

Dahlgren said

running away to the Yankees with household silver did not make a happy home.³

New rumors of assassination plots ran through the city. Indeed, just before Christmas a bullet had whizzed past Davis's ear as he took an evening ride. Now guards were assigned to follow him on horseback. He told Congress that "spies are continually coming and going in our midst"—something other Richmonders had been saying since Sumter.

He complained that offenders arrested on accurate information were being released because government testimony did not stand up in court. Northern papers, he said, suggested that General Butler was scheming against Richmond. "If, as is not improbable, his designs should point to servile insurrection in Richmond, incendiaryism, and the destruction of public works . . . how can we hope to fathom it and reach the guilty emissaries and contrivers but by incompetent negro testimony?"⁴

The answer, he said, was to suspend the writ of habeas corpus again. On February 17, Congress agreed, then adjourned and went home, grumbling about the president and his prosecution of the war.

Within days after Congress had departed, Davis sprang a surprise that would have shaken the Capitol with outrage if the legislators had been there. Apparently without consulting any advisers—knowing what their advice would be—he named Braxton Bragg commanding general, responsible for "the conduct of military operations in the armies of the Confederacy."

The capital's newspapers railed against the idea of seemingly rewarding a general for failure in battle. By doing so, Davis consciously flouted the opinion of most of the South's generals and politicians. But the contentious Bragg's shortcomings had been in command roles, where he had repeatedly failed to follow up tactical success. Back at headquarters he was a competent staff officer. And his new assignment was not what its title implied; he would not command the generals in the field but function as a chief of staff, advising Davis and taking some of the administrative load off the president and Adjutant General Cooper. Nevertheless, resentment of the Bragg appointment roiled official Richmond for days, until the Yankees demanded attention again.⁵

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On or about New Year's Day, newly promoted Union colonel Ulric Dahlgren had called at the White House in Washington to see his father's close friend, the president. There, wrote one of his colleagues, "we

Sonace S. Ferguson Actor of Story (1996)

had an interview with Mr. Lincoln in regard to the raid on Richmond, for the purpose of liberating the prisoners confined there." Reports of cruelty to Union prisoners had aroused Lincoln and all the North, and the president was "very desirous" of relieving their suffering.⁶

George E. Pond, then a lieutenant of Massachusetts infantry, wrote that Lincoln also hoped to stir disaffection in the South by scattering copies of his December amnesty proclamation behind Confederate lines. That announcement promised to restore citizenship and property—except slaves—to all those in occupied territory who took the oath of loyalty to the Union.⁷

After conferring with Lincoln, Brigadier General Judson Kilpatrick reported to Major General George G. Meade, commanding the Army of the Potomac facing Lee. Kilpatrick brought plans for a massive cavalry raid to liberate the prisoners in Richmond and destroy Confederate communications and supplies. Meade was unenthusiastic but, considering the president's sponsorship of the mission, he was ready to cooperate.

Near the end of raw February, Brigadier General George Armstrong Custer and 1,500 Union horsemen crossed the swollen Rapidan River beyond the west flank of Lee's army to draw Confederate cavalry in that direction. The next night, Yankee scouts surprised and captured Southern pickets at Ely's Ford, east of Lee. Kilpatrick and Dahlgren crossed behind them with some 4,000 troopers and rode unmolested toward Richmond while Meade's infantry demonstrated on Lee's left. With the Confederate cavalry distracted and telegraph lines cut, the Kilpatrick-Dahlgren force rode south for more than twelve hours before the capital heard that Yankees were on the way.⁸

Kilpatrick was familiar with the roads above Richmond; he had led the most damaging column of Stoneman's raiders during the battle of Chancellorsville the previous spring. The Yankee plan now was for him to thrust at the capital from the north while Dahlgren split away with some 500 men to cross the James River above Richmond.

Dahlgren would swing downstream on the south side to free the Yankees at Belle Isle, while Kilpatrick dashed straight in to free those at Libby and other prisons. Then Dahlgren would recross and rejoin Kilpatrick. With thousands of prisoners on the loose, they would torch the city and capture Confederate leaders.⁹ What they intended to do with those leaders may have led eventually to one of the great tragedies of American history.

At Libby imprisoned Union officers had been secretly notified that the raid was planned, and formed companies to fight as infantry under

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whoever liberated them. Then they were told that Major Thomas P. Turner, the prison commandant, had planted kegs of gunpowder in the basement, "enough to blow up the prison and prisoners." When artillery was heard in the outskirts, Turner declared that "I do not expect to live if your cavalry get into the city. I shall stick to my post of duty until Kilpatrick reaches here, then every damned Yankee in this place will be blown to hell."¹⁰

The presence of a romantic figure like Dahlgren at the head of a raiding column "must have lent inspiration to the daring undertaking, and must have added a kind of an adventurous charm to the entire spirit of this bold and questioning raid."¹² Ulric was the fair-haired son of Rear Admiral John Adolphus Dahlgren, chief of the U.S. Navy's Ordnance Bureau. After service at Second Bull Run, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville, young Dahlgren had lost a leg in the Gettysburg campaign. For his dash and bravery, he was promoted to colonel at the age of 21. Now, newly fitted with an artificial leg, he was back in the saddle on the most audacious ride of his life.

As a guide, Dahlgren had an ex-slave who was said to know the way to a little-used James River ford. Plodding through rain and darkness, his riders passed up a chance to capture a Confederate artillery park but destroyed a stretch of railroad. Early on March 1 they struck the James near Confederate Secretary of War Seddon's Sabot Hill plantation in Goochland County.¹³

Slaves informed the Yankees that the former governor, Henry Wise, was visiting relatives at a neighboring manor house, and Wise barely slipped away ahead of the raiders. Mistakenly thinking that another nearby place was the Seddon property, Dahlgren set fire to outbuildings there. Then as he and his men approached Sabot Hill itself, a servant called Aunt Lou rushed in yelling, "Lawdy, chillun, git up and dress quick as yer can. De whole hillside is blue wid Yankees!"

Dahlgren pounded at the door and was greeted graciously by Mrs. Seddon, who told him that his father had been her beau in Philadelphia years before. At that the polite young colonel doffed his hat and issued orders to halt further burning. He and his staff accepted Mrs. Seddon's invitation to step inside, where they chatted over glasses of twenty-year-old blackberry wine. Later the lady's kinfolk maintained that this inter-

*Afterward General Winder said this threat was just a bluff to keep Libby's inmates under control, but a Confederate joint congressional committee in early 1865 confirmed that a mine with "a sufficient quantity of gunpowder" had been planted beneath the prison. The prisoners were notified of this, the report said, and the plan succeeded because they "were awed and kept quiet." A few weeks later, the mine was removed.¹¹

lude of calculated hospitality had saved Richmond by allowing Wise time to warn the city's defenders.¹⁴

Dahlgren thanked Mrs. Seddon and turned back to business, only to discover that the ford had been made impassable by heavy rains. Believing the black guide had deceived him, Dahlgren ordered him hanged by the roadside. There local Confederates left the body swinging for a week to show slaves how the Yankees treated their kind.*¹⁵

There were only two courses left to Dahlgren: abandon the mission or rush straight downriver into Richmond. With speed and surprise, perhaps he could cross there and reach Belle Isle, whose only bridge was from Manchester on the other side.

Approaching the city, his men heard the sound of cannon from Brook Road, which apparently meant that Kilpatrick had attacked ahead of plan. But then the gunfire faded, suggesting that Kilpatrick had been driven off. Hiding his force in the woods until dark, Dahlgren then charged through Richmond's outer ring of defenses but met heavy, co-ordinated fire from local troops before he reached the second line.¹⁶

The capital was fully alert; as fleeing country people arrived telling of hordes of Yankee marauders, the alarm bell had brought defense forces running. Underage boys, overage men, and officers on furlough fell in as volunteer privates. Some outfits—including the Armory, Arsenal, and Tredegar battalions—headed for the outskirts directly from their places of work. The Departmental Battalion, its clerk-reservists scattered around the city, mustered first at Capitol Square.

From there 15-year-old Miles Cary shouldered his Springfield and marched with the clerks out Westham Plank Road. After splashing some four miles through rain and mud, they met troops of the Armory Battalion skedaddling back ahead of Dahlgren's troopers. The Departmentals quickly formed a blocking position across the road at Benjamin Green's farm.

Dahlgren, after breaking through the first defenders, ordered his men to dismount and advance as infantry. They drove right over young Cary in the militia picket line before a salvo from the Departmentals' main body turned them back. As the two sides scuffled in the blackness, Cary

*Union officers who helped plan or carry out the raid wrote that the hanged man had been sent as a guide from Washington or from Meade's headquarters. One said he had been the orderly of a captured Confederate signal officer.¹⁶ But William Preston Cabell, who wrote a detailed account of Dahlgren's swath through the Goochland County plantations, said the victim was "a burly negro man from the Stanard place" nearby, and the Richmond *Examiner* reported at the time that he was "the boy Martin, property of David Meems, of Goochland." Others identified the victim as Martin Robinson, a former local slave who had become a free bricklayer.¹⁷

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tried to bayonet Dahlgren, the only Yankee who was still on horseback. Dahlgren slashed and stabbed at the boy with his saber before wheeling away.¹⁹

Dahlgren thought the stout resistance meant that he had struck regular infantry. His surprise foiled, he was now pressed to escape with his command. Turning northeast, he hoped to skirt the defensive works, then make his way southeast toward Chesapeake Bay. During the night his force split and he rode on with only 100 to 125 troopers.

Kilpatrick, meanwhile, had tried to drive into the city from the north and had been repulsed at the intermediate line of defenses on Brook Road. Bivouacking that night in a stinging snowstorm, his force was surprised and scattered by Confederate cavalry led by Major General Wade Hampton. Joined by the troopers who had strayed away from Dahlgren, Kilpatrick fled down the Peninsula. But Dahlgren had farther to ride.²⁰

After crossing the Pamunkey and Mattaponi rivers, Dahlgren trotted into a night ambush near Mantapike, in King and Queen County, set by a motley force including home guards and local cavalrymen on furlough. They shot him down at the head of his column—the only man killed in the quick exchange of fire.²¹

As Dahlgren's body lay in the road, 13-year-old William Littlepage of the King and Queen home guard ran out to search it, hoping to find a watch. Because he didn't look in Dahlgren's overcoat he missed the watch. But in the colonel's inner pockets he found a cigar case, a memorandum book, and some folded papers.

William hid in the woods until morning with Edward W. Halbach, the teacher who had organized the company of schoolboy guards, and a handful of others. At daylight the surrounded Yankees gave themselves up, and the Confederates read the material that had been taken from Dahlgren's body.²²

The papers included a schedule of when the raiders were to cross each stream and check off each assignment, plus special orders for guides, scouts, pioneers, signalmen, engineers and the entire command, and an address from Dahlgren to his men. That address said:

"You have been selected from brigades and regiments as a picked command to attempt a desperate undertaking—an undertaking which, if successful, will write your names on the hearts of your countrymen that can never be erased...."

Perhaps inspired by Henry V at Agincourt, it warned: "Many of you may fall; but if there is any man here not willing to sacrifice his life in such a great and glorious undertaking, or who does not feel capable of

meeting the enemy in such a desperate fight as will follow, let him step out, and he may go hence to the arms of his sweetheart, and read of the braves who swept through the city of Richmond."

But what drew the most attention was this sentence:

"We hope to release the prisoners from Belle Island first, and, having seen them fairly started, we will cross the James river into Richmond, destroying the bridges after us, and exhorting the released prisoners to destroy and burn the hateful city, and do not allow the Rebel leader, Davis, and his traitorous crew to escape."

The language of the special orders was still more pointed:

"The bridges once secured, and the prisoners loose and over the river, the bridges will be secured and the city destroyed. The men must keep together and well in hand, and once in the city it must be destroyed, and Jeff Davis and Cabinet killed."²³

Halbach reported that he turned the papers over that afternoon to Lieutenant James Pollard of the Ninth Virginia Cavalry, who passed them on to Major General Fitzhugh Lee. Lee delivered them to President Davis, and then to Adjutant General Cooper for safekeeping.²⁴

When Davis released the Dahlgren papers to the Richmond press, the city roared demands for reprisal. The *Examiner* predictably blamed what had almost happened on "the milk-and-water spirit in which this war has hither to been conducted." It demanded that the captured raiders be executed as criminals, and that retaliation be ordered against the Union "with the most punctual exactitude."²⁵

In a heated cabinet meeting, most of Davis's circle urged that at least some of the raiders be put to death as a warning to the Federals. Davis resisted and was backed up by Robert E. Lee, whose son was still in Yankee hands. As George Bagby put it: "Secretary Seddon was in favor of hanging the whole party, but as his voice was only so much idle wind, it amounted to nothing, and the president's rose-water counsels prevailed."²⁶

At Libby Prison the captured raiders were locked below with the first black Union soldiers brought to Richmond, taken in skirmishing near Williamsburg. A sympathetic Yankee upstairs wrote that the smoke and stench in the basement from pine cooking fires and sewers was so stifling that those prisoners sometimes had to lie flat in order to breathe. The recaptured Colonel Rose carved a hole in the flooring above and dropped down playing cards, telling the raiders to turn a king face-up on their table when the guard was not looking. Then he fed cornbread and substitute coffee down to them through a funnel made from a broken bottle.²⁷

The Dahlgren papers had personalized the war between Lincoln and

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Davis in a way unseen before, and Washington's claim that they were falsified made no impression in the South. True, the written exhortations to kill Davis and his cabinet were so blatant that any prudent officer would hesitate to carry them on such a hazardous mission. But Dahlgren, who had lost a leg to the Rebels, was an impetuous cavalryman not yet 22 years old. When Lee sent photographs of the papers to Meade and asked if they represented official Union policy, Meade, of course, said no. Dahlgren's speech was never delivered to his command, and his orders apparently never issued as written, so those who rode with him insisted that they were false.

Dahlgren's father, the admiral, later asserted that in one place in the papers his family name was misspelled, which proved that the documents were counterfeit. But examination of the original showed that the apparent misspelling was caused by ink soaking through from the opposite side of the sheet. Though debate over the papers' validity would run on into the twentieth century, the weight of evidence suggests that they were indeed genuine.^{*28}

* * *

From the outset, many in the South believed that Abraham Lincoln had personally provoked the war, and he was blamed for each escalation of casualties and cruelty. Regardless of who had written the Dahlgren papers' words about killing Davis and his cabinet, those words raised official and popular anger. Already there had been the fire set in Davis's cellar, the rifle shot that sang past his ear, the aborted Wistar raid, and copious rumors of plots. Together with all this, the papers taken from the slain young colonel convinced Davis that Lincoln and Stanton had approved a new level of warfare—including arson, pillage, and assassination.

Well before these threats to his person, Davis and his advisers had approved covert operations to encourage the antiwar underground in the North. In February the Confederate Congress authorized \$5 million for

*Among the minor clues to this effect is an anonymous "Memoranda of the War" held by the Virginia Historical Society, which quotes Custer himself as denying Federal claims that the Dahlgren papers were forged or altered. Custer allegedly said that the night before he and Dahlgren parted, Dahlgren told him "that he would not take Pres. Davis & his cabinet, but would put them to death, and that he would himself set fire to the first house in Richmond and burn the city. He, Custer, did not think this purpose right."²⁹

John C. Babcock, one of Pinkerton and Sharpe's key intelligence operatives in and out of Richmond, was closely involved in planning the raid though he opposed it. In his effects at the Library of Congress is a note saying, "Letters found on Dahlgren's body published in Richmond papers. Authentic report of contents."³⁰