

A Battle of Wills: Morale, Hope, and the Army of Northern Virginia during the
Last Year of the Civil War

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Abstract:

“A Battle of Wills” examines the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia during the final year of the American Civil War. By investigating the reactions to events such as battles and political happenings that occurred among the soldiers of the Confederacy’s primary army we can see how the end of the Civil War unfolded for these men. The Army of Northern Virginia was the Confederacy’s main hope for independence and the vehicle through which its identity flowed. Victory or defeat of that army would dictate the outcome of the Civil War. This thesis argues that by examining the fluctuations in morale, optimism, and hope among these soldiers through their letters and diaries, along with a proper historical context of when they were writing, can provide us a better understanding about the end of the Civil War. The ending was not predetermined or inevitable and this is evidenced in the writings of the soldiers of the Army of Northern Virginia during the final year of the war.

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General Audience Abstract

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by

Jeffrey A. Felton

History MA Thesis, 2019

Introduction:

A veteran in the 7th North Carolina Infantry, writing July 17, 1864 to his mother, shared the feelings of his comrades and their sense of how the Civil War in Virginia was progressing. This soldier had believed after the retreat from Gettysburg, Pennsylvania in July, 1863 many of his comrades would not re-enlist or ever invade the North again. “What a vast difference between then and now,” he wrote, “nearly every man is anxious to go there now.”¹ Another soldier, also writing in July, 1864 wrote that “we are in high spirits here, having no idea of getting whipped.”² Hindsight informs us that at this stage of the war the Confederacy was already doomed and the end of the war was nigh. Wouldn’t we expect these soldiers and others like them to be discouraged at the way the war was turning out? “A Battle of Wills” seeks to address this question and many others by looking at the final year of the Civil War through the eyes, emotions, and motivations of the soldiers of the Confederacy’s premier fighting force, the Army of Northern Virginia.

Many historians equate Confederate defeat with a loss of will, lack of nationalism, or internal dissent. This scholarship often looks backwards from April 9, 1865 when the Army of

¹ Joseph Joyner to mother, July 17, 1864, in Joyner Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill (afterwards, UNC).

² Jeffrey C. Lowe, and Sam Hodges, ed., *Letters to Amanda: The Civil War Letters of Marion Hill Fitzpatrick, Army of Northern Virginia* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998), 161.

Northern Virginia surrendered, to frame their studies of the army and the finality of the Civil War in Virginia. Historian Gary Gallagher argued that we must examine the evidence at the time it was written, looking forward not backward, and to avoid the “Appomattox Syndrome” of viewing the Civil War backwards from its end.³ As historian Reid Mitchell suggested in his study of Civil War soldiers, “to understand the Confederate soldier, one must move beyond sentimentality or simplistic class analysis to a realization of the complexities of the wartime experience.”⁴ This analytical movement is what “A Battle of Wills” seeks to achieve.

Historians arguing about why the Confederacy lost the Civil War have fallen into two lines of argument: the Confederacy lost due to internal reasons such as Confederate government policies, a lack of nationalism among white Southerners, the self- emancipation of slaves, or a lack of will to win, while the second argument relies on the assumption that the Confederacy lost on the battlefield or due to external reasons like the United States blockade of Southern ports and U.S. military victory.⁵ “A Battle of Wills” does not seek to explain how the Confederacy was defeated but to explore the ways in which Army of Northern Virginia soldiers dealt with fluctuating optimism and internal as well as external pressures. This thesis will reinforce the importance of contingency when applied to Confederate defeat argued by James M. McPherson.⁶

³ Gary Gallagher, “The Spring of 1864: A Season of Hope in the United States and the Confederacy,” Banner Lecture Series, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia, May 7, 2014.

⁴ Reid Mitchell, *Civil War Soldiers*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1988) 159.

⁵ For the lack of will interpretation see Richard E. Beringer, Herman Hattaway, Archer Jones, and William N. Still, Jr., *The Elements of Confederate Defeat: Nationalism, War Aims, and Religion* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1988). Historian James M. McPherson has argued against Beringer, et al and others that the Confederacy was not defeated by a lack of will or nationalism but by a *loss* of will. See James M. McPherson, “American Victory, American Defeat,” in Gabor S. Boritt, ed., *Why the Confederacy Lost*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). For arguments for battlefield defeat as cause of Confederate defeat see Gary Gallagher, *Confederate War*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) and Boritt, *Why the Confederacy Lost*. See Mark Grimsley and Brooks D. Simpson, ed., *The Collapse of the Confederacy*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001) for essays tackling how the war terminated for the Confederacy.

⁶ McPherson, in *Why the Confederacy Lost*.

Applying contingency will show that the end of the war was not a pre-determined outcome that included Confederate defeat.

The late 1990s saw an increase in new military history that has continued to expand. “A Battle of Wills” is also new military history that is influenced by the methodologies of several monographs that have sought to explore why soldiers fought during the Civil War. It seeks to further those discussions by examining the nuances of emotion, hope, optimism, and defeat among the soldiers of the principal Confederate army during the final year of the Civil War. Unlike studies of soldier motivations, “A Battle of Wills” focuses on the morale and emotional state of the Army of Northern Virginia. Noted historian James M. McPherson has argued that Civil War soldiers fought for ideological reasons. He further argued that Confederate soldiers lost the will to fight at the end of the war. Chandra Manning used McPherson’s methodology as well as focused on race in her study of why Civil War soldiers fought. She argued that Confederate soldiers continued to fight in order to maintain their racial and gendered hierarchical status. However, evidence suggests that during the last year of the war, Confederate soldiers’ emotions and morale were not explicitly tied to race. Jason Phillips’ analysis of diehard Confederates, those soldiers who believed Confederate armies were invincible, takes McPherson and Manning’s arguments further by examining the varied physical, ideological, and abstract reasons why Confederate soldiers fought to the end. This thesis examines not only the diehards but those who abandoned the army during the final year of the war. It also looks at morale and optimism as lenses to see who and why these diehards continued fighting and why others did not. J. Tracy Power has written on the multiple facets of life in the Army of Northern Virginia during the final year of the war.⁷ “A Battle of Wills” seeks to explore why soldiers of the Army of

⁷James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought the Civil War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War*, (New York:

Northern Virginia continued to fight based on their expressions of hope, optimism, and morale. This thesis is influenced particularly by Power's work, but seeks to focus on one aspect of life in the Army of Northern Virginia, namely the power of reactions to events and morale on the soldiers of the army.

Desertion scholarship also informs "A Battle of Wills." Desertion occurred for a variety of reasons among Confederate soldiers as soon as the war started. Historian Mark Weitz has argued that desertion occurred among many Confederates because of a sense of betrayal felt by the soldiers who trusted the Confederate government and the upper classes to hold to their promise to protect their families while they served in the army. Weitz argued that the deserters believed the Confederate government reneged or completely failed to keep their promises. Kenneth Noe's analysis of late enlisting Confederate soldiers argued that Confederate soldiers had a variety of reasons for joining the army after the initial rush to the colors. He further argued that late enlisting Confederates proved to be just as reliable soldiers as early volunteers.⁸ Many of the soldiers I use as evidence are late enlisting soldiers or conscripts. Inclusion of their thoughts and optimism (or pessimism) is also instructive as it shows that not all diehard soldiers in Lee's army joined during the 1861 *raige militaire*.

"A Battle of Wills" follows fluctuating emotions of the Army of Northern Virginia from June, 1864 - April, 1865 by exploring a number of themes such as desertion, morale, war weariness, elections, defeat, race, and emotions. Any study that investigates or traces the human emotion, or reaction to events must rely on the words of the participants. This study relies

Vintage Books, 2008), Jason Phillips, *Diehard Rebels: The Confederate Culture of Invincibility* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2007) and J. Tracy Power, *Lee's Miserables: Life in the Army of Northern Virginia from the Wilderness to Appomattox*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

⁸ Mark A. Weitz, *More Damning than Slaughter: Desertion in the Confederate Army*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005). Kenneth Noe, *Reluctant Rebels: The Confederates Who Joined the Army After 1861* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010). See also Ella Lonn, *Desertion During the Civil War*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).

exclusively on letters and diaries written by soldiers in the Army of Northern Virginia written between June, 1864 and April, 1865. I have not incorporated post-war reminiscences due to the tendency of these writings to contain inaccurate remembrances. The spelling and punctuation I have left as the soldiers wrote it. It can prove difficult to read at times but I chose to leave spelling and grammar as they wrote it to illustrate how these men put words to paper and to show the differing forms of literacy among Lee's men. I chose to focus this thesis on the Army of Northern Virginia as it was the primary army of the Confederacy, the army that the Confederate people relied on to achieve independence, and the vehicle through which their hopes of national independence flowed.⁹ The Army of Northern Virginia had a record of victory which encouraged this faith. It is not the purpose of this study to judge what the soldiers wrote based on their intent as we may never know at this distance what their intentions were for writing or feeling a particular way. But it is the goal of "A Battle of Wills" to understand their feelings at the time they wrote them and place those feelings in proper historical context.

This study examines the men of the Army of Northern Virginia by looking at what they wrote at the time events were occurring. I have used the methodological framework of McPherson and Manning who examined thousands of letters and diaries written by thousands of soldiers in order to gain not a quantitative explanation but an example of the nuanced and changing emotions over the last year of the Civil War. One goal of this thesis is to let the soldiers of the Army of Northern Virginia speak for themselves. By placing the fluctuations in hope, optimism, and morale in the broader context of the events of 1864-1865 this thesis will examine whether their hopes were justified. The fall of Atlanta, Georgia and the Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1864 are given primary focus in terms of military events that affected morale.

⁹ See Gary Gallagher, *The Confederate War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

Political events such as the United States Presidential election and arming of slaves by the Confederacy are discussed and connected to military events. Through it all weaves the thread of desertion. Desertion, in hindsight, might seem to suggest that men were not dedicated to independence. In fact, men deserted for a variety of reasons and the act of desertion does not indicate a loss in belief in the Confederate cause. Desertion does, however, complicate the variety of hopes, expectations, optimism, and despondency, that influenced Lee's army.

Due to travel limitations I was not able to include examples from soldiers from every state. The majority of the examples I have used were written by soldiers primarily from North Carolina, Virginia, Georgia, and Alabama. I believe this to be a representative sample containing two deep South states and two upper South states. North Carolina and Virginia contributed the largest amount of men to the Confederacy, with Georgia and Alabama close behind. The samples come from both literate and illiterate enlisted men as well as officers of various ranks. I have tried to limit the use of high ranking general officer's accounts and to focus on the men in the ranks as they were the numeric majority of the army.

I argue that analyzing the reactions, hopes, optimism, and morale of the Army of Northern Virginia in the context of the final year of the Civil War, in their own words, shows us that Robert E. Lee's soldiers were not defeated, believed Union victory was not inevitable, and a belief that Confederate independence was achievable had some merit. Furthermore, by looking at these reactions and hopes in the context of events as they were occurring we can see that many soldiers believed that a separate Confederate nation was still achievable. I also argue that the fall of Atlanta, Georgia, in early September, 1864, while a significant commercial and transportation loss to the Confederacy, was not as devastating to the morale of Lee's army as we might expect. The Battles of Third Winchester and Fisher's Hill (September 19 and 22 respectively) had a

much greater impact on the psyche of the Army of Northern Virginia than has previously been asserted. These twin defeats were the first occurrence that significant portions of the Army of Northern Virginia had ever been completely routed from a battlefield. The impact of these defeats damaged the sense of invincibility among many of Lee's men, ensured the loss of the vital agricultural storehouse of the Confederacy, the Shenandoah Valley, and ensured the reelection of Abraham Lincoln and a prolongation of the war.

The significance of "A Battle of Wills" is that human emotions are complex and never finite. They change over time based on pressures both internal and external. "A Battle of Wills" is an important reminder for us to study events as they occurred and how individual actors' reactions to events shaped their actions. Sustained hope is a powerful motivating factor. Once hope is lost then a loss of will to continue in a particular endeavor is gone. In the case of many soldiers in the Army of Northern Virginia in the latter stages of the Civil War, this loss of hope directly corresponded with a loss of will to continue fighting and ultimately led to the end of the Civil War. This thesis seeks to complicate the narrative of the final year of the Civil War and to approach Army of Northern Virginia morale on its own terms.

Chapter One: "We have proven that we are able to whip Grant anywhere:' June 4 –

August 31, 1864."

June 4 – 12, 1864: End of the Overland Campaign

After the lopsided Confederate victory at Cold Harbor, Virginia, in early June, 1864, Private John D. Baughn, Company D, 45th North Carolina Infantry Regiment, candidly wrote his sister that the soldiers still “have a good deal of fighting to do yet we have no more prospects for peace than we had after the first Manassas fight [July 21, 1861].”¹⁰ Baughn, a 24 - year - old farmer from Mecklenburg, North Carolina,¹¹ cautioned his sister not to get too high or too low emotionally in terms of future prospects of victory. His warning exhibits one range of emotions felt by many soldiers serving in the Confederacy’s premier Army of Northern Virginia at the start of June, 1864. On the other hand, many more soldiers in the army felt that the Union was no closer to subjugating the Confederacy than it was in 1861, and that the army was still a potent fighting force.

From June 3 – August 31, 1864 many within the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia remained cautiously confident that the war was still winnable. During this period some soldiers were discouraged that the army was once again being pushed back to Richmond and Petersburg. Some were cautiously optimistic that if they could continue to do their job at holding back Grant, mowing down Yankees, and other Confederate armies could do something positive for the cause then yes, independence could be won and the war would conclude before the end of the year. Many of these same cautious men believed that if these holding patterns could continue until the Presidential election in the United States, then a peace candidate would likely be elected president and the war might cease with Confederate independence.

Confederate soldiers were well aware of the importance of the summer and fall campaigns and the effects their success or lack thereof would have on the political situation in the North as well as the South. Upcoming state gubernatorial and legislative elections in the

¹⁰ John Baughn to Martha Stone, June 12, 1864, in Baughn-Stone Family Papers, James I. Robertson Jr. Sesquicentennial Legacy Collection, Library of Virginia (afterwards, LVA).

¹¹ Jordan, Weymouth T., Jr., comp., *North Carolina Troops, 1861-1865: A Roster*, Vol. XI, 47.

South would also influence many soldiers feelings about whether it was worth continuing to fight. Many believed if the Army of Northern Virginia could sustain its positions then pro-war candidates would win. Ultimately, the majority of Lee's men wanted the war to end and to avoid being subjugated by the North. Their goal was an end to the war and an honorable peace which would establish their independence. Between June and the end of August, they had every reason to believe these ends were achievable and they recognized the means for achieving them would be accomplished by soldiers on the battlefield. In the minds of many of Lee's army the Confederacy was not on verge of collapse, the Army of Northern Virginia was not defeated, but on the contrary, to many, peace and Confederate independence were likely.

After a month of continuous marching, fighting, and maneuvering, the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia had been pushed back to the outskirts of the Confederate capital, Richmond, Virginia by Ulysses S. Grant's Union Army of the Potomac. Hindsight would indicate that this period marked the beginning of the end of Confederate hopes for independence. However, to many Confederate soldiers serving in the ranks of the Army of Northern Virginia the opposite was true. Though remaining in constant combat with Grant since early May, by the second week in June Confederate soldiers had inflicted ghastly casualties in horrific battles at the Wilderness, Spotsylvania Court House, and Cold Harbor. Grant lost around 60,000 men during the Overland campaign yet his Confederate adversary was still fully capable of fighting despite casualties of over 30,000 men. These casualty figures shocked the Northern public and Northern war weariness was at an all-time high.

Noticing the disparity caused many in Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia to feel extremely confident that Grant could not defeat them, Richmond could not be taken, Abraham Lincoln most likely faced defeat in the Presidential election, and Confederate independence was

likely. Historian Aaron Sheehan-Dean argued that by fighting on the defensive, seeing large numbers of dead Yankees, and for Virginians, (literally) defending their homes, Confederate soldiers' morale was supremely bolstered and many believed these factors indicated God was still on their side.¹² A strong confidence in their own fighting abilities, belief in Lee, and a strong unit cohesion within the regiments also underlined this high morale. Writing to his mother on June 9th, A.B. Simms of the Georgia Cobb's Legion felt that Grant was a butcher and that captured Union prisoners were discouraged that everywhere they moved they kept finding the Army of Northern Virginia waiting for them. Simms concluded that "our army are certainly in very fine spirits."¹³ On June 11th, a private in the 16th Mississippi assured his mother and sister that "we are still hopeful and confident."¹⁴ Artilleryman Creed Davis of the venerable Richmond Howitzers felt the opposite of many of his comrades. Writing home Davis felt that the "enemy is too near Richmond I fear our 'holy' cause is on the wane."¹⁵ A native Richmonder, Davis was likely concerned about the war being brought back to the outskirts of his hometown. In spite of Davis' doubts morale remained high in the army.

During the first two weeks of June, a large number of soldiers in Lee's army did not share Davis' despondency. On June 12th, many of Lee's men took pen in hand during a lull in the fighting to express their opinions on the recent battle at Cold Harbor and the confidence that many in the army were feeling. Luther Rice Mills of the 26th Virginia Infantry, wrote his father on the 12th that "Grant has been badly whipped by Gen. Lee and is now fortifying and recruiting his army." Colonel Charles Blacknall, 23rd North Carolina Infantry, assured his brother George

¹² Aaron Sheehan-Dean, *Why Confederates Fought: Family & Nation in Civil War Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 147-49.

¹³ Jane Bonner Peacock, ed., "A Georgian's View of War in Virginia," in *Atlanta Historical Journal* 23 no.2 (Summer, 1979): 109.

¹⁴ Robert G. Evans, ed., *The Sixteenth Mississippi Infantry: Civil War Letters and Reminiscences* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 2002), 269.

¹⁵ Creed Thomas Davis, June 11, 1864, in Creed Thomas Davis Diary, Virginia Historical Society (afterward VHS).

that “our men are in excellent spirits & condition, the army being better fed than I ever knew it before.” Blacknall exhibited the esprit de corps for which the Army of Northern Virginia was well known when he continued that “Grant is entirely out-generaled, after endeavoring for six weeks to break our lines, he finds Lee between him & Richmond, with a victorious army well entrenched.” Writing to a loved one in Alabama, Abel Crawford of the 61st Alabama Infantry thought that the Yankees “are about satisfied that they cant get Richmond.”¹⁶ As Creed Davis’ concern indicates, these sentiments are not indicative of every soldier in the Army of Northern Virginia at the end of the Overland Campaign. However, they do indicate a high morale among the soldiers, a belief that Lee was a superior general to Grant, and a conviction that their army was winning the war.

Despite the confidence among his men Lee was aware that Union military operations were occurring elsewhere in Virginia that threatened his supply lines as well as Confederate held territory. He believed Grant was busy entrenching his forces in preparation for a move across the James River to directly threaten Richmond and Petersburg. Writing Confederate President Jefferson Davis on June 9th, Lee confided that Grant was “awaiting the effect of movements in some other quarter to make us change our position.”¹⁷ One of the movements that Lee spoke of was the operations of Union Major General David Hunter in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Hunter threatened the crucial Confederate supply and transportation hub of Lynchburg, Virginia. Believing that the time was appropriate for dealing with Hunter’s threat, Lee on June 12th, ordered Jubal Early to take his veteran Second Corps out of the line and march west to drive

¹⁶ George D. Harmon, “Letters of Luther Rice Mills: A Confederate Soldier,” in *North Carolina Historical Review* 4 no. 3 (July, 1927): 302, Charles Blacknall to George Blacknall, June 12, 1864, in Oscar Blacknall Papers, North Carolina Division of Archives and History (afterwards NCDAH), Abel Crawford to Dora Crawford, June 12, 1864, in Abel H. Crawford Letters, Rubenstein Library, Duke University.

¹⁷ Clifford Dowdey and Louis H. Manarin, ed., *The Wartime Papers of Robert E. Lee*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1961), 771.

Hunter out of the Shenandoah Valley completely and if possible threaten Washington, D.C.¹⁸ By threatening Washington Lee anticipated that Grant would be forced to detach some of his own troops to defend the city which in turn might give Lee an opening to strike at Grant's forces then on the verge of crossing the James River towards Petersburg.

June 13 – 30: Early in the Valley and Stalemate at Petersburg

On June 13, 1864 Early's Second Corps left Lee's army and marched towards Lynchburg, Virginia. The weather was warm and the march was difficult but this westward movement signaled to the men that they were leaving the static warfare of the past month and were renewing the freedom of a mobile campaign. Numerous soldiers commented on the women they encountered along their route to Lynchburg, the hospitality shown them, and the food and good things given them. All of these instances encouraged the soldiers and instilled a belief that they were on the precipice of an important move that could have a positive outcome on the war. Lieutenant Leonidas L. Polk, 43rd North Carolina Infantry, wrote his wife June 16 from Charlottesville that if Hunter "does not run & escape, somebody will get a desperate whipping & we boys think we can guess who it will be." Writing the same day, Brigadier General William Gaston Lewis, commanding a North Carolina Brigade, confidently told his wife, "I think we will capture Hunter & his entire force in a few days. We have plenty of men, & they are good ones." Recognizing the importance of the expedition Polk believed that "we are now on one of the most important movements of the war & I think the friends of the South may look to its results with hope & confidence."¹⁹ Clement Evans, in command of a brigade of Georgians, wrote his wife on

¹⁸ Jubal A. Early, *A Memoir of the Last Year of the War for Independence in the Confederate States of America* (Lynchburg: Charles W. Button, 1867), 40.

¹⁹ Leonidas L. Polk to Sarah Polk, June 16, 1864, in L.L. Polk Papers, UNC, William G. Lewis to Mittie Lewis, June 16, 1864, in W.G. Lewis Papers, UNC.

the 18th that he and his men were “in excellent spirits and ready for the work before us.” Evans also felt “buoyant with the anticipations concerning the early return of peace. Our enemies will soon give up their mad project of subjugation.”²⁰ On the 17th Early, with a portion of the Second Corps, reached Lynchburg just in time to prevent its capture. He spent June 18th entrenching and preparing to receive an attack by Hunter. By the morning of the 19th Hunter was gone and Early’s pursuit through the Shenandoah Valley began. The men in the ranks were excited for the chance to be mobile again.

Returning to the Shenandoah Valley and escaping the static trench warfare developing around Richmond and Petersburg was a further boon to the optimistic attitude of Early’s men. Many of the Virginia regiments in the Second Corps were composed of men from the Shenandoah Valley. Many of these men were relieved to be leaving trench life and returning to the Valley. A surgeon in the 4th Virginia Infantry remarked that the “troops were pleased with the idea of going to their old range.” Alexander Paxton, a member of Company I, 4th Virginia, remarked on June 16th in his diary that “we were half glad to leave the Chickahominy. Tho’ at first did not know exactly where we were going to. Yet when we found our faces turned toward the old Blue Ridge it gave us great satisfaction.” North Carolinian Leonidas Polk concurred, writing his wife that “the most of us had rather be here than at Richmond, for obvious reasons.”²¹

Besides the good feelings from citizens, renewed mobility, and returning to a beautiful and thriving area, Early’s men encountered severe devastation among civilian property (homes,

²⁰ Robert Grier Stephens, Jr., ed., *Intrepid Warrior: Clement Anselm Evans, Confederate General from Georgia, Life, Letters, and Diaries of the Civil War Years*, (Dayton: Morningside, 1992), 419-420.

²¹ John Apperson Diary, June 16, 1864, in Black, Kent, and Apperson Family Papers, Special Collections, Newman Library, Virginia Tech University, Alexander Sterrett Paxton, Diary, in Alexander Sterrett Paxton Papers, James G. Leyburn Library Special Collections, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia, Polk to wife, June 16, 1864, L.L. Polk Papers, UNC. Note: The Chickahominy in Polk’s letter refers to the Chickahominy River which flowed around Richmond, Virginia. The Chickahominy is a low lying swampy river easily susceptible to flooding. Alexander Paxton was a native of Lexington, Virginia and an original member of Company I (Liberty Hall Volunteers), 4th Virginia. This company was originally composed of students from Washington College (now Washington & Lee University) in Lexington, Virginia.

barns, mills, wheat, livestock, etc.) that further hardened what was already a bitter feeling towards their Union foes. A desire for revenge and hatred for one's enemy were powerful motivators and likely bolstered a sense of duty among the soldiery to continue fighting. Scores of soldiers remarked in letters and diary entries upon the devastation they encountered as they drove north down the Valley after Hunter's retreating army. The anger they felt at the destruction hardened their determination to gain independence. Brigadier General Bryan Grimes, in command of a North Carolina brigade, wrote his wife that when he passed Union prisoners his heart literally quivered with hatred and "I inwardly feel longing to kill them, really bloodthirsty every day since leaving Lynchburg."²² Adjutant Seaton Gales on the staff of Brigadier General William R. Cox confided to his diary some scenes that Early's men witnessed along their march from Salem to Staunton, Virginia while pursuing Hunter. Gales wrote of the "painful evidence of the wanton, cowardly, and diabolical barbarity of the enemy, who swept the property of the Citizens along their path as with the besom of destruction. Unwilling to meet us in the field, they sought such ignoble and dastardly opportunities of wreaking their petty vengeance and venting their villainous malignity."²³

By the summer of 1864, enemy destruction of civilian property were important motivating factors for many Confederate soldiers. Being out of the confinement of the trenches as well as the enjoyment of the supplies and food the Valley offered (as well as the warm reception by its citizens) caused many in Early's army to feel that they were accomplishing something towards winning the war. This quite naturally necessitated a boost in morale and

²² Bryan Grimes to Charlotte Grimes, June 22, 1864, Bryan Grimes Papers, UNC.

²³ Seaton Gales Diary, in *The Farmer and Mechanic*, April 22, 1874. Gales would be captured during the retreat from the battle of Fisher's Hill, September 22, 1864. It was speculated by contemporaries that he was drunk and fell off his horse. William Ruffin Cox commanded a brigade of North Carolinians formerly commanded by Major General Stephen Dodson Ramseur. Cox' veteran brigade consisted of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 14th, and 30th North Carolina Regiments.

hope. Writing from New Market, Virginia on June 30th, Leonidas Polk wrote his wife of his belief that “it is the general impression that we will go across the Potomac. The way is open & something may turn up that will not only astound the Yankees but strike the world with astonishment, and some event will certainly transpire soon, that will give us a view of the end.”²⁴

While Early’s forces were confidently advancing north through the Valley towards the Potomac, the remainder of the Army of Northern Virginia was endeavoring to prevent Grant from seizing the vital rail center of Petersburg, Virginia. On June 13 and 14, at the same time Early withdrew from the front line, Grant began to move his army across the Chickahominy river and by the 17th was across the James River immediately threatening Petersburg. On the 14th Lee wrote to Jefferson Davis that he believed Grant’s next move was likely to try to take Petersburg.²⁵ Lee countered and moved across the James with the bulk of the army leaving Richmond lightly defended. His arrival in Petersburg was just in time to contribute to the salvation of the city.

The Army of Northern Virginia anxiously awaited Grant’s next move as they waited in their entrenchments. Even with the departure of Early and Grant’s disappearance from their front, many of Lee’s soldiers expected success whenever Grant’s plan would disclose itself. William Ross Stillwell, Company F, 53rd Georgia Infantry speculated in a letter written on the 14th to his wife that if Grant was intent on crossing the James “what success he will have that way is yet to be determined, but I think we have proven to the world that we are able to whip Grant anywhere on open ground. Our army is [in] fine spirits although they have had no rest for six weeks.”²⁶ A South Carolinian also writing on the 14th to his wife assured her that “all are

²⁴ Polk to wife, June 30, 1864, UNC.

²⁵ Dowdey, *Wartime Papers of Robert E. Lee*, 776-779.

²⁶ Ronald Moseley, ed., *The Stillwell Letters: A Georgian in Longstreet’s Corps, Army of Northern Virginia*, (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2002), 267-68.

satisfied that Lee will be ready for them, let them show themselves where & when they may.”²⁷

On June 15th while recuperating in a hospital in Petersburg, Nathaniel Tunstall, Company K, 32nd North Carolina cajoled his father and those at home not to give up hope. Tunstall remarked, “I hope you all are not whipped at home yet. Gen’l Lee and his veterans are still confident of success.”²⁸ Confidence in themselves as soldiers, their army, and their General further demonstrates the esprit de corps of the Army of Northern Virginia. It also shows a disconnect between soldiers and civilians who many soldiers regarded as being defeatists. These soldier letters provided assurance to those at home whose spirits may have been faltering that in the Army of Northern Virginia at least, all was well.

With the Democratic Party Convention only several weeks away, many Confederates wrote about their feelings on potential election outcomes and what the result might mean to Confederate chances of independence. The Judge Advocate General of the First Corps wrote to his wife about the upcoming United States Presidential election in November. This topic was an extremely powerful motivator for the men of the Army of Northern Virginia and its potential outcome and influence on the election will be discussed throughout this work. However, with Grant threatening Petersburg Charles Blackford was thinking more about the upcoming election than a threat to a vital supply center. Blackford wrote, “I do not regard Lincoln’s renomination a very bad thing for us. Whether he is elected or not depends on Grant’s success.”²⁹ Blackford described a growing sentiment within the army in terms of preferring Lincoln to whomever the Democrats nominated. Furthermore, Blackford’s observation revealed the recognition among many Confederates that preventing major Union victories could bring about an election result

²⁷ Joseph Banks Lyle to Dora, June 14, 1864, Joseph Banks Lyle Letters, VHS.

²⁸ Nathaniel Tunstall to George Tunstall, June 15, 1864, in Lucy Tunstall Alston Williams Papers, UNC.

²⁹ Charles Minor Blackford, ed., *Letters from Lee’s Army*, (New York: A.S. Barnes & Company, 1962), 256.

Blackford was from an aristocratic Virginia family. His brother Eugene was an excellent combat officer with the 5th Alabama Infantry who commanded a unit of sharpshooters.

favorable to the Confederacy. However, their desire before the August convention was for a peace candidate to be nominated to prevent Grant and Sherman from capturing Richmond and Petersburg, Virginia and Atlanta, Georgia respectively. By accomplishing this, many in the army felt that peace could be achieved before the end of the year and Confederate independence established. A considerable number of officers and men believed that the way to victory at this stage of the war would be on the battlefield. This belief enabled a sense of ownership in determining events and a renewal among many to continue fighting.

The successful resistance offered by the Confederate defenders around Petersburg and Richmond in June further convinced many that Grant would not take Petersburg and that he was no match for Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia. Writing on the 18th a member of the 16th Mississippi Infantry wrote home that the “North must admit that their ‘On to Richmond’ has proved a failure, at least so far.”³⁰ A North Carolinian in A.P. Hill’s Third Corps concurred. Writing his mother on June 19th, Samuel Lockhart, Company G, 27th North Carolina Regiment, described Union activity on the south side of the James River and boasted that “they [Union army] will not be so forward now, since Mr. Lee’s army has come over this side of the James. I think Grant is completely lost; he don’t know where he is going when he starts to Richmond via Petersburg. I hope he will soon see the folly in trying to take Richmond and quit fighting and let us alone, so we can rest.”³¹ The esprit de corps and confidence in success continued to run through the army. The ordnance sergeant of the 7th North Carolina Regiment wrote home that Grant “will find the same obstacle in the way, no matter which one [road] he tries. Any road is

³⁰ Evans, *The Sixteenth Mississippi Infantry*, 273. “On to Richmond” refers to a popular Northern slogan originating at the outset of the war which accompanied the start of each major campaign between the Union Army of the Potomac and the Army of Northern Virginia. Heavily used during George B. McClellan’s Peninsular Campaign of May, 1862, the slogan became a source of ridicule to Confederates due to successive failures to capture Richmond or defeat Lee’s army.

³¹ Samuel P. Lockhart to Mother, June 19, 1864, in Hugh Conway Browning Papers, Duke.

good enough if Lee & his veterans were out of the way. Our men are in better spirits then when they left camp. Grants men fought stubbornly at first, but are repulsed without difficulty now.”³²

This latter Confederate was prescient. Northern war weariness was rising in the Northern population and the Army of the Potomac. Juxtaposing the importance of morale and unit cohesion between the two armies is an example given by veterans of the Union Army of the Potomac. By June 18 the Army of the Potomac was becoming demoralized at the constant fighting and maneuver, particularly the idea of assaulting Confederate entrenchments. On June 18th soldiers from the veteran Second Corps of the Army of the Potomac refused to attack Confederate works. Army of the Potomac commander George G. Meade blamed the failure of the assault on the “moral condition of the army” further writing that if the same charges had been made at the Battle of the Wilderness the assault would have been successful.³³ Meade’s example is a perfect illustration of the toll the six week campaign of movement and combat had taken on the Union army (and the Confederate army as well).

With Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston holding back Union General William T. Sherman’s forces in Georgia, many Confederates were hopeful of ultimate success. Much conjecturing and hope occurred among many of the Army of Northern Virginia in relation to events within and without their purview. Elias Davis of the 8th Alabama Infantry confidently wrote in a letter home, “I know that Grant cant take Petersburg, and if he moves any farther by his left flank we will destroy his army.” Joseph Halsey of the 6th Virginia Cavalry was aware of the importance of the two primary Confederate armies holding their own. Halsey reported home on June 22nd that “Grant’s assaults are growing less frequent and very decidedly weak. We expect every day to hear of a heavy fight between Johnston & Sherman, and if successful there

³² Joseph Joyner to Mother, June 19, 1864, in Joyner Family Papers, UNC.

³³George G. Meade, *The Life and Letters of George Gordon Meade*, vol 2. (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1913), 207.

as here, the Yankee Armies must give way.” Halsey confirmed a widely held belief among the soldiers in the Army of Northern Virginia that they were succeeding in preventing Grant’s capture of Richmond and Petersburg. In the same letter Halsey connected the importance of the summer campaigns in Virginia and Georgia to the upcoming Presidential election, believing that as things stood, a peace Democrat had a good chance of winning the election.

Even members of Robert E. Lee’s staff were confident of success and in the army’s eventual defeat of Grant. Lee’s Adjutant General, Walter H. Taylor wrote from army headquarters that if Lee could “manage to attack Grant, we could rout the enemy and perhaps bring about that much desired peace.”³⁴ The recognition that battlefield victory would determine peace and independence for the Confederacy was beginning to become a well-regarded opinion as evidenced by Taylor’s correspondence as well as many others. At this stage of the war many Confederates knew that battlefield performance would also likely determine the next President of the United States. This shows a recognition among Confederate soldiers of the connection between the battlefield and the civilian world, in this instance, the political world of their enemy.

By the end of June, Lee’s forces were simultaneously threatening to cross the Potomac River into the North and holding back Grant’s numerically superior army around Petersburg and Richmond. In both theaters a large portion of Lee’s men believed that the Confederacy was on the cusp of victory. Writing to his sister from Deep Bottom along the James River, Samuel Lockhart summarily wrote that “the great campaign of ’64, about which so much has been said and possibly feared, has now pretty fairly developed itself, and with but little to cheer our enemies. In fact, unless there would be a turn of the tide, there is every prospect that it will bring them to grief.” On June 30th, after the repulse of a large Union cavalry raid on Confederate

³⁴ Elias Davis to Georgie, June 20, 1864, in Elias Davis Papers, UNC, Joseph Jackson Halsey to wife, June 22, 1864, in Halsey Family Papers, LVA, Taylor R. Lockwood, ed., *Lee’s Adjutant: The Wartime Letters of Colonel Walter Herron Taylor, 1862-1865*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 170.

supply lines, R. Lee Barfield, 8th Georgia Cavalry, wrote his wife from Petersburg that “our troops are perfectly confident of holding Petersburg and all seem in fine spirits.”³⁵ Esprit de corps and unit cohesion forged through three and a half years of mostly Confederate victories (in the East) also bolstered a belief that military victory was a foregone conclusion. The confidence that many of these men felt and conveyed through letters and diaries continued into July.

July, 1864 – With Early in the Shenandoah Valley and Maryland

At the start of July, Early’s army was threatening to cross the Potomac River into Maryland. Having accomplished phase one of Robert E. Lee’s objectives for him (driving Hunter out of the Valley), Early commenced the second part; cross into Maryland and possibly threaten Washington, D.C. with the goal being to force Grant to reduce his forces around Petersburg and Richmond to protect his capital. By July 4th the Confederates had occupied Charlestown and Martinsburg, West Virginia and were in front of Harper’s Ferry, threatening that place. Instead of taking it, Early crossed the Potomac into Maryland. The men were confident and excited at the chance of enjoying Union supplies in the captured towns. Alexander Paxton wrote in his diary how the men were feasting on captured commissary stores. Simultaneously, William Beavans of the 43rd North Carolina Regiment noted in his diary during the first few days of July the places and conditions the men experienced as well as the welcome they received by local citizens. Like most young men in their youth, Beavans also made note in each town of the physical appearance of the opposite sex.³⁶

³⁵ Samuel P. Lockhart to Sister, June 26, 1864, Duke; R. Lee Barfield to Wife, June 30, 1864, in Barfield Family Collection, Hargrett Library, University of Georgia (afterwards UGA).

³⁶ Paxton Diary, Leyburn Library, Washington & Lee University, William Beavans Diary, July 4, 1864, in William Beavans Diary and Letters, UNC.

As a result of three years' worth of destruction to Southerners' property, some men were hopeful of revenge being meted out upon the citizens of Pennsylvania. A hospital steward serving the Second Corps' hospital remained around Harper's Ferry as the army advanced toward Frederick, Maryland. Charles W. Sydnor was hopeful and vengeful when he wrote his fiancé that "no doubt by the time you receive this note we will be in Pennsylvania living upon the labour of the Dutch of that state. If our army is taken to that state the destruction that will mark their path has never been equaled by any army of present or former times. All appear anxious for an opportunity to repay the enemy for their cruelty whilst in Va." Sydnor, a native of the Winchester, Virginia area had reason for his vengeful spirit as his home had been occupied and fought over multiple times by both armies. Some men, remembering the lack of success on previous excursions into the North, were not happy about crossing the Potomac. The hospital steward of the 8th Virginia Cavalry was conflicted when he wrote in his diary on the fifth, "I don't much like this invading; I don't think it is our policy but at the present time it will doubtless do good by drawing these troops [Grant's] from before Petersburg which Grant can ill afford to spare."

As Early's force moved east towards Frederick, Maryland, the Union high command became worried for the safety of Washington, D.C. Grant indeed had detached some of his forces around Petersburg to confront Early but they had not yet arrived. All that was in the field to oppose Early was a small Union force under Lew Wallace (future author of the classic novel *Ben Hur*). On July 9th, Early defeated Wallace at the Battle of Monocacy and continued marching towards the Union capital. It was, to a North Carolina officer, "one of the most complete affairs of the war, our victory was most decisive & the route of the enemy surpassed anything that I

have witnessed in many a day.”³⁷ After marching from Lynchburg, Virginia to Frederick, Maryland, Early’s men were exhausted, filthy, and desperately in need of rest. Discipline was also suffering as a result of the summer campaign. Soldiers straggled, fell out of ranks, and committed individual acts of vandalism and larceny against Maryland citizens. Though morale was high, successful against Hunter and Wallace, and the belief in the ultimate success of the Confederacy (and their role in it), the combat cohesion of the army was starting to be affected by the summer heat and fatigue. Unit cohesion and discipline would be an issue going forward among Early’s men. For now, battlefield and campaigning success marked the path of Early’s men.

Early marched towards Washington, D.C. on July 10th. Many in his army wrote about the excitement of approaching the Yankee capital. George Peyton, 13th Virginia Infantry, shared the general mood around him. Writing on the 10th Peyton noticed that the “men, in high spirits, think that they are going to capture Washington.” Gales also wrote confidently on the 10th that “every eye glistened and every heart beat high at our triumphant progress and at the idea of such proximity to the Federal Capital.” Gales was confident they could take the city. The prospect of capturing the city continued the next day. Captain Cary Whitaker, 43rd North Carolina Regiment, confided to his diary the condition of his men on their approach to Washington, writing, “we begin to believe that we are going in fact to attack Washington, a very hard march but the men seemed in good spirits, especially after Gen Early came by and spoke words of encouragement to them.” Alexander Paxton could scarcely contain his excitement when the entry to his diary read, “July 11th District of Columbia!!! In sight of Washington City!!!” Paxton also noted the condition of his fellow soldiers, emotionally and physically continuing the entry, “The troops

³⁷ Blacknall to George, July 28, 1864, in Oscar Blacknall Paper, NCDAH.

seemed very much elated with the idea of getting so close to W. and many an old broken down fellow struck out with new energy and fresh determination when told 'twas only 10 or 8 miles to W-!!!"³⁸

Due to the extreme heat and fatigue, Early's army was straggling heavily and did not have enough combat cohesion to seriously threaten the city. Grant's reinforcements also had arrived in the city defenses and the opposing forces spent two days skirmishing. On July 13th Early began his retreat back into Virginia having accomplished the objective set for him in June; the Valley was cleared of Union forces and Grant had been forced to weaken his forces around Petersburg and Richmond. Though they did not take the city and were compelled to retreat back into Virginia, many of Early's men remained optimistic that the war could still be won by the Confederacy, or at the least, that defeat was not imminent. Leonidas Polk, though disappointed the Confederates could not take Washington boasted that, "this army has certainly been nearer his Capitol, than Grant has or probably soon will be to ours."³⁹ Battlefield and strategic accomplishments continued to drive confidence in victory skyward.

The latter half of July saw Early's men suffer one battlefield defeat and win two others. Though marching hundreds of miles in the extreme heat of summer, invading Maryland, threatening Washington, and retreating back to Virginia, Early's men, in the words of one North Carolinian, were "all in good health & cheerful & buoyant. We are nearly worn out, but as I said, in good health & spirits."⁴⁰ Their time in Maryland though short was still looked upon as a positive experience. Another North Carolinian wrote his brother that "we had a very good time in

³⁸ Walbrook D. Swank, ed., *Stonewall Jackson's Foot Cavalry: Company A, 13th Virginia Infantry*, (Shippensburg: Burd Street Press, 2001), 80, Gales, *Farmer and Mechanic*, Cary Whitaker Diary, in Cary Whitaker Papers, UNC, Alexander Paxton Diary, Washington & Lee.

³⁹ Polk to wife, July 17, 1864, L.L. Polk Papers, UNC.

⁴⁰ Polk to wife, July 17, 1864, in L.L. Polk Papers, UNC.

Maryland, and frightened Old Abe out of his boots. I don't expect that the old fellow has cracked a joke since we were there."⁴¹

By the end of July Confederate forces in the Valley would finally experience the taste of defeat. The Battle of Rutherford's Farm (July 20, 1864) was a small battle which occurred just north of Winchester, Virginia. It was a decisive defeat for a portion of Early's army and resulted in the complete route of Major General Stephen D. Ramseur's Confederate division. The portion of Early's army comprising the Second Corps, Army of Northern Virginia, had never been routed from a battlefield through three years of war. The battle resulted in a blame game for those seeking to understand how it could have happened and for Ramseur, a struggle to save face and reputation. Writing his wife shortly after the battle, Ramseur blamed his men, explaining, "my men behaved shamefully. They ran from the enemy, and for the first time in my life I am deeply mortified at the conduct of troops under my command. [If they] had behaved with their usual steadiness we would have gained a glorious victory." Writing his wife on July 23, 1864 Virginia artilleryman William Pettit expressed the shock of many saying, "It is said, no part of our army was ever before stampeded and routed."⁴² Though shocked at the result of Rutherford's Farm, many in Early's army were able to move past it, negating any negative effects the battle might have had. Recovery occurred as a result of the Battle of 2nd Kernstown, July 24, 1864 in which Early's army routed a comparably sized Union army.

The Battle of 2nd Kernstown was a complete victory for Early over Union forces still operating in the Valley. In an effort to restore their pride as soldiers, and to retrieve their

⁴¹ Blacknall to Oscar, July 31, 1864, in Oscar Blacknall Papers, NCDAH.

⁴² George G. Kundahl, ed., *The Bravest of the Brave: The Correspondence of Stephen Dodson Ramseur*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 242-43, Charles W. Turner, ed., *Civil War Letters of Arabella Speairs and William Beverley Pettit of Fluvanna County, Virginia, March 1862 – March 1865, Volume 2 – February 1864 – March 1865* (Roanoke: The Virginia Lithography and Graphics Company, 1989), 56. For more on the Battles of Cool Spring, Rutherford's Farm, and 2nd Kernstown, see Scott C. Patchan, *Shenandoah Summer: The 1864 Valley Campaign* (Lincoln: Bison Books, 2009).

reputation from the defeat at Rutherford's Farm, the Colonel of the 23rd North Carolina wrote his son that they "gave them the severest thrashing that ever was caught by Yankees since the war began. We did this to pay them back for a whipping they gave us at the same place a week before." Blacknall further assured his son that "this was the only defeat we have had, and we have fought seven battles. This was not caused by any want of courage on the part of our Brigade."⁴³ This final sentence incorporates many expressions common to Early's men at this time. Disbelief that they had been routed from a battlefield and unit pride; both crucial elements in the esprit de corps of an army. Blacknall's reassurance to his son may have also been a father's effort to convince his family that the defeat at Rutherford's Farm was merely a temporary setback and the proof of that was the overwhelming victory at 2nd Kernstown. Reassuring folks at home and putting on a brave face was one method in Confederate soldiers' letters to attempt to keep morale on the home front elevated. Judging by the correspondence of many soldiers this was a genuine confidence. It also helped to assuage the despair inflicted by defeat, such as at Rutherford's Farm, as well as restore hope in independence gained by victory, as at 2nd Kernstown.

Besides the defeat at Rutherford's Farm, by the end of July Early's campaign had been a success. Union forces were not an imminent threat to the Shenandoah Valley and what forces remained were reorganizing which allowed the Confederates in the Valley to wax prophetic (and hopeful) about events in Georgia. Many Confederates in the Valley believed that their efforts had contributed to the growing war-weariness in the North and that their contributions to eventual Confederate victory were important. From the last week in July to the first week in August Early's men recrossed the Potomac into Maryland and returned back to Virginia. These

⁴³ Charles Blacknall to Oscar Blacknall, July 31, 1864, Oscar Blacknall Papers, NCDAH.

movements were to ascertain the strength of gathering Union forces and to coax them to fight a decisive battle, which they were not ready to do. This portion of the campaign was much easier on Early's men as they had ample time to rest.

As all Confederate eyes watched events on the battlefield and connected the outcomes to the pending U.S. presidential election, the results of the gubernatorial election in North Carolina were telling as well. North Carolina soldiers voted on July 27 and 29 whether they would support war or reunion. This election pitted the incumbent, pro-war and pro-Confederate independence Zebulon Baird Vance against peace candidate and reunionist editor of the influential *Weekly Standard* newspaper, William W. Holden. Early's Tarheels took the time to vote and overwhelmingly supported Vance. A captain in the 43rd North Carolina reported in his diary that in Early's army, "Vance recd over Eighteen hundred votes and Holden only recd about one hundred and forty seven" and he hoped the same would be true in the rest of the Army of Northern Virginia and in North Carolina. According to this soldier there were several in his regiment who wished to vote for Holden but "had not the courage to have public opinion and do so mean an act." William Ardrey, 30th North Carolina, wrote in his diary that his brigade overwhelmingly voted for Vance.⁴⁴ According to Vance biographer Gordon McKinney, many potential voters for Holden in the army were prevented from doing so but nevertheless Vance would have still won an overwhelming majority.⁴⁵ In the trenches around Petersburg a North Carolinian admitted that in his regiment Holden won a small majority but in the brigade Vance won overwhelmingly.⁴⁶ A successful campaign in the Valley and Maryland balanced on top of the appalling casualties inflicted on Grant's army in the spring and that general's inability to

⁴⁴ Cary Whitaker Diary, UNC, William Ardrey Diary, Davidson College.

⁴⁵ Gordon B. McKinney, *Zeb Vance: North Carolina's Civil War Governor and Gilded Age Political Leader* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 226-27.

⁴⁶ William D. Alexander Diary, UNC; Alexander belonged to Company C, 37th North Carolina.

capture Richmond and Petersburg, was a major impetus in a renewal of confidence that the Confederacy could achieve its independence. This renewal was a major factor in the re-election of Vance, a proponent of fighting the war, to a state executive office. Furthermore it shows the belief at the time, at least among a majority of North Carolina soldiers, that fighting should continue, that the Confederacy was winning, and independence was a distinct possibility.

Rumors about elections and Atlanta affected the optimism and morale of many in Confederate armies in Virginia. News often reached Lee's men many days or even weeks after events occurred and was not always reliable. This tended to create a varied response to news in Georgia. Relating a rumor that Hood had defeated Sherman and that Grant had crossed to the north side of the James River, Leonidas Polk was ebullient writing his wife that "everything is bright & brightening for us." Little did Polk know at the time of writing that Hood had not defeated Sherman and Grant was merely moving forces on to that side of the river to test Lee's defenses south of Richmond. Alexander Paxton summed up the feelings of many in Early's army at the end of July. Writing from Martinsburg on the eve of crossing once again into Maryland, Paxton confidently entered into his diary, "The last Yankee has been run over the river again, so much for conquering the rebellion!"⁴⁷ "So much for conquering the rebellion." As seen in Early's successes in the Valley, the failure of Sherman to take Atlanta, and the stiff resistance offered by the Army of Northern Virginia around Richmond and Petersburg shows that these soldiers had reason to be optimistic.

The experiences of Early's men and their comrades in the fortifications around Richmond and Petersburg were similar. Early's soldiers were more mobile and were visibly achieving objectives whereas the soldiers around Richmond and Petersburg were hunkered down enduring

⁴⁷ Polk to wife, July 28, 1864, in L.L. Polk Papers, UNC, Paxton Diary, Washington & Lee.

the stagnation in the trenches, sharpshooting, and attacks upon their supply lines which, in turn, necessitated Confederate counterattacks. The men in the Army of Northern Virginia kept a keen eye upon events occurring in the Shenandoah Valley and Georgia throughout the month of July and their optimism for Confederate success continued to rise. However, many, particularly Georgia troops, were worried about the fighting around Atlanta. Though no large scale battle occurred in the Richmond and Petersburg sector for most of July, the month would not end without a unique experience for the soldiers of both armies.

July, 1864 – Army of Northern Virginia, Richmond and Petersburg

Though concerned about affairs in Georgia, many Georgia troops serving under Lee remained confident at the end of June and early July. The Confederate army in the west had easily defeated Sherman's assault at Kennesaw Mountain, Georgia, again confirming that Union attacks on fortified Confederates stood no chance of success. Though Sherman inched closer and closer to Atlanta, he was, in the eyes of many, being deftly held back. On their own front, many of these Georgians remained confident. Writing from the trenches around Petersburg Marion Hill Fitzpatrick, 45th Georgia Infantry wrote his wife on the 3rd that "tomorrow is the day Old Grant was to take a big dinner in Richmond but I rather think he will be sadly disappointed. I have no idea that he will ever take Richmond or Petersburg."⁴⁸

On the opposite end of the spectrum was Robert C. Mabry, 6th Virginia Infantry who wrote his wife from the trenches on the same day that he thought it was a "dark day for the Confederate States, but I hope a brighter day may soon dawn and we by God's blessings soon have a permanent peace. Petersburg I think is a doomed city."⁴⁹ Mabry, a volunteer in 1862, had grown tired of the war and believed that fighting would not bring the two sides any closer to

⁴⁸ Lowe, *Letters to Amanda*, 157.

⁴⁹ Robert C. Mabry to wife, July 3, 1864, in Robert C. Mabry Papers, NCDAH.

peace. Even though many in Lee's army were optimistic about Confederate independence some, like Mabry, were merely tired of fighting. War weariness, when faced with prospects of defeat, in Mabry's case the loss of Petersburg, affected the morale of veteran soldiers as much as any other factor. The deserted and damaged condition of the city itself likely played into Mabry's despair.

The destruction meted out by Union forces in Virginia was a motivating factor that caused many in Lee's army to have a renewed dedication to Confederate independence as well as a continuation of the war. Union cavalry raids at the end of June around Petersburg destroyed vital sections of railroad as well as civilian property. To many of Lee's men this seemed like unnecessary destruction of property nevertheless it was not new to soldiers serving in Virginia. Confederate engineer Charles Trueheart of Virginia angrily wrote his Mother from the trenches around Petersburg sharing his disdain for Grant and the method of warfare practiced by the detested Yankees. "These thieves and house burners were sent out on their hellish mission by his Satanic Majesty U.S. Grant, who failing to whip our Army, and consummate the oft repeated on to Richmond scheme of the Yankee nation, by the legitimate means, resolves, to burn, destroy and desolate everything within his reach."⁵⁰ Trueheart and many others, particularly those serving with Early in the Valley, saw firsthand the effects of the 1864 Union strategy of hard war upon Confederate civilian infrastructure and supply. This policy, though wreaking a large amount of destruction, only lengthened the war by energizing Confederate soldiers not to submit to what they perceived as barbarians bent on completely destroying the South. Revitalizing Confederate soldier's dedication to fighting was a negative side effect of the Lincoln government's war policy of hard war. Simultaneously angry, Trueheart's letter also reveals his

⁵⁰ Edward E. Williams, ed., *Rebel Brothers: The Civil War Letters of the Truehearts*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1995), 96.

confidence in the fighting ability of the Army of Northern Virginia in its sarcastic references to Grant's inability to crush the Confederates and not being able to take Richmond.

As the Georgians were well aware of events in their home state so too were other members of the army aware of events transpiring throughout the Confederacy. Early's success in driving out Hunter and entering Maryland also contributed to bolstered Confederate morale and hope that the prospect of victory was bright. Many, like Robert Taylor Scott of Major General George E. Pickett's staff thought that Early's success meant the relief of Petersburg and the transfer of the theater of war back to northern Virginia or even Maryland. On July 4th Scott confirmed to his wife the attitudes of the men, writing that "our army is in fine spirits and confident of success, we have every cause to hope, so far this campaign has been a decided success." Edward E. Sill, 2nd South Carolina Infantry confirmed Scott's expressions of hope. Writing his mother from around Petersburg Sill wrote that "everything here is confident of final success." As news of Early's raid on Washington, D.C. reached the men around Petersburg, their optimism continued. Rumors abounded that James Longstreet's Confederate corps had been detached to Early and according to Joseph Joyner "I think this will pay old Hunter back with interest for the raid he made in the valley." Joyner further commented that after the Gettysburg campaign in July, 1863 a majority of his comrades said "they never intended to cross that river again, and that Genl Lee would never get half of the army across again. What a vast difference between then and now. Nearly every man is anxious to go there now."⁵¹ Joyner's desire to invade Maryland may have been a longing to escape the static warfare that daily drained the energy and manpower from the Army of Northern Virginia and return to mobile war.

⁵¹ Robert Taylor Scott to wife, July 4, 1864, in Keith Family Papers, VHS, Edward E. Sill to mother, July 6, 1864, in Edward E. Sill Letters, Duke, Joseph Joyner to mother, July 17, 1864, UNC.

Throughout the first two weeks of July the soldiers around Richmond and Petersburg continued casting watchful and hopeful eyes to Georgia, Maryland, and the Shenandoah Valley. Though what they saw was at times concerning (Georgia) and positive (Maryland and the Valley), a large portion of Lee's army remained dedicated to fighting for Confederate independence. Surgeon Spencer Welch wrote his wife that although the army would have to remain in the horrid trenches and though he pitied the men Welch assured his wife that "our minds are prepared to endure anything rather than submit to them, and the nearer they get to us the more determined we are not to yield." John Walters of the Norfolk (VA) Light Artillery Blues wrote in his diary on Independence Day that Grant "as the crusher of this 'rebellion'" had not defeated Lee's army and that the previous two months of fighting and heavy Union casualties had shown the Northern people that Richmond and Lee were not Vicksburg and Pemberton.⁵²

A soldier in the 53rd GA was supremely confident that Lee's army could hold back Grant around Richmond and Petersburg. This soldier's esprit de corps was on full display when he wrote that "Grant says the siege of Richmond is begun, if so we don't know it. Tell me not that such an army as our whose prayers ascend the throne of God day and night can ever be subdued and conquered. Our army is in good spirits and as far as I know, in good condition."⁵³

The upcoming United States presidential contest continued to occupy the thoughts of Lee's men as the summer continued. John Sale, 12th Virginia Infantry, wrote from Petersburg to his aunt the hope shared by many that "if we can hold our own I think the disaffected section of the North will be apt to elect a Peace man for their next President." Sale also expressed a view

⁵² Spencer Glasgow Welch, *A Confederate Surgeon's Letters to His Wife*, (New York: Neale Publishing, 1911), 102, Ken Wiley, ed., *Norfolk Blues: The Civil War Diary of the Norfolk Light Artillery Blues*, (Shippensburg: Burd Street Press, 1997), 130-131. Confederate Lieutenant General John C. Pemberton was the commander of the important Mississippi River fortified city of Vicksburg, Mississippi who surrendered an army of 30,000 men and the city itself, thereby giving complete control of the vital river to the Union navy.

⁵³ Moseley, *The Stillwell Letters*, 273.

shared by most soldiers North and South that “every one of us, of course, has a natural desire for peace but, with very few exceptions, we would rather suffer further with the calamities of war than have a disgraceful peace.”⁵⁴ A disgraceful peace for many Confederates entailed subjugation and rule by the North, the loss of property, honor, political power, and social equality with black Southerners. These factors among others were reasons to continue fighting and hoping. Many Confederates did not care who won the election believing the end of the year would see the end of the war and Confederate independence established. J.J. Wilson, 16th Mississippi Infantry wrote his father about a possible fracture in the North and the possibility of a peace Democrat being elected. However, Wilson felt that “it don’t make any difference with us who is elected. It is generally believed that the present campaign will bring the war to a close.”⁵⁵

By mid-July many in Lee’s army were confident in their ability to hold Richmond and Petersburg. However, confidence that the Confederate army in Georgia could stop Sherman’s taking of Atlanta was waning. This range of emotions shows the importance of the summer campaign of 1864 in terms of Confederate hopes for victory either on the battlefield or by a peace candidate winning the United States presidency. It also indicates a belief among Lee’s men that they alone were the Confederacy’s only chance at survival. Many Confederate civilians believed this as well. Historian Gary Gallagher asserted that historians have overlooked the importance of Lee’s army to civilian morale which indicates a crucial connection between military events and Confederate society. Gallagher also argued that as faith in the Davis administration faded faith in Lee and his army grew.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ John F. Sale to aunt, July 9, 1864, in John F. Sale Papers, LVA.

⁵⁵ Evans, *The Sixteenth Mississippi Infantry*, 278-79.

⁵⁶ Gallagher, *Confederate War*, 8-9, 87-89. See also Gary W. Gallagher, *Becoming Confederates: Paths to a New National Loyalty*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013). In *Becoming Confederates* Gallagher argues through a case study of three Confederate generals that various loyalties were at play among Confederate soldiers that

A member of the 8th Georgia cavalry near Petersburg reported to his wife the success he and his comrades were having holding back the Army of the Potomac. Writing on the 11th, R. Lee Barfield wrote that “we entertain no doubt of our ability to hold the city & I think the Yanks are becoming aware of the fact.” The commander of the Georgia Cobb’s Legion of Cavalry expressed the confidence around Petersburg and the concern for Atlanta writing his father from camp that “Grant can do nothing with noble old Lee. I wish Johnston could get rid of Sherman in the same way.”⁵⁷ Due to Johnston’s failure to attack Sherman, Jefferson Davis replaced him with General John Bell Hood, a hard fighting veteran combat commander from Lee’s army. Davis’ hope was that Hood would attack Sherman and drive him away from Atlanta.

As Sherman continued to push Confederate forces closer to Atlanta many soldiers were concerned about the city’s fate but remained confident in their ability to hold out. Daniel Albright spoke of his concerns for Atlanta on the 15th and 20th of July writing that “great fears are felt for Atlanta,” and the late news of Hood’s appointment caused him to feel that things now appeared ominous and that “I fear Atlanta is gone.” In a comparison between the Army of Northern Virginia and their counterparts in the Army of Tennessee, staff officer Charles Blackford exhibited a common feeling of disdain for their western brethren sharing his concern over the constant Confederate retreat towards Atlanta. Writing to his wife on July 17th, Blackford wrote “Johnston’s army has been taught that falling back is the aim of a campaign and that fighting is an incident. Lee has taught us that an occasional retrograde movement is an incident and fighting is the aim.”⁵⁸

affected Confederate nationalism in which a Confederate loyalty was easily achieved by many. Gallagher further argued that Confederate identity and loyalty was achieved regardless of generational differences.

⁵⁷ Barfield to wife, July 11, 1864, UGA, Tammy Harden Galloway, ed., *Dear Old Roswell: The Civil War Letters of the King Family of Roswell, Georgia*, (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2003), 77.

⁵⁸ Albright Diary, UNC, Blackford, *Letters from Lee’s Army*, 267.

As a counterbalance to the concern over Atlanta came the news of Early's successful movements. Combined with their own ability to hold off Grant, Lee's men minimized the threat to Atlanta and continued to believe the war would end with Confederate independence. Writing from the trenches around Petersburg Hugh L. Deason, 10th Alabama Infantry, related to a friend the news of Early's appearance before Washington, D.C. and its moral effects. Deason boasted that "our hopes reinforce health & spirits. The Yankees can never get Richmond. We are sure of success. I think this is the last year of the war." A Georgian wrote his sister expressing his confidence in Lee, the Confederate cause, and in the prospect of peace writing:

Gen Lee is demonstrating to the Yankee nation that their modern Ulysses is not quite up to all the tricks of war. It is satisfactory proof that Gen. Grant is inferior [to previous commanders of the Army of the Potomac]. I think that before the dawn of the New Year we will all see evident signs of peace. I am not disheartened at Sherman's advance. He must and will be defeated before many more days passes over his head. I think all every thing is point in one direction and that is a speedy peace.

Fellow Georgian Marion Fitzpatrick concurred, writing his wife that "the news from Early is highly encouraging, while that from Johnson is gloomy. We are in high spirits here, having no idea of getting whipped."⁵⁹

As seen throughout this chapter news and rumors had a profound effect on the morale and reactions of hope or despair.⁶⁰ Reports from Atlanta and the Valley caused morale to remain high and at times fluctuate. Many were confident of Confederate victory and in the Army of Northern Virginia's role in that victory. However, even in the heady days of hope that summer, some were abandoning the cause. For a variety of reasons, men voted with their feet and

⁵⁹ Hugh L. Deason to Dossie, July 24, 1864, in Josephine Noble Papers, Auburn, Peacock, "A Georgian's View of War in Virginia," 113, Lowe, *Letters to Amanda*, 161.

⁶⁰ For more on the impact of rumor on morale see Jason Phillips, *Diehard Rebels*.

abandoned the army. Desertions would plague Lee's army during the winter of 1864-65 but were already being noticed in July. John Walters, a Virginia artilleryman, noted in his diary on July 16th that desertions were occurring in the 64th Georgia regiment adding that "this is getting to be somewhat of a common practice with this regiment, who are mostly of the new issue and have but lately joined the brigade." According to Walters these men were evidently conscripts who likely had no interest in fighting regardless of whether Confederate fortunes were in the ascendant or waning. Walters' account further indicates an effort by men who continued to fight to marginalize deserters, shirkers, and stay-at-homes in an effort to reinforce morale. Charles Blackford wrote the day after Walters that "there have been more desertions of late than ever before. I hear that even some Virginians have deserted to the enemy." Blackford empathized with them while explaining to his wife that "the hard lives they lead and a certain degree of hopelessness which is stealing over the conviction of the best and bravest will have some effect in inducing demoralization hitherto unknown."⁶¹

Earl J. Hess, in his work on field fortifications during the Petersburg campaign, highlighted the impact that continuously fighting in trenches had on the Army of Northern Virginia's morale. Hess connected the dwindling manpower issues the Confederates faced in terms of unit rotations on the line. Due to fewer men to hold dozens of miles of fortifications, Confederate units were not rotated out of the trenches as often as their Federal counterparts.⁶² Having to stay in dreadful conditions for weeks on end began to stretch men's limits physically and emotionally. This naturally had an effect on morale. While these examples do not indicate

⁶¹ Wiley, *Norfolk Blues*, 134, Blackford, *Letters from Lee's Army*, 267.

⁶² Earl J. Hess, *In the Trenches at Petersburg: Field Fortifications & Confederate Defeat*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). See also Hess' other books on the impact of field fortifications during the Civil War, *Fighting for Atlanta: Tactics, Terrain, and Trenches in the American Civil War*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), *Field Armies and Fortifications in the Civil War: The Eastern Campaigns, 1861-1864*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), and *Trench Warfare under Grant and Lee: Field Fortifications in the Overland Campaign*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

widespread dissatisfaction in the Army of Northern Virginia it does indicate that non-veteran troops could become an issue as manpower shortages afflicted the Confederacy and that war weariness even affected “the best and the bravest” of veterans. Veterans of Lee’s army had developed a strong unit cohesion and unit pride forged through three years of camp, drill, march, and combat. Some of Lee’s stalwarts eventually reached a breaking point. Just as all new conscripts did not prove to be deserters or poor soldiers, not all of Lee’s veterans found the war worth fighting anymore.⁶³

Once more, the battlefield would draw attention away from Atlanta, the Valley, and elections. On July 30, 1864 the soldiers defending Richmond and Petersburg experienced something new, the exploding of a mine and combat against black troops in the Battle of the Crater. On July 30 elements of Ambrose Burnside’s Union 9th Corps exploded several tons of gunpowder underneath a portion of the Confederate defenses outside of Petersburg, killing and wounding the men in the immediate blast area and creating a large deep crater. The Union plan was to send three divisions against the crater and to fan out and take the Confederate lines around it and if possible Petersburg itself. The attack was a failure. After an initial lodgment the black troops were sent in last but by then the disaster was unavoidable as thousands white and black were trapped in the crater. Almost 4,000 Union casualties resulted. Though not decisive it was a clear Confederate victory and many in Lee’s army wrote about the event. In many letters

⁶³ For more on Civil War desertion see Ella Lonn, *Desertion during the Civil War*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998). Originally published in 1928, Lonn’s study is still a crucial study on Civil War desertion; Mark A. Weitz, *A Higher Duty: Desertion Among Georgia Troops During the Civil War*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000) and *More Damning than Slaughter: Desertion in the Confederate Army*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), Richard Bardolph, “Confederate Dilemma: North Carolina Troops and the Deserter Problem, Parts I and II,” in *The North Carolina Historical Review* 66, no. 1 (January, 1989), Katherine A. Giuffre, “First in Flight: Desertion as Politics in the North Carolina Confederate Army,” in *Social Science History* 21, no. 2 (Summer, 1997), Scott King-Owen, “Conditional Confederates: Absenteeism Among Western North Carolina Soldiers, 1861-1865,” in *Civil War History* 57, no. 4 (December, 2011), and Rand Dotson, “‘The Grave and Scandalous Evil Infected to your People:’ The Erosion of Confederate Loyalty in Floyd County, Virginia,” in *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 108, no. 4 (2000).

and diaries the explosion itself was the most prominent news worth relating. Among others the appearance of black troops in combat was worthy of mention. Confidence remained high.

William Alexander of the 37th North Carolina wrote in his diary the day after the battle that

Grant “tried his mining with little success. He blow up our lines, but failed to capture our lines.”

Georgian A.B. Simms described to his sister how Union troops white and black were slaughtered

with seeming ease and that “Grant found out that Lee had enough men to meet his diversion and

at the same time give him a sound thrashing.” Daniel Boyd, 7th South Carolina Infantry wrote

happily that “they got so badly whipt at their own trick I don’t think they try it eny more.” Daniel

Stover, 7th Virginia Cavalry bluntly wrote of the crater attack that Grant’s “attempt met with the

same success that all his others had.” Shocked that the Union was utilizing black troops against

them, some Confederates, like Alva Benjamin Spencer, 3rd Georgia Infantry wrote to their loved

ones their disbelief. Spencer, for example, asked his wife to “just think of our brave men being

murdered by cruel heartless negroes. Isn’t it enough to render the Yankeys more despicable, if

possible, than ever? Certainly a kind & just God will not permit such a people to rule over us.”⁶⁴

Many Confederates believed the Union’s use of black troops to be further proof of their barbarity and further steeled many to continue fighting. Historian George C. Rable has argued that the Union’s use of black soldiers was one of many reasons that Confederate hatred towards the U.S. hardened as the war continued.⁶⁵ Confederate soldiers reacted violently at the sight of armed black soldiers and killing in the crater continued after many black soldiers had quit fighting. Richard Slotkin argued that this killing was partially the result of Confederate

⁶⁴ William D. Alexander Diary, UNC, Peacock, “A Georgian’s View of War in Virginia,” 115-16, Daniel Boyd to father, August 10, 1864, in Robert Boyd Papers, Duke, Daniel Stover to Sister, August 7, 1864, in Daniel Stover Letters, LVA, Clyde G. Wiggins, III, ed., *My Dear Friend: The Civil War Letters of Alva Benjamin Spencer 3rd Georgia Regiment Company C*, (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2007), 138-39.

⁶⁵ George C. Rable, *Damn Yankees!: Demonization and Defiance in the Confederate South*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015).

propaganda that demonized white Union soldiers and dehumanized further black Union soldiers as threats to white women and the enslavers of white Southern men.⁶⁶

The ultimate significance of the summer military campaign was that war weariness in the North grew to its highest point of the entire war, Grant was under pressure to achieve some sort of resolution before the election, and Republican Party powerbrokers began to see Lincoln as a losing cause. As July turned into August the Army of Northern Virginia continued to have supreme confidence in its ability to hold Richmond and Petersburg.

August, 1864 – Early's Army in the Shenandoah Valley

Throughout the month of August Early's men engaged in light skirmishing with Union forces, rested, reorganized, gathered and issued supplies, and felt confident that fighting in the Valley was over for the present campaign. Being well fed, rested, and nonchalant in regards to their enemy continued to drive optimism and morale. Allie Clack, 23rd North Carolina, wrote his sister from Bunker Hill, Virginia on the second day of August informing her of the activities and mood in camp writing, "we have been here some two or three days, resting, about twenty two miles from the river, enjoying the advantages of a plenty to eat & good water to drink, not much fear of the enemy." Also resting was Ruffin Barnes of the 43rd North Carolina. Barnes reminisced to his wife about the casualties suffered by his company and the conditions in the Valley. Barnes believed that "we are better off than if we had been lying in the trenches round Petersburg & Richmond, and we are more healthy and are up here where we can get the best kind of water to drink. I had much rather stay up here than to go back there...the boys all keep in fine spirits." Another soldier in the 23rd North Carolina concurred with his comrades writing his father that "we are faring splendid we get plenty of everything to eat." This soldier surmised that

⁶⁶ Richard Slotkin, *No Quarter: The Battle of the Crater, 1864*, (New York: Random House, 2009).

the lack of action signaled an end to operations. He confidently wrote that “I don’t think the Yankees will come hear and if they do I know we can whip them.”⁶⁷

Reminiscing about the accomplishments of the summer and the confidence it entailed was written about by many soldiers in the Valley. Describing some of the battles over the summer in the Valley David Parker exuded that “our army had whipt them round about some eight times this summer. They never have whipt us but the one time that was on the 20 of July [Rutherford’s Farm].” Later in the month Parker wrote that “the Yankees are so demoralised here that they cant get them to fight any atall.” Colonel Charles Blacknall wrote his brother ridiculing Union efforts during the Virginia campaign that year. “It must be humiliating indeed to the North, after making such immense preparations for over throwing the South & capturing Richmond, that after their strength have become exhausted & all their efforts put to nought, against Richmond, that we have a large army on their borders subsisting on their country & they powerless to afford protection.” Later in the month Blacknall wrote what many soldiers in Early’s army must have felt that “our men continue in fine health & spirits since we left Richmond, but I think I prefer marching & fighting here, to being blowed up in the trenches around Richmond.”⁶⁸

With confidence being high and body fed and rested Early’s men continued to look to the United States Presidential election as well as the North Carolina gubernatorial election. Many soldiers continued to believe that holding on around Richmond, Petersburg, and Atlanta as well as remaining a threat in the Valley would ensure a Northern peace victory and the end of the war. These soldiers correctly recognized the connection between battlefield performance and the

⁶⁷ Allie Clack to Carrie, August 2, 1864, in Carrie H. Clack Papers, UNC, Ruffin Barnes to wife, August 2, 1864, Ruffin Barnes Letters, NCDAH, William Brotherton to Father, August 6 and 10, 1864, in William H. Brotherton Papers, Duke.

⁶⁸ Riley Henry, ed., *Pen in Hand: David Parker Civil War Letters*, (Morgan Hill: Bookstand Publishing, 2014), 118, 122; Charles Blacknall to George Blacknall, August 8, 1864, in Oscar Blacknall Papers, NCDAH.

possibility of victory through political means. On August 4, 1864 North Carolinians took to the polls and voted overwhelmingly for incumbent Zebulon Vance's reelection, proving that many in the army and the Tarheel state were for the continued prosecution of the war. Surgeon John F. Shaffner, 4th North Carolina wrote from camp that the results of the North Carolina election had "given joy and pleasure to the soldiers of this Army. We all believed that Vance would be re-elected, but none expected the vote would be so nearly unanimous. Our good old State has done most nobly, and no stain blights her bright escutcheon." Writing on August 23rd Brigadier General Bryan Grimes hoped that the peace candidate and editor of an anti-Davis administration newspaper "begins now to open his eyes to his folly & has been taught a lesson not soon to be forgotten." ⁶⁹

Many Confederate soldier letters and diaries mentioned the desire for a Northern peace candidate to win, but once the Democratic Party's platform was revealed, a platform that included restoration of the Union regardless of slavery, Confederates preferred that Lincoln would be re-elected. With another four years of Lincoln Confederates understood that war would continue. By the end of August they had reason to be confident. Grant was no nearer capturing Richmond or Petersburg and Atlanta was still in Confederate hands. Early in the Valley could not draw Sheridan into a major engagement. On the Northern home front war weariness was peaking and by the end of the month Abraham Lincoln believed that he would not be re-elected. On August 23rd Lincoln issued a memorandum informing his cabinet that "it seems exceedingly probable that this Administration will not be re-elected. Then it will be my duty to so co-operate with the President elect, as to save the Union between the election and the inauguration; as he

⁶⁹ John Shaffner to Carrie Fries Shaffner, August 16, 1864, in Shaffner Diary and Papers, NCDAAH, Bryan Grimes to Charlotte Grimes, August 23, 1864, in Bryan Grimes Papers, UNC. Zebulon Vance defeated William Woods Holden by a total of 58,000 votes for Vance and 15,000 for Holden. See Raleigh *Weekly Standard*, October 19, 1864 for county by county vote total and comparison between gubernatorial election of 1862.

will have secured his election on such ground that he can not possibly save it afterwards.”⁷⁰ Northern war weariness was reported in Southern and Northern newspapers. A member of the 4th North Carolina serving as a correspondent and soldier wrote August 24th that “everybody thinks this the last year of the war – the Yankees themselves think so.”⁷¹ Activities around Petersburg would further encourage Confederate soldier hopes that peace was near and Confederate independence assured. Writing in his diary on August 30th, a soldier in the 5th North Carolina happily wrote that “the North is clamouring for peace.”⁷² Sharing this confidence was a North Carolina surgeon who admitted to his father that “the Yankees are in a perfectly demoralized condition and can be driven about like a flock of sheep.” After hearing reports of the victory at Reams’ Station the surgeon continued that “prospects for peace are manifestly brightening and I am at a loss to know what to do with myself in case we should come to terms.” On the eve of September Early’s Confederates were blissfully ignorant that the next month would change their attitude about the possibility of victory. Writing disdainfully in his diary August 28th, Alexander Paxton wrote that “the enemy retreat like cowardly dogs when we advance.” Major General Stephen D. Ramseur wrote cheerfully that “everything looks bright for our cause.”⁷³

August, 1864 – Army of Northern Virginia, Richmond and Petersburg

Unit cohesion and pride also sustained a sense of invincibility among Lee’s men. Writing to his father on August 5th the commander of the Cobb’s Legion of Cavalry wrote of Union raids in the area that though “they do a great harm to the country but *cant conquer* us but rather stirs us up to greater efforts to repel the rascals.” As the news from Atlanta grew grimmer soldiers in Virginia took time to differentiate between the Army of Tennessee and the Army of Northern

⁷⁰ Abraham Lincoln “Blind Memorandum,” August 23, 1864, in Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

⁷¹ E.B. Munson, ed., *Confederate Correspondent: The Civil War Reports of Jacob Nathaniel Raymer, Fourth North Carolina*, (Jefferson, McFarland, 2009), 134.

⁷² Henry Smith Diary in John Owen Papers, NCDAAH.

⁷³ Alexander Paxton Diary, Washington & Lee, Kundahl, *The Bravest of the Brave*, 260,.

Virginia which sheds light on the confidence and esprit de corps soldiers in the latter army felt throughout the war. A soldier in the 3rd Georgia wrote that “since the 4th of May, our arms have been signally victorious. Almost everywhere except in Georgia, we’ve met with unprecedented success. It seems as if that department has been & is now our only drawback. I believe we would long since have had peace if that army could have equaled the successes of the ‘Army of Northern Virginia.’ I don’t say this in a boast; I honestly believe it. In plain language, the misfortunes of that army have counterbalanced the successes of this.”⁷⁴ Already believing themselves superior to the Union forces opposite them Lee’s soldiers compared themselves to their own Confederate comrades elsewhere and found them wanting. Confidence in Lee combined with this esprit de corps continued to fuel optimism in the ranks among many soldiers. Confederate citizens also shared this faith in Lee and the army believing as Gary Gallagher has argued that the Army of Northern Virginia was vehicle through which Confederate national hopes flowed.⁷⁵

Not all of Lee’s men could withstand the conditions along the lines. Desertion continued to be a problem. Soldiers took notice of it and many were confused why men were leaving when things appeared to be going well for their cause. Elias Davis of the 8th Alabama noted that “night before last twenty five members of the 9 Ala Regt including one commissioned officer deserted. They did not go to the Yankees are efforting to get home. Some of them had been good soldiers. I am much surprised at the desertions from our Army now as the campaign here is drawing to a close; and we are living better than we did at this time two years ago. Our rations are good; so much as we want; shoes and clothing are more abundant than they were two years ago. All have shoes. The prospect for an early peace is more cheering than it has been since commencement.”

⁷⁴ Galloway, *Dear Old Roswell*, 88, Wiggins, *My Dear Friend*, 139.

⁷⁵ Gallagher, *Confederate War*, 8.

These good soldiers Davis referred to may have deserted because of the lack of communication from Alabama due to Sherman's cutting of communications during his siege of Atlanta. Though this does not illustrate a loss of hope of victory it may indicate a frustration among deep South soldiers that nothing was being done to protect their homes. Not all soldiers were being encouraged to come home. Frank Poteet, 49th North Carolina, confirmed to his wife that "you rote to me to not runaway if it is the will of my loving Wife I wont runaway you know that it is hard times hear."⁷⁶ Many soldiers had many reasons to desert and many soldiers had many reasons to continue fighting. Many like Poteet resisted the natural urge to escape daily exposure to death, poor rations, and to return to assist struggling family members.

Throughout August concern over the fate of Atlanta as well as communication lines into the deep South were heavy on the minds of many of Lee's soldiers, particularly Georgians. Though concerned for family and property many Georgians tried to remain confident in ultimate success. However, reactions and hopes varied as the fate of the city hung in the balance. An aide de camp to Major General Charles Field shared his concern writing on August 23rd that he was "in great & painful suspense to hear from Atlanta but as our mail communications have been again interrupted there is no telling when we will get letters." One week later as the situation in Georgia further deteriorated for the Confederates the same soldier wrote that "the news from GA today is not very cheering, by this movement it is feared that he [Sherman] will force Genl Hood to uncover Atlanta exposing the city to the mercy of raiders. I hope though it may all work out right yet though we are almost out of patience awaiting more cheering news from Ga." An officer in the Georgia Cobb's Legion of Cavalry wrote that the threat to Atlanta was having the opposite effect assuring his wife that "these raids can never subdue us in fact it will have the

⁷⁶ Elias Davis to Georgie Davis, August 13, 1864, Elias Davis Papers, UNC, Frank Poteet to wife, August 21, 1864, in Poteet-Dickson Letters, NCDAH.

contrary effect upon us, & will make us more bitter, more determined than ever to never again countenance a Yankee or their nation.” Plantation owner and officer in the 15th Georgia Edgeworth Bird wrote simply that, “our army in North Georgia seems unfortunate.”⁷⁷

Like their comrades in the Valley, the Confederates defending Richmond and Petersburg took especial notice of elections and conventions. A North Carolinian serving in a Virginia artillery unit wrote in his diary after the soldiers voted that “the vote for Vance is very encouraging, & if the people at home don’t vote for him they ought to be shipped out of the Confederacy.” He believed that victory on the battlefield and continuing to fight were the surest ways to peace, writing, “If the soldiers don’t know how peace is to be obtained who does?” The upcoming Democratic Party Convention also had tongues wagging in Lee’s army. Sharing the opinions of many of their brethren in the Valley, the soldiers defending Petersburg and Richmond also believed that if they and others could hold on that the growing peace sentiment in the North would sweep a peace candidate into office. This belief led some to make confident prophecies such as Hugh Crichton, 47th North Carolina, who wrote home that “Grant & Sherman will be in full retreat in 3 weeks from this time mark my words.” Another Confederate prognosticator wrote at the end of the month that once a peace Democrat was elected “there will soon follow a recognition of the Confederacy, and peace and happiness will soon hover over our now distracted country.” Many soldiers wanted peace no matter who was nominated; an honorable peace complete with Confederate independence. Expressing his own war weariness James Wilkerson, 55th North Carolina wrote on the 29th that “today is the day for the peace convention to meet in the North. I hope they will have an army mistress [armistice] and it is hope they will come to some conclusion for an honorable peace. I am tired of this

⁷⁷ Henry A. Smith Diary, Auburn, Galloway, *Dear Old Roswell*, 91-92, John Rozier, ed., *The Granite Farm Letters: The Civil War Correspondence of Edgeworth & Sallie Bird*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 184.

war.”⁷⁸Concern over the deteriorating situation in Georgia coincided with predictions about election results to cause fluctuating expectations and hopes.

Continued battlefield stalemate was another reason for many soldiers in Lee’s army to feel that the prospects for peace and Confederate independence were bright. On August 24-25, Grant detached his veteran Second Corps south to tear up portions of the vital Weldon Railroad around Reams’ Station. The position of this portion of track left the Second Corps detached and vulnerable. Lee, understanding the importance of the Weldon line for supplies, and the detached condition of the Second Corps, saw an opportunity and sent roughly 15,000 men south to secure the area around Reams’ Station. This risky move showed Lee’s characteristic boldness as well as a sense of desperation. With the Weldon line closed Lee would have to gather supplies from the south from different directions, thereby making it more difficult to supply his army. The resulting battle was a large success for the Confederates who routed the Second Corps, driving them away from Reams’ Station after suffering 2,600 casualties and the loss of nine cannon. This victory further encouraged Confederate optimism and prospects among many Confederate soldiers in Virginia.⁷⁹

Abel Crawford, 61st Alabama, wrote his sweetheart the day after the battle that “our forces are still successful in all the engagements around here. It seems the Yankees are getting to Petersburg in a way they don’t like.” An officer on Hill’s staff, who witnessed the attack, described the euphoria of victory, “this is the same Corps that Genl Hill has whipped several times before since we have been here. Everything was accomplished that was intended & it is

⁷⁸ Albright Diary, UNC, Hugh Crichton Letters, August 28, 1864, in Lucy Tunstall Alston Williams Papers, UNC, Wiggins, *My Dear Friend*, 148, James K. Wilkerson to sister, August 29, 1864, in James K. Wilkerson Letters, Duke.

⁷⁹ For more on the Battle of Reams’ Station and Grant’s Sixth Offensive see, Noah Andre Trudeau, *The Last Citadel: Petersburg, Virginia June 1864- April 1865*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991) and John Horn, *The Siege of Petersburg: The Battles for the Weldon Railroad, August, 1864*, (El Dorado Hill: Savas Beatie, 2015).

considered a brilliant victory.” A survivor of the battle wrote a friend that he was optimistic in ultimate Confederate success and refused to quit fighting until independence was achieved. “I think our prospects are brighter now than has been since the war,” he wrote, “ I am anxious for peace but unless we can get an honorable peace, that is the recognition of the Southern Confederacy, I will fight on. I rather fight than see my country subjected to Yankee tyranny. This present generation will never live to see the South subdued, no, never. The people will have freedom & independence or death.” For these believers the end of the war would bring Confederate independence. They only had to continue fighting and wearing down the Northern will to fight.⁸⁰

At the end of August, 1864 in the minds of many of Confederate soldiers serving in Virginia the war seemed to be almost over and Confederate independence assured. Many soldiers continued to be cautiously optimistic as August turned into September. Was their optimism misplaced? Was it a foregone conclusion that the Confederacy and her armies were already defeated by late summer 1864? Confederate forces had not yet given up around Atlanta, there was no major fighting in the Valley, and every Union attack around Richmond and Petersburg had been repelled. Combined with the horrendous casualties of the spring and summer, re-dedication to fighting the war among many voters in the South, war weariness in the North, and Lincoln’s own belief that he would be defeated in the upcoming United States presidential election, indicates that Confederate defeat was not pre-ordained. Also, it foreshadows the vital importance of events in September, 1864 to the ultimate conclusion of the Civil War.

⁸⁰ Abel Crawford to Dora, August 26, 1864, Abel Crawford Letters, Duke, Samuel Harper to sister, August 26, 1864, in Samuel Finley Harper Letters, NCSDAH, Hugh Deason to Dossie, August 27, 1864, Josephine Noble Papers, Auburn.

Chapter Two: The Realities of Defeat: The Turning Points of the Civil War in the East, September - December, 1864.

September, 1864 was a crucial month in the life of the Confederacy as well as Abraham Lincoln. The fate of Atlanta, Georgia was sealed and Jubal Early's Confederate threat in the Shenandoah Valley was all but eliminated. Around Richmond and Petersburg, Ulysses S. Grant slowly gained limited positions from Confederate defenders that contributed to the ultimate Confederate defeat in the area. October saw much of the same in Virginia: limited Confederate victories followed by decisive Confederate defeats. Battlefield defeats ensured Abraham Lincoln's re-election and a continuation of the war against the Confederacy. Military and political defeat affected the morale of many in a negative way leading to a spike in desertions at the beginning of December and signalling that the cause for Confederate independence was no longer achievable. However, many soldiers in the Army of Northern Virginia remained in the ranks into 1865.

This chapter will explore the major themes of the Civil War in Virginia during the third quarter of 1864: the potential for battlefield victory or defeat and its impact on Confederate morale; the meaning behind continued desertion among Confederate soldiers; the impact of defeat in the Shenandoah Valley; the blowback from Union policies; and the re-election of Abraham Lincoln. I argue that the Confederate defeats in the Shenandoah Valley had a greater impact on the outcome of the Civil War in Virginia than the fall of Atlanta and significantly contributed to ending any chances the Confederacy had in ending the war through a decisive military victory or negotiated peace.

Historians justifiably argue the importance of the fall of Atlanta to the final outcome of the Civil War. In their arguments they equate the fall of Atlanta with the re-election of Abraham

Lincoln and the foreshadowing of the defeat of the Confederacy.⁸¹ This is a partially correct argument. Using James McPherson's application of contingency to studying the end of the Civil War and its causation, several factors could have precluded the fall of Atlanta and William T. Sherman's subsequent destructive march to the sea. After the fall of Atlanta and instead of retreating to the south and west, the remnant of the Confederate Army of Tennessee could have retreated south and east which would have perhaps prevented Sherman's march in the first place. If Sherman still proceeded on his march he would have had to face a Confederate army that could have delayed him long enough to a) be reinforced, and b) impact the United States presidential election. In any case, the fall of Atlanta by itself was not as devastating to Confederate morale as previously argued.

Historians have argued that the fall of Atlanta had a devastating impact on the morale of the Army of Northern Virginia, prompting an increase in desertions.⁸² While certainly disheartening to some soldiers, particularly from Georgia, letters from Lee's men suggest that the fall of Atlanta had either a temporary impact or no impact at all on a large portion of Lee's men. This could have been due to the distance of Atlanta from the trenches around Petersburg and Richmond as well as the confidence many still had in holding out against Grant and Sheridan. Ultimately the arguments that Confederate morale was independent from military events are incorrect.⁸³ Military success or defeat had a major impact on morale among both Confederate soldiers and civilians. Combined with hardships at home and the front a military victory,

⁸¹ Albert Castel, *Winning and Losing the Civil War: Essays and Stories*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010, 29, Russell S. Bonds, *War Like the Thunderbolt: The Battle and Burning of Atlanta*, (Yardley: Westholme Publishing, 2010) xxi. For a comprehensive one volume study on the Atlanta Campaign see Albert Castel, *Decision in the West: The Atlanta Campaign of 1864* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1992).

⁸² Noah Andre Trudeau, *The Last Citadel: Petersburg, Virginia June 1864 - April 1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991) and Beringer, et al, *The Elements of Confederate Defeat*, 148-152.

⁸³ Beringer, etc., *The Elements of Confederate Defeat*, 148-152. See Gallagher, *Confederate War* for a rebuttal to the argument that morale was independent of military success.

however small, could boost morale and confidence in a positive Confederate outcome. Likewise battlefield defeat, as historian Paul D. Escott has shown in his study of the Confederacy, combined with the belief among soldiers and citizens that the Confederate government could not provide or protect civilians, contributed to a demoralizing effect on white Southerners.⁸⁴ More than Atlanta, the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia had a much greater impact on the optimism and morale of the Army of Northern Virginia.

The Shenandoah Valley in 1864 represented, as historian Aaron Sheehan-Dean argued, a microcosm of the war in Virginia as a whole. Battlefield and civilians were combined into one.⁸⁵ Union policy initiated by Ulysses S. Grant and carried out by Philip Sheridan in September and October destroyed nearly all the barns, mills, and wheat crops in the northern half of the Valley. This resulted in a devastation to both civilian's ability to provide for themselves as well as a source of supply to Lee's army. Known as "the Burning," this destruction contributed to a hardening of spirit among many Confederate soldiers, particularly among Early's troops who witnessed the destruction. "The Burning" had an unintended consequence for Union generals in that it further embittered Valley residents including many Unionists as well as kept many soldiers in the Confederate ranks who may have seriously contemplated desertion.

Historians regard the outcome of the Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1864 as destructive of Lee's major supply region as helpful to Lincoln's re-election. Others have argued that the results of the individual battles such as Third Winchester (September 19), Fisher's Hill (September 22), Tom's Brook (October 9), and Cedar Creek (October 19) permanently damaged the morale of Early's men.⁸⁶ While morale was certainly shaken, unit cohesion among the

⁸⁴ Paul D. Escott, *The Confederacy: The Slaveholders Failed Venture*, (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010).

⁸⁵ Sheehan-Dean, *Why Confederates Fought*, 142-143.

⁸⁶ Gary W. Gallagher, ed., *The Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1864*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), xiv, xvii.

veteran units of the Second Corps remained intact to continue fighting around Petersburg and Richmond at the end 1864 and into 1865. Thus morale either recovered, or the unit cohesion was confined primarily to diehards, veterans, and zealots. A major outcome of the Valley Campaign of 1864 was the destruction of Confederate soldier invincibility in Union eyes. This aura is discussed in studies of the Army of Northern Virginia in 1862-1863 and in biographies of Robert E. Lee, but once this legend of invincibility was severely shaken, it had a profound impact on Confederate and Union soldiers. Union soldiers, particularly in the Valley, gained ever more confidence that exhibited itself ultimately at the Battle of Cedar Creek in October. The impact on Confederate morale was to create despair to add to the hardships and growing despondency. The sense of invincibility was never completely destroyed as seen in the protracted defense of Petersburg and Richmond as well as the campaign that led to Appomattox Court House, but it was severely shaken by the decisive defeats in the Shenandoah Valley.

“The Army is a Great Deal Demoralized:” September, 1864

On July 17, 1864 Jefferson Davis replaced Joseph E. Johnston as commander of the Army of Tennessee with John Bell Hood. The change was brought about because of Johnston’s being driven back into the defenses of Atlanta and not stopping Sherman from approaching the city. Through a series of bloody attacks between July 20-28 Hood was no nearer repelling Sherman than Johnston was although he had severely hampered his own army’s offensive capability. As the siege wore on Confederates despaired. Finally, on August 31 and September 1 as a result of the Battle of Jonesboro, Hood evacuated the city and on September 2 Sherman occupied Atlanta. Looking back in hindsight, historian Albert Castel argued that the fall of Atlanta destroyed Confederate hopes for independence.⁸⁷ But in the minds of Confederate

⁸⁷ Castel, *Winning and Losing the Civil War*, 29.

soldiers that was not the case. Seeing events through participants' eyes and examining their reactions to events overturns hindsight interpretations such as Castel's. Even with the loss of Atlanta Confederate military fortunes could still have achieved their goal of holding out successfully until the election. A large reason for this is the belief of the men doing the fighting.

The eyes of Army of Northern Virginia soldiers continued to be on Atlanta but also on the pending election. George B. McClellan had been nominated by the Democrats as their candidate for the presidency. Reactions to the nomination varied. Oscar Hinrichs, an engineer officer on Early's staff, did not care who the candidates were as long as peace and independence was won.⁸⁸ John Evans writing on September 2 felt that McClellan's nomination gave "great satisfaction to the soldiers generally" and that many believed he would bring about peace but to Evans "I don't see much prospect for it."⁸⁹ Others, like Thomas C. Elder, 3rd Virginia Infantry, felt that McClellan, while not ideal, was "the best man for us."⁹⁰ Still, other soldiers, like artilleryman John Walters, felt that no matter who was elected president the war would continue for four more years and this fact demoralized many of his comrades who were anxious for peace. For Walters, and many others, four more years of war meant four more years of a potential early death. Some like South Carolinian James Wingard felt that McClellan's election would be akin to re-electing Lincoln. Writing to his brother from the lines around Petersburg Wingard shared that many of his comrades were happy about the nomination and the potential for peace but "I am fearful that his election will be our downfall, he is certain to offer terms of peace and I fear they will be such that the South cannot justify herself in accepting. Consequently it will cause a disunion in our ranks and prove our overthrow." Wingard wanted peace but he was "not willing

⁸⁸ Richard Brady Williams, ed., *Stonewall's Prussian Mapmaker: The Journals of Captain Oscar Hinrichs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 162-163.

⁸⁹ John B. Evans to Mollie Evans, September 2, 1864, John B. Evans Papers, Duke.

⁹⁰ Thomas C. Elder to Wife, September 4, 1864, in Thomas C. Elder Letters, VHS.

to let the North have peace on her own terms.” The South Carolinian shared the opinion of his president that a total separation between North and South was the only conceivable outcome to the war.⁹¹

McClellan’s acceptance was published on September 8, 1864. His main goal was the reestablishment of the Union as it was. This dashed the hopes of many Confederate soldiers that McClellan would bring about peace and a separation between the two sections. Feeling betrayed by McClellan’s position many wrote of their frustration. Virginia artilleryman Beverley Pettit wrote his wife to express his sense of betrayal saying that McClellan “[knew] full well that this condition will never be conceded.” Pettit finished by preferring Lincoln’s re-election. Pettit was not alone in his criticism of McClellan. North Carolinian Leonidas Polk, soon to be elected to the state legislature, dubiously wrote that “peace is all the theme in camp. I think the prospect gloomy. McClellan’s letter of acceptance, if he be sincere, is almost anything but a panacea for the ills that curse the land. Some see in it hope, peace but I must confess I fear it the starting point of worse times provided he should be elected.”⁹²

The desire for peace occupied the thoughts of nearly all Confederates. Though many soldiers were still willing to fight for it, seeing a positive outcome to their suffering and sacrifice was becoming more difficult. McClellan’s (and Lincoln’s) insistence on a restoration of the Union dashed the hopes of many of Lee’s soldiers who saw in the election a chance for a negotiated peace that would end the war. Desertions continued to siphon off troops from the army who saw no use in continuing the struggle. McClellan’s nomination renewed within many the longstanding belief that holding out would drive Lincoln (or McClellan) to the negotiating

⁹¹ James Wingard to brother, September 9, 1864, in Simon P. Wingard Papers, Duke.

⁹² George Brinton McClellan, *Printed. Letter of Geo. B. McClellan in acceptance of the nomination Chicago Convention*, Orange, New Jersey, September 8, 1864. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/scsm000266/>, accessed January 8, 2019; Turner, *Civil War Letters of Arabella Speairs and William Beverley Pettit*, 69; Leonidas Polk to Sallie, September 11, 1864, Polk Papers, UNC.

table. Nevertheless, many of Lee's soldiers knew the war and the election would be decided on the battlefield.

As word began to trickle into Virginia about the fate of Atlanta, opinions among Lee's army were varied. Many recognized that the city's fall would have a positive effect on Lincoln's re-election bid as well as boosting Northern morale; further evidence that Lee's men recognized that battlefield outcomes directly affected Northern elections. Still others recognized that if Hood's army remained intact to fight another day, then the loss of the city was not a significant loss. But as confirmation of the city's fall continued to filter into soldier's hands, reactions became more varied. A predominance of correspondence and diaries from Lee's soldiers indicate a renewed determination to continue fighting.

While recognizing the loss of the city as a severe blow, North Carolinian Tom Devereux assured his sister that "we are not whipped yet, and I think we never will be." Fellow Tar-Heel, surgeon John Shaffner summarized the belief of many of Lee's men when he wrote his wife the confidence he and many of his comrades had in the Army of Northern Virginia to continue holding their own. If other Confederate armies would do likewise, "no fear need be entertained of coming disaster, and national ruin." Admitting that the fall of Atlanta "produced a momentary depression with our soldiery, their usual hopeful spirits speedily gained the ascendancy, and now as ever, everyone has resolved to be free." In an effort to ameliorate any concerns his wife or acquaintances may have had, Shaffner optimistically concluded that "this disaster should by no means dispirit our people, but rather stimulate to renewed and gigantic exertions." George Peyton acknowledged the fall of the city and that peace was not likely by the end of the year, but, "our men did not attach much importance to it." Ever the diehard, Alexander Paxton concurred

with Peyton, confiding to his diary, “the troops are not dispirited by the news, but only renew their resolves to strike on for Southern Independence!”

Wealthy Georgian Edgeworth Bird tried to assure his wife that “all will yet be well, God will yet bless our cause. Everywhere we do well except in Georgia - and we’ll succeed there too.” Another Georgian in Lee’s army was especially concerned with the demoralization of the citizens of Georgia as a result of the city’s fall. Re-assuring his wife that though “its capture, did at first, I’m sorry to say, have quite a demoralizing effect on our army; but since the true condition of affairs has been made known, the same determined resistance and hatred to the Yankeys has returned stronger, if possible, than ever.” One veteran Virginia artillerist was not so confident, admitting to his diary “the future looks dark and hopeless for the South” as a result of the loss of Atlanta.⁹³ His negative outlook is an example that even stalwart veterans sensed that the future of Confederate independence was unclear. It must be noted that Devereux, Paxton, Peyton, and Shaffner were all with Early’s army in the Shenandoah Valley. As mentioned in Chapter one, the month of August and early September was largely a period of rest and refitting complete with abundant rations and mobility. With conditions like those in the Valley differing from the stale and miserable conditions of the trenches around Petersburg and Richmond, it would be easy to see how the fall of Atlanta would not have had as negative an impact on morale for Early’s men as those serving in the trenches.

Many of Lee’s men were fully aware, as was Lee, that Northern war weariness was at its highest by the summer of 1864 and that the capture of Atlanta would rejuvenate Northern willingness to prolong the war. Writing in his journal his thoughts about the fall of Atlanta,

⁹³ Tom Devereux to Kate Devereux, September 10, 1864, Thomas Devereux Letterbook, NCDAH; John Shaffner to Carrie Fries Shaffner, September 13, 1864, Shaffner Papers, NCDAH; Swank, *Stonewall Jackson’s Foot Cavalry*, 105; Alexander Paxton Diary, W&L; Rozier, *The Granite Farm Letters*, 202; Wiggins, *My Dear Friend*, 151; William H. Runge, ed., *Four Years in the Confederate Artillery: The Diary of Private Henry Robinson Berkeley*, (Richmond: Virginia Historical Society, 1991), 95.

Oscar Hinrichs correctly recognized that the city's fall "will stimulate the war feeling at the north and thus lead to a prolongation of the struggle." Lee's adjutant general, Walter Taylor agreed, writing his wife "I suppose everybody in Richd. will be very blue over the fall of Atlanta. The question is what effect it will produce on the North?"⁹⁴ With Lincoln's re-election in doubt, heightened war weariness in the North as well as growing discontent over a looming round of conscription to feed the meat grinder of war, on top of Lincoln's perceived refusal to negotiate a peace with the Confederacy, Northern support for the war was at its lowest of the entire war. Confederate soldiers knew it and grasped its importance as well as the importance of not losing on the battlefield.

Confederate soldiers recognized the effect that battlefield losses like at Atlanta (along with that city's crucial industrial and transportation network) might have on the upcoming election. A dual recognition existed that admitted that holding on militarily and preventing defeats would go a long way towards possible independence. Trusting to the election of a peace candidate in the North was one of the many hopes and ultimately unmet expectations that many Confederate soldiers had. One of Early's staff officers believed that "the most powerful argument that can be made use of against him [Lincoln] will be the success attending our armies in the field. Lee, Hood, and Early have the whole business in their own hands." The colonel of the 23rd North Carolina Infantry agreed, recognizing the importance of Confederate battlefield victory and the prevention of Union battlefield success writing his brother that "an uninterrupted tide of success during the whole campaign would in my estimation, having closed the war, McClellan & Pendleton would no doubt be elected, if the northern armies are unable to gain any material successes by the election." A private in the 6th Virginia Infantry despondently shared his

⁹⁴ Williams, *Stonewall's Prussian Mapmaker*, 167; Lockwood, *Lee's Adjutant*, 187-88.

reaction to the chances for peace through the election writing from the trenches to his wife that , “the fall of Atlanta has cast a gloom over us all we had looked to the nomination of McClellan as one step toward peace but our reverse in Georgia I fear will prove detrimental to his election but we can only hope for the best.” Alabamian James Boardman represented the thoughts of many deep South Confederate soldiers serving in Virginia writing that the primary impact of the fall of Atlanta was twofold. The city’s fall cut these soldiers off from communication with their families and the boon it would create in the North. Boardman wrote his sister that “this is the greatest misfortune that has happened to our armies since the campaign began, and is particularly disastrous at the present time, in giving encouragement to the enemy’s hopes of eventual success in Ga.”⁹⁵ The fall of Atlanta contributed to dashing these hopes but not eradicating hope entirely.

Engineer Charles Trueheart placed events in perspective. Even though Atlanta was lost, Trueheart assured his father that “at every point we are ready for him [Grant], Sheridan has met with as little, or even less success. Reverses have only caused a temporary depression with people hear.” Admitting that Atlanta’s loss dashed the expectations of peace for many, Edgar Ashton, 3rd Virginia Infantry resignedly wrote his aunt from the lines around Petersburg that “this will be one of the longest campaigns that ever has been yet.”⁹⁶ The effects of the fall of Atlanta were felt by all of Lee’s men. Reactions were varied as to the effect it had on Confederate independence but many realized their expectations and hopes were being dashed. While still holding on, many of Lee’s men continued to exhibit confidence, optimism, and hope that events would swing their way before the election. On the other hand, many soldiers from the deep South expressed concern for family and property as well as their concern with overall

⁹⁵ Williams, *Stonewall’s Prussian Mapmaker*, 168; Charles Blacknall to George Blacknall, September 9, 1864, Oscar Blacknall Papers, NCDAH; Robert C. Mabry to wife, September 5, 1864, Robert C. Mabry Papers, NCDAH; James Boardman to Sister, September 7, 1864, in Boardman Family Papers, Duke.

⁹⁶ Williams, *Rebel Brothers*, 119-20; Edgar Ashton to Aunt, September 9, 1864, in Edgar Ashton Letters, LVA.

Confederate hopes. Still many others, not putting pen to paper, voted with their feet and left the army, seeing the fall of Atlanta and the likelihood of a continuation of the war as even more reasons to despair.

Contrasting reasons for despair or confidence often derived from the physical conditions of soldiers operating in the Shenandoah Valley or the trenches around Petersburg and Richmond. Physical condition, rations, and other supplies were directly linked to morale. Soldiers serving in the Shenandoah Valley were mobile, well fed, and most importantly not in the trenches. In contrast, soldiers in the trenches around Petersburg and Richmond longed to be on the move and better fed. Soldiers from the Second Corps of the Army of Northern Virginia who had served in the Valley since July enjoyed an abundance of food compared to their comrades elsewhere. Mobility and an ability to drive off or defeat Union forces fed into their confidence. One soldier writing in the middle of September confessed that he and his comrades were “living high on mutton, beef, and fresh pork.” Colonel Charles C. Blacknall, commanding the 23rd North Carolina Infantry assured his family at home that “we get abundant supplies here.” North Carolina Brigadier General Bryan Grimes described to his wife that his men’s clothes were becoming worn and that around 200 of his men were barefoot. However, exhibiting his confidence in their fighting ability Grimes wrote that “with all our nakedness we can put up a most beautiful fight and the men go into it with spirit and i myself feel twenty years younger after being in a fight for a few minutes.” Nathaniel Raymer spoke for many in the Valley writing the editor of a hometown newspaper that “I believe every Confederate soldier in the Valley is glad that his lot is cast in Early’s Corps. Our mode of life is perfect happiness compared to the dreadful inactivity around Petersburg.” Raymer ended his letter with a description of the mood of his comrades including a direct linkage between morale and food. “[The] spirit of the army is

uncommonly buoyant, notwithstanding the reverses sustained by our arms in other quarters. We are faring sumptuously, and perhaps more than anything else is our reason for liking the valley so well.”⁹⁷

During the middle of August, Lee dispatched reinforcements to Early in the northern part of the Valley. These veteran soldiers included Joseph B. Kershaw’s division. Early utilized these reinforcements during his cat and mouse campaign with Sheridan from mid-August to mid-September when they were recalled by Lee. One of Kershaw’s men while camped around Winchester wrote his father describing his desires as to destination. “I don’t care where we go; so we don’t go to Petersburg. I don’t want to get back there. We are living better here than we did there. I believe.”⁹⁸ This soldier’s morale obviously improved once he and his comrades left the miserable and deadly conditions of the lines around Petersburg and Richmond. Many of Early’s soldiers would be singing a different tune by the end of the month.

Along the lines in Petersburg and Richmond many of Lee’s soldiers continued writing about their frustrations with the stagnant nature of the warfare they were being subjected to as well as the limited rations. These factors along with a sense that the Confederate government was protecting their families was causing the problem of desertion to continue. Many other soldiers longed to be in the Valley where the army was mobile and living off the land. A Louisiana artilleryman from the venerable Washington Artillery, wrote longingly to the editor of the *Richmond Whig* that “the bulk of the army look back with comparative envy upon the open field, with its rough marches and hardships, and would willingly risk again the fierce encounter for the pure air of the Valley or a sight of the Blue Ridge at sunset.” A Richmond merchant’s son wrote

⁹⁷ Tom Devereux to Mother, September 15, 1864, Thomas P. Devereux Letterbook, NCDAH; Charles C. Blacknall to George Blacknall, September 9, 1864, Oscar Blacknall Papers, NCDAH; Bryan Grimes to Charlotte Grimes, September 10, 1864, Bryan Grimes to Charlotte Grimes, September 10, 1864, Bryan Grimes Papers, UNC; Munson, *Confederate Correspondent*, 137.

⁹⁸ Daniel Boyd to Father, September 1, 1864, Robert Boyd Papers, Duke.

from the trenches to his father that “all of the boys are looking very well but are very tired of this trench duty for which I do not blame them at all.”⁹⁹ These soldiers recognized something that historians have glossed over in their studies on Confederate morale, namely the desire of Lee’s men to become mobile again and get at their Yankee enemy.

The adjutant general of the Army of Northern Virginia confidently wrote his wife from army headquarters that not only were soldiers returning to the ranks but that “all the troops are in the best spirits and condition imaginable.” Many of Lee’s soldiers in the trenches were not as confident as the adjutant general of the army who likely was attempting to keep the spirits of his wife and friends up. William Brotherton, 34th North Carolina Infantry was equal parts confident and discouraged when writing his cousin. Brotherton exhibited the usual confidence felt by the Army of Northern Virginia in terms of combat with the Yankees writing in reference to the Battle of Reams’ Station (August 25) that “we giv them the worst whipping tha was yet.” However, Brotherton was also worried about the recent conscription of his father as well as the lack of rations he and others along the lines were facing. “I have herd that father had to go to the army hit looks like tha don’t intend to leave a man at awl. I tel you this war cant last long we don’t git nothing to eat at awl.”¹⁰⁰ Localized and small scale victories could buoy morale but a hungry stomach and interventionist policies of the Confederate government were tugging at many soldiers’ loyalties.

Many soldiers were anxious to leave the trenches and others were worried about physical and visceral things like food, family, and the continuation of the war. Others were like artilleryman John Walters, who while admitting that the soldiers were lean, was still able to take

⁹⁹ “Fishback” to editor, *Richmond Whig*, September 6, 1864; Charles Baughman to George Baughman, September 8, 1864, in Baughman Family Papers, VHS.

¹⁰⁰ Tower, *Lee’s Adjutant*, 190-191; William Brotherton to cousin, September 7, 1864, in William H. Brotherton Papers, Duke.

conditions in stride. Writing in his diary his recent diet of eating the broadleaf weed purslane, Walters wrote that “farmers tell me that it is one of the best vegetable productions wherewith to fatten hogs, and as we Confederate soldiers have learned to eat almost any and everything, I do not see why we should not pitch in to pussley [purslane] with our characteristic vim, especially as many of us have many inches of hide which sadly needs filling out.”¹⁰¹

Confederate soldiers serving in the Shenandoah Valley were very confident due to being on the move, well fed, rested, and feeling invincible. Their confidence was well deserved but unfortunate, particularly their belief that the Union forces confronting them would not fight. Many of Early’s men were happy simply not being in the trenches around Petersburg and Richmond. Major General Stephen Dodson Ramseur, commanding one of Early’s divisions summarized the feelings of many of his soldiers writing “our campaign though a very active and arduous one, I think has been far more free from vexations and trials upon our patience and endurance than the campaign about Richmond would have been. I would rather campaign here during the Winter than remain in the trenches at Richmond & Petersburg.” Ramseur was a very perceptive individual who recognized in September, 1864 the fall campaign would ultimately decide the war. “If we can manage to prevent them from gaining any important successes, I surely believe that the Peace Party will compel a cessation of hostilities. Too much precious blood has been shed for the maintenance of our rights, too great a gulph has been opened between us & our foes to allow even the idea of reunion to be entertained.”¹⁰² Historian Gary Gallagher argued in his biography of Ramseur as well as his case study of Confederate loyalty that Ramseur was illustrative of the generation that grew up during the sectional crises of the 1850s. To Gallagher Ramseur’s generation of Southerners exhibited a Confederate loyalty and

¹⁰¹ Wiley, *Norfolk Blues*, 151.

¹⁰² Kindahl, *The Bravest of the Brave*, 270-273.

nationalism.¹⁰³ By the middle of September, 1864 Ramseur's and many other Confederate soldiers' expectations and hopes were to hold out and or defeat a Union army in battle during the fall. They believed this would bring at the least peace discussions and an end to fighting.

One of Ramseur's men maintained a confidence in Early's ability to defeat Sheridan. Writing his wife from a camp near Winchester, Virginia that "we have the best general in the Confederacy to wit Gen. Early," and that "we have had several fights with the Yankees. We whip them on every side." Brigadier General Bryan Grimes assured his wife that "we are still here in the Valley and if all the troops of the Confederacy were as disposed to do their duty as we of this Army there could be no doubt of our ultimate success." Another of Early's men agreed with the spirit of Ramseur's and Grimes' letters writing September 16th that "we don't look for anything onley to whip every fight we git in. After the Election is over it is thought this campaign [fall] will wind up this war."¹⁰⁴

By September 14, 1864, Union General Philip Sheridan, in command of the Shenandoah Valley District, was running out of time. As historian Scott Patchan demonstrated, the Union War Department was feeling pressure from Northern businessmen who were losing profits because of Early's presence in the northern Valley. Militarily, Sheridan needed to take advantage of the success of Sherman's capture of Atlanta and do something to relieve the stalemate at Petersburg and contribute a decisive victory to assist a Lincoln re-election. On September 17, 1864 Ulysses S. Grant appeared at Sheridan's headquarters discussing the latter's plans for dealing with Early. Sheridan finally began to move against Early the next day. Sheridan commanded an army of 41,000 men while Early could muster slightly over 15,000 for the

¹⁰³ Gary W. Gallagher, *Stephen Dodson Ramseur: Lee's Gallant General*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985 and *Becoming Confederates: Paths to a New National Loyalty* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2013).

¹⁰⁴ Henry, *Pen in Hand*, 123-124; Bryan Grimes to Charlotte Grimes, September 15, 1864, Bryan Grimes Papers, UNC; James Riley Cox to father, September 16, 1864, in James Riley Cox Papers, LVA.

coming engagement.¹⁰⁵ Sheridan's movement would result in the beginning of the end of the Civil War.

The back to back battles of Third Winchester (September 19) and Fisher's Hill (September 22) shook Lee's soldiers' morale significantly more than the fall of Atlanta and damaged expectations for a successful end of the war in 1864. Historian Aaron Sheehan-Dean argued that assigning blame after the two battles helped to sustain morale.¹⁰⁶ While certainly true in some respects, these two defeats also contributed to a growing disconnect between soldiers and civilians. One group Sheehan-Dean points out as receiving blame were the stay at homes who were perceived as doing nothing to contribute to Confederate independence. Soldiers' correspondence repeatedly complained, throughout the war, about men who stayed home or profited off the sacrifice of soldiers.

Beyond morale and expectations, these twin defeats ensured Lincoln's re-election, revitalized Northern support for the war, and ended the sense of invincibility felt by the Army of Northern Virginia about itself and the perception of invincibility felt by Northerners about the Army of Northern Virginia. In regards to the military situation in Virginia these twin defeats opened up the Shenandoah Valley to Sheridan's destructive operations known as "The Burning," ended Early's threat to the capital, limited Lee's ability to actively maneuver and regain mobility, and deprived Lee's army of thousands of desperately needed officers and men killed, wounded, captured, and absent without leave. Ultimately these two battles signified the end of Confederate hopes and expectations that the Army of Northern Virginia would be able to effect

¹⁰⁵ Scott C. Patchan, *The Last Battle of Winchester: Phil Sheridan, Jubal Early, and the Shenandoah Valley Campaign August 7 - September 19, 1864*, (El Dorado Hills: Savas Beatie, 2013), 187-189, 194.

¹⁰⁶ Sheehan-Dean, *Why Confederates Fought*, 170-171.

or alter the military situation in Virginia as well as impact the Northern presidential elections thus ensuring Confederate defeat.¹⁰⁷

Sheridan attacked the scattered forces of Jubal Early's army in the fields east and northeast of Winchester, Virginia on September 19th. Early was able to concentrate his army in time and hold off several attacks by Sheridan's much larger force. Elements of the Confederate army were even able to mount successful counter-attacks against the Yankees inflicting heavy casualties. The combat was so intense that some soldiers compared it to larger battles like Gettysburg and Spotsylvania. One North Carolina soldier present at the battle wrote his wife that "it was one of the hottest times I ever seen Gateysburg [Gettysburg] could not hold it a light while it lasted." Another compared it to to the carnage of the Mule Shoe at Spotsylvania writing his mother "yesterday we had one of the hardest fights on record, almost as heavy as the 12th of May."¹⁰⁸ After several hours of bloody combat Sheridan's numerical superiority showed against Early's weakened line. Launching a heavy counterattack against the vulnerable point in Early's line held by unreliable dismounted cavalry, Sheridan was able to simultaneously attack Early all along his line driving the Confederates back in disorder through the town of Winchester. It was the first time any elements of the Army of Northern Virginia had been routed from a battlefield. Early lost almost 4,000 men. Morale quickly recovered over the next two days as the army rested and reorganized in their strong defensive position atop Fisher's Hill, some 25 miles south of Winchester.

¹⁰⁷ For more on the 1864 fall campaign in the Shenandoah Valley see, Patchan, *The Last Battle of Winchester*, Jeffrey D. Wert, *From Winchester to Cedar Creek*, (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 1997), Jonathan A. Noyalas, *The Battle of Fisher's Hill: Breaking the Shenandoah Valley's Gibraltar*, (Charleston: The History Press, 2013), Gary W. Gallagher, ed., *The Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1864*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), and, as always, *War of the Rebellion, the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. 43.

¹⁰⁸ Nathan R. Frazier to wife, September 29, 1864, in Nathan R. Frazier Papers, Joyner Library, East Carolina University; Tom Devereux to mother, September 20, 1864, Thomas P. Devereux Letterbook, NCDAH.

On the morning of September 22nd Sheridan attacked Early at Fisher's Hill. Early's force, significantly weaker, was flanked again and routed in an even worse stampede than at Winchester. While morale had somewhat recovered in the two days since Third Winchester, many seeing the defeat as a hard won victory that became a defeat because of unreliable cavalry, Fisher's Hill was an unmitigated disaster that took the men's spirits several weeks to recover. However, the psychological damage from these two defeats on the heels of the fall of Atlanta, soured the mood of Lee's forces in Virginia. Early's men particularly, who in the days leading up to Third Winchester were confident in themselves and disdainful of Sheridan, now felt much differently about their chances of success. They had never before been so routed from a battlefield and the shock of the loss of their sense of invincibility weighed upon them as they sought to recover their spirits.

For the next several weeks of reorganization and recuperation Early's men tried to explain to those back home what happened and how they felt about the two defeats. Blame was passed to Early, the cavalry, or wagons. The need to affix blame shows the disbelief that veteran soldiers who had never before been routed from a field felt. Defense of unit or army reputation also helped assuage the losses.

Reconciling themselves to defeat at Third Winchester was much easier than the defeat at Fisher's Hill. Confederate soldiers could admit to a partial victory after fighting hard and a somewhat orderly retreat as compared to Fisher's Hill. Soldiers like Tom Devereux wrote multiple letters over successive days describing the defeat at Third Winchester as follows: "we were outnumbered but punished them terribly, we were not whipped. The men who said we were stampeded were in the rear, not on the line where they ought to have been. The wagons were

demoralized.”¹⁰⁹ A Virginia artilleryman blamed the infantry and cavalry writing his wife that he had never seen “men act so shamefully.” The chaplain of the 54th North Carolina Infantry attacked the manhood of some writing “The Cavalry and skulkers seemed to forget they were men.” Brigade commander Bryan Grimes was embarrassed at the conduct of his men writing “our troops did not behave with their usual valor.” Grimes, a veteran of the army’s battles since May, 1862, concluded that Third Winchester was “the most trying day of the war.” The ordnance staff officer for Robert E. Rodes’ Division wrote in his diary that “Cannot get over a feeling of sadness and humiliation at having been compelled to abandon Winchester in that style.”¹¹⁰ The reactions to defeat at Fisher’s Hill among Early’s men showed that they were even more embarrassed and shocked at the result of that battle.

Surgeon John Shaffner, 4th North Carolina Infantry, laid the blame for the loss at Fisher’s Hill like many others in Early’s army (including Early) on the cavalry. Shaffner also felt as many others did that the defeats “will depress our people and arouse once more the evil passions of our foe, and stimulate renewed exertions.” More so than the fall of Atlanta, Shaffner, “under existing circumstances, cannot longer believe that our subjugation is impossible, but we are now seriously threatened.” Writing a few days later Shaffner continued to express his shock at how bad the defeats were, particularly Fisher’s Hill. In a letter written on September 25th, Shaffner expressed the feelings of Grimes and many others that “we now know by actual and ruinous experience, that Confederate veterans are subject to panic. Our cause does now indeed look gloomy, and makes the most sanguine feel despondent.” Shaffner was now convinced the war would continue into 1865 and that Lincoln would be re-elected. Even into October he remained

¹⁰⁹ Tom Devereux to Mother, September 20, 1864, to Father, September 23, 1864, to Mother, September 25, 1864 in Thomas P. Devereux Letterbook, NCDAAH.

¹¹⁰ Turner, *The Civil War Letters of Arabella Speairs and William Beverley Pettit*, 72; John Paris to William H. Wills, September 20, 1864, in William H. Wills Papers, UNC; Bryan Grimes to Charlotte Grimes, September 20, 1864, Bryan Grimes Papers, UNC; James M. Garnett Diary, Southern Historical Society Papers, Vol. 27.

in shock. To him it was not the defeat that demoralized him but he “never dreamed that Confederate veterans could be routed - driven in disgrace and confusion.” Shaffner correctly surmised that if the same occurred to the army around Richmond and Petersburg, “I shudder at the consequences.”¹¹¹ Virginian George Peyton admitted that Fisher’s Hill was “the worst stampede I ever saw. We left the field a perfect mob.” Some soldiers blamed Jubal Early. Archibald Henderson, 12th North Carolina Infantry, wrote his brother that some of the men “do not believe they were whipped but out generalled badly.” Henry Berkeley, Amherst (VA) artillery, wrote that “the future looks gloomy and hopeless for the South just at present.” Usually confident in the success of the Confederate cause was Bryan Grimes. After Fisher’s Hill Grimes admitted that “then I felt for the first time that we would not establish the Confederacy.” A surgeon in the 4th Virginia Infantry, writing in his diary the night of the 22nd, “another stampede. I don’t know what is to become of us.”¹¹²

What is to become of us? This was a question many white Southerners had after the defeats of September. Despondency set in. How did the men in the trenches of Petersburg and Richmond react to Early’s defeat? Did they feel like their comrades in the Valley that the defeats at Third Winchester and Fisher’s Hill were more catastrophic to Confederate chances? Daniel Albright certainly did. Writing in his diary after receiving news of Early’s defeats, Albright wrote that the news “has cast a gloom over us all - more than the fall of Atlanta.” A South Carolina soldier wrote simply that “I am tyard of the war it looks like the Yankees will overrun us yet.” A Virginia artilleryman wrote in his diary that the news of Third Winchester caused

¹¹¹ John F. Shaffner to Carrie Fries Shaffner, September 25, 1864, September 28, 1864, and October 3, 1864, in Shaffner Papers, NCDAAH.

¹¹² Swank, *Stonewall Jackson’s Foot Cavalry*, 120; Archibald Henderson to Brother, September 29, 1864, in Archibald Erskine Henderson Papers, Duke; Runge, *Four Years in the Confederate Artillery*, 101; Bryan Grimes to Charlotte Grimes, September 30, 1864, Bryan Grimes Papers, UNC; John Apperson Diary, Black, Kent, Apperson Family Papers, VT.

some of his comrades to fear for the security of Richmond and that he had been experiencing “gloomy feeling for the last two weeks” as a result of the defeats in the Valley. Georgia soldier Edgeworth Bird admitted that as a result of Third Winchester “our affairs do wear rather a gloomy look just now” but with God’s help and an unbounded confidence in Lee, hope existed. Virginian Thomas Elder was in despair writing to his wife September 23rd the news that “Early has again been whipped. The war I think draws to its close. I am more firmly convinced than ever that the battles to be fought in Virginia this fall will decide the contest.” Georgian Alva Spencer tried to reassure his wife about the situation that existed. “Our cause is now at a point more critical than ever before known. Our armies are suffering defeats, and everything looks anything but peaceful. I think our cause is more dark and desperate today than it has ever been. After the [conflict] is passed we will enjoy an honorable peace.” An Alabama Major recognized the impact the defeats would have on Confederate chances for independence when he wrote that “our army has been considerably depressed by the news of Gen. Early’s disaster in the Valley. Surely our reverses are coming upon us at a most inopportune time.” North Carolinian Joseph Maides reported the news home and concurred with many that things were looking gloomy. Ultimately, Maides, like most other soldiers, wanted peace. Informing his mother that no matter who won the election, Northern subjugation was the aim and that though he was tired of fighting he and his comrades “are for its ending on honorable terms or none.”¹¹³

While the majority of Lee’s soldiers were despondent, some were hopeful. Though admitting that spirits were depressed because of Early’s defeats, an officer on Major General George Pickett’s staff still trusted that God would see them through. An artilleryman in the 13th

¹¹³ Daniel Albright Diary, UNC; Daniel Boyd to Father, September 21, 1864, Robert Boyd Papers, Duke; Wiley, *Norfolk Blues*, 157-159; Rozier, *The Granite Farm Letters*, 204; Thomas Elder to Wife, September 23, 1864, Thomas C. Elder Letters, VHS; Wiggins, *My Dear Friend*, 155, 157; W.J. Mims, “Letters of Major W.J. Mims, C.S.A.,” in *Alabama Historical Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (Summer, 1941):188-231; Joseph F. Maides to Mother, September 23, 1864, in Joseph F. Maides Papers, Duke.

Virginia Artillery strangely wrote his mother in early October that “I think the prospect is as bright if not brighter now that it was before the fall of Atlanta and Early’s reverses in the Valley.”¹¹⁴ A heavy artillerist was not likely to be on constant picket duty or in the front lines as much as his infantry counterparts thus this soldier’s expressions of confidence could be due to the safety of his position and not the experience of daily danger on the front line.

The significance of the defeats in the Valley to the overall war picture was summarized by Brigadier General Clement Evans, commander of a Georgia brigade under Early. Evans missed both Third Winchester and Fisher’s Hill from a wound received at Monocacy but once he arrived back with the army in the Valley he predicted the fallout from the defeats. Writing on October 7th, Evans surmised that “the fears of the North that Early might again cross the Potomac are all dissipated. The confidence of Grant that he can recruit his army, without endangering Washington has been increased, our people here have been deeply disappointed, at home greatly depressed, the Yankees jubilant, and Lincoln’s election greatly assured - all by these reverses.”¹¹⁵

Shortly after the reverses in the Valley, Grant struck Lee’s lines around Richmond. From September 29 to October 2, Grant’s forces took the New Market Heights and Fort Harrison, two important positions within the defensive lines around Richmond, dealing the Confederates yet another blow. Similar to other events, reaction was mixed. As news filtered into the hands of Lee’s men, soldiers’ emotions ranged from optimism to pessimism in a matter of minutes. One Confederate staff officer confirmed as much. This officer, writing in his journal after the fall of Fort Harrison, expressed the fluctuating nature of Confederate emotions, “I seem to be very fickle. Today I am speaking as if I were going to spill my last drop of blood for this question

¹¹⁴ Robert Taylor Scott to Wife, September 26, 1864, Keith Family Papers, VHS; Charles Baughman to Mother, October 7, 1864, Baughman Family Papers, VHS.

¹¹⁵ Stephens, *Intrepid Warrior*, 464-465.

[independence], and yesterday I was ready to leave for good. But such is human kind - never stable, changing all the time.” A perfect illustration of this human fickleness are consecutive diary entries written by a soldier in the 37th North Carolina Infantry in regards to Fort Harrison. Upon receiving confirmation of Fort Harrison’s fall this soldier wrote, “things look gloomy.” When word reached him that the fort had been attacked by Confederate forces north of the James River he wrote the next day, “the signs of the times look brighter.” Others tried to assure relatives that the loss of Fort Harrison and other setbacks were not damaging. Robert Taylor Scott assured his wife that the loss of Fort Harrison “is not deemed of much importance.” Likely trying to maintain his own spirits as much as his wife’s Scott continued saying that “our cause begins to look up. If we can hold our all will yet be well and that we can hold our own I think there is no doubt.”

Scott’s faith (or hope) is remarkable in light of the significant setbacks of September. Yet he was not alone, as multiple letters and diaries illustrate. Others, however continued to tire of the war and simply wished to go home in peace. With many hopes and expectations collapsing around them men like Edgar Ashton were “so tired of this bloody and cruel war and don’t see any prospect of its ending.” Conversely men like Georgian Marion Hill Fitzpatrick were confident in the Army of Northern Virginia because Grant *still* had not taken Petersburg and Richmond. “The spirits of the army are reviving now, though they have never been at a low ebb. We have checked Grant in all his grand movements on Richmond inflicted severe loss on him,” wrote Fitzpatrick.¹¹⁶ By the end of October events in the Shenandoah Valley would again create a new round of despair and hopes that the war would end.

¹¹⁶ Williams, *Stonewall’s Prussian Mapmaker*, 187; William D. Alexander Diary, UNC; Robert Taylor Scott to wife, October 3, 1864, Keith Family Papers, VHS; Edgar Ashton to aunt, October 6, 1864, Edgar Ashton Letters, LVA; Lowe and Hodges, *Letters to Amanda*, 173.

As the autumn days of October continued to change the natural landscape of Virginia, Confederate soldiers in the state continued to vacillate between despair, hope, confidence, and loyalty. As in September, events in the Shenandoah Valley would deflate the hopes of many that the war would end by the end of the year. The shock of defeat would renew defeatism and confidence within the soldiers of the Army of Northern Virginia.

After licking its wounds from their consecutive defeats of September, Early's army in the Shenandoah was ready to move north once more in order to prevent Sheridan from reinforcing Grant. Early received reinforcements from the main body of the Army of Northern Virginia and moved north to confront Sheridan once more this time south of Winchester. Rest, recruitment, and reinforcement had elevated the spirits of Early's men. Hope once more returned that something could be done to evict Sheridan from the Valley. An officer serving with Early wrote in his diary that "everything on the move this morning. Glad of it. 'On to Winchester' again. Only hope we will whip the Yankees and get there."¹¹⁷ The results of Sheridan's hard war campaign reinforced the hatred of the Yankees felt by most Confederates. This resulted in a renewed spirit of revenge among Early's men. However, the psychological damage inflicted by defeats at Third Winchester and Fisher's Hill would prove to be difficult to overcome.

As wounded men and others continued to return to the ranks of Early's army, the morale of their comrades rose. A member of the 4th North Carolina Infantry, writing to a hometown newspaper, wrote that men returning "has had a wonderful effect on the spirits of our men generally." Two days later a fellow Tar-Heel in the Valley summed up what many Confederate and Union soldiers likely felt by this stage of the war. After the bloodletting of the previous three years many soldiers felt lonely while on campaign due to the death, disability, or capture of

¹¹⁷ James M. Garnett Diary, SHSP 27.

friends and comrades. Nathan Frazier of the 45th North Carolina Infantry was not as ebullient as his comrade in the 4th North Carolina. Writing his wife from around New Market Frazier wrote that “the reason I say I am left alone is this there is no one here in my company that come out in this war when I come they are all gone some died and from the first beginning of this war 39 of my company has been captured as prisoners of war some 8 runaway and about 20 sick and at home and the horses pitted together the rest is killed and gone except 5 that is here 5 is all we have in my company and they are all recruits except myself and I wish I was out of it.”¹¹⁸

Devastation to civilian property was one motivator for many Confederate soldiers to continue fighting in late 1864. Writing his wife from New Market, Virginia on October 10th, Major General Stephen Ramseur shared the lengths he was willing to go to avenge the destruction throughout the central and northern Shenandoah Valley. “I would be willing to take a musket and fight to the bitter end, rather than submit to these miserable Yankees.” Campaigning in the Valley was not as pleasant a prospect to Ramseur as it was before the dual defeats of September. After listing the devastation witnessed, Georgian A.B. Simms confided to his wife that “it is sad, sickening to look upon. Justice may be tardy but it will surely overtake such miscreants some day when they little expect.”¹¹⁹ Scenes like those witnessed by Early’s men hardened the resolve of many to prevent like scenes from happening to their property in other states. The best way for that to occur was for men to stay in the ranks and keep fighting.

Early’s army had their chance at their enemy on the morning of October 19, 1864 along the banks of Cedar Creek near Middletown, Virginia. After executing a surprise attack that resulted in the route of the Union army and the capture of its camps, Confederate discipline deteriorated and a large portion of Early’s men plundered the captured camps. At the same time,

¹¹⁸ Munson, *Confederate Correspondent*, 140; Nathan Frazier to wife, October 12, 1864, Nathan Frazier Papers, ECU.

¹¹⁹ Kundahl, *The Bravest of the Brave*, 287; Bonner, “A Georgian’s View of War in Virginia,” 123.

Early called a fatal halt, realigned his lines, and waited. Arriving on the field in time to rally his retreating army was Philip Sheridan who quickly turned victory into a defeat that many Confederates claimed was worse than Fisher's Hill. As before, Confederate soldiers needed someone to blame and Jubal Early received the lion's share. The significance of Cedar Creek was the ending of any ability of Robert E. Lee to regain operational mobility in Virginia and this consequence more than the loss of Atlanta or defeat at Third Winchester sealed the Army of Northern Virginia into its defensive lines around Petersburg and Richmond. Also, as historian Hampton Newsome has argued, Cedar Creek allowed Grant to concentrate all available Union forces in Virginia lengthening the disparity in numbers even more.¹²⁰ Cedar Creek likely would not have changed the outcome of the election, but combined with the significant defeats in September a Republican victory was no longer in doubt.

On November 8, 1864 Abraham Lincoln was re-elected President of the United States. Along with recent battlefield defeats this political defeat marked a low point in Confederate fortunes. Confederates believed that if the armies in the field could prevent defeat until the election then possibly the Democratic challenger, George B. McClellan, could win and a negotiated peace could be worked out. This explains the feelings of many of Lee's men when they hoped the war would be over by the end of the year. Having supreme confidence in Lee and their own martial abilities emboldened these hopes and expectations. However, when Lincoln was re-elected on a platform of restoring the Union and ending slavery through war, many of Lee's men rededicated themselves anew to the fulfillment of their enlistment promise of 'three years or the war.' Many seemed at ease with the knowledge that fighting was the only option left to them short of negotiations, which, as some historians have shown, both Davis and Lincoln

¹²⁰ See Hampton Newsome, *Richmond Must Fall: The Richmond-Petersburg Campaign, October, 1864*, (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2013).

stubbornly held firm to their positions making compromise impossible. As historian Gary Gallagher has shown, the war would be won or lost on the battlefield.¹²¹

Confederate soldiers reflected the feelings of the different communities they came from, hoping the war would end soon with an ‘honorable peace’ and Confederate independence assured. Throughout the summer and fall of 1864 many hoped for a McClellan victory but once Lincoln’s re-election was secured, many rededicated themselves to continuing the fight. The reasons for this were highlighted by many Southern newspaper editors, politicians, and soldiers in their writings and speeches. Lincoln and the Republicans were hellbent on subjugating the South and there was nothing left to do but fight until the end. This belief kept thousands of Confederate soldiers in the ranks but many were also disheartened at the election results. Lincoln’s subsequent call for a million more men also hardened the resolve of many Confederates. As with other events human emotions ran the gamut, but as battlefield defeats piled up before the election many began to realize that their expectations and hopes were collapsing and Lincoln’s re-election confirmed it. Still, many held out hope and continued to fight.

By the end of November, Lee’s men were aware of the election results as well as the beginning of a new campaign in Georgia; Sherman’s march to the sea. Confederate hopes and expectations began to collapse and desertions from the army increased. As historians Mark Weitz and Paul D. Escott argue, loyalty to the Confederacy was not in question but betrayal by the Confederate government and upper class, combined with the election results, battlefield defeats, and the hardships of trench life sapped the will to fight among many of Lee’s men. To Weitz, the

¹²¹ See Paul D. Escott, *After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978) *The Confederacy: The Slaveholders’ Failed Republic* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), and Steven E. Woodworth, “The Last Function of Government: Confederate Collapse and Negotiated Peace,” in *The Collapse of the Confederacy*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001); Gallagher, *The Confederate War*.

election “crushed what little morale remained” in Lee’s army.¹²² Although the election results did demoralize some, it did not snuff out “what little morale remained.” Even among the discouraged and demoralized many continued to hope for a positive resolution and believed that there was something still worth fighting for.

Often despondent after bad news was Surgeon John Shaffner, 4th North Carolina Infantry. Writing his wife his outlook on the future course of the war Shaffner surmised that the election “has violently dashed to the ground, that beautiful and fragile vase containing ‘blessed peace’ which we so joyfully constructed during the past summer.” Shaffner felt as many did that until Third Winchester and Fisher’s Hill the hope of peace and Confederate independence was still possible. Now it was “war - unrelenting, cruel, and horrid war will probably hold high carnival during another term of four years. There is now absolutely no light ahead. All is ‘dark, gloomy, and forbidding.’” Shaffner shared the fears of many writing about the danger of Sherman’s advance through Georgia writing, “the march of Gen’l Sherman through the very heart of the Confederacy is a heavy blow, and many such thrusts must necessarily prove fatal.” Shaffner finished his predictions with a remonstrance of hoping for the best.¹²³

Engineer Charles Trueheart reassured his sister that he actually preferred Lincoln over McClellan, hoping, as was rumored, that his re-election would result in the Old Northwest seceding and or Democrats and Republicans coming to blows. Trueheart also believed that a McClellan victory would encourage desertion. A Georgian in the lines around Petersburg concurred with Davis. This soldier, wrote on November 10th and 11th that he hoped “the Yankees will go to cutting each other’s throats over the election and will let us alone.” As for Lincoln’s re-election, he felt that “I think it best for us but in this matter there is no telling.”

¹²²Escott, *The Confederacy*; Weitz, *More Damning Than Slaughter*, 253, 271.

¹²³ John Shaffner to Carrie Fries Shaffner, December 3, 1864, John F. Shaffner Papers, NCDAH.

Creed Thomas Davis, Richmond (VA) Howitzers, and his comrades were not surprised at the results judging from Davis' diary entry on November 17th, "we have just heard that Lincoln has been re-elected to the Presidency, which is nothing more than all expected." Bryan Grimes, writing his wife on election day, exhibited his dedication no matter the results writing "we can never be conquered and submission to the Yankees would be far worse than death itself but the war will continue for years until the Yankees see the utter uselessness of attempting to coerce us." Abel Crawford, 61st Alabama Infantry was more dispassionate yet realistic. Writing his opinions about Lincoln and his policies Crawford was resigned, observing that "it seems that we will have to endure the hardships of another four years of war. If the war goes on there be no other alternative but to fight it out."¹²⁴

Many like Shaffner wrote consecutively about the election and Sherman's march. Men like William Alexander, 37th North Carolina Infantry, summarized the feelings of many of Lee's men in his diary that there was "no alternative but another four years of war." Alexander also felt the surprise of many at the ease of Sherman's movements and the frustration that no Confederate army was there to stop him. As Paul D. Escott argued this failure to stop Sherman was seen as a betrayal on the part of Southern elites to protect the families of the soldiers away fighting.¹²⁵

A recent study on Confederate desertion shows that the problem of desertion was not confined to the final year of the war but vexed the Confederate authorities throughout the Civil War.¹²⁶ Robert E. Lee and other Confederate commanders were well aware of the problem and tried a multitude of remedies that ultimately all failed. During the fall of 1864 Lee complained to the government about the lack of men available to react to Union attacks along the Petersburg

¹²⁴ Williams, *Rebel Brothers*, 119-120; Lowe and Hodges, *Letters to Amanda*, 184-185; Creed Thomas Davis Diary, VHS; Bryan Grimes to Charlotte Grimes, November 8, 1864, Bryan Grimes Papers, UNC; Abel Crawford to Dora Crawford, November 16, 1864, Abel H. Crawford Letters, Duke.

¹²⁵ William D. Alexander Diary, UNC; Escott, *The Confederacy*.

¹²⁶ See Weitz, *More Damning Than Slaughter*.

and Richmond lines. Once Early was defeated in the Shenandoah Valley and returned to the main body around Petersburg and Richmond, Lee was still not able to mount any large scale mobile strike force capable of altering the strategic situation. Battlefield casualties and absent men were the prime culprit.

Throughout November and December 1864 many of Lee's men wrote letters home and diary entries concerning the amount of men deserting daily or weekly. In some instances these men wrote about why they would stay and fight while others deserted. One Georgian wrote of the frustration felt by other Georgia soldiers at the lack of resistance to Sherman as a cause for desertion. "A great many boys say if that army [Army of Tennessee] don't fight and drive back Sherman that they aint going to fight in Virginia any more," he wrote, but "I feel as much bound to fight Virginia as any other state though I rather be nearer home." Another Georgian described how 23 men deserted to the Union lines around Richmond. "We may make up our minds to remain in the service a year or two longer, or as long as the Confederate Government can hold out." It is interesting to note how some Georgians were still willing to fight in Virginia while their homes were being subjected to the threat of destruction by Sherman's march. Anger remained however. John Johnson, 19th Georgia Infantry, wrote that "the Georgians here are not well pleased with the way in which Georgia has been treated." That treatment aligns with Escott's argument that a belief existed among Confederate soldiers that the government abandoned their families while the soldiers were away. Virginian John Sale gave various reasons for the desertions when he wrote in late November that the deserters "assign various reasons for their conduct, some say they are not fed, others that they are not clothed, but I think the true cause is that they are tired of fighting and see no prospect of an end to it." Sale described common descriptions and complaints that are evidenced in a large amount of soldier

correspondence and causes of desertion; lack of food, living conditions, and tired of fighting.¹²⁷ Many soldiers like Franklin Stuart, 23rd North Carolina Infantry, threatened desertion outright. Stuart wrote from around Petersburg that “if I doant git a furlough I intend to tak won & it woant be for 18 days it will be won for the woar.” One Tarheel was very emotional writing from Petersburg that “I cant rite without crying it seemes to me that I never will git to come home any more.” Anger was also expressed towards the Confederate government and the effects of four years of unconstitutional policies such as conscription, impressment, and high taxes. Cornelius Jackson Bell, 5th Virginia Infantry, had hired a substitute earlier in the war and was now forced to enter military service. Writing his wife late in November Bell described the “great dissatisfaction there is in the army at present, caused by the tyrannical oppression of the government toward the families of men in the army.” Whatever the reasons behind individuals’ desertion, by late December, 1864 hope in Confederate independence was very low.

December, 1864 marked a low point in the morale of the Army of Northern Virginia that would get worse into 1865. Though many men deserted there were still thousands who were willing to fight, even if they doubted the eventual success of their cause. John Craig Evans, 23rd South Carolina Infantry, was a merchant before the war. In early December he wrote his wife Annie the reason he was still fighting. “I don’t feel like I am fighting & enduring for myself, but for them, the dear children.” Virginia soldier Luther Mills wrote his brother from the trenches near the Crater battlefield that he thought “it is the desire of the Army at large to fight it out to the bitter end.” Still exhibiting a faith felt by many white Southerners, Mills continued, “I would

¹²⁷ Henry H. Woodbridge to Father, October 28, 1864, in Henry H. Woodbridge Letters, UNC; John Johnson to Ell, December 15, 1864, in John A. Johnson Letters, UNC; John F. Sale to Aunt, November 29, 1864, John F. Sale Papers, LVA; Franklin L. Stuart to Mother, December 12, 1864, Franklin L. Stuart Letters, UNC; Francis Marion Poteet to Martha Poteet, December 3, 1864, in Poteet-Dickson Papers, NCDAH; Lee A. Wallace, Jr., *5th Virginia Infantry*, (Lynchburg: H.E. Howard, 1988) 96; Cornelius Jackson Bell to Wife, November 21, 1864, in Cornelius Jackson Bell Papers, LVA.

be very uneasy about our situation if Gen Lee was not in command.” J.J. Hill, 53rd Georgia Infantry was confident in the defensive prowess of the army still writing home “should the invader ever advance on us, I think we will be able to give them just such a reception as they merit.”¹²⁸ What optimism or hope was left among Lee’s men would be dashed yet again as the city of Savannah, Georgia was captured by Sherman on December 21st. With this capture the way to North and South Carolina was open to Sherman to continue his destructive campaign and perhaps eventually link up with Grant to confront Lee’s rapidly dwindling army.

During the three days surrounding Christmas, 1864, many of Lee’s men gloomily wrote home expressing their pessimistic outlook on Confederate independence. “The prospect ahead is dark & gloomy for independence. I hope something will soon occur to dispel the gloom that I confess oppresses me and which seems to be settling like a pall over the army & the country,” wrote a Virginia cavalryman. On Christmas Day many of Lee’s veterans felt lonely, sad at being absent from home, and despaired that their sacrifices were quickly becoming in vain. After news of the fall of Savannah and the almost complete destruction of the remnant of the Army of Tennessee, Virginia artilleryman Creed Davis confided to his diary that “our men are gloomy today, and are talking of the probable death of the Confederacy.” Alexander F. Fewell, 17th South Carolina Infantry, had served in the regiment in 1862, provided a substitute, and was recalled to duty in late summer, 1864. Fewell was not a young man, being in his 60s. “The news from both south and west I feel very lowspirited almost too much so but I cannot help it for I see no chance of our success at least for the present” wrote Fewell in a letter to his wife. “The army or at most those that I have conversed with all have their doubts about our success.” Jeremiah Baughn, 45th North Carolina Infantry, a veteran since March, 1862, felt angry at the continued

¹²⁸ John Craig Evans to Annie Evans, December 3, 1864, in John Craig Evans Letters, Atlanta History Center; George D. Harmon, “Letters of Luther Rice Mills - A Confederate Soldier,” in *North Carolina Historical Review* 4, no. 3 (July, 1927) 305; J.J. Hill to P.H. Bailey, December 16, 1864, in Bailey Family Papers, VHS.

lack of food and hinted at deserting. “I cant be a soldier without some food and now body els so that is anuth to say to you all I have been true to my country and went as far as anybody els,” wrote Baughn to his sister. Jeremiah Baughn did not desert but finished the war as a member of the Army of Northern Virginia. South Carolina soldier Drayton Pitts wrote his girlfriend shortly before the new year that “I don’t care much where I stay for I think the Confederacy is a going up about as fast as possible any how when they cant feed the soldiers not better than they do now.” The Chaplain of the 43rd North Carolina Infantry wrote a friend that “I think I can safely say, that the officers and men of this Regt are very much discouraged.”¹²⁹

Even though the Confederacy appeared to be in its death throes to some of Lee’s men, others remained hopeful. Wishful thinking, eternal hope, loyalty, and simply keeping spirits up at home caused men like William Andrews, 10th Virginia Artillery to write his father that “it is truly a gloomy time with us but no cause for despair. I think we will be able to prevail our cause is just I think.” Thomas Devereux admonished his sister that all would be well due to Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia. “We are in a tight place” Devereux admitted, “but I say stick up and keep a bold front and we are bound to win. Gen Lee has 60000 of the best soldiers in the world and they have unbounded confidence in him.” Veteran artillery commander William T. Poague wrote his mother that though the year 1864 was one of misfortune, “I am not disheartened. They are not beyond remedy.” Even if things were beyond hope, Poague felt that he had done his duty to his country and that was all any veteran of Lee’s army could wish. Writing on New Years’ Eve, a Virginia artilleryman wrote “the last of the year! ‘Tis a sad closing day - dary & gloomy over-head, & our political horizon fully as dark! The currency is almost flat - the people

¹²⁹ Joseph Jackson Halsey to Wife, December 24, 1864, Halsey Family Papers, LVA; Creed Thomas Davis Diary, VHS; Robert Harley Mackintosh, ed., *Dear Martha...The Confederate War Letters of a South Carolina Soldier*, (Columbia: R.L. Bryan Company, 1976), 179; Jeremiah Baughn to Sister, December 25, 1864, in Baughn Family Papers, LVA; Drayton Pitts to “Miss,” in Drayton Pitts Letters, LVA; Eugene W. Thompson to friend, December 26, 1864, in L.L. Polk Papers, UNC.

despondent! Oh, that a brighter day may dawn upon our young & glorious government! Hope has never yet forsaken me!”¹³⁰

Men like these were realists and not likely naive as to the prospects of independence. Writing words of encouragement not only boosted their own morale but was done in an effort to boost the morale of those at home. However, despondency, hopelessness, death, maiming, and desertion would continue into 1865.

Throughout the summer of 1864 for many of the men within the Army of Northern Virginia, morale was very high, expectations of independence were strong and somewhat realistic. After the fall of Atlanta, the loss of the Shenandoah Valley, re-election of Lincoln, and Sherman’s march to the sea, many Confederate soldiers lost the will to continue fighting, feeling that all was lost. However, thousands of soldiers continued to fight in spite of these events. Though many were not confident in ultimate success, many continued fighting for the same things that motivated them throughout the war, family, property, fear of subjugation by the North, comrades, Robert E. Lee, and the desire to make the sacrifices of the dead and living worth something. By 1865 other options were on table such as arming slaves and sending out peace feelers to the North.

Chapter Three: “It is useless to conceal the truth any longer:” Desperation and the end of the Civil War in Virginia, January - April, 1865

As 1865 approached, news began to filter into the lines around Petersburg and Richmond that the citizens of the surrounding area were gathering a New Year’s Day feast for the hungry

¹³⁰ William B.G. Andrews to Father, December 26, 1864, in William B.G. Andrews Letters, Duke; Thomas P. Devereux to Kate, December 27, 1864, Thomas P. Devereux Letterbook, NCDAH; Cockrell *Gunner with Stonewall*, 144; Daniel Albright Diary, UNC.

soldiers of Lee's army. Opinions of what they would receive varied among the soldiery from large amounts of turkeys, hams, vegetables, fruits, desserts, and other things they rarely if ever received. Many soldiers believed that the dinner would be a humbug. One of the latter was William D. Carr, 43rd North Carolina, who wrote on New Year's Eve, "there is great talk of the army getting a big dinner tomorrow. I would not be surprised if it was all a failier."¹³¹ A soldier in the 44th Georgia did not seem to have high expectations based simply on Richmond newspapers advertising it as such. He was more concerned with Sherman's movements than anything else at the time.¹³² Indeed, the New Year's feast was a major letdown. Some soldiers received nothing at all while some received small amounts of bread, turkeys, and other delicacies to share among the mess. In the end it was not nearly enough to ameliorate the ration problem that had been facing the army for several months. The failure of the New Year's dinner further showed Confederate soldiers what they already knew, their country could no longer reasonably feed them. Starving men gradually lose the strength to fight and execute marches. Added to the other hardships in the trenches such as the threat of death and exposure to weather and elements, food shortages sapped the will for many of Lee's men to continue fighting.

For Lee's men the new year began with hunger pangs and disillusionment. Sherman was on the coast of Georgia ready to march north into South Carolina and North Carolina. The Confederate Army of Tennessee was practically destroyed in November and December at the Battles of Franklin and Nashville, Tennessee. Sherman was therefore virtually unopposed. Grant's constant offensives and the necessity of constantly shifting to meet them sapped the strength of Lee's army. In North Carolina, the last open port to the Confederacy, Wilmington, was under siege. The year 1865 would also bring about desperate measures by the Confederate

¹³¹ W.D. Carr to Mother, December 31, 1864, in Sybill Carr Harris Collection, NCDAAH.

¹³² Asbury Hull Jackson to Mother, January 1, 1865, Harden Family Papers, Duke.

government in an effort to salvage any hope of deciding the war in their favor. These measures would include proposing the arming and freeing of slaves, consolidating companies and regiments, and sending peace commissioners to negotiate with the Lincoln administration. Lee's soldiers faced all of these challenges with both reluctance, defiance, and acceptance. No matter how Lee's men faced these policies, they could not overcome the lack of food and constant exposure to death in the trenches that caused many men to desert the cause. As historian Mark Weitz argued, desertion was a constant problem throughout the life of the Confederacy, not just the final year of the war.¹³³ But as a result of increased physical stressors and Union military successes, desertions increased from December, 1864 - April, 1865. Hindsight tells us that by the final year of the war the Confederacy had lost and spikes in desertions in 1865 are not a surprise. However, there were still thousands of Confederate soldiers willing to continue suffering in 1865 in an effort to win independence and peace on the battlefield. This begs the question of why. Why were these Confederate soldiers willing to continue fighting? What were they fighting for? Were they willing to accept the arming of male slaves in a last gasp at independence? What effect did Lincoln's refusal to negotiate in February, 1865 have on these men? Lincoln was not the only one unwilling to negotiate. As historian Steven Woodworth argued, if not for the stubborn refusal of Jefferson Davis to negotiate, many of these diehard soldiers may have been convinced to quit the war if Davis and others had been truly willing to negotiate peace instead of fighting till the bitter end.¹³⁴ Ultimately, as Joseph Glatthaar and J. Tracy Power observed, the stalwarts of the Army of Northern Virginia were fighting as much for

¹³³ Weitz, *More Damning than Slaughter*.

¹³⁴ Steven E. Woodworth, "The Last Function of Government: Confederate Collapse and Negotiated Peace," in Mark Grimsley and Brooks D. Simpson, ed., *The Collapse of the Confederacy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 36.

Robert E. Lee in 1865 as much as anything else.¹³⁵ As George C. Rable has pointed out, there was more to it than that. Rable argued that hardships were preferable to submission to Yankee rule as Lincoln's post-war intentions of emancipation and restoration had been common knowledge.¹³⁶ This contributed to a hardening of resolve among many Confederate soldiers to prevent that outcome or die in the attempt. Jason Phillips' argument that these diehard Confederates had developed a culture of invincibility through a variety of reasons including battlefield success, religion, and hatred for Yankees bears this out.¹³⁷

To many white Confederate soldiers continuing to fight was the only honorable choice left them. This chapter argues that most of the remainder of the Army of Northern Virginia were willing to accept desperate measures both political and tactical to achieve independence. Furthermore, I argue that Lincoln and Davis' unwillingness to negotiate hardened the resolve of many Confederate soldiers to continue fighting, thus prolonging the war unnecessarily.

The unit cohesion of the Army of Northern Virginia continued to be affected by elements out of the soldiers' control. Issues of supply, rations, and government policies affected soldiers' lives. The high casualties among junior officers during 1864 negatively affected discipline. Two pieces of legislation, debated since November, 1864, had a profound impact on morale and Confederate's dual identities as soldiers and white men. The Consolidation Bill and the debate and ultimate decision to arm slaves, had a positive as well as a negative effect on the rank and file of the Army of Northern Virginia. The Consolidation Bill directly affected the unit cohesion and pride forged by regiments and brigade through the previous four years of war.

¹³⁵ Glatthaar, *General Lee's Army*, 456; Power, *Lee's Miserables*, 298-91..

¹³⁶ Rable, *Damn Yankees!*, 118-121.

¹³⁷ Phillips, *Diehard Rebels*.

The arming of slaves was a revolutionary debate that overturned one of the ideological reasons for some Confederate soldiers to fight for independence. However, the debate and the opinions that flowed from it reflect a willingness among a large portion of the Army of Northern Virginia to accept black soldiers as well as their emancipation. Granted, ideas of equality were not motivations for this support, however, anything was preferable to submission to Yankee rule, and that included the freeing and arming of black Southerners. As historian Bruce Levine has argued, willingness to emancipate any slave who fought for the Confederacy was also a means to maintain the social status quo of white hierarchical rule and black submission.¹³⁸ The significance of the willingness to emancipate slaves who fought for the Confederacy signifies the powerful desire for independence that was a major motivating factor for Confederate soldiers to continue fighting.

In November, 1864 the Confederate Congress passed legislation consolidating understrength companies, battalions, and regiments while allowing officers to maintain their commissions.¹³⁹ This measure provoked outrage among the rank and file who had identified with a particular regiment or brigade, throughout their wartime service. Historical scholarship on the Army of Northern Virginia has typically observed the consolidation of units in terms of famous units like the Stonewall Brigade and Hood's Texas Brigade and its impact on those particular soldiers.¹⁴⁰ However, the threat of consolidation greatly affected the men in the ranks, particularly those who had fought for four years in the same unit. The potential loss of their unit

¹³⁸ Bruce Levine, *Confederate Emancipation: Southern Plans to Free and Arm Slaves During the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹³⁹ Confederate States of America Congressional Records, "A Bill to be entitled an act to authorize the consolidation of companies, battalions, and regiments," <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=dul1.ark%3A%2F13960%2Ft5bc4rg0z;q1=a%20bill%20to%20be%20entitled%20an%20act%20to%20authorize%20the%20consolidation%20of%20companies>, accessed February 28, 2019.

¹⁴⁰ See James I. Robertson, Jr., *The Stonewall Brigade*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977); J. Tracy Power, *Lee's Miserables*, 240-41; Susannah J. Ural, *Hood's Texas Brigade: The Soldiers and Families of the Confederacy's Most Celebrated Unit*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017).

identity and history angered many veterans and continued to add to their discontent with the Confederate government. Historians have glossed over this element in their studies of the Army of Northern Virginia.

As early as August, 1864, after the four brigades of Major General Edward Johnson's division had been almost entirely captured at the Battle of Spotsylvania Court-House (May 12, 1864) the necessity for consolidating the remnant of the brigades into more manageable wholes, resulted in resistance. Anger at the loss of unit identity flowed through the veterans of such famous units as the Stonewall Brigade and the Louisiana brigade. An inspection of these commands in August captured their frustration when it was reported that "both officers and men bitterly object to their consolidation into one brigade. Strange officers command strange troops."¹⁴¹ A veteran of the 5th Alabama Infantry, in a private letter published in his local paper, described the opinion of his comrades to the consolidation bill as "a majority of the troops are opposed to the bill." He threatened that if it passed he would immediately seek to join easier service in the cavalry.¹⁴² A veteran in the 53rd Georgia Infantry felt that the bill would "have a bad affect and it will cause a great despondency in the army aspecially with the enlisted men."¹⁴³ A soldier in the hard fighting 4th North Carolina Infantry summarized the feeling of many soldiers in late January writing his parents that, "the men are getting very much dissatisfied. The Consolidation Bill, which is to be carried into effect shortly will cause a good deal of desertion among our best soldiers. I am afraid our company and regiment will lose their name after all the hard service which we have done since the commencement of the war."¹⁴⁴ Robert E. Lee, in a

¹⁴¹ *OR*, Series I, Vol. 43, 609.

¹⁴² Joe Bowers to Editor, January 8, 1865, *Clark County Journal*.

¹⁴³ John B. Evans to Mollie Evans, January 11, 1865, John B. Evans letters, Duke.

¹⁴⁴ Battle, *Forget-Me-Nots of the Civil War*, 128.

letter to the Secretary of War believed that consolidation “would be extremely hazardous at this time.”¹⁴⁵

Whether members of the Stonewall Brigade or the 4th North Carolina, Confederate veterans viewed their companies, regiments, and even brigades as their home away from home and the locus of memories of hard service, death, and sacrifice. It is little wonder they and their Northern counterparts, revered their battle flags so passionately, for they represented comrades and sacrifice in camp and on campaign. Added to minimal rations, death in the trenches, and the ever encroaching Union armies, consolidation was one more element that tested the will of Confederate soldiers to continue fighting. Yet at the same time, unit pride motivated them to continue. However, regimental pride could possibly be compromised if arming slaves came to fruition.

Another debate gaining traction among Confederates was the arming of slaves. Arming slaves in conjunction with emancipation was a radical proposition as well as a desperate military measure. The idea was proposed publicly in January 1864 by Major General Patrick R. Cleburne, a prominent general in the Army of Tennessee. The debate entailed multiple discussions about emancipation, equality, and military service among Jefferson Davis, Congress, state governors, and even General Robert E. Lee. Lee went so far as to advocate emancipation for any slave who enlisted as well as emancipation for their families, post-war security in the South, as well as a bounty.¹⁴⁶ Bruce Levine, in his study on the debates of Confederate emancipation, argued that complex problems of politics, the military situation, and morale forced the Confederate government to adopt this desperate measure to salvage any hope at independence. Furthermore, as Lee mentioned in his advocacy for the plan, it would ensure fidelity from emancipated blacks

¹⁴⁵ *OR*, Series IV, Vol. III, 1144.

¹⁴⁶ *OR*, Series IV, 3, Section 2, 1013.

to white Southerners therefore maintaining white supremacy in the social order.¹⁴⁷ Yet, within the Confederate government and the rank and file of the army there were supporters and opponents to this plan. Supporters were willing to enact whatever means necessary for the army to achieve independence. Many detractors did not think black men capable of being good soldiers while others refused to be on the equal level of a private soldier with a black man.

As early as October, 1864 soldiers were sharing their feelings on the subject of arming and emancipating slaves to fight for the Confederacy. With the trio of defeats at Atlanta, Third Winchester, and Fisher's Hill behind them, and a likely victory for Abraham Lincoln at the polls, the debate about arming slaves evinced the implicit belief that those events more than any others, changed the morale and optimism of Confederate soldiers heading into 1865. However, to some soldiers in October, 1864 all hope was not lost and arming slaves was an abhorrent thought.

Charles Baughman, son of a Richmond merchant, wrote in late October his opinion as to arming slaves:

I never want to see one with a gun in his hand. I am perfectly willing that they should be put into the army as wagon drivers, cooks, engineers &c but I never want one to fight side by side with me. The army would not submit to it, half if not more than half would lay down their arms if they were forced to fight with negroes. I have heard a great many soldiers express their opinions on the subject, but have not heard a single one who said that he was in favor of it, in that they were nearly unanimous in saying that they would desert rather than serve with them. I think that is the worst measure that could be proposed and I hope that it will not be brought before Congress at all...I hope and trust that [it is] rejected. But if Congress does pass such a bill they will sound the

¹⁴⁷ Levine, *Confederate Emancipation*, 9. For Jefferson Davis' role in the debate, see Phillip K. Dillard, *Jefferson Davis' Final Campaign: Confederate Nationalism and the Fight to Arm Slaves*, (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2017).

death knell of the Confederacy. As for their fighting I think that one white soldier is worth a regiment of blacks.¹⁴⁸

As rations grew fewer, defeats mounted, and Union armies engulfed more Confederate territory, Confederate soldiers like Charles Baughman would welcome whatever measures necessary to achieve independence but equality with potential black soldiers was not likely to happen and unthinkable to some.

While the arming of slaves debate reached Congress support among the Army of Northern Virginia, while never united, continued to increase. Gary Gallagher and Bruce Levine argued that military importance trumped social issues in terms of Confederate victory or defeat. With regard to arming of slaves Levine argued that “it was here in the trenches that the prioritizing of military victory over its socioeconomic costs probably played its biggest role.”¹⁴⁹ Historian Chandra Manning argued that Confederate soldiers’ desertions in 1865 were because of arming of slaves.¹⁵⁰ This view does not connect the myriad reasons behind desertion, the implication being that arming slaves was not supported by soldiers does not accurately portray the opinions of many within the Army of Northern Virginia about arming slaves or the reasons behind desertions. Many soldiers’ written evidence suggests that arming slaves and giving those who fought for their freedom was more desirable than submission to Yankee rule. Writing in his diary, veteran soldier Joseph Banks Lyle of South Carolina admitted that the institution of slavery would be ended with arming slaves, “but if the alternative be slavery, or liberty we should not hesitate in making a choice.”¹⁵¹ Confederate soldiers throughout the war equated living under Yankee rule to slavery. Most, like Lyle, recognized that slavery in 1865 was already

¹⁴⁸ Charles Baughman to Father, October 23, 1864, in Baughman Family Papers, VHS.

¹⁴⁹ Gallagher, *Confederate War*; Levine, *Confederate Emancipation*, 114-116.

¹⁵⁰ Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over*, 218.

¹⁵¹ Joseph Banks Lyle Diary, Joseph Banks Lyle Papers, VHS.

doomed as a result of the war and many slaves' self-emancipation. Why not use the resources available to the Confederacy for independence by emancipating enslaved men so they could fight?

Reasons for desertion were varied and it is very likely some soldiers deserted as a result of this debate but the evidence suggests lack of rations, exhaustion, and the belief among many that the war was lost were more important factors. A soldier in the 3rd Virginia Infantry wrote his aunt that he was "tired of the war as any of them [the deserters from his regiment] but I am going to stay as long as I can get bread and meat to eat but when that gives out, I give out." Overwhelming evidence agrees with this soldier. The letters and diaries writing by soldiers during the final months of the war not only illuminate the desperate problem of desertion but the causes behind it; the lack of food. Writing home a soldier in the 45th North Carolina echoed his Virginia comrade. Jerry Baughn's dedication to the cause of independence was proven but, he wrote, "I cant be a soldier without some food and now body els. I cant go any farther unles tha feed."¹⁵² Baughn would stay in the army and be paroled in May, 1865.

A large influence on the decisions of those who supported arming slaves was Robert E. Lee. In January, 1865 Lee wrote to Virginia congressman Andrew Hunter advocating the emancipation of slave soldiers and their families. "We should employ them without delay," Lee wrote, "such an interest [enlisting] we can give our negroes by giving immediate freedom to all who enlist, and freedom at the end of the war to the families of those who discharge their duties faithfully(whether they survive or not) together with the privilege of residing at the South. To this might be added a bounty for faithful service."¹⁵³ What Lee and many others proposed was a complete overhaul of the Southern social structure, which, they agreed, would be destroyed

¹⁵² Edgar Ashton to Aunt, March 2, 1865, in Edgar Ashton Letters, LVA; Jeremiah Baughn to Sister, December 25, 1864, in Baughn Family Papers, LVA.

¹⁵³ *OR*, Series IV, Vol. III, 1012-1013.

whether the Confederacy won or lost. Their solution would at least maintain the white male dominated hierarchy that benefited them. As Lee was the heart, soul, and in many respects the conscience of the Army of Northern Virginia, many of his soldiers agreed to the arming of slaves if that was what was necessary to achieve separation from the Union. A Virginia artilleryman, writing home in late February, 1865 believed if “Gen Lee is in favor of it I shall cast my vote for it. I am in favor of giving him anything that he wants in the way of gaining our independence for I look upon subjugation as being the next thing to death although everything looks very gloomy I still have the faith that God will not suffer the marshal struggle that we are making be in vane.”¹⁵⁴ Veteran artilleryman, William T. Poague asked his mother what she thought about arming slaves. Poague felt likely like many others that, “I thought three months ago it ought to be done then. Everybody now in the army almost is in favor of it.”¹⁵⁵

Large organizations comprised of thousands of people will inevitably have differing opinions. The Army of Northern Virginia was no exception. There were detractors of the effort to arm slaves much of it based on racial equality. One Virginian felt that “if we can not gain our Independence without the aid of ‘coffee’ I am sure we can not do it with it.” Writing to his aunt, a member of the 12th Virginia Infantry wrote that “many men who are willing to serve the Country still longer, are not willing to be placed on an equality with negroes, which could not be helped were they placed in as soldiers.” An anonymous soldier writing the editor of the *Richmond Enquirer* felt that it would be a “low and execrable” thing to enlist slaves to fight for white independence. This soldier did not want to share “our honors, our fame, and our independence” with freed slaves who fought for the Confederacy.¹⁵⁶ Though ambivalent about

¹⁵⁴ Silas Chandler to wife, February 21, 1865, Silas Chandler Letters, LVA.

¹⁵⁵ Cockrell, *Gunner With Stonewall*, 149.

¹⁵⁶ Creed Thomas Davis Diary, VHS; John F. Sale to Aunt, December 31, 1864, Sale Papers, LVA; “A Voice from the Trenches,” to editor, in *Richmond Enquirer* November 11, 1864.

arming slaves, the soldier who felt the Confederacy could win without them stayed in the army and surrendered at Farmville, Virginia in April, 1865.¹⁵⁷ On March 13, 1865 the Confederate Congress voted to enlist slaves to fight for the Confederacy. It was too little too late. Though many refused to serve alongside black soldiers, given their preference or a choice in the matter, evidence suggests that a majority of the army supported it; as long as it helped them achieve independence. It did not, however, create widespread desertion.

The Confederate government continued to enact desperate measures to bolster morale as well as the army, as shown above. One way this occurred was more symbolic than literal; the naming in February, 1865 of Robert E. Lee as General in Chief of Confederate military forces. This act did bolster morale among the populace and the soldiers of the Confederacy and showed the degree of confidence that Lee's men still held in him. One of Lee's cavalry couriers and escort, George Marion Coiner believed that "the Army as well as the people have such unbounded confidence in him as a General that I think will have a tendency to restore confidence and hopefulness in the people and success to our cause."¹⁵⁸ Robert E. Lee in overall command of the Confederate military could not reverse the Union tide that was beginning to engulf the Army of Northern Virginia. Beyond symbolic and practical measure like arming slaves, other options were possibly open to the Confederates to achieve separation from the Union; peace talk increased due to two events, the visit to Richmond a Northern dignitary and the subsequent Hampton Roads Peace Conference.

Francis P. Blair, Sr., a close friend of Abraham Lincoln, twice entered Richmond in January 12, 1865 to discuss peace with Jefferson Davis and other notable Confederates. Though he was not officially sanctioned by the U.S. government, Blair's mission gave hope to

¹⁵⁷ Creed Thomas Davis, Compiled Service Record, <https://www.fold3.com/image/9102053>, accessed April 9, 2019.

¹⁵⁸ George Marion Coiner to Sister, February 8, 1865, in Coiner Family Papers, VHS.

Confederate soldiers that peace was nigh and that they simply needed to continue fighting. Blair's mission, while bolstering heavily sagging morale among some, was inconsequential to others. What were Blair's propositions to Jefferson Davis? A renunciation of slavery and Confederate independence and a reunited United States driving France out of Mexico to secure the continent. Davis, however, would not negotiate unless recognition of Confederate independence was assured.¹⁵⁹ This was something Lincoln would never do. As long as Confederate armies were in the field Davis could afford to be stubborn. But those armies were gradually being defeated. January 15, 1865 Fort Fisher, the key to the defenses of Wilmington, North Carolina, fell to a combined U.S. naval and army assault, closing the last open port of the Confederacy.

A peace representative from Washington was major news among Lee's men. Opinions varied. A staff officer felt that Blair's visit to Richmond "will gain us absolutely nothing."¹⁶⁰ Upon hearing rumors that Lincoln would grant independence if the Confederacy abolished slavery, a Virginia artilleryman noted in his diary the expendability of slavery. Commenting about the feelings of his comrades who had changed their views on the peculiar institution, John Walters noted that, "I could not but smile while listening to some of my company, who four years ago were ultra pro-slavery men and ardent advocates of war for the protection of our institutions, heaping all manner of anathemas upon President Davis if he does not accept the proposal."¹⁶¹ Combined with a willingness to enlist slaves (and grant them emancipation)

¹⁵⁹ William C. Harris, "The Hampton Roads Peace Conference: A Final Test of Lincoln's Presidential Leadership," in *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 21, no. 1 (Winter, 2000): 30-61. For a monograph length study of the Hampton Roads Peace Conference see James B. Conroy, *Our One Common Country: Abraham Lincoln and the Hampton Roads Peace Conference of 1865*, (Guilford: Lyons, 2014).

¹⁶⁰ Williams, *Stonewall's Prussian Mapmaker*, 230.

¹⁶¹ Wiley, *Norfolk Blues*, 187.

Walters' sentiments show a widespread willingness among Lee's men to sacrifice slavery for independence.

Rumors of peace began to grow as Confederate military fortunes continued to deteriorate. On February 3, 1865, Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of State William Seward, met with three Confederate peace commissioners, including Confederate Vice-President Alexander Stephens, in Hampton Roads, Virginia, to discuss terms for peace. Lincoln was adamant; so was Davis. Surrender of Confederate forces, abolition of slavery, and a restoration of the Union with acceptance of the Thirteenth Amendment. Davis would accept nothing but Confederate independence. With both leaders unwilling to budge they ensured the war would continue. Both leaders should shoulder the blame for continued bloodshed. Historians Steven Woodworth and Paul Escott blame Davis' absolute refusal to budge from independence as the primary reason the Hampton Roads Peace Conference failed. Davis, to Escott, misrepresented Lincoln's gestures in an effort to bolster morale, gestures which Escott argued were more flexible towards the South than what Davis represented.¹⁶² Whether Davis misrepresented Lincoln or not we will never know for the participants agreed that no notes were to be taken, though several attendees wrote about the proceedings shortly after. Whatever Davis' representations, they had the desired effect. Anger and a renewed determination to fight to the end reinvigorated many of Lee's men.

Some of this anger and determination was put into words for public consumption in the forms of regimental and brigade resolutions. These declarations of fidelity to the Confederate cause restated why some of these men fought in 1861 and why they were continuing to fight. Resolutions typically responded to the failed Hampton Roads Peace Commission in the form of a renewed spirit of fighting to the death and the recognition that the Lincoln administration was

¹⁶² Grimsley and Simpson, *The Collapse of the Confederacy*, 9; Escott, *The Confederacy*.

bent on subjugating the South no matter what. These resolutions were generally voted on by the rank and file as well as the officers. The resolutions 15th Alabama Infantry fully supported the raising of negro troops as well as continued resistance. “We the undersigned soldiers seeing the determination of the Federal government to finally subjugate us, confiscate our lands and property, free our slaves, believe the time has come for arming and putting into the Confederate States’ service two hundred thousand negroes and most respectfully urge that Congress pass a law to that effect.” The resolution was signed by all 143 enlisted men of the regiment. The resolution of the 1st Virginia Infantry wrote that as a result of Lincoln’s refusal to grant Confederate independence, the soldiers in the 1st Virginia believed that “no alternative is left us but to defend our homes, our property and lives as long as the foot of the vandal pollutes the soil of the South.”¹⁶³ The goal of these documents was to motivate soldier’s communities to continue to resist and support the army as well as to shame those who deserted. Lincoln’s refusing to negotiate Confederate independence created a do or die rejuvenation among many in the Army of Northern Virginia.

“The Lincoln Government recognizes us only as Rebels and Traitors against the constituted authorities - and that the path to honor is only through blood,” wrote a Georgia veteran echoing the sentiments of 1861.¹⁶⁴ A Virginia artilleryman observed that Lincoln’s terms renewed “pour people” to be “more determined than ever to fight to the bitter end.”¹⁶⁵ Likely this soldier was speaking for some of the soldiers and not the poorer class of Southern civilians who by this stage of the war were either refugees, starving, or desperate to receive aid from the Confederate government. An engineer officer reported that the results of the peace conference

¹⁶³ Richmond *Enquirer*, February 21, 1865; Richmond *Daily Dispatch*, February 22, 1865.

¹⁶⁴ Peacock, “A Georgian’s View of War in Virginia,” 129-30.

¹⁶⁵ Creed Thomas Davis Diary, VHS.

“seem to have had the effect of arousing everybody to what awaits the people of the South should they, through voluntary submission, or by force of arms, submit to Yankee rule.”¹⁶⁶ Abel Crawford, the 22 year old son of a wealthy Alabama father was not ebullient. Writing his wife from near Petersburg Crawford despondently wrote “there is no chance for peace yet, and I am afraid there won’t be until we are subjugated.” Placing the blame where it was partially due, Crawford continued, “it seems that our authorities are not willing to make peace on any terms shorter than Independence, but I am afraid that we will never get that. The chance looks very gloomy.”¹⁶⁷ It is interesting to note the dichotomy of reactions among the poor and wealthy. Some of the poor wanted to continue to fight and among the wealthy were those who were despondent about fighting. No matter the social strata all of Lee’s men longed for peace.

As a result of the loss of Fort Fisher, growing despondency, failure at Hampton Roads, and what was seeming to be the obvious outcome of the war, desertion continued to plague Lee’s army. Desertion was brought about by a variety of factors (lack of food, exposure, combat, disease, and dwindling military/political hopes) that affected each deserter differently. As J. Tracy Power notes, these factors led to a breakdown in morale which ultimately led to desertion.¹⁶⁸ The link between community and citizen soldiers is aptly illustrated in the problem of desertion. Historian Reid Mitchell argued that loyalty to family was greater than loyalty to the Confederacy and this was the primary cause of desertion. But as Mark Weitz and others have shown, Confederate desertion causation was much more complex than Mitchell’s argument. Weitz argues against Mitchell’s conflicting loyalties thesis by suggesting that Confederate

¹⁶⁶ Williams, *Rebel Brothers*, 142.

¹⁶⁷ Abel Crawford to Dora Crawford, February 17, 1865, Crawford Letters, Duke.

¹⁶⁸ Power, *Lee’s Miserables*, 301-02.

deserters, among other reasons, felt betrayed by the government and that they were not disloyal.¹⁶⁹

By late February, 1865 letters from home describing conditions and hardships, along with the misery of the soldier's experience, combined to increase desertion. Despondent letter writing particularly was having an effect upon North Carolina soldiers to the point that Robert E. Lee had to write North Carolina Governor Zebulon Vance that "there is good reason to believe that they [desertions] are occasioned to a considerable extent by letters written to the soldiers by their friends at home."¹⁷⁰ Among the topics most included in Confederate soldier correspondence during the last year of the war were the spirits of the soldiers (and the army at large), food, conditions, desertion and peace. Many soldiers made notice of numbers of men deserting in their own regiment, brigade, or some other part of the army. James Wilkerson, the son of a middle class farmer from Granville County, North Carolina, wrote despondently to his sister on Valentine's Day that he had "lost confidants in our men. It hurts my feelings to [missing] our men are doing like running away and deserting every day and night. Our army are becoming weaker and weaker." Wilkerson, though upset at the weakening of the army through desertion, understood the reasons why some deserted. He even contemplated it himself writing, "it looks very hard to have to stay here all of our lives and undergo what we do and then to be subjugated by the Yankees, oh it is awful to think of. I study about it a great deal here."¹⁷¹ Another Tarheel wrote his uncle that "17 got away from camp out of the 48th [North Carolina Regiment] last night. I fear to try to get away."¹⁷² Soldiers had to reconcile the danger of staying in the army and

¹⁶⁹ Mitchell, *Civil War Soldiers*, 170-71; see Mark Weitz, *More Damning than Slaughter*, 276, J. Tracy Power, *Lee's Miserables*, Jason Phillips, *Diehard Rebels*, and Joseph Glatthaar, *General Lee's Army*.

¹⁷⁰ *OR*, Series I, Vol. 47, 1270.

¹⁷¹ James K. Wilkerson to Sister, February 14, 1865, James King Wilkerson Papers, Duke.

¹⁷² Jesse M. Frank to John Frank, February 22, 1865, in Frank Family Papers, UNC.

the chances of escaping the army. Feelings of duty, responsibility, loyalty, family, honor, and comrades, conflicted with physical exhaustion, hunger, death, and hopelessness.

The easiest route to acquire plenty of food was to desert to the Yankees. A soldier in the 57th Virginia Infantry wrote that “our men are continually going over to the Yankees,” and threatening to do the same unless he could go home for a visit, “if we don’t we intend to take a good old French furlough.”¹⁷³ Virginian William A. Penn, son of a modestly wealthy widow, alerted his mother to his regiment’s desertion problem. “There are a good many of our soldiers deserting and going to the Yankeys, ten went from our Regt on day before yesterday,” Penn wrote.¹⁷⁴ These accounts, coming shortly after the results of the Hampton Roads Peace Conference were known, indicates that not every Confederate soldier was resolved to continue fighting until a military outcome decided matters. Each of these nameless men had their reasons to desert. Many likely had been stalwart veterans that simply had reached their physical and emotional limits. Negative news from around the Confederacy and the prospect of defeat looming ever larger, compelled many of Lee’s men to abandon the army.

By late March, 1865, desperate to somehow change the military situation around Petersburg and Richmond, Robert E. Lee ordered a lightning strike surprise attack on a portion of the Union lines. The resulting Battle of Fort Stedman on March 25 would be not only a final act of desperation but would illustrate that elements within the Army of Northern Virginia still had some fight left in them. The Confederate attack occurred in the early morning and was composed of approximately 10,000 men who captured the fort in a rush but were not able to penetrate into Union lines further. The attack was ultimately repulsed with heavy losses that the Confederacy could ill afford. What is remarkable is at this stage of the conflict, with desertions

¹⁷³ John Morris to Sister, February 23, 1865, in Morris Family Papers, LVA.

¹⁷⁴ William A. Penn to Mary Penn, February 19, 1865, Green William Penn Papers, Duke.

mounting, poor conditions in the trenches, low rations, and encroaching Union armies, that the Army of Northern Virginia was still able to mount a spirited offensive attack (albeit an unsuccessful one). The attack on Fort Stedman was a desperate gamble that Robert E. Lee took to change the military situation in Virginia, and, much like the hopes placed in U.S. election results, arming slaves, or negotiating peace with independence, military attacks like March 25th resulted in Confederate failure. On April 2, 1865, the Union Army of the Potomac finally broke through Lee's lines south of Petersburg. The Army of Northern Virginia began to fall apart. As the army retreated west in the hopes of finding rations along the way they found U.S. cavalry and infantry instead. Lee's goal was to link with Joseph E. Johnston's Confederate army in North Carolina. At the Battle of Sailor's Creek, April, 1865, over 8,000 Confederates became prisoners. Lee also lost a substantial amount of his remaining wagons and artillery. The Army of Northern Virginia was defeated. On April 9, 1865 at Appomattox Court House, Lee surrendered.

What did Lee's soldiers feel as they watched their beloved Army of Northern Virginia disintegrate around them along with their hopes for independence, in the final two weeks of the Civil War in Virginia? Extant letters and diaries are not as numerous during this time due to the constant activity and retreat. The ones that do survive exhibit shock at defeat, sadness at the ending, and descriptions of why they continued to fight. An unknown soldier in the 24th North Carolina Infantry likely spoke to why many in the army continued to fight when he wrote that "we owe a duty to our country and to our loved ones at home. To fight for the former is to protect the latter."¹⁷⁵

At the end of March and into early April many of Lee's stalwarts recognized that their war was ending and not as they hoped. "I have been in this Holy Cause for four long years,"

¹⁷⁵ T.M.G. to father, March 15, 1865, in Lowry Shuford Collection, NCDAH.

wrote Virginian Joseph Whitehorne, “I have fought and suffered and bled for the Confederacy and I would rather my bones bleach on some red hill of the Old Dominion than be subjugated.” One emotion driving men like Whitehorne to continue fighting was hatred. Four years of U.S. occupation and hard war policies, as well as the pending U.S. victory, fueled this hatred. The day of the breakthrough, April 2, Whitehorne wrote that he was “almost demoralized, I can’t see what will become of us. I feel that I would rather die than live.” The next day he wrote in his diary that many within the army would rather sell their lives in battle than lose to the hated Yankees. “We have resolved to fight them to the bitter end,” wrote Whitehorne.¹⁷⁶

Once the knowledge of the surrender reached the army sadness, anger, and disbelief took hold. Many of the surrendered continued to imply in their letters and diaries why they fought. Some refused to believe that it was possible. “I cannot believe that the southern people are yet subjugated,” wrote a Virginia artilleryman on April 10th.¹⁷⁷ Some, like Joseph Banks Lyle, 5th South Carolina Infantry, wanted to “believe that all will yet be well in the end, but where is that end!”¹⁷⁸ Joe Whitehorne likely spoke for many white Confederates writing on April 9, “Sad is a poor word to describe how I feel. To think we have been toiling, suffering, bleeding for our country and for the freedom to govern our states as we wish and then to be forced to surrender. I have a feeling we are not being true or loyal to our countless comrades who gave up their lives during this four years. All the officers cried and most of the privates broke down and wept like little children and Oh, Lord! I cried too. I’d rather been killed than go back to Pleasant Shade and tell them we were subjugated.”¹⁷⁹ Whitehorne was obviously feeling a range of emotions

¹⁷⁶ J.E. Whitehorne Diary, UNC.

¹⁷⁷ Kena King Chapman Diary, UNC.

¹⁷⁸ Joseph Banks Lyle papers, VHS.

¹⁷⁹ Whitehorne Diary, UNC.

including survivor's guilt, shame, and a loss of honor. Alexander Paxton, 4th Virginia Infantry wrote in his diary April 18th simply, "And Freedom shrieked as Lee's Army fell!"¹⁸⁰

The Army of Northern Virginia had been defeated. Much like their letters and diary entries beginning in November, 1864 Lee's men tried to reconcile their sacrifice, hopes for independence, refusal to believe that defeat was possible, and the things they thought they were fighting for (or to prevent). As the year 1865 began and soldiers began to abandon the army desperate measures were debated and enacted to maintain discipline, unit cohesion, and men in the ranks. This included a revolutionary upheaval of the Southern social structure seen in the arming of slaves debate. While an egalitarian proposition the arming of slaves was a last ditch effort to reinforce Lee's dwindling army.

The Army of Northern Virginia suffered enormous logistical constraints due to four years of war, central government impressment policies and inefficiency, and Union armies cutting of supply lines. Rations became scarce. Combined with the physical fatigue of front line service, responding to Union attacks on a widespread front, and exposure to all types of weather, many Confederate soldiers reached their physical and emotional limit and deserted either by going home or over to the enemy where they could be well fed. When added to the element of the hardships experienced by families and the gloomy military - political outlook we can see why Confederate soldiers began to abandon the army. Not all of them abandoned the Confederacy however. Desertion does not necessarily indicate a loss of patriotism but in most cases men had reached their physical, emotional, and soldierly limit.

Symbolic gestures at efficiency seen in unit consolidation and the appointment of Robert E. Lee as general-in-chief had different impacts on morale. The former was widely despised as

¹⁸⁰ Alexander Paxton Diary, W&L.

erasing the identity forged by soldiers through four years of war while the latter was seen as a positive event but one that would likely have little impact on events.

Efforts at peace negotiations in February, 1865 encouraged many in the Confederacy as well as the United States that perhaps the war would finally end. The recalcitrance of both Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln ensured that the only outcome to the war would be a military conquest of the Confederacy. Soldiers in the Army of Northern Virginia hoped for an independent Confederacy as a result of these negotiations but were deeply disappointed. They resolved to continue fighting to prevent subjugation to the hated Yankees even if it meant enlisting slaves and emancipating them.

The March, 1865 passage of legislation authorizing the raising of black regiments was too little too late to help reinforce the Army of Northern Virginia. Widely supported as a necessary war measure by the soldiers it met with resistance in some quarters. The wide acceptance of this measure indicates the desperation of the Confederate cause and the lengths that many were willing to go to in order to prevent the alternative.

By April, 1865 it was too little too late. Military measures and political desperation were not enough to offset the numerical advantage enjoyed by Ulysses S. Grant's Army of the Potomac over the Army of Northern Virginia. Hungry, exhausted, listless, and on the run, Lee and his men surrendered on April 9, 1865. As the primary vehicle through which Confederate hopes, optimism, and nationalism flowed, the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia effectively ended the Civil War.

Conclusion

A Confederate veteran, writing shortly after he was surrendered at Appomattox wrote of his commanding officer being visited by a Union officer, a schoolmate of the Confederate. "We

saw him come up and hold out his hand - the Major did nothing for so long it was painful. Then he took the offered hand and I had a feeling the war was really over. After all, I never hated any one Yankee. I hated the spirit that was sending them to invade the south.”¹⁸¹

The Civil War in Virginia was over. From June - September, 1864 many in the Army of Northern Virginia believed that they were winning the war, independence could still be theirs, hopes were raised, and morale was steady. Jubal Early's detached operations in the Shenandoah Valley are evidence that the army could still be a mobile fighting force. Even as trench lines began to extend around Petersburg and Richmond through June and July, many of Lee's men were confident in their ability to defeat any Union attempt to take their lines.

Throughout the summer months, Lee's army held serve in the trenches and made incursions into Maryland. Confederate hopes were renewed and for many morale soared. War weariness in the North was at an all time high and Abraham Lincoln was not sanguine in his chances for re-election. After the fall of Atlanta and the defeats at Third Winchester and Fisher's Hill in September, a noticeable change occurred in many of the letters and diary entries of Lee's men; despair. Jubal Early was cleared out of the Shenandoah Valley in October and the Valley was forever lost to the Confederacy. Lincoln was re-elected President in November and Lee's men realized that all they could do was fight or leave the army. As conditions worsened in the trenches, daily fighting occurred, and rations grew shorter, many of Lee's men succumbed to physical and emotional exhaustion. Many others simply saw the war as being lost and simply went home. However, enough of the army remained to continue to prevent Union victory in front of Petersburg and Richmond.

¹⁸¹ Whitehorne Diary, UNC.

With desertions increasing and Union armies in Georgia on the move, desperate measures were resorted to in Virginia. Debates raged over whether to arm slaves to increase the ranks of the army. A majority of Lee's men felt that it was necessary and supported the measure. However, when the law allowing arming of slaves was passed in March, 1865, it had little effect. Meanwhile, attempts to negotiate peace based on Confederate independence were met with refusal by the Lincoln administration. Hopes that the Army of Northern Virginia could seize the initiative were dashed at Fort Stedman in late March. By the time elements of the U.S. army broke through at Petersburg on April 2, there were simply not enough men left in the Confederate army to stop them.

The feelings among many in Lee's army at this time reflected those felt in the preceding months of 1865. The letters and diary entries of March and April spoke of constant desertions, hope the war would end, desires to go home, peace, and anger (particularly at the ease of Sherman's March). However, many refused to give up. They wrote of their dedication to fighting until the end, duty to family, community, and country; and a refusal to be subjugated. Reading between the lines the reader can detect the feeling that these men knew the war was ending yet refused to admit it for a variety of reasons. Many of their comrades simply gave up and deserted, reaching their limits of hunger and exhaustion. As one veteran wrote in March, 1865, "I have seen veterans of three full years who have faced death incessantly who believe in the southern cause as sincerely as I do, finally be conquered by gnawing hunger and desert to the enemy in hopes of a full meal. I hate the idea, but I won't criticize."¹⁸²

It is difficult to accuse the Army of Northern Virginia of having lost the will to fight. Certainly many soldiers did for a variety of reasons both political, communal and personal, but

¹⁸² Whitehorne Diary, UNC.

the semblance of an army continued to fight until they were overwhelmed on April 9, 1865. Perhaps the questions we have been asking about the Army of Northern Virginia are over simplified, cliched, driven by hindsight, or flat out wrong. Perhaps we should refocus our lens and look at the soldiers of the Confederacy's main army as a composite of human beings exhibiting human emotions, reactions, and hopes, and not simply a homogenous army only to be understood in light of hindsight. We must give them back the power of their voices and understand them truly in the context of their experiences and understand them in the context of the time they lived in. The only to do this is to read the evidence they wrote forward. If the fate of the outcome of the Civil War rested on whether the Army of Northern Virginia existed or not studying the hopes, optimism, morale, and attitudes of the men in that army will allow us a glimpse into the emotional culture of that army. It will also enable us to understand why many Confederate soldiers continued to fight on when hindsight judged the war to be over in July, 1863. Furthermore, the context of these hopes and attitudes were justified at the time and that is the key. Arguing for the suspension of belief, like some historians have posited¹⁸³ is an unsatisfactory explanation of why these soldiers felt as they did. By taking the words of these soldiers at face value and expanding them onto broader contextual map, we can see that they were not willingly duping themselves.

Future studies of the Army of Northern Virginia should continue to contextualize the power of hope, determination, and morale in terms of unit cohesion and esprit de corps but also in how the belief in the 'consent of the governed,' at least for white males, drove these feelings among citizen soldiers. This was a democratic-republican army that many times voted with its feet. A study similar to "A Battle of Wills" would be illuminating when applied to the hard luck

¹⁸³ See Beringer et al, *How the South Lost the Civil War*.

Confederate Army of Tennessee, an army that knew mostly defeat. The Trans-Mississippi theater has typically been neglected in Civil War studies until recent years. A comparative study on the main Confederate armies in that theater would provide a more complete picture of the emotional culture of Confederate armies.

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