ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The War Begins: From Fort Sumter to Bull Run

By **David Detzer**

Most people have no grasp of what war is like. Their understanding tends to be based on deeply flawed sources, like the purple prose of historians or reporters or novelists, the fanciful accounts of priests or shamans or political leaders, the wispy recollections of elderly soldiers. The realities too often become lost. How many average people realize that the vast majority of war fatalities are civilians, most of whom die of famine or disease. How many folks know that the same is true of the deaths of soldiers? For every warrior killed in battle, two or three or ten soldiers have died of dreaded camp fever, of dysentery, of some unnamed plague. The world has produced countless wonderful tales about battlefield heroics, but only a paltry few stories about soldiers wasting away from diarrhea or lung discharge. So it has almost always been. So it was in America in 1861, where the average adult's awareness of war's reality was drawn from either colorful history books about the Revolution or absurdly weak news stories from the Mexican War of the 1840s (during which more than 80% of America's losses were unrelated to battle, a fact that virtually never saw print).

On the weekend of April 12 to April 14, 1861, when Fort Sumter, in Charleston Harbor, was bombarded by Confederate cannon, the only losses was one federal soldier who died afterward when their artillery piece exploded during flag-lowering ceremonies. The incident of Fort Sumter, as operatic as it was, therefore seemed virtually bloodless. This reinforced the assumption that the approaching conflict would be heroic, unsullied by ugliness, somehow moral and noble, and quickly over. Most citizens on both sides held firmly to such wrong-headed notions. Virtually no one foresaw the coming realities: a four-year war of awful proportions and terrible losses on both sides.

When the small band of Fort Sumter's defeated American soldiers took their flag and departed Charleston Harbor on April 14, the Confederacy consisted of seven Deep South states: South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. The capital of this self-declared country was Montgomery, Alabama, where Jefferson Davis, recently elected provisional President, devoted his time to planning what to do next, unlike many in that city, who spent the day drunkenly celebrating their great victory over Fort Sumter. Davis was not naïve. He understood war far better than most men around him. A graduate of West Point (Class of 1828), he had served for seven years in the army, then resigned and became a planter in Mississippi. When the Mexican War began he returned to the army, and performed with courage. During the 1850s he

was appointed Secretary of War, and he filled this position with extraordinary ability. Now, in April 1861, he applied his hard-won military awareness to the problems he faced.

Davis perceived that his Confederacy faced a much tougher foe than most of those around him thought. He foresaw a hard war that might last for years. Unlike the happy celebrants outside on the streets of Montgomery, he did not think Abraham Lincoln would quietly or cravenly acquiesce to secession. As Davis correctly saw it, the enemy was not merely Lincoln and the small American army of around 15,000 men, it was America's potential. The population that Lincoln could draw from was vastly greater than the Confederacy's. The industrial power of the North was many times that of the South. If the war lasted more than a few months, Lincoln's navy could affect untold suffering on the Confederacy with a blockade of Southern seaports. To make matters worse, unless things changed in the next few weeks, the Confederacy was merely those seven states of the Deep South. In Davis's mind he had a number of tasks to do, and he had to do them right away. He could contact foreign countries—Great Britain, especially—to ask about getting aid, presumably in exchange for cotton. He hoped countries like Britain would somehow prevent Lincoln from blockading the Southern coastline. He had already begun to call upon Confederate governors to send military volunteers. States could provide some of the organizing, the training, and the weapons, and the Confederacy would try to shuffle the units together in some coherent way. All these ideas would be practical if the coming war rolled out as he suspected. But the most critical, the most immediate task was to persuade other states to join the cause. The sooner the better.

In Washington, meanwhile, Abraham Lincoln had his own problems, his own decisions to make. He needed to send ambassadors to assuage potential foreign concerns. And, like Davis, he had to urge his governors to raise volunteers, and to do so quickly. On April 14, the day Fort Sumter officially surrendered, Lincoln held a meeting of his Cabinet. They discussed the options, and agreed the president must release a proclamation asking the governors for 75,000 volunteer troops. In some ways Lincoln's clock was ticking with greater impatience than the Confederacy's. The physical position of Washington, D.C., lying along the Potomac, squeezed between Maryland and Virginia, meant the status of those two slave states was critical. If Virginia embraced the Confederacy, she would provide the South her large population and her important industries, to say nothing of her high reputation as the birthplace of so many presidents. She would also immediately threaten the very existence of Washington, just a few hundred yards across the Potomac. If Maryland also joined the Confederacy, she might cut railroad tracks and thereby block Northern troops from chugging by train to the capital's aid. Lincoln stewed about such prospects and sent representatives to both Maryland and Virginia. The next few weeks would decide the fate of the nation, one way or the other.

The two sides prepared for war, neither one very efficiently. Ministers packed and made plans to visit foreign lands. Politicians gave speeches. Newsmen wrote florid articles. Local militiamen, Northern and Southern, gathered and marched awkwardly in

their multi-colored, soon-to-be-ragged uniforms. Bands tootled horns and drums thumped. Down in Texas, the largest single unit of Lincoln's regular troops—thousands of them—found themselves trapped inside Confederate borders. Then, surrounded by excited Texas volunteers, they surrendered.

Lincoln's proclamation, asking for troops, triggered a series of questions in state capitals, especially in the so-called Border States: the eight slave states just north of the Confederacy. Those states, except perhaps Delaware, contained large portions of fervent secessionists or people who simply sympathized with Jefferson Davis's cause. The proclamation forced people who resided in the Border States to ask themselves a question: "Are we willing to provide soldiers to the Yankees in Washington who will use our boys to coerce brethren in the Deep South?" Eventually, the answer in three states was a decisive "No!" In time Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina left the Union and joined the Confederacy.

Kentucky, lying just south of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, could impact critical passage on both the Ohio River and the Mississippi. During the first year of the war both sides tried to persuade, or force, Kentucky to join them. Kentucky's young men joined both opposing armies, but the state remained in the Union, without noticeable enthusiasm.

Missouri held a similar geographic position since she occupied an important section along the Mississippi. Loyalists there, with pluck and luck, kept her in the Union.

Virginia had officially started to consider secession months earlier. Her voters chose delegates to attend a special convention to consider it, and to vote one way or the other. When this convention first met in Richmond in mid-February, 1861 it became immediately obvious that secession was not wildly popular. At least two-thirds of the delegates openly opposed it, especially those from the western, more mountainous counties where there were few slaves. (This fact, added to numerous others, indicates that secession, more than anything else, was primarily a method to retain slavery against the specter of abolition, which many Southerners mistakenly believed Lincoln supported.) After eight weeks of droning monologues, it seemed clear the convention opposed Virginia leaving the Union to join the Confederacy. Just before Fort Sumter erupted, in a straight vote on secession, the measure was soundly defeated eighty-eight to forty-five. News of the attack on Fort Sumter on April 12 and 13 did stir strong emotions in Richmond, but a cabal of pro-secession delegates failed to get traction toward their goal. Then on Monday, April 15, news of Lincoln's proclamation, promising "to suppress" the seven states of the Deep South, arrived, followed the next day by a telegram telling Governor John Letcher that Virginia was expected to provide three regiments for this purpose. When Letcher, a notorious waffler, was asked his reaction, he said he would await a decision of the convention.

Henry Alexander Wise was not pleased. He had once been governor himself, and was now steadfast for secession. In the past few days he had plotted with co-conspirators to send armed forces to grab a federal armory in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, northwest of Richmond, and the federal Gosport Navy Yard, southeast of the city, near Norfolk. The

two plans were already underway, their final assaults merely awaiting official approval from Letcher. So, Henry Wise, to spur the governor into action at last, attempted another ploy. Just after ten o'clock in the morning, on Wednesday, April 17, he appeared at the convention where he was a delegate. He was tall, gaunt, and slightly stooped. He had been in such a hurry that morning he failed to comb his hair, and his gray strands stood out from his skull like he was some maddened character in an opera. He rose from his seat, dramatically threw a pistol on his desk, and, his eyes mad with excitement, announced to his fellows that Virginians were already on their way to grab those two United States military bastions. It was time to vote, he said, and do it now. It was an electric moment, and he won. The convention voted for secession.

But the vote was hardly overwhelming; less than 62 percent of the delegates opted to leave the Union. Moreover, the convention, weeks earlier, had agreed that any decision must be ratified by a public referendum, and that popular vote was not going to occur until May 23. But although the state was not quite *officially* out of the Union, her leaders acted as though she was. In effect, therefore, Virginia was the first additional state to join the Confederacy. In Montgomery crowds were again ecstatic. (One important follow-up to Virginia's secession was that her western counties soon chose to sever their ties with the rest of the state, and in time became West Virginia.)

Harpers Ferry, Virginia, a town of about 3,000 people sat where the Shenandoah River, which split a long and lovely mountain valley, met the Potomac. In 1859 John Brown and his tiny band went there because it seemed a crucial place to invade the Slave World, and also because the United States maintained a sizeable armory there. Brown intended to rob it of its military contents in order to arm slaves. This town and its armory now, in April 1861, drew the attention of Virginians who, ironically, had the same goal as John Brown, but for precisely the opposite purpose. But the garrison of forty-six federal soldiers learned of the approaching force, burned the armory as best they could, and slipped across the river at night, heading toward Pennsylvania.

As for the Gosport Navy Yard, on Saturday, April 20, its command, aware of approaching enemies, burned their base, and departed.

Meanwhile, Northern governors were struggling to raise armies of volunteers. The very first volunteer company came together in Pottsville, Pennsylvania on April 12, 1861. Though they did not realize that Confederate artillery was hammering the walls of Fort Sumter that very day, the Pennsylvanians had heard a rumor of a possible "incident" developing somewhere in the Deep South. They wanted to be organized and ready. Although some of these men had literally never fired a gun and some were only dressed in overalls, they wired their governor they were ready for action. A few days later they arrived in Harrisburg, where they were squeezed together with four other volunteer companies. They took an oath to serve the federal government, and thereby stopped being merely state militiamen, and instantly became Lincoln's soldiers. They boarded a train and headed south toward Washington. For years, anyone traveling that route had to stop in Baltimore and transfer, often by foot, from one train station to another. This clumsy maneuver changed the history of this period.

The mood in Baltimore was testy. The city's citizenry remained divided. A Confederate recruiting office opened and became deluged with enthusiastic applicants. A few blocks away, a federal recruiter was also besieged by volunteers.

By the time the Pennsylvanians arrived in Baltimore, mobs had formed and milled through the streets separating the two stations. As the nervous federal troops marched through the city, mobs cursed them, tugged at their clothes, and threw assorted objects at their heads. One private was hit in the skull with a brick. Another unfortunate was smashed in the forehead by a burly individual with brass knuckles. The situation was ugly but might have been far worse had not city policemen walked along next to the soldiers, to keep order. By mid-afternoon the volunteers staggered onto an awaiting train and departed.

That evening they reached Washington City, where they were met and told to bed down inside the Capitol. They found their way to the House of Representatives, empty since Congress was not in session. They went to sleep hungry that night because Lincoln's government had failed to set aside any provisions for them. Their life in the army had begun. Whether they would soon be joined by additional regiments—given the volatile situation in Baltimore—remained to be seen.

In 1861 the governor of Massachusetts was John Albion Andrew, a no-nonsense Republican who loyally supported President Lincoln. As the political leader of his state, Governor Andrew officially commanded all its militiamen. On April 15 he received a telegram from the War Department telling him to send volunteers to the capital as rapidly as possible. Andrew was anxious to do so, and, unlike most other governors who got that message, he had several regiments relatively ready—organized and armed. But ordering them south would require money for their transportation and provisions along the way, and his legislature was not in session. Nor could it be assembled in less than perhaps a few weeks, which might be too late. Governor Andrew felt he was in a box.

At this moment a man whom Andrew detested charged into his office. Benjamin Franklin Butler, 43, a lawyer by trade as well as a very successful businessman, was, among other things, a Democrat with extraordinary ambitions. Although he sported a fat and doughy body, for years he had dabbled in the state's militia gatherings, considering these units a potential stepping stone to higher office. He was keenly aware that four of the country's first sixteen presidents had risen to fame due to military exploits, and he looked on this present crisis as a godsend, an opportunity. He now announced to Governor Andrew that he personally would lead Massachusetts's first regiments to Washington.

At this juncture Andrew refused. But Butler had a bargaining chip. Due to his business connections, he literally held promissory messages offering loans to the state to finance the regiments until the legislature could meet—so long as Butler commanded them. In other words, he was in a position to leave immediately, and possibly save Washington, and the country. Reluctantly, Governor Andrew accepted the offer.

But before Butler and all his regiments could leave, new, clarifying orders arrived from the army: Due to the situation in Baltimore, Butler should not come directly to Washington. Instead, he should head, by sea, to the large fortification on Virginia's Atlantic coastline, Fort Monroe. Butler obeyed. He found ships, and soon embarked. Unfortunately, one of his regiments, the Sixth, had already left, and was en route by train.

If opinion polls had existed in that era, Maryland's citizenry might have chosen secession. Or perhaps the opposite. Put another way, it is impossible to know how that state's voters would have voted on this issue, had there been a free and open referendum. But, in any case, "public opinion" was not going to decide how the state would jump. Ultimately, this question would be answered by military power.

Baltimore, one of America's largest cities, had long been referred to as Mobtown. It retained a well-deserved reputation for urban violence involving its numerous ethnic and religious factions that refused to meld comfortably together. In April 1861 the political tone of the city was especially noxious. The mood of the state was little better. Governor Thomas Holliday Hicks was a political hack, chunky in body and none-too-bright. Elected unexpectedly as an avid Know-Nothing, his political backing had recently disappeared when that party dissolved. The legislature was under the control of Democrats, a party with a wing of belligerent, rabid racists and pro-secessionists who promised noxious ugliness if even one more unit of Lincoln's soldiers tried to muscle through town. Their rage, already fermenting because of the passage through Baltimore of the five pathetic, unarmed companies of Pennsylvanians, reached a crescendo a few hours after the Pennsylvania men departed, when rumors spread that other volunteers were on the way.

During the morning of Friday, April 19, 1861, huge rallies took place in Baltimore. Orators blasted Lincoln and his whole Black Republican Party and his soldiers of coercion. While this was going on and mobs eddied through the streets, a train carrying the Sixth Massachusetts Regiment approached the outskirts. Colonel Edward Franc Jones, in command, was a solid man, well-aware his regiment had numerous weaknesses. Most of his troops were working men with families, unable to purchase military "extras"—like uniforms, in the case of two companies, or knapsacks and haversacks, blankets or tents. Virtually all his troops carried muskets, but these were mostly old and outdated, the ammunition of one gun often unable to fit another. Many of the men had done some marching in militia gatherings, but had little other training. Now, with only a modicum of military discipline, they were about to engage Mobtown. Colonel Jones was concerned they might do something provocative and thereby stir up a wasp's nest. So, as his train moved southward from Philadelphia, he paced its aisles and reminded his men to maintain their self-control unless actually fired on. And even in that case, they must only fire when ordered to do so by their officers. Jones even told his regimental band not to play stirring music. Wisely, he also advised his troops to practice loading their muskets. He knew many of them had never before performed this action.

Just before eleven o'clock that morning the train pulled into Baltimore's northern station. There, unexpectedly, the train company announced that the soldiers should not get off the train. Instead, each car would be uncoupled from the others and taken, one by

one, dragged by horses along a track through the city toward the other main station. Yet, using this method led to serious problems. The regiment was now divided into much smaller fractions, making it far weaker. Also, the process was cumbersome and slow, permitting bystanders to challenge and attack these "foreign" soldiers. In addition to taunts and curses and spittle, hysterical Baltimoreans of all ages flung bricks, stones, pieces of coal or iron, and horse manure at the cars, as well as nightsoil thrown from upper stories of buildings they passed. Some members of the hysterical mob carried guns and began to fire. Many of the train's windows were smashed in and shards of glass tore into the cheeks of soldiers. One volunteer had his thumb shot off. One car of troops, during a particular ugly stretch, was ordered to open fire, and quickly shot back through the windows at the crowd. Few of these men had ever fired a musket and, luckily for the civilians, their aim was poor.

At the end of an hour or so, the battered front companies of the regiment, led by Jones, arrived at the southernmost station in Baltimore. They waited for their companions.

Back, near the first station, teams of burly men laid heavy anchors across the tracks. No more cars could pass. The Massachusetts volunteers, caught, had to alight, and start to march directly into a huge throng of screaming, angry people. The deluge of missiles increased. Soldiers staggered. One fell, his head fractured. Those who stumbled to the ground were pounced on, stomped, and hammered with rocks. The din grew so loud the volunteers could hardly hear any orders. Only about twenty of them overheard their officer shout, "Fire!" But these few men stopped and did just that. Others of their companions followed. With the incredible noise bouncing off the buildings around them, the situation had become pure bedlam.

Then, as the situation grew to nightmarish proportions, a well-dressed gentleman slipped through the masses of shouting, gesticulating people, walked up to the officer in command, shook his hand, and murmured that he was George William Brown, mayor of the city, and that he was here to escort them to the southern railway station. With Mayor Brown in the lead, the makeshift battalion moved cautiously through the shrieking mob, led by about twenty policemen who appeared and formed a spearhead to press them ahead. Within minutes, they had reached their destination.

In the process of going through Baltimore, the Sixth suffered numerous casualties, obviously, but the exact numbers of killed and wounded are a bit murky. As to the totals of civilians killed and injured, those numbers are even sketchier: perhaps a dozen killed and a hundred or so "wounded" (given the uncertainties implied by that word).

The awful day in that town was not yet over. The Sixth had left behind their two dozen band members. The situation for those unarmed musicians was terrifying, but with the active assistance of some sympathetic Baltimore residents, the band was able to escape.

Another group of about 250 Pennsylvania volunteers almost went unnoticed at first, as the Sixth flailed its way through the city. These Pennsylvanians—a few

companies of men—had arrived on the same train as the Sixth. But they were unarmed, and remained uncertain what to do. With the departure of the Sixth, some of the popular rage focused on this new Yankee foe. Their exact fate this day remains strangely uncertain, but we do know that many of them suffered contusions and worse. At least one was killed. Luckily, the vast majority escaped by running, quite literally, northward.

The Civil War was not a week old, but in the North, lighthearted editorial prophesies about how short and easy the coming conflict was going to be now seemed puerile. In Baltimore, meanwhile, officials were frightened. As soon as the Sixth departed, Mayor Brown and Governor Hicks, together, wired Lincoln, begging the president not to send any more troops through the city, in order to avoid further bloodshed.

That evening, Baltimore saw numerous rallies, most of which featured pro-Confederate speeches. Meanwhile, the presidents of both major railways that serviced the city telegrammed Secretary of War Simon Cameron, a man they both knew, telling him they considered it impractical—and potentially harmful to the railroads—to attempt to send any more soldiers through Baltimore. The Secretary of War responded testily that troops would be coming through Baltimore, and they would fight their way past any mobs if necessary.

General Winfield Scott, an extraordinarily tough and canny old soldier, wired Philadelphia that Pennsylvania's volunteers must, immediately, jump to protect all southern-bound trains, telegraph lines, and important bridges.

Yet, at this moment some Marylanders were moving to destroy several critical railroad bridges, an action that would prevent the passage of any more south-bound trains. The question now was: Which side would be quicker? As it turned out, the teams of wreckers, with the reluctant and uneasy permission of the feckless Governor Hicks, riding through the darkness, were able to burn several key bridges before dawn.

With Baltimore apparently cut off, with a rebel force in Harpers Ferry now threatening the nation's capital from the north and with Gosport's fall perhaps cutting off access from Chesapeake Bay by way of the Potomac, Washington suddenly felt isolated and alone. General Winfield Scott, in charge of the army, officially had a couple of hundred men available, but many of these were antiquated paper-shufflers. Rumors of approaching armies of Confederate troops spread through the capital. Hotels emptied. City inhabitants who could afford to do so left. An eerie quiet prevailed.

A person peering from the roof of the White House could glimpse, across the Potomac, the graceful hills of Colonel Robert E. Lee's home in Virginia. (On Monday, April 22, after thinking about the vote of his state's convention, Mr. Lee, in civilian garb, took a train to Richmond to volunteer his services.)

Would military help arrive from the North? Given all the factors that had just cut the capital off, would help arrive in time? Lincoln, one day riddled by uneasiness, was heard to mutter, "Why don't they come?" [1]

Abraham Lincoln was absolutely inexperienced, the most woeful novice to occupy the White House in American history. But he held certain firm convictions—among them, the indivisibility of the United States. This belief gave him enormous strength.

The Constitution is positively vague about the exact powers of the chief executive. Since the days of Andrew Jackson, the men who held the office had not acted decisively. If the war had not come, it is likely Lincoln would have followed their path. But during this crisis, with Congress not is session, he had to act alone, often with little guidance, and he revealed an unexpected capacity for steely resolve.

On April 20 he authorized a raid on all important telegraph offices in the North, seizing recent wires. The next day his administration removed vast sums from the Treasury. Then he permitted specific New York merchants to purchase items the federal government wanted. All such actions were not only audacious, but illegal. When he learned that Maryland's legislature was about to meet and might vote to secede, he told General Scott to keep his eye on the situation there. If it looked as though that state body might in fact vote to join the Confederacy, Scott should use his army to close its doors and bombard Baltimore's civilians into quietude. Military law, thus, could replace civilian law in Maryland. (During the Civil War, 2,084 Marylanders were imprisoned, including seventeen owners of newspapers, twenty-nine members of the state legislature, and even Mayor Brown.) Abraham Lincoln often stomped upon his beloved Constitution, but at this critical juncture of American history, he saved the country. His vigor and his rigor meant that Northern regiments soon began to pour into Washington, long before the Confederacy could seriously contemplate an attack on his capital.

It is undeniable that during his four-plus years in office Abraham Lincoln produced an amazing litany of accomplishments. But his greatest shining moment came in the first few weeks of the Civil War.

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[1] Nicolay, John G., & John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History*, 10 vols. (New York: The Century Co., 1890), IV:153.