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## The Press and the Prisons: Union and Confederate Newspaper Coverage of Civil War Prisons

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THE PRESS AND THE PRISONS:  
UNION AND CONFEDERATE NEWSPAPER COVERAGE  
OF CIVIL WAR PRISONS  
1861-1865

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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by

Elizabeth C. Bangert

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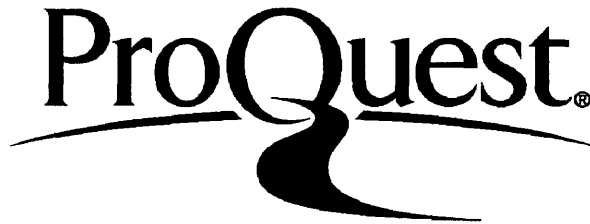
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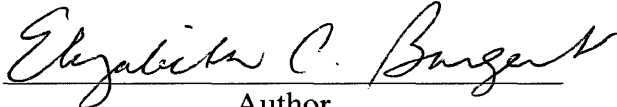
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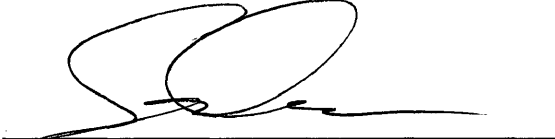
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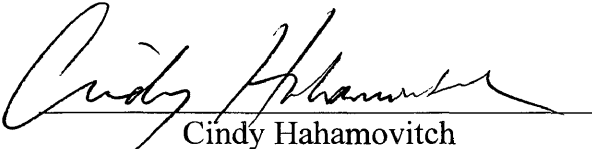
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores press coverage of the prisoner of war crisis during the American Civil War. Broken exchange cartels, lack of time and money, issues of pride and power, as well as overpopulation resulted in overcrowded prisons filled with sick, dying, and emaciated men on both sides of the struggle.

Historian William B. Hesseltine argued that Northern newspapers overstated the privation of prisoners of war, provoking a “war psychosis.” This thesis explores the interaction between the press and events on both sides of the conflict, by examining articles and editorials in the Union and Confederate press. Specifically, this thesis uses six newspapers, including the New York Times, the New York Tribune, the New York Herald, the Richmond Examiner, the Richmond Enquirer, and the Richmond Dispatch. Located in New York and Richmond, these papers had wide access to information, enjoyed large circulation, and commanded attention from politicians and ordinary citizens alike.

The Civil War was the first major American battle that was heavily covered by the American press. War coverage included investigation of and commentary on the prison situation. The press’ opinions, positive and negative, factual and exaggerated, had a significant impact on how Americans viewed the prison systems, the officials who ran them, and the prisoners themselves. The press used the representation of prisoners as a major focus for civilian mobilization, loyalty, enthusiasm, and sometimes outrage.

THE PRESS AND THE PRISONS: UNION AND CONFEDERATE NEWSPAPER  
COVERAGE OF CIVIL WAR PRISONS  
1861-1865



## INTRODUCTION

Of all the conduct that has forever stained and sullied the vesture of Southern chivalry—that has even stripped it of its false garb of honor, and compelled it to stand plainly and undisguisedly in all its infamous blackness before the people of the North—none has been more perfectly characteristic of Southern baseness and inhumanity, than the general treatment of those of our unfortunate soldiers who have fallen into rebel hands as prisoners of war.

-New York Times, October 2, 1864

The suffering to which our brave men have been subjected to by the Yankee demons is enough to melt the heart to tears...It was hoped by our men that they would soon be out of the clutches of the demons who have lorded it over them with a tyranny and cruelty worse than that of the dark ages.

-Richmond Examiner, April 14, 1863

These quotes are excerpts from two articles featured in two mid-nineteenth century newspapers. Similar quotes can be found in thousands of editorials and articles in the print media of the Civil War. While these two newspaper writers stood in opposition to one another in terms of the national conflict, these two writers did share something in common. Both expressed similar feelings on an emotional issue: the suffering of Union and Confederate prisoners during the Civil War.

The prisoners of war issue became a major focus of concern for both the Union and Confederacy during this national conflict. According to Civil War historian William B. Hesseltine, “No controversy ever evoked such emotions as the mutual recriminations between the Northern and Southern partisans over the treatment of prisoners of war.”<sup>1</sup> A cursory examination of the numbers of prisoner narratives found in most college libraries reveals the truth of Hesseltine’s statement.

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<sup>1</sup> William B. Hesseltine, “Civil War Prisons- Introduction,” Civil War History, Volume 8, Number 2 (June, 1962), 117.

One can usually find at least five to ten Civil War prisoner accounts on the shelves. Historians estimate that at least five hundred ex-prisoners of war published books, speeches, articles, pamphlets, and songs about their experiences in Northern and Southern prison camps.<sup>2</sup> Northerners and Southerners, common soldiers and high-ranking officers, educated and uneducated, rich and poor, all wanted to record their prison experiences for history as well as for fame and monetary gain. Many of these memoirs reveal the bitterness of imprisonment and sadness over the enormous loss of life. The Union and Confederate press exacerbated the situation, screaming out for retribution and revenge.

The reasons behind the prisoners' bitterness and the press' outrage stem from the complexity of the prison situation during the Civil War. Clearly, being a prisoner during any war is never enjoyable. Though the laws of civilized warfare require that a surrendering enemy soldier should be given quarter and treated well, prisoners rarely enjoy their stays in enemy territory. For the Civil War prisoner, however, incarceration was not only uncomfortable but also sometimes deadly. During the war over 55,000 or approximately thirty percent of the 400,000 Union and Confederate soldiers taken, died.<sup>3</sup> These high death rates can be attributed to a variety of factors including a lack of quality rations, clean facilities, proper medication, and a lack of space. Both Union and Confederate prisons suffered from such deficiencies.

Nevertheless, many ex-prisoners attributed the high death rates at a number of Union and Confederate prisons to something more than just a lack of good food. Many prisoners on both sides accused their captors of deliberate mistreatment.

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas Gibson Gardner, "Andersonville and American Memory: Civil War Prisoners and Narratives of Suffering and Redemption," (Ph.D. diss., Miami University, 1998), 70.

Returning prisoners went to the newspapers, complaining that they barely survived frequent beatings and the lack of food in overcrowded dirty prisons. Prison wardens supposedly withheld food sent to save prisoners and failed to provide medical care. Their stories must have been quite convincing, considering the numerous newspaper articles and memoirs published.<sup>4</sup> Many people were convinced that prisoners were deliberately mistreated simply by the emaciated appearance of returning prisoners, especially towards the end of the war. Some prisoners never came home, dying in prison. Shocked by this suffering, both Northern and Southern families cried out for retribution. Many families used the press to express their pain and anger.<sup>5</sup>

The pain and anger surrounding the prisoner issue did not end with the war's conclusion. The North won the Civil War and along with the victory earned the power to prosecute Southerners for the abuse of prisoners. Though rebel prisoners may have suffered just as much as Union captives did, the Yankees claimed that only the Confederates were responsible for the murder of prisoners. The Northern press, the public, and the returning captives all called for severe punishments of Southern prison officials. In the end, Captain Henry Wirz, the commandant of Andersonville prison, one of the worst Southern prisons, became the scapegoat for atrocities against Yankee prisoners. On August 23, 1865, Wirz was brought to trial in Washington before a special military commission. He was charged with conspiring with other Southern officials, including the late General John H. Winder, to injure and destroy the lives of Union captives under his care. After a two-month widely publicized trial,

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<sup>3</sup> Hesseltine, "Civil War Prisons- Introduction," 118.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 118. Hesseltine aptly stated, "no prisoner loves his jailer."

<sup>5</sup> Lonnie R. Speer, Portals to Hell: Military Prisons of the Civil War, (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1997), 290.

Wirz was found guilty and sentenced to death. Wirz protested his innocence and at the same time, refused to implicate anyone else as responsible for the abuse of prisoners. He was executed by hanging on November 10, 1865.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, punishing Wirz did not solve the Civil War prison crisis. The allegations of abuse of prisoners remained ugly issues for the reunited country. How did this issue impact America both during and after the Civil War? In order to answer this question, historians have examined prison narratives, letters, and speeches to understand better what it was like to be imprisoned during the war. Experts have also tried to explain why so many men died, looking at archaic medical practices and procedures. At the same time, the lives of prison officials like Henry Wirz have been dissected and explored to find out if they were really the villains that their prisoners made them out to be.

This thesis will be examining a relatively unexplored aspect of the complicated prison crisis. The newspapers of the Civil War era hold important keys to understanding the accusations, lies, and sadness surrounding this national nightmare in our nation's history. The prison situation became a major feature of the Northern and Southern press throughout all four years of conflict. Union and Confederate newspapers investigated the conditions in prisons, interviewing hundreds of returned prisoners and also reprinting letters from men still held captive. The press even went behind the scenes and experienced prison life firsthand, since many field correspondents were taken captive and imprisoned during the war. Newspapers rallied the public's support for the war by reminding them on a daily basis of the bravery and fortitude of the suffering prisoners. The press even encouraged

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 291-292. Wirz's death satisfied the Northern public's need for revenge to an extent.

retaliation on enemy prisoners for the abuse of loyal captives. These newspaper articles provide windows through which we can examine yet another side of the complicated and emotional Civil War. The Union and Confederate press reveal how two nations responded to human suffering with a multitude of emotions, ranging from anger, shock, sadness, and satisfaction. Through the press, we can examine how deeply a civil war can divide a nation.

The first and only historian to examine the press coverage of the prison situation was William B. Hesseltine. His book, Civil War Prisons: A Study in War Psychology, evolved from a dissertation Hesseltine wrote while a doctoral candidate at Ohio State University in the 1920s. Civil War Prisons debunked the theory that Confederates conspired to kill Union prisoners during the war. Instead, Hesseltine argued that the Union had a large hand in bringing about the deterioration of the prison system. While Hesseltine does not exonerate the South from all blame for the prisoners' suffering, he makes readers see that there were two sides to the prison story. Many decisions made by the Union regarding prisoners resulted in more suffering than necessary. In addition, Hesseltine demonstrated that virtual hells like Andersonville were the exception and not the norm among Southern prisons.

Hesseltine incorporated Northern press coverage of the prison crisis to prove that propaganda had a hand in generating the idea that Confederates murdered Union captives. He argued that Union propaganda succeeded in creating a "war psychosis," whereby the North became convinced that Confederates systematically abused and killed prisoners. This "psychosis" had an impact on Union prison officials, most notably, General William Hoffman, Commissary General of Prisoners. Hoffman cut

rations and reduced privileges for rebel prisoners because he and others believed that Southerners were doing the same things to their inmates. When the war ended, the visions of sick and emaciated men, found in every Northern town but also in the pages of newspapers and in U.S. War Department reports, made Northerners succumb to the psychosis even more.<sup>7</sup> As a result, Henry Wirz was executed and hundreds of ex-prisoners sat down to write their remembrances, vilifying the South.

Hesseltine explored this idea of a “war psychosis” in one chapter and in the conclusion of his book. To Hesseltine, the prisoner of war tragedy and war psychosis continued to divide the North and the South in the years following the Civil War. Close to two decades after the war ended, he noted, Union ex-prisoners still refused to let their experiences during the war go untold or unrecognized. In 1880 a bill was introduced into the House of Representatives proposing to pay eight dollars a month to all prisoners who were inmates of any Confederate prisons for more than six months. Ex-prisoners were paid an additional dollar a month for each month over one year’s imprisonment.<sup>8</sup> In this way, aging ex-prisoners hoped to keep their descendants aware of the sufferings they endured while incarcerated “victims” of Southern cruelty. To Hesseltine, the division between the North and the South over the prison issue was perpetuated by old hatreds never allowed to die.

Civil War Prisons presented a convincing argument concerning the Northern press’ influence on the prisoner of war tragedy. This thesis seeks to build on and revise some of Hesseltine’s arguments. While he used several good examples of press propaganda, he used different Union newspapers sporadically. This thesis

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<sup>7</sup> William B. Hesseltine, Civil War Prisons: A Study in War Psychology, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1930), 233.

examines three Union papers, the New York Times, the New York Tribune, and the New York Herald, in-depth and throughout the entire war. By the 1860s, New York was known as the “hub of American newspaperdom.”<sup>9</sup> The Times, the Tribune, and the Herald all enjoyed wide circulation and had access to many resources. While each paper subscribed to different political persuasions, all became vigorous supporters of the war, and more importantly, champions of the Union prisoner of war. This thesis will try to determine whether or not these three diverse newspapers contributed to Hesseltine’s “war psychosis” idea during the Civil War.

Expanding on Hesseltine’s ideas, this thesis will also explore Confederate press coverage of the prisons. As Hesseltine tried to present both sides of the prisoner of war tragedy, this thesis will present both the opinions of the Northern press and of the Southern press. We will look at the newspapers of Richmond, which by the 1860s, made the city of Richmond the “hub of the Confederate news enterprise.”<sup>10</sup> The Richmond Dispatch, the Richmond Examiner, and the Richmond Enquirer were widely read and well respected throughout the South. Though the Southern press industry was considerably smaller than that of the North, these three papers survived amidst a crumbling Confederacy. By 1865, the Confederate States were home to only twenty functioning daily newspapers.<sup>11</sup>

The Richmond press, like the New York papers, made the prison issue a major feature of their news columns. And just as Union papers reprinted captivity accounts

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>9</sup> J. Cutler Andrews, The North Reports the Civil War, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1955), 8.

<sup>10</sup> J. Cutler Andrews, The South Reports the Civil War, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 26.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 44, 504.

and hurled accusations of mistreatment at the South, the Confederate press featured the same accounts of suffering and the same denunciations of the enemy. This thesis endeavors to evaluate the Southern press coverage and determine if indeed the Confederate media tried to influence rebel authorities. Perhaps a comparable “war psychosis” can be found in the Southern press which had an impact on the care of Yankee prisoners.

This thesis is conceptually arranged in a simple manner. Chapter one is a detailed overview of the prison situation, from its early beginnings to its first problems to its ultimate deterioration. This chapter introduces the reader to the important people, places, and things that they will need to know later in the thesis. Chapter two explores the Union press coverage of the prisons, starting out with a brief review of the newspapers’ backgrounds. Newspaper histories are followed by an analysis of the major types of prison stories. Chapter three follows a similar format, only this time looking at strictly Confederate press coverage of the prisons. Finally, the conclusion tries to answer important questions raised by the evidence presented. This thesis encourages readers to evaluate propaganda’s influence on the public and politicians during a national crisis.



## CHAPTER I

### PREPARATION FOR PRISONERS OF WAR

By 1863, the prison situation in both the North and the South had reached crisis proportions. While many factors contributed to the deterioration of the two prison systems, the key to understanding this crisis is the composition of the prisons and prison administrations. From early on in the conflict, both Union and Confederate prison administrations lacked organization, support, supplies, and most critical, time. Prisoners poured in from massive battles like Bull Run, overwhelming the prison system and challenging the good will of both sides. Stubborn politicians made issues worse by refusing to back down on issues of exchange for fear that they would look weak to the enemy and to their people. As a result, the Union and Confederate prison systems constantly teetered on the edge of collapse, never fully providing for prisoners or satisfying critics.

#### **The Early Years**

Prisoners of war became an issue even before the war began. As the Southern states began to secede from the Union, the U.S. military officers stationed in the South became strangers in a foreign land. U.S. forts were seized and for the most part, military officers were allowed to leave peacefully. However, the situation became quite tense in some areas.

The question of prisoners of war first arose in Texas. The state passed an ordinance of secession in February of 1861. At that time, Brevet General David E. Twiggs was in command of U.S. troops in Texas. Texas secessionists appointed four commissioners to meet with Twiggs and other U.S. officers stationed in the state, to

order the surrender of federal property and of U.S. officers. Upon approaching Twiggs and demanding his surrender, Twiggs asked that he and his soldiers be allowed to leave the state with their weapons.<sup>1</sup> Eventually, Texas authorities allowed Twiggs' men to leave with their sidearms only. Twiggs, however, was dismissed by the U.S. Department and replaced by Colonel Carlos A. Waite.<sup>2</sup> Despite many hassles and setbacks, Colonel Waite was able to get most of his men out of Texas; however, the rules changed on April 11, 1861. Rebel authorities ordered Colonel Earl Van Dorn to prevent Union troops from leaving Texas and to regard any soldier that did not enlist in the service of the Confederacy as a prisoner of war. The next day the bombardment of Ft. Sumter began.<sup>3</sup>

The situation in Texas was significant because one of the Union officers taken prisoner would later figure prominently in the Union prison administration. Colonel William Hoffman was a West Point graduate with thirty years military experience when he joined the Texas regiments. He was appointed Lieutenant Colonel of the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry in October 1860 and he assumed command of barracks in San Antonio on February 11, 1861. Colonel Hoffman would later be among the first prisoners of war in this conflict.<sup>4</sup> On April 23, 1861, Hoffman and Colonel Waite and his men were officially taken as prisoners of the Confederate States of America.<sup>5</sup>

Hoffman and Colonel Waite did not remain prisoners for long. They and other officers accepted paroles offered to them on April 24. Basically, in accepting

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<sup>1</sup> Leslie Gene Hunter, "Warden for the Union: General William Hoffman (1807-1884)," (Ph.D. diss., University of Arizona, 1971), 8-9.

<sup>2</sup> William Best Hesseitine, Civil War Prisons: A Study in War Psychology, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1930), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Hunter, 10.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 10.

the parole, the men swore not to “bear arms against the Confederate States of America, nor in any way give aid and comfort to the United States...unless...duly exchanged for other prisoners of war, or until released by the President of the Confederate States.”<sup>6</sup> Having accepted this parole, the men were allowed to leave Texas by way of Galveston and then up the Mississippi River to Union lines. Hoffman and Waite were the lucky ones, however, because a substantial number of the enlisted men were forced to remain in Bexar County, Texas until they could be exchanged.<sup>7</sup>

Situations like the one in Texas played out throughout the newly formed Confederacy in the months leading up to the war. Southerners believed that they had the right to remove “foreigners” from their soil. Northerners maintained that these men should not have to surrender, nor take pledges or oaths. Until war was declared, Union commanders stationed in the South were instructed to consult with the War Department before surrendering. In fact, although General Twiggs tried to consult with his superiors (and received no answer), he was later removed from his post due to a discreditable surrender.<sup>8</sup> The secession crisis thus placed officers stationed in the South in a precarious position. One week they were just men doing their jobs, living in communities that they were probably very familiar with, interacting with civilians on a daily basis. The next week they were considered foreign invaders and, in some cases, made prisoners of war.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>7</sup> Lonnie R. Speer, Prisons to Hell: Military Prisons of the Civil War, (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1997), 4.

<sup>8</sup> Hesseltine, Civil War Prisons, 4.

In the months that followed, federal soldiers in other parts of the newly formed Confederate States of America were made prisoners of war. Their arrest and detainment made both governments aware of the fact that prisoners would be a major issue to contend with in this conflict. In addition, following the Battle of Bull Run in July of 1861, both nations realized that this was not going to be a short or small struggle. This was war and men would be shot, killed, and taken prisoner. Both sides began preparing to take care of prisoners of war, however, the preparations proved to be insufficient. Eventually, more than 150 military prisons came into existence and each one suffered in some way from lack of supplies, poor planning, and overpopulation.

### **Northern Prison Administration**

The supervision and care of prisoners of war fell under the department of the Quartermaster General of the Army, headed by General M.C. Meigs. Meigs, already burdened with supplying the army, petitioned the war department to appoint a Commissary General of Prisoners. Meigs argued that the chosen candidate “should be an accomplished gentlemen...as his office is of high power and importance.” The Commissary General needed to have “knowledge of military law and custom.”<sup>9</sup> General Hoffman was chosen for his long record of service in the U.S. Army and his reputation for being a strict disciplinarian with respect for the military and its laws. In addition, Hoffman, as a paroled prisoner of war, could not serve the U.S. in combat. He was appointed Commissary General of Prisoners in October of 1861.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Hunter, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

The Union's initial problem was finding where to put its first prisoners of war. Since the U.S. lacked military prison facilities, the federal army confined rebel prisoners in a series of old forts along the Atlantic Coast and in other structures temporarily designated as prisons. These prisons soon became overcrowded and unsanitary, and there was no set system of rules, parole, or exchange.<sup>11</sup> Realizing the need for some form of centralized control, Hoffman ordered that all correspondence regarding prisoners go through him. He established a standard set of rules for all prison commandants and instituted regular prison inspections. He also made it his goal to find ideal, low-cost sites for military prisons. One of the first sites he established was Johnson's Island, located in Lake Erie, just north of Sandusky, Ohio.<sup>12</sup> Hoffman would go on to establish prisoner of war camps at Camp Butler in Illinois, Camp Randall in Wisconsin, Camp Douglas in Chicago, and Camp Chase in Ohio. Prisons for Confederate prisoners of war could be found as far north as Massachusetts and as far west as New Mexico.

Hoffman began his work as Commissary General with high hopes. He planned on creating a well-laid out, well-disciplined, sanitary prison system that ran on a strict budget. However, Hoffman's plan, like his counterpart's agenda in the South, fell victim to a lack of time and preparation. Despite the fact that Quartermaster Meigs had requested the appointment of a Commissary General of Prisoners in July of 1861, the office went unfilled until Hoffman's appointment in October of 1861.<sup>13</sup> By then, the Union was already running out of places to put prisoners. At first, New York City was the prisoner of war center of the North. Its

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>12</sup> Speer, 11.

location on major railroads made it a convenient place to deposit prisoners. However, most of the facilities used were not large enough to accommodate the massive influx of captives. By 1864, New York City would be home to thirteen different facilities for Confederate prisoners, and all were overcrowded.<sup>14</sup> Besides New York, Washington, D.C. was also an important Union prison center. Over time, the nation's capital would become the Union's eastern depot prison center.

Hoffman would eventually open, build, or confiscate over 100 camps, sites, or former prisons for use by Confederate prisoners. Though records were not always complete and often inadequate, historians have estimated that during the Civil War the U.S. held a total of 214,865 rebel prisoners.<sup>15</sup> Of those, about twelve percent or 25,796 prisoners died.<sup>16</sup> These appallingly high numbers resulted from a variety of factors. Some explanations are found in the "ignorance of the times."<sup>17</sup> Numerous deaths resulted from a lack of expertise about health, nutrition, and sanitation. In addition, rebel prisoners had been born and raised in warmer climates, and many could not adapt to the much colder North. Homesickness during long imprisonment in "foreign" territory and delirium also killed several imprisoned men.

Prisons also deteriorated because of Hoffman's lack of control over funding for the prison system. Despite his many complaints and pleas, the Quartermaster General's department consistently placed Hoffman's needs and requests as one of their last priorities. For example, when Hoffman proposed to Meigs the construction of a proper sewer system at Camp Douglas, Meigs replied that this would be an

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<sup>13</sup> Hesselstine, 35.

<sup>14</sup> Speer, 33.

<sup>15</sup> William Best Hesselstine, "Civil War Prisons- Introduction," Civil War History, Volume 8, Number 2 (June, 1962), 118.

“extravagant” undertaking and denied his request.<sup>18</sup> The prison, which flooded with every rainstorm, was left the way it was and, as a result, the death toll continued to rise.

Hoffman’s efforts were also hampered by a lack of control over his own department and men. Leslie Gene Hunter explains how Hoffman’s lack of rank and military prestige hampered his efforts in caring for the prisoners. In July 1863, an angry Hoffman complained to the Secretary of War that, although he was in charge of all the Union prisons, some of the prison commandants outranked him. These commandants sometimes ignored Hoffman’s orders and a few did not even know that Hoffman was indeed in charge.<sup>19</sup>

As a result, the Northern prison system became disorganized and was ill-prepared to care for prisoners. In turn, Hoffman received criticism on all fronts, despite his best efforts. The Confederate government alleged that the North deliberately mistreated prisoners, inaugurating of policy of “deliberate, uncivilized brutality.”<sup>20</sup> Hoffman countered accusations of brutality constantly throughout the war, arguing, “all these prisoners are treated with as much attention and kindness as is consistent with their position, and no harsh treatment is permitted.”<sup>21</sup> In fact, Northern officials and many Union newspapers condemned the prison administration for treating the prisoners too well. The ultimate results of all this bickering and

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<sup>16</sup> Speer, xiv.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., xv.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>19</sup> Hunter, 152.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. War Department, War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894-1899), Series II, Vol. VI, pp. 267, hereafter referred to as O.R., with all references to Series II unless otherwise noted.

<sup>21</sup> Hunter, 127.

accusations were the deaths of thousands of prisoners and a legacy of hate between Americans that lasted long after the Civil War.

### **Southern Prison Administration**

Shortly after the Civil War began, Jefferson Davis had the foresight to begin making plans to accommodate prisoners of war. Davis instructed his Secretary of War, Leroy P. Walker, to write to Southern governors about the possibilities of finding suitable prisons in their states. Unfortunately, Davis' foresight did not result in a well-organized and prepared prison system. Amazingly, the South never formally assigned a commander over all Confederate prisons until 1864.<sup>22</sup>

As a result, the South was even more disorganized than the North in terms of the care of prisoners. Unexpectedly, one thousand prisoners became the wards of the Confederacy after the Battle of Bull Run. Having no other place to house these unfortunate men, it was decided that they should be placed in unused Richmond tobacco factories.<sup>23</sup> Davis placed Brigadier General John H. Winder in charge of their care. Winder had been a major in the United States Army, however, after Fort Sumter he resigned his commission and went to Richmond in search of work in the Confederate army.<sup>24</sup> Winder was offered the rank of brigadier general and was made inspector general of the Richmond military camps and provost marshal of the city.<sup>25</sup> Winder's responsibilities included everything from taking care of and dealing with deserters, spies, rowdy citizens, and running all of the Confederate prisons in the

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<sup>22</sup> Speer, xvii.

<sup>23</sup> Hesseltine, Civil War Prisons, 57.

<sup>24</sup> Sarah Annette Duffy, "Military Administrator: The Controversial Life of Brigadier General John Henry Winder, C.S.A.," (M.A. thesis, Creighton University, 1961), 40. Winder resigned on April 27, 1861.

<sup>25</sup> Arch Fredric Blakey, General John H. Winder, C.S.A., (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1990), 45.



vicinity of Richmond, plus undefined supervision of prisons outside of the capital.<sup>26</sup> Eventually, Winder would assume control over all of the prisons and prisoners of war east of the Mississippi River.

In the beginning, Confederate officials had originally intended to use Richmond as a distribution point for all prisoners of war. Few large prisons existed in Richmond, much less throughout the entire South. After filling up the city's tobacco factories with prisoners, Winder claimed nearby Belle Isle, a former island retreat for the wealthy, for use as a prison in June of 1862. Lacking buildings, Belle Isle was instead a stockade-type prison. Prisoners and guards were housed in tents surrounded by artillery, an arrangement Winder later used in the infamous Andersonville prison in Georgia. Without prison buildings, inmates lacked shelter and protection from the elements. The mortality rates at Andersonville, Belle Isle, and other prisons like these would be considerably higher than more conventional detention facilities.<sup>27</sup> Andersonville was used as a prison for only two years and in that short amount of time over 12,000 prisoners died within its fences.<sup>28</sup>

General Winder's attempts to organize and create a prisoner of war system were hampered by a lack of funds, a lack of cooperation, and a lack of skill and experience. Confederate officials did very little to help Winder and adopted a "not in my neighborhood" ideology when it came to establishing prisons in their jurisdictions. He lacked qualified and committed prison guards. In addition, Winder soon found that the care and supervision of prisoners ranked as a low priority on the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>27</sup> Speer, 12.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 332.

Confederate agenda.<sup>29</sup> Like Hoffman, Winder's requests for funding and aid were often turned down. Winder wrote to the Commissary General department complaining,

I respectfully beg leave to again call attention to the report of the Subsistence Department declining to pay the bills connected with the prisoners. It is very annoying and mortifying to have those bills returned in this way, and if continued the business of the prisons cannot be carried on.<sup>30</sup>

Winder and the Commissary General of the Subsistence Department, Lucius B Northrop, were constantly arguing over provisions for prisoners.<sup>31</sup>

Winder would continue complaining about lack of support throughout the war. For example, in July of 1864 Winder's cousin, Captain Richard Winder was busy working as the Quartermaster of Andersonville prison. He had been there since January and had received little financial or military support from the Richmond authorities. Captain Winder sent General Winder a desperate letter, asking him to forward it to Confederate Treasury officials. Captain Winder pleaded, "I am so seriously in need of funds that I do not know what I shall do. For God's sake send me \$100,000 for prisoners of war and \$75,000 for pay of officers and troops stationed here."<sup>32</sup> Neither Captain Winder nor General Winder received sufficient aid and, as a result, Andersonville and many other Southern prisons became what Lonnie Speer calls, "Portals to Hell." Of the 193,743 Union soldiers taken captive, over 30,000 or 15.5 percent died in Southern prisons.<sup>33</sup> Many died of the same causes as those victims in the North: disease, starvation, homesickness, and delirium. Death was

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<sup>29</sup> Blakey, 57.

<sup>30</sup> O.R. Vol. III, p. 892.

<sup>31</sup> Duffy, 53.

<sup>32</sup> Blakey, 189.

<sup>33</sup> Hesseltine, "Civil War Prisons-Introduction," 118.

probably more likely for a prisoner in the South due to the Confederacy's lack of food for their own people and the Northern blockade which restricted medicines and drugs to help the wounded.

As with Hoffman, Winder was criticized by Confederate and Union newspapers, the public, and politicians. The press often accused Winder of treating Union prisoners too well. When Winder impressed large amounts of flour that had been destined for Richmond markets, the Southern press accused him of "insane tyranny."<sup>34</sup> His struggle to feed the burgeoning prison population in Richmond was deemed insufficient by the North, who often referred to Winder as a cold, callous tyrant whose main objective was murdering all Union prisoners by starvation. Investigations by the U.S. Sanitary Commission lent credence to Northern accusations. Investigators found dirty prisons with high mortality rates. The commission concluded that "no prison or penitentiary ever seen by [us] in a Northern state equaled, in cheerlessness, unhealthiness, and paucity of rations issued, either of the military prisons of Richmond, Virginia."<sup>35</sup> As we will see, the opposition press vilified both Winder and Hoffman, accusing them and their governments of deliberately mistreating and killing prisoners.

### **Rules of Incarceration**

Though war is almost always chaotic and unpredictable, there are certain "rules" of modern warfare. First and foremost, although prisoners of war were the enemy, they deserved quarter, protection, and sufficient provisions for their welfare. As Hesseltine states, "prisoners of war shall be treated with humanity... [they] must

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<sup>34</sup> Blakey, 161.

<sup>35</sup> O.R. Vol. VI, p. 119.

be supported at the expense of the captor; they must receive the same care in respect to food and clothing as that accorded to the soldiers of the capturing army.”<sup>36</sup>

Prisoners of war in ancient times did not enjoy these same privileges. The Aztecs killed and sacrificed their prisoners to the gods. Greeks and Romans enslaved their captives. By the time of the American Revolution, prisoners enjoyed more “rights.” Although a prisoner might be subjected to indefinite imprisonment and required to agree to certain parole conditions, his life was usually protected.

The prisoner also possessed more options in securing his freedom in modern times. By the Revolutionary War, the policy of exchange had become universally accepted. Exchange involved two opposing armies exchanging captives, grade for grade and man for man. In this way, prisoners of war had more of chance of getting home alive. Now, the prisoner had the option of exchange along with the often precarious choices of escape or recapture. In addition, exchange alleviated the burden of caring for prisoners and it allowed one’s army to regain men.

### **History, the Exchange Issue, and the U.S. Civil War**

At the beginning of the Civil War, the United States and the Confederacy probably intended on following the rules of civilized warfare. Unfortunately, issues of status, recognition, and the “ideal soldier” often prevented the Civil War from being anything but civil. The issue of the legal status of seceded states would be one that contributed to the mass failure of the prison system and prisoner exchange. That is, the United States refused to recognize the Confederacy’s right to secede from the Union. Lincoln declared that those who seceded from the Union were not asserting their rights under the Constitution but instead engaging in traitorous actions against

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<sup>36</sup> Hesselstine, Civil War Prisons, 1.

the United States of America. Therefore, traitors were not protected under the rules of civilized warfare.<sup>37</sup> In terms of prisoners of war, this refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the Confederacy meant that the United States would not engage in prisoner exchange and would view all captives taken as guilty of treason, not simply as prisoners of war. The penalty for treason was death.

This issue of recognition and treason in war was not new to United States history. During the American Revolution, the British regarded the conflict as an insurrection and thereby “believed that the rules of conflict and the issue of what to do about prisoners did not apply.”<sup>38</sup> The British government feared that a general exchange of prisoners would give official recognition to the American Colonies as a sovereign power. Despite the fact that exchange commissioners were appointed for both sides, the Revolution did not see one official exchange of prisoners. Informal exchanges took place between commanders and finally, a year after the fighting ended, a general liberation of all prisoners was procured on April 15, 1783.<sup>39</sup>

During the War of 1812 issues of treason and recognition of who was a prisoner came into play. The British and the U.S. instituted no official policy on the treatment of prisoners or the procedure for exchanges. Each side tended to treat captives as they believed their own prisoners were being treated (a practice that would be repeated during the Civil War). Some were exchanged and paroled while others were kept in irons. When the British captured 23 Irish Americans in October of 1812, the Crown declared that these men were disloyal British subjects and would not be accorded the rights of prisoners of war. The Irish officers would be sent to

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>38</sup> Speer, 98.

England and tried for treason. The U.S. responded by taking 23 British officers hostage. Threats of retaliation flew back and forth across the Atlantic. On December 12, 1813 the British decreed that all captured American officers, regardless of rank, would be placed in close confinement.<sup>40</sup>

The War of 1812 prisoner issue had direct implications on the Civil War prisoner situation. The issue also touched the family of General Winder. Winder's father, William Henry Winder, had served as a brigadier general in the United States Army. Winder was taken captive at the battle of Stoney Creek on the Niagara frontier in June of 1813. Under the British proclamation, Winder was placed in close confinement and under a sentence of death. Winder, an adept negotiator, persuaded the British to give him a parole of sixty days during which he could meet with U.S. officials to try to resolve the exchange issue. Winder left his prison in January of 1814. When he returned he had been named the U.S. representative in all negotiations for prisoner exchange.<sup>41</sup> He met with the British exchange commissioner, Colonel Edward Baynes, upon returning to his Quebec prison on his honor under parole. Winder told Baynes that the twenty-three British hostages would not be released until the American hostages were freed. Finally, on April 15, 1814, both parties agreed on a mutual exchange of all prisoners. The "Winder cartel" went into effect on May 15, 1814.<sup>42</sup> This same "Winder cartel" would be used as the basis of the Civil War exchange cartel created in 1862.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>40</sup> Blakey, 17.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 153.

Many of the policies and practices of the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 in regards to prisoners of war would be repeated in the U.S. Civil War. Like the British, Lincoln and his Administration feared that a general exchange of prisoners would officially recognize the Confederacy as sovereign. Lincoln thus refused a general exchange and many of Lincoln's generals agreed with him. When Brigadier General U.S. Grant was asked in October of 1861 to participate in an informal exchange of prisoners with a Confederate general he refused, replying, "In regard to the exchange of prisoners, I recognize no Southern Confederacy." Brigadier General Charles F. Smith reacted the same way when approached by an enemy general wishing for exchange. He stated that, "To exchange prisoners would imply that the United States government admitted the existing war to be one between independent nations. This I cannot admit."<sup>44</sup>

Despite this official refusal to exchange prisoners, some U.S. and Confederate generals did allow informal exchanges on the battlefield. Many felt it was much cheaper to not have to care for and supervise enemy prisoners. In addition, many commanding officers justified exchange on the "grounds of humanity."<sup>45</sup> One of the first formal, but officially unsanctioned exchange of prisoners took place at Bird's Point, Missouri between Union Colonel William Wallace and Brigadier General Gideon Pillow of the Confederacy. On September 3, 1861 the two men met to exchange their prisoners. This unofficial act became a precedent for future unofficial

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<sup>44</sup> Speer, 98.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 100.

exchanges. Many commanding officers cited the Wallace and Pillow exchange procedures in designing their own methods of informal exchange later on in the war.<sup>46</sup>

### **A Crisis is Born**

The exchange issue would not be resolved by intermittent and informal battlefield exchanges however. As prisons began filling up, both governments felt the strain to provide care and provisions for many more mouths to feed. In addition, the status of navies brought the exchange problem into the national spotlight. Shortly after the war began, President Jefferson Davis announced that he would issue letters of “marque and reprisal” to anyone who wanted to engage private vessels against the United States. Shortly following this announcement, Lincoln declared that all vessels captured by the U.S. while under these letters of marque and reprisal would be considered guilty of piracy and punished according to the law. Punishment for piracy was death.<sup>47</sup> During the month of June, Lincoln’s proclamation was tested twice. A U.S. ship captured a small C.S.A. schooner named the “Savannah.” The crew of the “Savannah” was found with letters of marque and reprisal, and they were confined and accused of piracy.<sup>48</sup> Following the “Savannah” arrest, another Confederate brig was captured. U.S. forces detained the “Jeff Davis” brigantine commanded by Captain Walter Smith. Smith and his fellow privateers were placed in irons in Philadelphia to await their trial.<sup>49</sup>

Upon hearing of their capture and knowing that death sentences would be their likely punishments, Davis responded with fury. He threatened Lincoln that if

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>47</sup> Duffy, 53.

<sup>48</sup> Hesselstine, Civil War Prisons, 9.

<sup>49</sup> Blakey, 56.



any of the “Savannah” or “Jeff Davis” crews were harmed, Davis would retaliate on the Union prisoners he held at Richmond. After the Battle of Bull Run, Davis had received an influx of captives on which he could carry out his threats of retaliation. The privateers issue would alter the prisoner of war situation and help establish an effective exchange program between the North and South. Lincoln was now under pressure. As we will see in subsequent chapters, Union newspapers across the nation petitioned Lincoln to budge on the exchange question in favor of saving the Union prisoners. Why sacrifice innocent Union captives for a matter of principle? Still, Lincoln would not change his mind. The Confederacy even released 57 wounded men from Bull Run as a “token act of humanity,” to initiate exchange. Lincoln sent back an equal number of wounded rebel prisoners, but he declared that this would be an isolated act of humanity. Lincoln remained firm in his belief that exchange meant recognition of the Confederacy.<sup>50</sup> Union officers argued that the mere taking of prisoners was recognition of the legitimacy of the CSA. Prisoners from Bull Run now confined in Richmond drew up a petition asking that Lincoln procure their release through exchange. Still there was no response from the U.S. government.

The piracy issue dragged on into October and November of 1861. The “Savannah” crew was tried in New York but the jury could not reach an agreement. Captain Smith of the “Jeff Davis” was found guilty of piracy and sentenced to death. Meanwhile, the Confederacy moved to enforce its threats of retaliation. Jefferson Davis made an announcement concerning the issue on November 9, 1861:

The putting to death of prisoners of war is regarded as murder by all civilized nations, and it was considered certain that the judgement of mankind would be sufficient to deter the enemy from the commission

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 62.

of such a crime. When, however, some of our fellow citizens were captured on privateers they were treated as felons...Under these circumstances the following order was issued by the Department: 'Brig. Gen. John H. Winder...Sir: You are hereby instructed to choose by lot from among the prisoners of war of highest rank one who is to be confined in a cell appropriated to convicted felons, and who is to be treated in all respects as if such convict, and to be held for execution in the same manner as may be adopted by the enemy for the execution for the prisoner of war, Smith, recently condemned to death in Philadelphia.'<sup>51</sup>

General Winder was also ordered by Davis to select by lot thirteen other high-ranking prisoners in his custody. These men were selected to await the verdict of the "Savannah" case. On November 10, Winder did as commanded and selected fourteen of his highest-ranking prisoners. He then asked Congressman Alfred Ely of New York, a prisoner taken during the Battle of Bull Run, to select by lot the person who would be held in retaliation for Smith. Ely drew and selected Colonel Michael Corcoran of the 69<sup>th</sup> New York Militia. Corcoran was well known among the Irish community in New York. He and his fellow hostages were taken to the Henrico County Jail in Virginia, and later to Castle Pinckney in Charleston to await their executions.<sup>52</sup>

The Union flew into a frenzy. Soldiers' families and friends demanded that the government do something to save the prisoners. Union officers, both free and imprisoned, begged the government to soften its hardline policy. Even Union General H.W. Halleck, a known expert on international law, argued that the United States should allow prisoner exchange. He claimed that, "This exchange is mere military convention...the exchange of prisoners of war is only a part of the ordinary

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<sup>51</sup> O.R. Vol. III, p. 820-821.

<sup>52</sup> Hesseltine, Civil War Prisons, 13-14.

‘Commercia belli.’”<sup>53</sup> As seen later, the press would argue that an official refusal to exchange prisoners would discourage enlistments. If prospective recruits knew that they would face long imprisonments if captured, they might think twice about volunteering for military service.<sup>54</sup>

Eventually, under pressure from public opinion and Union newspapers, Lincoln and his Administration agreed to consider the possibility of a general exchange with the Confederacy. On December 11, 1861 Congress passed a joint resolution declaring the following: since exchanges had already been practiced indirectly; since enlistments would be adversely affected by lack of a general exchange policy; since exchange is a humane policy; and most importantly, since indirect exchange does not involved a recognition of the Confederacy as a legitimate government, Lincoln should continue these “indirect exchanges” immediately.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, battlefield exchanges would continue and be encouraged. However, there still was no general exchange policy.

The general exchange and hostage issue would drag on into 1862. Small, “indirect” exchanges continued to occur between the two armies. Although the U.S. War Department continued to regard these exchanges as “unofficial,” the department did begin to acknowledge them and instructed commanding officers to participate in battlefield exchanges. In addition, a breakthrough came about in the hostage issue in late January 1862 when the U.S. government reversed its policy on the privateers of the “Savannah” and “Jeff Davis.” The U.S. announced that it would now regard the

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>54</sup> Will be discussed in Chapter 2, however, newspaper citations include the New York Times, September 8, 1861, July 24, 1862, and March 31, 1864

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 16.

seamen as prisoners of war and treat them accordingly.<sup>56</sup> Finally, both the United States and the Confederacy appointed commissioners of exchange. Major General John E. Wool of the Union and Confederate Brigadier General Howell Cobb were appointed by their respective governments to reach an agreement on a general exchange. However, these men failed to procure a general exchange agreement that both sides would accept.<sup>57</sup>

Since Wool and Cobb could not come to an agreement, both men were replaced. The Union appointed John A. Dix as an exchange commissioner, while the Confederacy chose Daniel H. Hill. Finally, over one year since the privateer incident took place, a general exchange cartel was agreed upon on July 22, 1862. Basically, the agreement stated that prisoners of war would be exchanged on a man for man, rank for rank basis. There would also be a scale of equivalents if lower ranks were exchanged for higher ranks. For example, one general equaled sixty privates.<sup>58</sup> Locations for exchange were also agreed upon. In the east, City Point, Virginia was designated a point of exchange. In the west, Vicksburg, Mississippi was chosen. The cartel brought Colonel Corcoran and his fellow hostages home to New York, while the Confederate privateers finally returned to the South after a year in captivity.

Both governments appointed two exchange agents, one for the east and one for the west. These men would meet, compare lists of prisoners, and supervise the exchanges. Many different men occupied these appointments, basically because exchanges often failed throughout this war. The only person with any staying power

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>57</sup> Speer, 102.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 103.

was Colonel Robert Ould, the Confederate exchange agent in the east. Ould stayed in his position for the duration of the war.

The constant turnover among exchange agents and commissioners was due largely to the fact that, despite the cartel, the prisoner of war exchange system was constantly plagued with problems. Union officers were accused of miscalculating ranks in exchanges. For example, a Union commandant at Fort Warren Prison argued that he should be getting 480 privates for one brigadier general and thirty privates for one captain.<sup>59</sup> These gross miscalculations tested the security and wherewithal of the exchange cartel.

Another issue that harmed the exchange cartel was the issue of parole. According to the rules of war, under the parole system a captive would sign an oath not to take up arms against their captors until they were formally exchanged for an enemy prisoner of equal rank. In a perfect world, exchanges should take place within ten days of capture. However, during the early years of the Civil War, a prisoner would often have to wait as long as thirty days to be formally exchanged. In 1861 and part of 1862, most parolees were sent home to wait notice of their exchange or sent to a parole camp.<sup>60</sup> Both the Union and Confederacy captured more and more prisoners and this increasingly caused difficulties. By the cartel agreement of July 1862 the Union held approximately 20,000 Confederate prisoners while the South held between 9,000 to 12,000 Union captives.<sup>61</sup> Mountains of paperwork piled up and men were often “lost” in the system. Parolees languished at parole camps waiting for news. The North accused the South of sending paroled rebel soldiers

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 104.

back into the field before they were officially exchanged. In addition, both sides found that some of their soldiers were purposely being captured in order to be sent back home. The entire system was in disarray due to poor management, lack of time and planning, and most of all because of mistrust between the two governments.

However, these problems of planning and calculating did not do as much damage as did allegations of atrocities on the part of both governments. For example, shortly following the establishment of the cartel, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton issued orders allowing his military leaders stationed in Virginia to confiscate and use any property necessary to their command. Living off the land and resources of the South was cheaper and reduced the need for sending supplies from the North.<sup>62</sup>

Later, Major General John Pope, the new commander of the Army of Virginia, issued several orders in July 1862 that infuriated Southerners. Pope authorized his officers

to seize rebel property without compensation, to shoot captured guerrillas who had fired on Union troops, to expel from occupied territory any civilians who refused to take the oath of allegiance, and to treat them as spies if they returned.<sup>63</sup>

Southerners complained rigorously against these atrocities and threatened to limit exchange. Davis threatened that if any of Pope's officers were captured they would not be treated as prisoners of war but as felons. Union officials shot back arguing that the South should not accuse the North of arresting innocent citizens when the Confederate government made it standard policy since the beginning of the war to

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>62</sup> Stephen V. Ash, When the Yankees Came: Conflict and Chaos in the Occupied South, 1861-1865, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 54. Ash states that Pope's policy would help the Union forces "abandon the cumbersome policy of trying to supply themselves wholly from the North so as to avoid levying on Southern civilians and instead use the South as a major source of sustenance, taking food and forage, livestock and equipment, in whatever amounts were needed."

<sup>63</sup> James M. McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 501.

arrest and abuse Unionists. The North also condemned the South for demanding that guerrillas be considered prisoners of war when captured, since the South supposedly discouraged and condemned guerrilla warfare.

The South also threatened retaliation against another U.S. officer if he ever became a prisoner of the Confederate States. General Benjamin F. Butler had been stationed in New Orleans since April 1862, overseeing the occupation forces in that city. Butler had issued a series of orders that greatly infuriated the Southern people. He was already hated throughout the South for creating the phrase, “contraband of war,” and applying it to runaway slaves entering Federal lines. Butler first used the phrase in Virginia at Fortress Monroe. Three slaves escaped from Confederate fortifications to Butler’s lines. When a Confederate colonel came to claim the men and citing the fugitive slave law, Butler argued that since Virginia claimed to be out of the Union, the law did not apply.<sup>64</sup>

Butler continued to infuriate the South. He issued a second order, this time threatening Southern belles. Butler’s infamous “Woman Order” stated that any New Orleans female who insulted a Union soldier would be treated as “a woman of the town plying her avocation.”<sup>65</sup> Finally, Butler committed the ultimate atrocity in the eyes of the Southern people. Butler executed a citizen of New Orleans, William B. Mumford, for taking down a U.S. flag from a government building after the capture of New Orleans by the Yankees. For this outrage and many others, Davis made a proclamation on December 24, 1862 condemning Butler and ending exchange. He declared Butler a felon and an outlaw for the murder of Mumford and ordered that,

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 355.

<sup>65</sup> Ash, 198.

“no commissioned officer of the United States taken captive shall be released on parole before exchange until the said Butler shall have met with due punishment for his crime.”<sup>66</sup> Davis’ intended punishment for Butler was death by hanging. “Butler the Beast,” as he was known, became one of the most hated men in the South, second only to Sherman.<sup>67</sup> The Confederates would never capture Butler. He later was removed from his post in New Orleans and made a commissioner of exchange for the United States in late 1863.<sup>68</sup>

Secretary Stanton responded to Davis’ proclamation by suspending the exchange of all commissioned officers on December 28, 1862.<sup>69</sup> Despite this suspension, a few exchanges did continue and official exchanges would commence in late 1863. However, the cartel that had been so long in coming would ultimately fail.

### **Emancipation, Black Troops, and Exchange**

Many issues throughout 1862 tested the integrity of the exchange cartel. The issue of black soldiers would be a major contributing factor to the breakdown of the cartel and bring an end to all hopes of exchange for an extended period of time. Emancipation of the slaves had been an issue since before the war. Towards the latter part of 1862, Lincoln began making plans to officially deliver his Emancipation Proclamation, thereby freeing African Americans throughout the Confederate States of America. He also called for the active recruiting of black men for the Union army.

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<sup>66</sup> Hesseltine, Civil War Prisons, 86.

<sup>67</sup> The Richmond Examiner, February 11, 1864.

<sup>68</sup> Hesseltine, Civil War Prisons, 113, 210. Butler was appointed by General Halleck on Dec. 17, 1863. The United States officially halted exchanges in May 1863; however, public pressure forced exchanges to begin again later in the year. Hesseltine states that “The appointment of Butler [as exchange agent] was a concession to the demand of the people of the North that something should be done to obtain the release of the prisoners in the South.” Butler was a well-known politician who, after badgering government officials, earned his commission as exchange agent. His appointment infuriated the South.

<sup>69</sup> Speer, 105.



Lincoln made a preliminary announcement of his emancipation plans in September of 1862, causing a ruckus in the Confederate Congress. Confederate officials saw Lincoln's declarations as proof that the U.S. wanted to crush the South by inciting a "servile insurrection."<sup>70</sup>

President Jefferson Davis knew that Lincoln had set January 1, 1863 as the date for emancipation. He also knew that the Union army had already begun mustering black troops. Shortly after his proclamation concerning Butler, Davis also issued a statement on black troops.

All negro slaves captured in arms be at once delivered over to the executive authorities of the respective States to which they belong, to be dealt with according to the laws of said States...that the like orders be executed in all cases with respect to all commissioned officers of the United States when found serving in company with said slaves in insurrection against the authorities of the different States of this Confederacy.<sup>71</sup>

Under Confederate state law, punishments for black officers included execution or being returned to their "former owners," even if they had been free blacks prior to the Civil War. The white officers in command of black troops would be charged with inciting servile insurrection. The penalty for this crime was death.<sup>72</sup>

Lincoln did not heed Davis' threats of retaliation. Instead, he issued the Emancipation Proclamation as planned and came up with a few threats of his own. Lincoln warned Davis that if any U.S. troops, black or white, were harmed after being taken prisoner, captured Confederates would meet a similar fate. This volley of threats often did not protect black soldiers and their white commanders. Often, black

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<sup>70</sup> Hesselstine, Civil War Prisons, 86-87.

<sup>71</sup> New York Times, December 28, 1862.

<sup>72</sup> Speer, 105.

soldiers were shot during or immediately after surrendering. Their white commanders were also cut down, though the South denied these acts.

In terms of the exchange cartel, the decrees of retaliation seriously disrupted the system. Union and Confederate exchange commissioners met in January of 1863 to see what could be done. Since Davis had made his official declaration against African American troops on January 12, the commissioners agreed to exchange all officers captured prior to that date.<sup>73</sup> The cartel was doomed however. Due to increasing reports of brutality towards black prisoners and murders of white commanding officers, the U.S. decided to end all exchanges on May 25, 1863.<sup>74</sup>

The issue of black troops is blamed for ending prisoner exchange. In many ways, the use of black troops did weaken the cartel. White Southerners could not accept that blacks could be soldiers, much less deserve the same treatment as white prisoners. The Union was bound to protect all its soldiers, regardless of color and to prevent a drop in enlistments. However, some historians allege that the exchange system was doomed to fail despite the black troops issue. Lonnie Speer argues that the halt of prisoner exchange by the Union was also inspired by a desire to end the war quickly. Speer and others contend that several Union authorities, including Secretary Stanton and General Grant, believed that prisoner exchange prolonged the war because it reinforced Confederate armies. The South was often accused (and sometimes rightly so) of returning paroled prisoners to the battlefield before they were officially declared exchanged. In this way, the Confederates did not have to wait for the long arduous completion of the parole process. By ending exchanges,

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<sup>73</sup> Blakey, 161.

<sup>74</sup> Speer, 105.

Grant and Stanton believed that this would deprive the Southern armies of soldiers.

Grant argued,

I have seen from the Southern papers that a system of retaliation is going on in the South which they keep from us and which we should stop in some way. On the subject of exchange...every man we hold, when released on parole or otherwise, becomes an active soldier against us at once either directly or indirectly. If we commence a system of exchange which liberates all prisoners taken, we will have to fight on until the whole South is exterminated. If we hold those caught they amount to no more than dead men.<sup>75</sup>

Therefore, concerns about the duration of this bloody war also contributed to the ending of prisoner exchange.

The Union and the Confederacy would not officially exchange another prisoner until early 1865. There would be a few “special exchanges” along the way, but these did nothing to ameliorate the horrific prison conditions created by the ban on prisoner exchange. Newspapers, the public, and many historians blamed the exchange issue for the deaths of thousands of prisoners during the Civil War.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has endeavored to explain the prisoner of war situation during the Civil War. Due to lack of planning, lack of time, a refusal to cooperate, and mistrust, the prisoner of war situation became a national nightmare. Early on, the issue was, if exchanges were allowed, would this amount to an official recognition of the Confederacy as a separate nation? Lincoln circumvented this question by arguing that in this special situation, exchange did not equal recognition. Rebel prisoners taken would still be considered traitors; however, they would be cared for and allowed to be exchanged. Davis’ threats of retaliation forced Lincoln to accept that

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 115.

prisoners taken in this war should enjoy all the rules of civilized warfare. However, Lincoln still did not consider the South a separate nation, but instead an insurgent mass of traitors. These traitors would be allowed to engage in some aspects of “civilized warfare,” namely, prisoner exchange. However, the exchange cartel was never a perfect agreement. Issues of parole hurt the system. In 1863, the South’s refusal to treat captured African American soldiers as prisoners of war killed exchange for a time. In addition, the Union’s belief that exchange prolonged the war made Grant and other officials hesitant to fix the faulty exchange cartel.

Throughout the entire war, both the North and South accused one another of brutality towards captives. While some of these allegations probably were true, most mistreatment was unintended and due more to a lack of supplies and prison space. These allegations did inspire retaliation against innocent prisoners though, in the form of reduced rations, restricted sutlers, and sometimes brutal treatment.

The implications of the prisoner of war situation and the failed prisoner exchange cartel became the subject of countless newspaper articles and editorials throughout the North and South. The issue affected national pride and honor on both sides. The issue questioned the rules of civilized warfare and brought up hateful feelings towards former fellow countrymen. Newspapers created images of suffering prisoners of war that inspired two nations to call for bloody retaliation and accuse one another of horrific atrocities. This chapter has explained the prisoner of war situation during the Civil War. Now we will examine how this issue played out on the pages of six newspapers during this bloody and unforgiving conflict.

## CHAPTER II

### THE UNION PRESS AND THE PRISONS

In 1861, thousands of soldiers from the United States and the Confederacy went to war. At the same time, the press from both sides also went into battle. The press' mission was to cover a national conflict that became so grand, so bloody, so costly, and so long that many people as well as several newspapers would not survive the fight. On the eve of the war, the papers of New York City stood ready to cover the action. This chapter will explore how three of New York's newspapers, the New York Times, the New York Tribune, and the New York Herald covered one aspect of the Civil War. Beyond the battlefield, many stories could be found in Union and Confederate military prisons. There were accounts of pain and suffering as well as stories of revenge and remorse. There were even a few articles about joy and happiness. Newspapermen set out to find these stories and bring them home to the public. The press also used their coverage of the prisons to criticize Union and Confederate policy, to motivate readers to support the war, and to call for harsh measures to punish wrongdoers. In many ways, the Northern press became the champion of the Union prisoner of war.

Prior to examining newspaper coverage of the prisons, this chapter will briefly explore the three papers individually. Knowing whether a newspaper is conservative or liberal, pro-Union or secession sympathizer, independent or politically affiliated, may help explain how a paper responded to the prison issue. Newspapers known as "Administration Papers" tended to favor and support the Lincoln government on

every issue, while “Copperheads” were Northern papers that supported the right of secession. Most newspapers fell somewhere between these two extremes. At the same time, however, newspapers sometimes strayed from their usual standpoints during times of crisis.

### **The Giants of Newspaperdom**

Though the Times, the Tribune, and the Herald were each unique newspapers, they all shared one thing in common: they were all penny papers. A concept conceived in 1833 by Benjamin H. Day, the penny paper was an inexpensive newspaper that sought to provide “news for the masses.”<sup>1</sup> Of the three New York papers, the Herald was the first penny paper. Created in 1835 by James G. Bennett, a Scottish immigrant, the Herald would go on to earn the prestigious designation of being the most widely read paper in the world during the mid-nineteenth century, with a circulation of 77,000.<sup>2</sup> Bennett, like other penny press editors, refused to ally himself with any political faction. He stated that the Herald, “shall support no party— be the organ of no faction or coterie, and care nothing for any election, or any candidate from President down to Constable.”<sup>3</sup> However, despite this declaration of neutrality, the Herald, as well as the Times and the Tribune rarely refrained from participating in the political arena or taking sides on a partisan issue.

The Herald epitomized the successful penny paper. When the Herald was a year old, Bennett claimed that the paper had a daily circulation of 10,080, at least

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<sup>1</sup> Charles E. Clark and Michael Schudson, Three Hundred Years of the American Newspaper, ed. John B. Hench, (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1991), 383, 422.

<sup>2</sup> Sidney Kobre, Foundations of American Journalism, (Tallahassee: Florida State University, 1958), 307.

<sup>3</sup> Willard Bleyer, Main Currents in the History of American Journalism, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1927), 186.

50,000 regular readers, and a net revenue of \$30,000. While Bennett was known for his tendency to exaggerate, historian James Crouthamel argues that “there is no question of Bennett’s material success.”<sup>4</sup> People became attracted to Bennett’s paper because of its cheap price, sensational crime news, and variety of news features.<sup>5</sup>

While the Herald focused on crime and scandals in the news in order to cultivate a readership and make a profit, the New York Tribune also covered sensational news but with a different end in mind. The Tribune, founded in 1841, was the brainchild of Horace Greeley, a reform-minded crusader who supported such issues as abolition and prohibition. Greeley believed that newspapers could play a part in “social amelioration.”<sup>6</sup> He reported local news but also wrote scathing editorials criticizing wrongs in society, citing such issues as political corruption or the plight of the rural farmer. Greeley wanted his penny paper to cater to the masses, but be on a higher level than the scandalous Herald. His paper was nicknamed “The Great Moral Organ,” while also being described as “Anti-Slavery, Anti- Seduction... Brothels, Gambling Houses.”<sup>7</sup>

The Tribune attained the unique distinction of being a penny paper that was overwhelmingly identified with the persona of its editor. Historian J. Cutler Andrews notes that many Tribune readers believed that Greeley wrote everything in the paper. The Tribune was read throughout the country and many trusted and referred to the wisdom of “Uncle Horace” on a regular basis. Andrews contends that Greeley was

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<sup>4</sup> James L. Crouthamel, Bennett’s New York Herald and the Rise of the Popular Press, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1989), 54.

<sup>5</sup> Andie Tucher, Froth & Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and the Ax Murder in America’s First Mass Medium, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Frank L. Mott, American Journalism A History: 1690-1960, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1962), 243.

able to mold public opinion to a great degree “by signing many of its [Tribune’s] editorials, [and] by addressing his readers in their own language, simply, familiarly, and earnestly.”<sup>8</sup> Although Greeley never overtook the Herald in circulation, the paper was quite popular. Within two months of its first issue, the Tribune boasted a circulation of 11,000.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, although the Tribune tended to not be as scandalous as the Herald, Greeley’s views also alienated many people. Therefore, in 1851, former Tribune employee, Henry J. Raymond, decided to find a middle ground between these two papers and created the New York Daily Times (changed to the New York Times in 1857). As newspaperman Charles A. Dana once said, the Times “aimed at a middle line between the mental eccentricity of the Tribune and the moral eccentricity of the Herald...marking out for the Times a mean between the two extremes.”<sup>10</sup>

The Times was a success because it had a solid journalistic policy. Raymond stated that reporters for the Times would avoid writing “as if we were in a passion.”<sup>11</sup> The paper’s news was well-balanced and refrained from exaggerating events or preaching to readers. As historian Frank L. Mott concludes, “The Times may be regarded as the culmination and highest achievement of the cheap-for-cash newspaper movement...the Times became, under Raymond’s management, preeminently a newspaper.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Tucher, 132.

<sup>8</sup> J. Cutler Andrews, The North Reports the Civil War, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1955), 9.

<sup>9</sup> Edwin Emery and Michael Emery, The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media, (Edgewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978), 128.

<sup>10</sup> Bleyer, 241.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>12</sup> Mott, 280.



These three New York papers dominated the world of journalism by 1860. The efforts of James Bennett, Horace Greeley, and Henry Raymond had helped to make New York City “the hub of American newspaperdom.” Most of New York’s seventeen dailies were read well beyond the city and state limits.<sup>13</sup> Before this time, Washington, D.C. had been the center of the journalistic enterprise. With the decline in the use of presidential administration “organs,” New York was able to usurp Washington’s former control of American journalism.<sup>14</sup> Now, newspapers around the country would feature phrases such as “From the HERALD,” or “From the TRIBUNE,” and everyone knew the reference was to the New York papers.<sup>15</sup> As one Herald reporter noted, the papers of New York “penetrate everywhere...in St. Louis, New Orleans, Mobile...Chicago, San Francisco.”<sup>16</sup>

When the secession crisis broke out, each of the papers responded in their own way. Penny papers had been founded on the premise that they constituted an independent form of journalism and therefore, were free of political motivations. Nevertheless, “the Three Graces,” as the New York editors were known, tended to ally themselves with certain political persuasions.<sup>17</sup> Both Greeley and Raymond were devoted Whigs. As for Bennett, he had been a staunch Jackson man and served as editor of the Pennsylvanian, a Philadelphia Jacksonian daily. However, Bennett

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<sup>13</sup> Andrews, The North Reports the Civil War, 8-9.

<sup>14</sup> Mott, 304.

<sup>15</sup> Schudson, 65.

<sup>16</sup> Tucher, 112.

<sup>17</sup> James M. Perry, A Bohemian Brigade: The Civil War Correspondents—Mostly Rough, Sometimes Ready, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2000), 45.

became disenchanted with the party when it failed to support him during tough times, thereby encouraging him to start the independent Herald.<sup>18</sup>

In the months leading up to the Civil War, political ties became issues of contention for the press. In New York City alone, only five of the dailies were loyal to the Lincoln administration before and during the war. Among these were the Times and the Tribune. Mott explains that, “Of the others, two or three were negligible politically; but nine were proslavery, and from them five may be named as definitely pro-Confederate or Copperhead.” At the beginning of the war, the Herald fell into this latter category of five.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the fact that the Tribune and the Times were anti-secession, these papers differed in their tones and perspectives. Raymond issued a vociferous denunciation of the South’s secession at the start of the war. The Times remained a staunchly pro-Union paper during the war and even more so in 1864, when Raymond was elected as a Republican congressman from New York.<sup>20</sup>

At first, when secession rumors arose, Horace Greeley defended the right of peaceable disunion. “Let the erring sisters go in peace,” because although the idea of secession “...may be a revolutionary one...it exists nevertheless.”<sup>21</sup> This sentiment may have been Greeley’s honest opinion, however it is likely that it may have also stemmed from Greeley’s newfound hostility towards Lincoln. Greeley had lobbied

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<sup>18</sup> Crouthamel, 17.

<sup>19</sup> Mott, 339-340.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 346.

<sup>21</sup> Ralph Ray Fahrney, Horace Greeley and the Tribune in the Civil War, (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: The Torch Press, 1936), 43.

for Lincoln's presidential nomination in 1860.<sup>22</sup> With Lincoln's victory, Greeley expected a political appointment in return for his support. But it was William H. Seward who came out on top, becoming Lincoln's Secretary of State.<sup>23</sup> Greeley would later stand fully behind the Union effort, proclaiming "Forward to Richmond!" Although the Tribune and the Times were considered "Administration Papers," neither refrained from criticizing the government when they felt as though the state of affairs warranted it.

The reasons for the Herald's pro-Southern stance stemmed from several factors, among them Bennett's own past. After the Scotsman had been in America a few years, he moved to South Carolina to work on the Charleston Courier. Although he spent only ten months in the South, Bennett's experience with Southern culture would cause him to "look forever afterwards with feelings of friendliness and sympathy upon the southern cause."<sup>24</sup> His respect for the South was reflected in the Herald. When the war finally came in April of 1861, Bennett blamed it on "abolitionist nigger worship and on Lincoln's aggressive coercion of South Carolina."<sup>25</sup>

Probably the main reason why Bennett was so pro-Southern was because of the Herald's expansive circulation. The editor knew that the paper was read throughout the South. In fact, the Herald was one of the few northern newspapers freely circulated below the Mason-Dixon Line after 1860. The South had placed an

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 33, 36. Greeley actually supported Missouri judge Edward Bates at first, due to Bates' view of slavery as "an evil to be restricted." Greeley later supported Lincoln after he was selected as the Republican presidential candidate at the 1860 convention.

<sup>23</sup> Mott, 340.

<sup>24</sup> Perry, 49.

<sup>25</sup> Crouthamel, 79.

embargo on most northern journals in the months leading up to the war.<sup>26</sup> The future Confederacy had tired of the Times and its editor, the “Little Villain,” as well as the “nigger lover” Greeley.<sup>27</sup>

The Herald was one of the many thorns in Lincoln’s side when the new president took office. Lacking the support of one of the most powerful newspaper editors in the world was not a good way to unite a country behind a cause. Lincoln even urged his own generals to cooperate with Herald reporters.<sup>28</sup> After Fort Sumter, however, an angry mob outside of the Herald offices prompted Bennett to throw his support behind the Union. Nevertheless, he was often critical of Lincoln and other "radicals" in government for the rest of the war.<sup>29</sup>

Despite their differences, the war united the newspapers on some issues. One of these issues was the prisoners of war. As the prisoner of war situation became worse, the three papers began a rigorous campaign calling for the release of all prisoners and a change in Union policy. The suffering prisoner of war became the subject of countless headlines, stories, and editorials that filled the pages of the Times, the Tribune, and the Herald throughout the war. Papers of all political motivations united behind the prisoner of war issue, sometimes criticizing Lincoln for his failure to remedy the situation and often condemning the South for its supposed poor treatment of captives. Newspapers like the Times, the Herald, and the Tribune

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 79, see also Raymond K. Cooley, “John M. Daniel, Editor of the Richmond Examiner and Gadfly of the Confederacy,” (M.A. thesis, Old Dominion University, 1973), 106. Southern people were even threatened with imprisonment as early as 1856 for subscribing to the Tribune because of its abolitionist principles.

<sup>27</sup> Andrews, The North Reports the Civil War, 9.

<sup>28</sup> George H. Douglas, The Golden Age of the Newspaper, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 59.

<sup>29</sup> Mott, 349.

found an issue that they could all agree on: the need to fix the prison situation during the Civil War.

### **The Many Facets of Prison Stories**

Newspaper stories about prisons can be found in the Times, the Tribune, and the Herald from the very beginning of the war until the end. The sheer volume of stories is unbelievable, encompassing hundreds of pages of newsprint. When talking about “prison stories,” this category includes a wide range of different types of stories. Quite common throughout the war were brief stories or statements about the number of prisoners taken and/or where they were kept. Usually, the papers would list the names of prisoners alongside the names of wounded and killed soldiers in a battle report. Newspapers would also feature short reports on prisoners who were exchanged or paroled. Prisoner escapes and recaptures also made the daily papers. Finally, speeches and orders by prison and government officials on both sides were reprinted in the Union papers.

One major category of prison stories was the captive story. These stories included interviews with released prisoners and letters from prisoners still incarcerated. These accounts came from high-ranking officers, common privates, and field surgeons, and featured news of sometimes good but mostly terrible treatment by “barbarous” prison guards. These stories would often be used as “proof” of the South’s deliberate policy of harming and/or murdering prisoners. Prisoners argued that all of their statements were the “complete truth,” and “without exaggeration.”

Many said that they told their stories in order to remember “miserable comrades yet in captivity.”<sup>30</sup>

While captive stories occupied much of the newspaper columns, there were also several other types of stories that came out of the prison situation. Accounts of terrible treatment of Union soldiers in Southern prisons inspired countless stories and editorials discussing the possibility of initiating a policy of retaliation against rebel prisoners. The Times, the Tribune, and the Herald all wrestled with the idea that retaliation might be justified under certain circumstances in war, and/or if any retaliation would be a crime against humanity. Alongside these stories were outright denials of any mistreatment of rebel prisoners in Union prisons and allegations that these undeserving rebels were treated too well by Union prison authorities. In fact, newspapers alleged that the rebels were “fattening in idleness” living off the Union’s humanity while Northern soldiers wasted away in Southern dungeons.<sup>31</sup>

The exchange cartel also became a major focus of the Northern press. Papers chafed and complained as the exchange situation became worse and worse. Countless editorials questioned if exchange really meant recognition, while other editorials argued that a lack of exchanges would have a detrimental effect on the soldiers’ morale and on the desire of prospective recruits to enlist. Exchange issues also motivated the press to examine the history of prisoner exchange during conflicts like the American Revolution. Finally, newspapers cited humanitarian reasons to urge the government to facilitate an exchange, since the death tolls at both Northern and Southern prisons continued to rise.

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<sup>30</sup> The New York Times, April 17, 1864.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., February 3, 1864.

Finally, the prison issue sparked a flurry of stories and editorials about the Southern “race.” As the prisoner issue became worse and the captivity stories alleging Southern brutality became more numerous, there was a marked rise in the number of editorials commenting on the “natural brutality” of the Southern people. The press alleged that the people of the South were so “brutalized” by years of living with the system of slavery that, as a result, most Southerners tended to have a more brutal and barbarous nature. Newspapers concluded that the rumors of the mistreatment of soldiers must be true since the South was an entirely different race from the North, and furthermore, an uncivilized nation more cruel than the most vicious barbarians. The “chivalry of the South” were compared to Indian Sepoys, Malays, and other “barbarian” tribes. White Southerners were cannibals with “satanic spirits” who had for years abused innocent African slaves and now took out their wrath on the noble Union prisoners of war. The main purpose of these editorials about the “Southern race” seems to be a general dehumanization of the enemy in the eyes of U.S. citizens. The war was justified because these people were barbarians, a distinct race that needed to be punished and reformed. Southerners could not be trusted to care for prisoners therefore, exchange was necessary and retaliation a constant dilemma. Many papers would use dehumanization tactics to justify retaliation to their readers.

The purpose of this chapter is not to discuss and analyze each and every article relating to prisoners. There are simply too many stories. Instead, this chapter will examine the four most common “types” of prison stories: 1. Captivity accounts, 2. Allegations of mistreatment and calls for retaliation, 3. Prisoner exchange, and 4.

Dehumanization articles. These stories are usually featured on front pages with eye-catching headlines and often use inflammatory language. Within these categories, one can analyze each newspaper's view of prisoners, support or opposition to government policy, and the use of sensationalism and prominence of prison stories. While it cannot be determined if the public completely believed and/or were influenced by the press accounts relating to prisoners, it is certain that the intensive press coverage did not go overlooked. Newspapers became a major source of information about imprisoned loved ones and their prospects and/or locations of exchange.<sup>32</sup> Families of prisoners and other concerned citizens wrote letters to editors in order to publicize their demands for exchange. Returned prisoners flocked to newspaper offices to tell their stories. The public sought out the public medium of newspapers for information about loved ones and to voice their concerns about the deteriorating prisoner of war situation.

### **Captivity Accounts**

Captivity narratives were nothing new to the American public in the 1860s. Stories about noble sufferers being held against their will were as old as the American nation. Tales of white colonists being taken and held by Indian tribes were familiar to most Americans, young and old. Widely read stories like Uncle Tom's Cabin dealt with the African American "captives" of the South and their attempts at escape.<sup>33</sup> The Civil War prisoner narratives would command the same interest. Civil War

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<sup>32</sup> Douglas Gibson Gardner in "Andersonville and American Memory: Civil War Prisoners and Narratives of Suffering and Redemption," (Ph.D. diss., Miami University, 1998), 175. Newspapers became important unofficial sources of information for soldiers' families since "there was no organized system of notification of family members of the dead, wounded, missing, or captured," during the Civil War.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 75-76.



prisoners of all ranks would go on to publish countless books and remembrances of their captivity following the war. During the war, newspapers became the medium to publish “mini narratives,” of suffering and captivity.

One of the first captivity accounts that made the papers was that of Colonel Michael Corcoran. Corcoran was one of the South’s first great trophies of war, captured during the Battle of Bull Run. Along with Congressman Alfred Ely of New York, Corcoran would be used as a negotiating tool to bring about a general prisoner exchange and to safeguard the lives of Southern privateers. Corcoran’s capture and imprisonment after Bull Run made headlines across the Union, but commanded the most attention in New York. The Irish colonel had attained prominence as head of the 69<sup>th</sup> regiment of the state militia. Corcoran had endeared himself to all Irish Americans when he refused to order his regiment out in a special parade in honor of the Prince of Wales in 1860.<sup>34</sup> Following his selection as a hostage, hundreds of Irishmen gathered at Faneuil Hall in New York to demand his immediate release.<sup>35</sup>

Readers learned about Corcoran’s life in captivity through letters sent to his wife and friends that were reprinted in New York newspapers. Corcoran’s letters started off generally devoid of emotion, basically describing his capture and fellow prisoners incarcerated along with him. One must remember that all letters sent out by prisoners were usually subject to strict censorship.

Corcoran’s letters did become more opinionated as his incarceration dragged on, however. In a letter dated October 21, 1861 and reprinted in the New York

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<sup>34</sup> Lonnie R. Speer, Portals to Hell: Military Prisons of the Civil War, (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1997), 23.

<sup>35</sup> William Best Hesseltine, Civil War Prisons: A Study in War Psychology, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1930), 19.

Tribune, Corcoran wrote about his transfer from imprisonment in Virginia to captivity in South Carolina. He told his friend Captain James P. Kirker that the hospitality of prison guards in South Carolina far surpassed that of Virginia guards. Corcoran explained that in Virginia, “we [prisoners] had not been permitted one moment for air or exercise during the fifty days of our detention in the ever memorable Tobacco Factory, and without bedding of any kind.”<sup>36</sup> Corcoran went on to extol the virtues of the South Carolinians when talking about the protection of prisoners from the prying eyes of the public. It was a common practice, both in the North and South to allow visitors to prisons, even if the visitors were of no relation to the prisoners.<sup>37</sup> Corcoran complained that in Richmond, Union prisoners were “subjected to the idle and offensive curiosity of spectators...crowds were permitted to assemble in front of our prison, to stare at us all day.” In contrast, no such visits were permitted in Charleston, prompting Corcoran to say that “Indeed, the people of Charleston presented a striking contrast of gentlemanly behavior towards us, on our arrival and departure...not a single offensive word was spoken or act committed.”<sup>38</sup>

The colonel’s praise of South Carolinians did not last for long. In a letter dated November 19, 1861, Corcoran wrote that since his selection as a hostage for Captain Smith, he had been placed in a “common jail...on an equal footing with the most depraved classes, and locked up at night like felons.”<sup>39</sup> Corcoran assured his friends and family that although his situation was “almost unbearable,” he bore this

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<sup>36</sup> The New York Tribune, November 20, 1861.

<sup>37</sup> For example, at Elmira Prison in New York, two observation platforms were erected outside the prison walls. For fifteen cents, spectators could come observe the prisoners. See James I. Robertson, Jr., “The Scourge of Elmira,” Civil War History, Volume 8, Number 2, (June, 1962), 190.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, November 20, 1861.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, December 23, 1861 and Times, December 21, 1861.

burden with honor in order to “maintain the glorious flag” of his adopted country. The colonel, aware that he might be executed, implored the U.S. government to effect an exchange immediately, for “no tongue can tell, pen describe, nor imagination conceive what those poor fellows have suffered during these last sixteen weeks.” No longer were the prison guards gentlemen, but instead they greeted new prisoners with a salutation similar to “You d—d Yankee, etc., etc., what have you got?”<sup>40</sup> Men were robbed of money, food, and the clothes on their backs, according to Corcoran.

Corcoran’s stay in the South continued to be a popular press item. The famous colonel supposedly escaped in late December when the jail he was housed in burnt down. An escaped prisoner from the jail, Lieutenant Samuel D. Hurd, related an amazing story of Corcoran’s supposed escape through a burning window.<sup>41</sup> The colonel did not escape however. Nothing was heard from him till the end of January, when two of Corcoran’s letters to Captain Kirker were reprinted. Corcoran did not even mention the fire, so it is questionable if Corcoran’s jail even burnt down. Corcoran wrote that his health was good and that the men were in good spirits. The colonel commended his prison guards, saying that they are “strict, but most courteous and obliging” and doing everything necessary to “make the condition of all the prisoners comfortable.”<sup>42</sup> In this way, Corcoran seemed to waver on his feelings about the prison guards, sometimes labeling them as fiends and at other times commending them for their humanity. However, this letter was important for another reason. At its conclusion, Corcoran made several veiled complaints against the U.S.

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<sup>40</sup> Times, December 21, 1861.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., December 24, 1861 and Tribune, December 24, 1861.

<sup>42</sup> Times, January 25, 1862 and Tribune, January 27, 1862.

He maintained that he nor any of his fellow prisoners have made any complaint against the Union. Nevertheless, he was upset that,

while many of those who deserted their post on the battlefield, and ran off from the face of danger to a place of safety, have been rewarded with almost unprecedented promotion, I think it is due to the officers and men who remained in the performance of duty faithfully to the last, and there fell victims to a long imprisonment, that they should receive at least sufficient consideration to relieve them from the most disagreeable position that men can possibly be placed in.<sup>43</sup>

This statement struck a blow against Lincoln's refusal to exchange and questioned the bravery of several officers in the Union army who may have retreated from battle too quickly. Corcoran reminded readers, the military, and the president that the prisoners would not continue to wait silently, subjected to the pains of imprisonment.

Along with Corcoran's correspondence were several letters from his fellow prisoners. Many prisoners tell a similar story, along with constantly praising the colonel for his brave deeds. Lieutenant Edmund Connelly (sometimes spelled Connolly) was imprisoned alongside Corcoran and chosen as a hostage for the privateers. Early on, he wrote home to his wife Ellen that he was treated well and hopeful for exchange.<sup>44</sup> However, Connelly's family did not find comfort in his letters and professions of well being. Connelly's three brothers, John, Michael, and James protested his imprisonment in a letter written to the Tribune. The brothers addressed the letter to President Lincoln, but sent the letter to the press because, "Through the Press, which is the palladium of the People's rights, we would most respectfully address you." Connelly's brothers appealed to Lincoln, asking him to

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<sup>43</sup> Times, January 25, 1862.

<sup>44</sup> Tribune, August 11, 1861.

remember their brother's great deeds on the battlefield in the service of his country.

The letter also warned the president that

if our friends are left to pine away in dark and dreary dungeons of the South, where do you expect to find American soldiers to quell the rebellion? Who are the men that will go to fight...if they are given to understand that our Government will desert and neglect them if they should happen to fall into the enemy's hands?<sup>45</sup>

These pleas for justice by the Connelly brothers were probably echoed by thousands more families, watching and waiting for the return of their men.

Connelly and Corcoran are just two examples of soldiers whose imprisonment made national news. In the three New York papers alone, over one hundred letters from men in Southern prisons can be found. Before the exchange cartel of 1862, many of the letters echoed the sentiments of Connelly and Corcoran. Prisoner Alex McArthur told a friend back home that although his imprisonment was "cruel," he argued that "The men are all plucky and we would rather stay here ten years than let up one atom or even take the oath for them. We are still for the Union now, and the Union forever."<sup>46</sup> As time went on, however, the letters became less hopeful. A private letter reprinted from the Hartford Evening Press told a sad story of a soldier living in a filthy Richmond prison. He described the poor quality and lack of food, the overflowing water closets, and the prevalence of disease. The soldier claimed that "the desolation wrought by these heartless Rebels is actually beyond description." He concluded that the situation could only get worse. His letter ended with an accusation and a promise. He stated, "I am convinced also that the people of the North ought to know how their officers are treated. Many who have gone home have not given the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., August 22, 1861.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., December 5, 1861.

true view. I have told the truth in this letter.”<sup>47</sup> The prisoner asked that his name not be mentioned because letters of prisoners published in the North were reprinted in Southern papers and he would face severe punishment if found out.

These letters of desperation and despair garnered much response from readers. A letter to the editor of the Times begged for something to be done about the prison situation. The letter conveyed vivid images of the suffering prisoners, stating

To be shot down, captured while powerless, exhausted for want of food and loss of blood—weary, sick, helpless, enduring this long journey—to be incarcerated in prison, stretch their mutilated limbs on a comfortless cot... to pass restless days and sleepless nights with scarce any other sounds to greet the ear save the bitter lamentations, piercing cries, and long-continued moans of poor tortured humanity.<sup>48</sup>

It is not known if the author of this letter spent time in prison, but he or she certainly seemed well acquainted with all the supposed terrors of Confederate prisons. This letter was followed by a response from the Times, saying that it was in agreement with the author. The Union prisoners should be rescued. However, the Times reminded readers that Lincoln was well aware of the men’s difficult situation and was doing everything possible to remedy the issue. The Times warned that a general exchange now would equal recognition, and this was “not deemed prudent.” The “no-exchange” policy would probably not change until the Union held more prisoners than the Confederacy.<sup>49</sup>

In examining the significance and vast number of prison letters reprinted in northern papers, it can be concluded that these letters kept the public aware of the prisoners’ continued dissatisfaction with captivity. These letters prompted a response

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., May 28, 1862.

<sup>48</sup> Times, September 29, 1861.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., September 29, 1861.

from both the newspapers and the public. These letters also served as a constant reminder to the government that the prisoner of war issue would remain a point of contention until the situation was resolved.

When prisoners returned home they continued to make statements to the press about their wartime incarcerations. After extensive research, it was determined that at least one deposition or story of a former prisoner (either exchanged or escaped) can be found in one of the three New York papers every month, from July 1861 to April 1865. Many said that they told their stories so as to hasten the release of fellow countrymen still imprisoned. Others probably enjoyed the notoriety and attention they received.

Colonel Corcoran certainly did not keep quiet after returning home. Corcoran returned to a hero's welcome in Boston, making speeches all the way home to New York. His speeches were reprinted in the Times, the Herald, and the Tribune. Corcoran spoke of the "heartless character of the Rebellion," arguing that the South was responsible for "murdering more than a thousand soldiers, robbing more than six hundred dead bodies."<sup>50</sup> Looking back on Corcoran's letters from prison, one wonders if he honestly believed his accusations against the South or if he was just caught up in the fervor of the moment. The purpose of examining Corcoran's comments is not to judge whether or not he and other prisoners were mistreated. However, it is interesting to note that, after his release, not once did Corcoran mention to the public press that he sometimes received fair treatment. Later, in 1864, Corcoran would publish a book about his captivity. In the book he stated that most charges of prisoners' hardships were "misrepresentations made by the Northern

newspapers to impress their readers.” Corcoran praised General Winder for doing “all in his power, as far as was consistent with existing rules and orders, to make the prisoners under his charge as comfortable as possible.”<sup>51</sup> Corcoran may have not spoken out when he returned home lest he be seen as unpatriotic or unsympathetic to prisoners still held.<sup>52</sup>

Soldiers’ stories of imprisonment ranged from the commonplace to the utterly depressing. In the early months of the war some prisoners said, upon their return, that they had been treated fairly. These accounts of good treatment are mostly found in the Times, but a few can be found in the Herald and in the Tribune. Twenty-two soldiers that had been captured at Bull Run returned to New York under flag of truce, saying that they “have been most courteously and kindly treated by the military authorities of the Confederate States, and give a most unqualified denial to all the stories of killing or ill treatment of wounded National soldiers.”<sup>53</sup> The front page of the November 26, 1862 Tribune featured the headline, “Harsh Treatment of Union Prisoners,” only to have the prisoners state that they “were generally treated courteously by the officers placed over them.”<sup>54</sup> One Union prisoner that had been held in Richmond commented that while the people of that city rarely expressed any sympathy for the prisoners’ plight and the newspapers often tried to vilify the

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<sup>50</sup> Tribune, Times, and the New York Herald, August 30, 1862.

<sup>51</sup> Sarah Annette Duffy, “Military Administrator: The Controversial Life of Brigadier General John Henry Winder, C.S.A.” (M.A. thesis, Creighton University, 1961), 50-51.

<sup>52</sup> Hesselstine argues in “The Propaganda Literature of Confederate Prisons,” The Journal of Southern History, Volume 1, Issue 1 (Feb., 1935), 55-66, that Corcoran “designed his book as a recruiting pamphlet and could not afford to picture his treatment too darkly.” (58) Hesselstine cites the book’s publication date as 1862, while Speer cites it as 1864 and Duffy as 1865. Library records put the publishing date at 1862, therefore, it may have been used to recruit men, promoting the positive aspects of military enlistment.

<sup>53</sup> Times, August 14, 1861 and Tribune, August 15, 1861.

<sup>54</sup> Tribune, November 26, 1862.



prisoners, he said that “this inhuman disposition on the part of the press has met with no response in the heart of any [prison] official.”<sup>55</sup>

Other returned soldiers never mentioned mistreatment, but rather described the ways they passed the time in captivity. Union prisoners in Galveston fashioned rings out of meat bones and sold them to guards.<sup>56</sup> Another prisoner also mentioned fashioning rings out of bone, but went one step farther. Prisoner James Gillette and his fellow prisoners carved out chairs, tables, pipes, and cooking utensils out of materials they were able to obtain. These Richmond prisoners (most likely housed in Libby prison) created a “Prisoners’ Court,” where men could voice their grievances against fellow prisoners. The men also founded “The Prisoner’s of War Dramatic Association,” in order to “exemplify the fact that a Yankee acknowledges no insurmountable obstacle to self-amusement.”<sup>57</sup> Besides the dramatic association and the court, prisoners created a police organization, known as the “Prison Association,” with regular officers. The seal of this association was a ring of lice chasing each other around with the motto, “Bite and be d—d!” Congressman Ely was elected president of the association.<sup>58</sup>

Nevertheless, most returning prisoners had nothing but negative things to say about their imprisonment, and the accusations of bad treatment only became more inflammatory as the war progressed. A Richmond prisoner described his experience in a tobacco warehouse, where he and his fellow prisoners were “packed together, and suffered severely from swarming vermin, and from want of air, food, water, and

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<sup>55</sup> Herald, January 6, 1862.

<sup>56</sup> Times, March 8, 1863.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., December 21, 1861.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., February 27 1862.

room.”<sup>59</sup> Another returned prisoner told the Herald that the suffering men “turn their eyes in supplication to the North, in order that they may be released from this barbarous servitude.”<sup>60</sup> An escaped prisoner accused the rebels of trying to kill the prisoners by “slow starvation” and “exposure to the weather.”<sup>61</sup> These accounts of suffering were topped with screaming headlines and commented on in biting editorials in all three New York papers.

### **Champion of the Zouaves**

Most captivity stories featured in the papers included a variety of ranks of soldiers. The New York Tribune, however, became particularly concerned with a certain kind of prisoner during the first year of the war. The Tribune published several captivity stories and editorials on the Zouaves. The Zouaves were regiments of soldiers who fought and dressed according to the rules and practices of their French brethren. Zouaves first came into being after the French occupation of Algiers in 1830. Algerian men of the Zouaoua, a fierce Kabyle tribe, were recruited for the French army. These men, known as Zouaves, also served in the Crimean War, however, by this time Zouave regiments also included white Europeans. Zouaves became known worldwide for their “gaudy, oriental uniforms coupled with their roguish behavior and unquestioned bravery.”<sup>62</sup> American newspapers like Harper’s Weekly covered the Zouaves’ adventures and filled their pages with illustrations of the regiments’ unique uniforms. By the time of the Civil War, the Zouave “craze”

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<sup>59</sup> Tribune, August 18, 1861.

<sup>60</sup> Herald, Dec. 23, 1861; see also Herald Sept. 18, Oct. 27, Nov. 19 & 22, 1864 for more prison accounts.

<sup>61</sup> Tribune, November 17, 1864.

<sup>62</sup> Edward J. Hagerty, Collis’ Zouaves: The 114<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Volunteers in the Civil War, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 23.

was alive and well in America. Elmer E. Ellsworth organized the first Zouave unit in 1859 in Illinois. New York City would be home to four Zouave regiments at the start of the war, mostly made up of firemen.<sup>63</sup> Zouaves were not just confined to Union armies. The Confederacy had its share of Zouave regiments, including the famous Louisiana Zouaves, otherwise known as the Tiger Zouaves or Jefferson Davis' Pet Wolves.<sup>64</sup>

All three New York papers reported news of the Zouaves victories and losses; however, it was the Tribune that focused particularly on Zouaves that fell prisoner to the enemy. In its July 30, 1861 issue, the Tribune featured the glaring headlines of "Resentment Against the Zouaves" and "The Rebels Refuse to Bury Them [Zouaves]." The paper noted that the dead members of the New York Fire Zouaves were purposely left unburied. It claimed that "Any man with a red shirt or pantaloons of the Zouave cut fares badly at the hands of the enemy."<sup>65</sup>

Why is alleged animosity against the Zouaves important? Obviously the issue is important because these are U.S. soldiers being mistreated deliberately. However, the issue was of particular importance to New York because these men grew up there. The Tribune knew that this was a hot news story that would attract Zouave families and supporters. Indeed, New Yorkers did respond to the Zouave issue. In a letter to the editor, a citizen identified as "Jackson" complained that Jefferson Davis and his people were inhumane for not burying and caring for the Zouaves. If this practice continued, the writer warned Davis that it would be met "with such an overwhelming

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>64</sup> John Persinger, "The First Louisiana Zouave Battalion, Coppen's Zouaves," Washington Civil War Association, 5 June 2001, <<http://www.coppenszouaves.org/unit.htm>>.

burst of Northern indignation that the deepest cave or darkest swamp of his Southern Confederacy will not protect him.”<sup>66</sup>

The Tribune echoed the public’s complaints about the treatment of Zouaves in scathing editorials. The paper argued that the name of the New York Fire Zouaves “became at once a terror to the Rebels,” so the South felt that they had to destroy them. Because of the bravery of the Zouaves in battle, “the flower of Chivalry (the South) went to seed before their burning blasts.”<sup>67</sup> The bodies of some dead Zouaves were violated, with the paper charging that the body of a captain was mutilated, his throat being cut from ear to ear and his ears and nose cut off.<sup>68</sup> Those Zouaves captured were subjected to cruel imprisonment and afforded no medical care. The Tribune even reprinted a July 27<sup>th</sup> article from the Richmond Enquirer that criticized the behavior of the Zouaves. The Enquirer charged that most Union prisoners were well behaved and sorry for taking up arms against the South. In contrast, “the Fire Zouaves are incorrigible. They seem perfectly oblivious to every sentiment of honor, gratitude, or decency. They have nothing but the human form and faculty of speech to distinguish them from Gorillas.”<sup>69</sup> The Tribune blasted back at the “chivalry” of the South, and warned the Confederates that retribution for the abuse of Zouaves would be promptly meted out.

During the summer of 1861, the Tribune became the champion of the New York Zouaves. The paper even lashed out at the New York Times for not being more

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<sup>65</sup> Tribune, July 30, 1861 and Herald, July 30, 1861. This Tribune issue also claimed that Colonel Corcoran of the 69<sup>th</sup> regiment died of battle wounds.

<sup>66</sup> Tribune, August 4, 1861.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., August 7, 1861.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., July 24, 1861.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., August 6, 1861.

supportive of local Zouave regiments. In an editorial entitled, “Without Honor in Their Own Country,” the Tribune cited the Times for making disparaging and disheartening remarks about the bravery of the Zouaves in an article entitled “End of Them.” In the article, the Times complained that “the [NY] Fire Zouaves were just about the worse men in the army, the most reckless in their behavior...the first to run from the field, and the loudest braggarts after they had left it.”<sup>70</sup> The Tribune blasted back that while all Union recruits needed better drill and discipline, the Times should not be making such disparaging remarks about fellow countrymen, for fear that this would discourage enlistment. Furthermore, the Tribune argued that the Times’ article took the rebel’s view of the Zouaves, as revealed in the July Enquirer article. Here a popular paper accused another well known paper of lacking patriotism, a charge quite scandalous and made at a time when the Union greatly needed support after its embarrassing Bull Run loss. Nevertheless, no response from the Times about this editorial could be found.

As the summer of 1861 ended, so did the Tribune’s focus on the plight of the Zouaves. All three papers continued to mention them in battle accounts, etc., but there were no further articles in the Tribune charging the South with specifically mistreating Zouaves. Though the issue was short-lived, it does demonstrate how one newspaper could rally a people behind a cause. The Tribune’s praise of its hometown soldiers probably endeared the paper to New Yorkers and brought Horace Greeley financial rewards.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., August 12, 1861. The Times article could not be read because of a bad microfilm copy.

## Medical Personnel and Prisons

Surprisingly, some of the most heart-wrenching and believable stories came from military surgeons returned from battle and/or released from captivity. Most surgeons were considered non-combatants by both sides, however, medical personnel were sometimes made prisoners and/or instructed to stay with the Union prisoners and provide them with medical attention. These surgeon testimonials commenced filling the pages of Northern papers directly following Bull Run.

In July 1861, a huge story with insight on surgeons' experiences on the battlefield filled five columns of the paper. The Tribune's special correspondent obtained information from several unidentified surgeons and officers and determined that the rebels engaged in "the savage and deliberate slaughter of our wounded and helpless men."<sup>71</sup> According to this article, the rebel cavalry deliberately charged on the surgeons whose "battlefield hospital" was clearly marked by a green scarf, the symbol of medical personnel in war. After charging the medical site, the cavalry took many prisoners and then burned the site down, "broiling alive our suffering and helpless wounded men." The correspondent argued that the men who committed these atrocities were not isolated soldiers but groups of men under the command of high-ranking officers. In addition, the markings of a surgeon (the green flag or scarf) and the yellow flag of a hospital were international symbols used by all "civilized nations," therefore, there was no way that the rebels could have mistaken them for combatants.<sup>72</sup> The language used in this article conjures up images of extreme suffering by innocent people and outrageous inhumanity on the part of the rebels.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., July 28, 1861.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., July 28, 1861.

The surgeon testimonials only became more numerous as the war continued. Another Bull Run story filled almost the entire eighth page of the Times and this time included sworn statements by a Dr. J.W. Stewart, a Union surgeon who was taken prisoner along with ten other surgeons during the battle. Stewart confirmed some of the atrocities detailed in the Tribune article. Men badly wounded cried out to the doctor, “If you are going to leave us kill us first, the enemy will bayonet us as they did the wounded before. Don’t let us live to be butchered by them.” The reports of the enemy’s treatment of the wounded had obviously reached these men’s ears prior to battle. Dr. Stewart stayed with his wounded despite the fact that he knew he would be captured. When taken, he was led away to Richmond and verbally abused by the rebels. Prisoners were called “d—d lazy Yankee sons of b—s,” and wounded men were forced to walk despite their injuries. The doctor spent a short time in a Richmond prison, whereby he was exchanged, paroled, and sent home.<sup>73</sup>

Surgeon testimonials were significant to the press because newspapers and most likely the public saw them as objective, educated, “professional gentlemen” whose words could not be doubted.<sup>74</sup> Imprisoned surgeons told of wounded and sick Union soldiers being denied medical care. Surgeons often tried to help them, but often had no medical supplies. Some surgeons testified to the callousness of rebel doctors, amputating legs with rusty saws and Southern women refusing to give water to dying Yankees.<sup>75</sup> One rebel surgeon supposedly said he “wished he could take out the hearts of the d—d Yankees as easily as he take off their legs.”<sup>76</sup> Another rebel

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<sup>73</sup> Times, September 1, 1861.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., November 28, 1863.

<sup>75</sup> Herald, July 21, 1862.

<sup>76</sup> Tribune, May 1, 1862.

surgeon supposedly “had a perfect mania for amputating limbs.” This same surgeon was also accused of letting men bleed to death during the night because he refused to be disturbed while sleeping.<sup>77</sup>

These testimonials would also later be used by the War Department to investigate the treatment of Union prisoners. Newspapers added validity to accusations of bad treatment by including surgeon testimonies and saying that these doctors had or would soon be testifying before the War Department authorities. In November of 1863, four U.S. surgeons from four separate regiments told their stories to the Times and the Herald, the day before they were to meet with War Department officials. In the article, the men described their time spent in Libby Prison. The doctors related stories of extreme suffering, with prisoners dying mostly from inadequate and/or poor rations which brought on diarrhea, scurvy, and a variety of other diseases. They concluded that “under a treatment of systematic abuse, neglect, and semi-starvation, the numbers who are becoming permanently broken down in their constitutions must be reckoned by the thousands.”<sup>78</sup> The doctors also mentioned that the Richmond press had declared that the Yankees receive better treatment than they deserve. All four surgeons did make clear however, that certain rebel surgeons were in no way responsible for the high mortality rates, instead, these men should be commended for their “kindness and faithful performance of their duties with the limited means at their disposal.”<sup>79</sup>

The point of highlighting surgeons’ statements in the papers is to show that the press had substantial evidence from credible sources by which to make their

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<sup>77</sup> Herald, November 22, 1864.

<sup>78</sup> Herald and Times, July 28, 1863.



accusations of barbarity towards the prisoners. Whether or not what the surgeons said was true, it is evident that they became important eyewitnesses to prison life and experienced firsthand the humanity or inhumanity of their Southern captors.

### **Jailed Bohemians**

The stories of imprisoned reporters comprised yet another category of captivity accounts. While newspaper correspondents were tramping about the battlefields looking for good stories, they constantly ran the risk of being captured and imprisoned. Several reporters, or bohemians as they were known, were captured during the war, yet this imprisonment only meant a temporary interruption of their reporting. Upon their release the correspondents wrote long extended articles about their time in captivity. Among the three papers, the Herald featured the most imprisoned reporter stories, most likely because the Herald employed the most correspondents in the field.<sup>80</sup> Most reporters' captivity narratives made front-page news and often confirmed suspicions of the South's poor treatment of prisoners.

Although several correspondents of Union papers were captured early on the war, most of these men were only detained a few days or weeks and never saw the inside of a prison. In examining imprisoned reporters' accounts and consulting books about Civil War correspondents, Mr. J. H. Vosburg of the Herald probably held the distinction of being the first correspondent imprisoned in a rebel facility during the war. The Confederates imprisoned Vosburg in Libby Prison. Vosburg remarked that he was told his capture had been planned for over a week; the Confederates wanted to elucidate some important information about Union General Hooker's military plans.

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<sup>79</sup> Herald and Times. July 28, 1863.

Mr. Vosburg apparently had no information to tell, nevertheless he was carried off to Libby. His account of his time there was the first complete examination of the prison and its occupants, by a reporter, since the war began. Many correspondents had observed Libby from the outside and heard stories about it, however, Vosburg's account was unique because he himself was a prisoner. He described the condition of the prisoners as poor and the prison officials as stern. He commented several times on the substandard conditions he was forced to live in, sleeping in the cold, on nothing more than a cot "covered with vermin." Vosburg mentioned a visit from General Winder to the prison, a person he described as "a venerable looking man at first glance...but when one notes his sharp features...his cold, cruel gray eye, and his haughty, insulting air, you readily believe him to possess the unrelenting heartlessness attributed to him."<sup>81</sup> Although Vosburg spent less than a month in captivity, he managed to make extensive commentary on everything from prison life to the condition of the Confederate army to predictions about how long the war would last.

The Confederates successfully captured several members of the Northern press, however, no prisoners were as notorious as two Tribune correspondents captured in May of 1863. Their stories made national headlines and provided in-depth information about the condition of Union prisoners in seven separate Confederate facilities. Albert D. Richardson and Junius Henri Browne had both been long-time reporters for Greeley's Tribune. On May 3, 1863, they and Richard T. Colburn of the New York World decided to catch up with the U.S. Army, stationed

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<sup>80</sup> Brayton Harris, Blue & Gray in Black & White: Newspapers in the Civil War, (Washington, D.C.: Batsford Brassey, Inc., 1999), 125.

55 miles south of Vicksburg at Grand Gulf. The men started their journey at Miliken's Bend, a town 25 miles north of Vicksburg. They decided that the best way to reach Grant's army was to run the Confederate batteries on a barge down the Mississippi River.<sup>82</sup> This proved to be a fatal mistake. Rebel forces fired on their boat and took them captive. Both men were warned by fellow prisoners that they should not tell the Confederates about their association with the Tribune, rather, "tell them you are correspondents of a less obnoxious journal."<sup>83</sup> Not heeding this advice, the men revealed their connection to Greeley's paper and were subsequently denied exchange as non-combatants. Repeated efforts by Greeley, President Lincoln, and General Benjamin Butler brought no results. Robert Ould, Confederate Commissioner of Exchange argued that an exchange was out of question since, "The Tribune did more than any other agency to bring on the war. It is useless for you to ask the exchange of its correspondents. They are just the men we want, and just the men we are going to hold."<sup>84</sup>

Richardson and Browne would end up spending twenty months in captivity. The Tribune heralded their return home on the front page of its February 8, 1865 issue. Bold headlines proclaimed how the men had survived "A Thrilling Capture, a Long Confinement, and a Marvelous Escape." Each reporter related his own account of imprisonment in the South. Richardson likened his return to the North as "out of the jaws of death, out of the mouth of hell."<sup>85</sup> After being marched to Vicksburg, the

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<sup>81</sup> Herald, May 9, 1863.

<sup>82</sup> Perry, 156.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>84</sup> Andrews, The North Reports the Civil War, 613, see O.R. Vol. 6, pg. 183-184, 657, Vol. 7, pg. 1035.

<sup>85</sup> Tribune, February 8, 1865.

Tribune correspondents and Colburn were taken before Major N. G. Watts, a Confederate prisoner exchange agent, who had them sign parole papers and promised that the men would be on the next truce boat home. The men were then sent to Atlanta and finally to Richmond to reach their truce boat. However, because of their connection to the Tribune, Richardson and Watts were not allowed to return North with Colburn. Subsequently, they were held in the Richmond prisons, first at Libby and later at Castle Thunder.

While in Richmond, the men made the acquaintance of Richard Turner, a prison official, and Major Thomas P. Turner, the commandant of Libby. Both men were “extremely cruel” according to Browne. Richardson commented that a line ought to be inscribed over the door of Libby saying, “Abandon all hope, who enter here.” Following four months in Libby, the men were imprisoned in Castle Thunder which they argued was “more tolerable” than their previous prison. Richardson stated that “The officers did not cast any of those gratuitous indignities upon prisoners, to which they were subjected at the latter place [Libby].”<sup>86</sup>

Like many other Union prisoners, the Tribune correspondents were forwarded farther South in early 1864. Richmond could barely feed its burgeoning prison population and Confederate authorities felt it was much safer to distribute prisoners to other locations.<sup>87</sup> The Tribune reporters were sent to the Confederate States Penitentiary in Salisbury, North Carolina, arriving there on February 3, 1864.<sup>88</sup> Salisbury was a dreary place, once reserved only for Confederate officers guilty of

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., February 8, 1865.

<sup>87</sup> Arch F. Blakey, General John H. Winder, C.S.A., (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1990), 172. See also Frank L. Byrne, “Libby Prison : A Study in Emotions,” The Journal of Southern History, Volume 24, Issue 4, (November, 1958), 441.

serious offenses. Richardson and Browne did remark that the layout of the prison allowed them more time out of doors, however, this was the only positive aspect of the prison. Browne described his prison in this way:

I often wished I could obtain a photograph of that room [his cell], for I can give no idea of its repulsiveness and superlative squalor. A gentleman seemed more out of place there than the Angel Gabriel would in a prize ring, or the Pope of Rome at a Five Points dance house.<sup>89</sup>

Nevertheless, despite their discomfort, both men said that they fared much better than the rest of the prisoners. Both complained that the rations were insufficient, supplies of blankets and clothing were never delivered, and the prisoners who died were condemned to “a rude and unknown grave.” Sheer boredom and prolonged captivity killed many, while others tried escape or enlisting in the rebel army. Both reporters lamented over the sad state of the prisoners; many “praying to die” in order to end their confinement.

After nine months at Salisbury, the imprisoned correspondents could endure prison life no longer. They planned to escape along with another reporter from the Cincinnati Gazette, a Mr. William E. Davis. Procuring a fake pass that allowed them to go beyond the prison walls to visit those in the prison hospital, the three men made their getaway. In penny paper tradition, the reporters’ escape was described in every thrilling detail. Along the way through the mountain country of western North Carolina, Unionist families and black slaves helped the men in their journey to freedom. Finally, they reached Tennessee, thanks to a “NAMELESS HEROINE” as their guide. On January 13, 1865, they arrived at the Union picket line at Strawberry

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<sup>88</sup> Perry, 164.

<sup>89</sup> Tribune, February 8, 1865.

Springs, fifteen miles east of Knoxville. In 27 days the men had traveled over 340 miles.<sup>90</sup>

Browne's and Richardson's captivity narratives were heralded as proof positive that the South deliberately abused prisoners. The Tribune alleged that the South held the reporters with "demonic satisfaction," and both men were forced to survive in substandard conditions.<sup>91</sup> Browne's and Richardson's testimonies were quite damaging to the South, and both reporters testified before the Congressional Committee on the Conduct of War regarding the treatment of Union prisoners by rebel authorities.<sup>92</sup> Both men also wrote books about their prison experiences after the war.<sup>93</sup> Although it cannot be determined if both men were telling the truth, it can be said that both did make positive comments about their captivity occasionally. Both said that most rebel soldiers in the field were courteous to them and provided them with all they needed in terms of food, supplies, etc. Once in the prisons, both reporters argued that the Libby was cleaned and fumigated often and that Castle Thunder authorities faithfully delivered their supplies sent from the North. While they did not paint a rosy portrait of prison life, their accounts both seemed to be honest.

This question of the validity of their captivity stories comes to light when examining the narratives of other correspondents imprisoned along with Browne and Richardson. Two Herald reporters shared Browne's and Richardson's confinement in Castle Thunder during a twelve-week period. Major John S. Mosby, a notorious

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<sup>90</sup> Perry, 173.

<sup>91</sup> Tribune, January 23, 1865.

<sup>92</sup> Herald, January 31, 1865.

<sup>93</sup> Harris, 264.

guerrilla who terrorized Union lines throughout the state, captured reporters L.A. Hendrick and George H. Hart in Virginia. Hendrick and Hart were conveyed to Richmond where they were registered at Libby and later taken to Castle Thunder. While the men certainly did not enjoy prison, they presented a rosier picture of captivity than Browne and Richardson. At Libby, Hendrick said “In the reception and searching process...I saw none of the unfeeling cruelty and merciless degradation of prisoners according with written accounts of escaping prisoners and those released.”<sup>94</sup> Responding to charges that Confederate hospitals for prisoners provided inferior treatment, Hart argued that

I had anticipated a scarcity of many of the essentials [medical supplies], but found that there was no article of real primary importance that was deficient...I have rarely seen a hospital governed with greater care or fidelity in the North...no distinction is made between men of the North and of the South.<sup>95</sup>

Both men testified that rations were given out faithfully and were of good quality. Hendrick argued that the rations were probably better than Confederate army rations. Furthermore, as said by Browne and Richardson, all care packages from the North were faithfully delivered and distributed. Finally, unlike other prisoners, Hart and Hendrick had nothing but positive things to say about their prison guards. Hart commented that, “I take great pleasure in making record of this fact...Captain Richardson, of General Winder’s staff is the present commandant, and his conduct to the prisoners, as a general thing is marked with exceeding humanity.”<sup>96</sup>

How could men of similar occupations, sharing the same prison have such different things to say about their confinements? One must remember that Hart and

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<sup>94</sup> Herald, January 30, 1864.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., February 10, 1864.

Hendrick only endured twelve weeks, while Browne and Richardson endured twenty months in seven different prisons. In addition, Browne and Richardson both said that Castle Thunder was the most tolerable prison they were confined in. In analyzing the experiences of these four reporters, three things are evident. First of all, members of the Northern press did not endure confinements as severe as those of Union soldiers. Although their prison stays were by no means enjoyable, they all said that they were allowed to purchase extra food and receive packages from the outside. Union soldiers were not always afforded the same luxuries. Secondly, the confinements of Browne and Richardson were probably substantially harsher than that of other reporters because of the reputation of the paper that they worked for. The Tribune was the fiery abolitionist paper of the North, a newspaper that Southerners had grown to hate. No better way to express that hatred than by arresting and detaining two representatives of Greeley's journal. Finally, the South consciously favored detained Union reporters from newspapers that they felt were less critical of secession than papers like the Times or Tribune. The Herald had been popular with Southerners prior to the war and continued to be read in the South following secession. While the Herald did condemn the South many times for supposed abuse of prisoners, the paper also did not fail to print many stories like those of Hart and Hendrick, which argued against the allegations of brutality. Hart even said in the conclusion of his captivity narrative that, "It is true I have not had an extensive opportunity of observation; but it is my firm conviction that the suffering of our prisoners has been greatly exaggerated."<sup>97</sup> Therefore, newspaper affiliation had a direct effect on the outcome of

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., January 30, 1864.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., February 10, 1864.



some captivity narratives and perhaps also on how the public perceived the treatment of Union prisoners in Confederate detention facilities. A person who was a devoted Herald reader might not have been as quick to believe allegations of mistreatment of prisoners than perhaps a devotee of the Times or of the Tribune.

### **Controversial Retaliation**

Captivity narratives not only sparked concern for Union prisoners of war, these stories also inspired anger and vengeance. All three newspapers, to varying degrees, responded to reports of suffering soldiers with editorials about the possibility and/or the need for retaliation. As mentioned earlier, the issue of retaliation was first broached when the South threatened to execute Colonel Corcoran and other hostages in revenge for the incarceration of Southern privateers. From then on, the retaliation dilemma continued to be an issue on the minds of all Americans. Newspapers also wrestled with the issue, sometimes loudly calling for retaliation and at times labeling it as an act of barbarism.

The New York Times printed the most editorials about retaliation during the war, according to my research. Surprisingly, this moderate paper whose editor once said, “We will refrain from writing as if we were in a passion,” was the first of the three to forcefully urge the U.S. to carry out the harsh sentences against the Southern privateers.<sup>98</sup> The Times argued that the “Savannah” case was a clear-cut issue of piracy, which the U.S. had condemned two months prior, making piracy punishable by death. Furthermore, “to pause because the enemy threatens sanguinary reprisals

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<sup>98</sup> Bleyer, 240.

would be the merest weakness... It must be proved that the people at least are not playing at warfare.”<sup>99</sup>

The privateer issue became more complicated once the South had chosen Colonel Corcoran and thirteen other men as hostages. Now, if the U.S. carried out the death sentences of the privateers, fourteen innocent Union soldiers would be executed. The Times responded to this crisis, warning the South that, “this policy of retaliation is a two-edged sword...If they visit these severities upon our officers in their hands, we shall be compelled to retaliate upon their men in ours.”<sup>100</sup> Although at this time the South held more prisoners than the North, the Times argued that the U.S. held many men of great importance to the rebel cause (the Times never names these men).<sup>101</sup> In addition, the Times assured readers that the U.S. would continue to refuse to recognize the South as a belligerent nation, deserving of certain rights in war such as prisoner exchange. Finally, the paper proposed that the “Savannah” privateers be given new trials. Subsequently, the U.S. should carry out a form of retaliation by placing Southern prisoners in similar confinements as those experienced by Union prisoners like Colonel Corcoran.

The Tribune echoed the Times’ sentiments in an editorial entitled, “Necessary Severity.” The Tribune explained to readers that the crimes of the “Savannah” pirates were deserving of death, for they “roam[ed] the ocean for the sole purpose of preying upon the weak and defenseless.” In contrast, the Union prisoners fought a “manly fight” and unfortunately must be denied their freedom to order to maintain the United

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<sup>99</sup> Times, June 26, 1861.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., November 19, 1861.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., November 20, 1861.

States' stance on the rights of the South.<sup>102</sup> Like the Times, the Tribune advised placing some of the Southern privateers in uncomfortable confinements similar to those experienced by Union hostages. The Tribune recommended housing the privateers alongside common felons in the Tombs, a notorious New York penitentiary.

Surprisingly enough, the characteristically sensational Herald maintained quite a moderate position on the "Savannah" case. The paper argued that there should be no dispute whether or not the "Savannah" crew was engaged in secessionist activities against the U.S. The crew clearly committed an offense against the Union, however, should they be convicted of piracy and sentenced to death? The Herald argued no, the privateers did not deserve death because they were not "enemies of the human race," the papers' definition of pirates. The paper believed that the privateers deserved the same rights as soldiers on land. Captured Confederate army soldiers were not sentenced to death, so why should "soldiers on the sea" be labeled pirates and sentenced to die?<sup>103</sup> The Herald was always accused of being a secessionist sympathizer during the early years of the war, which may explain its views on the "Savannah" issue. Nevertheless, the paper's stance on the issue makes some sense. Apparently it made a lot of sense to Lincoln, who later employed the Herald's idea concerning the "Savannah" prisoners.

Calls for retaliation were not made again until the summer of 1862 when the South protested the policies of General Pope's army. Jefferson Davis made a speech about "Pope's atrocities" arguing that if caught, he and his fellow soldiers would not

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<sup>102</sup> Tribune, November 19, 1861.

<sup>103</sup> Herald, November 1, 1861.

be seen as prisoners of war but as felons.<sup>104</sup> Later in that same year, retaliation issues would flare up again, this time for something much worse than abusing Confederate citizens. Union General John McNeil, also known as the “Butcher of Palmyra,” executed ten Confederate guerrillas for the alleged murder of Unionist Andrew Allsman. Allsman had been working as a guide for Union troops in Missouri and was supposedly captured by Confederate General Joseph Porter. General McNeil sent a letter to Porter demanding Allsman’s return within ten days or he would execute ten of his rebel prisoners. McNeil did not hear anything from Porter and thereby carried out the executions. Jefferson Davis ordered that Lieutenant General T. J. Holmes, Commander of the Trans-Mississippi Department, to meet with Union authorities to demand the immediate surrender of General McNeil and his forces. If McNeil did not surrender then Davis would order Holmes to execute the first ten Union officers that fell into his hands.<sup>105</sup>

The three newspapers each responded differently to the crisis. The Herald quietly mentioned the McNeil incident and made no opinion on it. The Tribune responded by arguing that this execution was unique because the men were guerrillas and “universally suspected of abduction or murder.” The rebels deserved to be executed as murderers, but their deaths in no way deserved like retaliation by South.<sup>106</sup>

In contrast, the Times actually criticized McNeil for his actions. The paper argued that McNeil should have taken more time to consider the consequences of his action. Furthermore, the murder of Allsman was never established, and even if he

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<sup>104</sup> Tribune, August 11, 1862.

<sup>105</sup> Times, November 28, 1862.

was murdered, did his life equal the lives of ten men? The Times concluded its scathing editorial by voicing its support for retaliation, but retaliation that was well thought out:

If the law of retaliation is to be invoked on our side, as we think it should be, to prevent the horrible atrocities which have in many instances been perpetrated upon Union men, it is desirable that it should be done with more deliberate regard to justice and with formalities better calculated to show us guiltless in the eyes of the world, than General McNeil seems to have considered necessary.<sup>107</sup>

The Times' comment about being "guiltless in the eyes of the world" foreshadowed criticism from the London press concerning the McNeil executions. In a Times editorial a few days later, the paper said that it was no surprise that several London papers, including the Times, the Herald, and the Post severely denounced McNeil's act. Since these papers were "open and avowed advocates of the rebel cause" their statements could be dismissed. However, the Times worried about criticisms printed in the "London Star and other friendly journals."<sup>108</sup> The Times then assured the Star that McNeil was not an officer in the National army, rather, he belonged to the "Home Guard" of the State of Missouri, a militia that existed solely under state authority. The paper went on to remind all of the foreign press that Unionists throughout the South had been abused and murdered since the war began, yet not one word of these crimes had been mentioned in Europe. The Times concluded that the U.S. must denounce McNeil's act and make amends, "not only to prevent the

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<sup>106</sup> Tribune, November 27, 1862.

<sup>107</sup> Times, November 28, 1862.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., December 1, 1862. See reprints of London papers in New York Times, December 29, 1862.

threatened retaliation of the rebel President, but to remove from the Union cause the damning stigma which such acts are calculated to impress upon it.”<sup>109</sup>

These editorials by the Times and Tribune demonstrate very different thinking on the part of the two editors, Greeley and Raymond. Greeley, a man known to sometimes go to extremes, argued that the guerrillas deserved to die since they were murderers anyway. In addition, Greeley maintained that the South was not entitled to shoot Union officers in retaliation since the life of a rebel guerrilla did not equal a national soldier. Furthermore, the South could not even claim a right to retaliation since the Confederates refused to recognize guerrillas as Confederate soldiers.<sup>110</sup> In contrast, the once “passionate retaliator,” the Times, called for moderation. McNeil’s act was brazen and ill conceived; he should have waited longer to carry out the sentences. Furthermore, McNeil placed the U.S. in a precarious position in relation to Europe. Accounts of barbarism on the part of the U.S. might encourage Europe to support the Confederacy. The Times, once such an advocate of retaliation, now raised concerns about its impact on Union soldiers and on Europe.<sup>111</sup> In essence, the Times talked incessantly about the need for retaliation, but sometimes shied away from its actual enforcement.

The South never made good on its promises of retaliation in the McNeil incident. Other retaliation issues soon took precedence. Back in August of 1862, General Butler had ordered the execution of William B. Mumford for taking down a Union flag in New Orleans after the occupation of Federal troops. Supposedly, Jefferson Davis found out about the execution in late August, but Mumford’s death

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., December 1, 1862.

<sup>110</sup> Tribune, December 5, 1862.

was not confirmed until November. Besides Mumford's execution, the South was also dealing with a defeat at Antietam in September and Lincoln's issue of the Emancipation Proclamation. On December 23, 1862, Davis responded to these matters in a fiery proclamation, which was reprinted in all of the Northern papers. Davis declared Butler and his troops outlaws and felons, deserving of capital punishment. In addition, just to make sure Butler was punished, Davis ordered that "no commissioned officer of the United States, taken captive, shall be released on parole, before exchange, until the said Butler shall have met with due punishment for his crimes."<sup>112</sup> However, Davis did not stop there. With news of African American enlistment in the Union army and the freeing of the slaves, Davis responded with his greatest threat ever. Any black soldiers captured in arms would be delivered over to the executive authorities of the "respective States to which they belong." In other words, they would most likely be executed or sold into slavery for fighting against the South. Furthermore, white commanders of African American regiments would be punished by death for inciting a "servile insurrection."<sup>113</sup>

The Times, the Tribune, and the Herald all responded with screaming headlines and scathing editorials. The Times reprinted the speech on its front pages twice, on December 28 and 29 respectively, both headed with phrases like, "The Black Flag," and "Retaliatory Policy Fully Inaugurated." The Tribune and the Herald also placed the entire speech on their front pages, with headlines like "Blind Fury of Jeff. Davis," and "Terror of the Rebels."<sup>114</sup> The proclamation was further discussed

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<sup>111</sup> See also the Tribune's response to the London press on December 30, 1862.

<sup>112</sup> Times, Herald, and Tribune, December 29, 1862.

<sup>113</sup> Times, Herald, and Tribune, December 29, 1862.

<sup>114</sup> Tribune and Herald, December 29, 1862.

in the editorial pages of the press. The Times featured three editorials on the subject, labeling the charges against Butler as “undeniably false.” The paper then proceeded to rehash all the events leading up to Mumford’s death, all the while arguing that Butler was completely in the right to execute him. In reference to the order concerning African American troops, the Times believed that “it is a proclamation to prevent a proclamation.” Davis issued his proclamation in order to scare Lincoln away from enforcing the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863.<sup>115</sup> Finally, the paper concluded that if the Confederates did indeed carry out their threats of retaliation against black soldiers, the U.S. would not retaliate in kind. Once again, here is another example of the Times becoming more moderate in its stance on retaliation. The paper argued that “to imitate the barbarities of desperate and enraged barbarians is a thing which religion, humanity, and the usage of civilized nations and our own self-respect alike forbid.”<sup>116</sup>

The Tribune also filled its columns with editorials on Davis’ proclamation. Like the Times, the Tribune labeled the charges against Butler false and called this section of the proclamation, “empty bravado.” In reference to order concerning slaves, the Tribune identified this as a deliberate policy of murder inaugurated by the rebels. Interesting to note, the Tribune reminded the South that they were the first ones to enlist black soldiers. Regiments of black soldiers were raised in New Orleans to fight on the side of the Slaveholders’ Rebellion. The paper asked, “Is it a law of civilized warfare that slave-holders and rebels alone may arm and use negroes?” The Tribune concluded that Davis may make his accusations and issue orders but in

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<sup>115</sup> Times, December 28, 1862.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., December 29, 1862.



reality, “he will frighten nobody.”<sup>117</sup> The Davis proclamation did not encourage the Herald to advocate retaliation. Instead, the paper pointed to the Emancipation Proclamation as the real problem. According to the Herald, Lincoln’s freeing of the slaves would inaugurate a dangerous new phase of war. Bennett’s advised Lincoln to remove the “radicals” from his Cabinet and “put in their places men of well known capacity and of conservative principles, who hold the salvation of the Union paramount to all theories about negro equality, and who will advise Mr. Lincoln to withdraw his proclamation.”<sup>118</sup> This response from the paper was probably not surprising, considering that the Herald was known for its sometimes racist opinions and its opposition to abolitionism.

Following the Davis proclamation of December 23, 1863, most issues of retaliation dealt with the refusal by the South to recognize blacks as soldiers and deserving of treatment as prisoners of war. In addition, with the breakdown of the cartel in mid-1863, and as reports of inhumane treatment of prisoners rose, so too was there a marked rise in the number of editorials calling for retaliation solely on the basis of allegations of mistreatment.

For the Tribune, the issue of retaliation most often came up in reference to the treatment of black soldiers. True to its abolitionist roots, the Tribune championed the cause of protecting the black prisoner. In February of 1863, the Tribune urged the U.S. to adopt a bill that would provide equal protection to all soldiers, black and white. The paper argued that if the South continued its policy of not treating captured blacks as prisoners of war, then retaliation should be the government’s next resort.

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<sup>117</sup> Tribune, December 29, 1862. See also Times, December 29, 1862.

<sup>118</sup> Herald, January 17, 1863.

However, retaliation must be well thought out and the last resort. “Before we enter on a career so terrible as that, if we mean to appeal to the toleration of Christendom and the verdict of History for our justification, we must have exhausted in advance every effort to prevent it.”<sup>119</sup> The Tribune believed that the U.S. needed to provide evidence showing it had exhausted all other options in order to justify retaliation. Due to the South’s “perfidy” the Union was forced to use retaliation as a means of protecting its men.

This issue of protection of soldiers continued to be the Tribune’s rallying cry. In July of 1863, the Tribune printed news from Charleston concerning the siege of Fort Wagner. The men of the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts led the assault and suffered many casualties and prisoners taken. Returning white soldiers from the fight told of rebels asking them if they commanded negro troops. If they responded no, the rebels told them that they were fortunate, because “every damned nigger officer would be hung or shot at sight.”<sup>120</sup> The newspaper proceeded to list several recent incidents where black Union soldiers had been sold into slavery or murdered. The Tribune blamed Lincoln for these crimes against humanity, arguing,

“Had the President but issued his proclamation declaring that all soldiers under the flag have the same rights, and that any violation of them would be followed by merciless retaliation; and had he acted on that announcement, these horrors would have long since come to an end.”<sup>121</sup>

Lincoln quickly responded to the Tribune’s call for justice for black soldiers. In a proclamation issued on July 30, but not made public until August 3, Lincoln promised protection of all U.S. soldiers. In order to ensure this protection, Lincoln ordered

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<sup>119</sup> Tribune, February 4, 1863.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., July 31, 1863.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., July 31, 1863.

...that for every soldier of the United States killed in violation of the laws of war, a Rebel soldier shall be executed, and for every one enslaved by the enemy or sold into slavery, a Rebel soldier shall be placed at hard labor on the public works, and continued at such labor until the other shall be released and receive the treatment due to a prisoner of war.<sup>122</sup>

Consequently, the Tribune praised the President for this “long-delayed announcement.”

While the Times and the Herald were not as loud as the Tribune in their calls for protection of black soldiers, the two papers were both shocked by the massacre at Fort Pillow in April of 1864. Though historians are conflicted in their opinions about the battle, it is alleged that Confederate Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest and his troops purposely shot down black troops who had thrown down their arms in surrender. In addition, many federal soldiers at the battle claimed that Forrest and his men shot and killed wounded blacks.<sup>123</sup> Though historians still debate the issue, the Northern press was convinced that Forrest deliberately murdered black soldiers. Front-page headlines screaming “Massacre,” “400 Soldiers Butchered,” “Negroes Buried Alive,” “Shocking Scenes of Savagery,” and “Retaliation to be Made” filled the columns of the Herald, Tribune, and the Times.<sup>124</sup> Revolting images of death included, “The Rebels threw the negroes in piles, after stripping them of their boots and clothing...and burned them.”<sup>125</sup> Sadistic rebel soldiers “nail[ed] negroes alive to buildings, and then set fire to the buildings, while they stood and gloated over the

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., August 3, 1863.

<sup>123</sup> Speer, 110.

<sup>124</sup> Times, Herald, and Tribune, April 16-17, 1864.

<sup>125</sup> Tribune, April 23, 1864.

slow and horrible death of the wretched victims.”<sup>126</sup> The scenes presented by the press remind modern-day readers of images from the Holocaust during World War II.

In response to the Fort Pillow massacre, the Times and Herald joined the Tribune in calling for swift retaliation. The Times argued that since the rebels had given up on winning European recognition, they would now kill blacks without impunity. Though retaliation was shocking, it was a necessity.<sup>127</sup> The Herald urged the U.S. to follow through with its threats of retaliation to teach the South a lesson. Bennett’s paper believed that “every prisoner taken from the gang which assaulted Fort Pillow ought to have had short shrift.”<sup>128</sup> The once racist Herald now applauded Lincoln’s desire to protect black soldiers and reminded the South that abuse of African American soldiers would no longer be tolerated.<sup>129</sup>

### **Hesseltine and Retaliation**

In his pivotal book, Civil War Prisons, William B. Hesseltine discussed another form of retaliation used during the war. Hesseltine argued that due to press reports of mistreatment of Union prisoners in Confederate detention facilities, Union officials initiated retaliation against rebel prisoners in the North by cutting rations and reducing privileges. Hesseltine cited a few articles, mostly from the Times, which protested the comfortable accommodations rebel prisoners enjoyed. While Hesseltine was probably right that accounts of suffering motivated Union policy towards rebel prisoners, he did not make clear if the Northern press itself advocated retaliation. In my research I have found very few examples where newspapers called for a reduction

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<sup>126</sup> Times, June 27, 1864.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., April 26, 1864.

<sup>128</sup> Herald, July 3, 1864.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., April 19, 1864.

in rations or privileges. The few articles that do exist are found in all three New York papers.

Early in the war, the Northern press spoke out against what they saw as “coddling” the Confederate prisoners. The Times reprinted an article from the Boston Advertiser concerning the treatment of rebel prisoners at Fort Warren in Boston. Boston area women supposedly visited the prison daily, bringing baskets of food, clothing, etc. The Times complained that “It is a flagrant insult to the country while our prisoners in the cities of the South are subjected to every indignity and every discomfort. . . these hoary traitors should be thus feted and petted.”<sup>130</sup> The Ohio residents also became targets of criticism because of their treatment of the rebels. The Tribune complained that local free blacks were imprisoned to serve captive rebel soldiers. Rebel prisoners were allowed to “parade” about the capital of Ohio and enjoyed sumptuous dinners at the homes of local secession sympathizers. The paper screamed out that “several of these men have the blood of hundreds of our brethren on their hands. . . for their luxuriant and indecent stay here the United States foots the bill.”<sup>131</sup> An outraged Tribune also lashed out at secession sympathizers who brought “luxuries” to rebel wounded on Riker’s Island in New York, bypassing wounded Union soldiers “as though they were unworthy of notice.”<sup>132</sup> Finally, the Herald criticized the well-fed rebel prisoners, saying that they “constantly whine for

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<sup>130</sup> Times, October 8, 1861. The Advertiser would later condemn Boston’s mayor for comforting the “traitors at Fort Warren,” and made it into an election issue. The paper reminded Irish voters of Colonel Corcoran’s captivity, saying, “Sons of the Emerald Isle, think of poor Corcoran when you vote on Monday.” In Minor H. McClain, “The Military Prison at Fort Warren,” Civil War History, Volume 8, Number 2, (June, 1962), 141.

<sup>131</sup> Tribune, May 16, 1862.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., July 29, 1863.

luxuries” like whiskey and “dainties.” The North treated them well because it was “humane and Christian,” yet certain lines should be drawn to prevent coddling.<sup>133</sup>

The New York Times took a controversial stance on rebel prisoners in an editorial entitled “Rebel Prisoners, and What Should Be Done With Them.” At this time, the paper saw no hope for an exchange of prisoners, and acknowledged that forty to fifty thousand rebel prisoners would be dependents on the North for an indefinite period of time. The paper suggested perhaps that these prisoners could do something to “earn their bread.” The Times argued that European nations make prisoners of war to earn their keep. The U.S. should follow Europe’s example, using these thousands of prisoners on public works. In this way, prisoners could earn their keep, which the paper alleged cost the government close to twenty million dollars a year. In addition, the Times claimed that it was concerned about the “injurious effects of unemployed confinement” on the prisoners. There was no need to allow this “pack of criminals to fatten in idleness, and die of gout and inanition.”<sup>134</sup>

Some Richmond papers would later call the Times’ idea atrocious; however, Confederate prison officials soon found the plan something to emulate. The Richmond Enquirer reported that hundreds of Yankee prisoners were employed making shoes for the rebel army and/or laboring on public works. The paper argued that “for every Yankee so employed a detailed man can be sent to the trenches.”<sup>135</sup> It

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<sup>133</sup> Herald, November 11, 1863.

<sup>134</sup> Times, February 3, 1864. This editorial was probably prompted by a letter from Quartermaster-General Meigs to Henry Raymond advocating the use of rebel prisoners on public works, to save them from idleness and to help the Union war effort. Meigs cautioned however that, “I do not wish to appear in print,” so perhaps the Times adopted the idea as its own to protect Meigs. See O.R. Vol. 6, pg. 893-894.

<sup>135</sup> The Richmond Enquirer, Sept. 20, 1864. See also The Charleston Mercury, Sept. 20, 1864 (reprint of Richmond Examiner article), The Richmond Dispatch Oct. 28, 1861, The Richmond Whig, August 5, 1861, and Times, Oct. 4, 1864.

is not known if prisoners were actively employed doing odd jobs by either government for an extended period of time. However, when the South began to place captured black prisoners at work on fortifications in Virginia, General Butler issued a *lex talionis*, or law of retaliation, order. As long as the South continued to use African American prisoners as “slaves,” Butler would force an equal number of rebel prisoners to work on Union fortifications.<sup>136</sup> Butler enforced these threats until the South finally backed down.

Some final examples of the open encouragement of retaliation by the newspapers were letters to the editor. While these letters were not directly the newspapers’ opinions, the press allowed them to be printed. In my research, I found that only the Times featured these letters, however, I am sure that the Tribune and Herald probably had its share of angry retaliation letters.

A particularly resentful letter written by a former Union prisoner called for retaliation upon a certain set of rebel prisoners. The prisoner described his experiences at Libby and Belle Isle Prison, describing the latter as a virtual hell where the “chivalry” of the South deliberately starve the “d—d Yankees.” At the conclusion of this front page, three-column letter, the author offered a solution to remedy these past abuses of captives. He called for retaliation, but retaliation only on Virginia soldiers. Since, “in Richmond a prisoner is looked upon as a dog and treated accordingly,” the prisoner saw no other choice. “Retaliation, then, strict, stern and unflinching, and that on Virginia rebels only, is the true remedy for this monstrous disgrace to the age we live in and to civilization.”<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Times, October 15, 1864.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., November 6, 1863. The Times made no comment on this letter.

Most other letters called for a general retaliation upon rebel prisoners, regardless of origin. Many saw it as the only solution, arguing that it would be more cruel and inhumane to continue to allow the rebels to mistreat Union prisoners. “We must retaliate their heathenism upon themselves,” argued one letter. The writer believed that retaliation would receive an instant response from Davis, who, upon hearing of the suffering of his fellow countrymen, would immediately end the outrages against Union captives.<sup>138</sup> Nevertheless, it must be noted that alongside these retaliation letters, there were also many examples of correspondence calling for fair treatment of the rebels. One letter suggested that instead of retaliation, the U.S. should instruct its prison guards to be stern, “so stern that our severity shall impress the prisoners.”<sup>139</sup> By limiting the privileges of captive men, such as buying extra food or receiving packages from people other than their family, the U.S. could avoid cruel retaliation.<sup>140</sup> Another letter discussed the treatment of wounded rebel prisoners in Union hospitals, commending Northern doctors and nurses for their care and devotion to the patients. The letter warned that the numbers of visitors to the hospital should be restricted but that the men should be allowed some company. The letter concluded, “Let us not follow the example of the Richmond surgeons and jailers, and treat a fallen foe dependent on our mercy rigorously.”<sup>141</sup> Finally, another letter, this time from the Union prisoners confined at Columbus, South Carolina, denounced

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<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, December 23, 1864.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, December 26, 1864.

<sup>140</sup> See Leslie Gene Hunter, “Warden for the Union: General William Hoffman (1807-1884),” (Ph.D. diss., The University of Arizona, 1971), 184-185. Hoffman placed restrictions upon the packages that prisoners could receive. In November of 1863, Hoffman ordered that packages of food for prisoners would no longer be permitted. Packages of clothing were allowed, but only those packages sent from their immediate families. On Dec. 1, 1863, Hoffman ordered that most trade with sutlers would be prohibited.



retaliation upon the rebel prisoners. The men stated that they knew the U.S. had already retaliated by reducing rations to rebel prisoners.<sup>142</sup> Despite their personal suffering, the Union prisoners argued that “We deprecate the necessity of inflicting additional retaliation [on rebel prisoners].”<sup>143</sup>

These letters and editorials on retaliation presented both points of view on the issue. Hesselstine spent a whole chapter of his book arguing that a “war psychosis,” created by the Northern press, motivated Union officials to retaliate on rebel prisoners and later accuse the South of deliberately murdering prisoners. While it was undeniable that all of the newspapers used in this thesis advocated some form of retaliation against prisoners, Hesselstine never mentioned the press articles that denounced revenge. Like General William Hoffman and other Union prison officials, retaliation was an extreme step to take and something many refused to even consider. Both Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis issued retaliatory orders, only to waver when called on to enforce the order. Both men were vilified and praised for their stances on retaliation.<sup>144</sup> The point is that the “war psychosis” was not as clear cut as Hesselstine made it out to be. Like Union officials, newspapers and their readers wrestled with the issue throughout the war.

### **The Exchange Imbroglio**

Newspapers debated and deliberated over more than just retaliation in terms of the prisoners. Issues of prisoner exchange became front-page news as the war progressed. In examining the coverage and commentary on prisoner exchange, one

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<sup>141</sup> Times, May 24, 1862.

<sup>142</sup> See Hunter, 192-193. In April and June of 1864 Hoffman reduced rations considerably. Hunter argues that Hoffman was clearly being influenced by Hesselstine’s “war psychosis.”

<sup>143</sup> Times, December 20, 1864.

can see a distinct pattern emerge in all three papers. Generally, from 1861 to the end of 1862, newspapers in the North eventually supported the exchange of prisoners for humanitarian, manpower, and other practical reasons. The Northern press called on the U.S. government to procure an exchange with the South despite issues of belligerent nation, recognition and national pride. The press also used the exchange issue as a way of criticizing Union war policy. Following 1862, the exchange situation changed with the issue of the Emancipation Proclamation. Davis refused to consider African American men as soldiers and worthy of exchange. Eventually, this refusal would kill the exchange cartel. Though the press blamed the South for ending the cartel, the press had also found new reasons to criticize Union war policy. Issues of black and white prisoners would divide the press just like it divided the nation.

As explained in Chapter one, the Union did not plan to exchange prisoners when the war began. The U.S. believed that to exchange prisoners would accord a “belligerent nation” status upon the Confederates. The Union saw the South as a rebellious set of traitors, not as an independent nation. However, as the war dragged on, the Union’s exchange policy drew criticism. One of the most vocal critics was the press, especially the New York Times.

During 1861, the Times had waffled between supporting or opposing the Union’s stance on exchange. As mentioned before, the Times sided with Lincoln on some occasions, arguing that exchange would equal recognition and was “not deemed prudent.”<sup>145</sup> However, the paper also attacked the Union’s stance on prisoner exchange directly following the Battle of Bull Run. Inspired by a letter to the editor,

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<sup>144</sup> Herald, May 30, 1863.

<sup>145</sup> Times, September 26, 1861 and November 20, 1861.

the Times declared that exchange would not equal recognition of the South as a nation. The author of the letter, identified as “F.L.,” stated that according to international law, the exchange of prisoners “would amount to an acknowledgement of the enemy, as a belligerent—a sovereign power possessed of the right of waging war.” However, the author argued that, in this case, an exchange of prisoners would recognize nothing beyond the “fact” of war.<sup>146</sup> A Times editorial agreed, stating that “We are at a loss to perceive any harm that could possibly come to our cause from exchanging prisoners.”<sup>147</sup> Furthermore, the paper believed that Lincoln must place reality and the public’s wishes over pride. Families of the captured soldiers wanted their men back as soon as possible.

The Times became increasingly more “pro-exchange” as the war dragged on. In September 1861, the Times heard about the informal exchange between General Benjamin M. Prentiss and Brigadier General Pillow.<sup>148</sup> The paper applauded both men for their actions; actions that the Times hoped would be emulated and repeated. In addition, the paper challenged the recognition issue again, this time charging that the U.S. had already recognized the South as a belligerent nation. “The first flag of truce displayed by any portion of our Army was an acknowledgement of the enemy’s character as a belligerent. Major Anderson made such an acknowledgement at Fort Sumter.”<sup>149</sup> Therefore, a general exchange should commence immediately.

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., August 19, 1861.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., August 19, 1861.

<sup>148</sup> According to Speer, the first unsanctioned formal exchange of prisoners was between Colonel William H. L. Wallace and Brigadier General Gideon J. Pillow (p. 99). However, in this article, the Times said that an unsanctioned formal exchange took place between General Benjamin M. Prentiss and Pillow. The timing and location of the exchanges is so similar that it is highly likely that these are one in the same.

<sup>149</sup> Times, September 8, 1861.

This editorial also brings up an unexpected facet of the prisoner of war situation, discussed almost exclusively by the Times. According to the Times, the lack of an exchange cartel would discourage military volunteers. Prospective recruits might shy away from enlisting if there was a good chance that they would not be exchanged if captured. The Times saw exchange as critical to the survival of the U.S. Army. “There is no doubt whatever that the apprehension of a tedious imprisonment does more to prevent the rapid completion of regiments than any other single cause.”<sup>150</sup> The U.S. government would only have itself to blame when Union regiments could not fill their ranks. Lincoln needed to stop worrying about so many technicalities and start arranging for an exchange.<sup>151</sup> Furthermore, the Times felt that a general exchange cartel would “be an immense stimulus to volunteering; we think it good for a hundred thousand men.”<sup>152</sup>

The Times even used history to justify prisoner exchange. The paper found that during the American Revolution the British government refused to exchange prisoners with the colonists for fear that this would recognize the colonies as an independent nation. However, informal exchanges occurred throughout the war. The Times argued that if smug British commanders could consent to exchange, so too could the U.S.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., September 8, 1861.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., October 3, 1861 and March 31, 1864.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., July 24, 1862.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., December 11, 1861 and January 5, 1862. See also Gardner, 93n.21. Gardner argues that “writers on Civil War prisons rarely (if ever) drew what would seem obvious parallels with the sometimes harsh plight of Americans in British hands during the Revolution and War of 1812.” Obviously, newspapers recognized the connection, in terms of exchange. Also, the Herald compared Civil War and Revolutionary War prisons in January 6, 1862 and November 11, 1863 issues.

The press also believed that the exchange issue worsened the suffering of Union prisoners. Commentary on the lack of exchanges often accompanied captivity narratives and/or editorials about the suffering of Union soldiers in “Southern dungeons.” In this way, exchange was seen as a way of saving the prisoners and probably considered more “civilized” in comparison to retaliation. Failing to procure an exchange would be “cruelty indeed,” according to the Tribune.<sup>154</sup> The absence of prisoner exchange had resulted in the “untold suffering [of] thousands of Union prisoners,” said the Times. Furthermore, the U.S. was partly to blame for this suffering. The Herald condemned U.S. policy on exchange, arguing, “These men ought not be sacrificed any longer to a mere diplomatic or political technicality. Humanity, reason, justice, common sense, all appeal in tones that should not be ignored, for a prompt termination to the senseless quibble of which those brave men are the victims.”<sup>155</sup> All three papers even cited the admirable willingness on the part of the rebels to exchange prisoners.<sup>156</sup>

Eventually, the Union and Confederacy agreed upon a general exchange cartel in late July of 1862, much to the appreciation of the press and the public. For the rest of 1862, not much was heard about prisoner exchange. Problems arose however with the Emancipation Proclamation and Davis’ order concerning black soldiers. For the rest of the war, the press largely blamed the South for the end of prisoner exchange and criticized the North for not actively seeking out a solution.

When the Union formally stopped all prisoner exchanges, the press supported this action, blaming the South for disrupting the cartel. As with the retaliation issue,

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<sup>154</sup> Tribune, February 3, 1862.

<sup>155</sup> Herald, November 12, 1861.

the Tribune championed the cause of the black soldier. The Union wanted to continue exchanges, but the South's perfidy made it impossible. The Tribune asked, "But what writer on international law, or the laws of war, ever laid down the principle that rebellion was the privilege of Whites alone?"<sup>157</sup> The paper concluded that exchanges could no longer continue until an agreement was reached treating all prisoners on equitable terms.

The issue of the black prisoner caused division in the press (and in the Union) over whether or not to continue exchanges. In an editorial, the Tribune noted that several "Copperhead journals urge the President to submit to any demand rather than leave our soldiers to starve in Richmond prisons."<sup>158</sup> The paper worried that there is "a real danger that the rights of the colored soldier and the duty of the Government might be forgotten amid the warm sympathies with suffering prisoners."<sup>159</sup> Furthermore, the U.S. could not give into Confederate demands now because it would be a sign of weakness and who knew what the rebels would ask for next. The Tribune hoped that Lincoln would think twice before abandoning black prisoners to the "savage cruelty of the slave masters."<sup>160</sup>

Concern for black prisoners was not universal among the press. As the Tribune had feared, even the Republican Times called for resumption of exchange even if it meant giving into rebel demands concerning black prisoners. The Times stated, "Concede anything, everything, no matter what, if it will only ransom these heroes from the grip of their tormentors while life yet flickers. We can afford it...at

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., July 8, 1862 and Times and Tribune, July 9, 1862.

<sup>157</sup> Tribune, August 3, 1863.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., November 18, 1863.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., November 25, 1863.

whatever cost.”<sup>161</sup> In more extreme words, the Herald lashed out at blacks and those who fought for black equality. The Herald warned that, “The people will not much longer see the best interests of the country thus sacrificed to the nigger.”<sup>162</sup> The paper complained that a “miserable faction” of Congress made the cause of black Americans their top priority. The Herald saw these extremists as the reason why exchange broke down, since “with proper and courteous negotiations” the problems with the cartel might be solved.<sup>163</sup>

The Times, given its ties to the Republican Party, continued to make some surprising suggestions concerning black prisoners. The Times reprinted a letter to President Lincoln from four Andersonville prisoners sent to Washington to ask for an exchange. The letter told of incredible suffering, with Union prisoners “wander[ing] about in a state of idiocy,” due to a lack of food, clothing, and shelter, but most of all, a lack of hope for exchange. The writers also said that their prison guards told them that the only obstacle in the way of exchange was the status of black prisoners. The prisoners begged Lincoln to consider an exchange of white soldiers, calling it an issue of “national honor.” The Andersonville men justified their case in this way:

The whites are confined in such prisons as Libby and Andersonville, starved and treated with a barbarism unknown to civilized nations. The blacks, on the contrary, are seldom imprisoned. They are distributed among the citizens or employed on government works... They are neither starved nor killed... True, they are slaves again but their slavery is freedom and happiness compared with the cruel existence imposed upon our gallant men.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., November 25, 1863.

<sup>161</sup> Times, November 14, 1863.

<sup>162</sup> Herald, February 1, 1864.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., December 18, 1863.

<sup>164</sup> Times, August 24, 1864.

Since these two classes of prisoners were so different, the men felt that “the Government can honorably consent to an exchange.”

The Times commented on the Andersonville letter with a scathing editorial accusing the U.S. of perpetuating the prisoners’ suffering. The paper argued that in order to save these men from their daily torment, drastic measures must be taken. The Times called for the U.S. to “exchange the white prisoners man for man at least; if no better can be done for the negro troops now, their time will come anon.”<sup>165</sup> As the dire prison situation continued, the Times again pushed the U.S. to save white soldiers. The paper argued, “Surely, it is better thus to save a portion of our prisoners, than to leave all, white and black, alike to perish...Probably the true policy is to save the white man by exchange, and to protect the black man by retaliation.”<sup>166</sup> Once again, the press considered retaliation as a possible solution to the exchange nightmare. The Times’ stance on black prisoners must have been seen as a bit extreme, considering the fact that Henry Raymond, the editor, was a well-known member of the Republican Party.

Black prisoners, exchange, and the suffering of prisoners all brought up issues of trust between the two governments. Once an exchange cartel had been worked out in 1862, both nations breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that loved ones would be coming home. For the South, the exchange was a welcome blessing considering the fact that the Confederacy could barely care for its own soldiers. When the cartel fell apart, both sides lashed out, blaming one another for the failure of the cartel. Letters between exchange commissioners were reprinted in Northern and Southern

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., August 24, 1864.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., December 27, 1864.



newspapers.<sup>167</sup> Major General E. A. Hitchcock, Commissioner of Exchange, even wrote a lengthy letter to the New York Times explaining why the exchange cartel failed. He laid the blame entirely on the rebels, mentioning the black prisoner issue as a major factor. In addition, Hitchcock argued that rebel Commissioner Ould purposely paroled and sent men back into the field without first alerting Union authorities. Hitchcock alleged that the way he found out about Ould's deception was through the Richmond newspapers. Since the South did not respect the laws of war, the U.S. ordered an end to exchanges.<sup>168</sup> In the months following the war, Hitchcock would continue to blame the South for ending prisoner exchange.<sup>169</sup>

The evidence presented makes clear that the exchange issue was a major facet of the prisoner of war problem during the Civil War. Issues of pride, recognition, status, race, and trust all complicated the situation. Formal exchanges did not exist until early in 1865, when the South finally agreed to exchange all prisoners, regardless of rank. The fact that the Confederacy had become so desperate for soldiers that it began to recruit blacks for its own army probably encouraged the resumption of formal exchanges.<sup>170</sup> General Grant obtained an exchange effective in February of 1865, an exchange heralded by all the newspapers.<sup>171</sup> The exchange nightmare was finally over, yet the prisoner of war issue would continue long after the surrender at Appomattox.

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., October 6, 1862, November 16 & 23, 1863, December 31, 1863, September 6, 1864, January 25, 1865, Tribune, September 8, 1864, October 17, 1864, and Herald, October 7, 1862, November 25, 1863.

<sup>168</sup> Times, Dec. 2, 1863, Tribune and Herald, Dec. 3, 1863. See also O.R. Vol. 6, pg. 594-600, 615-617.

<sup>169</sup> Times, August 23, 1865.

<sup>170</sup> James M. McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 836-837.

## **The Dehumanization of the South**

In the preceding three categories of prison stories, this chapter examined how newspapers sometimes used dehumanization tactics to explain and prove that the Confederacy deliberately mistreated Union prisoners. However, dehumanization stories and editorials were so numerous that they deserve a category of their own. The language used in these stories is inflammatory, hateful, and sometimes bizarre. Southerners were compared to barbaric tribes and labeled as naturally brutal because of their long exposure to slavery. One could say that the press made up these ridiculous assumptions about the South out of pure spite, or a desire to encourage unity against an “evil people.” The press could also have used these stories to encourage the war effort, motivating people to enlist in order to bring an end to the South’s “evil” ways. Several articles called for an “expedition of mercy” to liberate the men in Richmond prisons. Letters to the editor offered ships to liberate prisoners, or called on volunteers to do garrison duty in Washington, D.C., thereby allowing the Army of the Potomac to go rescue the “starving patriots.”<sup>172</sup>

Most of all, however, these dehumanization tactics played the biggest part in creating what Hesselstine terms as the “war psychosis.” While there were only a few newspaper articles that directly called for retaliation, these “dehumanization articles” could be seen as justifying and encouraging retaliation without coming out and directly demanding it. In addition, by demonizing the enemy, the North exonerated itself from any guilt it might have felt if it did employ retaliation tactics. Social psychologist Leon Festinger calls this process “cognitive dissonance.” Simply put,

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<sup>171</sup> Times, Tribune, and Herald, February 12 & 13, 1865.

It is always useful to think badly about people one has exploited or plans to exploit...No one likes to think of himself or herself as a bad person. To treat badly another person whom we consider a reasonable human being creates a tension between act and attitude that demands resolution.<sup>173</sup>

By demonizing Southerners, the North justified the war and rationalized actions that they believed would protect “innocent Union prisoners,” actions such as retaliating on innocent rebel captives.

The Tribune was the first New York paper of the three to “dehumanize” the South during the war. In an editorial entitled, “Our Savage Foes” the paper warned the North that the South was no ordinary enemy. The paper argued that,

Under the brutalizing influence of Slavery, the restraints of civilization have worn away, and their boasted chivalry given place to a barbarous cruelty... Their treatment of our wounded and prisoners stamps them as destitute of all the attributes of humanity.<sup>174</sup>

This editorial, written just after Bull Run, called on the North to refrain from treating captured Confederates with “courtesy and consideration” because Union men did not receive the same kind attention.

This first “dehumanization” article brings up a theme found only in the Tribune and the Times. The idea that people in the South had been “brutalized by slavery” was one found in countless editorials and stories in these two papers. This belief echoes to some extent the theories put forth in Hinton Rowan Helper’s 1857 book, The Impending Crisis. Helper, a Southerner, argued that “slavery lies at the root of all the shame, poverty, ignorance, tyranny, and imbecility of the South.”<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Times, November 22, 1863, August 10 & 23, 1864, and Herald, October 31, 1863, November 19, 1863.

<sup>173</sup> James W. Loewen, Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 68.

<sup>174</sup> Tribune, July 24, 1861.

<sup>175</sup> McPherson, 199.

When the book came out, it was praised by many throughout the North, including the Tribune. Although the Times and the Tribune did not cite Helper's book in their arguments concerning slavery's effect on the South, it is clear that they supported and drew on some of his assumptions. In addition, Hesseltine recognized the connection between abolitionism before the war and prison atrocity stories. He argued that the writers of Northern prison accounts realized that just as people wept over the plight of black characters in Uncle Tom's Cabin, so too would they weep over the imprisoned patriots.<sup>176</sup>

The press compared slavery to a disease or sickness. "Slavery blights, brutalizes, and destroys the last remnant of justice, mercy, and magnanimity....It permeates with poison...and sears the conscience that views it without loathing and without horror."<sup>177</sup> Having been exposed to slavery for many years, all Southerners became hardened to human suffering. The Times stated, "We see that nothing but Slavery could harden the heart of any man, with even the exterior of a gentleman, so that he could insult and starve a prisoner."<sup>178</sup> Southerners were raised from infancy to become accustomed to cruelty. The Times concluded that Union prisoners were doomed to suffer since,

The wrongs which cry to Heaven from the prison-pens of Georgia, are but another chapter of the unknown wrongs and agonies which have cried from a thousand slave plantations for more than a century. The Southern slaveholders are no more cruel to the sick and wounded and helpless soldiers of the Union, than they have always been to the unfortunate race which has been subject to them.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Hesseltine, "The Propaganda Literature of Confederate Prisons," 58-59.

<sup>177</sup> Tribune, June 25, 1862.

<sup>178</sup> Times, March 31, 1864.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, December 4, 1864.

Both papers continued these analyses of Southern people and slavery well after the Civil War. The Tribune even printed a three-column story comparing the “degenerate” Southerners to the advanced New Englanders. Once again, slavery was to blame for the South’s “stupidity and vile nature.”<sup>180</sup>

Although the press’ allegations about slavery’s effect on Southern society were quite extreme, the newspapers did not stop there. The press went so far as to imply that the South was really a different nation, not politically, but culturally. The papers made allegations that Southern people had strayed so far from “enlightened civilization,” i.e. the North, that they were not even civilized anymore. As the war dragged on, the papers went so far as to identify Southerners with “barbarian tribes” and “inferior” races.

Once again, the Tribune was the first to question the humanity of the South. In an editorial entitled, “The Two Civilizations,” the paper argued that the manner in which the Union dead and prisoners were treated clearly proved that Southerners were barbarians. The paper recalled the kind treatment Southern prisoners were given in the North, “lavished with delicate gifts of cakes and jellies and flowers.” In contrast, Union prisoners were shut away in dungeons and Union dead were given a rude burial. The Tribune concluded that, “While we endeavor to wage war for the Union... after the most civilized and Christian fashion, the rebels resort to every expedient known to savage and civilized nations to make it as barbarous and revolting as possible.”<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Tribune, July 18, 1865.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., August 11, 1861.

Accusations by the press of barbarity became more extreme as the war continued. According to the Tribune, a Senate Committee investigation found that Confederates not only mistreated prisoners but also “insulted the wounded and desecrated the dead.” Union dead were buried naked, face down in the ground. Bones of Union dead were carried off as “trophies” and the head of an officer was cut off and “turned into a drinking cup on the occasion of his wedding.” Testimony from witnesses even suggested that the skull of a Union officer had been exhibited in the office of the Sergeant-at-Arms of the House of Representatives.<sup>182</sup> The entire report was filled with extreme allegations that surely shocked many readers.<sup>183</sup>

While the Tribune labeled the South as a different civilization, the Times, at first, reminded readers that “the rebels were our brothers.”<sup>184</sup> Yet, the paper wrote in the next breath about the same atrocities mentioned in the Tribune. The Times mentioned how Southern women send their men off to battle, demanding that they bring back “Lincoln’s scalp,” and Yankee blood. Besides the influence of slavery, the paper blamed the South’s degradation on such things as ignorance, “the furies of the [Southern] women,” and a “brutalized Press.” The Southern press “have continuously and directly excited to the greatest bloodthirstiness, and, with tongues ‘set on fire of hell’ they have cultivated malignity.” The Times’ diatribe concluded, seeing no end to the Southern atrocities.<sup>185</sup>

The Times and the Tribune also made a habit of identifying white Southerners with specific “barbarian tribes.” The Times devoted an entire editorial to the

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., May 1, 1862.

<sup>183</sup> Report was also featured in the Herald and the Times, May 1, 1862.

<sup>184</sup> Times, April 7, 1862

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., April 7, 1862.

similarities between Confederates and the Sepoys of the recent East Indian rebellion.<sup>186</sup> Three days later, in describing the treatment of Union prisoners and those wounded and killed, the Times preferred to identify the rebels with Chippewas, Malays, and Fejees. Sarcastically, the paper stated “No, they are not Chippewas. They are the chivalry of the South.”<sup>187</sup> Time and again, the label “chivalry” was derisively given to the South and later contrasted with savage tribes. Later the Times engaged in a practice of correlating Southerners with New Zealand savages and Asiatic barbarians. The paper argued that the disease of slavery transformed white Southerners into savages. “The virus of the institution... has eaten out every atom of higher nature originally brought from European civilization. It has gradually converted the breed into a race like the Asiatic.”<sup>188</sup>

The correlation between savages and Southerners only became worse as time went on. The Tribune labeled them “dirty Hottentots” and “Fejee cannibals,” who kept prisoners in “charnel houses,” “Black Hole[s] of Calcutta,” and “Golgotha[s].”<sup>189</sup> Sometimes the papers even argued that the Confederates were much worse than barbarians. Following a letter from a Union prisoner alleging mistreatment, the Tribune claimed that a “Fejee cannibal would blush to have such charges made of his

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid., September 3, 1862.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., September 7, 1862.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., December 27, 1864. See also Times, March 31, 1864. In the Times, May 1, 1862, the paper blames miscegenation for the South’s “vile nature.” “We must remember, too, that the civilization of the South is a composite one, made up of Caucasian and African elements, and that it displays the very worst features in the natures of each... Where the two races come together, in the most intimate of all relations, as the mixture of color shows, the higher [whites] falls much more than the inferior [blacks] ascends.”

<sup>189</sup> Tribune, October 22, 1861, March 5, June 3, and November 4, 1864. See also Times, September 4 and 9, 1862 and October 2 and 16, 1864. See also Herald for characterizations of prisons as similar to “the dungeons of St. Mark,” in Sept. 11, 1863, Jan. 30, 1864, Sept. 18, 1864, & March 20, 1865 issues.

behavior toward his human food.”<sup>190</sup> In another case, the Tribune described Confederates purposely bayoneting and shooting wounded and surrendering men. The paper believed that “A Malay pirate or an infuriated Comanche would not do so inhuman a thing. Nature would assert herself even in their breast.”<sup>191</sup>

While the Tribune and the Times dehumanized the South by identifying them with barbaric tribes, the Herald preferred to demonize Southern officials. Confederate prison guards were described as “brutal, ignorant, and bloodthirsty,” punishing any infraction with abuse or death. Prison officials who allowed this kind of treatment were described in equally negative terms.<sup>192</sup> One of the Richmond prison commanders was Lieutenant David H. Todd, a man described as “tyrannical” and with a heart that lacked “one drop of pity.”<sup>193</sup> Todd, a half-brother Mary Todd Lincoln, was transferred from Richmond to the western front in late 1861.<sup>194</sup> Another hated prison commander was Major Richard Turner, an officer at Libby Prison. According to the Herald, Turner often allowed his guards to maliciously abuse prisoners. Union prisoners were not allowed to look out the windows of their prison, and if caught, they would be fired at. The Herald reported that, “It became a matter of sport to kill a Yankee...Major Turner remarked, ‘The boys are in want of practice.’ The sentry said he had made a bet he would kill a d—d Yankee before he came off guard.”<sup>195</sup> Returned prisoners even told of Richmond prison guards who stripped prisoners of all their clothing, and cut off men’s fingers to obtain their wedding rings

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<sup>190</sup> Tribune, May 28, 1862.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., June 25, 1862.

<sup>192</sup> Herald, December 28, 1863. Richmond prison officials described as “another breed of dogs.”

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., January 8, 1862.

<sup>194</sup> Speer, 162.

<sup>195</sup> Herald, September 26, 1864.



and other jewelry.<sup>196</sup> Finally, one of the most vilified Southern prison officials was Captain Henry Wirz, commandant of Andersonville. Captain Wirz was described as a “brutal monster.” Wirz told prisoners to “Get up, you God damned son of a b—h; stand up in line, or I will shoot you down.”<sup>197</sup> Eventually Wirz would become the scapegoat for all of the Union’s anger and sorrow concerning prisoners. Wirz was tried and hung for “crimes against humanity” on November 11, 1865.<sup>198</sup>

Next to Wirz, the most vilified and denounced Southern prison official had to be General Winder. Almost every mention of him in the Northern press denounced him in some way. The Times called him “Hog Winder,” while the Tribune argued that he seemed to “indulge the hate of a devil towards our unfortunate men.”<sup>199</sup> In a letter to the editor, a reader questioned how best to describe the treatment of Union prisoners in the South. Their solution was to say that prisoners had been “Windered,” since this would “convey at once a clear and definite idea...to thousands of mourning families; and so long as the history of this rebellion is remembered, the infamous name of Winder should be connected with the part he has taken in it.”<sup>200</sup> Another letter reminded Union families how dying Union prisoners often raised their fists to the sky, wishing that “God would spare him to take the life of that one man,” i.e. General Winder.<sup>201</sup> In addition, the press would later comment that when Winder died on February 6, 1865, his supposed last words were “My faith is in Christ; I

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid., December 27, 1864.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., September 18, 1864.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., November 11, 1865, Times and Tribune, November 11, 1865. Besides demonizing Wirz, the press also misspelled his name constantly. Various spellings included “Wirtz,” “Werz,” and “Wertz.”

<sup>199</sup> Times, December 11, 1864, and Tribune, November 17, 1864.

<sup>200</sup> Times, December 11, 1864.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., March 11, 1865.

expect to be saved. Be sure and cut down the prisoners' rations."<sup>202</sup> Historians today believe that Winder probably would have suffered Wirz's sentence had he not died before the war ended.<sup>203</sup>

The evidence presented clearly proves that the Herald, the Tribune, and the Times actively engaged in dehumanizing Southerners throughout the Civil War. These three papers made the South more than an enemy; the press demonized the South to the extent that Southerners were no longer considered human. The result of these scathing editorials probably was retaliation upon rebel prisoners and the war trials held at the conclusion of the fighting. Union papers even blamed such figures as General Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson for the suffering of the prisoners.<sup>204</sup> Eventually, Henry Wirz would be the only one to suffer for the South's treatment of the prisoners.

Interestingly enough, during the Wirz trial, which occupied the pages of the press the entire summer of 1865, the Times wrote an editorial debating who was responsible for the "murder of Union prisoners." The Times claimed that some people in the North believed that punishing Wirz would create sectional bitterness. The Times retorted with a most unusual response, considering its past characterizations of Southerners.

The notion that the Southern people will sympathize with those who are put on trial is absurd. The great body of them would regard the alleged deeds with just as earnest an abhorrence as the Northern people themselves. They are not devils; they are not brutes; they have human blood in their veins...It is important to rid the Northern heart of its present feeling that these were Southern atrocities; that they were crimes natural to the

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<sup>202</sup> Duffy, 1.

<sup>203</sup> Blakey, xii. Winder died of a massive heart attack during an inspection of a Florence, S.C. prison camp on February 6, 1865 (p. 5).

<sup>204</sup> Times, January 9, 1865 and June 17, 1865.

Southern character. They were perpetrated in the South, but that was all there was Southern about them.<sup>205</sup>

The Times had spent the entire war identifying Southerners as Malays, Sepoys, and a variety of other supposedly “barbaric” tribes. Now the paper called for Northerners to forget their past assumptions about Southerners, assumptions that the Times and other newspapers had a role in creating.

The Times, the Herald, and the Tribune consciously and deliberately used dehumanization tactics throughout the war to demonize the South. It cannot be determined if the public truly believed that Southerners were comparable to “Fejee cannibals” and “Malay pirates.” Many Americans who had relatives in the South probably saw these comparisons as ridiculous and sensationalized hype. However, plenty Northerners probably agreed with the characterizations. One only has to look at the hundreds of prisoner narratives published after the war. Most demonized Southerners and accused them of purposely murdering prisoners. In addition, Hesseltine points to how the “war psychosis” continued even after the war, due to Radical Republicans waving “bloody shirts.” Hesseltine argues that “No group in American furnished more gore for the bloody shirt than ex-prisoners of war.”<sup>206</sup> Whether the media frenzy before and after the war helped to fill these prisoner accounts and Congressional diatribes with hate towards the South is unknown. However, clearly, these dehumanizing characterizations of the South by the press only added to prisoner of war hysteria both before and well after the Civil War.

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid., August 4, 1865.

<sup>206</sup> Hesseltine, “The Propaganda Literature of Confederate Prisons,” 64. See also Hesseltine, Civil War Prisons, 247-248 for numbers of prison narratives published during and after the war.

## Conclusion

The plight of the Union prisoner of war became a major feature in the Northern press from the very beginning of the Civil War. Three Union newspapers, the New York Times, the New York Herald, and the New York Tribune each had their own perspectives on the prisoner situation. The Times was a “passionate retaliator” now and then, while the Tribune was a devoted defender of black prisoners. The Herald, a longtime friend to the South, did not hesitate to chastise the Confederacy when it believed the South was overstepping its bounds. These newspapers’ perspectives changed throughout the war, as conditions varied and crises developed. Through it all, the Union prisoner of war was a constant symbol of patriotism, of sacrifice, but also of the South’s tyranny. Stories of unbelievable suffering arrived at the doorsteps of newspaper readers every day. The Northern press used the Union prisoner of war as yet another way to condemn the wayward South and call readers to support the Union cause.

In the same respect, the prisoner of war was used to criticize and condemn the North. All three papers denounced the North’s obstinacy in regards to the exchange imbroglio. The need for an exchange cartel was a daily news item in the Northern press. Following the Emancipation Proclamation, the issue of the black prisoner of war became national news. The Times and Herald suggested sacrificing black prisoners for the safety of thousands of white prisoners. In contrast, the Tribune championed the right of black soldiers to all the privileges of enlistment in the military, including that of having the right to prisoner exchange. Lincoln rewarded the Tribune's efforts with a declaration providing for the protection of all Union troops.

The Union press coverage of Civil War prisons cannot be understood through one single type of story, controversy, or aspect. Just as the prison problem became increasingly complicated during the war, so too did the press coverage of the prisons become complex. The influence of the coverage on Union citizens, officials, and prisoners is evident. Now we will examine how the South covered the prison problem, looking at three newspapers in the capital of the Confederacy: Richmond.

## CHAPTER III

### THE CONFEDERATE PRESS AND THE PRISONS

By the outbreak of the Civil War, the North and the South were, in many ways, two different nations. Different economies, ways of life, and perspectives on government helped widen the rift between these two sections of America. The newspaper industries of the North and the South reflected these growing differences as well. Southern journalism had never been as large or as expansive as that of the North. It was quite common for a successful Southern newspaper to have a circulation of only 3,000, as the South had fewer cities, less dense populations, and lower literacy rates.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Southern papers tended to be more closely affiliated with political parties than Union papers. Many soon-to-be Confederate papers were founded as “organs” of political figures and their respective parties.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the many differences between the Northern and Southern press, some common ground could be found. In terms of the newspapers used in this thesis, both Northern and Southern papers shared a concern for the prisoner of war situation. Rebel prisoners locked away in Northern “dungeons” were the subject of countless articles and editorials in Richmond papers throughout the war. As seen in the North, the rebel press used the prison issue to criticize both

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<sup>1</sup> Donald E. Reynolds, Editors Make War: Southern Newspapers in the Secession Crisis, (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1970), 4-5. See also Raymond K. Cooley, “John M. Daniel, Editor of the Richmond Examiner and Gadfly of the Confederacy,” (M.A. thesis, Old Dominion University, 1973), 104. Cooley states that the Southern press was at least twenty years behind the Northern press in most areas of newsgathering, production, etc. He attributes this to the South’s focus on agriculture over industrialization.

<sup>2</sup> Reynolds, 5.

Union and Confederate policy. Prison stories also motivated public support for the war, encouraged retaliation against Union prisoners, and fueled the South's hatred of the Yankee invaders.

### **The Hub of Southern Journalism**

The Southern newspapers used in this thesis have histories just as colorful as those of the Northern press. All were founded in the early to mid-nineteenth century, and some of the newspapers were political organs while others were "independent" penny papers. One Southern paper with a long-standing political affiliation was the Richmond Enquirer, established by Thomas Ritchie as a semi-weekly in 1804.<sup>3</sup> Ritchie bought the Enquirer from Meriwether Jones. Jones had been the editor of the short-lived Examiner (1798-1804), and when this paper failed, Jones sold it to Ritchie who changed its name.<sup>4</sup> The Examiner was originally founded to support the Jefferson Administration. Ritchie continued this support with his Enquirer and later emerged in the 1820s and 1830s as one of the leaders of the Democratic political machine known as the "Richmond Junta." Mott calls the Enquirer, "the great paper of the southern states in these years."<sup>5</sup> Ritchie's paper grew in influence throughout the South and became known as the "Democratic Bible."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> J. Cutler Andrews, The South Reports the Civil War, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 26.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Houston, "Edward Alfred Pollard and the Richmond Examiner: A Study of Journalistic Opposition in Wartime," (unpublished M.A. thesis, American University, 1963), 49.

<sup>5</sup> Frank L. Mott, American Journalism A History: 1690-1960, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1962), 188, 255.

<sup>6</sup> Marvin Davis Evans, "The Richmond Press on the Eve of the Civil War," The John P. Branch Historical Papers of Randolph-Macon College, Volume I, (January, 1951), 10, 20.

Ritchie edited the Enquirer for forty-one years, leaving for Washington in 1845 to edit an “organ” of the Polk administration, the Union.<sup>7</sup> His sons ran the Enquirer for a brief time and then sold the paper to the firm of Tyler, Wise, and Allegre in 1860. The Enquirer’s allegiance to the Democratic Party persisted, though the paper was not as closely connected to the party as it had been under Ritchie. By 1845, the now daily paper was known for the “literary quality” of its content and the emphasis editors placed on accuracy.<sup>8</sup>

Although the Richmond Examiner was also established as a paper of the Democratic Party, it could not have been more unlike the Enquirer. The Examiner was established in 1847 to counter the influential Richmond Whig, as well as the dominance of the Whig party in Virginia’s capital. In some respects, the Examiner could be described as the “Herald” of the South. Edited by the effusive John M. Daniel, the paper criticized any person or party it desired. The paper was described as “an enterprising sheet, [which] always has the news, is fond of the sensational, pitches into everybody and everything, and is altogether one of the most readable and attractive newspapers in the South.” Other characterizations were not so friendly, labeling the Examiner as the “the Ishmael of the Southern press, so far as it is against everybody.”<sup>9</sup>

Like the New York Tribune and Greeley, the Examiner was largely identified with the personality of its editor. Daniel was known for his thought-provoking editorials, yet his techniques disturbed some. Unlike most Southern gentlemen, Daniel was far from polite. As Andrews notes, “Few American editors of his day

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<sup>7</sup> Mott, 256.

<sup>8</sup> Andrews, The South Reports the Civil War, 27.



employed more severe invective or resorted more to sarcasm.”<sup>10</sup> Daniel’s extreme opinions did not alienate everyone however, since the Examiner became a favorite among Confederate soldiers.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the Richmond Dispatch was the neutral member of the group. Like the New York Times, the Dispatch was conservative in tone, being founded on the principle that it was “devoted to the interest of the city and free and independent in its political views.” The Dispatch was the idea of William H. Davis and James A. Cowardin, two men who wanted to model the publication on a successful penny paper, the Baltimore Sun. Founded in 1850, the Dispatch was described as a “cheap paper, selling for two cents a copy...[and] catering to the taste of the masses.” The paper was one of the most successful newspapers in the South, with a circulation of 18,000 by 1860, larger than that of all of the other Richmond dailies combined.<sup>12</sup> This certainly was significant, since by the 1860s Richmond was home to five daily newspapers.

Though the Enquirer, the Examiner, and the Dispatch may not have all shared similar political beliefs, they did share a belief in the right of secession. Yet, though these papers remained firmly united behind the Confederacy’s cause, they also did not refrain from criticizing those in positions of authority. The outspoken Examiner had a relationship with President Jefferson Davis like that of the Herald with Lincoln. In fact, the Examiner and the Charleston (South Carolina) Mercury were known as

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>11</sup> Cooley, 119-120. See also Emeline Lee Stearns, “John M. Daniel and the Confederacy,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1928), 69. Stearns reports that Confederate soldiers considered the Examiner “next to the Bible in the camp.”

the two biggest critics of the Davis administration in the entire Confederacy. The Examiner condemned the “imbecility of Davis and his cabinet, the inefficiency of Southern generals, and the ‘star chamber’ meetings of the Confederate Congress.”<sup>13</sup>

The prisoner of war issue became a major point of contention between Davis and Daniel. The fiery editor loudly called for retaliation against Union prisoners.<sup>14</sup>

Daniel proclaimed, “We must pay the enemy back in a savage coin of vengeance, and settle our accounts in blood.”<sup>15</sup>

The Enquirer and the Dispatch were both more moderate in their positions in comparison to the Examiner. Most historians note that the Enquirer largely remained a supporter of Davis and his Administration for the majority of the war.<sup>16</sup> As always, the Richmond Dispatch took the middle ground. Supportive of Davis in the beginning, the paper later began complaining of “barren victories” in late 1862. Overall, the paper remained “devoid of critical comment and flamboyantly patriotic.”<sup>17</sup> Of course, all three papers were always quite critical and bitter towards the North.

These three newspapers made the city of Richmond the “hub of the Confederate news enterprise” for the duration of the war.<sup>18</sup> The fact that any Confederate papers survived the conflict is noteworthy, considering the many obstacles that the Southern newspaper industry faced soon after the conflict began.

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<sup>12</sup> Henry Gabler, “The Rebel Press: Six Selected Confederate Newspapers Report the Civil War Battles,” (M.A. thesis, The College of William and Mary, 1971), 25.

<sup>13</sup> Houston, 24. See also Stearns, 53.

<sup>14</sup> Houston, 83.

<sup>15</sup> Cooley, 160.

<sup>16</sup> Andrews, The South Reports the Civil War, 27.

<sup>17</sup> Harrison A. Trexler, “The Davis Administration and the Richmond Press, 1861-1865,” The Journal of Southern History, Volume 16, Issue 2 (May, 1950), 191.

Examining the physical appearance of most Southern papers reveals how significantly the war adversely affected them. While Northern dailies were increasing the numbers of pages, the Southern press was scaling down dramatically.<sup>19</sup> Only five percent of American papermills were located in the South before the war, therefore, as Union forces occupied more of the region supplies were cut off.<sup>20</sup> By July 1862, all the Richmond dailies were being published on half (single) sheets. This practice spread throughout the South.<sup>21</sup> Ink and other printing supplies were scarce, forcing many papers to reduce the frequency of publication and/or use crude replacements like shoe-blackening.<sup>22</sup> The Richmond Enquirer even turned to its readers for help, begging for any supplies they had, such as old wallpaper or rags.<sup>23</sup>

The Southern papers also had to deal with the pernicious problem of the draft. As the war progressed and the Confederacy began running low on manpower, newspaper editors, printers, and reporters were pressed into service. After much protest from the press, a law was passed in September of 1862 exempting one editor of each newspaper and “such employees as the editor or proprietor may certify upon oath to be indispensable for conducting the publication.”<sup>24</sup>

The Richmond papers were not as successful or as large as the New York press. However, two of the papers survived the war and the Examiner made it to the

<sup>18</sup> Andrews, The South Reports the Civil War, 26.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 25. See also Michael Schudson, Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1978), 66 and Evans, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Mott, 363.

<sup>21</sup> Andrews, The South Reports the Civil War, 42. See also Cooley, 226.

<sup>22</sup> Andrews, The South Reports the Civil War, 43. See also Cooley, 112. Cooley states that “Paper and ink had disappeared from the civilian market in Richmond by April 1863.”

<sup>23</sup> The Richmond Enquirer, July 16, 1861.

<sup>24</sup> Gabler, 8.

very end of the conflict.<sup>25</sup> Amidst a crumbling Confederacy, runaway inflation, and widespread poverty, the Richmond papers survived and prospered to some degree. The Examiner's weekly net receipts were between \$1000 and \$1500. Daniel himself made a yearly net profit of \$50,000 from his newspaper.<sup>26</sup> The Enquirer reported a net income of \$25,000 a year. Finally, the Dispatch's circulation peaked to 30,000 by the end of the war.<sup>27</sup> During the war it became the largest paper in the South.<sup>28</sup> More importantly, articles from the Richmond papers were reprinted throughout the Confederacy and along with the rest of the Southern press, "stimulated greater public interest in news in the South than had ever been known before."<sup>29</sup>

### **Prison Story Lines**

During the Civil War, the Richmond papers featured hundreds of articles concerning prisons and prisoners of war. The sheer volume of stories makes it necessary to highlight only a few major types of prison articles. Like the Northern press, the Southern papers wrote about retaliation and the need for exchange. Richmond papers also featured captivity accounts, though not nearly as many as found in the New York newspapers. Finally, the Virginia papers also engaged in dehumanization tactics to disparage the Northern soldier.

There are differences, however, between the Southern coverage and the Northern coverage of the prison issue. First, there were considerably fewer captivity

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<sup>25</sup> See Cooley, 235 and Houston, 93. Daniel died from a respiratory ailment on March 30, 1865. The last issue of the Examiner on March 31, 1865, featured his obituary. Daniel left the paper to Henry Rives Pollard who could not revive the paper and sold it to Thomas H. Wynne and associates. On July 15, 1867 the paper was combined with the Enquirer to form the Daily Enquirer and Examiner.

<sup>26</sup> Cooley, 226.

<sup>27</sup> Andrews, The South Reports the Civil War, 28, 32-33.

<sup>28</sup> Cooley, 117.

<sup>29</sup> Andrews, The South Reports the Civil War, 47.

accounts featured in the Richmond press. Possible explanations for this include a lack of column space, due to a scarcity of newspaper printing supplies, especially paper. The Enquirer tried to explain the lack of captivity narratives in a March 2, 1864 editorial that accompanied a prison account. The paper argued that,

the character of the Southern soldier is such that he nourishes his wrongs in the recesses of his heart till the opportunity for vengeance arrives, and seldom can be induced to come before the public with a narration of his personal griefs. And hence it is so few statements of outrages perpetrated upon our prisoners by the enemy appear in the Southern press...A simple instance of privation in the Libby is heralded over the North with venomous eloquence...but thousands of Confederates may freeze in shanties on bleak prairies...starve in the midst of plenty, rot in their vile dungeons, and nothing is known of it to the outside world.<sup>30</sup>

Whatever the reason for the paucity of prison accounts, the few featured in the Richmond press largely painted a negative picture of life in Northern prisons. These accounts were used by the press as proof of the North's deliberate abuse of rebel prisoners and the need for exchange. Prison narratives sometimes also accompanied calls for retaliation and denials of bad treatment of prisoners.

Reports of Southerners suffering in Union prisons sparked countless retaliation articles as well. Calls for retaliation, however, varied by newspaper. The Examiner became the loudest advocate for retaliation, calling for "Lex Talionis," or "eye for an eye" on a regular basis. The paper also used the retaliation issue to criticize President Davis for what the paper saw as yet another example of Davis' lack of leadership and ability. The Enquirer and the Dispatch called for retaliation at times, but never on the same scale as the Examiner.

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<sup>30</sup> Enquirer article reprinted in the Charleston Mercury, March 2, 1864. Original date of Enquirer article not found. See also the Richmond Examiner, June 7, 1862. The Examiner comments on how the Northern press writes lies about Southern treatment of prisoners. These false "tales of barbarity of which Hottentots are not capable, and they are believed."

By far, the largest category of prison stories in the Richmond papers can be classified as the “Denial and Blame” articles. Editorials denying the bad treatment of Union prisoners filled the pages of Southern papers from the very beginning. These articles were accompanied by vociferous denunciations of Northern prisoner of war policies and accusations that these policies progressively worsened the prison situation. From the North’s refusal to exchange to Hoffman’s orders to cut rations, the Richmond press argued that Union allegations of Southern mistreatment of prisoners were completely false. Rather, Union prisoners suffered because the North refused to abide by the laws of war and essentially was responsible for tragedies like Andersonville.

Finally, the Southern press also participated in dehumanizing the Northern people. However, these dehumanization tactics were largely directed more towards the Union prisoners themselves. Union soldiers were described as everything from “Yankee bluebirds,” to “Hessians,” to “Egyptian locusts.”<sup>31</sup> It may be that the Richmond papers desired to portray these prisoners as undeserving and sometimes inhuman, thereby not worthy of Southern hospitality and deserving of their pathetic confinements. An “Old Abe disciple” and a “common thief” would be easier to hate than a regular soldier would be to most Southerners.<sup>32</sup>

### **Captivity Accounts**

The few wartime captivity accounts featured in the Southern press all came from returning rebel soldiers. Often, these men were not named, only their regiment or place of origin was used for identification. Their stories of confinement mostly

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<sup>31</sup> Enquirer, Jan. 13, 1862, Examiner, Feb. 20, 1864 & Oct. 5, 1863, and the Richmond Dispatch, July 17, 1862.

mirror those of Union prisoners. Prison was a dreary place, filled with indignities and suffering.

One of the first captivity accounts came from a group of somewhat famous rebel prisoners, the privateersmen of the “Savannah.” The Richmond Enquirer reprinted an article from the Charleston Mercury heralding the return of the men, “after months of incarceration in the dungeons of the Yankee Government.” The article listed the men returned and subsequently detailed the many abuses the men endured during their stays in the North. Rebel prisoners were confined in “damp and filthy cells,” usually in “double irons.” The food, consisting of salt pork, soup, and bread was scant and flavorless. The privateersmen developed scurvy and “the itch.” The paper reported that the privateers-men had all decided never to become prisoners again. “The general determination of the exchanged prisoners is to be shot before they will again be taken and undergo the miseries of a Northern prison.”<sup>33</sup> In sum, this captivity account presented a very depressing scene and differed dramatically from the Northern press’ assertions that rebel prisoners were coddled and cared for.<sup>34</sup>

The care for rebel prisoners in the North by secession sympathizers was mentioned in an early Southern captivity account. According to returning prisoners from North Carolina, they were kept alive by the kindness of Northern secession sympathizers. These men told amazing stories of their capture and confinement. When taken by the Union cavalry, they were tied to the cavalrymen’s horses and made to run alongside. If they fell, they were “beaten and slashed with unsheathed

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<sup>32</sup> Dispatch, July 2, 1861.

<sup>33</sup> Enquirer, August 12, 1862, reprint of Mercury, August 9, 1862.

<sup>34</sup> The prison experience of the privateersmen was probably much worse than other prisoners, since these men were not considered prisoners of war but pirates and felons.

sabres on the head and body, and cursed in a manner which would disgrace the merciless Sepoy or the filthy Hottentot.” The prisoners were taken to Washington, D.C., where they were locked away and left to die. However, thanks to the “true hearts” of Washington ladies, they survived. The women cared for their wounds and brought them food. And, despite Union attempts to end their concern for the prisoners, “the gushing tide of their true tender hearts could not be diverted from its current by the bayonet or tyrant’s edict.”<sup>35</sup>

As seen in some Union prison accounts, certain prisons became infamous for their reputations as dungeons. This was also the case in regards to Confederate prison accounts about Northern prisons. Rebel prisoners began to complain about the conditions in Illinois prisoner of war camps. One such place was Camp Douglas. Established in February of 1862, the prison was, at first, praised for its efficiency and comfort by prisoners. Rebel prisoners enjoyed well-stocked kitchens, a plethora of clean clothes, and full access to sutlers.<sup>36</sup> However, over time the prison became crowded and dirty. Due to a lack of a good sewer system, the prison flooded on a daily basis.<sup>37</sup> The death toll rose steadily and conditions became almost unbearable. This worsening condition was reflected in returning prisoners’ accounts. One prisoner told the Examiner how Camp Douglas was “worse than the Hole of Calcutta.” During the spring and summer the men lived in wet, damp quarters,

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<sup>35</sup> Examiner, June 11, 1862.

<sup>36</sup> Lonnie R. Speer, Portals to Hell: Military Prisons of the Civil War, (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1997), 72.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 73.



“infested with vermin.” During the winter of 1862, over thirty rebels froze to death. Prisoners even accused Union authorities of poisoning them.<sup>38</sup>

Another Illinois prison, Alton prison, was also deemed a dungeon by returning rebel prisoners. Alton suffered from many of the same problems as Camp Douglas. Overcrowding and a lack of clean water created problems as early as 1862.<sup>39</sup> Rebel prisoners told of being robbed of clothing, money, and blankets upon entering the prison. Sometimes a prisoner was even required to strip down naked so that Union authorities could make sure that he was not hiding “the best of his shirts.” Supposedly, this “strip search” took place in front of Union women “who sat in their carriages and enjoyed the spectacle with seeming delight.” Prisoners suffered from small pox, pneumonia, and diphtheria, and were often told that they would be released from their suffering if they took an oath to the United States. Finally, dead prisoners were not even given a proper burial. Prison gravediggers buried nine men to a coffin to save money.<sup>40</sup>

Another Northern “dungeon” was Elmira prison, located in Elmira, New York. Originally a training camp for new recruits for the Union army, the camp was converted into a prison in May of 1864. According to Speer, unlike other Union and Confederate prison camps, Elmira did not slowly degenerate into a “concentration camp.” The prison was “hell on earth from the very beginning.”<sup>41</sup> The death rate at Elmira, 24 percent, topped even the worst Southern prison, Andersonville.<sup>42</sup> One

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<sup>38</sup> Examiner, April 17, 1863.

<sup>39</sup> Speer, 67-68.

<sup>40</sup> Examiner, June 24, 1863.

<sup>41</sup> Speer, 241, 245.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 244. See also James I. Robertson, Jr., “The Scourge of Elmira,” Civil War History, Volume 8, Number 2 (June, 1962), 184.

prisoner described his time at Elmira in a letter to Examiner. J.W. Crawford of the 6<sup>th</sup> Virginia Cavalry escaped from Elmira in October of 1864. He described life there as “wretched,” with up to thirty prisoners dying a day. Crawford called the people of the North “the meanest people that ever lived.” For a month and a half he successfully dug a tunnel in order to escape his captors.<sup>43</sup>

Some rebel prisoners had the misfortune of being imprisoned several times in the North. They thereby had the opportunity to compare prisons. One returning prisoner told the Enquirer that Fort McHenry, Fortress Monroe, and Fort Norfolk were “the most endurable places of confinement the enemy have.”<sup>44</sup> Even so, rebel prisoners still suffered from lack of food, light, and safety. A prisoner described a room in Fort McHenry known as “Hell.” There prisoners were robbed and beaten by common criminals, both fellow soldiers and regular citizens. Other prisoners were kept in cells for four or five months without seeing daylight. Finally, a gallows, “hungry for their blood,” was erected outside several Union prisons to remind the rebels of their fate if they should try to escape or misbehave.<sup>45</sup>

Rebel captivity narratives also revealed the implications of General Hoffman’s orders to reduce rations and supplies given to prisoners. A prisoner just returned from a fifteen-month incarceration in Fort Warren complained that since the winter of 1863 “the reins have been gradually drawn tighter and the rations reduced.” Once allowed to purchase and receive “luxuries,” rebel prisoners were now denied

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<sup>43</sup> Examiner article reprinted in the New York Tribune, November 14, 1864.

<sup>44</sup> Enquirer article reprinted in Mercury, March 2, 1864. Original date of Enquirer article not found.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, March 2, 1864. See also Enquirer February 26, 1864 for captivity account of a Confederate officer held at Fort McHenry who mentioned that once the Yankees heard that the South had “applied ‘Lex Talionis’” he and his men were granted few privileges.

coffee, tea, sugar, and clean clothing.<sup>46</sup> Another prisoner, Colonel M.L. Woods, returned from a twenty-month captivity at Johnson's Island prison camp in Sandusky, Ohio. The former prisoner claimed that during the first six or eight months of his imprisonment, he was treated well. Following this however, the prison sutler was restricted and rations became scarce. Despite all the suffering, however, the he commented that the men refused to take the oath of allegiance to the U.S.<sup>47</sup>

Unlike the Union press, the Richmond papers did not feature any captivity accounts of medical personnel or reporters. Nevertheless, it is known that several Confederate surgeons were detained and imprisoned.<sup>48</sup> In relation to the lack of reporter captivity narratives, it is surprising considering the fact that many rebel reporters spent time in Union prisons. Among them include telegraphic correspondent of the Memphis Appeal, M.W. Barr, and Richmond Examiner reporter Edward Alfred Pollard.<sup>49</sup>

### **Calls for Retaliation**

As seen in the North, tales of suffering and pain inspired calls for retaliation in the South. The Southern press demanded retaliation for some of the same reasons as seen in the Northern press. The treatment of captives was, by far, the biggest motivation to demand revenge.<sup>50</sup> However, the newspapers also saw retaliation as a way to get back at the North for blockading Southern ports. The press also urged

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<sup>46</sup> Dispatch, November 5, 1864.

<sup>47</sup> Enquirer article reprinted in Mercury, January 21, 1865. Original date of Enquirer article not found.

<sup>48</sup> Examiner article reprinted in Mercury, January 12, 1864. Original date of Examiner article not found.

<sup>49</sup> Andrews, The South Reports the Civil War, 272. See also Houston, 111.

<sup>50</sup> See Enquirer articles reprinted in Mercury, March 2, 1864, and January 21, 1865. See also Dispatch, November 5, 1864.

retaliation for what they called “imputations on our honor.” Finally, one paper used the retaliation issue to try to bring down what it considered to be an inept President.

The “Savannah” crisis initiated the first rallying cry for a Southern retaliatory policy. The Examiner reprinted a Charleston Mercury editorial, calling for hostages to be taken and all manifestations of concern for the welfare of Yankee prisoners to quickly end.

Let the muster roll of the ‘Savannah’ be obtained, let two prisoners, at least, for our one be forwarded from Richmond to the Charleston jail...If it brings about the slaughter of our friends and of our children, so be it; they will know how to die, and we will know how to avenge their unholy and unnatural murder. But let us move in this matter at all hazards.<sup>51</sup>

The “Savannah” case foreshadowed newspaper debates concerning what side initiated retaliation first. Both the Northern and the Southern press debated back and forth as to who started “uncivilized warfare” first. Of course, the Richmond press argued that the Union had “raised the Black Flag” first, and that Southern acts of retaliation were only in response to Northern atrocities. The Examiner argued that from the very beginning, the U.S. had engaged in uncivilized warfare. “The United States have said nothing about the black flag, but they have done the thing...they [are] making war with the avowed intention of hanging their adversaries like felons.”<sup>52</sup>

The Enquirer also responded to what it perceived as Yankee tyranny deserving of retaliation. Shortly after an exchange cartel was agreed on, the newspaper reminded readers that the cartel provided for the exchange of soldiers only. Confederate citizens and sympathizers (prisoners of State) were left to waste away in Union “dungeons” due to the continued enforcement of the Confiscation and

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<sup>51</sup> Examiner, August 19, 1861. Mercury article also reprinted in New York Times, August 21, 1861.

<sup>52</sup> Examiner, June 7, 1862.

Emancipation Act of the United States. This act ordered that all citizens of the South who supported the rebellion were traitors and condemned to the death. The Enquirer condemned the faulty exchange cartel and argued that the Confederacy should have held out in case it had to “carry out the bloody retaliation that Act must render necessary.”<sup>53</sup>

The Dispatch also believed that the North first raised the “Black Flag.” The paper responded to accusations against General Stonewall Jackson charging him with raising the Black Flag early on in the war. The Dispatch argued that the Northern mode of warfare compelled Jackson to fight ruthlessly. According to the newspaper, “there has been no clearer case of national highway robbery and murder than this North American invasion of the South, and General Jackson, who saw this from the beginning, proposed to treat them as highway robbers and murderers deserve to be treated.” The paper complained that Union prisons were evidence of the North’s unchristian mode of warfare.

What flag is it which waves over those Northern bastilles where our gallant Confederate soldiers pine in wretchedness, to which death is a relief, and where they are plied with cruelty to compel them to take an accused oath? What is that but the Black Flag in its most infernal form? What difference between killing the soldier outright on the field of battle and putting him to death by inches in the horrid prisons of Chicago, Columbus, Alton...except that the latter is more cruel, wicked, and devilish?<sup>54</sup>

The Dispatch concluded that no one should question the humanity of Jackson because he met the “Black Flag” of the enemy with another “Black Flag.” Rather, Jackson’s

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<sup>53</sup> Enquirer article reprinted in Mercury, August 12, 1862. Original date of Enquirer article not found.

<sup>54</sup> Dispatch article reprinted in Mercury, February 18, 1864. Original date of Dispatch article not found.

“mode of resistance...if adopted at the commencement of the war, would have brought it to a speedy termination.”<sup>55</sup>

This idea that if the South had enforced and used retaliation regularly from the early start of the conflict was one echoed by many Southern papers during the war, including the Richmond press. The biggest advocate of enforcing retaliation was the Examiner. In fact, the Examiner used the retaliation issue as part of its three pronged attack against Davis beginning in 1862. Besides complaining about Confederate currency problems and the retention of inept military leaders, the Examiner lashed out at Davis for his failure to apply “Lex Talionis.”<sup>56</sup> Daniel, the editor, believed that retaliation was the only effective means “to prevent the atrocities of the cruel and vile,” i.e. the Union army.<sup>57</sup> The editor was angered by reports of the poor treatment of rebel prisoners of war, the murders of Confederate citizens, and the destruction of Southern property, and demanded that Davis carry out retribution.<sup>58</sup>

The Examiner justified retaliation in times of extreme crisis. The paper believed that the U.S. was “conducting this war in a style which can only be characterized as diabolical.” Since the enemy would not fight according to the laws of warfare, retaliation was the only option “to compel a cruel and bad nation to conform its conduct of war to the laws and usages of Christian civilization.”<sup>59</sup> While the Examiner vehemently condemned the North for its treatment of prisoners, it saved its biggest criticisms for the Confederate Administration.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., February 18, 1864.

<sup>56</sup> Stearns, 53. Stearns states that the application of “Lex Talionis” was urged in the Examiner from the beginning of the war. Daniel did not begin to criticize Davis for failing to apply “Lex Talionis” until 1862.

<sup>57</sup> Examiner, September 2, 1862.

<sup>58</sup> Cooley, 159.

Imbecility, and the most puerile vanity, has characterized the conduct of the Southern leaders. Instead of resorting to 'Lex Talionis' at once, and with resolution, they have made the misery of their country an occasion to parade their Christianity and chivalry.<sup>60</sup>

The Examiner continued its assaults throughout the war on Jefferson Davis' lack of retaliation. The paper proclaimed that "'Humanity' and 'chivalry' will be the death of us."<sup>61</sup> Despite Davis' retaliation proclamations, the Examiner chafed because the orders were not enforced. The paper blamed not only Davis, but also the Confederate Congress as well. "But while it has promised, preached, denounced, and vapoured...Congress has not done one single act to impel the President upon the execution of that duty [retaliation]."<sup>62</sup> The Examiner even condemned General Winder for treating Union prisoners too well.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, the paper considered the rest of the world's reactions to Davis' empty threats of retaliation. "What will people say—what will the civilized world think of us?"<sup>64</sup> "The country is tired of all this inhuman humanity, and the world is laughing at it."<sup>65</sup>

The Examiner saw retaliation as Davis' "imperative duty to [his] own people."<sup>66</sup> Southerners gave Davis and his Administration the power to govern and protect them, therefore, "[if] the question is between acting harshly to our enemies or cruelly to us; it may be Christian to hold out your own cheek to be slapped, but not to

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<sup>59</sup> Examiner, September 2, 1862.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., June 7, 1862. See also Stearns, 54.

<sup>61</sup> Examiner, June 21, 1864.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., September 2, 1862.

<sup>63</sup> Sarah Annette Duffy, "Military Administrator: The Controversial Life of Brigadier General John Henry Winder, C.S.A.," (M.A. thesis, Creighton University, 1961), 49-50.

<sup>64</sup> Examiner, September 2, 1862.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., June 21, 1864.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., August 4, 1863.

present your country's."<sup>67</sup> The Confederate government had an obligation to its people. All notions of humanity aside, the paper argued that,

If you are an individual, you may forgive; if a government, you neither may nor shall; simply because forgiveness to an enemy is an invitation to rob and slay your own people; and you have no right to extend such an invitation; you are not elected to that office in order that you may invite an enemy to lay our fields and our houses in ruins and ashes.<sup>68</sup>

In essence, Daniel's paper saw Davis' failure to enforce retaliation as bringing more harm against the Confederacy. Union officers "laugh[ed] at our hollow threats," and abused Confederate prisoners with impunity.<sup>69</sup>

This failure to enforce retaliation made the Confederacy function and act just the way the Union wanted it to, according to the Examiner. Since the beginning of the Civil War, the U.S. had regarded the Confederacy not as a separate and independent nation, but as a mass of traitors. The Examiner questioned if even the Confederate Administration itself viewed Southerners as members of an independent nation. "In what light are the people of the Confederate States regarded by their own Government? As belligerents resisting by war an invasion from a foreign people—or as a gang of malefactors evading and postponing the penalty of their crimes?" Since the Confederate Administration "shrinks from retaliation for outrage, pillage and murder," the paper argued that the "Government does virtually acknowledge and accept the whole theory of Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Seward."<sup>70</sup> The Examiner even cited cases where the Confederacy confined men as hostages in retaliation for Union offenses (i.e. the McNeil incident) and then let the men go after a few months. The

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., June 21, 1864.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., August 4, 1863.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., March 5, 1864.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., March 5, 1864. See also Houston, 83.



paper concluded that since retaliation was never carried out, the Confederate government “accepts for us, and in our name, the position of rebels and malefactors.”

Daniel and his Examiner even went so far as to question the motives of the Davis Administration in not enforcing retaliation. The paper asked, “What idea, what motive, what fatal delusion or hallucination holds them back from their obvious course?...Is it nervous terror shrinking from necessary pain?”<sup>71</sup> The paper even wondered if Davis purposely did not enforce retaliation so as to save his own soul should the Union win. The Examiner asked, “can this man be saving up for himself, in case of the worst, a sort of plea in mitigation of punishment?...is this Christian meekness of his intended to save his own life?”<sup>72</sup>

In each of these articles blasting the President for his failure to enforce retaliation, Daniel provided harsh alternatives for the South to adopt. “If they begin to slaughter prisoners, you not only may but ought to, slaughter prisoners.”<sup>73</sup> Retaliation, “may also be the way to peace,” so the Confederate government should “repay outrage with outrage, fire with fire, blood with blood.”<sup>74</sup> Finally, all “robbers and abusers” should meet with “a quick trial and a dogdeath.”<sup>75</sup>

The Examiner’s efforts did have an impact on Davis. In her memoir of her husband, Varina Davis commented on the effects of the Daniel’s criticisms.

The frantic appeals by the Examiner of Richmond to ‘hoist the black flag,’ retaliate on Yankee prisoners for the starvation and abuse of our prisoners... inflamed many true men against the President, because he would not adopt that course; but throughout the weary years of these pin pricks, which annoyed and galled him greatly, he never relaxed his determined stand

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<sup>71</sup> Examiner, August 14, 1863.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., March 5, 1864.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., August 4, 1863.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., August 23, 1864.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., March 5, 1864.

against this dastardly retributory policy. He answered hotly to a member of Congress who was a pervert to the Examiner's views... 'As to the torture of prisoners, I can resign my office at the call of the country, but no people have the right to demand such a deed at my hands.' The Examiner... was unable at least to engraft an ignoble policy upon that of the Administration.<sup>76</sup>

Following the war, Davis himself confirmed his wife's assertions. During his imprisonment for war crimes, Davis wrote to a friend arguing that in no way was he responsible for cruelty to prisoners. He cited the Examiner's criticisms of him throughout the Civil War as proof that he never purposely harmed Union captives.<sup>77</sup>

Davis and his Administration were not the only ones who felt the wrath of the Examiner in terms of the treatment of Yankee prisoners. While the paper did not urge ordinary citizens to individually retaliate on Union captives, the paper did censure citizens who treated captives too nicely. The paper complained that, "while the soil of Virginia is pressed by the foot of the blood-thirsty and murderous foe, the most tender and unceasing social attentions are yet offered in Richmond" to Yankee prisoners. The paper argued that this "overdone kindness" must quickly end.<sup>78</sup> In another article, the Examiner condemned a Confederate prison guard who spoke too nicely to arriving Yankee prisoners. Supposedly, the guard said "Well, fellows, take care of yourselves; sorry for you, but hope you will soon be exchanged." The paper denounced his action, claiming that "the men thus addressed were representative specimens of the man-murdering, woman ravishing, house-burning, thieving,

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<sup>76</sup> Cooley, 161. See also Varina Davis, Jefferson Davis, ex-President of the Confederate States of America, Volume II, (New York: Belford Company, 1890), 550-51.

<sup>77</sup> Cooley, 161, 163. Cooley gives good reasons for the impracticality of retaliation. Also, since the South lacked food and other necessities for its own people, Cooley concludes that, "The only retaliation left for the South concerning prisoners in most cases would have been deliberate starvation or murder."

<sup>78</sup> Examiner, January 8, 1862.

plundering, army of Grant.” The Examiner concluded that this prison guard should be “broken of his commission and sent to keep them [Yankee prisoners] company.”<sup>79</sup>

While the Examiner may have been the most vocal critic of Davis and his retaliation principles and anyone else who was “too kind” to Yankees, the other two Richmond papers did make some comments on the subject. As early as October of 1861, the Dispatch argued that the South should have, from the beginning, pursued a hard line policy when it came to prisoners of war. According to the paper,

the South would have been justified in acting from the threshold upon the principle, ‘No quarter asked or given.’ We believe that such a principle would have been politic, as well as just, and was the only one to convince the course, brutal ruffians of the Northern population that we are in earnest.<sup>80</sup>

The Dispatch believed that if the situation was reversed and the South had invaded the North, then the Union “would not have troubled themselves with prisoners, but drowned us all in the nearest river, as we would have deserved.” Quite a statement from a supposedly moderate newspaper.

Another example of the Dispatch’s approval of retaliation included a letter to the editor calling for retaliation against Union prisoners for abuses of rebel prisoners in the North. The letter was from a former prisoner who had suffered due to General Hoffman’s orders reducing packages, rations, and access to sutlers. While rebel prisoners were suffering in the North, Yankee prisoners were comfortably lodged in Southern penitentiaries. The prisoner argued that retaliation was necessary because it “alone will touch the senses of our brutal foes.” Furthermore,

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., June 29, 1864.

<sup>80</sup> Dispatch, Oct. 28, 1861. This article advocates retaliation upon only the volunteers in the Union army. “The officers and privates of the old regular army, whose duty forces them to go wherever they are ordered, should not be objects of personal animosity to any of our people. But the volunteers

And should Yankees in our hands be allowed to purchase or receive, while our friends are denied? We say No- most emphatically, No. shut down at once, a la Hoffman, and treat them as dogs that they are until we learn that our friends are allowed to purchase for themselves... Do what will help our own boys in Northern prisons, and let the Yankees fare as they may. They have no love for us, and only laugh in their sleeves at Southern sympathy and gullibility.<sup>81</sup>

The Dispatch attached a copy of Hoffman's August 10, 1864 order to cut packages sent to prisoners from people other than immediate family members, and to restrict sutlers.

The Enquirer first responded to the issue of retaliation in regards to the enlistment of black soldiers in the Union army and the end of the exchange cartel. The paper blamed the cartel breakdown on the Union, arguing that "They [U.S.] are determined to insist upon our using such ruffian 'officers' and their band of black brigands as honorable enemies."<sup>82</sup> The Enquirer denounced the actions of the U.S., but also took the time to condemn the Confederacy. The paper complained that the U.S. still viewed the Confederacy as a mass of traitors and insurgents since the South never enforced retaliation. The Enquirer argued that if retaliation was not enacted,

This Confederacy cannot afford any longer to suffer itself to be dealt with on this footing. Absolutely, we are either belligerents or 'Rebels' pure and simple. If we are not prepared to stand upon our rights in the first character, we may as well avow ourselves Rebels at once, beaten rebels, and take the consequences of our criminal acts.<sup>83</sup>

The once "organ" of the Davis Administration was becoming a bit frustrated with the government it had once so rigorously supported.

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brought themselves here, and would have no one but themselves to blame, if they were to receive the severest treatment."

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., November 5, 1864.

<sup>82</sup> Enquirer, July 30, 1863. Also reprinted in the Tribune, August 8, 1863.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., July 30, 1863. See also Enquirer, July 28, 1863 and Dispatch, September 24, 1862.

The Enquirer's frustration with Davis, the exchange cartel, the North, and even the prisoners themselves continued throughout the rest of the war. However, there was a moment during the conflict when the Enquirer ceased its calls for retaliation and in so doing, strayed from popular press opinion. In early February of 1864, the Enquirer wrote an editorial concerning the inmates at Libby Prison. The paper asked, "What becomes of the Federal officers who go into the Libby?" The Enquirer marveled at how hundreds of Yankee men had entered the prison in the past six months, "yet that unfathomable reservoir of hapless humanity does not overflow." Men were packed away like "nocturnal sardines," and "forced constantly to breathe impure air." The paper condemned prison authorities that refused to allow the inmates to enjoy the outdoor air and some exercise and demanded that

They [the prisoners] should have an open space outside, however limited, in which to obtain some respite from the unwholesome atmospheric diet; a piece of ground with a little patch of blue sky over it and a gush of fresh air and a sprinkle of sunshine in it, would be no tax upon the Confederate commissariat, and might, at least, render supportable a captivity which has become inevitable.<sup>84</sup>

The Enquirer denounced the Union for leaving Yankee prisoners to languish in Southern prisons, and accused the North yet again of abusing rebel captives. However, the paper argued that despite all this, the Confederacy should strive to treat all Yankee prisoners well. "It should be our aim to make the contrast in treatment of prisoner so much in our favor that even old Abe Lincoln's face would tingle with the blush of shame." This would be the last and only time the Enquirer or any Richmond paper spoke out against retaliation and spoke for good treatment of Yankee prisoners.

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<sup>84</sup> Enquirer, February 2, 1864.

The Enquirer's sentimentality towards the Union captives did not last for long. Ten days later, the paper had new ideas on the prisoners, the exchange cartel, and the Confederate authorities. The Enquirer lashed out at Davis and the Confederate Congress for contemplating recalling the "outlawry of Butler." Remember, the South had declared General Butler an outlaw following the execution of Mumford. However, Butler was made a special agent of exchange in December of 1863.<sup>85</sup> Since the prisoner of war situation had become so bad by early 1864, Davis and the Congress contemplated recognizing Butler as an exchange agent and proceeding with exchanges. The Enquirer condemned any thought of Butler's recognition. The paper argued that the people of the South wanted desperately for Butler to pay for his crimes. When the Confederacy ordered that Butler be executed if captured, "No action ever taken by the Government has received a heartier and fuller popular approval." The Enquirer made clear that it wanted an exchange of prisoners as soon as possible, however, an exchange that questioned the Confederacy's honor was not worth the trouble and it might mean problems for the future. The paper believed that "To back down in the case of outlawry will not be enough; when once our cowardly foes recognize a weakness in the knees of the Confederate authorities, they will advance their demands."<sup>86</sup>

The Enquirer suggested that rather than resume exchange, the Confederacy should retaliate for the Union's appointment of Butler as exchange agent. Retaliation could be found in the form of the Southern climate. The paper argued,

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<sup>85</sup> William B. Hesseltine, Civil War Prisons: A Study in War Psychology, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1930), 113, 210.

<sup>86</sup> Enquirer, February 8, 1864. Also reprinted in Tribune, February 12, 1864. In contrast, the Richmond Whig urged the Confederacy to recognize Butler, see December 31, 1863.

The Winter is almost passed...the season we had most to dread for our prisoners; the Summer is the season the Yankees have most to fear for theirs... We can retaliate the inclement and rigorous Winter by imprisonment of the Yankee prisoners during a malarious and unhealthy Summer.”<sup>87</sup>

The paper even suggested outside activities for the prisoners during the hot summer.

In response to the New York Times article [February 3, 1864] advocating the use of prisoners on public works in order to “earn their keep,” the Enquirer had its own plan for Union prisoners.

The Yankee prisoners put at work down South during the coming Summer would experience some of the blessings of the “Sunny South” of which they are at present totally ignorant. With the thermometer at 90 and 100 degrees in the shade, the Yankees would soon curse the Times for its economical recommendation.<sup>88</sup>

The Enquirer concluded that with news of Yankees suffering in the heat, the Northern public would compel the U.S. to conduct prisoner exchange in a fair and legal manner.

Weather and food supplies became a focus of the Richmond press in their discussions of retaliation on Yankee prisoners. Prior to the exchange cartel in July 1862, Union and Confederate authorities agreed that the U.S. could send supplies to the Yankee prisoners.<sup>89</sup> Following the cartel breakdown, the two sides also worked out an agreement in December of 1863 allowing the North to send clothing, food, and other necessities.<sup>90</sup> The sending of supplies was in response to the South’s complaint that they could not treat the prisoners well because of the Northern blockade which restricted supplies, such as medicines. The Times and the Tribune commended both sides on agreeing to put the needs of prisoners first over political squabbles, and

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<sup>87</sup> Enquirer, February 8, 1864. Also reprinted in Tribune, February 12, 1864.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., February 8, 1864. See also Examiner article reprinted in Mercury, September 20, 1864.

<sup>89</sup> Enquirer, December 10, 1861, and the New York Herald, January 25, 1862.

called on Union citizens to aid the supply effort.<sup>91</sup> Surprisingly, the New York Herald argued that the South's failure to ask for supplies to feed starving U.S. prisoners, "fully justifies the conclusion that they have deliberately adopted the policy of starving their Union prisoners of war to death, from that ferocious hatred which springs from a devilish despair." The former friend of the South believed that if the Confederates simply confessed their inability to feed prisoners, then the Union would send shiploads of supplies.<sup>92</sup>

In contrast, the longtime enemy of the South, the Tribune, argued that although returned prisoners complained of being "starved to death," the paper did not believe that the South purposely denied food to Union soldiers. Rather, the prisoners starved because the "whole Confederacy is on short rations." Because of Southern pride, Confederates "accept the stigma of cruel treatment in a given case rather than acknowledge their dire poverty." The Tribune concluded that it was the duty of the U.S. government to send supplies and the paper hoped that the South would allow and distribute these goods to suffering prisoners.<sup>93</sup>

The Richmond press welcomed the sending of supplies. The Enquirer responded specifically to the Tribune article, saying "we are prepared to urge our Government to permit the United States to send anything, clothes or provisions, they

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<sup>90</sup> Hesselstine, Civil War Prisons, 112. See also O.R. Volume VI, p. 515.

<sup>91</sup> Tribune, Jan. 6, 1862, Nov. 14, 17, & 21, 1863, Dec. 1, 2, 22, & 31, 1863, Times, Dec. 13, 1862, March 5, 1864, October 28 & 29, 1864.

<sup>92</sup> Herald, October 31, 1863. This article uses the condition of recently returned Union prisoners (most of whom were quite sick) as proof that rebels abused and starved them. The article calls on Lincoln to recruit a volunteer militia to guard DC and thereby allow the Army of the Potomac to take Richmond by force to rescue the prisoners.

<sup>93</sup> Tribune, November 11, 1863. This is only example of where the Tribune believed it was not the deliberate policy of the South to abuse prisoners.



may think proper.<sup>94</sup> While the paper scoffed at the Tribune's comment that the South was either "desperately poor or desperately cruel," the Enquirer acknowledged that the South, especially Richmond, was suffering from a lack of food. With winter approaching, all of the Richmond papers made comment on the deleterious effects that a harsh winter and a scarcity of food would have on Union prisoners:

We would assure those Yankee soldiers that death on the field were far better than captivity here this Winter, and would accordingly counsel them also not to be taken alive.<sup>95</sup>

We have nine thousand of them [prisoners] in this city and four thousand on Belle Isle, and the question which forces itself upon the attention of every one who gives the matter a thought is, how are they to be fed? ...we certainly can't find them victuals much longer. They have already eaten up all our beef and have begun upon the sheep.<sup>96</sup>

The Yankee Government, under the laws of civilized warfare and the cartel, are entitled to these men, and if they will not take them, let them be put where the cold weather and scant fare will thin them out in accordance with the laws of nature.<sup>97</sup>

Having nothing else to do, and being naturally greedy, they eat like so many wolves or hyenas... What is to be done? The people are suffering already, while the Yankees are comfortable... Certainly, the prisoners are to be kindly treated, but if we are forced to choose between them and the wives and children... who are threatened with starvation and freezing, there will be but one voice, and that not in favor of the Yankees.<sup>98</sup>

The sending of supplies obviously came at a critical time, considering the Richmond press' predictions and preferences concerning Yankee prisoner food supply.

Yet, as usual, an agreement between the North and the South soon became complicated. The Northern press began printing reports that Confederate authorities were not allowing supplies to be distributed and/or even leave the ships carrying the

<sup>94</sup> Enquirer, November 20, 1863. Also reprinted in Tribune, November 27, 1863.

<sup>95</sup> Enquirer, October 31, 1863. Also reprinted in Times, November 8, 1863.

<sup>96</sup> Examiner, October 29, 1863. Also reprinted in Times, November 8, 1863.

<sup>97</sup> Examiner, October 30, 1863. Also reprinted in Times, November 8, 1863.

supplies.<sup>99</sup> The Richmond press responded defiantly, charging that all supplies were delivered. Furthermore, the press argued that the Confederacy should stop the delivery of all Union supplies. The Enquirer lashed out saying,

The good nature of our Government is misunderstood in this matter...the thing is wrong itself; it aides our enemies in their policy of holding our prisoners and declining exchange; it gratifies their pride and enables them to represent us as pensioners upon their bounty...At all events, the present system is felt to be incompatible with our dignity as a people; and there would be general satisfaction if it were brought to an end.<sup>100</sup>

The Examiner countered Union claims that supplies were not delivered by describing the “sumptuous feast” enjoyed by Yankee prisoners housed at Libby Prison. The paper noted specific dishes that the men would enjoy, including “spiced beef,” “chocolate,” and “wine.” Sarcastically, the Examiner concluded by thanking the prisoners for inviting some of the “lean and hungry” Richmond officials and throwing the scraps to the “poor of Richmond.”<sup>101</sup>

The Richmond press got its wish. On December 11, 1863, Commissioner Ould sent a letter to Brigadier General S.A. Meredith, the Union Agent of Exchange, informing him that no more Union supplies would be accepted.<sup>102</sup> The Tribune learned from a Union minister who had spoken with Confederate authorities that the supplies were stopped because of the North’s false allegations. According to the minister, the rebels saw these accusations as “an imputation on their honor by the press and Government authorities...and asserted that the officers in Libby Prison, from the immense supplies they had received, could set a table from their stores in

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<sup>98</sup> Dispatch, October 30, 1863. Also reprinted in Times, November 9, 1863.

<sup>99</sup> Herald, November 19, 1863 and Tribune, November 19, 1863.

<sup>100</sup> Enquirer, December 7, 1863. See also Enquirer, December 8, 1863. Both articles are reprinted in Times, December 14, 1863.

<sup>101</sup> Enquirer, December 8, 1863. Also reprinted in Times, December 14, 1863.

hand equal to any hotel.”<sup>103</sup> Clearly, this is an example of the press having an effect on prison policy. Union papers filled with accusations that supplies were not delivered probably irritated many Confederate officials. Richmond papers that demanded an end to the delivery of all supplies may have inspired the South’s decision to refuse more provisions from the North. Whatever the case, the South’s decision to stop supplies was heralded in all three New York papers and all three Richmond papers.<sup>104</sup> Both sides saw it as retaliation upon prisoners of war.<sup>105</sup>

### **Deny It All and Blame the Enemy**

The supply issue could also be considered part of the category known as “denial and blame” stories. When the supply issue was first raised, the Southern press agreed that it would be a good way to help prisoners. When the South halted the delivery of Northern supplies, the Richmond press blamed the North for forcing the Confederates to stop accepting deliveries in the name of pride and honor.

Another issue that grew out of the supply situation was the Southern press’ idea that an even better solution to saving the prisoners was the resumption of prisoner exchange. Throughout the war, the South would use the troubled exchange cartel as its trump card. According to the Southern press, if the North really wanted to save prisoners, all the Union needed to do was agree to an exchange of prisoners, provided that it was on the South’s terms. Since the North would not agree to this, the South blamed all the suffering of Union prisoners on the North’s refusal to

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<sup>102</sup> Enquirer, December 14, 1863. Also reprinted in Times, December 18, 1863.

<sup>103</sup> Tribune, December 14, 1863.

<sup>104</sup> See the December 14, 1863 issue of Herald, Times, Tribune, Enquirer, Examiner, and Dispatch.

<sup>105</sup> An agreement was worked out in November of 1864, allowing both sides to send supplies for their prisoners. See the press announcement in Mercury, November 11, 1864. Also, see letter from Commissioner Ould in O.R. Volume VII, p. 837.

exchange. Essentially, in the eyes of the Southern press, the Union was responsible for any suffering endured by Yankee prisoners in the South.

In the early months of battle, both Northern and Southern prisoners were angered that they were not immediately paroled and exchanged. The Southern press recognized this and immediately began placing the blame on the Union. The Examiner noted that many Union officers “think it hard that the consideration usually accorded ‘officers and gentlemen’ in civilized war is not granted them.” However, the paper argued that the conflict was the “most uncivil civil war that the world has ever seen.” Due to the “treachery” of the Lincoln Government, Union officers would not be granted their freedom.<sup>106</sup>

Shortly following Jefferson Davis’ proclamation in late December 1862 calling for an end to all exchanges due to the Emancipation Proclamation, the Enquirer supported the president in his attack. However, unlike the Dispatch and the Examiner, the Enquirer did not believe that skin color was the sole reason why exchanges ended. The paper pointed to the treachery of the United States government, arguing that the employment of the South’s property was the real reason behind the breakdown of the cartel.

The composition of armies is a matter belonging exclusively to the authorities of the nation itself. If the Yankees like negro troops, they have a right to employ the free negroes of the United States in its armies, and they have a right to demand for them the proper treatment as prisoners of war... color has nothing to do with soldiers.<sup>107</sup>

The paper even mentioned that the Confederacy employed many Native Americans in the Southern army.<sup>108</sup> The Enquirer argued that the South was outraged rather by the

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<sup>106</sup> Examiner, October 11, 1861.

<sup>107</sup> Enquirer, December 18, 1863.

employment of slaves and Southern free blacks in the ranks of the Union army. The U.S. had no right to “steal” the South’s property. The paper hoped that Confederate authorities would adjust the law refusing to exchange black prisoners. Instead, only those black prisoners from the Union army who were formerly slaves or Southern free blacks would be denied recognition as prisoners of war.<sup>109</sup>

The Enquirer continued to focus on actions by the Union that the paper labeled as “gross and constant violation[s] of the cartel by the enemy.” The paper noted the “murder” of Mumford and the executions of ten rebel guerillas.<sup>110</sup> In addition, the Enquirer complained that the Union exchanged soldiers on paper, but never returned the actual men. As a result, Union men were getting out of prison and Confederates were not.<sup>111</sup> Although frustrated by all these violations of the cartel, the Enquirer was even more aggravated by the North’s accusations that the South was the one violating the cartel. The paper worried about how Europe would perceive this one-sided view of the exchange story. “Our Northern enemies . . . have had the ear of mankind, and have poured into it what tale they please . . . to rouse the indignation of the universe against us.” The Enquirer hoped that the rest of the world would see this article as a “formal protest and remonstrance against the attempt being now made by the Yankee nation to persuade the world that we have broken faith with them.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., December 2, 1863. Also reprinted in Tribune, December 8, 1863.

<sup>109</sup> Enquirer, December 18, 1863, see also Enquirer, December 8, 1863.

<sup>110</sup> See Chapter 2, pgs. 38-41 for the mention of Mumford and the guerrillas.

<sup>111</sup> The U.S. accused the South of the same thing, putting men back in the field without officially exchanging them. See Speer, 104.

<sup>112</sup> See Enquirer article reprinted in Mercury, March 2, 1863. See also Examiner article reprinted in Mercury, January 12 1864 for a list of “Yankee atrocities.”

## The Real Reasons Why Yankee Prisoners Suffer in the South

The Southern press also used the food issue to blame the Union in the exchange controversy. Later in the war, when exchanges finally took place, the Southern press responded to Yankee accusations that the Confederacy deliberately starved prisoners. During late 1863 when only sick and wounded prisoners were being exchanged, the Dispatch argued that Northerners made false allegations of barbarity, when in reality, they were the ones responsible for the prisoners' deteriorated condition. "For it was they who set the example of removing for exchange Confederate prisoners who were too ill to endure removal, thereby compelling us to do the same." Furthermore, the paper alleged that the Union deliberately refused to exchange prisoners so as to starve the Confederacy.<sup>113</sup> The Dispatch claimed that, despite lack of food for the people of Richmond, "The prisoners are treated much better than the Yankee Government has any right to expect."<sup>114</sup> The press also claimed that if the Union would stop "pillaging and ravishing" the South, then the prisoners would receive better food.<sup>115</sup>

The North's refusal to fix the cartel only meant bad news for all prisoners, according to the Enquirer. While the paper denied that Union prisoners were ever mistreated, it also blamed the North for making their own men endure imprisonment.

It is the United States Government that is starving its own soldiers by keeping them in Richmond. All the 'cruelty' they suffer is inflicted by their own authorities; all the hardships they endure proceed from the

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<sup>113</sup> See Dispatch article reprinted in Tribune, November 10, 1863. See also Examiner, June 27, 1864, and Examiner articles reprinted in Tribune, June 2, 1864 and February 10, 1865. See also Richmond Whig, March 8, 1864, also reprinted in Times, March 12, 1864.

<sup>114</sup> Dispatch, November 6, 1863. Also reprinted in Tribune, November 10, 1863.

<sup>115</sup> Dispatch, March 24, 1865. Also reprinted in Times, March 30, 1865. See also Enquirer, August 12, 1862 and February 19, 1864. See also Enquirer, November 20, 1863, reprinted in Tribune, November 27, 1863. See also Examiner, May 28, 1864. Also reprinted in Tribune, June 2, 1864.

policy of their own Government. An exchange of all prisoners held by both Governments... would liberate from confinement, 'cruelty,' and 'starvation,' the men that have enlisted under the flag of the 'best government the world ever saw.'<sup>116</sup>

The Enquirer concluded, "we are prepared to renew the cartel."

Throughout the rest of the war, the Richmond press blamed the Northern exchange policy for the suffering of Union prisoners. When General Grant and General Lee finally effected an exchange in February of 1865, the South praised the decision but also questioned it. A Richmond Examiner article muddled over several reasons for the exchange breakthrough. The paper believed that the U.S. had refused to exchange because they could keep "so many good soldiers out of our ranks."<sup>117</sup> In addition, the Examiner thought that press and public pressure had influenced the exchange decision. While the paper encouraged the commencement of prisoner exchanges, it also warned that Southern exchange commissioners should be wary of Northern promises. "Let our agents remember that they are dealing with the most fraudulent and dishonest nation on the face of the earth; with men who must have a profit on every barter, and would coin into drachms [sic] the heart's blood of their own mothers."<sup>118</sup>

According to the Richmond press, the exchange imbroglio was not the only reason why Yankee prisoners were suffering. The actions of fellow soldiers and Union medical personnel also tormented Union captives. Following Bull Run, the Enquirer responded to allegations that rebel soldiers abused wounded and captive Yankees, charging that Union soldiers were the ones to blame.

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<sup>116</sup> Enquirer, November 20, 1863. Also reprinted in Tribune, November 27, 1863.

<sup>117</sup> Seems to refer to Grant's plan to not exchange prisoners in order to crush the South. See Speer, 115.

But even if it were true that we have been unkind to prisoners, with what grace does the reproof come from those who, in their precipitate flight from Manassas, scampered like buffaloes away, without ever speaking one word of consolation to, or doing one kind act for their own wounded and dying, and who suffered the Confederates, whom they so hate, to bury even their dead.<sup>119</sup>

In subsequent articles, the Richmond papers continued to comment on how Yankee wounded were left on the battlefield by their comrades.<sup>120</sup> In addition, the Examiner even alleged that Union battlefield surgeons left Yankee wounded to die on the field. This argument explained why Union mortality rates were so high, according to the Examiner. Yankee injured “neglected by their own surgeons, lay on the battlefield several days before any attention could be paid to their wounds by our surgeons, and then in a great many cases it was too late to effect any good by amputation and other surgical operations.”<sup>121</sup> The Examiner continued to argue that abandonment by Yankee soldiers and surgeons was a prime cause for high death rates in Confederate prisons and hospitals. In addition, Southern prison and hospital officials were far from the inhumane monsters that the Northern press portrayed them to be. Rather the paper argued that Union officers were the inhumane ones. “If any evidence was wanted of the utter inhumanity of Grant, and the want of care and neglect of his wounded, it would be presented at the hospitals in this city where the mangled forms of his hirelings, deserted on the battlefields, have been carried for treatment.”<sup>122</sup>

Yankee prisoners also suffered because of fellow inmates, according to the Richmond press. Calling the Union prisoners “an aggregate of sin and depravity,” the

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<sup>118</sup> See Examiner article reprinted in Tribune, February 10, 1865.

<sup>119</sup> See Enquirer article reprinted in Tribune, August 13, 1861.

<sup>120</sup> Enquirer, July 19, 1862. Also reprinted in Times, July 24, 1862. See also Examiner article reprinted in Times, August 21, 1861.

<sup>121</sup> Examiner, July 25, 1862.



papers alleged that prisoners stole from one another.<sup>123</sup> Adhering to the popular stereotype that Yankees possessed great “ingenuity and skill,” the Examiner commented on how Belle Isle prisoners used these skills to prey on one another. “They are the most inveterate thieves, and on every opportunity depredate upon one another. For one to take off his shoes, or a piece of his garment, and fall to sleep, is to invite a theft from his comrade.”<sup>124</sup> Therefore, allegations that Union prisoners were practically naked because of Confederate brutality were completely false. According to the papers, evil prisoners were to blame for half-clothed Union soldiers.<sup>125</sup>

In describing the Richmond prison known as Castle Thunder, the Examiner told of its “lecherous, thieving inmates.” According to the paper, new prisoners were greeted with the cry of “fresh fish!” They were then knocked down and beaten by veteran inmates. The rookies were also robbed of all their valuables. The Examiner argued that a line should be inscribed over the entrance to the prison saying, “who enters here leave valuables behind.”<sup>126</sup>

The Dispatch even blamed the freezing deaths of several Belle Isle prisoners on the depravity of other captives. In responding to a U.S. Sanitary Commission report condemning the cruel treatment of Union captives on Belle Isle, the paper said that a lack of good tents did not kill prisoners. Rather, prisoners all had tents and fires in order to keep warm. According to the paper, only one prisoner died because

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., June 11, 1864. See also Examiner, May 25, 1864 and Enquirer, May 24, 1864.

<sup>123</sup> Dispatch, July 8, 1862.

<sup>124</sup> Examiner, August 4, 1862. Also reprinted in Mercury, August 7, 1862.

<sup>125</sup> The Union press also acknowledged that Yankee prisoners robbed one another. See Herald, February 10, 1864 and Times, November 11, 1864.

<sup>126</sup> Examiner, June 29, 1864.

“he was frozen by the cruelty of his own fellow prisoners, who thrust him out of the tent in a freezing night because he was infested with vermin.” The Dispatch claimed that the Yankees “fared as well as their guards.”<sup>127</sup>

### **Clean Prisons and Dirty Inmates**

Reports of a prisoner “infested with vermin” might seem like proof that Yankees were not as well off as the Confederate press alleged them to be. A person who is well cared for would probably not be suffering from insect infestations. However, the clever Southern press even had an explanation for insect-ridden prisoners. According to a Richmond Sentinel article that was reprinted in the Enquirer and the Examiner, the dirty habits of the prisoners caused their infestations. The article denounced the North for alleging that Libby prison was infested with bugs. Rather, the paper argued that,

There are certainly no vermin in the rooms when assigned to prisoners, and if they exist at all, then it is from the fact that they are brought there by the prisoners themselves, among whom are many whose naturally filthy habits preclude them from being free of such pests.”<sup>128</sup>

The Dispatch even commented how the prisoners were “urged to keep themselves clean.”<sup>129</sup> In contrast, the Enquirer lamented how the rebel prisoners in Union dungeons tried to keep clean however, “Little or no soap is furnished by the Vandal dogs who have our brave men in custody, and the facilities for keeping clean are by no means good.”<sup>130</sup> Cleanliness became a major tool of the Richmond press in refuting charges that Southern prisons were dungeons and places of extreme

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<sup>127</sup> Dispatch, March 24, 1865. Also reprinted in Times, March 30, 1865.

<sup>128</sup> The Richmond Sentinel, December 30, 1863 reprinted in Examiner and Enquirer, January 2, 1864.

<sup>129</sup> Dispatch, March 24, 1865, reprinted in Times, March 30, 1865. See also O.R. Volume VI, p. 544-546.

<sup>130</sup> Enquirer, November 24, 1863. Also reprinted in Tribune, November 27, 1863.

suffering. All three Richmond papers painted pictures of prisons as well-ordered, extremely clean havens for Yankee prisoners. Belle Isle was described as “pleasant” and “salubrious,” a site “much more agreeable than any locality which has been given to our wounded soldiers.”<sup>131</sup> Yankee prisoners enjoyed frequent baths in the “noble James” river, and their health greatly improved.<sup>132</sup> The prison was also fumigated regularly.<sup>133</sup> The Examiner called Belle Isle the “Yankee summer resort,” and commended the “beautifully laid out” camp and the “rigid discipline.” The paper even commented that “At this season of the year a visit to the Island would be very pleasant, but military rules forbid it without a permit.”<sup>134</sup> By March of 1863, Belle Isle medical inspectors reported that one-fourth of the prisoners were ill. Prisoners began complaining of a lack of good food, and some men out of desperation even ate the prison commandant’s dog.<sup>135</sup> The Richmond Medical Director, William A Carrington, even remarked that “The men are much too crowded. They have not sufficient quantity of blankets nor sufficient fuel supplied.”<sup>136</sup> However, as late as July of 1864, the Examiner still considered the prison a “salubrious Yankee resort.”<sup>137</sup>

Other prisons were also commended for their comfort and cleanliness. Libby prison, often referred to as “Hotel d’ Libby,” and “Major Turner’s Hotel,” was praised for being well stocked and well ordered. The Dispatch described Turner as a

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<sup>131</sup> Enquirer, July 11, 1862. See also Dispatch, July 14, 1862.

<sup>132</sup> Dispatch, July 19 & 26, 1862. See also Examiner article reprinted in Mercury, August 7, 1862. See also Mercury, August 2, 1862.

<sup>133</sup> Examiner, September 24, 1862.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, September 1, 1863, and July 1 & 8, 1864.

<sup>135</sup> Speer, 204-205.

<sup>136</sup> O.R. Volume VI, p. 587-588. See also Examiner, October 5, 1863 where a Richmond city councilman calls Belle Isle an “unpleasant place.”

<sup>137</sup> Examiner, July 5, 1864.

“most polite and accommodating officer.”<sup>138</sup> Supposedly a Union general even visited the prison and declared that “It is the best conducted prison in the world.”<sup>139</sup> The Richmond press also heralded Castle Thunder as a commodious prison. Established in August of 1862 to replace Castle Godwin, the Enquirer called Castle Thunder a prison that was “as orderly, convenient, and comfortable as could be desired.” Also, “The general cleanliness of the place is the first object which strikes the visitors sense of appreciation as he enters.”<sup>140</sup> Loam and lime were spread on the floors of the prison to absorb “noxious gases.”<sup>141</sup> The prisoners were allowed to enjoy the outdoors in a large plaza attached to the prison, which afforded them “the exercise and pure air [that]...has been very conducive to good health and discipline.”<sup>142</sup>

The newspapers also claimed that happy prisoners lived in these clean prisons. The Enquirer reprinted a prison song written by the “Richmond Prison Association,” made up of prisoners mostly from the Libby. The paper alleged that inmates were daily involved in composing and singing songs.<sup>143</sup> The Examiner featured an article on a grand presentation of a wooden sword to Congressman Ely by his fellow

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<sup>138</sup> Dispatch, March 31, 1862. See also Sentinel, March 1, 1865.

<sup>139</sup> Dispatch, January 28, 1865. Also reprinted in February 2, 1865.

<sup>140</sup> Enquirer, August 21, 1862. See also March 4, 1862 for Castle Godwin description.

<sup>141</sup> Dispatch, January 12, 1863.

<sup>142</sup> Examiner, July 28, 1863. See also Examiner, May 30, 1864, and June 30, 1864. See also Dispatch, October 11, 1862 and Enquirer, November 24, 1863, reprinted in Tribune, November 27, 1863.

<sup>143</sup> Enquirer, January 4, 1862.

prisoners.<sup>144</sup> The paper also mentioned how prisoners held real trials to discipline fellow prisoners.<sup>145</sup>

### **Living Like a King in Libby Prison**

Besides clean prisons with a variety of enjoyable activities, the press also maintained that Union prisoners were well fed. Richmond papers often refuted claims that prisoners lived off bad rations. The Enquirer argued that the Yankees were better off in prison than in the Federal army.<sup>146</sup> The paper later even estimated the average cost of feeding the prisoners: \$1,500 daily and \$11,000 a week. In September of 1861 rations of coffee and sugar were cut back, however, the Yankees supposedly told the Enquirer that “their food, even minus the sugar and coffee, is more plentiful and nutritious than that which constituted their usual fare in the Federal camps.”<sup>147</sup> In response to Northern press coverage of a returned Union prisoner’s captivity account alleging that Yankees were fed the “flesh of defunct mules,” the Examiner set out to refute these claims. Examiner reporters went over to Libby Prison (where the prisoner in question had been held) and sampled some of the food. The reporters came to the following conclusion:

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<sup>144</sup> Examiner, October 7, 1861.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., June 29, 1864. See also Whig, August 5, 1861 and December 16, 1863. The Whig states that Union prisoners were drawing up a letter to send to the Herald and the Tribune, “denying in the fullest and strongest manner the infamous lies about Confederate cruelty which have recently been circulated at the North.” See also Enquirer, September 24, 1861 and Examiner July 21, 1863 for denials that Confederate guards randomly shot at Union prisoners.

<sup>146</sup> Enquirer, July 2, 1861.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., September 20, 1861.

We have on occasion...partaken of the meat that this dilettante German [the prisoner] so stigmatizes, and found it excellent bovine, nutritious and sweet smelling, and not a part of that useful quadruped, related to the donkey and Wardener [the prisoner's last name]. As for soup and bread, not better is served on the tables of the first hotels of Richmond. Would to heaven our soldiers were furnished with such rations.<sup>148</sup>

Yankee prisoners were not suffering, but rather eating everything in site in the city of Richmond. The Examiner compared Yankee prisoners to the “locusts of Egypt,” since they ate up the city’s subsistence.<sup>149</sup> The paper growled that this “azure-stomached race” “eat[s] up ten times [its] worth in bread and meat.”<sup>150</sup>

Articles concerning the feeding of prisoners were also accompanied by commentary on the expensive cost of taking care of the Yankee detainees. The Richmond press howled over the thousands of dollars that it cost just to feed Union captives in the city. In addition, these articles also demonstrated to the North that prisoners were well cared for, despite returning prisoners’ allegations in Union papers. These articles could also be seen as calls for harsher treatment of prisoners, since most of the commentary argued that Yankees were treated better than they deserved.

As early as October of 1861, the Dispatch complained that the Yankees were burdensome to feed. In fact, the Dispatch was the first newspaper out of the six used in this thesis to advocate making the prisoners “earn their keep.”<sup>151</sup> The Dispatch continued to complain throughout the war that Union prisoners did nothing for their own upkeep. “It takes an enormous quantity of victuals to feed so many hungry mouths...and the onerousness of the burden to the Government is not lessened when

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<sup>148</sup> Examiner, April 4, 1863. See also Enquirer, February 19, 1864.

<sup>149</sup> Examiner, October 5, 1863.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., October 5, 1863. See also Examiner, June 28, 1864.

we reflect that all of the consumers are non-producers.”<sup>152</sup> The paper even went so far as to call the prisoners “bread-consuming, non-producing animals.”<sup>153</sup>

The cost of prisoner maintenance was often mentioned in Richmond papers alongside or within articles about the need for an exchange. The Examiner lamented in May of 1863 that there were about four thousand prisoners in the city of Richmond. These prisoners cost the government thousands of dollars a day, for every day that they were not exchanged.<sup>154</sup> One Examiner article even alleged that it cost the Confederacy close to \$60,000 a day to feed prisoners.<sup>155</sup> The Dispatch believed that the money to feed the Yankees would be better spent on rations for the Confederate army.<sup>156</sup> The Enquirer complained that Yankee prisoners damaged tobacco factory machinery and chewed up thousands of pounds of chewing tobacco. The paper protested the destructiveness of these “Hessians,” who were “truly an expensive lot of prisoners.”<sup>157</sup>

Once an exchange agreement was worked out, the papers rejoiced over the money the Confederate Government would save with the Yankees’ departure. According to the Enquirer, the release of prisoners would relieve the Confederacy of

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<sup>151</sup> Dispatch, October 28, 1861.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., September 1, 1862.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., September 29, 1862.

<sup>154</sup> Examiner, May 11, 1863.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., July 8, 1863.

<sup>156</sup> Dispatch, July 19, 1862.

<sup>157</sup> Enquirer, January 13, 1862. See also Examiner, June 17, 1864, the paper argues that the South saved money and time in using the tobacco factories for prisons. The Examiner commends the South for being well prepared to take care of prisoners.

a daily tax of about \$2,000.<sup>158</sup> The Dispatch speculated that \$4,000 would be saved just in food and guard costs alone.<sup>159</sup>

### **Dehumanization of the Enemy**

Articles concerning the cost and care of prisoners were just one type of news feature that used dehumanization tactics. As seen in some of the articles used throughout this chapter, the Southern press used language and ideas that made the enemy appear inhumane and distinct from Southern people. Unlike the Northern press, however, the Richmond papers focused more on dehumanizing the Yankee prisoners themselves rather than the North as a whole. Out of all three papers, the Examiner made the most disparaging comments about the North. According to Michael Houston, the Examiner encouraged Southerners early on in the war to accept and support secession because the North and the South were two “distinct nations, whose essential differences outweighed the common ties of race, language, religion, and laws.”<sup>160</sup> Daniel compared the relationship between the North and South as equal to Great Britain’s treatment of her colonies. The North did not need the South to exist, yet it refused to let the South go and grant Southerners their independence. Later on in the war, the Examiner went so far as to say that the “people of this Confederacy are distinct from the Yankee in blood, in institutions, in ideas, and in all the elements of separate nationality.”<sup>161</sup> The paper concluded that secession and war

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<sup>158</sup> Enquirer, February 20, 1862.

<sup>159</sup> Dispatch, September 15, 1862.

<sup>160</sup> Houston, 55.

<sup>161</sup> Cooley, 136.



were necessary actions in order to cut the South loose of the “rotten carcass” of Northern civilization.<sup>162</sup>

Overall however, the Richmond newspapers, including the Examiner, spent more time disparaging the actual Yankee prisoners rather than the citizens of the North. Generally, the Southern press refrained from the Northern press’ practice of identifying the enemy with barbarian tribes and devilish brutes. Rather, the Southern press focused more on portraying Yankee prisoners as foreign, uneducated, lazy, and uncivilized.

Besides calling Yankees “inveterate thieves,” “non-producing animals,” and “locusts,” two Richmond papers used ethnic slurs to dehumanize prisoners. Along with calling prisoners “Hessians,” the Enquirer also considered the army of the North to be “uncivilized.” The paper argued that the exchange imbroglio brought out the fact that the Union cared nothing for its own soldiers, since the majority of its army was made up of “foreign mercenaries.” The Enquirer maintained that the North’s constant supply of soldiers mostly came from “the swarming hives of Europe.”<sup>163</sup>

The Examiner went one step farther than the Enquirer, attacking the specific nationalities of prisoners. As already seen in the article about the “mule meat,” the Examiner attacked prisoners of Germanic heritage. In a May 1863 article, the paper continued its xenophobic ways in describing how prisoners were registered upon their arrival at Libby Frison. The Examiner claimed that, “The mass of them gave unmistakable evidence, in their low, repulsive countenances, of their Teutonic and Celtic extraction, particularly the former, and “Yaw, yaw,” sounded along the line, as

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<sup>162</sup> Examiner, May 28, 1864. Also reprinted in Tribune, June 2, 1864.

<sup>163</sup> Enquirer, July 28, 1863.

they moved, like the grunt of so many pigs.” The paper also featured a “typical” conversation between a prison clerk and a new inmate:

Clerk to prisoner- ‘What is your name?’

Prisoner (who is a stumpy specimen of a German with three loaves of bread under his arm, and the half of one in his mouth, and a comrade similarly equipped beside him)- ‘Yaw, dat ish my name.’

Clerk- ‘But what is your name, how do you spell it?’

Prisoner (depositing his bread on the floor, so as to give him the count on his fingers)- ‘C-h-awe-ez-e-n-be-r-t-l-y-l-l-e-r. Yaw, dat ish my name. You pronounce zim?’

The Teuton with the unpronounceable name, picked up his loaves and was shoved along for the next comer, who proved himself the possessor of a harder name still, and to have entered the army the day he set foot on Northern soil- the 28<sup>th</sup> of December last.<sup>164</sup>

In this way, the Examiner painted the picture of a Northern army that was not really American, rather made up of the poor and uneducated of Europe. Plus, the fact that the man joined the army the day he came to U.S. could be the paper’s way of indicating that Northern troops did not really commit to, believe in, or understand their cause like the Southern soldiers. In a later article entitled, “Whom We Are Fighting,” the paper looked to prisoner name lists as proof that the Northern army was made up of foreigners. These lists included prisoners’ names, states and regiments that they belong to, and “place of nativity.” The newspaper claimed that “the nativity of Grant’s hirelings embrace every discovered country on the face of the globe, with the exception of China, Japan, Hindoostan, and several other more enlightened nations.” The Examiner claimed that close to 75 percent of Union soldiers were foreigners. The paper concluded that these prison records would show

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<sup>164</sup> Examiner, May 11, 1863. This article also mentioned how there was a Zouave prisoner among the group. The paper was shocked at seeing this, considering that the Zouaves had been “thinned out” by Confederates “who have a hatred of scarlet.”

“the world at some future day how many different races, tongues, kindred and people the South had to defend herself against.”<sup>165</sup>

When black Union prisoners began arriving in Richmond, the Examiner also took the opportunity to criticize these men as well. The paper described how a light-skinned “black sheep” was discovered among the “white flock,” and later removed to “quarters becoming his importance.”<sup>166</sup> The Enquirer joined the Examiner in disparaging black soldiers as unreliable and not built for battle.<sup>167</sup> In fact, the paper argued that Confederate soldiers preferred to fight black soldiers because they lacked fighting ability. “We would certainly prefer to fight negroes rather than Americans, Irishmen, or Germans, for the simple reason that nature has denied the negro every essential quality of a soldier.”<sup>168</sup> Here the Enquirer seemed to argue the opposite of the Examiner, inferring that Germans and other ethnic groups within the Union army were qualified and capable soldiers.<sup>169</sup>

Besides disparaging the ethnic and racial backgrounds of Union prisoners, all three Richmond papers used derogatory names to refer to Yankee captives. As mentioned before, Yankee prisoners were described as “Hessians” by the Enquirer, but also by the Dispatch.<sup>170</sup> Other nicknames included “mercenaries,” “abolition

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., June 22, 1864.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., July 21, 1863.

<sup>167</sup> Enquirer, December 18, 1863. This article also states that should blacks be sent into battle, rebel troops “understand what to do in such cases.”

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., December 2, 1863. Also reprinted in Tribune, December 8, 1863.

<sup>169</sup> See also Whig, September 3, 1861, and a reprinted Whig article in Times, March 10, 1864. The Whig advocates putting white soldiers with captured black prisoners. “This is a taste of negro equality, we fancy, the said Yankee officers will not fancy overmuch.”

<sup>170</sup> Enquirer, January 13, 1862 and Dispatch, July 17, 1862.

officers,” “bluebirds,” “Old Abe’s disciples,” and “luckless Lincolnites.”<sup>171</sup>

Supposedly, most prisoners were “saucy, impudent, and boastful,” and a few were “murderers, woman ravishers and desolators.”<sup>172</sup> And, of course, the Zouaves and gorillas were almost one in the same thing.<sup>173</sup> Other prisoners were simply cowards who ran away from battle and surrendered out of fear.<sup>174</sup> The Examiner even mocked the “whining” Union survivors of the Fort Pillow massacre.<sup>175</sup>

The Richmond press clearly engaged in creating strange representations of Yankee prisoners. Some men were portrayed as thieves, others as imbeciles. Ethnic heritages were questioned, along with courage and commitment to the Union cause. In an unusual article, the Examiner observed the way Union wounded in Southern hospitals responded to the pain of their injuries. In contrast to Confederate wounded, the Examiner reported that Yankee hospital patients groaned, cried, and screamed in pain. Union soldiers supposedly begged rebel surgeons to shoot them to put them out of their misery. Hospitals for Confederate wounded, on the other hand, were filled with pleasant sounds and faces, and “the wounded joke and laugh about their wounds as though something to be proud of.” The Examiner concluded that these differences in pain endurance indicated something about the two armies’ devotion and belief in their respective causes.

Whence this difference of endurance? Is it not the consciousness on the one hand that they are engaged in a just and holy cause, and on the other that they are engaged in a wicked and unjust crusade, and that their

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<sup>171</sup> Enquirer, Sept. 20 & 24, 1861, Dec. 19, 1862, Examiner, March 30, 1864, and Dispatch, July 2, 1861.

<sup>172</sup> Examiner, May 13, 1864 and June 27, 1864.

<sup>173</sup> Enquirer, July 27, 1861. Also reprinted in Tribune and Times, August 6, 1861.

<sup>174</sup> Examiner, May 20, 1864.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, April, 27, 1864. Also reprinted in Times, March 29, 1864.

wounds are a just retribution for this folly and crime?<sup>176</sup>

In this way, the Examiner vilified the prisoners while also doubting their courage and faith in the Union cause.

Finally, one Richmond paper also presented the Yankee prisoners as whining informants to the Northern press. When a Mrs. R. Frazier, a Union woman, was captured behind enemy lines, she was taken to Richmond and lodged in Castle Godwin for a time. Upon her release, the Dispatch asserted that she suffered from a condition known as “the diarrhea of words.” Her complaints or “twaddle,” as the Dispatch called them, concerning her treatment while a prisoner of war would appear in the Northern press.<sup>177</sup> Later in the war, a group of officers being sent home had much to complain about their confinements. The Dispatch felt sure that “on arriving in Lincoln’s domains [they] will no doubt have wonderful stories to tell of their sufferings.”<sup>178</sup>

### **Using Dehumanization to Ennoble**

Besides functioning as criticisms of Yankee prisoners, these characterizations of Union prisoners also ennobled the Confederate soldiers. In an indirect way, the descriptions of Yankee prisoners as dumb, weak, lazy, murderous, and evil made the common Confederate soldier appear valiant and noble. The Union press demonized the South by associating Southern people with barbarian tribes and therefore rallied

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<sup>176</sup> Examiner, May 18, 1864.

<sup>177</sup> Dispatch, August 2, 1862.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, October 13, 1862. See also Rebel, March 8, 1865 article reprinted in Times, April 8, 1865 concerning the drowning of Yankee prisoners at Cahawba, Alabama. The paper explained that the drowning was an accident. However, the Rebel predicted that, “the malignity of our enemies will torture the circumstances of the flooding of the prison at Cahawba into another evidence of our determination to abuse the prisoners in our hands, and make it a pretext for retaliation.” Also spelled “Cahaba,” see Speech 332.

support throughout the long war. The Confederate press, on the other hand, disparaged Yankee soldiers and elevated the Southern soldiers in the process. Confederate soldiers were noble because they were strong, pureblooded Americans who fought for a worthy cause. Disparaging the Yankee prisoners may have also encouraged the Confederacy to consider the Union captives as unworthy of proper care. Ignoble men did not deserve good rations and easy living while in prison.

### **Conclusion**

The Richmond press made the prisoner of war situation a major news story during the four long years of the Civil War. Like the Union press, the Richmond newspapers became the champions of Confederate prisoners of war. Although the Richmond Examiner, the Richmond Enquirer, and the Richmond Dispatch did not feature as many captivity narratives as seen in the New York press, the Southern papers still made it clear that Confederate prisoners lived tormented lives in Union “dungeons.” The thought of these men suffering inspired these three papers and their readers to call for retaliation upon innocent Union prisoners. Calls for retaliation even became a way to criticize the Confederate government. The Examiner became the most vocal critic of Jefferson Davis’ refusal to retaliate, blaming him for the suffering of Confederate soldiers and citizens alike. The Dispatch and the Enquirer also began to criticize Davis for his refusal to hoist the “Black Flag.” Only one time throughout the entire conflict did one of the papers speak out against retaliation. The Enquirer advocated good treatment of prisoners, yet it would call for retaliation a few days later.

The Richmond papers also used the prisoner of war situation to attack the United States. In response to the Union's claims that Yankee prisoners were being abused, the Richmond press shot back and blamed faulty Northern policies for any reports of suffering. An unfair exchange policy, a severe blockade, and other aspects of the Union's "unchristian mode of warfare," made it hard for the South to afford Yankee prisoners with the best care and lodging. At the same time however, the Southern press deeply resented Northern press allegations that the Confederacy was "desperately poor." Rather, the Richmond papers claimed that Southern people were not paupers nor would they subject themselves to "imputations on their honor." Pride killed the supply agreement between the two nations. The supply issue aside, the Richmond press also blamed any suffering on Yankee prisoners themselves, since local prisons were clean, healthy places where Union inmates were treated better than they deserved.

Finally, like the New York press, the Richmond newspapers actively engaged in disparaging the enemy. While all three papers encouraged hatred for the North as a whole, the Southern press spent more time dehumanizing the Yankee prisoners themselves. Portraying them as everything from thieves to dolts to murderers, the papers created images of Union captives as unworthy foes. Using language that probably encouraged and/or condoned the abuse of prisoners, the Richmond newspapers engendered hatred against these Northern invaders.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined the coverage of the prisoner situation during the Civil War by six newspapers. Founded in two important cities, New York and Richmond, these papers and their messages spread far and wide throughout the Union and the Confederacy. The New York and Richmond press championed the cause of their respective prisoners of war, and used the symbol of the suffering prisoner to rally the public behind calls for retaliation against the enemy. The papers also criticized their own governments and hurled accusations against enemy authorities. Finally, these newspapers engendered hatred against innocent people through dehumanization tactics.

After reading the hundreds of articles from these six newspapers, however, there may still be some doubt as to whether or not the press really had an impact on the prisoner of war situation. As is the case today, people during the 1860s probably did not believe everything that they read in the newspapers. Historians cannot go back in time and poll all the newspaper readers of the mid-nineteenth century to gauge their trust of press reports and editorials.

Yet, by examining the evidence presented in the Official Records, it is apparent that U.S. and Confederate authorities did place some faith in newspaper reports and that the press had an impact on the prison situation. As already mentioned, the supply issue was exacerbated by Northern newspaper reports alleging that supplies sent for Yankee prisoners were not delivered and/or redirected for use



by the Confederate military. The Richmond press perceived these accusations as insults to the Southern humanity and encouraged Confederate officials to cease accepting supplies. Confederate authorities agreed and refused any further supplies from the North. This is one clear case where the Richmond press encouraged a Southern “war psychosis” which, in turn, had an influence on the Confederate Government’s treatment of Yankee prisoners.<sup>1</sup>

Other examples exist as well where Confederate authorities responded to news from Union papers. Commissioner Ould wrote to Northern exchange officials complaining that the rules of the exchange cartel were not being adhered to, citing evidence from Northern newspapers.<sup>2</sup> Southern officials first found out about the death of William Mumford at the hands of General Butler from a newspaper report. General Robert E. Lee wrote to General George McClellan to confirm Mumford’s death, inclosing a newspaper article announcing the execution.<sup>3</sup> Even General Winder who had once said that he refused to permit the press to upset him, responded to information he had found in the Union press.<sup>4</sup> He claimed that a “system of treatment has been inaugurated by the United States Government to Confederate prisoners infinitely worse, more inhuman, uncivilized, and barbarous,” than anything Yankee prisoners had to endure in the South. The general alleged that he knew rebel prisoners were being abused because of statements found in the Northern press.<sup>5</sup> The Official Records also feature several other letters sent from Confederate authorities

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<sup>1</sup> O.R. Volume VI, p. 534, 973.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Volume IV, p. 602.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., Volume IV, p. 134.

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Annette Duffy, “Military Administrator: The Controversial Life of Brigadier General John Henry Winder, C.S.A.,” (M.A. thesis, Creighton University, 1961), 46.

<sup>5</sup> O.R. Volume VI, p. 267.

regarding exchanges, arrests, and acts of retaliation that relied upon newspaper citations.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, Union authorities monitored the news in the Southern press. Union officials commented on issues of paroles and exchanges found in press reports. General Butler sent General Hoffman copies of the Richmond Enquirer stating that paroled men not yet officially exchanged were ordered into service by the Confederacy. He advocated some sort of action in retaliation on the part of the U.S.<sup>7</sup> General Butler also complained to Commissioner Ould when Yankee prisoners were put to work on Confederate fortifications. Butler cited as proof excerpts from two Richmond papers.<sup>8</sup>

In another case, a U.S. naval surgeon who had observed conditions in Richmond hospitals for prisoners wrote to the Commissioner of Exchange, E.A. Hitchcock, stating that Richmond papers acknowledged the abuse of Yankee prisoners and encouraged it. The doctor claimed that Richmond papers like the Examiner declared that the Yankees deserved the abuse for invading the South. Furthermore, the letter to Hitchcock stated that the Southern press complained of Union captives being treated better than they deserved. The doctor believed that Southern officials were listening to the Richmond press and therefore encouraging and/or allowing the mistreatment of prisoners.<sup>9</sup>

Union authorities also used Confederate papers (and Union papers) to find out if certain Yankee officers were going to be exchanged or taken hostage in

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., Volume II, p. 619, 832, Volume III, p. 23, Volume IV, p. 827, and Volume VII, p. 58.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., Volume VII, p. 574.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., Volume IV, p. 562, Volume VI, p. 958-960, and Volume VII, p. 970-971.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., Volume IV, p. 572.

retaliation.<sup>10</sup> The Richmond papers were monitored for their commentary on black prisoners, and for the continued use of advertisements announcing the capture of “runaway slaves,” which the North worried were instead free black citizens.<sup>11</sup> Northern authorities even looked into captivity accounts found in Union papers to determine their truth and to order revenge.<sup>12</sup>

Besides the impact on the U.S. and Confederate governments, one can see that the press had an effect on the public as well. Letters to the editor from both citizens and soldiers indicated that people were actively reading newspapers to find out information about prisoners of war. Families like the Connellys wrote letters to newspapers in the hopes of reaching national authorities that would save their loved ones.<sup>13</sup> Relatives on both sides looked to the press for information concerning those captured, wounded, imprisoned, and exchanged.<sup>14</sup> Returning prisoners told their stories to newspapers in the hopes of helping those still imprisoned, or encouraging retaliation, or simply to see their name in print. Clearly however, the numerous captivity accounts that can be found in both Northern and Southern papers indicate that the people saw the press as an important medium to exchange information. The fact that General E. A. Hitchcock, Commissioner of Exchange took the time to write a lengthy letter to the Times in order to vindicate the North from all blame in the exchange imbroglio was one example of how important the press was to the prisoner

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., Volume IV, p. 654-655, Volume VI, p. 62, 69, 307, 342, 801-802, Volume VII, p. 1085, Volume VIII, p. 236, 811.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., Volume VI, p. 615-617, and Volume VII, p. 687-691.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., Volume VII, p. 80-81.

<sup>13</sup> The New York Tribune, August 22, 1861.

<sup>14</sup> One example includes a letter reprinted in O.R. Volume V, p. 866-867, from a North Carolina man named William Coker who wrote to Richmond authorities asking if all exchanges would be reprinted in the Richmond Enquirer. Also, all newspapers reprinted long lists of men exchanged, killed,

of war crisis.<sup>15</sup> Through the press, politicians and military officials could better inform the public about efforts being made to save the prisoners.

This thesis has also updated the Hesseltine argument of 1930. The northern press probably did induce a “war psychosis.” Union papers turned the issue of the treatment of prisoners into a national crisis. As the numbers of prisoners increased, so too did the numbers of stories describing their cruel imprisonment. The public looked for a way to assuage their grief over this national nightmare. Newspapers provided answers for common citizens as well as politicians, offering solutions like retaliation. As the war continued, newspaper propaganda contributed to an atmosphere of panic and distrust concerning the South’s treatment of prisoners of war. Even when the Confederacy tried to provide for Yankee prisoners, such as when the South allowed the North to send supplies, these actions were questioned and ridiculed by the Northern press. Every action taken by the Confederacy regarding Yankee prisoners became suspect in the eyes of Union papers. The Northern press generated a hysteria that only made a bad situation worse. Influenced by a constant barrage of editorials and articles demanding revenge, Union officials did cut rations and reduced the quality of life for rebel prisoners. Union authorities succumbed to popular opinion, an opinion that had been crafted and influenced largely by newspapers. Consequently, rebel prisoners became the victims of a Union prisoner policy that was heavily influenced by press propaganda.

At the same time, however, this thesis has proved that the “war psychosis” was not as clear cut as Hesseltine supposed it to be. Sometimes Northern papers

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captured, or wounded. A few examples include New York Times, Sept. 25, 1861, Oct. 24, 1864 and Tribune, July 23, 1862, Nov. 6 & 7, 1863, August 10, 1864, January 23, 1865, and February 1, 1865.

called for leniency towards rebel prisoners. Being inhumane to prisoners was often identified with acting like a Southerner. Union newspapers encouraged their readers to strive for a higher standard of “civilized” thinking. Also, this thesis made use of substantially more articles from more newspapers. Hesseltine tended to rely upon the New York Times as his evidence of the Northern press creating a “war psychosis.” Through examination of other press resources, one can see how papers on the same side of the conflict had different views of this national crisis.

This thesis has also provided new information on the coverage of the prison situation by the Southern press. While books like Speer’s Portals to Hell, Blakey’s General John H. Winder, Andrews’ The South Reports the Civil War, and even Hesseltine’s Civil War Prisons all make use of citations from the Richmond press, this paper suggests that we should attend to the political divisions between the Richmond papers. Historians have acknowledged that President Jefferson Davis suffered from a lack of support from the Richmond press. In this thesis, we see how the Richmond papers manipulated the prisoner of war issue into yet another way to attack the Confederate president. Davis constantly anguished over the scathing editorials found in the Richmond Examiner that denounced his weak retaliatory policy. All three papers questioned Davis’ strength as a leader and condemned him for his “chivalry.”<sup>16</sup> As the crisis progressed, the Richmond press called out for strong leadership that would extinguish any sympathy felt for the imprisoned

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<sup>15</sup> Times, December 2, 1863.

<sup>16</sup> This goes against Harrison A. Trexler’s arguments in “The Davis Administration and the Richmond Press, 1861-1865,” The Journal of Southern History, Volume 16, Issue 2 (May, 1950), 192. Trexler argued that, “The Dispatch, however, never became bitter or caustic toward the Davis regime.” One has to only look at the Dispatch’s articles concerning retaliation against prisoners of war to see that the newspaper became quite critical of Davis’ handling of the situation as the war progressed.

Yankees. The newspapers argued that since Confederate prisoners in the North were afforded little sympathy by their captors, the South should refrain from showing any compassion for these unwanted and undeserving Yankee strangers.

The prison situation quickly reached crisis proportions in the South. As the Confederacy became increasingly bankrupt and could not provide for its own people, the press increased its attacks on the Davis Administration for seeking to provide for Yankee inmates, people that the press believed deserved death rather than life. Lacking support from the press and ultimately the Southern people, Davis and Southern prison officials could do little to ameliorate the prisoners' suffering. Tragedies like Andersonville and Libby Prison resulted.

However, along with the scathing editorials condemning Davis and prison officials for treating Yankee prisoners too well, the Richmond press sought to exonerate the South from any blame in the prisoner of war situation. Rather, the North was to blame for the suffering of the imprisoned Yankees. Due to the "unchristian" policies of the Union, Northern soldiers were forced to languish in Confederate prisons. Issues like emancipation, parole, supplies, and retaliation questioned the wherewithal of the prisoner exchange cartel. The Richmond press constantly reminded the world that the South had never broken faith with the North. Rather, the North was responsible for the ending of exchanges and of supplies sent to save Yankee prisoners.

In another respect, this thesis inadvertently helped to clear the records of prison officials like General William Hoffman, General John H. Winder, and Captain Henry Wirz. This thesis joins Leslie Gene Hunter's dissertation on General Hoffman

in exonerating the general of some of the blame for the suffering of rebel prisoners. Hoffman was not completely at fault for the prison crisis. The policies of his superiors, the lack of time and money, and the exchange imbroglio all contributed to the worsening of the prison situation. Hoffman became the scapegoat for the failure of the Union prison system. In the same vein, Winder and Wirz became scapegoats for the breakdown of the Southern prison system. Like Hoffman, Winder suffered from a lack of money, time, and support. Captain Wirz was handed a virtually impossible situation when he was placed in control of Andersonville prison. Wirz' inability to run Andersonville ultimately cost him his life. The North used Wirz as yet another way of exacting revenge against the defeated Confederacy.

Finally, this thesis demonstrated how the status of prisoners of war is not strictly a modern, post-Vietnam phenomenon. Not often considered when discussing the Civil War is how significant prisoners of war were to the conflict. Lincoln and Davis had to take into consideration how their policies would impact the imprisoned citizens that they had promised to protect. The North and the South used prisoners of war as objects of manipulation. Human commodities hold substantial weight when placed on the war bargaining table, as seen early on in the Colonel Corcoran/ "Savannah" incident. At the war's end, the prisoner issue continued to be significant, as seen in the Wirz trials, in the explosion of prisoner narratives, and in subsequent legislation providing financial assistance for former prisoners of war. Clearly, prisoners of war held important significance both during and long after the Civil War.

In conclusion, this thesis has explored the emotional Civil War prison situation in a way not often considered by historians. Yes, those who have written

about the prisons and prisoners of war have used newspaper citations before. However, to focus solely on the press coverage of such a disturbing period in our nation's history is a perilous undertaking. The newspaper is a medium that has been around for hundreds of years. While it is an important historical tool, it cannot always be relied on to tell the truth. This thesis did not seek to determine if Union and Confederate prisoners suffered during the Civil War. Of that there is no doubt. Instead, this thesis sought to explore the influence of propaganda in relation to the prison situation. The fascinating thing about it all is that most prisoners were just innocent people who had been captured in battle fighting for their country. Yet, these thousands of imprisoned individuals ignited fiery manifestations of hatred towards former countrymen in the pages of six newspapers during the Civil War.



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