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Too Little Too Late? The Introduction of the Spencer Rifle

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Abstract

The photo above does not seem like much, but the story behind it is incredible. On August 17, 1863, a man named Christopher Miner Spencer entered the White House, gun in hand. He was let in past the sentries and ushered in to meet with President Abraham Lincoln. Spencer was at the White House to show the president his invention, the repeating rifle. He had been trying to get it adopted by the United States Army with little success, so he decided to go to the man with the most power. Spencer showed Lincoln his gun, and the president was impressed by how simple it was. One could take it apart and put it back together in only a few minutes, needing only a screwdriver. Lincoln invited Spencer back to the White House so that they could test the rifle. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Christopher Miner Spencer, Spencer Rifle, Lincoln, Weaponry

Disciplines

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Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Too Little Too Late? The Introduction of the Spencer Rifle

By [Savannah Labbe '19](#)

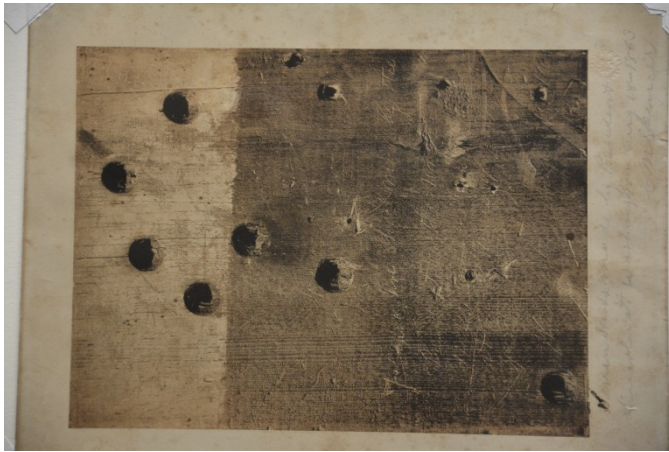


Photo courtesy of Ron Perisho collection.

The photo above does not seem like much, but the story behind it is incredible. On August 17, 1863, a man named Christopher Miner Spencer entered the White House, gun in hand. He was let in past the sentries and ushered in to meet with President Abraham Lincoln. Spencer was at the White House to show the president his invention, the repeating rifle. He had been trying to get it adopted by the United States Army with little success, so he decided to go to the man with the most power. Spencer showed Lincoln his gun, and the president was impressed by how simple it was. One could take it apart and put it back together in only a few minutes, needing only a screwdriver. Lincoln invited Spencer back to the White House so that they could test the rifle.

The next day, Spencer arrived around 2 P.M. Lincoln, Spencer, and a few others went out onto the Mall, near where the Washington Monument stands today, to do some target practice with the Spencer rifle. Lincoln took the rifle and shot, missing the target a bit. This shot can be seen on the lower right-hand side of the photo. The rest of his shots were right on target. While they were shooting some sentries ran over to them, yelling for them to stop firing. They did not realize they were yelling at the President until he stood up and looked at them. They apologized and hurried away as Lincoln remarked that they could at least have stayed and taken a few shots. After this, the

shooters returned to the White House, and Lincoln gave Spencer his target to keep as a souvenir. The picture of that souvenir can be seen above.

This episode might cause one to question why Spencer had to go to such lengths to get the army to adopt his weapon. By all accounts it was superior to the muzzle-loading weapons that were used for most of the war. It was shorter and could fire fifteen to twenty shots in one minute. This is five to seven times faster than muzzle-loaders, for which it was considered rapid fire if one could get off three shots per minute with a muzzle-loader. This rate of fire was not even really feasible, as it took a lot of time to reload, and the rifle was susceptible to over-heating. The Spencer rifle, however, could hold seven rounds, allowing one to shoot seven times before having to reload. Many saw the advantages of this. Spencer had shown his rifle to the Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, in May of 1861, and the navy quickly bought more and more of his rifle; by the end of the war, they had 10,000. General McClellan also saw the advantages of this rifle, requesting them for his troops in 1861. The War Department would only give them to one brigade, Colonel Berdan's 1st U.S. Sharpshooters, as they were very expensive. Local newspapers, such as the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, pleaded with the government to adopt the weapon, believing that it would save more soldiers' lives and asking for "the ordnance department [to] please take notice." Entire brigades even bought them for themselves. For example, Colonel John Wilder appealed to his men of the 17th Indiana to contribute money for the purchase of Spencer rifles.

If everybody saw the advantages of these weapons, why were they not adopted much sooner? The answer lies with the chief of the Bureau of Ordnance, James W. Ripley. Ripley was a veteran of the war of 1812 as well as the Mexican-American War. He was used to muzzle-loaders and resistant to change, thinking that smooth-bores and muzzle-loaders were much better than rifled muskets and breech-loaders. After all, as he remarked to Lincoln, "men enough can be killed with the old smooth-bore and the old cartridges, a ball and three buckshot." He dismissed the Spencer as just another newfangled weapon, which was why Spencer had to go to Lincoln to plead his case. Lincoln quickly endorsed the Spencer rifle after he tested it and replaced Ripley with George D. Ramsey, causing orders for Spencer rifles to skyrocket.

While the army did start to adopt the Spencer rifle, it was mostly used by the cavalry. In addition, it was adopted in 1863, when the war was half over, even though it had been available since 1860. If it had been adopted before, how many lives could have been saved? The war may have ended earlier, and the casualty rate could have been lower, as these kinds of rifles may have deterred the devastating charges seen so often in the Civil War. For example, there were 2,655 casualties as a result of Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg. This devastating charge may have been prevented had all of the Union troops been armed with Spencer rifles. The charge would have been seen as futile, and the men would not have been able to get so close to the enemy—as was often the case—because of the rapid and intense fire that the Spencer was capable of.

On the other hand, this type of gun had the possibility to increase casualties, as it could fire more shots quicker. It would also be difficult for the Confederates to use the Spencer if they captured it because it used a type of bullet that the Confederacy did not produce. It is impossible to tell what kind of difference the Spencer rifle would have made if it had been used earlier in the war, but this story could have important implications today. The United States Military has been using essentially the same rifle, the M4/M16, for over fifty years. This rifle really first saw action in the Vietnam War and has been around ever since. The M16 had a lot of problems in Vietnam as Robert Scales, a Vietnam veteran, describes. These problems were due to the gas system that the M16 has and that the M4 (a lighter version of the M16) still has today. The gun uses a gas-pressured system in which the gas produced from the fired bullet pushes the bolt back and causes the next round to cycle into the chamber. Since the bolt is a freely-moving part, any dirt or dust that gets into the rifle can cause the bolt—and consequently the rifle—to jam, which is very harmful when fighting in the types of environments that we do today. Is there something better out there, or is the army just resistant to change like it was during the Civil War?

Robert Scales believes there is something better out there. The AK-47 uses a piston-driven operating system in which the bolt is not a freely-moving part of the gun, so dirt or dust will not hamper its effectiveness. The AK-47 cannot just simply be adopted by the United States, as Russia is the only country that has perfected the manufacture of AK series rifle. The United States would have to buy them from Russia and rely on Russia for parts, which could be disastrous if the political situation soured and Russia cut off exports. However, it does show that there is something better out there. Can something similar be made in the United States? It is evident that the gun the United States Military uses today could be improved upon to be better suited to the type of fighting we see today. However, the question that remains: is the military resistant to change and all the costs that come with it, or are they just unable to find anything better made by United States manufacturers?

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