

"Recollection, Retribution, and Restoration:  
American Civil War Prison Policy in  
Union and Confederate Prisoner-of-War Memory."

Over a hundred and thirty eight years have passed since Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House and yet the Civil War continues to live in American historiography. Despite David Herbert Donald's announcement in the early 1960s that Civil War history was dead, historians have continued the campaign. Over the past four decades historians have advanced the standard of research on several historiographic fronts: gender and race issues, sectional party allegiances, the economy and home front in the Union and the Confederacy, military leadership, strategy, and tactics, foreign diplomacy, and the impact of industry and technology on soldiers and society. From all of the aforementioned, there emerges and increasingly clearer portrait of the people, places, and episodic events that form the very bedrock of contemporary fascination with the war. Yet despite all of the innovation and erudition, historians have written little on an equally important and highly contentious subject: the Civil War prisoner-of-war system. It was a system that claimed the lives of thousands of men and forever changed the political and ideological perception of those who survived to tell about it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For a snapshot of present Civil War historiography through the end of the twentieth century and the areas in need of further mining see James M. McPherson and William J. Cooper, Jr., Eds., *Writing the Civil War: The Quest to Understand* (Columbia, South Carolina, 1998); A select sampling for further investigation may also include: pioneer and Civil War history master David H. Donald's, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York, 1960) and *The Nation in Crisis 1861-1877* (New York, 1969); For gender issues see Catherine Clinton, *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (New York, 1992), or Elizabeth D. Leonard, *All the Daring of A Soldier: Women of the Civil War Armies* (New York, 1999), or Karen Zeinert, *Those Courageous Women of the Civil War* (Brookfield, Conn., 1998); For the African-American experience see John David Smith, *Black Soldiers in Blue: African-American Troops in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 2002), or Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (New York, 1990), or Emory M. Thomas *The Old South in the Crucible of War: Essays* (Jackson, Mississippi, 1983); For politics and economy see Roger L. Ransom, *Conflict and Compromise: The Political Economy of Slavery, Emancipation and the American Civil War* (New York, 1989), or Michael F.

Because former as well as recently emerging literature on the American Civil War prison system has bent toward specific case studies of individual camps and conditions, the objective of this study includes the institutional perspective of prison policy in order to form a combined recollection of the system. By combining the soldier's perspective with that of the policy-makers, a more transparent image emerges and enables us to better differentiate myth from reality. Results indicate that late-war camp conditions were more of a byproduct of inconsistent early war policy directives, including friction between central and state governments, and less the result of inadequate care or intentional mistreatment as maintained by some veterans, preachers, and politicians.<sup>2</sup>

Because United States foreign policy was predicated upon neutralizing any foreign belligerent or *de facto* recognition of the South, the Lincoln administration logically avoided any cartel or exchange agreement, an act that would have been a form of belligerent recognition in and of itself. The North only acceded to a *conditional* exchange policy after Southern *de facto* recognition was achieved, because of the blockade, and whenever a majority of prisoners were held by the South. Political expediency, therefore, dictated prison policy.

With the question of *de facto* recognition remaining at an impasse well into the first year of the war, neither the United States nor Confederate governments developed an effective means for dealing with prisoners-of-war in any form of proactive manner. The governmental policy delays, therefore, caused logistical

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Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development: From the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1992), or David W. Blight, *Union and Emancipation: Essays on Politics and Race in the Civil War Era* (Kent, Ohio, 1997); For Leadership see Gary W. Gallagher, *Lee and His Generals in War and Memory* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1998), or Grady McWhiney, *Grant, Lee, Lincoln, and The Radicals: Essays on Civil War Leadership* (Evanston, Illinois, 1964); For diplomacy see Lynn M. Case and Warren F. Spencer, *The United States and France: Civil War Diplomacy* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1970), or Brian Jenkins, *Britain and the War for the Union* (Montreal, McGill-Queens University Press, 1974), or James D. Bulloch, *The Secret Service of the Confederate States* (New York, 1959).

<sup>2</sup> To crudely illustrate a point: An Amazon.com search under "books" for "Civil War Prisons" yields one hundred and eight results alone; all of which deal specifically with individual camps or episodes like Andersonville, Elmira, Libby, the Sultana Disaster, et al. A definitive volume dealing specifically with prison policy is yet to be written.

problems for both sides: *who* should pay for it in the North, and *how* to pay for it in the South. Logistical concerns, coupled by an ever-changing geographical and geopolitical landscape, caused further policy delays. Because of the delays both governments were accused, at home and across the battle lines, of premeditated mistreatment. The perception on the part of the prisoners with respect to their governments' apparent lack of empathy, then, is what exacerbated much of the pejorative post-war rhetoric and recrimination; rhetoric and recrimination utilized for political, and at times, personal gain both inside and outside the federal and state legislative assemblies.<sup>3</sup>

The apparent lack of governmental empathy is best illustrated in the prisoner's shared belief that they were held in captivity, without hope of exchange, in order to reduce their ranks by disease. Yet despite the personal reproaches of the prisoners, wartime policy, rather than an intentional withholding of supplies, led to their demise. Ulysses S. Grant reluctantly affirmed the priority of military policy—one of necessity—when he said, "It is hard on our men held in Southern prisons not to exchange them, but it is humanity to those left in our ranks to fight our battles."<sup>4</sup> Irrespective of Grant's words or the reality of military and political decision-making, the prisoner's personal accounts, shaped largely by what they *actually believed* to be true, would have a lasting and motivating impact, and thus would serve as harbingers for all subsequent sectional polemics. In short, this paper argues that the lack of

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<sup>3</sup>James G. Randall, *The Civil War and Reconstruction* (Boston, 1937); Ovid L. Futch, *History of Andersonville Prison* (Gainesville, Florida, 1968); William Best Hesseltine, *Civil War Prisons: A Study in War Psychology* (New York, 1958) see esp. pages 1-39; Lonnie Speer, *Portals to Hell: Military Prisons of the Civil War* (Mechanicsville, Virginia, 1997). For international legal considerations, albeit cursory, see Richard S. Hartigan, *Lieber's Code and the Law of War* (Chicago, Ill., 1983), 9, 43-44; James McPherson "Lincoln and the Strategy of Unconditional Surrender," in *Lincoln, The War President*, (New York, 1992), 43; and Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War*, (Cambridge, 1995), 10-13. Francis L. Ludes and Harold J. Gilbert, eds., *Corpus Juris Secundum: A Complete Restatement of the Entire American Law*, 101 Vols. (Brooklyn, New York, 1956), 93, 12; *U.S. Supreme Court Reports of the United States*, Lawyers ed., 118 Vols. (Rochester, New York, 1917-1967), 17, *The Prize Cases*, 459.

<sup>4</sup>*War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 73 Vols. (Washington, D.C., 1880-1901), Ser. II, Vol. VII, 605-607 (hereinafter cited as *O.R.*).

consistent prison policies, most a byproduct of the changing goals and the unexpected duration of the war, in Washington (and to a lesser degree in Richmond), as well as interference by state governments, created the misery of the emaciated. The memories of the emaciated, then, impacted postwar rhetoric and retarded reunion.<sup>5</sup>

For years before and after Robert E. Lee moved his army toward Appomattox Court House, the general public and politicians in both sections tirelessly rekindled the recriminatory rhetoric that would come to surround the prisoner-of-war system. Union and Confederate soldiers, politicians, and veterans used the system's ghastly aura--for personal and political reasons--to strengthen and sustain sectional animosity. Whether for monetary or political gain, veterans, aided by some legislators eager to raise their own political capital, often embellished accounts of their imprisonment on pension applications. Politicians too would wave the bloody shirt with their incendiary rhetoric regarding the treatment of their captured citizens, soldiers, and sailors in order to solidify home-front support during the war, and to exacerbate political animosity after the war.<sup>6</sup>

In a 1916 speech Bennett H. Young, a former Confederate prisoner of war at Camp Chase in Ohio, ably illuminated that which had aided the false consciousness of the public regarding recriminatory and sectional party rhetoric. He said that "much of the bitterness between the North and the South during and since the war grew out of the treatment of prisoners. . . . It suited the purposes of the 'bloody shirt' element to exaggerate every possible circumstance in order to embitter the people of the North against the people of the South . . . [so as to

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<sup>5</sup>William Best Hesselstine, "The Propaganda Literature of Confederate Prisons," *Journal of Southern History* 1(1935):56-66; Nancy A. Roberts, "The Aftermath of Civil War Prisons and Their Dead," University of Oregon, 1996, DA9714504, May, 1997.

<sup>6</sup>*Congressional Globe*, 42<sup>nd</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 29 Jan. 1872, 692. For pensions see Maris A. Vinovskis, "Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War? Some Preliminary Demographic Speculations," *Journal of American History*, 76 (1989), 55. On veterans who were politicians see Gerald W. McFarland and Katzuto Oshio, "Civil War Service and Loyalty to the Republican Party; 1884," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, 15 (1987), 170-172.

give] the party then in power lengthened control of the government."<sup>7</sup> Young therefore, maintained that some politicians were willing to manipulate sources--bend ethical principle--in order to meet political practicality.

From the three-score years that preceded Bennett's comments, there emerged a literary effusion of articles, expositions, and anecdotes about prisons. Veterans from the North and South were uniformly convinced "that their jailors had subjected them to treatment heinously designed to reduce their ranks by starvation and disease."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, ex-prisoners called into question, some in published form, the leaders and policies that had created and protracted their time in the valley of the shadow. Thus despite what Bennett held to be true in the twentieth century, few veterans *believed* to be true in the immediate postwar period of the nineteenth century.

The first published accounts of prison life in the South appeared in the late summer of 1862 following the exchange agreement between opposing governments. The initial accounts were written to incite a public outcry against the inhumane treatment of soldiers by southern "barbarians." Yet because the very nature of an uninterrupted exchange reduced the overall time that individuals were held in captivity, the original published accounts failed to produce much response, humanitarian or otherwise, in the North.<sup>9</sup>

When autumn approached a year later in 1863, however, Union policy regarding the cartel changed, and the exchange was halted. The Lincoln administration attributed their suspension of the cartel to several factors: the South's refusal

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<sup>7</sup>Bennett H. Young, "Address at Columbus, Ohio, June 10, 1916 on the decoration of the graves of Confederate soldiers at Camp Chase," *Confederate Veteran*, 24 (August 1916), 348-352.

<sup>8</sup>Hesseltine, *Civil War Prisons*, 56-57; *New York Times*, Aug. 1, 21, Oct. 3, 1865.

<sup>9</sup> On July 12, 1862 Major Generals John A. Dix (U.S) and Daniel Harvey Hill (C.S.), acting under orders from George Brinton McClellan and Robert E. Lee respectively, met to discuss articles for a cartel or exchange agreement. Despite having been notified by President Lincoln six days earlier to avoid any formal type of verbal recognition to the Confederacy (Lincoln still arguing his case of a municipal war) in the provisions, Dix was given plenary power to draw up provisions. The Dix-Hill agreement was based upon the cartel of 1813 drawn up between the United States and Great Britain. It was ratified four days later on July 22, 1862. See *O.R.*, Ser. 2, Vol. 4, 210, 239, 266-68; for effect of

to validate its parole and exchange of the Port Hudson and Vicksburg prisoners; the desire of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and General Ulysses S. Grant to curb desertion and bounty jumping by federal soldiers; and most importantly, Grant's belief that the most expeditious way to relieve all inhumane suffering and treatment was to end the war. The northern policy change, then, was in keeping with Grant's desires to end the war, one he called "a military necessity."<sup>10</sup>

Secretary Stanton utilized the stoppage of the exchange, moreover, to inaugurate a renewed prison literature campaign on the national level to help deflect growing criticism from Washington onto Richmond. Stanton wanted to convince northerners, and the rest of the world, that the southern confederacy had erected and maintained a "deliberate system of savage and barbarous treatment and starvation"<sup>11</sup> of northern prisoners. He prodded the U.S. House Committee on the Conduct and Expenditures of the War as well as aid societies like the United States Sanitary Commission and Christian Commissions to make public their interviews with former prisoners, audits of camps, and abstracts of their official reports and findings.<sup>12</sup>

By the early summer of 1864, the U.S. House committee finished its investigation of ex-prisoners from an Annapolis hospital and made its official report. The report, containing thirty pages and eight photographs, summarized the testimony of prisoners held in Richmond's Libby Prison and on nearby Belle Isle on the James River in Virginia. It was quickly distributed throughout the north among the various presses. The House committee said that the "evidence proves, beyond all matter of doubt . . . that the inhumane practices . . . are the result of the determination on the part of the rebel authorities to reduce our soldiers in their power, by privation of food and clothing, and by exposure."<sup>13</sup> Secretary of War Stanton added fuel to the report when he said, "The

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published accounts and cartel agreement see *New York Times*, July 13, 24, 1862; for periods of confinement see *Speer Portals to Hell*, xiv

<sup>10</sup>*O.R.*, Ser. II, Vol. VII, 605-607; John Y. Simon, Ed., *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, 24 Vols. (Carbondale, Illinois, 1967-1988), Vol. XIII, 158, 180, 323.

<sup>11</sup>*O.R.*, Ser. II, Vol. VII, 110-111, 115.

<sup>12</sup>U.S. House of Representatives, 38<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, Report Number 67, 4-5 (hereinafter cited as *Report No. 67*); Hesseltine, *Civil War Prisons*, 60.

<sup>13</sup>*Report No. 67*, 2-4.

enormity of the crime committed by the rebels towards our prisoners for the last several months is not known or realized by our people . . . [as there] appears to have been a deliberate system of savage and barbarous treatment and starvation."<sup>14</sup> Thus heading into the fall elections of 1864, Stanton's incendiary rhetoric, combined with the report of the House Committee on the Conduct and Expenditures of the War, served as the spark that helped inflame the northern populous behind the Union war effort and President Lincoln's reelection bid. Northerners seemed to accept that the war must continue, and thus bolstered the decidedly Republican policy objectives.

In a continued effort to make northern audiences believe that southerners were brutes, the United States Sanitary Commission also investigated the conditions of prisoners who had been held by the Confederacy in Richmond's Libby and Belle Isle prisons. The Sanitary Commission corroborated the U.S. House report by claiming that they too witnessed "diseased and dying [men] . . . [that were] physically ruined for life."<sup>15</sup> The Sanitation Commission concluded its findings with the veiled charge that much suffering might have been alleviated by Confederate authorities despite shortages of supplies in the Confederacy's capital. The "dreadful condition of things," it continued, "might be attributable to even other causes than the possible destitution of the rebel government."<sup>16</sup> By "other causes," the commission was referring to the South's alleged "spirit of cruelty, inhumanity, and interested malice."<sup>17</sup>

Following Lincoln's reelection and the reports of the U.S. House on the Conduct of the War and U.S. Sanitary Commission, the South had heard and remained silent long enough. On March 3, 1865 the Confederate Congress responded to the allegations. In a report issued by a joint committee of Confederate senators and representatives, the South, bristling at the North's hypocrisy regarding prison camps, stated their disdain for the recent publications circulating throughout

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<sup>14</sup>O.R., Ser. II, Vol. VII, 110-111, 115.

<sup>15</sup>U.S. Sanitation Commission, *Narrative of Privations and Sufferings of United States Officers and Soldiers While Prisoners of War of Rebel Authorities. Being Report of a Commission of Inquiry, Appointed by the United States Sanitary Commission* (Philadelphia, Penns., 1864), 21.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 92-95.

<sup>17</sup>O.R., Ser. II, Vol. VII, 338.

the North as well as the mainland of Europe. It read, "This report is rendered especially important by reason of persistent efforts lately made by the Government of the United States, and by associations and individuals connected or co-operating with it, to asperse the honor of the Confederate authorities and to charge them with deliberate and willful cruelty to prisoners of war."<sup>18</sup>

The Confederate joint committee's report countered the charges laid against them by the U.S. House and Sanitary Commission by leveling charges of their own. The southern joint committee claimed that northern prisoners "were not in a worse state than were the Confederate prisoners [who] returned from northern hospitals and prisons." Moreover, and more importantly, they berated the North for the deplorable state of its prison camps given the abundance of supplies throughout the federal army and the northern nation at large. The joint committee, with a measure of sarcasm and irritation, added that "the humanity and superior management [which have been] subjects of special boasting by the U.S. Sanitation" were completely false and never applied to southern prisoners while captive in the north.<sup>19</sup>

The Confederate joint committee also conducted several interviews with its soldiers and surgeons who had been held captive in the north. One account, given by an assistant surgeon, stated that, "I have seen many of our prisoners returned from the North who were nothing but skin and bones." Another surgeon added, "I have never seen such a set of men in worse condition. They were so enfeebled and emaciated that we lifted them like little children. Many of them were like living skeletons."<sup>20</sup> The report went on refute and counter, point by point, the statements made by the U.S. House Committee's report. Moreover, the Confederate

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<sup>18</sup> R.A. Brock, Ed., *The Southern Historical Society Papers*, 52 Vols., 1876-1959 (Millwood, New York, 1977), Vol. 1, No. 3, 113-114, 132-153, (hereinafter cited as *SHSP*); *O.R.*, Ser. II, Vol. VIII, 338. It should be noted that two of the eight photos included in the original reports issued by the U.S. House and Sanitary Commission's reports were of men who died *before* the Sanitary Committee visited Annapolis, and a third photo was of a soldier who was from a military field hospital thus lending credence to the South's frustrated response and subsequent cry of northern disingenuousness. For a full explanation see Hesseltine, *Civil War Prisons*, 69-113.

<sup>19</sup> *SHSP*, Vol. 1, No. 4, 225; Vol. 3, No. 4, 197-214; *O.R.*, Ser. II, Vol. VIII, 341.

representatives sought to depict the United States Sanitation Commission as a mere instrument of propaganda for the Lincoln administration.<sup>21</sup>

When the war concluded in 1865, Northern and Southern ex-prisoners began to compile a list of complaints relative to their treatment while held in captivity. Veterans who had successfully passed through the valley of the enemy's shadow complained about theft, compatriots being shot, poorly equipped and staffed hospitals, inadequate or nonexistent medical supplies, a lack of shelter and poor sanitation, inconsistent supply and quality of foodstuffs, cruelty and harshness of prison guards, and most widely documented, the stoppage of the exchange. Postbellum polemicists, therefore, had a plethora of complaints, relative to the mistreatment of prisoners, with which to wave the bloody shirt and to advance their public and at times private agendas.<sup>22</sup>

From 1865 to the outset of American involvement in World War One, veterans and politicians utilized the prisoner-of-war system to support disability claims on their applications for pension, and to psychologically assuage their mental debilitation through the writing of papers and pamphlets. Though some veterans' accounts of prison life and psychological anguish were truly reflective of the conditions within the camps, as substantiated by northern and southern veteran's

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

<sup>21</sup> *Confederate Imprints, 1861-1865. Based on Marjorie Lyle Crandall, Confederate imprints, a checklist, 1955, and Richard B. Harwell, More Confederate Imprints, 1957 (New Haven, Conn., Research Publications, 1974), 144 reels. Reel 2:43; O.R., Ser. II, Vol. VIII, 340-341.*

<sup>22</sup> While too numerous to list in the space provided see the following less utilized early war primary publications: For Northern accounts on conditions and psychological effects, Lieutenant William C. Harris, *Prison Life in a Tobacco Warehouse in Richmond* (Philadelphia, 1862), passim; William H. Jeffrey, *Richmond Prisons 1861-1862* (Vermont, Connecticut, 1940), 19, 98-115; William H. Merrill, *Five Months in Rebelldom; or Notes from the Diary of a Bull Run Prisoner ay Richmond* (Rochester, New York, 1862). For Southern accounts see, John J. Dunkle [Fritz Fuzzlebug pseudonym], *Prison Life During the Rebellion* (Singer Glen, Virginia, 1869), Knauss, *The Story of Camp Chase*, 3-15; Joe Barbieri, *Scraps from the Prison Table at Camp Chase and Johnson's Island* (Doylestown, Pennsylvania, 1868), 103-106, 131; Bartlett Malone, *Whipt em' Everytime* (Jackson, Tenn., 1960) 45-48; Martha Buck, "A Louisiana Prisoner-of-War on Johnson's Island, 1863-1865," *Louisiana History* 4(1963), 236. See also *O.R.*, Ser. II, Vol. III, 152-156, 213, 221-224, 238-241, 379, 498-500, 604-605, 694, 730-751, and Ser. II, Vol. IV, 112-116, 136, 167-183 for some of the more detailed pages of reports.

accounts, many reflections often embellished and perverted the reality of their imprisonment and the prison system as a whole. What is important to remember is that many *believed* that their condition had been part of a deliberate scheme by a barbarous enemy to reduce their ranks, rather than a mere oversight or consequence of war. The reality of the prison system and poor conditions within the camps, however, was that both sides lacked a standardized system of administration. Because of the lack of standardization, the experiences and conditions faced by individual prisoners varied with the geographic location of the camp, composition of the guards, and overall management.<sup>23</sup>

The lack of standardization was further hindered in both the North and the South because of disagreement between the central and state governments. In early 1862 because some state prison camps, like Camp Chase near Columbus, Ohio, were both poorly managed and geographically placed, the Lincoln administration decided to provide for a formalized development of the prison camp system.<sup>24</sup>

On October 26, 1861 Colonel William H. Hoffman, a parolee from the United States Eighth Infantry in Texas, was appointed commissary-general of prisoners. Hoffman, a former prisoner and man with considerable legal experience, immediately began to implement a detailed plan of centralization. All correspondence regarding the prison system was required to pass through his office. Moreover, as directed by the War Department in Washington, he was to

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<sup>23</sup> For a good account of the psychological effects—and the roller coaster ride of emotion regarding exchange—within the camps, see Joe Barbieri, *Scraps from the Prison Table*, 100-106, 125-131. David E. Chesebrough, *God Ordained This War: Sermons on the Sectional Crisis, 1830-1865* (Columbia, South Carolina, 1991), 127-129. The North began to replace camp guards with paroled soldiers who thought, upon their surrender, that they would be sent home rather than to finish out their enlistments. The South, with a dwindling number of fighting men, began to replace their camp guards with older men and young boys whose age and temperament were anything but civil and stable. As a result, northern and southern prisoners were exposed to greater physical and psychological anguish because of the change.

<sup>24</sup> As early as August 1861, General M.C. Meigs, quartermaster-general of the army, instructed then Secretary of the War Simon Cameron that a commissary-general of prisoners would be required. Meigs made his decision both because of the growing number of Confederate seaman (Lincoln referred them to as pirates because of the debate of *de facto* recognition) that had been captured, and most importantly, Union defeat at (First) Manassas meant the war may well last much longer than the preconceived ninety days.

establish rules for camp commandants--in accordance with international law--and to call for the development of a system of audits and inspections.<sup>25</sup>

In the autumn of 1861, the Union supported several prisons that had been erected haphazardly with regard to provincial departmental need and in absence of a centralized governing body (largely because of the aforementioned position of Lincoln's administration regarding the *de facto* recognition of the Confederacy). From the concrete citadel of Fort Warren in Boston Harbor, Massachusetts to a confiscated medical college in St. Louis, Missouri, the Union held Confederate "insurgents" in poorly constructed and inadequately guarded prison camps. For Hoffman, the prisons presented a clear security risk.<sup>26</sup>

In order to reduce the feasibility of escape because of poor geographic location and to limit the possibility of cavalry raids whose purpose may also be to aid escape, Hoffman, with the support of the quartermaster-general of the army General M. C. Meigs, decided to build a new military prison camp well within the Union's interior. They looked to the shores of Lake Erie near Sandusky and Norwalk, Ohio, and singled out the islands of Put-in-Bay. Following inspection of the islands, Hoffman reported that Johnson's Island afforded the most suitable site. The island, located well over a mile out in the bay, was easily accessible and maintainable from a sizable railhead located in nearby Sandusky.<sup>27</sup>

Following the U.S. War Department's review of the report, Hoffman received authorization to go ahead with the construction of the prison on Johnson's Island. Under orders and in accordance to Hoffman's direction, the camp would house approximately a thousand prisoners at a time, and was to be constructed as parsimoniously as possible. Hoffman's governance and capital spending regarding construction, as well as the prison camp system at large, therefore, would follow the same logic of cost considerations over comfort levels.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *O.R.*, Ser. II, Vol. III, 48; Speer, *Portals*, 11.

<sup>26</sup> *O.R.*, Ser. II, Vol. I, 151; *Ibid.*, Ser. II, Vol. III 46-47, 50-53, 136; It should also be noted that because the number of prisoners held was negligible, humanitarian concerns factored little into policy directives. After Confederate-held Fort Donelson surrenders in early 1862, however, policy will evolve with the increased number of captives and size of prison populations.

<sup>27</sup> Hesseltine, *Prisons*, 37-38; *O.R.*, Ser. II, Vol. III, 54-58.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, Ser. II, Vol. III, 8, 49, 54-58, 122-123.

In February 1862, the prison camp on Johnson's Island was completed. The question of control, however, met with varying degrees of friction from the governor of Ohio, Richard Tod. Although aware that the fort at Johnson's Island had been fully funded from federal coffers, Governor Tod insisted that he be allowed to appoint Ohio volunteers as guards and to establish regulations for governance of the camp. Hoffman responded to Tod's request with disgust and dismay. With respect to his centralized plan, he argued that because prisoners were to be sent to pre-determined camps according to their appropriate rank,<sup>29</sup> that any deviation from the newly established standard of regulations and control would lead to potential problems of mismanagement or adjustment of newly transferred prisoners--new prisoners like the thousands recently captured after the fall of Fort Donelson.<sup>30</sup>

Hoffman specifically used Camp Chase, under Tod's and the State of Ohio's supervision, as an example of mismanagement and as a way to publicly spar with and humiliate Governor Tod's administration in Columbus. The Confederate officers that were held at Camp Chase were free to leave the prison compound and to go into the town of Columbus each day as long as they gave their word as gentlemen that they would return within a twenty-four hour period. Captured Confederate officers, then, could readily be seen "suffering" in Columbus' finest hotels and brothels, many accompanied by their slaves. The complete lack of control displayed at Camp Chase, along with the continued complaints from the citizens of Columbus, helped to bring about total Federal control of all prisoners within the state (and the several states). Thus for the Confederate officers at Camp Chase, the party, quite literally, was over.<sup>31</sup>

While the Union struggled to establish a unified and coherent prison camp policy, the South also met with difficulties in its development of a system. On

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<sup>29</sup> Officers were to be separated from enlisted men.

<sup>30</sup> *O.R.*, Ser. II, Vol. III 427. The surrender of Fort Donelson thrust approximately twelve thousand Confederate troops into a nascent prison system designed for far fewer prisoners, and thus added to the problems Hoffman faced in gaining centralized control. It is also the site that Grant earned his *nom de guerre* "Unconditional Surrender" Grant.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 326-327, 427-429; William H. Knauss, *The Story of Camp Chase*, 22-63, 315.

May 21, 1861, the Confederate Congress ratified an act regarding treatment of prisoners-of-war. Confederate President Jefferson Davis' administration, unlike its counterpart, pushed for the rapid development of an effective prison camp system to further bolster its desire for international recognition, *de facto*, *de jure*, or otherwise.<sup>32</sup>

Less than a month later in June, 1861 and with a continued proactive view toward the development of the prison camp system, Confederate Secretary of War Leroy Walker approached the North Carolina's governor's office with the request of securing a new prison site.<sup>33</sup> Walker, under pressure from the people of Richmond who clamored for the removal of "Yankee" prisoners, was relieved when he was notified that North Carolina would be willing to recommend a suitable site once located. North Carolina authorities quickly presented Salisbury. Located in the southwestern corner of North Carolina and presumably well into the Confederacy's interior, Salisbury served as major railroad hub for points "north, south, and west" for ease of transportation.<sup>34</sup>

The recommendation of Salisbury, however, came at a price. Henry Toole Clarke, serving as Governor *ex officio* following the passing of Governor John Willis Ellis, insisted that North Carolina be allowed to "furnish *proper* troops for guard purposes." Moreover, and rather surreptitiously, Clarke recommended that the purchase of a cotton factory in Salisbury, which could house nearly two thousand prisoners, "be withheld from the public until after the purchase." Moreover, Clarke went on to imply that the factory could be sold for at least double its purchase price "when the war is over."<sup>35</sup>

Walker was upset by the arrogant tone of Clarke's letter, his material-minded rhetoric, and his insinuation that only troops from North Carolina were capable of guarding the camp. Over the subsequent months, Walker would spar with Clarke over various legal matters including unapproved prisoner exchanges. Because North Carolina pursued the exchanges, Walker reasoned, the state's

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<sup>32</sup>*Confederate Imprints*, Reel 2:43.

<sup>33</sup>Governor John Willis Ellis had recently passed away and the affairs were handled by Henry Toole Clarke as Governor *ex officio*.

<sup>34</sup>*O.R.*, Ser. II, Vol. III, 681-682. Governor Ellis would pass away in July, 1861 of poor health.

actions sought to undermine the Confederate government's central control and thus left open the door for confusion and mismanagement. Upon receiving news that Confederate bonds could be sold to cover the cost of construction and with the influx of prisoners following the Confederate victory at the First Battle of Manassas, however, Walker softened. He had little choice but to concede to Clarke's wishes.

Jefferson Davis too found himself embroiled in debate with Virginia's Governor John Letcher. Letcher maintained that captured Union officers should be surrendered to his commonwealth for trial. They were to be tried, he believed, for inciting slave insurrection. Davis, like the rest of the country, well understood from the trial of John Brown what a guilty verdict in Virginia would most probably bring for Northern officers--death by hanging--and thus worked to neutralize Letcher's position for obvious diplomatic purposes. Despite the resolution of Letcher's demands, however, Davis would ultimately win the debate. In March 1863 outright control of prisoners was turned over to the central authorities in Richmond.

The disagreements, even if largely rhetorical, would be but a few examples of the several well-documented battles between Davis' administration and the various state governors like Francis Pickens, Zebulon Vance, Joseph Brown, and John Letcher. They were, in the end, debates that delayed action and that ultimately impacted the collective memories of those officers and soldiers who were kept in a constant state of flux.<sup>36</sup>

Surprisingly, and counter to much of the postwar pejorative prose, some veterans, like those Confederate officers imprisoned at Camp Chase, portrayed the prison experience in a different light. "It is very pleasant today," wrote one North Carolinian in 1864. "We had pical [pickle] Pork for breakfast this morning and for dinner we had Been [bean] Soop."<sup>37</sup> Other accounts, though not nearly as numerous as those describing the darker side of camp life, suggested that prisoners were afforded access to goods sold by sutlers and that meals were

<sup>35</sup> *O.R.*, Ser. II, Vol. III, 682.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, Ser. II, Vol. IV, 701-702, 828-829, 849-850. The Dix-Hill cartel helped aid Davis' argument for central control of prisoners, especially officers.

<sup>37</sup> Bartlett Y. Malone, *Whipt em' Everytime*, 45-48.

provided by local citizens. Colonel William Ward of the 9<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Cavalry reported that he was able to purchase "two different calico shirts at \$2 each"<sup>38</sup> while imprisoned in Alton, Illinois. A Chaplain White from the Rhode Island Heavy Artillery held in North Carolina said, "We went with a guard to a house nearby, and which was evidently the property of a well-to-do family. They treated us kindly. They were rebels, and no mistake."<sup>39</sup>

Despite a fairly large body of positive rhetoric regarding the treatment of soldiers,<sup>40</sup> which seems to suggest that prison perception was truly a case by case experience, the politicians paid them little lip service following the war. Preachers too played on the extraordinary circumstances of the system and spoke to the sensational rather than the real. Additionally, the press refused to circulate them as widely as their "darker" counterparts. Instead, the politicians, the press, and at times the preachers, chose to revisit the atrocities of the prison camps at the hands of a "barbarous murderer" in an effort to revitalize sectional animosity and to increase political capital as well as rates of subscription. In short, the dark side sold.<sup>41</sup>

While being subjected to the postwar rhetoric of imprisonment, northern and southern citizens attempted to reconcile the more widely circulated accounts of demoralization, demise, and death within the context of their individually professed Christian principles like forgiveness. The assassination of President Lincoln, however, hardened the hearts of northerners more fully. With Lincoln's assassination, they were less willing to turn the other cheek toward the southern

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<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Robert E. Denney, *Civil War Prisons and Escapes* (New York, 1993), 184.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>40</sup> Only a few examples have been given for space considerations. It should be noted, however, that many of the diaries, whether sympathetic to or totally against the system as a whole, are mostly poor sources because the intention of the authors is an unknown, and because many are historically inaccurate.

<sup>41</sup> Hesseltine, *Civil War Prisons*, 175-180; Hesseltine, *Propaganda*, 56. Also see Nancy A. Roberts, "The Aftermath of Civil War Prisons and Their Dead."

populace. The tragedy played out at Ford's Theater only seemed to confirm the denunciatory sentiment of the northern prisoners, politicians, and polemicists.<sup>42</sup>

From the first published accounts in 1862 and through the 1880s, veterans regularly contributed their battle and prison memories to magazines and newspapers thus increasing circulations. The accounts, however, often played to the sensational and, at times, mirrored the ever-popular dime novels. Preachers too exacerbated the festering animosity between sections shortly after the war. In one postbellum sermon, a northern preacher excoriated Confederate authorities when he said, "We see the unmitigated turpitude [of the South] . . . It is the same spirit . . . that starved our unhappy prisoners at Andersonville—that butchered our men in cold blood at Fort Pillow—that froze our veterans to death on Belle Island [Isle] . . . [and] that crowded our officers in the damp dungeons of Richmond."<sup>43</sup> The partisan nature of some publishers and preachers, therefore, fanned the embers within the political chambers that, in turn, weld together northern sentiment against a common enemy, the South.<sup>44</sup>

In 1869, the political inferno fully engulfed both sections of the country following the release of House Report No. 45. The published report was the byproduct of a committee appointed by the U.S. House of Representatives to investigate the treatment of prisoners of war. After interviewing over three thousand former prisoners, the committee concluded that the treatment had been the result of "slavery, treason, and rebellion." Moreover the report recorded that the alleged abominable treatment of Union prisoners provided a perverse example "to which the eyes of future generations revert with shame."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* Especially section on recriminations. See also James O. Henry, "The United States Christian Commission in the Civil War," *Civil War History* 6(1960), 374-388.

<sup>43</sup> Chester F. Dunham, *The Attitude of the Northern Clergy Toward the South 1860-1865* (Philadelphia, 1974), 194-195.

<sup>44</sup> David B. Chesebrough, *God Ordained This War: Sermons on the Sectional Crisis, 1830-1865* (Columbia, South Carolina, 1991), 127-140; Kathleen Diffley, *Where My Heart is Turning Ever: Civil War Stories and Constitutional Reform, 1861-1876* (Athens, Georgia, 1992), xii-xxxiv; Allan Peskin, "Was There a Compromise of 1877?" *The Journal of American History* 60(1973), 70, 75.

<sup>45</sup> U.S. Congress, *Report of Treatment of Prisoners of War and Union Citizens*, 40<sup>th</sup> Congress, 3<sup>rd</sup> Session, 1869, 253-258 (hereinafter cited as Report No. 45).

Confederate veterans and leaders responded to *Report No. 45* as they had to all previous reports from House committees and "federally-backed" commissions like the United States Sanitation and Christian Commissions. They blamed United States policy and its decision-makers. Southern leaders never denied the charge that Union soldiers suffered in their prison camps. What they did contest, however, were the allegations of intentional mistreatment and, most importantly, that the South was solely to blame for all the prisoners' privations. Jefferson Davis blamed the Lincoln administration's decision to end the exchange as it had been "one of the established usages in war between civilized nations."<sup>46</sup> Further, he argued that the withholding of medicines as contraband of war prevented supplies from reaching hospitals inside southern prison camps thus increasing the number of Union casualties. For Davis, the root cause of all of the humanitarian misfortune was the end of the exchange.<sup>47</sup>

Davis' argument regarding the misrepresentation of intentional mistreatment by the South found support in the U.S. War Department records concerning the number of prisoners and deaths within the prison camps. During the war the Confederacy held 270,000 Union prisoners of which 22,000 lost their lives. Conversely the North held 220,000 Confederate prisoners of which 26,000 perished. For Davis and Confederate veterans, the U.S. War Department numbers painted a horrific picture of reality; the reality that more Confederate soldiers died in Union camps even though "in every material respect . . . the North held greatly the advantage."<sup>48</sup>

In 1878, the inflammatory sectional rhetoric regarding prison camps reached its pinnacle. A debate in the House of Representatives over the pending Amnesty Bill sounded the assembly call for both political parties and once again stirred the smoldering ashes of animosity between sections of the country. The Amnesty

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<sup>46</sup> Jefferson Davis, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, 2 Vols. (New York, 1881), Vol. I, 581; *SHSP*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 113-132.

<sup>47</sup> Stewart Brooks, *Civil War Medicine* (Springfield, Massachusetts, 1966), 13-14. While the U.S. did withhold medicinal products, it, like the exchange, was deemed a "military necessity" in order to end the war. Moreover, it was believed that any medical products sent south would have been used for Confederate battle wounds and not Union prisoners of war.

<sup>48</sup> O.R., Ser. II, Vol. VIII, 970-972, 990-1004.

Bill offered the restoration of unlimited political rights to all who had previously held public office in the United States, but had given service to the Confederacy during the war. The debate began when presidential hopeful James G. Blaine of Maine sought to amend the bill by specifically excluding Jefferson Davis. Blaine argued for exclusion on the grounds that the former Confederate commander-in-chief "was the author [who] knowingly, deliberately, guiltily, and willfully . . . [orchestrated] the gigantic murders and crimes at Andersonville [prison]."<sup>49</sup> Moreover, Blaine repeated the northern claim in *Report No. 45* that Confederate prisoners had been treated fairly, and that all acts of atrocities had occurred south of the Mason-Dixon Line.<sup>50</sup>

In response to Blaine's assault on Davis and the South at large, Representative Benjamin Hill of Georgia voiced his dismay at the purely political rhetoric of Blaine and some Republicans, "We had well hoped that the country had suffered long enough from feuds . . . [and] from inflamed passions . . . [only to see] the passions from which all were hushing shall be re-inflamed."<sup>51</sup> Benjamin Hill, like Davis and southern veterans had often repeated before him, argued that northern policy was responsible for the suffering. "Every horror," Hill declared, "grew out of the necessities of occasion." Moreover, those "necessities were cast upon the confederacy by the war policy of the other side."<sup>52</sup>

Hill's rebuttal, however, showed that the deep sectional wounds caused by the war were healing. He refused to place blame, as some southerners had in the past, on any one individual, committee, or commission. Rather, in comparing the death tolls, northern and southern, as reported by the U.S. War Department, he stated that the "horrors are inseparable, many of them and most of them resulting from a state of war." Hill well understood Blaine's personal presidential aspirations and thus his desire to drive a wedge between northern and southern Democrats in an attempt to regain Republican control of the House. "The

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<sup>49</sup>U.S. Congress, 44<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, *Congressional Record* (January 10-13, 1876), Vol. 4, 324.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 325. For an outpouring of comments regarding Blaine's comments see *SHSP*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 113-132.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 345.

gentleman from Maine has so ostentatiously paraded, for obvious partisan purpose of exciting upon this floor a bitter sectional discussion, from which his party, and perhaps himself, may be the beneficiary."<sup>53</sup>

Hill's oration, while detailed, reasoned, and strong, could do little to save the Democratic-sponsored Amnesty Bill. The measure would fail. Yet even though the measure failed and the Hill-Blaine debate served to prolong the generation-long argument over mistreatment of prisoners-of-war, Hill's refusal to point a sectional finger at any one entity showed that the disagreement had evolved to one that once again transcended sectional lines to the more traditional political party lines. The hands of time, therefore, had begun to heal the wounds of war.<sup>54</sup>

In the end, postbellum remembrance of the American Civil War prison system, much like the memories of those who were held within the camps, varied from inmate to inmate. Because each individual's perception of the system differed, the prisoners' collective memory formed a patchwork of partisan perception; a series of still-frame photographs that formed an irrational and illogical collage open to interpretation, and at times, manipulation. Regardless of experience or perception, however, most recollections were driven by a desire for some degree of indemnification--whether psychological, political, or financial--for having been subjected and sacrificed to the machinations of wartime policy and postwar politics.

While the purpose of this paper has been to build a bridge in the gap of the present American Civil War prisoner-or-war system historiography by focusing on an *institutional* perspective to the problem, it clearly remains a cursory study at best. Further elucidation awaits the innovation and erudition of some future author who can provide a more complete, detailed account; further work that also suggests that the study of the American Civil War remains very much alive.

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 347-348.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 350-353.