

THE CHARGER



CLEVELAND CIVIL WAR ROUNDTABLE

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President's Message for May 2015

“The Greatest Gaffe of All?”

My dictionary defines a gaffe as “an unintended act or remark causing embarrassment to its originator.” In 1989 the journalist Michael Kinsley wrote that a *political* gaffe occurs when some truth is revealed that a politician did not intend to admit. In other words, it is that rare occasion when a politician inadvertently says what he or she *really* means but would rather the general public not know it. In modern times a gaffe calls for immediate damage control to “walk back” the statement which was “misspoke.” One might even acknowledge “a mistake was made” (note the passive voice) or even go so far as to “take responsibility” as long as no consequences are attached.

I'm sure that we can all come up with recent examples of gaffes from both ends of the political spectrum. In the spirit of bipartisan comity I won't cite any, but when it comes to the Civil War let's take off the gloves. In March 1861 the very newly elected Vice-President of the Confederacy, Alexander Stephens, gave his famous “Cornerstone Speech” in Savannah, Georgia. It is critical to appreciate the timing here which was just after the formation of the provisional CSA which was then comprised of seven seceded states. The speech was just a month before the firing on Fort Sumter after which an additional four states joined the CSA.

In the 1840s Stephens was a US Congressman from Georgia. He was on friendly terms with his fellow Whig Party member, Abraham Lincoln. They both strongly opposed the Mexican-American War. However, they split on the Wilmot Proviso which banned slavery in any territory acquired from the Mexican War. Stephens naturally opposed it while Lincoln voted for it “as good as forty times” (his words). The Wilmot Proviso passed the House numerous times but never the Senate. Sound familiar to anything today? As the Whig Party disintegrated in the mid-1850s, Lincoln became a Republican and Stephens a Democrat.

Stephens was never a “fire-eating” proponent of secession, but he recognized the right of a state to secede. His views on slavery were crystal clear. In the March 1861 Cornerstone Speech he forthrightly stated that African slavery “was the

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immediate cause of the late rupture and the present revolution.” Stephens noted that the new Confederacy had corrected the mistaken notion of those founding fathers who thought slavery was wrong and hoped it would somehow fade away in time. Stephens declared, “Our new Government is founded on exactly the opposite ideas; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not the equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and moral condition. This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.” The hall burst into applause.

How was this speech a gaffe? Many years later Stephens tried to “walk back the speech.” He claimed that he spoke extemporaneously and perhaps he got carried away. He further asserted that the reporter’s notes were “very imperfect” and that he, Stephens, had been careless in correcting them before the speech was published. But there is no evidence to support his claims. Indeed he had made similar remarks before and he never repudiated a word during the war.

Most gaffes are simply embarrassing, but this one had real time consequences. It was widely quoted in the international press and became a diplomatic gift to the Union cause. The Cornerstone speech has been described as “the Gettysburg Address of the Confederate South” because it concisely captures the essential principles of the Confederacy.

This month marks my last as president of the Roundtable. It’s been quite a party as well as a privilege to serve in this capacity. Our Roundtable works because of innumerable collaborative efforts. I’m bound to leave someone out if I start thanking all those who have helped me this past year. That’s on me, not them. Besides I don’t make my exit with a gaffe as traditionally defined.

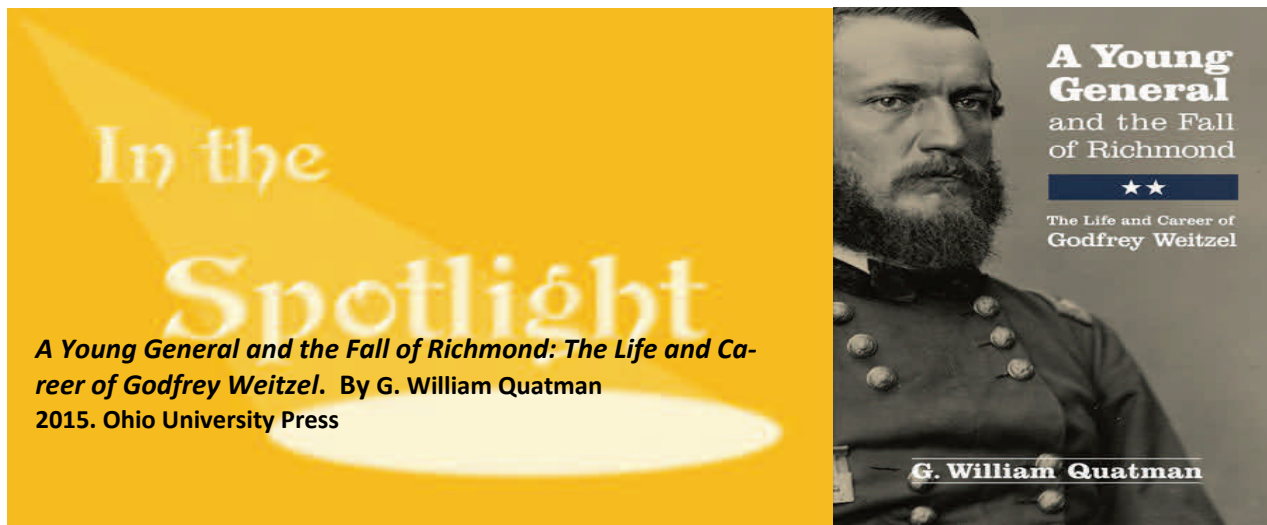
Patrick Bray

New Book Announcement from Clarksville CWRT

A few months back Dick Crews and I tangled in writing over the role of Nathan Bedford Forrest in the Atlanta Campaign of 1864. He charged that Forrest was negligent in not raiding Sherman's vulnerable rail lines in Tennessee, and I countered with the fact that he was on his way when a Federal expedition from Memphis tied him down which culminated in the June 10, 1864 Battle of Brice's Crossroads near Guntown, Mississippi. I further went on stating that this expedition, and others like it, was planned by Sherman to keep Forrest off his rail lines, and those plans worked very well.

I wanted to make mention of a recent book that covers one of these expeditions to tie down Forrest in Mississippi. Thomas E. Parson, a park ranger at the Corinth Interpretive Center, a unit of Shiloh National Battlefield, has written *Work For Giants: The Campaign and Battle of Tupelo/Harrisburg, Mississippi, June-July 1864*. This is an excellent book, the fruition of tremendous research into primary sources as well as excellent analysis of what went right for the Federals and what went wrong for Confederates Stephen D. Lee (Forrest's boss) and Forrest in the campaign. Parson goes into the overall strategic vision of Sherman and that the fighting in Mississippi in the summer of 1864 should indeed be included in the overall view of the Atlanta Campaign. Covering the campaign from the privates of both sides up to the generals. Parson shows great strengths as a historian and author. This book is exactly what such studies should be.

Thanks,
Greg Biggs
Clarksville CWRT



Gottfried Weitzel was born in 1835 in rural Germany near Strasbourg, France. Two years later his parents emigrated to Cincinnati and the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood and their son's name was changed to Godfrey. Godfrey Weitzel would become one of the Union's youngest commanders and be a prominent participant at some of the Civil War's most dramatic moments. These included the capture and occupation of New Orleans, the failed attack at Sabine Pass, Texas, the siege and capture of Port Hudson on the Mississippi, the siege of Richmond, the failed first attempt to capture Fort Fisher, North Carolina, and finally the capture and occupation of the Confederate capital of Richmond. He would also become the commander of the all black XXV Corps after his initial refusal to command black USCT troops in Louisiana.

Weitzel was admitted to West Point, although he had to postpone admission until he reached the minimum age, where he became the youngest cadet. He graduated in 1855, ranking second in the class behind his roommate Cyrus Comstock. Their paths would cross during and after the Civil War. Weitzel was assigned to the Engineers and sent to New Orleans to work on its fortifications. Just before the outbreak of the Civil War, he was assigned to West Point as an instructor, as was his former roommate Comstock.

When the war began, Weitzel's first assignment was to reinforce Ft. Pickens off Pensacola. After recruiting fellow Germans in Cincinnati, he was sent to Washington City to work on fortifying its defenses. There, he fatefully was picked to accompany Ben Butler in the campaign to capture New Orleans because of his knowledge of its forts that he had worked on before the war.

Weitzel was a key to the successful capture of the South's largest city and port by the army under Butler and the navy under David Dixon Porter and David Farragut. His tactical advice was critical to the capture of the two forts guarding New Orleans. After Butler's departure following his controversial reign in the city, in July 1862 Godfrey Weitzel succeeded him in the role of military mayor of the conquered city. With Butler as his patron, Weitzel was promoted from the rank of captain to brigadier general and won his first battle. To Butler's surprise, Weitzel resisted commanding newly organized black troops for fear that it would incite the Louisiana population. After the replacement of Butler with Nathaniel Banks, another political general, Weitzel became a brigade commander in the XIX Corps. He participated in Banks' campaign against the Mississippi river stronghold of Port Hudson, including two unsuccessful assaults and a siege, ending in its surrender on July 8, 1863. Weitzel accepted that surrender.

After that his military fortunes suffered setbacks in a defeat in Louisiana against Dick Taylor, and then he was a division commander in Banks' ignominious defeat at the attempted invasion of east Texas at Sabine Pass, when a handful of defenders disabled three ships, preventing a landing by the army.

However, he was soon called to Virginia to again serve under Ben Butler, commanding the Army of the James at Drewry's Bluff before Richmond. He arrived in May, 1864 to command the 2d Division of the XVIII Corps .



That same month his troops repulsed an attack by P.G.T. Beauregard. Weitzel was promoted to the rank of major general and then command of the corps after its commander Edward O.C. Ord was wounded on September 29 during the capture of Fort Harrison. The next day Weitzel's troops repelled the attempt of Robert E. Lee to retake Fort Harrison. However, later that month his command was unable to carry out Butler's plan to assault Richmond when James Longstreet rushed troops to its defense. With the re-organization of the Army of the James, a recovered Ord took command of the new XXIV Corps (the former X and XVIII Corps), and Weitzel became commander of the all African American XXV Corps (USCT). Black troops had impressed Weitzel by their bravery on September 29.

Weitzel and his troops were next ordered to join Butler in his campaign to capture Fort Fisher, guarding the Confederacy's last port at Wilmington, North Carolina. There he was joined by Cyrus Comstock.

Unfortunately, following the naval bombardment Butler's ill-conceived assault on Christmas day, 1864 failed, leading to his dismissal (and a later trial resulting in a dismissal of the charges). Weitzel escaped any blame for this defeat (and Fort Fisher was captured a few months later).

Weitzel would soon become briefly in the spotlight. Ordered to assault Longstreet's lines despite his fear of heavy casualties, Weitzel avoided this due to Sheridan's victory at Five Forks, the collapse of the Petersburg defenses, and Lee's retreat from defending Richmond. On April 3, 1865 Weitzel led his USCT troops into the devastated city, accepted its surrender by its mayor, and slept that night in Confederate President Jefferson Davis' mansion. He had to restore order in the ruined city. Nine days later, President Abraham Lincoln, with his son Tad in tow, arrived in Richmond. Lincoln met with Weitzel about how to deal with the dying Confederacy, to which Lincoln advised: "If I were in your place I'd let 'em up easy, let 'em up easy".

When Lincoln and Weitzel met with former Justice John Campbell, one of Davis' peace representatives earlier that year, Lincoln agreed to allow the Virginia legislature to meet in Richmond in order for the state to be re-admitted to the Union. This infuriated Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, who repudiated this and ordered Ord to replace Weitzel in command of Richmond on April 13, the day before Lincoln's assassination.

Two months later, Weitzel and his troops were shipped to Texas to defend the border. He mustered out in March, 1866 at age 30 and rejoined the Army Corps of Engineers. His postwar duties took him to the Great Falls of the Ohio River, the building of lighthouses on the Great Lakes, and yet another reunion with Comstock. Relocated to Philadelphia, he died of typhoid fever in March, 1884 at age 49 and was buried in Cincinnati. Tragically, his young first wife had died accidentally in 1859 shortly after their marriage and two of his three children with his second wife died young.

Weitzel's meteoric rise in the Union Army mirrors that of cavalry commanders like George Armstrong Custer and James Wilson. His successes overshadowed his few setbacks. His wartime career was certainly one of the more interesting of Ohio's many Union generals. He is remembered with the Ord-Weitzel Drive and Gate in Arlington National Cemetery.

Quatman says in his preface: "Perhaps with the publication of his life story, Godfrey Weitzel will receive the proper attention he has thus far been denied".

Submitted by Dennis Keating



Ohio USCT Medal of Honor Recipients by Dennis Keating



Of the African-Americans who have been recipients of the Medal of Honor since its creation, 23 of those served in the U.S. Colored Troops (USCT) during the Civil War. Twelve of those were recipients because of their bravery on September 29, 1864 at the battles of Chapin (Chaffin)'s Farm, New Market Heights, and Fort Harrison outside Richmond. Two of those 12 were from Ohio: Sergeant Major Thomas R. Hawkins, 6th USCT, born in Cincinnati: He rescued the regimental colors and First Sergeant Robert Pinn, 5th USCT, born in Stark County: He led his company after all of the officers were killed or wounded.



In Summer, 1864, besieging Petersburg, U.S. Grant continually attempted to cut the railroads supplying Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia defending Petersburg and Richmond. From September 30-October 2 (the battle of Peebles' Farm) the V and IX Corps and cavalry of the Army of Potomac attempted again to sever the South Side railroad. In an attempt to distract Lee, Grant ordered Ben Butler to have his Army of the James attack toward Richmond. Butler ordered David Birney's X Corps, along with a division of the USCT from Edward O.C. Ord's XVIII Corps, to attack the Confederate defenses at New Market Road and Heights. The rest of Ord's Corps would attack Fort Harrison. On September 29 Birney's troops led by the USCTs captured New Market Heights, taking heavy casualties. Ord's troops captured Fort Harrison but Ord was wounded, along with several other commanders killed and wounded, and the attack stalled along Chaffin's Bluff. The next day Lee ordered a major assault to retake Fort Harrison, now under the command of Godfrey Weitzel. Lee's attempt to recapture the fort failed. Butler's Army of the James renewed its attack toward Richmond on October 27, led by Weitzel's XVIII Corps but was repulsed by troops rushed from James Longstreet's Corps. Likewise, the simultaneous attack by three corps of George Meade's army failed to outflank Lee's defenses at Hatcher's Run and the Boynton Plank Road.

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Noah Andre Trudeau. *The Last Citadel: Petersburg, Virginia June 1864-April 1865* (1991), pp. 206-254.

African American Civil War Medal of Honor Recipients: <http://thomaslegion.net/africanamericanmedalofhono>

USCT in the Civil War: 5 Battles

By Dennis Keating

Beginning with Ben Butler in Louisiana (the Corps d'Afrique) and after President Abraham Lincoln's issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation after the battle of Antietam in September, 1862, African-Americans, both freedmen and also newly-free former slaves, volunteered for service in the Union army. In the racially segregated Union army, they became the United States Colored Troops (USCT), led by white officers. A total of 179,000 (including 5,092 from Ohio) enlisted in 175 infantry regiments and other units. Many provided labor support rather than combat troops. They joined the army despite the threat from the Confederacy that if captured they faced either enslavement or execution. They suffered over 68,000 casualties, including 2,751 combat deaths.

The following five battles are among the best known engagements of the USCTs.

Milliken's Bend (June 7, 1863)

As part of U.S. Grant's campaign to capture Vicksburg, a supply depot was established at Milliken's Bend, about 15 miles northwest of the city. A small Union force which included the African Brigade (recent black recruits) was attacked by Walker's Texan Division of Richard Taylor's force at Milliken's Bend. With the help of two federal gunboats, the rebels were driven off after hand-to-hand combat. Grant observed that the Negro troops had "behaved well".

Fort Wagner (July 18, 1863)

As part of the campaign to capture Charleston, South Carolina, the Union had to capture Fort Wagner on Morris Island. An attack on July 11, 1863 was repulsed, leading to another attack a week later. The second assault included the 54th Massachusetts, one of first regiments of the USCT. It was led by Robert Gould Shaw. This attack was also repulsed, with heavy casualties among the 54th's ranks, including its commander. Sergeant William Carney of the 54th was awarded the Medal of Honor for retrieving its U.S. flag. The heroic charge by the 54th was depicted in the 1989 film *Glory*.



Fort Pillow (April 12, 1864)

The Mississippi River fort was occupied by Union troops in 1862 to protect Memphis. In 1864 half of its garrison was composed of USCT. On April 12, Nathan Bedford Forrest's cavalry surrounded the fort, having launched a raid into western Tennessee. Refusing Forrest's surrender demand, the outnumbered defenders fled to the river bank, where many died and charges of a massacre of the USCT (80 percent of whom died) were made. The federal Congressional Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War concluded that a massacre had occurred, which Confederates denied. The controversy over Forrest's conduct and that of his troops continued. In the aftermath, the Confederacy refused to change its treatment of captured black Union soldiers.

The Crater (July 30, 1864)

U.S. Grant wrote to Henry Halleck: "It was the saddest affair I have witnessed in this war". The attack plan by IX Corps commander Ambrose Burnside was to have his USCT Division lead the attack after the underground tunnel made by his Pennsylvania miners exploded to breach the Confederate defenses protecting Petersburg. However, Meade objected that if the attack failed and they suffered heavy casualties, it would be claimed that they were sacrificed. However, after the misguided lead attack by an untrained white division under a drunken commander which entered the crater caused by the explosion instead of bypassing it as planned, the USCT troops were sent into the crater, where they too suffered terrible casualties from the Confederate counterattack. The battle of the Crater was portrayed in the book and movie *Cold Mountain*.

Nashville (December 15-16, 1864)

When George Thomas launched his attack on John Bell Hood's decimated Army of Tennessee outside Nashville, his army included a USCT Division under James Steedman. In the attack on the first day, the USCT served as a feint for the main attack. On the second day, the USCT participated in an assault against the right of Hood's line. The 13th USCT regiment had five color bearers shot, and it lost 40 percent of its number, the highest Union casualty rate in the battle. A monument to the USCT is in the Nashville National Cemetery.

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Joseph T. Glatthaar. *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers.*

Tom Quinn. *American Massacre: Fort Pillow and the Day That Changed a War.*

Wiley Sword. *The Confederacy's Last Hurrah: Spring Hill, Franklin, and Nashville.*

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Noah Andre Trudeau. *The Last Citadel* (pp. 98-127).

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Presented by Anthony Gibbs

Wednesday - May, 13, 2015

Judson Manor 1890 East 107th St. // Cocktails: 6pm Dinner 6:30pm

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