

strength of the Confederacy was first put forward by Frank Owsley in his book *State Rights in the Confederacy*, published in 1925.

He argued that war's demand for a powerful centralized government was undermined by the centrifugal forces of states rights, civil liberties (at least for white men), and individualism. The resistance to a powerful government came from local officials, such as Governor Joseph Brown of Georgia, but also from those inside Davis's administration, such as Vice President Alexander H. Stephens, who denounced conscription (which "outraged justice and the constitution"), federal taxes, martial law, and the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus ("a blow at the very 'vitals of liberty' "). Owsley wrote that the epitaph carved on the tombstone of the Confederacy should read: "Died of States Rights." The Civil War scholar David Donald expanded the epitaph to read, "Died of Democracy."

But more recently, historians have argued that the theory stands on a shaky foundation. Despite dissent, they point out, the South conscripted soldiers a year before the North, and had a larger percentage of soldiers who were drafted. And while Abraham Lincoln jailed more dissenters, the Confederate government came down ruthlessly on Union sympathizers in Tennessee and North Carolina. The Confederacy may have talked states rights, but its power was centralized.

Besides, as Civil War historian James McPherson notes, the North experienced similar internal fractures and Lincoln took a fiercer and more public flogging than Davis. When Lincoln jailed war dissenters and suspended the writ of habeas corpus, many labeled him a despot. New York's Irish were so incensed at being conscripted for an emancipation war that they rioted, causing the worst civil insurrection in American history. Through much of the war, vocal Peace Democrats called Lincoln and the war a failure and wanted to negotiate a peace and let the Confederates go. If Lincoln had lost his reelection of 1864, McPherson points out, we might be making the argument that internal dissent was the reason the *Union* lost the war.

DID THE SOUTH LOSE THE WILL TO FIGHT?

Some historians have raised a larger question: Did the South at some point lose the *will* to fight? Were the Confederates missing a fire behind their cause?

Authors of *Why the South Lost the Civil War* argue that despite the initial outburst of war fever in the South, the Confederates started the war with a weak premise. President Jefferson Davis, responding to the North's mobilization of troops, spoke to his Congress on April 29, 1861, saying, "All we ask is to be let alone"—hardly the inspirational cry that comes off the lips of most successful revolutionaries. While states' rights were paid lip service, many Southerners were ashamed or at

least uncomfortable with the real cause of the war—protecting slavery.

Many poor Southerners resented slave-owners, especially larger ones, who were exempted from the draft, an exemption sanctioned by the Confederate Congress. And even those willing to fight for slavery lost their cause by the last year of the war, when Southern leaders, including Robert E. Lee, offered to arm slaves and free them if they fought for the Confederacy. Perhaps the strongest argument that the South lost the will to fight is that in the early fall and winter of 1864–1865, 40 percent of Confederate soldiers east of the Mississippi deserted.

James McPherson, though, argues in *Battle Cry of Freedom* that this “loss of will” thesis suffers because it doesn’t recognize that the will to fight often pivots on military success and failure. “Defeat causes demoralization and loss of will,” McPherson writes, “victory pumps up morale.” During the summer of 1864, for example, devastating casualties and a stalled offensive nearly undermined Northern morale to such a degree that Lincoln expected to lose his reelection. But the taking of Atlanta and Philip Sheridan’s rout of Jubal Early’s army in the Shenandoah Valley created a “depth of determination . . . to fight to the last” that “astonished” one British journalist.

What about the quality of leadership? If Abraham Lincoln and his commanders were switched with Jefferson Davis and his, would the Confederacy have won?

WHAT IF THE LEADERS WERE REVERSED? WOULD THE SOUTH HAVE WON?

Did the superior quality of Northern leadership win the war for the Union? The Union hardly had the edge in leadership at the war’s launch. “I fought, bled, and came away” after “charges upon the wild onions,” Abraham Lincoln said about his military experience in the Mexican War, and “a good many bloody struggles with the mesquitos.” His only national political experience was an ineffectual term as a congressman, after which he said, “I neither expect, seek, or deserve” to return to Washington—and he didn’t. By contrast, Jefferson Davis was a West Pointer who had served admirably in the Mexican War and was elected a congressman, a senator, and then appointed U.S. secretary of war by President Franklin Pierce.

But as the war progressed, Lincoln revealed himself the more capable leader. Davis bickered with those who disagreed with him; Lincoln chose his rivals during the presidential campaign for his cabinet members and always valued winning the war over winning an argument. And while Davis often got lost in the war’s details, Lincoln concentrated on the larger strategic picture, one that would win the war once he found a general to execute it.

What about each side’s military leaders? Southern generals in the early war, such as Albert Johnson, Pierre Beauregard, and “Stonewall” Jackson, were superior to Northern bumblers such as

George McClellan, John Pope, Joseph Hooker, and Ambrose Burnside. And Robert E. Lee is generally praised as the best tactician of the war.

But the best military strategist of the Civil War was probably General Ulysses S. Grant. “The first quality of a general-in-chief,” Napoleon once said, “is to have a cool head which receives exact impressions of things, which never gets heated, which never allows itself to be dazzled, or intoxicated, by good or bad news.” Of all the generals in the war, that description best sums up Grant. He, Lincoln, and William Tecumseh Sherman understood that the way to win the war was to fight it all-out, everywhere at once, against armies and civilians, and that’s what they did in 1864.

EMANCIPATION AND ARMING OF THE EX-SLAVES— THE DECIDING FACTOR?

Americans have always understood that the Civil War emancipated the slaves. But did the freeing of slaves during the war and the arming of the African-Americans after 1863 actually provide the Union victory?

From the very start of the war, slaves slipped away from Southern homes and plantations to find safety behind Union lines. By the time the war ended, between 500,000 and 700,000 slaves would escape to freedom. That was 15 to 20 percent of the Confederacy’s slave population, but the impact they had, writes Joseph T. Glatthaar in his essay “Black Glory: The African-American Role in Union Victory” was “so much greater than their numbers.”

As slaves disappeared across enemy lines, fewer hands were available to make weapons or grow the crops that fed both Southern civilians and soldiers. “So long as the rebels retain and employ their slaves in producing grains, [etc.],” wrote Union General-in-Chief Henry Halleck to Ulysses S. Grant on March 31, 1863, “they can employ all the whites in the field [of arms]. Every slave withdrawn from the enemy is equivalent to a white man put *hors de combat* [out of action].” This mass flight also undermined one of the core Southern ideologies behind the war—that slaves were contented with their position.

This mass exodus, and the recruitment of freed blacks into the U.S. military, also made it clear that the war was not about keeping the Union—“a goal too shallow to be worth the sacrifice of a single life,” according to Civil War scholar Barbara Fields—but a historic struggle to free the slaves. Fighting a “freedom war,” as African Americans called it, released a new energy for the war in the North and also discouraged European leaders from joining pro-slavery Confederates.

The double-barreled policy of black emancipation and enlistment may have turned the war. “I believe it is a resource which, if vigorously applied now, will soon close the contest,” Lincoln told Grant in 1863. “It works doubly, weakening the enemy and strengthening us.”

Roughly 300,000 black men served in the Union army; 180,000 black men would see combat, 10,000 more served in the navy. They would engage in over 40 major battles and 450 smaller ones. Eighty-five percent of the eligible black population in the North signed on; in the war's final year, 120,000 black soldiers enlisted. By the time of Appomattox, about one in every eight Union soldiers was a black recruit.

DID CHANCE PLAY A ROLE IN THE UNION VICTORY?

Historians have long acknowledged that small events can have momentous historical consequences. Was this true of the Civil War? Would minor alterations in a battle or a political decision have turned a grinding Union victory into a Confederate one? Such musings lead to many "what-if"s of the Civil War that many history buffs have played since the day General Lee surrendered.

What if the eight border states had all sided with the South instead of splitting between the two sides? Might the added men and resources have swung the balance of power to the Confederacy? And if the British government had listened to its textile lobby and recognized the Confederacy, wouldn't British domination of the seas have destroyed the Union blockade, brought more supplies to the South, and put the Confederacy over the top to victory?

What if two Union soldiers drinking coffee had not picked up the plans for Lee's invasion of Maryland, wrapped around three cigars? Would Lee have whipped Union General George McClellan at Antietam, perhaps destroying his army, and then marched on to Washington and sent the U.S. government fleeing?

And what if Brigadier General Gouverneur Warren had not put out the frantic call to Union soldiers to mount Little Round Top at Gettysburg just minutes before the Confederate attack on the Union's left flank? Would the Confederates have taken Round Top, crumbled the Union line, and won Gettysburg and the war?

One more: What if General William Sherman's march into Atlanta on September 2, 1864, had been delayed by ten weeks? Might former Union general and Democratic presidential candidate George McClellan beaten Lincoln, forcing Lincoln to make peace with the Confederacy? Might you now be reading about Lincoln as a failed president, who oversaw the end of the American democratic experiment and who failed to slow the expansion of slavery on the continent?

"TO COLORED MEN! FREEDOM, PROTECTION, PAY, AND A CALL TO MILITARY DUTY!"

This recruitment poster was aimed at recruiting African-American men into the Union Army to defeat the Confederacy.

