Beecher Lectures 2005: Preaching Morality in America's Civil War

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Dedicated to Harry Baker Adams

Lecture Two: Proportionality: The Soldier's Civil War

In this lecture we move from providential jeremiads and presumptions that God is on our side, to the bloody effects of these words in increasingly disproportionate massive destruction. Yesterday I said that numbers count. Today I note that words count. And nowhere do they count more than in the Civil War as tens of thousands and then hundreds of thousands of soldiers heard the call and contemplated the total annihilation of the enemy. In facing the reality of an implacable foe and unprecedented destruction Lincoln recognized by 1862 that he would require what he termed a "lever" to move public opinion in acceptance of the looming destruction. That lever would be the Emancipation Proclamation announced following the battle of Antietam in September 1862, and scheduled to take effect January 1, 1863.

Besides being an ardent abolitionist himself, Lincoln saw in emancipation the grounds for escalation, but only as a "war measure," that applied only to slave states in rebellion. Far from being the "Great Emancipator," Lincoln made plain that his proclamation did not extend to the loyal "border states" of Maryland, Kentucky, Delaware, and Missouri. They would be free to keep possession of their slaves. As well,

any slaves in a rebellious state that returned to the Union before 1863 would remain slaves. In reflecting on those dark days of 1862, Lincoln later explained: "Things had gone on from bad to worse, until I felt that we had reached the end of our rope on the plan of operations we had been pursuing [i.e. a limited war]…that we had about played our last card, and must change our tactics, or lose the game!"[1] By Lincoln's calculation, the killing must continue on ever-grander scales. But for that to succeed the people must be persuaded to shed the blood without reservations. This, in turn, required a moral certitude that the killing was just. Only emancipation—Lincoln's "last card"—would provide such certitude.[2] In so doing he counted on a rising tide of anti-slavery sentiment in the North, an even greater tide of hatred for the "enemy," and a mounting desire to hurt the South where they would feel it most. In moral terms, Lincoln repeatedly made it quite clear that he did not need emancipation to fight a just defensive war.[3] But in practical terms, emancipation was necessary as a war means to total war. The causal direction here is critical and opposite of American memory: it would be emancipation as

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[1] Quoted in David Herbert Donald, Lincoln, 364. Donald goes on to demonstrate how Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was motivated at least in part to "undercut the congressional initiative for emancipation by acting first." (365)

[2] The literature on slavery and emancipation during the Civil War is immense. For primary sources, the best compilation is the ongoing series of edited documents from the National Archives: Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, edited by Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Steven F. Miller, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland. Major secondary works include: John Hope Franklin, The Emancipation Proclamation (New York, 1963); Leon Litwack, Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery (New York, 1979); James M. McPherson, The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction (Princeton, 1964); William K. Klingaman, Abraham Lincoln and the Road to Emancipation, 1861-1865 (New York, 2001); and, most recently, Allen C. Guelzo, Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America (New York, 2004).

[3] This point is made in Herman Belz, Emancipation and Equal Rights (New York, 1978), 30-31: "A closer look at Republican Unionism will show…that it contained a moral dimension identical to that which historians have more readily discerned in the emancipation policy. Instead of a two-stage progression of war aims from nationalistic reason-of-state to antislavery moral principle, there was in Republican war policy a continuous concern for both expediency and moral idealism in the defense of the Union and in the adoption of an emancipation policy."

a means toward total war and unconditional surrender, not total war as a means towards emancipation and total abolition.

It is important also to remember that Lincoln's proclamation did not include slaves in the loyal border states. Furthermore, his hatred of slavery did not translate into the higher moral imperative of hatred of racism, though all abolitionists recognized it was a necessary starting point. Frederick Douglass recognized this tragic limitation even as he praised emancipation. As long as the Union was the nation's ultimate priority and not abolition and racial equality, racism would endure:

> The law and the sword cannot abolish the malignant slaveholding sentiment which has kept the slave system alive in this country during two centuries. Pride of race, prejudice against color, will raise their hateful clamor for oppression of the negro as heretofore. The slave having ceased to be the abject slave of a single master, his enemies will endeavor to make him the slave of society at large.[4]

Douglass saw the future.[5]

Essentially, Lincoln gambled that if the " right" of emancipation could be shouted loud enough, then few would raise hard questions about the conduct of the war, both in terms of soldiers in the field (proportionality) and war on civilians (discrimination). To a significant degree Lincoln's gamble won. It could never satisfy northern Democrats who campaigned for a quick ending of the war and an amicable reunion resting on the premise of an apartheid state and white supremacy. But northern Republicans were ecstatic. The vast majority of Protestant clergy were Republican and insisted on their duty to preach politics on the subject of slavery, emancipation, and Lincoln's total war policy. But on

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[4] Frederick Douglass, The Day of Jubilee Comes, reprinted in Henry Steele Commager, ed., The Civil War Archive, 578. For a fuller discussion of Douglass's response to emancipation, see David W. Blight, Frederick Douglass' Civil War, 106-15.

[5] This theme is developed brilliantly in David Blight, Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory (Cambridge, MA, 2001).

the subject of just conduct, they would fall back on the old chestnut of spirituality, and say nothing. That would be left to the president and his generals.

The logic of the northern and southern jeremiads made it virtually impossible for preachers to register judgments of uncertainty or ambiguity for their own cause. The rhetoric was pat, the originality nil. Speakers and writers employed stock arguments to draw on reflexively, depending on immediate events.

Already in 1861, the jeremiad established a clinching of the rhetorical war knot, closing off alternatives or compromises. Were leaders in power able to see both sides as right and wrong, then alternatives to war might be explored. But in an atmosphere of absolute right and wrong, with God in control and demanding the total surrender of sin and tyranny, few could escape the trap. In one of the greater ironies of Civil wartime preaching, the very universality and inclusiveness of the jeremiad undermined itself and effectively removed all restraints from the war's brutality, generating a de facto fatalism. Indeed, fatalism became engrained so that nothing was unacceptable; it just was. No destruction could be too great because God, not man, was orchestrating affairs. All one could do was mouth the proper rituals, beat the drum of patriotism, and keep on fighting, confident in the right and ultimate vindication.

To be sure, not all supported the relentless escalation of the fighting. In a letter on July 7, 1862 to Lincoln written from his headquarters at Harrison's Landing, General George McClellan, commander of the mighty Army of the Potomac (and a staunch Democrat) insisted that "our cause must never be abandoned." Nevertheless, he issued strong concerns over what we are calling proportionality. For McClellan and his fellow Democrats, there needed to be clearly articulated rules of engagement for armies in the

field because “this rebellion has assumed the character of war.” This meant that the Confederates had to be treated less as criminals or rioters than as citizens and soldiers of a hostile state in which the conduct of war would be governed by the international rules of engagement.

As commander-in-chief, Lincoln was responsible for determining such “a civil and military policy,” and, in McClellan’s view, that policy should invoke the highest principles to insure the speediest and most amiable reconciliation:

> [The war] should be conducted upon the highest principles known to Christian civilization. It should not be a war looking to the subjugation of the people of any State in any event. It should not be at all a war upon population, but against armed forces and political organization. Neither confiscation of property, political executions of persons, territorial organization of States, or forcible abolition of slavery should be contemplated for a moment. In prosecuting the war all private property and unarmed persons should be strictly protected, subject only to the necessity of military operation.

For all its nobility, McClellan’s humanitarian code of war did not extend to slaves. But equally tragic, few voices were willing or able to pick up McClellan’s call for a war of “highest principles.”

Two days after receiving McClellan’s letter, a frustrated and disappointed Lincoln paid a personal visit to McClellan at the general’s headquarters. When forced to choose between a principled war and victory, Lincoln chose victory. He removed McClellan from command, and brought the fiery General John Pope from the West to command the Army. After spending three weeks in Washington with Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, Pope, a staunch Republican general clearly understood the new course his commander wanted him to take. In a word, escalation—a war that would unavoidably carry deep into the lap of the enemy, civilians as well as soldiers.

Total war, with emancipation as the inner accelerator, meant articulating a war ethic in which civilian suffering could be presumed and morally justified. By the spring of 1863, Lincoln's legal scholar, Francis Lieber, would complete a rationale for total war that would stand as a new American foreign policy.[6] Under the rubric of "military necessity," Lieber's Code as it came to be called recognized no moral restraints short of rape or murder. The Midwestern *Christian Instructor and Western United Presbyterian* recognized that "the people are becoming somewhat restive, thoroughly roused, and in certain quarters a little desperate, and are demanding of the Administration to do what it has to do quickly."[7] The northern press greeted the general orders with glee and headlines celebrating, "THE KID GLOVE POLICY ABANDONED."[8] The slippery slope began.

The conventional dating of the beginning of total war on civilians is usually marked by President Lincoln's appointment of General Grant as commander of Federal armies, and the subsequent appointments of Sherman and Philip Sheridan to key commands in 1864. The decision itself actually came earlier, in July and August 1862, at the same time Lincoln was drafting his Emancipation Proclamation. It was made not by commanding generals, but by their commander-in-chief, President Lincoln.

By summer 1863 the war had become both about Union and freedom with no spending caps. With that, northern and southern soldiers knew they were in for the fights of their lives. They also knew that few voices around them, in the military or out, were questioning whether they should be killing each other in such mindless numbers.

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[6] See below, chapter 20.
[7] The Christian Instructor and Western United Presbyterian, July 26, 1862.
[8] A. W. Bill "Letter to a Friend," August 8, 1862, "Civil War Papers," Box 2 Folder 8, AAS. For further descriptions of the effects of General Order No. 5 see two articles by Daniel E. Sutherland: "Abraham Lincoln, John Pope, and the Origins of Total War," 582; and "Introduction to War: The Civilians of Culpepper Country, Virginia," Civil War History 37 (1991), 120-37.

As northerners celebrated the fourth of July, 1863, word reached them of a ferocious series of battles around the Pennsylvania farming village of Gettysburg. For two days Lee's Army of Northern Virginia probed Union lines for weaknesses, leading to multiple pitched battles of mounting ferocity. Having failed to turn Union General Mead's Army of the Potomac on either flank on days one and two, Lee determined on a frontal assault of the Union center, over the vociferous objections of his second-in-command, General James Longstreet. Despite Longstreet's objections, Lee selected his "Old War Horse" to lead the assault, augmented with a fresh third division under the recently arrived General George Pickett and his 5,000 Virginia veterans—all, Pickett bragged, aching for a good fight. Historian Bruce Catton described the scene:

> Then out of the woods came General Lee's assaulting column, like actors in some unimaginable drama coming at last onto the stage—rank after rank, Pickett and Pettigrew and Trimble and their divisions and when they got into the open the men halted and dressed their ranks as carefully as if they were going on parade. They were worth looking at. Their line was a mile wide from flank to flank, Pickett's division on the right, Pettigrew's beside it, Trimble's in close support, general officers mounted, battle flags overhead, sunlight glinting off of the rifle barrels. They perfected their alignment, finally, and when the line began to roll forward it looked irresistible.[9]

The sight did not deceive the Yankees. General Winfield Scott Hancock's II Corps held their fire, patiently awaiting the lambs about to be sacrificed. Many must not have believed what a perfect target Longstreet's courageous divisions made. Pettigrew's and Pickett's divisions converged at "the angle" near the center of Meade's line. At 200 yards, artillery and infantry fire erupted frontally and on both Confederate flanks. As the Rebels continued to advance closer, Federal artillerymen switched their ammunition from case shot and shell to murderous canister and then to golf-ball sized double canister.

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[9] Bruce Catton, Never Call Retreat, 190.

Longstreet's brave soldiers fell in waves. Pettigrew's already-mauled division actually led the legendary "Pickett's Charge" and took the hardest hit. Confederate infantry pulled down their caps over their eyes and bowed their heads, in one observer's words, "as if meeting a hail storm."[10] A few hundred actually breached the Federal line and engaged their foes in close combat. But they were soon beaten back marking what military historians label "The High Tide of the Confederacy."

Private John Emerson Anderson of Boston retraced the battlefield the following day. The sight filled him with an odd sympathy:

> Many hundreds of the enemies dead were still lying where they fell. As we passed over that field of blood, and death, in thoughtful silence, we looked on those upturned youthful faces, and as we saw no trace of passion, or of hate, our minds would wander unbidden away off to that Southern home, and picture a fond Mother, who on bended knees is fervently asking Gods blessing to rest on her darling soldier boy. And as we spread our mantle of charity over them we murmur, "my brother rest in peace."[11]

As great as the hatreds were, they could not extend to dead, wounded, and helpless soldiers, who were "brothers" once more.

Northerners died no less grimly than southerners. One destined to die at Gettysburg was Sergeant Charles Ward of the 32nd Massachusetts Volunteers. Like many soldiers, Ward had written, "I hope I may come home again but life here is uncertain," and wondered "how I shall conduct myself if called to fight." He found out soon enough as his brigade charged the wheat field at Gettysburg no July 2, and absorbed 50 percent casualties. Sergeant Ward fell, wounded by a sharpshooter. After lingering for seven days, he died on July 9. In his last letter to his mother, written after he was wounded, he wrote: "Dear Mother, I may not again see you but do not fear for your tired soldier boy.

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[10] Dunn quoted in Earl J. Hess, Pickett's Charge, 246.
[11] John Emerson Anderson, "Memoir," "Civil War Papers," Box 1 Folder 2, 112, AAS.

Death has no fears for me. My hope is still firm in Jesus. Meet me and Father in heaven with all my *dear friends*. I have no special message to send you but bid you all a happy farewell. Your affect and soldier son, Charles Ward."[12]

The final assault of the three-day Battle of Gettysburg lasted little more than half an hour. Of the 14,000 Confederates who braved the assault, only half returned. Pickett lost 42 percent of his men and all of his senior officers. After three days of battle, Federal losses totaled 23,049 and Confederate losses 28,063 for a total of 51,000 casualties. Depending on whether the three days are counted as three battles (in which case the Confederacy arguably won two) or one, the Confederacy had reached its high water mark and never returned to the North in force.

Glory could not compensate the emptiness for individuals who lost loved ones. One especially emotional account was provided by *Times* correspondent Samuel Wilkerson. After earlier describing the magnitude of the battle, he eventually reported the battle's aftermath alongside the body of his dead son. In words almost too pure to bear, he wrote:

> Oh, you dead, who at Gettysburg have baptized with your blood the Second birth of Freedom in America, how you are to be envied! I rise from a grave whose set clay I have passionately kissed, and I look up and see Christ spanning this battle-field with his feet and reaching fraternal and lovingly up to heaven. His right hand opens the gates of Paradise—with his left he beckons to those mutilated, bloody, swollen forms to ascend.[13]

The three-day battle of Gettysburg is preserved in American memory as the greatest battle in the Civil War. In fact, most military historians agree that Antietam was the most important battle, but when Lincoln gave his brief address at Gettysburg, the

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[12] Charles Ward, "Letter to Mother," 1863, "Civil War Papers," Box 2 Folder 6, AAS.
[13] New York Times July 6, 1863.

place would be forever etched in American memory as the site on which America's greatest sermon was preached inspiring the living for generations to come with the resolve "that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation shall have a new birth of freedom; and that this government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

From Gettysburg on, Americans North and South would not look back to restrained codes or charity. With minds set like flint on the task at hand, no questions arose of proportion or acceptable losses. One suspects that the casualties from Gettysburg could have numbered 100,000 instead of 50,000 and the response would have been the same. One writer for *The Independent* noted how numbed Americans had become to bloodshed. In the opening, relatively benign, military encounters, "every early dash in the war was turned into fame…Our first defeats threw the whole community into panics, for men were then unused to stern times." But that changed profoundly for the worse: "We have since become so familiar with war, that Gettysburg, a greater battle than Waterloo, made no such impression upon the popular mind as the first few flashes of powder from [Fort] Sumter, at daybreak of April 19, 1861."[14] The moral brake linings had sheared, leaving only reflexive endorsements of a cause that knew no limits.

In the Dutch Reformed Church of Stapleton, New York, Thomas H. Skinner undertook to examine the nation "from the stand-point of Eternal Providence," and, in effect, speak for God's global intentions in the war. Clearly God was only on the side of the North, and the South was "simply demonic."[15] America, Skinner concluded, and not Christ's return to earth, would lead the world into millennial glory.

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[14] The Independent, August 27, 1863.
[15] Thomas H. Skinner, Light in Darkness (Stapleton, 1862), 4, 8, 11.

In such nationalistic millennialism, historian James Moorehead discerns a "dangerous substrate" that identifies Providence with "the idealistic conception of American destiny." Such identification minimizes moral restraints or adherence to international standards of war common to all civilized nations. Instead, it can legitimate excesses and raw terrorism. By linking emancipation and the "crusade" against slavery to total war and a "crusade" against the Confederacy, Lincoln's administration watered the seeds of an American-led Christian imperialism that was not without costs in later American history.[16]

Behind the suffering lay a mounting fury that generated blood appetites that could not be satisfied. These sentiments found their most strident voice in the clergy and their calls for blood revenge. In a funeral sermon for Confederate Lieutenant Abram Carrington reprinted in the *Central Presbyterian* of Richmond, the firebrand Robert Dabney preached an incendiary sermon condemning the North for an "aggressive war," which, in moral terms, "is wholesale murder."

Lieutenant Carrington, a close friend of Dabney's, had become the most recent victim of the conflict. After extolling Carrington's courage at the battle of Frazer's Farm, Dabney took aim at the hearts of his congregation's young men:

> Surely [his] very blood should cry out again from the ground, if we permitted the soil which drank the precious libation, to be polluted with the despot's foot! Before God, I take you to witness this day, that its blood seals upon you the obligation to fill their places in your country's host, and "play the men for your people and the cities of your God," to complete vindication of their rights.[17]

The language of blood as a "precious libation" could not go unnoticed by Dabney's young hearers as they prepared themselves for sacrifice.

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[16] James H. Moorhead, American Apocalypse: Yankee Protestants and the Civil War 1860-1869 (New Haven, 1978), 81.
[17] Central Presbyterian, March 12, 1863.

In the North, blood recurred as a theme in Horace Bushnell's meditations as the necessary and sufficient condition for nationalism. The shed blood of soldiers, North and South, white and black, would stand as the vicarious atonement for the newly realized, organic Christian nation state. This was not simply a metaphorical atonement, but quite literally a blood sacrifice required by God for sinners North and South if they were to inherit their providential destiny. By late 1863, this war that was not self-consciously fought *for* the creation of an American civil religion was unintentionally becoming *about* the creation of an American civil religion that would grow as the killing endured.

By 1863, political preaching in the North and South had virtually completed the apotheosis of "patriotism" into a full-blown civil religion. "Martyrdoms" became a major theme in 1863 fast and funeral sermons. Even as the North won, the costs mounted to staggering levels, and the only accolade that seemed to work for most were "martyrs" sacrificing themselves upon the "altar" of their country.

In the South, as defeats mounted, evangelical revivals in the army increasingly filled religious <u>and</u> secular presses. Unlike the North, where army revivals were less widespread, churches went unharmed, and revivals tended to be reported only in the religious weeklies, Confederate army revivals became secular news.

Revival sermons were augmented among the soldiers by spontaneous prayer meetings. One letter, written by a chaplain to the Richmond *Religious Herald* predicted the future impact of Confederate army revivals:

> I know young men to whom this war has been a real blessing in this respect; and if they live to see it close, their churches at home will mark what I say. Sometimes in thinking over this matter, and seeing such striking examples of Christians improved by being soldiers, I have almost come to the conclusion that the war is

> not such an unmitigated evil, after all…Men who have come out of this war Christian soldiers, will not be apt to desert the standard of Christ afterward.[18]

The chaplain was right. These were the very men who, with the war's end, would lead mighty evangelical revivals that would transform the post-war South from Episcopalian and "Spartan" to "converted" evangelicals.

No one in 1861 could have predicted that ministers would claim war—and defeat—as a moral and religious good that made men Christians. Yet, by 1864, that was indeed their claim. Just as white Christian apologists in the antebellum South had praised slavery as a converting institution for the "pagan" slaves, so these Civil War apologists now praised war as a converting institution for white soldiers and, in turn, white society.

In this madness, we see the seeds of what would become the post-war "Religion of the Lost Cause" in the South, and the triumph of evangelical Protestantism. Where the antebellum Southern evangelical was tarred with the label of "dissenter," and, worse, "effeminate," post-war evangelicals and itinerants would be reared in the armies and hardened in the battles. In the new South, to be evangelical and "born again" would come to signify the Confederate army, as well as the southern pulpit. It would mean pride and manliness, humility and submission. The "Lost Cause" of the white Christian South would constitute a self-contained region—and religion—isolated from the international community of believers that preserved the sacred memories of the war and the revivals its army produced.[19]

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[18] Religious Herald, April 21, 1864.

[19] The "New South" orthodoxy was captured early on in the books dealing with Confederate army revivals. See especially William W. Bennett, A Narrative of the Great Revival which Prevailed in the Southern Armies during the Late Civil War (Philadelphia, 1877); and William J. Jones, Christ in the Camp, o r Religion in Lee's Army (Richmond, 1887). On the connections between Civil War revivals and the Religion of the Lost Cause, see Harry S. Stout and Christopher Grasso, "Civil War, Religion, and

Meanwhile, in the North, Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation carried the strategic practical benefit of making African American soldiers available to Union armies. Lincoln did not have to wait long to see if slaves would enlist. The answer was yes, in droves. To Lincoln's delight, the most striking candidates came from the border states. 42,000 black men from the border states served in the army and 2,400 more in the navy. In all, 180,000 to 200,000 black soldiers fought for the North, with losses killed and wounded totaling 70,000 or over one-third of the total engaged.[20]

In moral terms, the most significant battles were not always the biggest. Port Hudson, Milliken's Bend, and Fort Wagner were all relatively small battles, but carried huge symbolic significance for North and South. Confederate slaveholders and northern Democratic white supremacists, assumed that blacks could not or would not fight under 'the black flag" as the equals of whites. Just as the black's humanity had been denied in the classroom and voting polls, so also was his manliness and honor denied on the battlefields. Black leaders such as Douglass recognized that only action would dispel such racist myths.

Colonel Robert Shaw's 54th Massachusetts would put to rest all such myths as black troops fought bravely at Fort Wagner. Their commander would be killed at the walls of Fort Wagner, but the country soon learned of their bravery under fire. In the weeks following Fort Wagner, word of black bravery reached African American churches throughout the North. The African Methodist Episcopal newspaper, Christian Recorder, printed a letter from James Lynch, their correspondent in South Carolina, who visited the wounded " colored heroes" in the hospital and proudly reported: "I never saw men so

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Communications: The Case of Richmond," in Randall M. Miller, et. al., eds., Religion and the American Civil War (New York, 1998), 313-59.

[20] Cornish Dudley Taylor, The Sable Arm, 288-89.

cheerful in suffering in my life. It seems as though every man had counted the cost and fought and bled from the deepest inwrought convictions of duty." As for the commander, Robert Shaw, he "was buried in a pit with twenty-five of his men. The Colonel if he had chosen wouldn't choose another grave. This young hero—though fallen in battle, has written his name on the hearts of the colored race, and his deeds of valor—his zeal in the cause of liberty will give the historian of this war his brightest page."[21]

Fort Wagner persuaded many racist and skeptical white northerners that African Americans could fight well and bleed for their country alongside whites. Soon after the war was concluded, a writer for the New York *Tribune* looked back on that day as pivotal:

> It is not too much to say that if this Massachusetts Fifty-fourth had faltered when its trial came, two hundred thousand colored troops for whom it was a pioneer would never have been put into the field, or would not have been put in for another year, which would have been equivalent to protracting the war into 1866. But it did not falter. It made Fort Wagner such a name to the colored race as Bunker Hill had been for ninety years to the white Yankees.[22]

The analogy to Bunker Hill is not overdrawn. The only way to know if soldiers can fight is to let them fight. What white Americans learned at Bunker Hill, African Americans learned at Wagner—or, more accurately, relearned, for they too fought nobly alongside white patriots in the Revolution.

By 1864, Confederates were also aware that black soldiers performed admirably. The response was predictable. On April 12, the intrepid and brutally racist slave trader Nathan Bedford Forrest led a Confederate cavalry division on a mission to reduce Fort Pillow, Tennessee, and block Federal navigation along the Mississippi. The fort was

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[21] Christian Recorder, August 22, 1863.
[22] New York Tribune, September 8, 1865.

defended by 262 black soldiers from the 11th U.S. Colored Troops and 295 whites. Together they were no match for the superior numbers and tactical genius of Forrest.

By afternoon, Forrest had his 1,500 men in position and took the fort with light casualties. Despite Confederate denials at the time, evidence has since shown that many Federal troops, and in particular the black troops, were murdered after they had surrendered and laid down their arms. In later congressional testimony, eyewitnesses described rebel troops shouting, “No quarter! No quarter! Kill the damned niggers; shoot them down!” Claims of black soldiers buried alive may have been inflated, but it is clear that scores of black soldiers and some white compatriots were “massacred” after their surrender—an act of cold-blooded murder.[23] Forrest himself avoided censure because he “neither ordered nor condoned the massacre.” Left unsaid was the fact that he did not need to. What he needed to do was order the protection of prisoners. It was a lesson in moral avoidance that northern generals would also learn perfectly.

By 1864, moral evasion extended to prisoner of war camps as Union and Confederate prisons became killing pens, lacking in any moral forethought for the care of thousands of prisoners of war who were no longer being exchanged. With both sides rejecting a continuation of prisoner exchanges, disaster of unimaginable proportions ensued. Prisoners found themselves confined in tiny spaces that could not accommodate them, and in many spaces lacked even a roof over their heads. Soon, disease emaciated bodies and killed, with neither glory nor romance as compensation, only a slow demoralizing death.

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[23] An early account of the massacre appeared in Joseph T. Wilson, The Black Phalanx, 348-58. For a balanced assessment of the evidence on all sides, see Albert Castel, “The Fort Pillow Massacre: A Fresh Examination of the Evidence,” Civil War History, 4 (March, 1958), 37-50.

No good prisons existed, South or North. In July 1864, Confederate prisoners were transferred from Point Lookout to vacant barracks at Elmira, New York. Familiar problems of sanitation and disease appeared, augmented by a rash of scurvy caused by no-vegetable diets. By the end of August, over 700 cases of scurvy had been reported. In October, word emerged from Camp Douglas of a rapid increase of fatalities, and Elmira health officials concluded that based on mortality rates in August and September, the entire prison population would be depopulated within a year.[24]

The worst prison experience was, of course, the infamous Camp Sumter in Andersonville, Georgia. By August, the prison designed to hold only 10,000 reached a population of nearly 33,000, making Andersonville the fifth largest "city" in the confederacy. There, in a state of complete demoralization, prisoners fought with each other and "raiders" robbed and killed fellow prisoners. One prisoner, John Ransom, kept a diary in which he noted "Raiders kill some one now every day. No restraint in the least. Men who were no doubt respectable at home, are now the worst villains in the world." Only after the prisoners threatened Superintendent Henry Wirz with a full-scale riot did he consent to allow the prisoners to organize a police force of "Regulators" and supply them with clubs to apprehend the leading raiders. Soon "arrests" were made and trials organized by fellow prisoners. Six gang leaders were sentenced to be hanged for murder. Another eighty-six were sentenced to "run the gauntlet" inside the stockade. Although too weak to join in the gauntlet, Ransom could scarce contain his excitement at the prospect of hangings.

> On July 11, the convicted murderers were led to the hastily constructed gallows and allowed last words. Most blamed starvation or "bad company" for their actions. One "spoke of his mother and sisters in New York, that he cared nothing

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[24] William B. Hesseltine, Civil War Prisons, 203.

> as far as he himself was concerned, but the news that would be carried home to his people made him want to curse God he had ever been born." The hangings themselves were received by the prisoners as long overdue justice. As the condemned prisoners (now doubly so) made their confessions, others shouted and interrupted them, eager to see justice—or revenge—executed.

The hangings diminished the killing, but not the dying. Each day as many as 220 died in the stockade and the camp hospital. By the end of July, Ransom could not walk and "am trouble with poor sight together with scurvy and dropsy. My teeth are all loose and it is with difficulty I can eat." The daily presence of death and dying inured all to the decencies of life:

> There is no such thing as delicacy here. Nine out of ten would as soon eat with a corpse for a table as any other way. In the middle of last night [July 18] I was awakened by being kicked by a dying man. He was soon dead. In his struggles he had floundered clear into our bed. Got up and moved the body off a few feet, and again went to sleep to dream of the hideous sights. I can never get used to it as some do. Often wake most scared to death, and shuddering from head to foot. Almost dread to go to sleep on this account. I am getting worse and worse, and prison ditto.

Ransom did survive—barely—but 15,000 other prisoners were not so fortunate. With loud shouts for patriotism and silence on issues of proportionality or humane treatment of prisoners, the war was bound to spiral downward until there were no more souls to sacrifice upon the altars of their nations. 1864 would eclipse all prior years combined in studied savagery and massive destruction.

On the battlefield, destruction without proportion peaked as Lee's veteran Army of Northern Virginia faced off against Grant's and Meade's equally veteran Army of the Potomac in spring 1864 in the forests of Virginia. [crude Darwinian survival]

Winslow Homer's painting of the Wilderness captured the haunting, almost surreal quality of the terrain where the two veteran armies would soon grapple in a

desperate battle fought on May 5, 1864. The dark forestation was so thick with small pines and scrub oak, cedar, and dogwood that visibility all but ended beyond ten yards, making coordination between large military elements virtually impossible.

Throughout the day, men fought in clumps of desperate engagement that became lonely worlds unto themselves. Lacking any visibility or contact, soldiers sometimes fired on their own men. Worse, in the dense and dry underbrush, artillery and musketry ignited fires up and down the line. Dead trees burned like kindling as 200 wounded Union and Confederate soldiers and their fallen horses suffocated or burned where they lay. Victory could not be seized; precious daylight waned and rebel soldiers got caught in a crossfire from their own troops. As later summarized by a recovered Longstreet: "Thus the battle, lost and won three times during the day, wore itself out."[25]

Across the extended lines, Grant faced the similarly hoary specter of massive blood sacrifice, but was willing to trade a "great loss of men" in return for steadily eroding Lee's dwindling army. Had the soldiers sensed that millions back home would have been morally aghast and outraged at the looming slaughter, desirous only of peace, neither Grant, nor Lincoln, nor all the statesmen on earth could have impelled the soldiers forward. In this war, however, citizens on both sides cried for no surrender.

From the Wilderness, both armies moved a short distance to murderously reinforced entrenchments at Spotsylvania Court House. There, in what would prove to be the longest sustained hand-to-hand action of the war, the soldiers clawed, bit, and stabbed at each other in a 1,500-yard killing pit known variously as the "Corner," "Death-angle," or, later, the "Bloody Angle." In that agonizingly small space, two entire corps of over

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[25] James Longstreet, From Manassas to Appomattox, 565.

20,000 soldiers piled in and stood facing each other at 50 yards. Large trees were cut in half, severed by musket fire coming from both sides. For 23 hours, from dark to dark, soldiers threw themselves at one another in a savage death dance during which communications were impossible, lines unformed, and men fighting desperately for their lives.

All discipline broke down as the soldiers devolved into wild men. When ammunition ran dry, they threw bayonets like spears or used their rifles as clubs to beat the enemy senseless. Even the dead were re-enlisted in this fight as soldiers shaped the hands of their dead and dying comrades to hold cartridges, so that as those fingers stiffened in a cupped position, they would provide ready access to the ammunition. Union Major General Lewis A. Grant described the fatal intimacy of the battle: “Many were shot and stabbed through crevices and holes between the logs; men mounted the works, and with muskets rapidly handed them kept up a continuous fire until they were shot down, when others would take their places and continue the deadly work.”[26]

As afternoon passed into night, no relief arrived. Exhausted Confederate troops at the apex were ordered to hold the line “at all costs” until a new line could be entrenched at the base of the salient. Finally, at midnight, the exhausted rebel survivors fell back, wild-eyed and mad with the horror of non-stop killing. Over 5,000 Confederates lay dead or wounded, alongside 6,000 Yankees, many of them pressed so deep in the mud by the feet of their comrades that their features could not be discerned.

The next day Federal Lieutenant Colonel Lyman walked the battlefield. In a letter to his wife, he described the scene: “The bodies of friend and foe covered the ground.

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[26] Quoted in Freeman, Lee’s Lieutenants, III, 408.

Some wounded men were then taken out from under three or four dead ones. One body, that lay exposed to the fire, had eighty bullets in it."[27]

Still the fighting pressed on as the warrior priests prepared for new sacrifices. In the aftermath of Spotsylvania, even Grant was stunned by the carnage. By the time the two armies finally broke off on May 20, they left behind 18,000 Federal casualties to Lee's 10,000. In little over 12 days, the Army of the Potomac had lost 32,000 men. Northern reporters, and not a few Democrats, branded Grant a "butcher," and some of his own soldiers agreed. Nothing before had equaled the sheer intensity of killing. Yet even as the mounting death reports hit home, thoughtful men and women did not raise serious questions of scale and proportionality. Grief and sorrow mixed aplenty, fueling new levels of hate and fury. The bottom line was: more.

But still they were not through and neither president was willing to invoke proportionality and say "enough." At Cold Spring, Yankees mounted suicidal assaults on well-entrenched rebel defenses. In the mistaken belief that Lee's lines were spread too thin, Grant ordered yet another frontal assault on June 3 intended to break through Lee's soft underbelly, roll up his army, and march on the gates of Richmond.

At 4:30 the tragically brief assault began. In lockstep madness, each advancing Union corps was enfiladed by Lee's cannon and musket fire on the flanks, while simultaneously receiving direct fire in front. Artillery batteries worked their Napoleons furiously with double charges of canister, turning the assault troops into a bloody mass of writhing humanity. In little over an hour, three assaulting Federal corps were repulsed with staggering losses that totaled 7,000—a rate of roughly 116 men per minute. In

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[27] Theodore Lyman, With Grand and Meade from the Wilderness to Appomattox 114.

surveying the carnage, Lee's horrified General Evander Law would write of the battle: "it was not war, but murder."

But *was* it murder? Ultimately, that is for each of us to answer. But the sheer fact that a hardened general (who himself was severely wounded at Cold Harbor) would raise it makes the question realistically worth asking. Sadly, moral questions about proportionality in the field are not the only moral questions you will have to answer. Still remaining is the equally important issue of discrimination and civilian suffering, the issue we shall turn to in lecture three.

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