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The Political War

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The Political War

Abstract

Pity Abraham Lincoln. Everything that should have gone right for the Union cause in the spring of 1864 had, in just a few weeks, gone defiantly and disastrously wrong.

For two years, the 16th president had toiled uphill against the secession of the Confederate states, against the incompetence of his luckless generals and against his howling critics from both sides of the congressional aisle. Finally, in the summer and fall of 1863, the course of the war had begun to turn his way. Two great victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg staggered the Confederates, and those were followed by a knockdown blow delivered at Chattanooga by the man who was fast becoming Lincoln's favorite general, Ulysses S. Grant. "The signs look better," Lincoln rejoiced, "Peace does not appear so distant as it did." [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Civil War, Abraham Lincoln, Cold Harbor, President, secession, Confederacy, Union, Ulysses S. Grant, Robert E. Lee

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The New York Times

Opinionator The Political War

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June 5, 2014



A Union artillery battery at Cold Harbor. Credit Library of Congress

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For two years, the 16th president had toiled uphill against the secession of the Confederate states, against the incompetence of his luckless generals and against his howling critics from both sides of the congressional aisle. Finally, in the summer and fall of 1863, the course of the war had begun to turn his way. Two great victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg staggered the Confederates, and those were followed by a knockdown blow delivered at Chattanooga by the man who was fast becoming Lincoln's favorite general, Ulysses S. Grant. "The signs look better," Lincoln rejoiced, "Peace does not appear so distant as it did."

Peace was not the only thing that would be brought closer by victory. The presidential election of 1864 was looming, and if Lincoln had any desire for a second term, a victorious end to the war was the surest way to secure it. He had never seriously considered taking what appeared to some people as an obvious shortcut to remaining in office – declaring the war to be a national emergency and suspending elections for the duration, though two Union governors, in Indiana and Illinois, had done

what amounted to that on the state level. That only made the need for military victory all the more urgent, and so Lincoln installed Grant as general in chief of all the Union armies in March 1864, and Grant obliged him with a comprehensive strategic plan that united Union assaults in Georgia, Alabama and, under his own direct command, in Virginia.

None of it worked, and the place where it seemed to work the least was under Grant's own nose. Crossing the Rapidan River on May 4, 1864, Grant's army entered at once into a series of head-to-head contests with Robert E. Lee's fabled Army of Northern Virginia. Fighting three pitched battles – at the Wilderness, Spotsylvania Court House and the North Anna River – and enduring numerous smaller collisions, Grant worked his way down toward the Confederate capital at Richmond, which he got within 10 miles of by the end of the month. But the fighting had cost a colossal total of 40,000 dead, wounded and missing, and Lincoln gloomily understood that the Northern public “hold me responsible.”

They weren't the only ones. Radicals within Lincoln's own Republican Party in Congress had long been convinced that Lincoln's preference for a soft postwar Reconstruction was dis-heartening the Republican base. They were further angered when the Republican national committee, headed by Lincoln's ally Edwin D. Morgan, met in late February 1864 and announced that the party would hold its presidential nominating convention in Baltimore in June, not as “Republicans,” but as the “National Union Convention.” As Grant's campaign in Virginia ground agonizingly forward, the most vehement of the Radicals – led by Frederick Douglass, Wendell Phillips and Horace Greeley – staged a protest convention in Cleveland's Cosmopolitan Hall, and on June 4 nominated the Radical darling, John Charles Fremont.

If ever there was a moment when Lincoln needed good news from the battlefield, it was now, and Grant wanted to deliver it. The staggering blows he had dealt the rebels convinced him a little too easily that the Confederates were “really whipped,” that “our men feel they have gained morale over the enemy and attack with confidence,” and that with one more blow, “success over Lee's army is already assured.” On June 1, Grant launched a hasty strike at Cold Harbor, before the bulk of his army could get into action. Even so, the attack cracked the Confederate defenses on the Cold Harbor road and forced them to fall back. With another good push, Grant might just be able “crush Lee's army on the north side of the James, with the prospect in case of success of driving him into Richmond, capturing the city perhaps without a siege, and putting the Confederate government to flight” – not to mention providing a rousing military endorsement for Lincoln's renomination.

But Grant, in his eagerness, had badly misread the Confederates, and when he launched a full-dress attack at Cold Harbor on June 3, it resembled (as one Confederate general put it) “not war but murder.” Well-prepared Confederate infantrymen mowed down federal attackers. Grant's army sustained 3,500 casualties in the main attack and another 2,500 in related actions that day, and the armies settled into a miserable standoff.

Yet Grant carefully limited his report of the Cold Harbor debacle to four terse sentences, including the claim that “our loss was not severe.” And in the official report of the campaign he filed after the war, Cold Harbor consumed just three sentences in 51 pages. For years afterward, Grant's doubters wondered whether he had deliberately soft-pedaled the failure at Cold Harbor in order to limit political damage to Lincoln on the eve of the Baltimore convention. There is no direct evidence of such collusion; still, Grant's dismissal of his losses as “not severe” is peculiar.

Even more peculiar, newspaper reporting from the field was shut down by the War Department because of “a violent storm.” The New York Times (whose editor, Henry Raymond, was the new

chairman of the National Union Party's national Committee) did not publish an account of the June 3 attack for three more days, and even then, merely observed that "losses were inconsiderable."

Strangest of all, however, was Grant's refusal to propose a truce to recover the wounded from the battlefield until June 7. Military tradition dictated that only the loser of an engagement asked for such a truce. Even though there could not have been much debate about who had won and who had lost at Cold Harbor, Grant delayed the truce agreement (and any public admission of defeat) for four days, while men suffered and died from thirst, blood loss and exposure.

By June 7, however, any anxiety that bad news from Cold Harbor would endanger Lincoln's nomination was past. That same day, the Union National Convention opened at the Front Street Theater in Baltimore, with Robert J. Breckinridge asking triumphantly, "Does any one doubt that this convention intends to say that Abraham Lincoln shall be the nominee?" They did not, and the next day, undisturbed by any news of Cold Harbor, Lincoln – described by one state delegation as "the second savior of the world" – was unanimously renominated by the convention.

Given how diligently the National Union Party's staff had worked to ensure Lincoln's renomination in the months before the Baltimore assembly, even the freshest news from Cold Harbor might not have made much difference. But keeping the ill wind at bay certainly did not hurt. Nor was it uncommon in this war for the impact of bad military news to be blunted by creative hesitation. One of Grant's corps commanders was overheard telling a staffer not to report actual casualty figures: "It will never do, Locke, to make a showing of such heavy losses." After that, wrote the officer who overheard him, "I always doubted reports of casualties." It irked one Philadelphia newspaper on June 9 to admit that "we can scarcely find out that there was fought one of the bloodiest battles of the war, yet, until yesterday, no one knew its result." This was, in the end, a highly political war, in which military decisions frequently turned before the winds of politics. And in the coming months, Lincoln would find far greater political challenges in the path of re-election than the ones presented by Cold Harbor.

Sources: R.P. Basler, ed., "Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln"; Larry T. Balsamo, "We Cannot Have Free Government without Elections": Abraham Lincoln and the Election of 1864," Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society 94 (Summer 2001); Gordon C. Rhea, "Cold Harbor: Grant and Lee, May 26-June 3, 1864"; Ralph Morris Goldman, "The National Party Chairmen and Committees: Factionalism at the Top"; Andrew F. Rolle, "John Charles Fremont: Character As Destiny"; The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series One, 37 (pt 1); Gordon C. Rhea, "The Overland Campaign," Hallowed Ground 15 (Spring 2014); The New York Times, June 6 and 8, 1864; Ernest B. Furgurson, "Not War But Murder: Cold Harbor, 1864"; D.F. Murphy, "Proceedings of the National Union Convention Held in Baltimore, Md., June 7th and 8th, 1864"; Morris Schaff, "The Battle of the Wilderness"; David E. Long, "Cover-up at Cold Harbor," Civil War Times Illustrated 36 (June 1997).

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