

Hiatory 225  
Re: Notes w/ "Politics of War"  
Source: George article  
Dahlgren/Kilpatrick Raid (March 1864)

CTE  
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1. Origins:

In May 1863 during the battle of Chancellorsville, General Hooker sent General Stoneman and a large cavalry force behind Lee's lines to disrupt his supply lines and communications, and create as much psychological damage as possible. (By 1863 the Union cavalry was finally about on a par with the Confederates in the east). In five days of the campaign Stoneman's forces went clear around the Confederate lines and even penetrated Richmond's defenses.

This raid or penetration in depth did little damage but it brought back some interesting intelligence. That Richmond was so poorly defended that Stoneman's cavalry could have taken the city if the Union had been aware of its vulnerability. The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin crowed that Stoneman's forces could have "bagged the whole administration, and set the Union prisoners free."

[Reference here to the Richmond POW camps at Libby and Belle island]

This intelligence about Richmond's spotty defenses was reaffirmed by a paroled Union General who was in Libby at the time of Stoneman's raid. The general, August Willich, later had an interview with Lincoln and he confided this information to the President. Lincoln was excited by the idea and remarked to General Hooker that the Union cavalry could have "safely gone in and burnt every thing & brought us Jeff Davis."

Beginning in November 1863 it was estimated that the Rebs held about 13,000 Union POWs in Richmond in the two camps. There was serious concern about their welfare because paroled Union prisoners from Richmond were returning to the Union in dreadful condition--starvation and exposure were the main factors.

Remember by winter of 1863 Lee's Army of Northern Virginia was on half rations. Food was scarce in the Confederacy and provisioning of food to Confederate troops was made even more severe by the gross mismanagement of Lucius Northrop, Commissary-General of the Confederacy. Northrop was probably the most hated figure in the Davis Administration and for good reason--he was a complete incompetent. Word was the only reason Davis kept him on was old school tie stuff--they were classmates at the Point.

There was mounting pressure on the White House to do something about these Union POWs in Richmond.

The Union POW problem was complicated by the EP and the

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and the introduction of black troops into the Northern war effort. The Confederacy refused to treat black soldiers as legitimate fighters deserving the same treatment as white POWs. Until this could be sorted out the prisoner exchange program was on hold.

[Add parenthetically: it was never really sorted out. Discuss in some detail when we look at blacks in the military. Came a time when Grant decided to stop all POW exchange when he launched his war of attrition in the spring of 1864].

This meant that POWs were piling up in Richmond prisons and the condition of their treatment was deteriorating as their numbers increased. By winter of 1863 the battles of Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville added large numbers of Union prisoners to the pool already under

This may have sparked Lincoln to authorize raids on the Rebel capital city. In any case rumors began to circulate and were taken seriously by President Davis. Some of the Union POWs from Libby and Belle Island were made ready for transfer to a new camp. Andersonville, in Georgia.

General Isaac Wistar raid. This raid began in February 1864. Wistar served under General Ben Butler at City Point at the foot of the Peninsula. The raid was repulsed. It is clear that Lincoln and Sec of War Stanton were aware of the Wistar raid to free POWs (and possibly burn Richmond and capture Davis and other members of the Confederate Government; or even assassinate them?).

The next attempt was the large-scale Judson Kilpatrick raid that took place at the end of February and beginning of March 1864.

The two-pronged purpose:

This raid like the earlier Wistar effort went sour at the outset. The second in command, a Colonel Ulrich Dahlgren, who was to penetrate Richmond while Kilpatrick's cavalry diverted the defenders was ambushed by Confederates and killed instantly. Dahlgren's father was Admiral John Dahlgren, who was a Lincoln favorite.

In any case found on Dahlgren's body were several documents (in a cigar case) and one of these documents included the extraordinary sentence

"THE MEN MUST KEEP TOGETHER AND WELL IN HAND, AND ONCE IN THE CITY IT MUST BE DESTROYED AND JEFF DAVIS AND CABINET KILLED."

There is good evidence that Lincoln and Stanton were involved in the planning of the Kilpatrick raid. The question that lingers is whether they sanctioned what today would be called the

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"Executive Action" operation that was laid out in the Dahlgren document?.

Or was this a self-starter operation on the part of Kilpatrick & Dahlgren "liberally" interpreting their orders?

Or was the Dahlgren document a Confederate forgery to destroy the moral advantage the North had won in this contest with the second war aim to end slavery.

Richmond circulated the Dahlgren revelations to the candid world. Especially to the Palmerston Govt. in England. General Lee wrote personally to Union General Meade as to whether this assassination attempt was now the official policy of the Lincoln administration. Meade of course insisted that it was not and that the Union was not resorting to "Black Flag" warfare.

But Meade did not believe for a moment that the Dahlgren document was a Confederate forgery. He was certain it was authentic (as did many of his fellow Union officers. Meade was just not certain whether it was an initiative that originated with Kilpatrick who had a reputation for "wildness" or had it originated with the Lincoln and Stanton. So the assurances he gave Lee were not his personal beliefs.

Democratic Papers in the North condemned the whole sorry affair. Most Union papers dismissed the Dahlgren papers as Southern forgeries.

In the end, after the war was over, Stanton called for the papers to examine them. They disappeared. Strong suspicion that Stanton probably confind them to his fireplace.

What can we make of all this?:

\* That the war had turned ugly by the beginning of 1864.

\* That a corner was turned. What goes around comes around. Vide: The conspiracy to assassinate Lincoln may have been sown in the these union raids.

The war had turned very ugly

News of the raid

*Kilpatrick  
not removed  
from his  
command*

CF

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Re: Addendum notes to Kilpatrick/Dahlgren Raid

source: Furgurson, Ashes of Glory

F makes certain that Lincoln knew of the raid and approved it.

The two-prong raid:

General George Armstrong Custer and a force of 1,500 cavalry crossed the Rapidan to alert Lee's west flank and draw off his troops.

Kilpatrick and Dahlgren w/ a force of about 4,000 Union horsemen were then to ride to Richmond. Kilpatrick was to enter the city and liberate the POWs in Libby. Dahlgren with a smaller force of 500 was to cross the James River and free the POWs at Belle Island.

The commander of Libby and all Richmond were alive with rumors about another Union raid after the failure of General Wistar's earlier failed attempt. The major in charge of Libby prison had planted kegs of gunpowder in the prison basement and was prepared to blow up the entire building if the expected Union forces reached the prison.

Note, too, that the Union POWs in Libby were alerted to the planned raid and were prepared for the break out. They would be armed and those capable would be sent to burn down the city.

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Furgurson attributes the fact that Dahlgren kept the plans and purposes of the raid on his person to the fact that he was so young. He was only 22 years old.

Furgurson believes that the papers were authentic. He notes that Custer claimed that the Dahlgren documents were authentic.

A John Babcock, one of the Union spies that made up the Richmond network of Union spies also verified the authenticity of the documents. The Richmond Union underground was closely involved in the planning of the raid.