



Soldiering, Manhood, and Coming of Age:
A Northern Volunteer

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When Abraham Lincoln first ran for President, Cyrus F. Boyd was already twenty-four years old. Nevertheless he would later say that he and the other Republican boys of Palmyra, Iowa, "organized a company of young men just young enough and strong enough to do some tall yelling." They must have been a sight—each one wearing blue overalls, white shirts, and "a chip hat," riding horseback to electioneer for Lincoln. "We were supposed to be assisting Abraham Lincoln to be elected President and everybody now knows that he was elected." The horses, he later confessed, were really colts. "We not only had to break and drill ourselves but had to break the *colts* also and at the same time."

This frolicking lot of young politicians became one of the companies Iowa contributed to the Union war effort. "When our man Lincoln called for men to suppress the insurrection we did not respond the first time but at the next call we left the colts at home and went almost to [a] *boy*." The word "boy" and indeed the emphasis are not mine but Boyd's himself, when he looked back years later at the events of the Civil War. Later in life, Boyd took his wartime diary and rewrote it into an account of his months in the Fifteenth Iowa Infantry Regiment, the regiment in which he served until he left to become an officer in another

outfit. This autobiography, a mixture of a young man's diary and an old man's reflections, he sent to a friend of his who had soldiered with him in the Fifteenth Iowa. Cyrus F. Boyd self-consciously molded his autobiographical tale of service in the army into a story about a boy becoming a man—making soldiering a coming-of-age experience. He obviously expected his friend would recognize this story and share this understanding of their youthful joint service in the Union army.¹

This vision, this credo of masculinity, maturation, and military service, was hardly unique to Cyrus F. Boyd or to the Civil War. Both during the years 1861 through 1865 and all through the postwar period, as Americans tried to make sense of their war, they linked the transformation of the civilian into soldier and the passage of a boy into adulthood. At the minimum, the relationship was twofold. First, with a great number of American youth—defined roughly as those still living within a parental household—joining the army, those who lived through the war emerged at the age traditionally associated with full manhood. They “came of age” during the war and the war had to be part of that experience. Second, the very ideas of man, soldier, and citizen were inextricably linked. Remaining a civilian was thought unmanly; going to war a proof of manhood. Since coming of age means not simply becoming an adult but assuming adult gender roles—becoming a man—popular thought sometimes conflated the two transformations. And so did many of the young men who served in the armies.²

Considering the age of many Union soldiers, as well as that of their Confederate counterparts, the stress on war as a maturing process is hardly surprising. Gerald Linderman notes that “in both armies, eighteen-year-olds constituted the single largest age group the first year of the war.”³ The men who served in the Union companies habitually referred to themselves as the boys, as did their officers and civilians, and nobody seems to have taken offense at the term. What strikes us now is how elderly Civil War armies were compared with the ones produced by mass conscription in the twentieth century. But nonetheless, from 1861 to 1865, many American men spent in the army the period of late adolescence and early adulthood usually associated with coming of age.

Cyrus F. Boyd felt the change begin in his initial weeks of service. The first sign that the young soldier was entering man's estate may have come from the flattering attention of the young women both back home and in other Iowa towns. In his diary, Boyd began noting how well the girls treated him. The company was mustered in Keokuk and there Boyd could scarcely make up his mind which young lady appealed to him most—“very shy” Lizzie Sullivan whose eyes were “sparkling black,” or the Johnston girls, who gave him and his friends gingersnaps when the regiment went down river. When attending church, he principally noticed the women: “The people are very sociable—especially the young ladies who seem to take a great interest in the soldiers.” All of his stepping out with Maggie, Aggie, and Lizzie seems to have been given zest by the fact that he was a soldier soon to be off to the war. One night, “We had a good dinner and a pleasant time not unmarred however by the ever present thought this might be the *last* time we should meet these kind people.” The romantic soldier paying court before the army moves on was a role that Boyd took to with no trouble. While it may have marred the good times, it also added to their appeal. On the day the regiment boarded the boat that began their journey to the battle of Shiloh, they marched down the Main Street to Keokuk under the eyes of the women of the town. “1000 strong we marched that afternoon in the pride and glory of youthful soldiers. The sound of the music—the cheering shouts of the people robbed [us] of all regrets and we marched proudly away. I saw some of our good friends on the side walks—but it would not do to look back.”⁴

While Boyd and other decent young men were sparking the local girls, other Iowa soldiers enjoyed the saloons and brothels of Keokuk. Boyd complained of their fascination with the pleasures of the river town. But these unrepentant soldiers were claiming man's estate just as Boyd was, although in less respectable ways. These young men asserted their freedom from home and their new sense of masculinity with liquor and prostitutes. Soon Boyd recognized that this type of coming-of-age would be typical of his fellow soldiers, although he never learned to approve. “Whiskey and sexual vices,” he claimed, “carry more soldiers off than the *bullet*.”⁵

This escape from small-town morality seemed to be an inescapable part of soldiering. Old soldiers told a young recruit in another part of the Union army that "unless a man can drink, lie, steal, and swear he is not fit for a soldier." The men who pursued these vices and others—gambling and swearing were even more commonplace than drinking and fornication—disturbed Cyrus Boyd most by their enthusiasm: "How eager they seem to abandon all their early teachings and to catch up with everything which seeks to debase." Entering into the heavily masculine world of the army, they prided themselves on these thoroughly masculine vices. But to Boyd, who believed that true manhood required not release but restraint, the speed of his fellow soldiers' degradation was appalling.⁶

Part of masculinity was achieving a self-discipline within the institutional discipline of the army. Cyrus F. Boyd and other northerners were as proud of their ability to withstand the temptations to which other soldiers gave in as they were of their service to the Union. Indeed, virtuous self-discipline was in itself a kind of service. When secession and rebellion were perceived as hot-headed and impulsive—the result of unrestrained passion—self-discipline had political implications. During the war with the emotional, treacherous—feminine, childlike—South, the son of the rational, loyal—masculine, adult—North should be manly and upright.⁷

Yet part of the transformation necessary to become a soldier was hardening. While Boyd worried about men whose morals coarsened, he himself became less sensitive than he had been, more inured to suffering—both his own and others. Hardening was a process that ranged over all aspects of Boyd's life, from the commonplace to the most serious. It included getting used to a variety of discomforts and privations. His diet became coarser and simpler. "We have bid farewell to Bakers bread, cow's milk and such soft things. Had a piece of meat and a hard tack for breakfast—we are gradually breaking in." He learned to live outdoors; on the company's first night camping, "some of the boys began to think of their *mothers* and to talk of returning to their comfortable homes in the western counties."⁸

Hardening also included becoming accustomed to death and violence. The Fifteenth Iowa Infantry's introduction to blood-

shed was perhaps more sudden than most. On April 6, 1862, they were aboard a steamer at Pittsburgh Landing, having breakfast, when the order came to go ashore. Once there, they ran into the battle of Shiloh. They hurried for three miles, "meeting hundreds—yes thousands of men on the retreat who had thrown away their arms and were rushing toward the Landing—most of these were *hatless* and had nothing on them except their clothes." Some of those who fled had been shot; some ran and others were being carried off on stretchers. As they passed, the Iowans could not help noticing that some of the men were "covered with blood from head to foot."

"Here we were a new Regt which had never until this morning heard an enemies gun fire thrown into this *hell* of a battle—without warning." This was what the Civil War generation and others before and since called "the baptism of blood"—a phrase that connoted not only sudden and complete maturation but a radical transformation in character and experience. In telling his story, Boyd deliberately contrasted the innocence of the recruits to the horror of the baptism.

The general horror of battle quickly became more specific. The Fifteenth Iowa came to the edge of a large field with a ravine at one end. They crossed the ravine and deployed into line of battle, all in clear view of the Confederates. The rebels fired on them. "Here I noticed the first man shot. . . . He was close to us and sprang high in the air and gave one groan and fell *dead*." Then the hardening began. Boyd and his fellow soldiers each had to step over the newly dead man. "Each man as he came up seemed to hesitate and some made a motion to pick him up." But they could not stop to tend to the man. Instead, the officers "sternly" ordered a charge, the men responded with a cheer, and they moved forward—only to be pushed back and to retreat over that same open ground. Masculinity meant restraining both their instincts to flee—to be a coward was to be no man—and their instincts to minister to the corpse.

As they were recrossing the field, a soldier came to Boyd and told him that his brother Scott was being left behind. Exhausted, Scott had collapsed on the ground. Boyd ran back to rescue his brother, only to be told "he never could go any farther and that I had better save myself and let him go." Pleading with his brother

had no effect, so Cyrus Boyd grabbed Scott Boyd "by the *nap of the neck* and jerked him upon his feet and told him to *come* or I should help him with my *boot*." Scott stood up and Cyrus helped him seek cover in the ravine. There he left his brother, confident he could work his way to safety, and returned to his company.

They continued to fight and fall back, ending up on the bluffs back at the landing where they had disembarked that morning. From the bluffs, they witnessed the arrival of Buell's army—all, in Boyd's opinion, that saved Grant, his army, and themselves. There was a final rebel charge but the Union forces held. Then came night, in many ways more horrible than the day had been. As the rain came down, Boyd and his company tried to sleep, listening to the groans of the other men, wounded and dying, who surrounded them, and to the sounds of wounded horses "running through the darkness." Morning came and they were thankful to be held in reserve through the second day's fighting.

After the battle was finally over, Boyd and his friends went out and examined the field where they had fought. In just a few days war had changed them forever: "By this time we had become accustomed to seeing *dead* men and the *shock* had passed." They walked unmoved through the camp of the Fifty-second Illinois, looking at the bodies of dead and wounded soldiers, Union and Confederate, "alternately scattered over the ground." Some of the wounded were "so near dead from exposure they were mostly insane." Elsewhere on the field, Boyd came across a dead rebel lying "on his back with his hands raised above his head"; the man "had died in great agony. Boyd reached down and, for a memento, took a button off his coat.

"War is *hell* broke loose and benumbs all the tender feelings of men and makes of them *brutes*." This was one conclusion Boyd drew after experiencing battle—presumably he included himself in his observations. He also concluded, "I do not want to see any more such scenes and yet I would not have missed this for any consideration." Being a man meant risking horrors that might unman an individual—not by feminizing him but by making him inhuman. The hardening process was painful but it was well begun.⁹

Boyd noticed his own hardening most when it centered on his reaction—or growing lack of reaction—to suffering and death.

He also found himself, despite his fears of moral degradation, taking food—chickens, pigs, roasting ears—from southern civilians. This was a more traditional form of masculine assertion that usually characterized the modest Boyd: being one of a group of armed men invading a homestead and taking what they wanted because nobody there could stop them. For Boyd, this food was due to the soldiers because they were loyal and self-sacrificing, while southerners were neither, and because, well, because they were soldiers. But he still responded to peacetime values that held foraging was theft. When Company E slaughtered a rebel sheep, Boyd noted approvingly that, "Major Purcell gave them a healthy old lecture and told the men they would not be allowed to *kill sheep* even if they were away from *home* and that hereafter such men would be severely *punished*."¹⁰

Finally, the hardening required a kind of mental vigor. Even as he inveighed against whisky and fornication, Boyd believed the real enemy to the soldier was internal. "More men *die* of homesickness than all other diseases—and when a man gives up and lies down he is a *goner*." His strategy for surviving the war was not simply military discipline—the ability to march, fight, obey orders, and keep oneself clean—not just moral discipline—the avoidance of temptation and degradation—but mental discipline as well. "Keep the mind occupied with something new and keep *going all the time* except when asleep." This pursuit of action and Boyd's practice of positive thinking was another duty required by manliness.¹¹

That Cyrus F. Boyd should look back and choose to shape his life in the Union army into a tale of his coming-of-age is hardly surprising. This understanding of manhood, with its complex layers of definition, was commonplace among northerners of the Civil War era. Ideas about true manliness were central to the experience of northern men enlisting in the army, serving through the war, and remembering their service. In fact, the image of the young soldier coming of age was so central to later understanding of the war that it became, through a kind of cultural metonymy, a figure for both true manhood and for the nation itself.

Becoming a man was no simple step for a middle-class northerner like Cyrus F. Boyd. Sexual assertion by itself was insuffi-

cient; indeed, the young man might regard it as a sign that he was unmanly because he failed to exercise manly restraint. Physical violence—hunting and killing his fellow man in what seemed to be an extension of a primitive, perhaps savage, role—might be masculine, but true manhood required self-discipline and civilized morality. Both sexuality and violence had to be domesticated before a male became a true man—the one could be fulfilled only within the family, the other had to be directed purposefully toward a licensed enemy. Yet the demands of familial duty—defending family, home, and country—threatened to undercut the emotive ties that should bind a man to wife, parents, children, and friends: could a man harden himself enough to survive the war yet remain a son and a husband? True men recognized the role of emotions. An Illinois soldier confessed to his wife, “I cannot sing yet those songs such as, the vacant chair, the tears come.” He went on, however, to invoke the ideal of manliness to justify his tears. “A man that cannot shed a tear when he thinks of those he left at home, is no man.” Shedding a tear might be easy or painful or meaningless; what should a man do when his brother is lying exhausted on the battlefield of Shiloh while his company is rushing on? Is he first a sergeant or a sibling?¹²

Volunteering in itself was a sign of coming into manhood—it meant accepting a man’s duties to defend his home and country. It was also, for many soldiers, the first time they had been away from parental supervision. Besides, military service had long been regarded as a climacteric. Sidney O. Little, an Illinois soldier, sounded as if he doubted his mother could believe in his transformation—he told her “you may think me jesting”—but he assured her that “my coming into this war has made a man of your son.” As Benjamin F. Ashenfelter put it, deciding not simply to enlist but re-enlist in August 1863, “A man that is afraid to face his Countries foe on an open field would not Defend A wife & children from the Midnight Assassin.” Another, boringly predictable attitude toward the relationship of soldiering and manliness was the claim that those who refused to fight weren’t men at all—they might as well be women. As one soldier said, “Any young man who is drafted now and forgets his manhood so far as to hire a substitute is’nt [*sic*] worthy the name of man and ought to be put in petticoats immediately.” When the soldier Wilbur

Fisk, an unofficial correspondent of his newspaper back home, explained why he sometimes wrote at length on the minutiae of soldier life, he spoke to the children of the community. “I thought perhaps some of the boys who read the *Freeman*, but are not old enough yet themselves to be soldiers, and some of the little girls too, perhaps, who never can be soldiers, but who almost wish sometimes they had been born boys so that they could, would be interested to read all about the little affairs in a soldier’s common everyday life.”¹³

Soldiers and other northerners frequently talked about fighting for the Union in specifically familial terms. Buraige Rice, a New York captain, predicted the sure defeat of rebellion. “By the sacrifice and blood of our fathers was the Republic founded and by the treasure, faith, honor, and blood of their sons shall the same glorious flag forever wave over us.” The Union was a fragile legacy handed down by the fathers of the Revolutionary generation; their sons owed it protection.¹⁴

But the long chain of familial responsibility did not end with the Civil War generation. The soldier’s manhood required him to be a dutiful father as well as an obedient son. Henry H. Seys attributed his patriotism to “all the teachings of my boyhood—the very milk that nourished me in my infancy.” This childhood education forced him to serve; otherwise “I should despise myself and be *ashamed to answer the questions of my children*.” Preserving the Union was the duty he owed both the generation behind him—particularly, it would seem, his mother—and the generation to come. He further told his wife, “teach our children that their duty to the land of their birth is next to their duty to their God. And that those who would desert *her* in the hour of danger, should be deserted by Him when *their* final calamity comes.” Fathers expected mothers to inculcate their children with patriotic values; the feminine, domestic sphere was the ground for the masculine, public world.¹⁵

Henry H. Seys—and many others like him—saw himself as part of an extensive family, one that included generations of Americans, not just his own parents and children. To put it simply, many northerners considered the Union itself a family. Fighting for the Union was, in that sense, much like fighting for one’s family.

This metaphor influenced more than just the experience of

the young men of the North who joined the Union army. It underlay a lot of thinking about the Union's war goals. One way to sum up Union war motivations succinctly was to say that the South needed to be taught a lesson. The North was the schoolmaster, the army the rod, and the South the disobedient child. The Vermont Yankee Wilbur Fisk, looking back in 1894, remembered the enthusiasm with which "we boys" had greeted the war. "We were ready to shout hurrah because now there would be a chance to teach the South a lesson, but we didn't realize how much it would cost us to teach it."¹⁶

Americans had a habit of talking about the body politic in terms of family relationships. Even antiwar northerners used familial imagery—"let the erring sisters depart in peace." Sisterhood, in this case, wasn't powerful—the image provoked a sad aura of weakness. Northerners who were prowar used the image of unruly children who had to be made to obey. Sometimes this way of thinking about the South even reached the battlefield. Usually the specific familial imagery was hidden—northerners discussed southerners in terms of irrationality, emotion, savagery. One soldier wrote after the battle of Shiloh, "We showed them on the 2d day that northern obstinacy and coolness was more than a match for southern impetuosity"—northern obstinacy and coolness making up a critical part of manliness. Occasionally, northern imputations of southern childishness could be detected overtly. Henry C. Metzger wrote his sister, "I hate to hear the Rebels cheer when they make a charge, they put me in mind of small schoolchildren about the time school is out." And indeed, sometimes men at war sound as if they have schoolboy notions of honor behind all the bloodshed and policy. A perfectly sensible Wisconsin soldier wrote his wife this, as he visited with defeated Confederate soldiers in Johnston's army in 1865: "They are willing to admit that we have whipped them, and that is all that we want of them, is to acknowledge that we are too much for them, and we will also get along very finely." The soldier knew that behind the war had been issues of the nature of the American Republic, the fate of democratic institutions, the place of slavery in a free society—yet he was able to write as if getting the Confederates to cry uncle had been the whole point of the conflict.¹⁷

The family analogy for understanding southern rebellion and northern response—the notion that the southern states might best be understood as disobedient children, the northern ones as filial—was woefully inadequate, indeed nonsensical. I am not suggesting that anyone who seriously thought about politics entertained it for a minute or ever pushed the analogy into an identification. But in a period when political duties were so often expressed in familial imagery, it is striking that an armed rebellion of grown men was sometimes made to sound like a squabble in a kindergarten. The family metaphor provided perhaps the most common image by which people thought about the political world.

Volunteer soldiers were dutiful sons of both their parents and their Revolutionary forefathers. Rebels challenged the mild parental authority of the national government—and thus defied the Revolutionary generation as well. In that sense, the good sons of 1861 went to war against the bad sons. Perhaps there is a hint of this, however attenuated, in the way we continue to call the Civil War "the Brothers' War." And if there is not, at least there is little doubt we still think of the war as a family tragedy.

Thinking about the Civil War experience as a rite of passage also continued into the next generation, as the sons of 1861 became the fathers of the Gilded Age. Once war becomes the defining experience for manhood, how can sons grow up in its absence? Just as the sons and grandsons down the line of the revolutionary generation knew that they might never measure up to the heroes of 1776, the children of the postwar era faced the knowledge that the ultimate courage was shown not by them but by their fathers. (Or perhaps worse—as in the lifelong case of Theodore Roosevelt—had *not* been shown by their fathers.) Mrs. C. E. McKay, a Civil War nurse, said in 1876, "And ought we not carefully to teach the children of the present generation,—charging them not to let their children or their children's children forget what it cost their fathers to leave to them a united country?"¹⁸

Men who had suffered through and survived the war told their children that military experience was crucial to manhood—in fact, they spoke of war not only as a burden to be borne manfully but as a piece of luck. "Through our great good fortune," Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., said, "in our youth our hearts

were touched with fire." Both the veterans and the younger men coming after them worried that with no equivalent experience, the youth of America would never grow into men. College athletics—played, at Harvard, on Soldier's Field—were just one way that postwar society tried to reproduce the manly experience of war for their children. Stephen Crane, in his great novel *The Red Badge of Courage*, imaginatively seized the Civil War—and can we not hear, in its subtle ironies, a rebellious protest against turning frightened young men into heroes? Theodore Roosevelt literally seized upon war, pursuing the strenuous life up the slope of Kettle Hill. It took a generation of men uncertain of their manhood to find in the quick and nasty war with Spain in 1898 "a splendid little war."¹⁹

Talking about and presumably thinking about Civil War soldiers coming of age eventually influenced thinking about the war itself. Some saw—and still see—the Civil War as a coming-of-age experience for the nation entire. The war unified the country; it created strong institutions, including a powerful if short-lived army, and a long-lived sense of American power; it made Ohioans and New Yorkers as well as South Carolinians and Alabamians realize that they were Americans. It is as if the nation could not really mature without a massive bloodletting inflicted on itself, as if six hundred thousand deaths were some kind of adolescent rite of passage.

And Cyrus F. Boyd? He completed the romance of war by returning to Keokuk after Appomattox and marrying Maggie Johnston, one of the young ladies who had presented him gingersnaps. He had already become a soldier and an officer. Becoming a husband and a father—becoming in that sense, as well, a man—was for him part of his Civil War experience. Nothing in the diary he left us suggest that he would have been surprised that his years spent fighting for the Union could be interpreted as years he spent growing up. He wrote as if the war that swept down on him and his companions was as natural and expected and necessary as childbirth, love, and death. This synchrony of public and private lives was how a generation of soldiers—and their children who followed—made sense of the painful, fumbling, demotic heroism and the remarkable unremarkableness of the men who fought for the Union.