The Words of the Soldier: Civil War Letters and Memoirs of Common Soldiers and the Meaning of the Civil War

History 130

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The United States in 1861 was filled with Americans who prided themselves in their not so distant ancestors who freed the country from British reign. Resultantly, Americans from both the North and South had a deep rooted sense of patriotism. In the American Civil War, the common soldiers of both sides used this sense of patriotism as the foundation for their personal interpretation of the Civil War’s meaning. To soldiers from the North, the Civil War meant the preservation of the Union. To the soldiers from the South, the Civil War meant independence from a tyrannical government in defense of their way of life. Despite these motivations to enlist at the beginning of the war, many soldiers endured a temporary loss of the war’s meaning as the drudgery and gruesomeness of the conflict escalated and the level of supplies and meaningful work declined.

Patriotism ran deep in many Northerners as they contemplated enlisting in the Union Army. Ultimately feeling the need to defend and preserve the Union, soldiers like Joseph Perkins, a medical student at the University of Vermont, signed with local units forming in their townships and counties. Upon learning of the attack on Fort Sumter, Perkins decided to enlist. While describing his decision to his brother in a letter from April of 1861, Perkins stated “When this great national crisis came…I felt I must go to my country’s rescue…My life is at my country’s disposal and if possible should be given ten thousand times ere I’d be ruled by tyrants and much less traitors.” ¹ Perkins’s willingness to give his life demonstrates that Union soldiers saw the preservation of the Union as more important than their own lives.

The willingness of soldiers to lay down their lives in preservation of the Union was not conceived only of the mind of individual soldiers. It was common at the outbreak of the war that the Northern soldier’s desire to preserve the Union was influenced by his home community. In a letter from April of 1861 to her brother who had enlisted in the 1st Vermont, Ann Stevens commented how the men of their town of Morrisville enlisted with one another and “calmly and considerately [gave] themselves for their country,” demonstrating the courage men found in going to fight for the sake of the Union with their comrades. Stevens continued to mention how the wife of one of the townsmen said “she will give her husband up for the country,” showing how the family back home had influence upon enlistments as they too saw that the war meant the preservation of the Union.  

Upon encountering a series of victories that neared the end of the war, Union patriotism was high, and in February of 1865, President Lincoln attended the Hampton Roads Conference. There he stated that only unconditional surrender and an end to slavery would be accepted. Hearing this, the true meaning of the war once again rose to the forefront in the mind of many soldiers. In one particular case, a private in the 1st New York Artillery stated that the deaths of his comrades were not in vain because “we shall come forth from the fire of trial and have proven to the world that the American people can and will govern themselves and that our country is indeed the land of the free and the home of the brave.”

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words, Northern soldiers saw the sacrifices they had made come to fruition in the actions of Mr. Lincoln, thus showing that to Union soldiers, the war was fought to save the Union.

Despite the fact that soldiers wished to return home, many had resolve to fight the war until its end as was the case of Union soldier, Charles Morey. Originally one of the 75,000 troops called upon by Lincoln in 1861, Morey was present at the siege of Petersburg until he was killed on April 2, 1865. Merely three days before his death, Morey wrote in a letter to his mother, “We hope and pray that we may be able to strike the death blow to the rebellion before many days but perhaps we may fail yet we hope for the best and will work hard for it and trust in God for the accomplishment of the remainder, now is the time that we need divine assistance pray for us that we may accomplish all.”4 Clearly by these words, Morey demonstrated that by faith in God, Union soldiers had been able to combat the hardships of soldiering and retain the desire to save the Union through the end of the Civil War.

Southern soldiers also felt a call to defend their homeland at the outbreak of the war. Their way of life was at stake. Even if they did not own slaves, white men did not want to see their social status fall below or equal to that of blacks. With the war looming in the distance, the patriotism of southern men swelled. In an 1879 article reminiscing the war in the Hawkinsville Dispatch, David Fleming described the men of Pulaski County, Georgia saying “So eager were the patriotic citizens to unite with this first company that the ranks were soon filled and many

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had to be denied admission,” demonstrating the Southern man’s willingness to go to war for the
defense of his home and social status.⁵

Confederate soldiers viewed themselves as patriots equivalent to the Americans of the
Revolutionary era. They believed the North to be oppressive of the South, just as the British
were of the American colonists. Consequently, Southern soldiers saw their enlistments as steps
towards breaking the bond of tyranny placed upon them. After being captured at Gettysburg, a
corporal from Alabama said that he and his fellow soldiers fought for “the same principles which
fired the hearts of our ancestors in the revolutionary struggle,” demonstrating the importance of
Revolutionary values in the sense of patriotism carried by Southern soldiers in their fight to free
Dixie.⁶ In language reminiscent of Patrick Henry’s “Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death” speech,
one Georgian soldier said in a letter to his wife in 1864 that “if I fall Let me fall for I will fall in a
good cose for if I can not git Liberty I prefer death.”⁷ Clearly, this war meant more than
protecting a way of life. It was a stand in defiance of Northern tyranny.

Southerner soldiers believed that their cause for war was justified in the eyes of God;
however, they also believed that by allowing the war to endure as long as it had, God was
punishing them for their sins. In a letter to his father written in April of 1864, George Phifer

⁵ Fleming, David. "Historical Sketch of Company G, 8th Georgia, CSA." Hawkinsville
Dispatch, July 10, 1879, quoted in Steven E. Woodworth, Cultures in Conflict The American
Civil War (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2000), 56.

⁶ “Edmund DeWitt Patterson in journal entry, July 4, 1863,” in Yankee Rebel: The Civil
War Journal of Edmund DeWitt Patterson, ed. John G. Barrett (Chapel Hill, 1966), 119n, quoted
in James M. McPherson, What They Fought For, 1861-1865 (New York: Anchor Books, 1996),
10, 72n.

⁷ “S.J. McLeroy to his wife, July 3, 1864,” in John Cumming Papers, quoted in James M.
Erwin, a soldier in the 60th North Carolina Regiment, reflected this sentiment precisely, saying that “Should a kind Providence favor us a little further as has been the case in the opening of the Spring, we may look hopefully forward and see Peace not far distant. But if it is necessary. That our beloved South should be still more severely chastised, we can only bow the head and receive inflictingly and with awe, the merited punishment of our shortcomings.”

This Southern faith in Providence during the war provided Southern soldiers confidence in their decision to combat the North in a war meant to protect the Southern way of life.

Common to soldiers on both sides of the war was the loss of hope in and focus on the original meaning of the war. This loss is embodied in the lack of enthusiasm due to laborious assignments, poor food, political distractions, and infrequent combat. In some cases, these characteristics of the war changed the meaning of the war for soldiers, causing them to decide not to reenlist at the end of their enlistments.

For some Union soldiers, adverse living conditions and lackluster labor assignments were enough to diminish the meaning of the war that they once possessed. Living on board a ship during a transit from Fort Monroe to Hatteras Inlet, George Tillotson, a sergeant in the 89th New York Infantry complained in February of 1862 saying “the soldiers have had some work throwing out ballast (sand) which took some three days and nights with about 70 men working at a time…Myself with lots of others were taken with seasickness.” Noting the lack of inspiration in the soldiers around him, Tillotson also says that “I don’t think that if these soldiers were discharged that one in a hundred could be got to enlist again.”

This hopelessness marked by

8 “George Phifer Erwin to his father, April 29, 1864,” in Steven E. Woodworth, Cultures in Conflict: The American Civil War (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2000), 164.

Tillotson’s words clearly shows that the call to preserve the Union found in soldiers at the time of their enlistment in April of 1861 temporarily diminished. Enduring the drudgery of the war for nearly a year, Tillotson later proclaimed in a letter written in October of 1862 to his wife in New York, “I don’t feel as patriotic as I did.” Not only did he lose his sense of patriotism, he lost sight of the original motivation for his enlistment, saying that he would “rather see the Union divide than have the war last the remainder of my term.”

This severe loss of hope in future Union success in the war marked by Tillotson’s words demonstrates that some Union soldiers truly lost efficacy in their ability to save the Union.

Facing a series of victories in 1862, Union morale was on the rise. This rise was soon hindered by President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. With its enactment, the Emancipation Proclamation altered the meaning of the war for many Northern soldiers to an abolitionists’ war. By no means were Northerners proponents of abolition. In many cases, they were blatantly racist. In a letter written in May of 1864 to his aunt, Union soldier George M. Turner demonstrated Northern racism when describing a black soldier as “a dirty black nigger.”

Originally enlisting to preserve the Union, many soldiers were outraged that the liberation of the enslaved was now a goal of the war. This sentiment is embodied in a letter written in 1863 by John Harpin Riggs, a soldier in the Connecticut Volunteers on January 2, to


his father the day after the Emancipation Proclamation took effect. In his letter, Riggs stated that “I do not want to fight any longer when I enlisted I came to defend the flag and to keep the union as it was but they have turned this war into a niger war and I want to get out now as soon as posable.”\(^\text{12}\) The war’s new meaning clearly damaged morale for Union soldiers like Riggs who consequently saw their enlistments as a means of freeing the enslaved rather than a means of preserving the Union.

Not only in the Union did soldiers lose sight of the original intent of their enlistments, but so did soldiers of the Confederacy, especially during times of no combat. In a letter written in February of 1862 to the sister of his dead fiancée, Confederate Corporal Charles Hutson claimed that “Office-seeking even in the Army has become the order of the day and patriotism has been quietly put away for afterthought.”\(^\text{13}\) By redirecting their efforts away from the war during lulls in the fighting to gain influence in the Army, Confederate soldiers lost focus on freeing their country from what they considered an aggressive North. The true meaning of this war to the Confederates was temporarily lost to the politics of the military. However, advancement in the Army was not the only distraction that caused the South’s soldiers to momentarily lose their goal of independence.


Soldiers in Confederate Army suffered of a lack of food that reduced Southern morale and contributed toward a temporary loss of the war’s meaning. In describing his hunger to his sister in June of 1862, Edward Ward, a private in the Confederate Army who later rose to the rank of an officer, wrote “I often wish I was a negro with a good master. We keep nearly starved.”\footnote{“Edward Ward to Elmira Ward, June 14, 1862,” in Robert E. Bonner, \textit{The Soldier’s Pen} (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 59, 244n.} Hopelessness in the Southern cause is evident in these words by placing the quality of life of the Confederate soldier below that of the enslaved, the epitome of worthlessness and disgrace. Considering his life to be of less quality than the enslaved, the Confederate soldier lost his focus on freeing Dixie from the North. However, there exists duality in these words. Because this soldier claimed that an enslaved person with a good master was well fed and cared for, the Southern belief that slavery genuinely benefitted the enslaved is wholly exemplified. Therefore, as slavery was benevolent toward the enslaved, it was worth the lives of Southern white men to defend it as the cornerstone of their lifestyle.

Despite the dynamic in the war’s meaning that soldiers of both army’s endured, their initial intentions to preserve the Union as in the case of the North or to be freed from tyranny as in the case of the South prevailed. As demonstrated in their words, common soldiers of both sides were able to see past the adverse living conditions and political distractions of the war and continue fighting until its end in April of 1865. These two very different meanings of the war embraced by the common soldiers of the respective armies contributed to the legacy of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Grasping on to the anti-tyrannical meaning of the war that caused them to enlist and unwilling to allow the liberation of the enslaved disrupt the Southern lifestyle, ex-Confederate soldiers would contribute to acts of violence, inhibition of voting, and enforcement...
of discriminative regulations against the ex-slaves that crippled Reconstruction and influenced the mockery of freedom blacks would suffer for the next century.
Bibliography


“George Phifer Erwin to his father, April 29, 1864,” in Steven E. Woodworth, Cultures in Conflict The American Civil War (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2000), 164.


