



# Lincoln Lore

July, 1984

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## HOSTAGES IN THE CIVIL WAR (Continued)

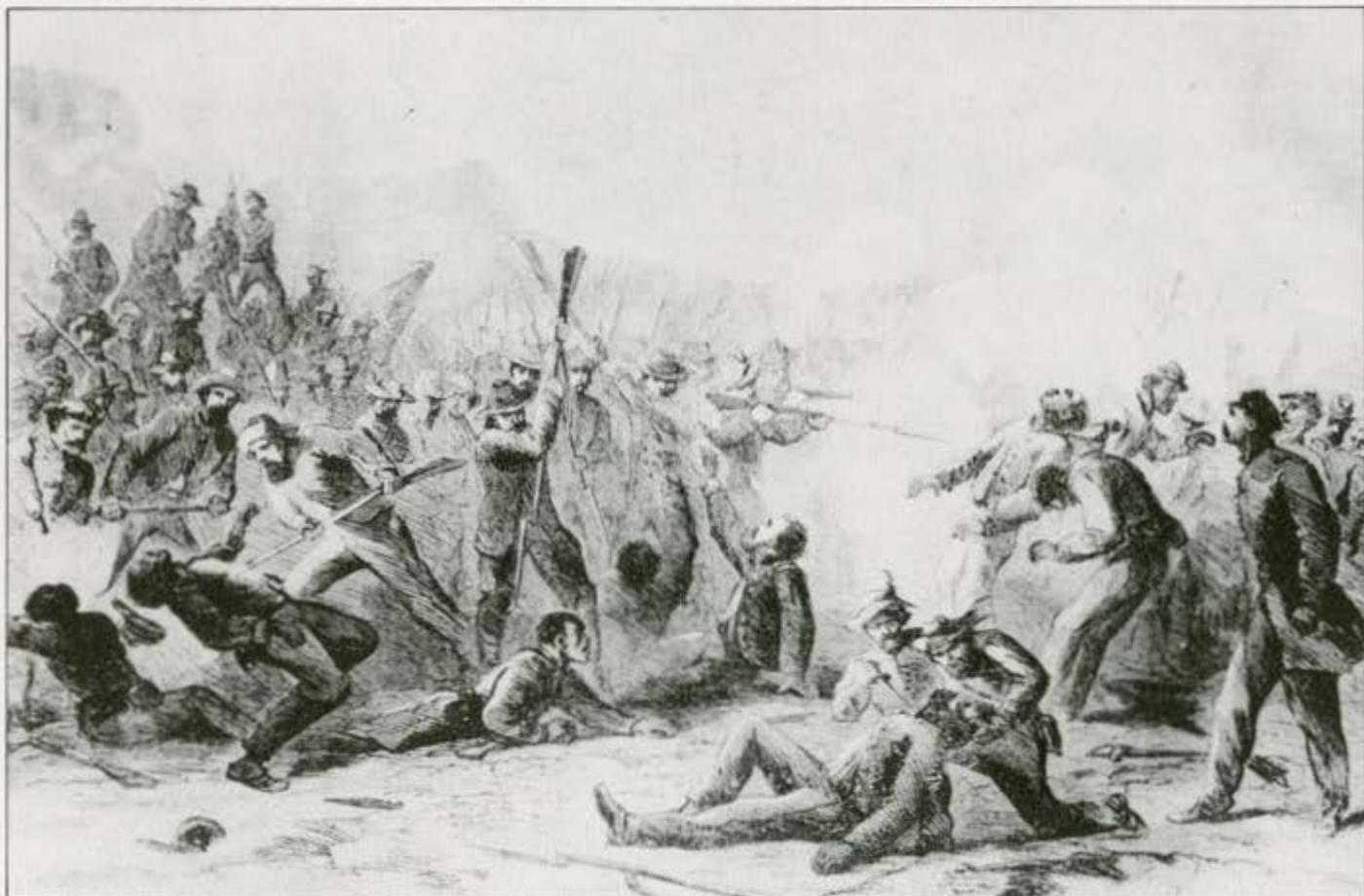
Before the release of the Fredericksburg hostages, President Abraham Lincoln had written a letter to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton about one of the prisoners:

Understanding that Mr. John J. Chew, of Fredericksburg Va — is now in arrest as a hostage for our wounded soldiers, carried by citizens from Fredericksburg into the rebel hands at Richmond, and understanding that Mr. Chew, so far from doing anything to make him responsible for that act, or which would induce the rebels to give one of our men for him, he actually ministered, to the extent of his ability, to the relief of our wounded in Fredericksburg, it is directed that said John J. Chew be discharged and allowed to return to his home.

Lincoln was not, apparently, aware of the War Department's discovery that most of the Federal soldiers had been stragglers rather than seriously wounded men. But he otherwise clearly understood the principles involved in the taking of the

Fredericksburg hostages: some of the citizen prisoners bore some direct responsibility for the act, but others were held merely to "induce" the Confederate authorities to give up their Union prisoners in exchange.

In a less well documented incident, a Dr. Samuel K. Jackson and one Joseph Mead, already prisoners in Old Capitol in Washington, were selected by the War Department as special hostages for James Hamilton and J. P. Culbertson, who were themselves being held as hostages by the Confederates in Salisbury, North Carolina, prison. After thirteen months in prison, Culbertson and Hamilton were released because they promised Confederate authorities they would work for the release of two civilian prisoners held in the North. By 1864 the Confederates had lost a great deal of territory to Federal occupation, and arrests of civilians by the Lincoln administration were becoming distinctly "Southernized." Increasing numbers of Confederate citizens from occupied territories



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FIGURE 1. The Fort Pillow Massacre.

poured into Federal prisons, as anxious generals contended with restive local populations of questionable loyalty.

On September 2, 1864, Hamilton wrote Secretary of War Stanton a letter which caused some deterioration in hostage policy:

Mr. Culbertson and I were prisoners for thirteen months, held as hostages. [Robert] Ould [in charge of Confederate exchanges of prisoners of war] alleges that you hold citizens on insufficient or no charges who are not connected with military organizations. He released us because we promised to try to effect the release of Smithson and Reverend Doctor Handy. We were told that you consent to the release of Handy. Ould proposed to release all civilians and capture no more. He proposes to exchange the soldiers, man for man, and hold the excess, and says you might hold hostages for the negro soldiers if they refuse to exchange them. This much I promised to say. Could you not capture and hold as hostages, say, two or three for one, some prominent citizens of Virginia to procure the release of the seven citizens who are remaining in prison at Salisbury, N.C.? West Virginia did so for some of her citizens, and they were sent North. I received some intimations that such a course would prove successful.

The treatment of prisoners is severe; food deficient in quantity and quality. Returned prisoners' accounts of treatment are true, Fulton and Ould to the contrary notwithstanding. Boxes and letters even are not given. I received no letters, nor any one else, for two months previous to my release. The boat that brought me up had boxes on it for rebels in our prisons. Many think that Major Mulford is too kind to them and cares less than he should for our men. . . . I fear to occupy too much of your time; at any rate, I cannot yet write connectedly, having lost much of healthy mental tone through sufferings experienced in prison. . . . I presume that you know all about the fearful mortality at Andersonville, Ga., and the fiendish treatment that causes it.

The influence of Hamilton's letter can be seen in the following letter from Colonel William Hoffman, the United States Commissary General of Prisoners, to General Albin Schoepf, who was in command at Fort Delaware:

The Secretary of War directs that the twenty-six citizen-prisoners recently sent from this city [Washington] to Fort Delaware as hostages for a like number of citizens of Pennsylvania now in confinement in Salisbury, N.C., shall be treated and fed as far as practicable in the same manner that the prisoners are for whom they are hostages.

I enclose herewith a letter received from Mr. James Hamilton, late a prisoner at Salisbury, giving an account of the food and treatment he received while there, and I respectfully request you will make the treatment of the hostages referred to correspond with this in all particulars as far as practicable.

Evidence of hostage taking in the western theater of war lies in the following letter, written on October 26, 1864, to President Jefferson Davis by Brigadier General John C. Vaughn, a Confederate cavalry commander in Tennessee:

Permit me to bring to your notice the fact that a large number of the best citizens of East Tennessee are now in confinement in Knoxville, held by the Federal authorities as hostages for citizen prisoners of East Tennessee now confined in different prisons in the Confederacy. The U.S. authorities at Knoxville, Tenn., propose to make an entire exchange of citizen prisoners with me. Those held by the Confederate Government are a low-down, vagabond set, whilst those of ours held by them are of the wealthiest and most influential class of loyal citizens of East Tennessee. Our Government could have nothing to lose but all to gain by the exchange, therefore I respectfully ask of you, if agreeable with your views, to have Colonel Ould send forward all citizens prisoners of East Tennessee for exchange.

A special order from Richmond, dated November 9, 1864, directed Major General John C. Breckinridge to authorize Vaughn to negotiate an exchange of all citizen prisoners in East Tennessee. When Robert Ould got wind of the proposal,

he wrote a cautioning letter to Secretary of War James Seddon, saying that a similar attempt months before had failed because the Federal authorities excluded from the exchange all persons indicted for treason (on the grounds that such were no longer under military jurisdiction).

On December 1, 1864, Vaughn nevertheless drew up articles of agreement for the exchange of hostages for East Tennessee Unionists held by the Confederates. Vaughn delivered twenty-nine men on December 10, and the Union provost marshal released some hostages and sent for others being held in Ohio at Camp Chase and at Johnson's Island. Five days later, Seddon disapproved of the articles of agreement. The Confederate Secretary of War protested that the Unionist prisoners were themselves hostages for Tennesseans indicted for treason and these were not included in the agreement. By contrast, incidentally, Major General Ethan Allen Hitchcock, the United States Commissioner for Exchange in Washington, approved of the agreement. Presumably, the handful of hostages exchanged on the tenth went free, but the agreement went no farther.

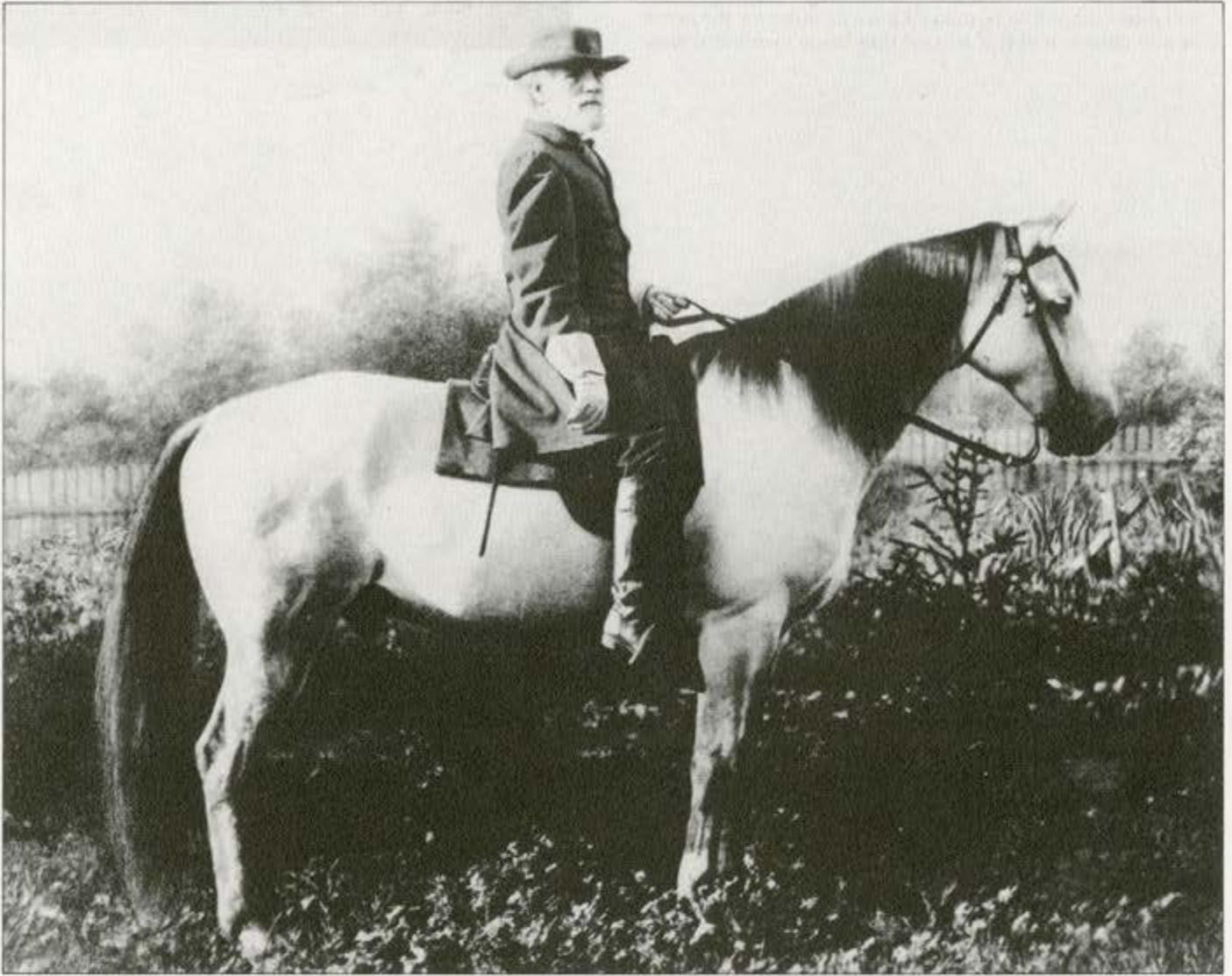
On January 18, 1865, Colonel Ould wrote a Federal agent of prisoner exchange about a prominent Southern hostage:

The Confederate authorities have been informed that the Hon. C. C. Clay, sr., and another prominent gentleman of Huntsville, Ala., have been arrested and taken to Nashville, where they are held as hostages for the safety of Judge Humphreys, formerly of the Confederate Army, and more lately a citizen of Madison County, Ala. Judge Humphreys was arrested by General Roddey, as I have been informed, for disloyalty. When that fact was made known to the Confederate authorities his release was ordered. It is not known whether he has been detained at all; but be that as it may, there is no purpose to hold him in custody. Major-General Withers reports that he is not in his custody. I hope, therefore, that orders will immediately issue for the release



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FIGURE 2. Ulysses S. Grant.



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FIGURE 3. Robert E. Lee.

of Mr. Clay and his companion. If Judge Humphreys is not now at liberty, he will be released as soon as directions to that effect can be given to the proper authority.

Clement C. Clay was seventy-six years old in 1865 and had not taken an active part in the Civil War.

The letter about C. C. Clay is revealing of the dangers to liberty inherent in any primitive administrative system. Careful readers will have noticed that Colonel Ould apparently did not know the name of the man arrested with Clay. He never referred to him by name. The Union authorities may not have known the name either, as the only record of many arrests was a receipt from a provost marshal signed by the prison authorities. If the prisoner arrived with a large group of other Confederate prisoners, he might have been identified on the receipt only as a "citizen" with "charge unknown." Colonel Ould himself was not able to ascertain from the only authority he knew to contact whether the man for whom Clay was held hostage had ever actually been arrested or whether he was still in custody. It was possible under such foggy administrative conditions to be shunted from prison to prison for several weeks without the local authorities' knowing why the prisoner was held.

On February 16, 1865, General Ulysses S. Grant wrote General Robert E. Lee about some alleged hostages known to Grant only from a clipping from a Richmond newspaper:

Inclosed I send you communication from W. N. R. Beall, relating to James Monnehaue, with endorsements thereon, and an extract from the Richmond Examiner, dated December 8, 1864, containing statement of the capture of

thirty-seven Union citizens and their commitment to Castle Thunder, to be held as hostages for the good treatment and return of Confederate citizens alleged to have been captured by us. Previous to the receipt of the enclosed communication and before any attention was called to the extract from the Richmond Examiner, I directed the release of all persons held by military authority within the Department of Virginia and North Carolina against whom sufficient evidence could not be found to convict them of the offense with which they stand charged, and also such as were imprisoned without proper charges, if any such there were. Similar orders were intended to be given throughout the entire military command of the United States, but before such orders are now given I desire information as to the truth of the statement of the Richmond Examiner, before referred to, and, if true, the names of the persons held by us for whom they were seized and held as hostages, and when and where captured, that their cases may be inquired into and the proper action had as to each. I would respectfully propose the release and exchange of all citizen prisoners now held by military authority, except those under charges of being spies or under conviction for offenses under the laws of war on both sides.

Lee responded on February 18:

I have received your letter of the 16th inst: and have submitted your proposition to release citizens held as prisoners by either party to the Secretary of War. I shall be glad if some arrangement can be made to relieve such persons from unnecessary suffering. I have no knowledge of the facts mentioned in the extract from the newspaper, but

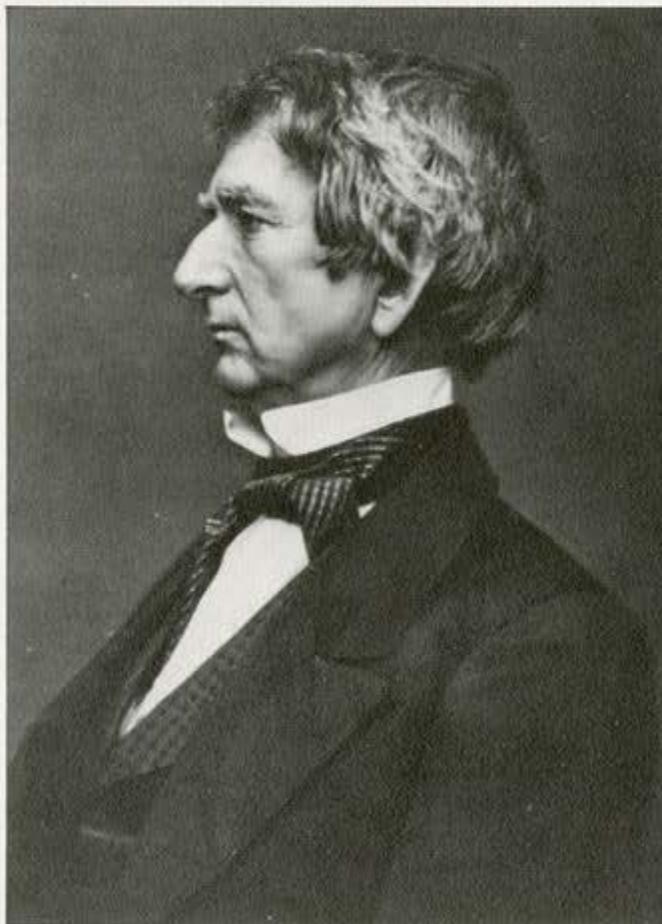
will direct inquiry to be made. I gave no order for the arrest of any citizen, and if it be true that those mentioned were taken by any of our forces, I presume they are held as hostages generally for persons of the same class in the custody of the Federal Authorities, and not for particular individuals.

Three days later Lee told Grant:

I am informed by the Secretary of War, to whom the proposition relative to citizen prisoners contained in your letter of the 16th instant was submitted, that our commissioners of exchange have already received instructions to effect an arrangement with those of the United States similar to that proposed by you. And I am also informed that it is intended that the release of citizen prisoners held by the Confederate authorities shall immediately follow the exchange of military prisoners now in progress. This fact renders it unnecessary to reply more fully to your specific question with reference to the prisoners referred to in your letter, and I hope there will be no difficulty in relieving all such prisoners on both sides.

The unequal number of civilian prisoners held by the two belligerents, the North having a great surplus because of their occupation of vast amounts of Confederate territory by 1865, had prevented similar exchanges in the past. Whatever the outcome this time, these letters once again reveal the dangers to freedom that lay not only in seizing hostages unilaterally but also in maintaining such poor records that "proper charges" were not necessarily noted for every civilian prisoner.

The civilian hostage cases mentioned thus far are little known, but one instance of embracing a policy of taking military hostages is well known to students of the Civil War. As a result of the Fort Pillow Massacre of April 12, 1864, several members of the Lincoln administration — and Abraham Lincoln himself — proposed holding Confederate prisoners of war hostage for the surrender of the perpetrators of the



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FIGURE 4. William H. Seward.



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FIGURE 5. Salmon P. Chase.

massacre. Secretary of State William H. Seward wanted to "give the insurgents an opportunity to deny the charge," but he also suggested that Confederate prisoners equal in number and rank to the Union soldiers killed at Fort Pillow should be "set apart and held in rigorous confinement" pending that explanation. Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton also recommended holding soldiers hostage, and Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase urged the execution of a number of Confederate officers equivalent to the Federal soldiers killed at Fort Pillow (but Chase would have excluded Confederate enlisted men, "for the slaveholding class, which furnishes such officers, holds very cheap the lives of the nonslaveholding classes which furnish the privates"). And even conservative Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles gave consideration to taking hostages:

I have written a letter to the President in relation to the Fort Pillow massacre, but it is not satisfactory to me, nor can I make it so without the evidence of what was done, nor am I certain that even then I could come to a conclusion on so grave and important a question. The idea of retaliation — killing man for man, which is the popular noisy demand, is barbarous, and I cannot assent to or advise it. The leading officers should be held accountable and punished, but how? The policy of killing negro soldiers after they have surrendered must not be permitted, and the Rebel leaders should be called upon to avow or disavow it. But how is this to be done? Shall we go to Jeff Davis and his government, or apply to General Lee? If they will give us no answer, or declare they will kill the negroes, or justify [Nathan Bedford]Forrest, shall we take innocent Rebel officers as hostages? The whole subject is beset with difficulties. I cannot yield to any inhuman scheme of retaliation. Must wait the publication of the testimony.

*(To be Continued)*