

ANDERSONVILLES *of the* NORTH

THE MYTHS AND REALITIES OF NORTHERN TREATMENT
OF CIVIL WAR CONFEDERATE PRISONERS

JAMES M. GILLISPIE



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INTRODUCTION

IN 1998, JAMES MCPHERSON OBSERVED in *Writing the Civil War* that while the Civil War has been and continues to be the most written-about event in American history, a remarkably small percentage of the literature has focused on the prisoner of war issue. Since that time, about a dozen books on this topic have been published, though rarely by academic presses. This relative dearth of writing on the subject may reflect the belief that William Best Hesselstine's seminal work, *Civil War Prisons: A Study in War Psychology* (1930), set such a high standard that there was little meaningful to add. More likely it reflects an understandable reluctance to tackle a subject that remains highly controversial nearly 150 years after the war ended. Whatever the reason, writing on this topic, whether by lay historians or Ph.D.-holding scholars, has rarely shed new light on it or attempted to offer a new interpretation of prisoner of war policies and life inside the war's camps. My intention is to offer a book that does offer a new perspective on Northern POW policies and how Federal officials treated Confederate captives during the Civil War.

From the end of the war until Hesselstine's book appeared, Union officials had been characterized as horribly inhumane when it came to their treatment of Confederate prisoners. Because of a basic lack of Christian compassion in Yankee DNA, postwar Southerners argued, conditions in Federal prisons were excessively harsh and deadly. According to writers from the Lost Cause era, Confederate prisoners were thrust into crowded and filthy pens where they were systematically denied adequate food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. Since Union officials had the resources to provide all of these things but cruelly chose not to, Southern prisoners suffered and died in huge numbers.

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Hesseltine took a much more objective view of the situation. While he did think that given the North's resources mortality in Union prison camps was too high, he did not attribute it to some congenital defect in Northerners' basic character. Rather, he suggested they denied vital resources to Confederate prisoners because they suffered from what he called a "war psychosis." After being bombarded with prison atrocity stories by the Northern press, officials decided in 1864 to initiate a retaliation program where supplies such as food and medicine were withheld as a way to dish out to Southern prisoners the same treatment that Union prisoners were believed to be receiving at places like Belle Isle in Richmond and Andersonville in Georgia. Northern officials were not evil, they were misguided.

Since Hesseltine's still-valuable book, there has been a noticeable trend back towards characterizing Northern officials as cruel, vindictive, and negligent in their prisoner of war policies. This has been most true of books published by non-academic presses but university professors have also tended to condemn Federal prison officials and policies as callous and unnecessarily harsh in their writing. In the 1960s one scholar described Union officials as acting towards Southern prisoners with "sadistic apathy." In 2005 the most recent scholarly treatment of this issue, *While in the Hands of the Enemy*, was published by the prestigious LSU Press. In this prize-winning book, Charles Sanders breaks with past writers in that he holds both governments responsible for deplorable conditions in their prisons. But, like virtually every other work, this one is particularly hard on Northern officials. Sanders concludes that by the middle of the war, and especially during its final year, Union policies were "deliberately designed to lower conditions in the camps and increase immeasurably the suffering of the prisoners."

The literature has been almost uniformly negative in its assessment of Federal prison policies and treatment of Confederate prisoners of war. But there have been a couple of books published within the last decade that have broken with this well-established image of cruel and negligent Yankee keepers. In 2000 Northern Illinois University Press published *Rebels at Rock Island* by Benton McAdams. This excellent study of a notorious Northern prison acknowledged that life there was difficult and potentially deadly. But while showing that life there was hard, McAdams did not find any compelling evidence of a Federal conspiracy to lower conditions there. That same year Dale Fetzer and Bruce Mowday's study of Fort Delaware, *Unlikely Allies: Fort Delaware's Prison Community in the Civil War*, was

published by Stackpole Books. Like McAdams, these authors show that life there was difficult but find little to indicate that Northern officials systematically mistreated prisoners or denied them adequate food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. These two studies are quite good and offer a very different perspective on Northern prison policies, but they have had little effect (if the writing done since their publication is any indication) on altering or revising the long held, wholly negative image of Union prison policies.

This book argues that the most reliable evidence, wartime records and Southern diaries, supports McAdams' and Fetzer and Mowday's less negative characterization of Federal prison policies and treatment of Confederate prisoners. There is a mountain of eyewitness testimony from former prisoners testifying to how Union officials starved, beat, and generally abused them every chance they got. But as I argue in the first two chapters, postwar writing done about the Civil War's prisons should almost never be taken at face value as reliable primary source evidence. Both Northerners and Southerners in the half-century or so following the war exploited this issue for personal, political, and social reasons. Rarely does one find a postwar narrative, whether it be about Andersonville or Rock Island, that reads like a dispassionate attempt to accurately portray what life was like as a prisoner during the Civil War. The overwhelming majority, from both regions, are virulent polemics that often conflict with wartime records and diaries. I have, therefore, chosen not to rely on eyewitness testimony written after 1865.

Rather I have chosen to rely more heavily on the *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion* and the *Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion*. These "Northern" sources have their problems but they are far less flawed than postwar narratives. While Union records may not always fully acknowledge the defects in Northern prisons, they also were not intended for popular consumption or created to make sure Union officials came off looking better to historians after the war. Significantly, Southern diaries, more reliable because they were private and not written to achieve any particular agenda, tend to support rather than undermine the Northern wartime records. Thus, this study relies exclusively on wartime sources as the most reliable available.

What these records reveal is that Union policies towards Confederate prisoners were more humane than commonly thought. One of the most important misconceptions about Federal prison policies is that the United States suspended the exchange agreement that existed between the two governments in the spring of 1863 solely out of military self interest. The

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records clearly show that this decision was prompted by Confederate policies regarding black Union soldiers. When the United States chose to utilize African Americans, the Davis administration responded by declaring that blacks were not legitimate soldiers and if captured they would be treated as either recovered property or as insurrectionists liable to summary execution. Davis and Confederate officials had the right to make any laws they liked regarding African Americans. If they chose not to use black soldiers, that was their right; it was also the right of the United States to utilize this manpower source if they chose. Union officials were violating no law and the notion that they were somehow bound to prosecute the war to suit their enemy's tastes is preposterous. Having chosen to use black soldiers, the United States was obliged to protect them from enslavement and execution, punishments that were recognized by Western nations as illegitimate treatments of soldiers captured in battle. Records show clearly that Northern officials firmly and plainly made it clear to Confederate authorities that until Richmond was willing to recognize black Union soldiers as equally eligible as whites for exchange under the 1862 agreement the cartel would remain suspended.

Not only do the records show that Union authorities did not suspend the exchange cartel out of cold military calculation, but they also show that throughout the war officials generally acted with humanity towards Southern prisoners. In the fall of 1861 United States officials, with no real experience and few international laws to guide them, created a prison system with an officer to oversee it, something Richmond did not do until late in 1864. General Orders No. 100, issued in April 1863, formalized Northern prison policies and were considered humane and enlightened enough to become the model for international laws on the subject later in the century. An elaborate inspection system made sure that General Orders No. 100 was being complied with. Inspection reports and Southern diaries indicate that most of the time food, clothing, and shelter were adequate by the standards of the time. There were, of course, periods when these things were not adequately supplied but they appear to have been episodic rather than chronic or systematic. When it came to medical care, statistics show that Confederate prisoners were often more likely to recover from major killers like dysentery, smallpox, and pneumonia in a Union prison than at the South's largest medical center, Chimborazo Hospital in Richmond. Such evidence strongly suggests that the characterization of Federal officials as cruel, negligent, and sadistically apathetic towards Southern prisoners of war is in need of updating.

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Given the highly controversial nature of this topic it is necessary to be as systematic and thorough as possible or risk being pilloried for selective use of the evidence. I have done mini studies of the North's nine major prisons to determine how closely General Orders No. 100 was complied with, placing particular emphasis on the food, clothing, shelter, and medical issues in them. The ultimate result is, I think, a book that significantly broadens our understanding of how Union officials dealt with prisoners during the Civil War. However, that approach is necessarily repetitive and does sacrifice readability, something I hope the reader will understand and forgive.

As a final word of introduction to this study, this attempt to revise and update the image of Federal officials in this area is most emphatically *not* intended to be an apologist piece. Far too often revisionist works go too far, becoming so fixated on revising or updating an existing interpretation that they swing too far in the opposite direction. Ultimately the revised interpretation is often just as distorted and inaccurate as the original model. I have tried to avoid that pitfall here; the reader will have to be the ultimate judge, of course. But I do not argue or even remotely suggest that conditions in Northern prisons during the Civil War were anything other than difficult and dangerous. Prisoners' barracks were often drafty, damp places with leaky roofs; food quality and quantity were not always what they ought to have been; the camps were unsanitary breeding grounds for all sorts of diseases; and Northern officials often took too long to fix serious problems in their prisons. What this book does propose is that difficult living conditions do not by themselves constitute proof of systematic negligence and cruelty and that the most reliable evidence available seriously undermines the widely held idea that Union officials conspired to make their prisons as horrible and deadly as possible. Even if the reader does not accept the idea that the Yankees were considerably more humane and reasonable in their treatment of Confederate prisoners than commonly thought, this author hopes he/she will accept that the traditional, well-established image of cruel Northern keepers can no longer stand alone as *the* interpretation of Northern policies toward and treatment of prisoners during the Civil War.

- 1 -

SERVANTS OF THE DEVIL AND JEFF DAVIS

THE NORTHERN VERSION OF THE POW EXPERIENCE,
1865-1920

ON APRIL 9, 1865, GENERAL ROBERT E. LEE surrendered the South's principle army and best hope for victory to General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House in Virginia and signaled the beginning of the end of the Confederacy. Northerners everywhere were jubilant. The Civil War, which was not supposed to last so long or cost so much in lives and treasure, was finally, mercifully, over. What was not over, what in fact was only beginning, was the work of explaining to themselves, and more importantly, to future Americans, what this late conflagration meant and symbolized. Northern veterans began writing and talking about their experiences in the greatest event in American history since the Revolution almost as soon as the guns fell silent. Between 1865 and 1920 Northern writers churned out a massive body of work about the Civil War. Accounts of battles are, of course, numerous but many veterans also focused on the other aspects of soldier life—camp life, marches, forms of recreation, and the like. One area that received close attention was how Northern soldiers suffered in Confederate military prisons.

Postwar prison narratives written by Northerners between 1865 and 1920 were universally negative. When reading narratives from this era, one discovers quickly that regardless of when written they are virtually indistinguishable from each other. In fact, one will even occasionally find the same illustrations used in different books. Generally the researcher finds several charges leveled against the South. Confederates murdered Federal prisoners

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in cold blood on a regular basis. Union prisoners were improperly fed, when they were fed at all, and Southern authorities denied them adequate shelter from the elements. Vicious dogs, usually associated with Andersonville, tracked down escapees, mauling them for Confederates' amusement. Finally, guards tortured prisoners by various devices such as suspension by the thumbs and the use of cat o' nine tails.

Most of the postwar writing pertaining to Confederate prison life (and death) is set in the notorious Andersonville in Georgia. Books and articles set in other Southern facilities like Richmond's Libby Prison and Belle Isle in the James River and Salisbury in North Carolina do exist but they were far less popular than those using Andersonville as settings. Even before the war ended, Andersonville had gained a reputation with the Northern public as a black hole of suffering and death. Hanging its commandant, Henry Wirz, as a brutal war criminal gave such impressions the stamp of legitimacy. With Andersonville "proven" to have been a uniquely ghastly place by late autumn 1865, it is not surprising that writers would choose it as the setting for books and articles for the next half-century. These stories placed prisoners on the same plane as veterans who could tell more stories of combat; they proved that a morally corrupt element in the country had been vanquished; and they sold well too.

The notion of cruel Rebel jailors acting on orders from Jefferson Davis and other high-ranking Confederate officials did not emerge from thin air after Appomattox. During the war both sides had accused each other of inhumane treatment of prisoners. Many Northerners became convinced that Union prisoners were mistreated when newspapers published atrocity propaganda during the war's first year as a means of putting pressure on the Lincoln administration to do something to get Northern soldiers out of Confederate hands. Lincoln had been reluctant to negotiate a formal exchange agreement at the time out of fear that doing so would give the Richmond government official recognition, thus opening the door for European recognition and aid. An official exchange cartel was worked out in July 1862 and operated until its suspension in June 1863. From that point on, prison populations increased and stories of Confederate cruelty again became common.

In time of war any and all negative propaganda about one's enemy is generally accepted as unvarnished truth. It also usually follows that the actions of one's own government and soldiers during wartime are perceived as above reproach. Such was certainly the case with the prison issue. Northerners believed that their government ran spa-like resorts for

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Confederate prisoners while officials in Richmond fiendishly plotted new ways to increase suffering and death among Union prisoners. Veteran and ex-prisoner Alva C. Roach, writing at the war's close, offers a good example of the average Northerners' opinion about how prisoners of war were treated during the Civil War. "While our men in Southern prisons were dying from starvation and exposure, the rebels in Northern prisons fared sumptuously every day; had good quarters, . . . and received the respect and civility due them as prisoners of war." Roach's claims of Southern cruelty were far from new or unusual. A year earlier, in the spring of 1864, some of the sickest prisoners the South held were paroled by special agreement and sent by flag-of-truce boat to Annapolis, Maryland. Being the worst cases, these parolees were in shockingly poor physical condition; some would live barely a month after their release.¹

Federal officials were on the scene or arrived shortly after the prisoners' arrival to view their condition and gather first-hand evidence of conditions in Confederate prisons. One of these officials was the chairman of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, Benjamin Wade. What Wade saw understandably horrified and angered him. Many, he commented had "literally the appearance of living skeletons, many of them nothing but skin and bone." Such specimens were not the unfortunate but inevitable by-products of war; these men were reduced to their wretched state, Wade concluded, by wicked, premeditated policy.²

Wade, and other Union officials on hand, were mistaken in their conclusion that the 1864 parolees were victims of Confederate cruelty, but under the circumstances it seemed to be the obvious one. Wade scoffed at Southern claims that Union prisoners were fed the same rations as Southern soldiers. How, he asked, was it possible for rations to reduce sedentary Northerners to the state of emaciation he witnessed at Annapolis while the same rations fortify "the rebel soldiers [sufficiently]...to make long and rapid marches and to offer a stubborn resistance in the field[?]" The Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, did not think the claim that Northern captives starved on the same rations that Southern soldiers seemed to thrive on made much sense either. Even allowing that the Annapolis parolees were the worst cases, Stanton concluded that Union men in Confederate hands were not getting all they were entitled to. He spoke for most Northern officials that spring when he said that there must exist "a deliberate system of savage and barbarous treatment and starvation, the result of which will be that few, if any of the prisoners . . . will ever again be in a condition to ren-

der any service, or even to enjoy life.” These official ideas about Confederate prison policies did not change after the shooting stopped.³

Government officials from Washington were not the only ones to investigate and report on the Annapolis prisoners. The United States Sanitary Commission was in Maryland that spring as well. The Commission’s report, published in 1864, confirmed what the newspapers had been printing regularly for at least a year and reinforced officials’ conclusions about Southern barbarity towards Union prisoners. The same commission, in a separate investigation in Annapolis of Southern treatment of prisoners, drew the same conclusion. “The best picture cannot convey the reality, nor create that startling and sickening sensation which is felt at the sight of a human skeleton, with the skin drawn tightly over its skull, and ribs, and limbs, weakly turning and moving itself, as if still a living man!” Repeating Wade’s query, the Commission asked, “what other deduction can be drawn, than that all was a premeditated plan, originating somewhere in the rebel counsels for destroying and disabling the soldiers of their enemy, who had honorably surrendered in the field.” The report was never amended and stood as powerful proof of Confederate cruelty in the decades after 1865.⁴

Without a doubt, though, the most decisive act cementing images of Southern barbarity in Northern minds was the trial and execution of Henry Wirz. Union officials would have preferred to try the Confederate prison head, General John Winder, but he had died of natural causes the preceding February. In July 1865 the *New York Times* helped sustain the popular desire to hold someone or some group responsible for Southern prison policies. “The assassins of the president disposed of, the Government will next take in hand the ruffians who tortured to death thousands of Union prisoners. The laws of civilized warfare must be vindicated; and some expiation must be exacted for the most infernal crime of the century . . .” The following month the *New York Tribune* expressed the opinion; “It is very certain that our soldiers in Southern military prisons were treated with a degree of inhumanity and barbarity that finds no parallel in modern civilization.” Another Northerner railed that Andersonville’s and other prisons’ horrors were directly attributable to “some general design upon the part of the rebel Government . . .” It was in this vengeance-laden atmosphere that Wirz (and through him the South) went on trial before a Northern military tribunal. Little wonder that Andersonville’s most recent and best historian has noted that, “Wirz was a dead man from the start.”⁵

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One of the first books published after the war detailing Union prisoners' suffering at Andersonville was *The Demon of Andersonville or, The Trial of Wirz*, an abridged, newspaper-style recounting of the trial filled with "evidence" of Southern depravity as personified by Wirz. The book's title page sends the clear message that Wirz was not of this world, but was from an evil nether region. The page sports a color illustration of Wirz in an oval frame with a malevolent glare on his face. Behind the frame is a winged demon with long nails, a barbed tail, and an evil grin. According to the book, it was Wirz's demonic qualities that made him Richmond's choice to run Andersonville. Confederate authorities knew that such a heartless individual would ensure that Yankee prisoners suffered terribly and died in large numbers. General Winder, readers discover, wrote Wirz during the war to tell him, "he was wanted to torture and murder at his discretion the Union soldiers whose fate it was to be captured by the rebels." Wirz, being the fiend that he was, eagerly accepted the position.

Those delving into *The Demon of Andersonville's* "evidence" learned how Southern leaders such as Winder and their henchmen "perfected the plan of murdering the Union soldiers . . . by starvation, by overcrowding, and by exposure to all weathers." Accusations of cold-blooded murder were common in this book and would be repeated numerous times, sometimes verbatim, over the subsequent half-century. In one instance a one-legged wretch pleaded pitifully with Wirz to be let out of the stifling stockade for a little fresh air. Wirz's response was, "Shoot the one-legged Yankee devil!" According to the author, a sentinel eagerly complied by blowing part of the prisoner's head off. When authorities hanged Wirz in November 1865, the event, according to this particular book, and in the North's collective imagination, "ended the career of a faithful servant of the Devil and Jeff Davis." *The Demon of Andersonville's* tone and wild accusations were echoed in numerous memoirs and other writing by Northerners between 1865 and 1920.⁶

Far and away the most common specific charge made against the South's prison camps after the war was that the guards routinely shot prisoners without provocation. One former prisoner wrote, "The guards appear delighted to receive orders [to shoot prisoners] and seem to find real consolation in having the privilege of firing upon us on the most trivial pretext. A thirst for blood seems to characterize them." Published shortly after the war, A. O. Abbott's *Prison Life in the South* revealed how cruelly trigger-happy Southern prison personnel were. While on the way to prison, the train stopped, at which point one poor prisoner stepped out of line to

relieve himself and was shot. In his 1865 book, Gilbert Sabre reported that at Belle Isle Union men were shot down for singing patriotic songs. Warren Lee Goss told readers in his 1869 memoir: "Frequently the guard fired indiscriminately into a crowd." At the end of the century another ex-prisoner reported that "prisoners were shot down in cold blood at Macon and Columbia, simply because some of the guards wanted to kill a 'Yankee'." Another claimed in 1912, "Prisoners were frequently shot without cause by the rebel officers and guard, in a spirit of malice or as a vindictive display of power, and often the act was accompanied by the language of hatred and sometimes . . . of levity."⁷

Often one finds the allegation that prison officials rewarded sentinels with furloughs or promotions for killing defenseless Yankees. Robert H. Kellogg, who testified at the Wirz trial and became something of a professional Andersonville survivor in the postwar years, writing and speaking about his ordeals there, was among the first to allege that Southern keepers were rewarded for murdering prisoners. The guard who shot a captive, according to Kellogg, "receives a furlough as a reward for the very *virtuous deed* he has done." According to another, a guard murdered a prisoner and shortly after the incident the perpetrator had new sergeant's stripes, proving that murdering prisoners was rewarded rather than punished by the Confederate government.⁸

According to at least a few Northern writers after the war, armed guards were not the only personnel in Southern prisons doing their part to kill as many Yankees as possible. Some claimed that post surgeons were very active in furthering the Confederate policy to use prisons to incapacitate and murder Union captives. *The Demon of Andersonville* points out in several places that Southern surgeons injected prisoners with poison on the pretext of vaccinating them against the dreaded smallpox. One 1870 memoir claimed that not only were prisoners poisoned, but many were injected with a hereditary disease so that survivors of captivity would return to the North to weaken and kill Yankees for generations to come. Another ex-prisoner claimed shortly after the war that Andersonville doctors ran a "dissecting house" where they conducted "experiments" on human guinea pigs. No details about the "experiments" are provided, probably to allow Northern imaginations to supply images far more gruesome than anything the writer might have been able to conjure with mere words. One narrative must have horrified readers when they read that doctors at Andersonville performed amputations on fully conscious prisoners for fun, not because such terrifying operations were necessary.⁹

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Charges that Southern surgeons actively participated in programs to actually induce death were less common than the accusation that sick and wounded prisoners were ignored and/or mistreated. John Lynch of the 13th New York Cavalry painted a very nasty picture of Andersonville's medical personnel. They strolled through the stockade, Lynch said, "apparently more with the view of enjoying the sufferings of their victims than to prescribe for their relief." Augustus Hamlin wrote that Confederate doctors "gloated over the distresses of their fellow men, and delighted in the awful destruction of life which was branding with eternal infamy the manhood of their nation." The notion that a government would permit, even encourage, its doctors to neglect and mock sick and wounded prisoners was truly reprehensible and a good indication of how morally bankrupt the Confederate cause truly was.¹⁰

To have been murdered by a guard or a surgeon was a terrible fate to be sure, but some Northern writers pointed out that at least such deaths were generally quick. Lessel Long expressed the opinion that it "would have been doing many a poor boy a good service if they had . . . drawn [the prisoners] up in a line and shot them, instead of torturing them by the slow process of starvation and exposure." Speaking at the ceremony to dedicate the memorial to Pennsylvania's dead at Andersonville in 1909, General E. A. Carman echoed Long, saying that the "soldier who is struck down to death or wounds in battle is to be envied when compared with the slow death of exposure and starvation." In *Harper's Pictorial History of the Great Rebellion* readers discovered that thousands of helpless Union prisoners, "from weakness induced by starvation, became idiots." Henry Hernbaker, a member of the 107th Pennsylvania concluded while at Belle Isle that Richmond's policy "respecting us seemed to be to unfit us as much as possible for future service, and in order to secure this object the more speedily, they cut down our scant half rations to one-half the usual quantity. Death began to reap a rich harvest . . ." An Andersonville survivor in the mid-1870s said rations at Andersonville were as follows:

One day we received nearly a pint of black stock beans, cooked with a good mixture of worms, hulls, husks, etc., etc., nothing else; next day we were given a small piece of coarse corn bread, poorly baked, with sometimes about two ounces of rotten beef with sometimes a little salt.¹¹

Not only were Northern prisoners allegedly denied medical care and adequate food as a matter of Southern policy, cruel Confederate officials, especially at Andersonville, denied them shelter from the elements. At

Andersonville, one survivor reported, all the trees that could have afforded some protection from the summer heat were cut down in order to increase prisoners' discomfort. There were plenty of trees that could have been cut down and given to the prisoners to make shelter with at places like Andersonville but having the inmates bake in the sizzling Southern sun and shiver on cool, damp nights was all part of the diabolical Confederate plot to weaken and kill prisoners of war. George Russell recounted for an 1886 Grand Army of the Republic audience that a lot of the prisoners at Andersonville "had no shelter at all" and had to "lay [lie] down on the pitiless earth at night with no other covering than the clothing on their backs, few of them having any blankets, chilled at night and scorched by the heat by day" Another claimed that the sun was "scorching hot here, and having nothing to protect us from its burning rays, the whole upper surface of our feet would become blistered" John Lynch guessed that at Andersonville, due to evil Richmond policies, "fully 80 per cent. of the prisoners had no protection from sun or storm." To have refused to provide even rudimentary shelter at Andersonville, where plenty of building material existed and where, according to one writer, the temperatures routinely reached between 120 and 140 degrees was truly a sign of barbaric character.¹²

Postwar critics also alleged that Confederate officials chose prison sites that were most likely to increase Union prisoners' misery and mortality. One declared that Belle Isle in Richmond "seemed to have been chosen for its capability of adding to the wretchedness to which our brave men were compelled to submit. The ground was low, wet, and flat, and calculated to breed every character of fatal diseases." Ambrose Spencer maintained that Southern officials chose Andersonville's location because the stream that ran through the stockade and served as the prisoners' water supply was "well known in that country [to be] the prolific parent of disease and death" One Andersonville survivor given to colorful expression described the same stream as "a serpent, breathing death, its mouth full of corrosive poison."

General Winder was well aware of the stream's potential for destruction, according to many Northern writers, and deliberately put Union prisoners in the position of having to rely on a disease-ridden water supply or go without. One ex-Andersonville inmate alleged that Winder had remarked in 1864, "I am going to build a pen here that will kill more Yanks than can be destroyed at the front. That marsh in the center of the pen will help kill them mighty fast." Another quote attributed to Winder in an 1866 piece reads: "I will make a pen here for the d—d Yankees, where they will rot faster than they can be sent!" Twenty-one years later another ex-prisoner

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claimed Winder said: “We are doing more for the Confederacy here in getting rid of the Yanks, than twenty of Lee’s best regiments at the front.” How prisoners would have been privy to Winder’s conversations is never mentioned and, in all likelihood, never questioned by the readers who were eager for “evidence” to support their belief that the Confederate cause had been morally bankrupt with no redeeming characteristics whatsoever.¹³

In addition to murder, starvation, exposure, and neglect in pens specifically chosen for and designed to maximize suffering and death among Northern prisoners, readers of prison narratives between 1865 and 1920 learned that systematic torture was part of the Southern prison experience. Having been used to abusing slaves, the theory went, Southerners were hardened to human suffering. Consequently they routinely subjected Northern captives to thumb screws and beatings with leather whips. Prisoners were also subjected to the excruciating torture of having their thumbs tied behind their backs and being lifted several inches off the ground with all the prisoner’s weight pulling on the thumbs. One prisoner claimed to have seen a fellow prisoner at Andersonville “hung by the thumbs for two hours, nearly killing him for trying to get a little something to eat.” Not all postwar prison narratives go into the grisly details of how prisoners were tortured by fiendish rebels, but many do use the term “torture,” leaving no doubt in the reader’s mind that Union prisoners were abused physically as a matter of Confederate policy during the Civil War.¹⁴

Many Northerners considered Southern slaveholders’ use of dogs to track down runaway slaves particularly uncivilized and cruel. Thanks largely to the description in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of Eliza attempting to escape across the ice-choked Ohio River with her baby clutched to her breast as hounds brayed after her, nipping at her heels, this theme fit nicely into postwar prison horror tales. Numerous memoirs and books exploited this image to great effect, describing Southern keepers and their fiendish hell-hounds chasing down and mauling Union prisoners. One writer claimed he saw a returning escapee who “was badly torn by [the dogs], and was so weak he could scarcely stand up. He was sent to the hospital that night, where he died from his wounds” Northern readers also learned from these narratives that Wirz was not exactly upset when a prisoner or group of prisoners made a break for freedom. On the contrary, he purportedly enjoyed escapes, viewing them “as a relaxation from the monotony of his [ordinary] torturing.” For Wirz, taking out the dogs to hunt human prey was a delightful and regular diversion. This particular theme worked so well in postwar accounts of Andersonville that some have scenes of

fleeing prisoners in rags being chased and/or torn to pieces stamped on the covers or title pages.¹⁵

While these narratives make fascinating reading, they are not particularly useful as primary source material regarding life in Confederate prison camps during the Civil War. In the overwhelming number of cases, they were written to achieve one or a combination of objectives, which seldom included a desire to provide posterity with an unbiased, objective reporting of the Union prisoner's experience. William Marvel has recently discussed the unreliability of postwar accounts of Andersonville, describing them as full of exaggerations and often offering tales that either lack wartime corroborating evidence or contradict existing wartime records. Social, political, economic, and personal concerns among Northerners, especially veterans, drove Northern writing and played significant roles in shaping how the Union prisoner of war experience was portrayed by the victors. An examination of these factors offers a fascinating and revealing picture of how important the Civil War, or more precisely, the manipulation of its memory, was to postwar Northerners.¹⁶

For Northerners, victory in the war vindicated antebellum claims of moral and cultural superiority over the benighted South. As one historian has noted, "The final defeat of [the Confederacy] allowed the Yankees to . . . proclaim again their superiority in matters of war, leadership, and culture." Indeed, Northerners fully expected their defeated foemen to offer "a complete repudiation not only of what had been southern mores and beliefs, but also of all that allegiance to the Confederacy implied." White Northerners, like most Americans at the time, entered the war viewing it within a millennial framework—an Old Testament-style trial by ordeal of good versus evil. One Northern minister used that very term, describing the Union as the "New Israel . . . going through the Apocalypse on its way to the millennium, the Kingdom of God on earth."

The message emanating from Northern pulpits just prior to and during the war had been loud and clear: the war was a holy crusade against heretics. Ministers such as Henry Ward Beecher told Unionist listeners not to fear the war because God would intervene on the North's behalf because its cause was the righteous one. "Our only fear," he railed, "should be lest we refuse God's work. He has appointed this people, and our day, for one of those world-battles on which ages turn. Ours is a pivotal period. The strife is between . . . a wasting evil and a nourishing good; between *Barbarism and Civilization*." Dr. Edward Everett Hale told listeners in 1862: "We are to introduce into the South and Southwest, new men, new

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life, and a higher civilization.” Reverend Daniel C. Eddy told one audience, “Argue as we may, our Southern people are a different race . . . Slavery has barbarized them, and made them a people with whom we have little in common.” Prison horror narratives were designed as much as anything else to fit into that prevailing attitude.¹⁷

In much postwar writing done by Northerners, each government’s treatment of its captives (in addition to military victory) proved that the righteous and honorable cause had prevailed. Northern victory achieved more than simply quelling an internal rebellion; it had triumphed over a truly corrupt, inhumane society. In the postwar world, as Marvel has noted, “Andersonville came to signify all that was evil in the hated Confederacy.” This also explains why it was discussed so much more than Libby, Belle Isle, Salisbury, and other pens. Union prisoners did not suffer, according to these writers, because of a lack of resources or any other mitigating circumstance; they suffered and died because their jailors were truly barbaric, dishonorable, unchristian people. “[W]ho ever heard before,” A. O. Abbott asked in 1865, “of men who called themselves Christians coolly and on principle starving men to death for no other reason than that of fighting for their country?” One ex-prisoner claimed that Southerners were so morally and religiously perverted that they believed that “kindness shown to a Union prisoner was treason to God!” The terrible abuse and neglect of Northern prisoners was, one writer argued in 1886, “nothing but cold-blooded murder, premeditated from day to day, by these curses who were too low down in the scale to be classes in the human family.” The theme that the South’s mistreatment of defenseless non-combatants spoke loudly and clearly about the character of its citizens and its cause was a common one in postwar writing.¹⁸

Having heard from Southerners for at least twenty years before Lincoln’s election how much more chivalrous, honorable, and Christian they were than Yankees, Northerners seemed to really enjoy attacking that image using Andersonville terror tales for their ammunition. Alva Roach declared that far from being the gracious gentlemen they claimed to be, Confederate officials treated him and his comrades so badly that it “would disgrace the wild Arab of the Sahara.” Another survivor spoke for many when he said that Union experiences in Confederate prisons proved “Either the race of F.F.V’s [First Families of Virginia] have become sadly degenerated, or they were always inferior to the people of the North.” “The South boasted of its chivalry,” Lessel Long wrote in 1886, “and yet no tribe of savages was ever guilty of greater barbarity.” Another wrote that “The

southern press and southern orators have always laid stress upon the chivalrous character of their people. History places some of the greatest crimes of which the human family have been victims at the door of the world's chivalry." Andersonville, according to another, would stand as a monument "to the everlasting shame of those concerned, and to the detriment of the fair fame of the South, its chivalry and its humanity." "Not content," another commented, "to have been the cause of the most needless war ever waged, they have affiliated themselves with crimes which are revolting to every Christian civilization except that of the chivalrous slaveholding South." One ex-prisoner called the treatment dished out by Confederate prison personnel "defiant to the principles of Christianity," which he claimed was unknown in its true form south of the Mason-Dixon Line.¹⁹

When not using prison narratives to tear down the myth of Southern chivalry and gentlemanliness specifically, Northern writers expended a considerable quantity of ink arguing that this issue proved beyond all doubt that the Confederacy had been generally evil and devoid of any redeeming characteristics. "It seemed that the more bitter our anguish became," one former prisoner wrote, "the more delighted were our fiendish keepers." A Libby Prison survivor said, "the general inhuman treatment we received at the hands of those having us in charge were acts . . . unparalleled in the history of civilized warfare." Such assertions that the South waged a war that violated the rules of civilized war was one of the more common elements found in postwar Northern writing about Confederate prisons. Union prisoners endured, a writer for *The Atlantic Monthly* claimed, "insults, bitter and galling threats, exposure to scorching heat by day and to frosty cold at night, torturing pangs of hunger,—these were the methods by which stalwart men had been transformed into ghastly beings with sunken eyes and sepulchral voices." Southern prison policy, according to a Union veteran, "without exception, from Virginia to Texas, was one of stupendous atrocity." Ambrose Spencer informed readers that the "laws which regulate civilized warfare, and demand kind attention for those taken in arms—were intentionally and cruelly disregarded [by the Richmond government]." When Josiah Brownell entered the Andersonville gates, he said he viewed prisoners who had been "suffering every day misery and woe such as the Evil One himself need not have been ashamed to have imposed upon his subjects."²⁰

To further emphasize that the Civil War proved Northerners to be more honorable and chivalrous than their Southern brethren, much of the postwar writing juxtaposed life in Northern and Southern prisons. In a number of books and memoirs Confederate prisoners were supposedly

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treated with great care and humanity by Northerners. With the war scarcely over, one commentator argued that while “our men in Southern prisons were dying from starvation and exposure, the rebels in Northern prisons fared sumptuously every day; had good quarters,...and received the respect and civility due them as prisoners of war.” This same writer went so far as to compare the officers’ prison at Johnson’s Island in Ohio to “a first class hotel.” In the mid-1880s an ex-prisoner claimed that Union prisons were entirely free from “any complaint of inhumanity such as disgraced the cause of the Southern Confederacy.” Hoping in 1911 to help ensure that future generations had the facts, a former Camp Morton guard wrote that “our Government dealt with its prisoners with conscientious regard for life” and “abusive treatment of [Confederate prisoners] did not enter into the code of the Union soldier.” That Union prisoners did not receive any of the same “magnanimity” Southern prisoners were reportedly showered with made Confederate policies, and through them, the cause itself, seem that much more repugnant in Northern minds, which was rather the point.²¹

Gruesome tales of starvation and torture in the enemy’s prisons could also play an important role in making sure that current and future generations never forgot the enormity of Union veterans’ accomplishment in the Civil War. They had triumphed over a real evil in the country and in so doing had not merely maintained the Union that had existed in 1860 but had fought hard and suffered terribly to refashion the nation, passing on a new and improved version of it to their descendents. Veterans wanted, indeed they demanded, the gratitude of the country for their crusade, the success of which came at a tremendous amount of sacrifice. Nothing proved better at illustrating the courage, endurance, and patriotism of the Northern soldier of the Civil War than narratives of places like Andersonville. A generation with that level of devotion to God and country deserved, certainly in veterans’ eyes, a special and exalted place in society and history.

Two good studies of the Grand Army of the Republic, a powerful veterans’ lobby that emerged after the war, point out that many veterans did not think the nation was doing enough for its ex-crusaders. They expected preferential treatment for jobs and pensions as their due for services rendered in the fight of good over evil. They got no preference when it came to job security, however, and President Grover Cleveland vetoed a bill to expand the list of veterans eligible for federal pensions beyond those who had been physically disabled by combat. The GAR and other veteran advocacy groups organized to pressure the government for greater veterans’

benefits, especially pensions, which was an increasingly important goal as the war generation reached retirement age. The GAR and other groups encouraged ex-prisoners to relate their experiences to remind public officials in Washington that defeating the evil Confederacy deserved more rewards in the form of pensions and that having been starved and tortured in Rebel prisons was just as physically debilitating as having been hurt on the battlefield. One historian of the era's veteran organizations has noted that a "fascination with the sufferings of prisoners of war permeated the columns of the soldier papers, as indeed it permeated much of the nonveteran discourse about the war." To become a member of the GAR, in fact, the initiate had to kneel before a coffin on which was written the name of an Andersonville victim. It is no coincidence that the last two decades of the nineteenth century saw an explosion of Andersonville narratives. And these stories had their desired effect. One bill introduced in the House of Representatives in 1880 and endorsed by the National Ex-Prisoners of War Association would pay Union veterans who had spent up to six months in any Southern prison a pension of eight dollars per month; the amount would be nine dollars for those who had spent a year or more in such facilities. By the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century pension guidelines had been liberalized to the point that virtually any Union veteran who applied got one. In 1907, for example, one of every three dollars spent by the federal government was spent on veterans' pensions.²²

As veterans aged they thought not only about larger pensions but also about how the war years and their role in the great event of their lifetime would be remembered by later generations of Americans. They wanted to be remembered as grand heroes who had removed a diseased element from the nation. The emphasis on sectional reconciliation at the end of the century, though, threatened that interpretation. Northern veterans were not unwilling to extend the hand of friendship to ex-Confederates; the GAR even held joint reunions with former enemies. But they did not want handshakes and a general willingness to forgive the ex-Rebels to cause anyone then or later to forget which side had been wholly right and righteous and which wholly wrong and evil. Union veterans were particularly upset at the display of the Confederate flag all over the South as a sacred symbol and the return of dozens of captured flags to the South. A columnist for the *New York Tribune* captured that feeling well in 1881 when he wrote:

As ensigns of an unholy cause the Confederate flags are, and of right ought to be, odious to the eyes of loyalty; but as the exponents of manly daring, forti-

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tude, and devotion to an idea (although a wrong one) they are entitled to the respect of all men and well worthy the reverence of those who upheld them so bravely on the field of martial strife.

One veteran lamented that school textbooks were not doing their job at the end of the century to teach American children that the North had fought a righteous war against a sinful and traitorous enemy, being “content . . . to give the causes on each side which led up to the Rebellion, leaving the reader to his own conclusion as to the right or wrong of it.” The Northern cause and the Northern one alone deserved veneration and stories of Confederate-run prison pens like Andersonville were partly designed to remind the younger generation and those that would come after the veterans were long dead that the Southern cause had been wholly and utterly wrong.²³

Northern Republicans eagerly made prisoners’ suffering part of their “bloody shirt” campaigns, which were so much a part of the political landscape of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Republicans, with a great deal of help from the powerful and active GAR, successfully painted Democratic opponents, even those with solid war records, with the Confederate/Andersonville brush. During the 1868 election year, for example, one Republican partisan reminded a crowd that their choice was between patriotic saviors of the Union and “the late Confederate army of the South, and their more treacherous allies, the Copperheads of the North.” The GAR called Democrat and former Union general Francis P. Blair a “servant of the lost cause,” and denounced the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives of the 1870s as the “Confederate House.” Such allusions were quite damaging when being associated with the Confederacy in any way was to be associated with Davis, Wirz, and Andersonville.

In an attempt to garner the veteran vote, James G. Blaine roared in an early 1870s political debate that “neither the deeds of the Duke of Alva in the Low Countries, nor the massacre of Saint Bartholomew, nor the thumb screws and engines of torture of the Spanish Inquisition begin to compare in atrocity with the hideous crimes of Andersonville.” James Garfield, a former Federal officer, was yet another politician who recognized the political hay to be made by exploiting the prisoner of war issue along with other “bloody shirt” themes. While campaigning in Toledo, Ohio, in October 1879 he addressed a group of Andersonville survivors, praising the ex-prisoners as noble heroes while hinting that his opponent ran under the standard of those who had inflicted such suffering upon them in Georgia some fifteen years

earlier. "We can forgive and forget all other things before we can forgive and forget [Andersonville]." Of course the last thing Garfield wanted was for veterans and other voters to forget anything about the war that Republicans might find useful in pressuring voters to support them. John Lynch, an Andersonville survivor, railed that if you vote for Democrats "you mock the maimed forms of our numerous comrades throughout the land, and then, indeed you mock the spirits and mortal remains of the martyrs of Belle Island, Salisbury, Florence, and Andersonville."²⁴

Finally, hair-raising tales of prison misery served to place former inmates on the same heroic plane as other veterans who could boast of participating in exciting, historic battles. Former prisoners did not want to be remembered by later generations as soldiers who sat out the war (possibly because they ran from it) far from harm's way, contributing nothing significant to the grand crusade to preserve and purify the Union. When reading former prisoners' memoirs one is often reminded that Federal prisoners could have escaped their terrible suffering by taking the oath of allegiance to the Confederacy. Instead, they said bold and intensely brave things like, "You can starve my body, but you shall not stain my soul with treason!" In 1914 A. J. Palmer told a gathering of former prisoners and others at Belle Isle, a stop on their journey to Andersonville to dedicate the New York monument, "I look upon these comrades that have lain here in unmarked graves so long as the supreme heroes of the war. Every single one of them had a way to escape. All you had to do was to walk out to the gate and hold up you hands and say you were ready to take the oath of allegiance to the Confederacy, and you would have walked out scot free." He then asked rhetorically, "How many of them did it? In the city of Richmond, not eighty of them, all told, but six thousand of them lie dead about our feet *rather than do that.*" Martha A. I. Burdick wrote a poem for the Union prisoners that built on that theme, which read in part:

They died, and yet they might
have lived—
Might have escaped their awful
lot—
If they had bartered loyalty
for their release, but they would not.

Being a prisoner was thus just as honorable and brave as having endured the battlefields' perils, perhaps more so. Survivors' medals presented

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to the New Yorkers in 1914 had on one side an image of the infamous stockade with the noble words, “Death Before Dishonor” above it, making the point clearly that these prison veterans preferred risking a slow painful death to joining immoral traitors. One former prisoner argued that Andersonville “was the greatest battlefield of the war. On no other field is there any record of such mortality. As to those heroes who lived and died here in indescribable torment and misery, a grateful country will some day give credit due for unexampled loyalty under unexampled circumstances.” These New Yorkers were certainly not expressing any new views on the matter. Maine’s monument, for example, erected a decade earlier in 1904, reads: “In grateful memory of those heroic soldiers of Maine who died that the Republic might live, and of those who daring to live, yet survived the tortures and horrors of Andersonville Military Prison, 1864–1865.”²⁵

Exaggerating and fabricating tales of life in Southern prisons and then using them to pursue a variety of ends may have been very well and good for Federal veterans and Republican politicians, but white Southerners deeply resented Northerners’ manipulation of the prisoner of war issue to brand them, their region, and their cause as immoral, barbaric, and dishonorable. While condescending and insulting attitudes from the North were nothing new, former Confederates felt their sting more acutely in the wake of defeat. White Southerners reacted to postbellum insults as they had to the antebellum variety, by turning them on their heads. If Northerners would use the treatment of prisoners as the litmus test to prove which side embodied noble, Christian characteristics, Southerners would do the same. Between 1865 and 1920 Confederate veterans and other Southern writers put out their side of the prison issue, one where Confederate prisoners languished in a number of Northern Andersonvilles.

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APPENDIX A

RECOVERY RATES FROM DISEASE AT THE NINE MAJOR UNION PRISONS AND AT CHIMBORAZO HOSPITAL¹

Facility	Number of Diseases Treated	Number of Deaths from Disease	Recovery Rate
Johnson's Island	3,571	156	95.64%
Fort Delaware	43,571	2,199	94.96%
Alton	28,766	1,455	94.95%
Camp Douglas	68,809	3,929	94.29%
Camp Chase	23,946	1,739	92.74%
Chimborazo Hospital	23,849	2,717	88.61%
Rock Island	13,453	1,589	88.19%
Camp Morton	8,863	1,175	86.75%
Point Lookout	43,571	3,639	85.33%
Elmira	10,178	2,927	71.25%

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