

WHAT THEY FOUGHT FOR 1861—1865

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ANCHOR BOOKS
A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC.
NEW YORK

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“THE WAR WILL NEVER END UNTIL WE
END SLAVERY”

In his Second Inaugural Address, on March 4, 1865, Abraham Lincoln stated a proposition to which most historians today as well as most Americans of Lincoln's time would assent: slavery before the war had been a “powerful interest. All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union, even by war.”¹

On this issue at least, the president and vice-president of the Confederacy concurred with Lincoln. In 1861 Jefferson Davis justified secession as an act of self-defense against the Black Republicans, whose purpose to exclude slavery from the territories would make “property in slaves so insecure as to be comparatively worthless . . . thereby annihilating in effect property worth thousands of millions of dollars.” And in his famous “cornerstone” speech of March 21, 1861, Alexander Stephens maintained that the Republican threat to slavery was “the immediate cause of the late rupture and the present revolution” of Confederate independence. The old confederation known as the United States, Stephens continued, had been founded on the false idea that all men are created equal. The new Confederacy, by contrast, “is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the

superior race, is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based on this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth."²

Some Confederate soldiers were equally plainspoken in their avowals of slavery as the cause for which they fought. On the eve of secession, a young lawyer in Shreveport looked forward to "a great cotton slave Republic—with a future the most auspicious that ever waited on earthly government." He lived to see the rise but not the fall of this republic, for he was killed at Gettysburg. A lieutenant in the 28th Mississippi told his wife in 1863 that "this country without slave labor would be completely worthless. . . . If the negroes are freed the country . . . is not worth fighting for. . . . We can only live & exist by that species of labor: and hence I am willing to continue to fight to the last."³ A captain in the 8th Alabama likewise vowed "to fight forever, rather than submit to freeing negroes among us. . . . [We are fighting for] rights and property bequeathed to us by our ancestors." And a Georgia officer, owner of forty slaves, reassured his wife, who in 1863 expressed doubts about the future of slavery, that if the Confederacy won the war "it is established for centuries."⁴

Several Confederate soldiers welcomed Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation for bringing the real issue into the open. The "Proclamation is worth three hundred thousand soldiers to our Government at least," wrote a Kentucky cavalry sergeant who rode with John Hunt Morgan. "It shows exactly what this war was brought about for and the intention of its damnable authors." And a Virginia captain, a small slaveholder in the Shenandoah Valley, believed that "after Lincoln's proclamation any man that would not fight to the last ought to be hung as high as Haman."⁵

Confederate prospects for victory appeared brightest during the months after the Emancipation Proclamation, partly

because this measure divided the northern people and intensified a morale crisis in Union armies. Slave prices in the South rose even faster than the rate of inflation during that springtime of Confederate confidence. A number of soldiers wrote home advising relatives to invest in slaves. The famous "boy colonel" of the Confederacy, the planter's son Henry Burgwyn, who became colonel of the 26th North Carolina at the age of twenty-one, urged his father in February, 1863, to put every cent he had into slaves. "I would buy boys & girls from 15 to 20 years old & take care to have a majority of girls," he wrote. "The increase in number of your negroes by this means would repay the difference in the amount of available labor. . . . I would not be surprised to see negroes in 6 mos. after peace worth from 2 to 3000 dollars." Gettysburg cut short his life before he could witness the collapse of his dreams.⁶

But Gettysburg did not discourage Colonel E. Porter Alexander, Longstreet's chief of artillery, who won fame in that battle for directing the barrage that preceded Pickett's charge. Three weeks after the battle, Porter advised his wife to buy a wet nurse for their twins, for "Carline & her baby wd. be a fine *speculation* at \$2000." Even as late as January, 1865, an officer from low-country South Carolina wrote to his fiancée that "now is the time for Uncle to buy some negro women and children on the principle that if we don't succeed the money won't be worth anything and if we do slaves will be worth a 1000 times more than now."⁷

But such candid discussions of slavery were the exception rather than the rule. Even in private letters, Confederate soldiers professed more often to fight *for* liberty and *against* slavery—that is, against their own enslavement to the North. "Sooner than submit to Northern Slavery, I prefer death," wrote a South Carolina captain to his wife in 1862, a phrase

repeated almost verbatim by many soldiers.⁸ They filled their letters and diaries with references to "the ruthless invader who is seeking to reduce us to abject slavery." "The Deep still quiet peace of the grave is more desirable than Vassalage or Slavery." We must "die as free men or live as slaves"; better far "to die rather than be slaves." Such remarks are rescued from bombast by knowledge that all four men who wrote them—two lieutenants, a sergeant, and a private—were killed in action.⁹

Those soldiers were using the word *slavery* in the same sense that Americans in 1776 had used it to describe their subordination to Britain. Confederates claimed to fight for the same liberty their forefathers had won in 1783. A letter home from a Confederate Missourian used the word *liberty* five times in two sentences, and a corporal in the 9th Alabama celebrated his twentieth birthday in 1862 by writing proudly in his diary that "I am engaged in the glorious cause of liberty and justice, fighting for the rights of man—fighting for all that we of the South hold dear."¹⁰

Referring to the American revolutionaries, Samuel Johnson had asked sarcastically in 1775: "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?"¹¹ The question had struck an exposed nerve. Many Americans in Thomas Jefferson's time felt acutely the paradox of fighting for liberty while holding other people in slavery. There was no shortage of Yankees in 1861 to point out the same paradox in Confederate professions. "The *perfect* liberty they sigh for," said Abraham Lincoln, is "the liberty of making slaves of other people."¹² But Confederate soldiers, unlike many of their forebears of 1776, seemed unconscious of the paradox. In the countless references to liberty, freedom, justice, equal rights, and the like in their letters and diaries, I have found but one reference to any sense of inconsistency between the ideas of fighting for liberty and for slavery. A low-country

South Carolina planter's son in Hampton's Legion considered all this talk about liberty and the rights of man "simple nonsense; I for one am fighting for the maintenance of no such absurdity. . . . We are appealing to chartered rights. . . . It is insulting to the English common sense of race [to say that we] are battling for an abstract right common to all humanity. Every reflecting child will glance at the darkey who waits on him & laugh at the idea of such an 'abstract right.'"¹³

Absurdity or not, most Confederate soldiers believed that they were fighting for liberty *and* slavery, one and inseparable. A young physician from Louisville who joined the 4th Kentucky Confederate Infantry wrote that "We are fighting for our liberty, against tyrants of the North . . . who are determined to destroy slavery." Another South Carolina planter with Hampton's Legion wrote to his wife in early 1862 that he was willing to give his life "battling for Liberty and independence." Several weeks later he wrote again in consternation that his faithful body servant had run away to the Yankees. "It is very singular," he lamented, "and I cant account for it." A Georgia planter wrote to his wife in 1863 of "the arch of liberty we are trying to build"—and a few sentences later told her to sell a troublesome slave.¹⁴ A planter's son who with two brothers fought in the 16th Mississippi wrote home in 1863 that he had been offered \$3,500 for his body servant but was holding out for \$4,000. When one of his brothers was killed at Cold Harbor, the soldier consoled their mother that "he died that we might live free men." In the spring of 1864 a South Carolina lieutenant who fought, as he put it, to defend "the land of liberty and freemen" told his mother that he intended to sell his no-account body servant, who then ran off before he could do so. Good riddance, said this soldier—"but [I] would rather had converted him into money."¹⁵

During the antebellum period many southerners had

avoided using the words *slaves* and *slavery*, preferring instead *servants* and *southern institutions*. Some Confederate soldiers kept up this practice even in private letters, referring to "our own social institutions," "the integrity of all our institutions," "the institutions of the whole South" as the cause for which they fought.¹⁶ In 1863 a young North Carolina officer stopped for a meal in the home of a Pennsylvania farmer during the Gettysburg campaign. He described the scene to his mother: "They live in real Yankee style wife & daughters & a help doing all the work. It makes me more than ever devoted to our own Southern institutions." A Georgia lieutenant in Longstreet's corps was a little more explicit. "Pennsylvania is the greatest country I ever saw in my life," he wrote his wife. "Molie if this state was a slave state and I was able to buy land here after the war you might count on living in Pennsylvania."¹⁷

Most of the soldiers quoted so far came from slaveholding families. They tended to emphasize the right of property in slaves as the basis of the liberty for which they fought. This motive, not surprisingly, was much less in evidence among nonslaveholding soldiers. But some of them emphasized a form of property they did own, one that was central to the liberty for which they fought. That property was their white skins, which put them on a plane of civil equality with slaveholders and far above those who did not possess that property. Herrenvolk democracy—the equality of all who belonged to the master race—was a powerful motivator for many Confederate soldiers.

Even though he was tired of the war, wrote a Louisiana soldier in 1862, "I never want to see the day when a negro is put on an equality with a white person. There is too many free niggers . . . now to suit me, let alone having four millions." A yeoman farmer from North Carolina facing the Yankees in Virginia vowed to "make them know that a white

man is better than a nigger."¹⁸ Similarly, a farmer from the Shenandoah Valley informed his fiancée that he fought to win "a free white man's government instead of living under a black republican government," and the son of another North Carolina dirt farmer said he would never stop fighting Yankees who were "trying to force us to live as the colored race." Many northern soldiers shared the bewilderment of a Wisconsin private who wrote home describing a conversation with Confederate prisoners captured in the Atlanta campaign: "Some of the boys asked them what they were fighting for, and they answered, 'You Yanks want us to marry our daughters to the niggers.'"¹⁹

Such sentiments were not confined to nonslaveholders. Many slaveholding soldiers also fought for white supremacy as well as for the rights of property. An Arkansas captain was enraged by the idea that if the Yankees won, his "sister, wife, and mother are to be given up to the embraces of their present 'dusky male servitors.'" After reading Lincoln's Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction in December, 1863, which stipulated southern acceptance of emancipation as a condition of peace, another Arkansas soldier, a planter, wrote his wife that Lincoln not only wanted to free the slaves but also "declares them entitled to all the rights and privileges as American citizens. So imagine your sweet little girls in the school room with a black wooly headed negro and have to treat them as their equal." Likewise, a Georgia lieutenant wrote to his wife from the trenches on the Chattahoochee that if Atlanta and Richmond fell, "we are irrevocably lost and not only will the negroes be free but . . . we will all be on a common level. . . . The negro who now waits on you will then be as free as you are & as insolent as she is ignorant."²⁰

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Confederate soldiers were constantly preoccupied with this matter. In fact, only 20 percent of my sample of 374 southern soldiers

explicitly voiced these proslavery convictions in their letters and diaries. Not surprisingly, the proportion of soldiers from slaveholding families expressing such a purpose was double that from nonslaveholding families—30 percent compared with 14 percent. Ironically, the proportion of Union soldiers who wrote about the slavery question was much greater, as we shall see. There is a ready explanation for this evident paradox. Emancipation was a salient issue for Union soldiers because it was controversial. Slavery was not salient for Confederate soldiers during most of the war because it was not controversial. They took slavery for granted as part of the southern way of life for which they fought, and did not feel compelled to discuss it. Although only 20 percent of the soldiers avowed explicit proslavery purposes in their letters and diaries, *none at all* dissented from that view.

None, that is, until the last months of the war. In the winter of 1863-1864 General Patrick Cleburne, a division commander in the Army of Tennessee, had proposed that the Confederate army should resolve its manpower shortage by freeing and arming slaves. This heretical suggestion had been squelched because, as one of Cleburne's fellow officers said, "its propositions contravene the principles on which we fight."²¹ But it did not stay squelched. By the following winter, discussions of the matter became widespread. In February, 1865, Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee threw their weight behind a measure to enroll slaves in the army—with the assumption, although not the explicit authorization, that they would be freed as a reward for such service. This was a desperate move, but these were desperate times. As a Mississippi newspaper put it: "Although slavery is one of the principles that we started to fight for . . . if it proves an insurmountable obstacle to the achievement of our liberty and nationality, away with it!"²²

After contentious debate, the Confederate Congress finally

passed the Negro soldier bill on March 13, 1865. The margin was three votes in the House and one in the Senate. This close split probably mirrored divisions among Confederate soldiers. By that time, however, so many soldiers had been killed or wounded or cut off from mail communication with their homes that the evidence of their real feelings is quite thin. For what it is worth, the opinions of a dozen soldiers divided more or less evenly between those who reluctantly supported the measure and those who angrily opposed it.

Soldiers in the former category shared the view of a Louisiana sergeant who wrote in January, 1865: "If we continue to lose ground as we have for the last 12 months, we will soon be defeated, and then slavery will be gone any way, and I think we should give up slavery and gain our independence." The son of a wealthy Georgia planter still believed that "the negro's happiest condition is in slavery," but between abolition by the Yankees and emancipation by Confederates he was willing to choose "the lesser of two evils." A Tennessee officer agreed that "slavery is lost or will be, & we had as well emancipate if we can make anything by it now. . . . We can certainly live without negroes better than with yankees and without negroes both."²³

But such opinions encountered stiff resistance from other soldiers. A South Carolina planter's son wrote from the Petersburg trenches that this "humiliating" measure would "throw away what we have toiled so hard to maintain." A Missouri captain reported that his men believed it contrary to "what they have fought for the last four years." A sergeant in the 17th North Carolina who had served through the whole war wrote in February, 1865, that many men in his company were deserting because of the Negro soldier bill, and he was thinking of doing so himself. "Mother," he said, "I did not volunteer my services to fight for a free negroes country but to fight for A free white mans free country & I

do not think I love my country well enough to fight with black soldiers."²⁴ The questions of whether black men would fight for the Confederacy and whether white soldiers would accept them became moot; before the experiment could be tried, the war was over.

A year before Lee surrendered at Appomattox, a southern private noted in his diary that Confederate victory was certain because "we are fighting for our property and homes; they, for the flimsy and abstract idea that a negro is equal to an Anglo American."²⁵ He was wrong. Few Union soldiers professed to fight for racial equality. And while the abolition of slavery was one of the two great results of the Civil War—the other being preservation of one nation indivisible—not many Union soldiers claimed to fight *primarily* for that purpose.

Four decades ago Bell Wiley wrote that scarcely one in ten Union soldiers "had any real interest in emancipation *per se*."²⁶ If by "*per se*" Wiley meant "in and of itself alone," one in ten may even be an exaggeration. Rare indeed were two soldiers, one from Wisconsin and the other from Maine, whose letters home contained such sentiments as: "I have no heart in this war if the slaves cannot go free. . . . [Our cause is] nobler even than the Revolution for they fought for their own freedom, while we fight for that of another race. . . . If the doom of slavery is not sealed by the war I shall curse the day I entered the Army or lifted a finger in the preservation of the Union."²⁷

But if "emancipation *per se*" meant a perception that the abolition of slavery was inseparably linked to the goal of preserving the Union, then almost three in ten Union soldiers took this position during the first year and a half of the war, and many more were eventually converted to it. In November, 1861, a Massachusetts officer and Harvard graduate

declared that "slavery has brought death into our own households already in its wicked revolt against the government. . . . There is but one way, and that is emancipation; either that or we must succumb and divide." A stonemason who served as a private in another Massachusetts regiment considered "the object of our government as one worth dying to attain—the maintenance of our free institutions which must of *necessity* result in the freedom of every human being over whom the stars and stripes wave." Or as a twenty-year-old farm boy in the 1st Minnesota Infantry put it more succinctly in December, 1861: "The war will never end until we end slavery."²⁸

But this was far from a universal opinion among Union soldiers. At times during the first two years of the war, for every soldier who held this opinion another expressed the opposite conviction: that emancipation was an unconstitutional and illegitimate war aim. Whereas a tacit consensus united Confederate soldiers in support of "southern institutions," including slavery, a bitter and explicit disagreement about emancipation divided northern soldiers. For six months during the winter and spring of 1862-1863, this question seriously sapped Union army morale. But unlike Confederate opinion on slavery, which remained relatively constant until the final months of the war, Union opinion was in a state of flux. It moved by fits and starts toward an eventual majority in favor of abolishing slavery as the only way to win the war and preserve the Union.

During the war's first year, the slavery issue seldom came up in the letters of most northern soldiers, for at this time the official war aim was only restoration of the Union. Nevertheless, during that year some soldiers predicted that the war must also become a fight to abolish slavery. A young schoolteacher who enlisted in the 5th Wisconsin declared in August, 1861, that "I have been talking all my life for the cause of liberty but now the time is nigh at hand when I shall have a

chance to aid by deed this cause." A farmer's son from Connecticut dropped out of Yale after his sophomore year in 1861 and enlisted in a cavalry regiment, as he explained to his mother, to fight "for Liberty, for the slave and the white man alike. . . . I have turned out to be a right out and out Abolitionist. The guaranties of the Constitution to Slavery, I claim, have been, one and all forfeited by the rebel slave owners." In July, 1861, a Union naval officer asserted that there would never "be peace between the two sections until slavery is so completely scotched [that] . . . we can see plainly in the future free labour to the gulph. . . . I think myself the Southerners are fighting against fate or human progress."²⁹ What is remarkable about this last quotation is that it came not from a Yankee fanatic but from Percival Drayton, a native of South Carolina and scion of a prominent planter family, whose brother Thomas Drayton became a Confederate general.

Experience in the South reinforced the convictions of most antislavery soldiers. After talking with a slave woman in Virginia who described the brutal whipping of her husband in a matter-of-fact way, a private in the crack 83d Pennsylvania wrote in January, 1862: "I thought I hated slavery as much as possible before I came here, but here, where I can see some of its workings, I am more than ever convinced of the cruelty and inhumanity of the system." More typical than such humanitarian concerns, however, was a contempt for southern ignorance and backwardness, which many Yankee soldiers attributed to slavery. An Ohio farmer's son who marched through Tennessee remarked on "how far behind the North they are in improvements of every kind. . . . The institution of slavery is as much a curse to the whites as the blacks and kills industry and improvements of every kind. Slavery has deadened all enterprise and prosperity. School houses are a rare sight."³⁰

As northern armies penetrated into the South they became agents of emancipation by their mere presence. Slaves flocked to Union camps everywhere. Attempts by their masters to reclaim these fugitives turned soldiers previously indifferent toward slavery into practical abolitionists. Many letters tell of soldiers hiding fugitives in camp and laughing at the impotent rage of owners who went home empty-handed. Officers sometimes winked at this activity despite orders to the contrary. From Tennessee a Wisconsin soldier wrote home in March, 1862, that "whe have got lots of contraband negroes in our regt now and there is no less than two negro hunters in camp every day hunting for negroes Our colonel tells them if they can get them out of the lines they can have them but that is the trouble a negro hunter finds himself in a hot bed when he gets into the Regt they [throw] them out in a hurry."³¹

The attitudes of a good many soldiers on this matter were more pragmatic than altruistic. "I don't care a damn for the darkies," wrote an Illinois lieutenant, but "I couldn't help to send a runaway nigger back. I'm blamed if I could. I honestly believe that this army has taken 500 niggers away with them." In fact, "I have 11 negroes in my company now. They do every particle of the dirty work. Two women among them do the washing for the company." Another Illinois soldier, an infantry sergeant, wrote from Corinth, Mississippi, in 1862 that "every regt has nigger teamsters and cooks which puts that many more men back in the ranks. . . . It will make a difference in the regt of not less than 75 men that will carry guns that did not before we got niggers."³²

By the summer of 1862, antislavery principle and pragmatism fused into a growing commitment to emancipation as both a means and an end of Union victory. This development represented a significant hardening of northern attitudes toward "traitors," whose rights of property—especially

property in slaves—were entitled to little respect. “We have been . . . playing with *Traitors* long enough” was a typical phrase in soldiers’ letters. “This thing of guarding rebels property has about ‘played out.’ . . . We have guarded their homes and property long enough, now is the time for action. . . . The only way to put down this rebellion is to hurt the instigators and abettors of it. Slavery must be cleaned out. . . . The time has come to march through this nest of vipers with fire and sword, to liberate every slave.”³³

Officials in Washington came to the same conclusion. In July, 1862, Congress passed the second confiscation act and Lincoln made his momentous decision to issue an emancipation proclamation. It would not become public for two months, but meanwhile the work of practical emancipation went on. “That bill to confiscate the rebel property is just what we want,” wrote a Rhode Island sergeant. “If a rebels property gits eney favers from eney of our Soldiers you can call me a poore judge.” The colonel of the 5th Minnesota wrote from northern Alabama in September, 1862, that “I am doing quite a business in the confiscation of slave property. . . . It certainly makes the rebels wince to see their ‘niggers’ taken off which is a source of private satisfaction to me. . . . Crippling the institution of slavery is . . . striking a blow at the heart of the rebellion.”³⁴

But a good many Union soldiers disagreed. A backlash of antiemancipation sentiment began to surface in the letters of a number of them in 1862. This sentiment brewed up from a mixture of racism, conservatism, and partisan politics. The experiences and observations in the South that made some soldiers more antislavery made others more antiblack. “No one who has ever seen the nigger in all his glory on the southern plantations will ever vote for emancipation,” wrote an Indiana private. “If emancipation is to be the policy of this

war . . . I do not care how quick the country goes to pot.” An abolitionist clergyman’s son in the 12th Maine wrote home from Louisiana in the summer of 1862 that “I do not want to hear any more about negroes when I get home. . . . I have got sick and tired of them . . . and I shall hereafter let abolition alone. . . . They are a set of thieves . . . and the boys here hate them worse than they do secesh.” An artillery major from New York, a Democrat like so many officers in the Army of the Potomac under McClellan, wrote that if Lincoln caved in to “these ‘black Republicans’” and made it “an abolition war[,] . . . I for one shall be sorry that I ever lent a hand to it. . . . This war [must be] for the preservation of the Union, the putting down of armed rebellion, and for that purpose only.”³⁵

This major spoke for a substantial number of Union soldiers. After all, at least two-fifths of them were Democrats and another tenth came from border states. Their resistance to any notion of turning the war for Union into a war against slavery was one reason for Lincoln’s hesitancy to do just that. The cause of Union united northern soldiers; the cause of emancipation divided them. Letters and diaries mention vigorous campfire arguments about slavery. A Massachusetts sergeant made the following entry in his diary for February 4, 1863: “Had a jaw on slavery in the evening, & Jim did n’t agree with the rest of us, & so he got mad.” At about the same time an Indiana corporal wrote in his diary: “At night got into an argument, with a man that believed Slavery is right.—Had a warm time.” A New York lieutenant wrote to his sister in January, 1863, that in his officers’ mess “we have had several pretty spirited, I may call them *hot*, controversies about slavery, the Emancipation Edict and kindred subjects.”³⁶

It was no accident that these heated discussions took place

during the winter of 1862-1863. The Emancipation Proclamation provoked a new level of consciousness about the relationship of slavery to the war. Soldiers who had advocated an antislavery war from the beginning naturally welcomed the proclamation. As a captain in the 46th Pennsylvania put it, Lincoln's action made the war no longer merely a contest "between North & South; but a contest between human rights and human liberty on one side and eternal bondage on the other." A Minnesota corporal wrote approvingly to his wife: "Abraham 'has gone and done it' at last. Yesterday will be a day hallowed in the hearts of millions of the people of these United States, & also by the friends of liberty and humanity the *world* over."³⁷ In a letter to his fiancée an Illinois cavalry sergeant quoted with admiration the peroration of Lincoln's message to Congress in December, 1862: "In *giving* freedom to the *slave*, we *assure* freedom to the free." Several soldiers rang changes on the theme expressed by a New York private: "Thank God . . . the contest is now between Slavery & freedom, & every honest man knows what he is fighting for."³⁸

These were the idealists. The pragmatists weighed in with equally forceful, if less elegant, expressions. "I am no abolitionist," wrote an enlisted man in the 55th Ohio, "in fact despise the word," but "as long as slavery exists . . . there will be no permanent peace for America. . . . Hence I am in favor of killing slavery." An Indiana sergeant told his wife that while he had no use for free blacks, he approved the Emancipation Proclamation "if it will only bring the war to an end any sooner I am like the fellow that got his house burned by the guerrillas he was in for emancipation subjugation extermination and hell and damnation. We are in war and anything to beat the South."³⁹ As for those who howl that we are now "fighting for the nigger," rather than for Union, wrote a forty-year-old Ohio private to his wife, "if they are such fools

as not to be able to see the difference between the means employed, and the end in view, let them remain blind."⁴⁰

But plenty of soldiers believed that the proclamation *had* changed the purpose of the war. They professed to feel betrayed. They were willing to risk their lives for Union, they said, but not for black freedom. The proclamation intensified a morale crisis in Union armies during the winter of 1862-1863, especially in the Army of the Potomac. The removal of McClellan from command, the disaster at Fredericksburg, and the fiasco of the Mud March had caused morale in that army to plunge to an all-time low. Things were little better in Grant's army on the Mississippi, where the first attempts against Vicksburg had come to grief.

Desertion rates in both armies rose alarmingly. Many soldiers blamed the Emancipation Proclamation. The "men are much dissatisfied" with it, reported a New York captain, "and say that it has turned into a 'nigger war' and all are anxious to return to their homes for it was to preserve the Union that they volunteered." Enlisted men confirmed this observation with a blizzard of bitter comments in letters home. "I am the Boy that Can fight for my Country," wrote an Illinois private, "but not for the Negros."⁴¹ A private in the 66th Indiana wrote from Mississippi in February, 1863, that he and his messmates "will not fite to free the niger . . . there is a Regiment her that say they will never fite untill the proclamation is with drawn there is four of the Capt[ains] in our Regt sent in there Resignations and one of the Liutenants there was nine in Comp. G tride to desert." At the end of 1862 another Illinois soldier with a wife and children reflected on the "cost of freeing the Black Devils. No less than 300,000 of our own free white citizens have already been sacrificed to free the small mite that have got their freedom. . . . I consider the life & Happiness of my family of more value than any Nigger."⁴²

How widespread were such attitudes? How dangerous were they to the morale and cohesion of Union armies? The answers are difficult to quantify precisely. For a time during the winter of 1862-1863, antiemancipation expressions seemed to outnumber those on the other side. And morale certainly declined—although defeatism and lack of faith in Union leaders may have had more to do with this than the Emancipation Proclamation. In any case, the decline of morale proved short-lived, for the Union armies did not fall apart and soon won some of their most decisive victories of the war. And of the soldiers in my sample who expressed a clear opinion about emancipation as a war aim at any time through the spring of 1863, two and one-half times as many favored it as opposed it: 36 percent to 14 percent. If we apportion those who did not comment on the subject evenly between the two sides, the picture would conform with the results of a poll in March, 1863, in the 15th Iowa, a fairly typical regiment. Half of the men endorsed the Emancipation Proclamation, a quarter opposed it, and the other quarter did not register an opinion.⁴³

These figures undoubtedly understate antiemancipation sentiment, for the regiment's colonel was a strong supporter of the proclamation and the poll was an open one. The two-and-one-half-to-one majority for emancipation in my sample also probably overstates the margin in the army as a whole, because proemancipation sentiment was strongest among those groups overrepresented in the sample—officers, and men from professional and white-collar occupations—and underrepresents the less educated soldiers from blue-collar and immigrant backgrounds among whom antiblack and antiemancipation attitudes were strongest.

Nevertheless, the evidence indicates that proemancipation convictions did predominate among the leaders and fighting soldiers of the Union army. And that prevalence increased

after the low point of early 1863 as a good many antiemancipation soldiers changed their minds. Two factors played a part in their conversion. The first was a dangerous rise of copperheadism on the home front during the first half of 1863. Peace Democrats zeroed in on the Emancipation Proclamation in their denunciations of Lincoln's unconstitutional war and their demands for a negotiated peace. This produced an anticopperhead backlash among Union soldiers, including many Democrats, that catapulted some of them clear into the Lincoln camp on emancipation. This pilgrimage can be traced in the letters of two Ohio soldiers, one a nineteen-year-old private and the other a thirty-four-year-old colonel.

For three months after the Emancipation Proclamation, Private Chauncey Welton of the 103d Ohio damned it up and down and backward and forward in letters to his family, staunch Democrats all. "I enlisted to fight for and vindicate the supremacy of the constitution," he wrote, but "we did not enlist to fight for the negro and I can tell you that *we never shall . . . sacrafise [our] lives for the liberty of a miserable black race of beings.*" But then he began to change his tune, especially after Clement L. Vallandigham was nominated for governor of Ohio on an antiwar platform, which "fell like a thunderbolt on this regiment," reported Welton. By June, 1863, he had become converted to the idea that abolition of slavery was "a means of haistening the speedy Restoration of the union and the termination of the war." This letter fell like a thunderbolt on his father, who regarded it as heresy. But young Welton became a Republican, and by early 1865 he sounded just like an abolitionist when he wrote in joyful anticipation of a restored nation "*free free free yes free from that blighting curs Slavery the cause of four years of Bloody Warfare.*"⁴⁴

As colonel of the 67th Ohio, Marcus Spiegel was the highest-ranking officer of the Jewish faith in the Civil War.

As a Democrat he denounced the Emancipation Proclamation, writing to his wife in January, 1863: "I am sick of the war. . . . I do not fight or want to fight for Lincoln's Negro proclamation one day longer." But when his men began to say the same thing, repeating what they had heard from home or read in Democratic newspapers, Spiegel grew alarmed. "Stand by the government right or wrong," he told his regiment. By April, 1863, he had repudiated the Democratic party; by January, 1864, a few months before he was killed in the Red River campaign, he wrote his wife from Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana, that "since I [came] here I have learned and seen more of what the horrors of Slavery was than I ever knew before. . . . I am [in] favor of doing away with the . . . accursed institution. . . . I am [now] a strong abolitionist."⁴⁵

The second factor that converted many soldiers to support of emancipation was a growing conviction that it really did hurt the enemy and help their own side. In this respect the contribution of black soldiers—whose enlistment was a corollary of the emancipation policy—did much to change the minds of previously hostile white soldiers. A junior officer in the 86th Indiana reported in March, 1863, that men who two months earlier had damned the "*abolition war*" and threatened to desert now favored both emancipation and black soldiers. "We use all other kinds of rebel property," he wrote, "and they see no reason why we should not use negroes. Every negro we get strengthens us and weakens the rebels. The soldiers now say if there can be negroes enough raised to conquer the rebels let them do it." An antebellum Douglas Democrat from Illinois wrote his wife in 1863 that his regiment had confiscated horses and liberated hundreds of slaves in middle Tennessee. "Now what do you think of your husband degenerating from a conservative young Democrat to a horse stealer and 'nigger thief'?" he asked her playfully.

"So long as [my] flag is confronted by the hostile guns of slavery . . . I am as confirmed an abolitionist as ever was pelted with stale eggs."⁴⁶

Not all antiabolitionist soldiers experienced such a conversion. An Indiana private decided against reenlisting for another three-year hitch because the war had become a crusade "to Free the Nigars . . . and I do not propose to fight any more in such a cause." A private in the 6th Kentucky complained in the spring of 1864 that "this is nothing but an abolition war. . . . I am a strait out Union and Constitution man I am not for freeing the negroes." His brother in the same regiment agreed and added a wish that "old abe lincoln . . . had to sleep with a negro evry night as long as he lives and kiss ones ass twice a day."⁴⁷

But this was a distinctly minority view among Union soldiers by 1864. When Lincoln ran for reelection that year on a platform pledging a constitutional amendment to abolish slavery, he received nearly 80 percent of the soldier vote—a pretty fair indication of army sentiment on slavery by that time. "It is astonishing how things has changed in reference to freeing the Negros," wrote a soldier from Lincoln's state, a farmer by trade. "It allwais has been plane to me that this rase must be freed befor god would recognise us . . . we bost of liberty and we Should not be Selfish in it as god gives us liberty we Should try to impart it to others. . . . thank god the chanes will Soon be bursted . . . now I belive we are on gods side . . . now I can fight with a good heart." A Michigan sergeant in his forties, also a farmer, wrote his wife from Georgia in the spring of 1864 that "the more I learn of the cursed institution of Slavery, the more I feel willing to endure, for its final destruction. . . . After this war is over, this whole country will undergo a change for the better . . . abolishing slavery will dignify labor; that fact of itself will revolutionize everything."⁴⁸ He never experienced disappointment with

this vision of the future; an enemy sharpshooter ended his life near Atlanta in August, 1864.

Had the Michigan sergeant lived to witness the North's retreat from Reconstruction in the 1870s and the South's disfranchisement and formalized segregation of blacks in the 1890s, he might have wondered whether the abolition of slavery had revolutionized everything after all. By the 1890s the road to reunion between men who wore the blue and gray had paved over the issues of slavery and equal rights for freed slaves. Middle-aged veterans in the Grand Army of the Republic and the United Confederate Veterans held joint encampments at which they reminisced about the glorious deeds of their youth. Many of them reached a tacit consensus, which some voiced openly: Confederate soldiers had not fought for slavery; Union soldiers had not fought for its abolition. It had been a tragic war of brothers whose issues were best forgotten in the interests of family reconciliation. In the popular romanticization of the Civil War, the issue of slavery became almost as invisible as black Union veterans at a reunion encampment. Somehow the Civil War became a heroic contest, a sort of grand, if deadly, football game without ideological cause or purpose.

Some veterans, however, dissented from the tendency to blur the issues of the war, especially slavery. Their most eloquent spokesman was Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. Twenty years after he had described the Union cause as "the Christian crusade of the 19th century," Holmes declared in a Memorial Day address to other veterans in 1884 that "in our youth our hearts were touched with fire. It was given to us to learn at the outset that life is a profound and passionate thing."⁴⁹ Like Holmes, many Civil War soldiers felt a profound and passionate commitment to the ideological pur-

poses for which they fought. If some of them later forgot this, there is no better way to recover what motivated them from 1861 to 1865 than to read their letters and diaries written in the immediacy of experience. Only then can we truly understand what they fought for.

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