



Revised History

A Microcosm of the Yankee-Marxist Mindset—The Dahlgren Papers

By Al Benson April 4th, 2022

Any who have studied the history of the War Between the States aka the War of Northern Aggression have probably heard of the infamous Dahlgren Papers. The Dahlgren Papers were a set of orders found on the body of Colonel Ulric Dahlgren after he was killed in Judson (Kill-Cavalry) Kilpatrick's bungled attempt at a raid on Richmond, Virginia in 1864. This was supposedly a raid to attempt to free federal prisoners of war. One writer said it was a "Moe, Larry, and Curly kind of caper."

Whatever it was, Lincoln personally authorized it. The idea of a raid on the enemy's capitol in wartime is not a particularly alarming one. Jubal Early tried it on Washington in 1864 and almost pulled it off. Had he a bigger force than he had he might have gotten away with it. However, Jubal Early did not have in his coat pocket a set of orders instructing him to murder Abraham Lincoln and his cabinet "on the spot." Ulric Dahlgren had such a set of orders in his possession, and therein lies the Yankee dilemma (and worldview).

When Dahlgren first heard about Kilpatrick's planned raid on Richmond, he got permission to go along. It is not clear whether he was aware of Kilpatrick's unsavory reputation or not. Quite possibly he wasn't. Kilpatrick inherited the nickname "Kill-Cavalry" from his own men, who, early on, realized he would not hesitate a split second to sacrifice their lives in needless cavalry charges if it would help enhance his military reputation, and possibly his political aspirations later on. In his book "Kill-Cavalry" author Samuel J. Martin took note of Kilpatrick's "flawed character" and Kilpatrick's intolerance toward anyone that dared to disagree with him; if he couldn't win a verbal argument, why then "his fists continued the argument." So typical of the Yankee mentality!

Martin observed that Kilpatrick seemed more "noticeable than notable." Part of his flawed character showed itself in his attempts to inflate his own importance in military reports. Martin said of him "By recording blatant falsehoods about his performance in battle, Kilpatrick showed his raw greed for fame as a soldier." He was also not overly cautious in the female company he kept, much of it of a rather low character.

At any rate the idea of the raid on Richmond seems to have been his brainchild. Dahlgren, although he also exhibited the tendencies of the Yankee worldview, seems to have been personally honest and a brave soldier. He had lost part of one leg in battle. Too bad he had to team up with Kilpatrick. It cost him his life.

The object of the raid was supposed to have been the release of federal prisoners, both in Richmond and at the Confederate prison at Belle Isle on the James River. Dahlgren was made Kilpatrick's second-in-command and given a column of cavalry, close to 500 in number. With this he was supposed to enter Richmond and free all the Union prisoners he could. Writer Joseph Galloway noted that Kilpatrick had about 4,000 cavalry and said Dahlgren had about 460. Dahlgren split off taking his 460 men and going west, hoping to cross the James River 25 miles above Richmond and push on Richmond's lightly defended southern part. Kilpatrick was to hit the northern part of the city while Dahlgren freed the prisoners.

The entire plan went awry from the beginning. It was February, there had been rain, and the James River was too high for a crossing. Then Dahlgren ran into Confederate militiamen. He tried to hook up with Kilpatrick who had actually gotten into Richmond's outer defenses. By that point, though, Confederate resistance had begun to solidify, and so the gallant Kilpatrick, with around 4,000 men, tucked tail and ran, leaving Dahlgren to whatever fate he might encounter with his 460 men. During his attempt to fight his way out

of the Confederate net, Dahlgren was killed. When the fighting was over, a 13-year-old Confederate home guard, looking for valuables among the dead, found what would become known as the Dahlgren Papers on Dahlgren's body. The youngster turned these papers over to his commanding officer, Captain Halbach, who was totally shocked when he read: "We hope to release the prisoners at Belle Isle first &...we will cross the James River into Richmond, destroying the bridges after us & exhorting the released prisoners to destroy and burn the hateful City & do not allow the Rebel Leader Davis and his traitorous crew to escape."

And the instructions to his troops, written on Cavalry Corps stationary, were even more to the point: "The City must be destroyed and Jeff Davis and cabinet killed." Here Dahlgren gave us perfect insight into the worldview of the Yankee: kill what you cannot control; destroy your opposition any way you can—the end justifies the means!

The Dahlgren Papers were passed along to Confederate leaders, photographed, and copies sent to the Yankee General Meade with a letter from Robert E. Lee, asking if this sort of thing had now become the official policy of the North (it always had been the unofficial policy). At that point there was much frantic scurrying among Yankee generals, seeking to "cover their sixes" as the saying goes. Naturally Meade, when called on the carpet, swore that the papers were Confederate forgeries and that he never issued any such orders. General Meade, according to Virgil Carrington Jones in his book "Eight Hours Before Richmond" wrote to his wife and said: "This was a pretty ugly piece of business, for in denying having authorized or approved 'the burning of Richmond' or killing Mr. Davis and cabinet, I necessarily threw odium on Dahlgren. I, however enclosed a letter from Kilpatrick, in which the authenticity of the papers was impugned; but I regret to say Kilpatrick's reputation and collateral evidence in my possession, rather go against this theory. However, I was determined my skirts should be clear, so I promptly disavowed having ever authorized, sanctioned or approved of any act not required by military necessity, and in accordance with the usages of war."

That was quite a revelatory statement to his wife. You can read it a couple different ways. Officially the Yankee hierarchy denied it had anything to do with the Dahlgren Papers, but knowing the Yankee (Marxist) mindset, one has to question that assertion. Over the years since this episode, authors have written on both sides of the subject. Wayne Schultz, writing in "The Dahlgren Affair" seemed sure the papers were Confederate forgeries. Virgil Carrington Jones in "Eight Hours Before Richmond" took the opposite position. I read both books. Also, historian Stephen W. Sears, writing in the Summer 1999 issue of "Columbiad" took issue with the idea that the papers were forgeries. He felt they were genuine—and possibly the brainchild of one Edwin M. Stanton. Writer Joseph Galloway observed that in November, 1865; "Lincoln's Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, ordered Francis Lieber, the keeper of captured Confederate records, to turn over everything relating to the raid. Lieber gave Stanton the original papers and notebook found on Dahlgren's body, plus all relevant correspondence from the Confederate archives."

Historian James O. Hall searched widely for the missing papers and finally tracked them to Stanton. "Suspicion lingers," Hall wrote, "that Stanton consigned them to the fireplace in his office." Remember, this was the same Edwin Stanton responsible for the missing pages in John Wilkes Booth's diary. If only the ashes in Stanton's fireplace could somehow be resurrected and reconstructed and given voice, what a story they might tell!

For my part, I do not doubt that the Dahlgren Papers were genuine, because they so clearly reveal the Yankee worldview: do whatever you have to do to your adversaries, no matter who or what gets killed or destroyed in the process. After all, you have to break a lot of eggs to make an omelet—and the end does justify the means—no matter what.