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Adam Stauffer

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Abstract

On the morning of May 24, 1861, a group of Union cadets marched into the city of Alexandria, Virginia. The cohort looked peculiar in their flamboyant Zouave uniforms with bright blue shirts and flashy red sashes. They were led by a dashing young colonel named Elmer Ephraim Ellsworth and charged with occupying the city. Noticing a Confederate flag flying high on the roof of a hotel called the Marshall House, Ellsworth and a few of his men entered the building, determined to bring it down. The trip up the stairs was easygoing and the flag was quickly retrieved without incident. But on the way down everything went wrong. The innkeeper, a Confederate sympathizer named James W. Jackson, appeared with a shotgun and fired, piercing Ellsworth's heart. As he stumbled backward he uttered his final words: “My God!” Almost immediately, Corporal Francis Brownell aimed his rifle directly at Jackson's forehead and shot his colonel's murderer. In the coming conflict scores of men and boys would be slaughtered in similar fashion causing Americans to rethink the grim and brutal realities of modern war. The deaths of Ellsworth and Jackson constituted the first official battle fatalities of the Civil War, but many more followed. [excerpt]

Keywords

Civil War, Elmer Ephraim Ellsworth, culture of war, culture of death, duty and honor

“The Fall of a Sparrow”: The (Un)timely Death of Elmer Ellsworth and the Coming of the Civil War

Adam Q. Stauffer

On the morning of May 24, 1861, a group of Union cadets marched into the city of Alexandria, Virginia. The cohort looked peculiar in their flamboyant Zouave uniforms with bright blue shirts and flashy red sashes. They were led by a dashing young colonel named Elmer Ephraim Ellsworth and charged with occupying the city. Noticing a Confederate flag flying high on the roof of a hotel called the Marshall House, Ellsworth and a few of his men entered the building, determined to bring it down. The trip up the stairs was easygoing and the flag was quickly retrieved without incident. But on the way down everything went wrong. The innkeeper, a Confederate sympathizer named James W. Jackson, appeared with a shotgun and fired, piercing Ellsworth’s heart. As he stumbled backward he uttered his final words: “My God!”¹ Almost immediately, Corporal Francis Brownell aimed his rifle directly at Jackson’s forehead and shot his colonel’s murderer. In the coming conflict scores of men and boys would be slaughtered in similar fashion causing Americans to rethink the grim and brutal realities of modern war. The deaths of Ellsworth and Jackson constituted the first official battle fatalities of the Civil War, but many more followed.

When discussing the Civil War, this grim scene at Alexandria in 1861 is rarely conjured up. Yet, in a more general sense, it was a scene that became all too familiar to

countless numbers of soldiers and civilians during the conflict—when thousands of Union and Confederate soldiers marched gloriously off to war only to be cut down by an enemy’s bullet. The war, which many saw early on as a contest of duty and honor, all too often descended into a firestorm of death and destruction. Elmer Ellsworth became the first official battle fatality of the conflict. His death challenged the assumptions of an entire generation raised on the idea that to serve one’s country in war was a moral act which demonstrated one’s virtues as a citizen. “The patriotic past and the Biblical past were the two great historic memories by which Americans measured their present,” Reid Mitchell points out.² Christianity promised heavenly rewards to the individual who led a life of selflessness and demonstrated his or her commitment to protecting established institutions. Furthermore, Americans looked to the past, in particular the Revolutionary War, for their definitions of heroism. The true hero, it was thought, was one who died for liberty and country. As a consequence many pictured warfare as a romantic venture designed to show one’s national commitment to the rest of the citizenry. This martial spirit, which placed a strong emphasis on personal valor and patriotism, saturated the early nineteenth century American’s perception of combat and human conflict.

1. Quoted in Ernest B. Furgurson, *Freedom Rising: Washington in the Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 94.

2. Reid Mitchell, *Civil War Soldiers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 1.

During the antebellum era and the early years of the Civil War violence was glorified in both the North and South. “Military service was a grand romantic adventure or a showcase for strutting masculinity as a practical duty of citizenship,” Orville Vernon Burton explains. “That was the sum of military service as most understood it: quite apart from saving their country or defending their principles, every recruit anticipated that a fellow in uniform would always stand in good stead with the ladies, and quite possibly with employers and customers too, once the little fighting was concluded.” When the war came, this romantic sentimentalism was shattered on the battlefields of Manassas, Shiloh, and Fredericksburg. Soldiers above and below the Mason-Dixon Line placed their self-perceived virtues on a pedestal and believed that these virtues alone would ensure victory over the morally inferior enemy. “Courage,” military historian Gerald F. Linderman states, “was the individual’s assurance of a favorable outcome in combat The primacy of courage promised the soldier that no matter how immense the war . . . his fate would continue to rest on his inner qualities.”³ Elmer Ellsworth came to represent this pre-war mindset and his boyish features and upright moral conduct were seen as proof that he was ordained to become one of the North’s Civil War heroes.

While still a child, Ellsworth’s mother once remarked in her journal that he possessed a “military propensity.” She knew he was destined for greatness. Yet one would have been hard-pressed to believe his mother considering his origins. Born to a poor family, struck hard by the Panic

of 1837, in Malta, New York, his future prospects were dim. Despite his humble beginnings, Ellsworth was a determined young man—he dreamed of going to West Point and becoming a great military general like his hero George Washington. Circumstances, however, provided that he choose a different career path and, like many young easterners during the early nineteenth century, he went west to seek his fortune. He spent some time in Chicago, struggling with many low-paying jobs, eking out a meager existence. In his spare time Ellsworth studied military strategy. It did not take long before he was able to put this training to good use. While still living in Chicago he met Charles A. DeVilliers, who had served in the Crimean War with the French Zouaves. DeVilliers was a significant influence in Ellsworth’s life and encouraged him in his pursuit of a career in the military.⁴ Ellsworth eventually became involved with Chicago’s National Guard Cadets and was soon propelled to the position of colonel. Suddenly, his future was no longer in doubt. He had found an outlet that soon propelled him into the national spotlight.

Military drilling was popular entertainment during the antebellum era. Crowds flocked to watch handsome young men in uniform perform various exercises and physical feats. “It was part of the romantic approach to warfare,” explains one historian, “war was glamorized and poetized with such trappings as sweeping plumes, flowing sashes, golden spurs, and flashing sabers.” Ellsworth soon transformed the Chicago Cadets into one of the premier drilling companies in the country. He introduced them to a new type of fighting style that

3. Orville Vernon Burton, *The Age of Lincoln* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007), 138; Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 61.
 4. Quoted in Edward G. Longacre, “Elmer Ephraim Ellsworth,” in *American National Biography*, eds., John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), VII, 454; Ruth Painter Randall, *Colonel Elmer Ellsworth: A Biography of Lincoln’s Friend and First Hero of the Civil War* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), 11-12, 30, 46-47.

came to define his career—the Zouave. Americans first became aware of the Zouave soldier during the Crimean War. After observing the troops in action, George B. McClellan wrote that the French Zouaves were the “beau-ideal of a soldier.” Their outfits—baggy red pantaloons, colorful sashes, tight-fitting jackets, and fez caps—made the cadets an exotic visual spectacle in the eyes of the nation. More importantly, however, the Zouave ideal emphasized physical fitness, free bodily movement, and the ability to hit targets in the most difficult positions. As one Chicago newspaper stated, “A fellow who can take a five shooting revolver in each hand and knock the spots out of the ten of diamonds at 80 paces, turning somersaults all the time and firing every shot in the air—that is a Zouave.”⁵ It is no wonder why Ellsworth’s troupe became one of the most celebrated entertainments of the antebellum era.

During the summer of 1860 the Chicago Cadets traveled through the Midwest and Northeast on a nation-wide drilling tour. Ellsworth made sure that on the trip his company behaved itself according to the most puritanical of Victorian standards—no consumption of alcohol, no cavorting with prostitutes, no gambling, and no billiard playing. It was to be a shining example of Christian piety and military discipline. However, the initial reaction to Ellsworth’s Zouave uniforms and drills was negative. As Henry H. Miller explains, “The company was much criticized by the press of the entire country for its audacity and presumption in issuing . . . challenge[s] to older and presumably better drilled companies.” Yet this pompous lambasting did not last long. As the cadets made their way east they became a “must-

see” curiosity, drawing large crowds and acquiring star-struck admirers. The group of flashy Zouaves became all the rage in the North. After the 1860 tour Ellsworth’s “portrait sold by the thousand, and ladies swooned over the dashing young officer and his men.”⁶ The poor boy from Malta had become a national celebrity by the age of twenty-three. On August 14, the cadets held their last drill of the tour at the famous Wigwam in Chicago where, just three months earlier, the Republican party had nominated Abraham Lincoln as its presidential candidate.

Ellsworth met Lincoln while living in Springfield. Recognizing the potential of his young friend, Lincoln took Ellsworth under his wing. During the Election of 1860, Ellsworth made a number of public speeches in Illinois in order to rally the state’s citizens behind Lincoln. His addresses were widely praised and some even compared him to the great orator Stephen Douglas.⁷ This was a flattering comparison for a man who just two years earlier could barely afford to feed himself. Those days of poverty, however, were long gone and Ellsworth was well on his way to becoming a noteworthy figure in American public life. Lincoln’s election to the executive office gave Ellsworth another major opportunity. He was asked by the new president to assist in providing security for the long train ride from Springfield to Washington. Ellsworth became part of a cohort of young up-and-comers who Lincoln invited to assist him in the White House. The group also included the Bavarian-born John G. Nicolay and the handsome John Hay of Indiana, who both became Lincoln’s private secretaries and closest companions during the war.

5. Randall, *Colonel Elmer Ellsworth*, 45; quoted in Robin Smith, *American Civil War Zouaves* (1996; reprint, Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1998), 3, 5.

6. Henry H. Miller, “Ellsworth’s Zouaves,” in *Reminiscences of Chicago During the Civil War*, ed. Mabel McIlvaine (1914; reprint, New York: Citadel Press, 1967), 19, 21; Smith, *American Civil War Zouaves*, 5.

7. Randall, *Colonel Elmer Ellsworth*, 198.

Nicolay, Hay, and Ellsworth constituted the cream of the northern crop of promising young gentlemen. Many believed that, in time, they would become the major political and military leaders of the country—new heroes for a new generation.

Upon arrival, Ellsworth stayed in the capital and served as Lincoln's personal body guard and confidant. "In truth," historian Stephen B. Oates points out, "he was so much a part of the [Lincoln] family that he'd once caught the measles from Willie and Tad." On April 15, a little over a month before Ellsworth's death, Lincoln wrote a touching letter to his young friend which demonstrated the intimacy of their relationship:

Ever since the beginning of our acquaintance, I have valued you highly as a person[al] friend, and at the same time (without much capacity of judging) have had a very high estimate of your military talent Accordingly I have been, and still am anxious for you to have the best position in the military which can be given you, consistently with justice and proper courtesy towards the older officers of the army. I can not incur the risk of doing them injustice, or a discourtesy; but I do say they would personally oblige me, if they could, and would place you in some position, or in some service, satisfactory to yourself.⁸

It is not hard to see why Lincoln was so taken with Ellsworth. Both had been born into humble circumstances and had risen to the national spotlight during the 1850s. In many ways Lincoln considered Ellsworth a surrogate son. He looked out for his young comrade and hoped to appoint him to a high military position in the future. And when the call came Ellsworth answered.

After the siege at Fort Sumter in April of 1861, war between the sections became only a matter of time. Lincoln quickly requested volunteers from each state that remained in the Union. Ellsworth, seeing an opportunity to put his skills to good use in the coming conflict, rushed to New York City to raise a Zouave regiment. He placed an advertisement in the *Tribune* on April 19, requesting the city's firefighters to enlist: "I want the New York firemen, for there are no more effective men in the country, and none whom I can do so much. They are sleeping on a volcano in Washington, and I want men who can go into a fight." Soon Ellsworth had enough soldiers to form a regiment and he set about training them in the Zouave style. The firefighters, coming from a vocation that required athleticism and agility, easily caught on to the rigorous exercises and drills. They ended up adopting the standard dark blue United States Army uniform, but kept the scarlet red of the Zouaves in their shirts. Before embarking to the capital the 11th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment paraded down Broadway before the citizens of Manhattan. The famous diarist George Templeton Strong was on hand to watch the spectacle. "They are a rugged set," he wrote, "generally men and boys who belong to target companies and are great in a plug-mess." These were after all tough, working-class individuals raised on the mean streets of New York City. "These young fellows march badly," Strong continued, "but they will fight hard if judiciously handled."⁹

Ellsworth had the wherewithal to handle such a bunch. Arriving at the capital on May 2, the regiment found thousands of

8. Stephen B. Oates, *With Malice Toward None: The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1977), 234-235; Abraham Lincoln to Elmer Ellsworth, April 15, 1861, in Roy P. Basler, et al. eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 4:333.

9. Quoted in Daniel Mark Epstein, *Lincoln's Men: The President and His Private Secretaries* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 44; Randall, *Colonel Elmer Ellsworth*, 231; *George Templeton Strong*, *Diary of George Templeton Strong*, vol. 3, *Diary of the Civil War, 1860-1865*, edited by Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas (New York: Macmillan Company, 1952), 137.

soldiers milling around the city awaiting orders. The multitude of strange uniforms and colors that congregated at the capital in the spring of 1861 caused the city to look like an extravagant parade of soldiers from all over the country. Lincoln's private secretary John Hay greeted the Fire Zouaves and later commented humorously about the scene in his diary:

Tonight Ellsworth & his stalwart troupe arrived. He was dressed like his men, red cap, red shirt, grey breeches grey jacket. In his belt, a sword, a very heavy revolver, and what was still more significant of the measures necessary with the turbulent spirits under his command, an enormously large and bloodthirsty looking bowie knife, more than a foot long in the blade, and with body enough to go through a man's head from crown to chin as you would split an apple.

Hay went on to call Ellsworth's troops "the largest sturdiest and physically the most magnificent men I ever saw collected together." It did not take long for the Zouaves to attract attention. They were as entertaining as a festive carnival or a three-ringed circus, plaguing the city and its inhabitants with bizarre antics and outrageous behavior. On May 9, they even helped in saving Willard's Hotel, which had caught fire and almost burned to the ground. After hearing of the event Hay admitted, "They are utterly unapproachable in anything they attempt."¹⁰

Then the morning of the planned occupation of Alexandria came. Ellsworth gave one final speech to his men: "Boys, yesterday I understood that a movement was to be made against Alexandria . . . All I can say is, prepare yourself for a nice sail, and at the end a skirmish. When we reach the place of destination, act as men, as well

as soldiers, and treat them with kindness until they force you to use violence. I want to kill them with kindness." But the operation, which had started out as a simple occupation, ended with a shotgun blast to Ellsworth's heart, killing him just as he was entering the prime of his life. *New York Tribune* reporter Edward H. House witnessed Ellsworth's demise first-hand. "He was on the second or third step from the landing, and he dropped forward with that heavy, horrible, headlong weight which always comes of sudden death inflicted in this manner." Yet, House wrote, "His expression in death was beautifully natural." The first battle fatality of the Civil War hit the White House hard. When Lincoln got word of the incident he was so overcome with grief that he was unable to hold back tears and had to excuse himself from a meeting. "I will make no apology, gentlemen, for my weakness," Lincoln told his guests; "but I knew poor Ellsworth well, and held him in great regard."¹¹

Ellsworth's regiment was struck by the passing of its beloved colonel even to the point of considering violent retaliation against southern civilians. "As rage succeeded the first shock of grief," states historian Margaret Leech, "the Fire Zouaves threatened to burn the town of Alexandria, it was thought prudent to confine them for the night on a steamer in the middle of the Potomac." Meanwhile, Ellsworth's body was transported back to the White House where the President and a few close friends held a private viewing. A funeral commenced the next day, garnering the attention of almost every newspaper and press outlet in the North. At this early stage in the conflict, death was a relatively new phenomenon, but later, when the

10. Michael Burlingame and John R. Turner Ettliger eds., *Inside Lincoln's White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 16-17, 20, 22.

11. Quoted in Luther E. Robinson, "Elmer Ephraim Ellsworth, First Martyr of the Civil War," *Illinois State Historical Society Transactions* 30 (1923): 121; quoted in Randall, *Colonel Elmer Ellsworth*, 258-259; quoted in Epstein, *Lincoln's Men*, 65.

body count numbered in the hundreds of thousands, Ellsworth's untimely demise seemed less significant. After the funeral, Mary Todd Lincoln was given the Confederate flag, stained with Ellsworth's blood, which only one day before flew high on the roof of the Marshall House. John Hay, who just a few weeks before had witnessed the Zouaves enter Washington, told his friend Hannah Angell that "when Ellsworth was murdered all my sunshine perished. I hope you may never know the dry, barren agony of soul that comes with the utter and hopeless loss of a great love."¹²

Lincoln wrote a letter to Ellsworth's parents on May 25, giving his condolences. "So much of promised usefulness to one's country, and of bright hopes for one's self and friends, have rarely been so suddenly dashed, as in his fall." Lincoln asserted that Ellsworth had an overwhelming "power to command men . . . and a taste altogether military, constituted in him, as seemed to me, the best natural talent, in that department, I ever knew." In later years, when Lincoln was having ongoing strategic disagreements with his commanders, one wonders whether he thought of Ellsworth and what might have been. "My acquaintance with him began less than two years ago; yet through the latter half of the intervening period, it was as intimate as the disparity of our ages, and my engrossing engagements, would permit." He went on to praise Ellsworth's virtues and character—something that Victorian America admired about its heroes. "To me, he appeared to have no indulgences or pastimes; and I never heard him utter a profane, or an intemperate word." This was probably stretching the truth, but Ellsworth's prudery

became legendary and he was remembered as the shining example of a humble soldier serving and dying for his country. "In the hope that it may be no intrusion upon the sacredness of your sorrow," Lincoln concluded, "I have ventured to address you this tribute to the memory of my young friend, and your brace and early fallen child."¹³

No contemporary was touched more deeply by Ellsworth's death than his friend John Hay. Hay wrote three articles (two in 1861 and one in 1896) highlighting his relationship with Ellsworth and praising the character and fortitude of the man. Writing in *The Washington Chronicle* on May 26, Hay argued that "no man could have died more deeply lamented than the young hero who is moving today in solemn grandeur towards the crushed hearts that sadly wait him in the North." Next Hay painted Ellsworth as a nineteenth century medieval knight—a man who might have sat comfortably at King Arthur's roundtable. "His dauntless and stainless life has renewed the bright possibilities of the antique chivalry, and in his death we may give him unblamed the grand cognizance of which the world has long been unworthy—'*Le chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*.'" Later that summer he penned another piece which was published in *The Atlantic*. In it he described Ellsworth as a man who possessed "the bright enthusiasm of the youthful dreamer and the eminent practicality of the man of affairs."¹⁴ Hay clearly saw that Ellsworth's personality had great potential to excel in the national spotlight. Yet these grand expectations were cut down by buckshot from the gun of an angry Confederate sympathizer.

12. Margaret Leech, *Reveille in Washington 1860-1865* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), 81; Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 363; quoted in Epstein, *Lincoln's Men*, 65.

13. Andrew Delbanco ed., *The Portable Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Viking, 1992), 208.

14. Quoted in Charles Anson Ingraham, *Elmer E. Ellsworth and the Zouaves of '61* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1925), vii.

Predictably, the South's response to the Marshall House incident was markedly different from that of the North's. To many supporters of Dixie, Ellsworth was seen as a prime example of Yankee aggression, a blatant representation of northern arrogance and disregard for individual civil liberties. He did after all enter a man's home without permission and confiscated a piece of private property. James Dawson, a lawyer from Selma, Alabama, referred to the Union occupation as "the invasion of Virginia by Alexandria" and believed Ellsworth's actions had sealed his fate. "Providence seems to have cut him off, as soon as he touched our soil, and it will not surprise me, if the army, led on by [Winfield] Scott, does not meet the same fate." One southern newspaper praised hotel owner James W. Jackson, who had "perished a'mid the pack of wolves," for defending his liberty against the tyranny of the Union Army. There was a large outpouring of sympathy for Jackson. Money was even donated by compassionate southerners and a small collection was given to his widow and children. Six months later southerners were still talking about the incident. Diarist Mary Chestnut recalled visiting with "A man repeating Manassas stories" who told her that after Ellsworth's death Union soldiers seized many southern civilians living in Alexandria, including the eighty year old mother of Jackson, and marched them to Washington for imprisonment.¹⁵ Below the Mason-Dixon Line bitterness was the response to the Ellsworth incident.

The death of Ellsworth sparked controversy that cut across sectional lines. Mary Todd Lincoln's half-sister Elodie, a staunch

Confederate supporter, had to answer many letters concerning her sister's relationship with Ellsworth.

"[He] was only an acquaintance of Kittie's, but one with whom she was thrown much last winter, and being agreeable I think they were excellent friends, nothing more, but had she then seen him in his true light, she could not surely have entertained even that feeling. Nothing but contempt and scorn would have been the emotion of woman for such a man."

Whereas the North praised Ellsworth for his virtues, the South cursed him for his tempestuous disregard for civil liberties. The sections had clearly split over the issue. One year after the incident the embers were still burning. Confederate Chief of Ordnance Josiah Gorgas wrote in his journal on June 12, 1862 that "a man by the name of Jackson killed Ellsworth, colonel of Zouaves, for entering his home, & attempting to haul down the Confederate flag on his home in Alexandria. Jackson was of course instantly butchered. His devotion had an eclectic effect, & was looked on as a happy omen of the spirit of the war."¹⁶ According to Gorgas, Jackson represented everything that the South stood for—honor, private property, and civil liberties—a physical manifestation of the Cause. Ellsworth was just another Yankee who wanted to impose his will on the good people of Dixie.

Perhaps the South should have thought twice about praising the death of Elmer Ellsworth. Almost immediately after the incident young men and boys filled with a spirit of anger and vengeance urgently headed to the nearest recruiting station and volunteered to fight for the Union.

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15. Steven E. Woodworth, *Cultures in Conflict: The American Civil War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 76; quoted in E. B. Long, with Barbara Long, *The Civil War Day by Day: An Almanac, 1861-1865* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 78; E. Merton Coulter, *The Confederate States of America, 1861-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), 424; C. Vann Woodward ed., *Mary Chestnut's Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 241.
16. Woodworth, *Cultures in Conflict*, 78; Sarah Woolfolk Wiggins ed., *The Journals of Josiah Gorgas 1857-1878* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 41.

Ironically, the death of his good friend became a godsend for Lincoln who, before Ellsworth's death, was struggling to find enough men to fill army regiments. In New York City, George Templeton Strong, who just days before witnessed the Zouaves parade down Broadway, wrote in his diary that "Colonel Ellsworth was a valuable man, but he could hardly have done such a service as his assassin has rendered the country. His murder will stir the fire in every western state, and shows all Christendom with what kind of enemy we are contending." Strong was correct. Ellsworth's death became the lightning rod for recruitment that Lincoln had been looking for. The 44th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment even nicknamed itself "The People's Ellsworth Regiment" and the "Ellsworth Avengers." "Ellsworth's death rejuvenated martial enthusiasm," William Marvel has stated, "bringing enough men into the camps to fill companies that even the prospective captains had given up any hope of completing."¹⁷ Even in death Ellsworth contributed to the Union cause.

"Death's significance for the Civil War generation arose as well from its violation of prevailing assumptions about life's proper end – about who should die, when and where, and under what circumstances," Drew Gilpin Faust has recently stated in her book *This Republic of Suffering*. All too soon, Faust continues, "A military adventure undertaken as an occasion for heroics and glory turned into a costly struggle for suffering and loss." The realities of modern warfare were difficult to accept. Many were flabbergasted that thousands of fathers, sons, and husbands were dying by horrific means that went against the prior expectation of what was considered an honorable death. Ellsworth represented

the naïve assumption that many Americans had about war during the antebellum era. His death, therefore, is significant in that it punctured the romantic spirit that so pervaded the prewar mind. The general public was unsure of how to cope with the murder of such a dashing young man. As Faust explains, "the press, in this moment before casualties became commonplace, detailed every aspect of his death, from his heroic sacrifice of life, to the honoring of his body in state in the White House, to his lifelike corpse." One soldier, as Luther E. Robinson recalls, "who went into the war at sixteen, as a drummer boy, (John Dalton, Monmouth, Illinois) told me . . . that he recalled the death of Ellsworth as clearly as that of Lincoln, four years later; that his community in Ohio mourned Ellsworth deeply and that all the people loved him."¹⁸

During the course of the war Ellsworth's death lingered in the memory of many soldiers and civilians of the Union. Like John Brown, his legacy was immortalized in popular ballads that were sung on long marches and in comfy parlors alike. James D. Gray of Reading, Pennsylvania composed the most popular song, "The Death of Col. Elmer E. Ellsworth," on the first Sunday after Ellsworth's murder. The anthem emphasized the patriotism and sacrifice of the young Zouave and bears the stamp of the rampant nationalism that spread across the North after his death. A small excerpt demonstrates the Romanization of Ellsworth and the mystique that was built up around his short career:

Cut off in all the prime of youth,
This noble Ellsworth fell,
Slain by a treacherous traitor's hand,
Hark! hear his funeral knell.
I die, I die, he nobly said,
But in a glorious cause,

17. Strong, *Diary of the Civil War*, 146; William Marvel, *Mr. Lincoln Goes to War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006), 78.

18. Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2008), xii, 5, 94; Luther E. Robinson, "Elmer Ephraim Ellsworth," 123.

In exercise of freedom's rights,
 My country and her laws,
 My country and her laws, my boys,
 My country and her laws.
 In exercise of freedom's rights,
 My country and her laws.

Mary S. Robinson's popular 1866 book, *A Household History of the American Conflict*, featured a striking frontispiece of Ellsworth in his prime. Chapter five reported a fictional account of a father recounting Ellsworth's life and death to his children, telling them they would do well to emulate this soldier. "Remember that name, children. He was a true man; the youngest and greatest hero of the war, thus far." But for the father it was Ellsworth's virtues that stood out. "I can remember no truer specimen of a Christian American youth than Elmer Ellsworth."¹⁹

It is difficult to contemplate what might have been if Ellsworth had not been shot and killed in Alexandria. One commentator has stated that "on the roll-call of great captains, when this greatest of all wars closed, his name might have stood second to none." Even Robert E. Lee, upon hearing about the Marshall House incident, is said to have remarked that Ellsworth would have become the commanding general of the Union Army had he lived. "The world can never compute," John Hay wrote in 1896, "can hardly even guess, what was lost in his untimely end." But this, of course, is all speculation. Ellsworth rose from poverty to the national spotlight in the span of just a few years. He captured the hearts of many patriotic citizens, eager soldiers, and young damsels. Yet there is no escaping the fact that in death he contributed more to the Union cause than in life. Ellsworth was himself aware of what his potential

martyrdom might entail. As he wrote to his parents before that fateful day: "I am perfectly confident to accept whatever my fortune may be, and confident that He who noteth even the fall of a sparrow, will have some purpose even in the fate of one like me."²⁰ Today, Ellsworth is a largely forgotten figure in the annals of American history. His legacy has been overshadowed by Civil War giants like Grant, Lee, and Sherman. During the early days of the conflict he was remembered as the first soldier to sacrifice his life for his section—but there were many more to come.

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19. Jerry Silverman, *New York Sings: 400 Years of the Empire State in Songs* (Albany: Excelsior Editions, 2009), 47, 49; Mary S. Robinson, *A Household Story of the American Conflict: The Brother Soldiers* (New York: N. Tibbals, 1866), 74-75.
 20. Miller, "Ellsworth's Zouaves," 40; Randall, *Colonel Elmer Ellsworth*, 271; quoted in Ingraham, *Elmer E. Ellsworth*, vii; quoted in Furgurson, *Freedom Rising*, 93.