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Abstract

The idea for this post was born from a comment I made while bored and generally sleep deprived on a road trip to the James Buchanan symposium earlier this fall. After some serious historical discussion with my traveling companions, including two other CWI fellows, I made a very non-serious observation. It went something like this:

"You know, I think Buchanan looks a lot like a soft-serve vanilla ice cream cone" [*excerpt*].

Keywords

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

General McClellan is a Fruitcake and Other Tasteful Metaphors

November 27, 2015

By Ryan Nadeau '16



The idea for this post was born from a comment I made while bored and generally sleep deprived on a road trip to the [James Buchanan symposium](#) earlier this fall. After some serious historical discussion with my traveling companions, including two other CWI fellows, I made a very non-serious observation. It went something like this:

“You know, I think Buchanan looks a lot like a soft-serve vanilla ice cream cone.”

After being met with some justifiably confused replies, I explained myself: in all the pictures I had seen of him he seemed to have a round and soft face with an upturned tuft of wispy white hair that reminded me of the machine-processed look of a soft-serve vanilla ice cream. I extended my metaphor beyond looks as well, saying that much like ice cream, Buchanan melted under the pressure and heat of the nation during his presidency, requiring Lincoln to come in and clean up the mess—politics and melted dessert both.

Despite my silly intentions, my companions thought that this was an amusingly apt comparison. Ensuing conversation over the next few days thus resulted in what you see before you: the first of several blog posts exploring how famous Civil War figures compare to food.

First on the menu, a delightful selection of Union generals. Bon appétit.

Ulysses S. Grant – A Potato

Let me be clear: I have no intention of arguing that Grant would have been a more efficient general and president had he been mashed or fried.

As hard to believe it is now, potatoes were not always a popular food. *The Oxford Companion to Food* bluntly describes their first introduction to Europe from the South America in five words: “It was not a success.” By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, potatoes had rapidly developed popularity among all classes of people due to their versatility and ease of growth. And, of course, in this century, potatoes are everywhere.

General Grant, similarly, did not have an easy start. Prior to the Civil War, his early years were marked by moderate success at best and abject failure at worst, ranging from his respectable service in the Mexican-American War to his dismal attempt at farming. When finally given the chance to shine, however, Grant set his legacy in stone through his victories in both the Western and Eastern theaters of the Civil War, from Vicksburg to Appomattox, a military legacy that would send him straight to the White House.

Like the potato, Grant rose from humble beginnings to greatness. And similarly to the starch, Grant’s legacy is perhaps most tarnished by his selection of companions. While generally a healthy food, the nutritional value of potatoes can be ruined when buried in butter and bacon, just as Grant’s poor selection of political advisers drove his presidency into corruption.

George B. McClellan – Fruitcake

Naturally, there is something amusing about comparing the twice-replaced general and failed presidential candidate to the cliché of the most unwanted and generally despised holiday dessert. Nobody wants a McClellan for the holidays. Amusement aside, however, the two share distinctive similarities.

According to the *Oxford Companion*, the version of the fruitcake we are most familiar with today came into prominence in the eighteenth century, when creating them was “a major undertaking.” “Prodigious quantities of ingredients” had to be carefully prepared and in vast quantities. One noted recipe dating back from that century calls for thirteen pounds of currants and twenty eggs, among other outrageous quantities—quantities that would be difficult to manage now, let alone before refrigeration and supermarkets.

Altogether, the absurd levels of preparation described is highly reminiscent of the behavior of the consummately-prepared McClellan, notorious for only acting when he was certain he had all his military affairs distinctly in order. Like a fruitcake, he required his own prodigious quantities (of

men and supplies) to be fully prepared before he was comfortable advancing the army (or baking the cake). Until then, there is no progress with enjoying either dessert or victory, and in terms of seeing either achieved faster you are likely better off with something and someone else.

William T. Sherman – Various Meats

General Sherman presents a challenge to my comparisons. On the one hand, there exists the well-defined stereotype of him as a veritable butcher of men and propagator of an excessive campaign of “total war” in the South. Even as someone who rejects this narrative, the association is nevertheless hard to shake. With that in mind, I would choose to compare Sherman to barbecue ribs. If, however, I were to fully reject this legacy and think of him in terms of his personal qualities alone, I would choose a more delicate meat: veal.

Ribs, as is well known, are extraordinarily messy to eat. Sauce will get everywhere, and you’ll be left with a big pile of bones. They’re best served hot and straight from the grill, and as such, are widely associated with Southern barbecue culture. The comparisons write themselves in that regard: straight from the fire, bones, and ruin in Georgia.

Accepting this narrative is too simple, however, and does poor credit to the man who, in his own words, found war to be hell and its supporters to be only those who had never experienced it firsthand. Rather than a self-confident slaughterer, he bore the stress of his job clearly and heavily, having suffered a nervous breakdown early in the conflict out of pessimism regarding what victory would take.

It is for these reasons that I would compare him to veal—in part to keep with the theme of meat started with ribs, but also due to the moral difficulty involved in its production. Veal is an expensive dish and has long been considered a highly exquisite meat. And yet, in order to acquire it, calves are often raised in very poor conditions and, by necessity, slaughtered young. As with General Sherman, a high-quality result (total victory) comes at a moral price that remains debated.

The next course: Confederate generals.

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