Those Nasty Dahlgren Papers

A clear view into the Yankee-Marxist worldview

By Al Benson, Jr.
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Any who have studied the history of the War of Northern Aggression has, no doubt, heard of the infamous Dahlgren Papers. The Dahlgren Papers are 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, supposedly to attempt to free federal prisoners of war. Writer Joseph Galloway labeled Kilpatrick's raid "poorly planned and badly executed," and said it was "A Moe, Larry, and Curly kind of caper."

Whatever it was, Abraham Lincoln personally authorised it. The idea of a raid on the enemy's capitol during wartime is not a particularly alarming one. Jubal Early tried it on Washington in 1864 and almost pulled it off, however, General Early did not have in his coat pocket a set of orders instructing him to attempt to murder President 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).

COL. ULRIC DAHLGREN

When Dahlgren 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 unsavoury reputation or not. Kilpatrick inherited the nickname "Kill-Cavalry" from his own men, who, early on, realised he would not hesitate a 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 noted Kilpatrick's "flawed character, " and Kilpatrick's intolerance toward anyone who dared disagree with him: if he could not win a verbal argument, then "his fists continued the argument." Typical of the Yankee mentality.

Martin said he seemed more "noticeable than notable." Part of his flawed character showed itself in his attempts at inflating 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 rather low character; but then, that's another story. At any rate, the idea of the raid on Richmond seems to have originated in the febrile brain of Judson Kilpatrick. Dahlgren, although he also exhibited the tendencies of the Yankee worldview, seems to have been personally honest and a brave soldier. Too bad he had to team up with Kilpatrick. It cost him his life.

The object of the raid seems to have been the release of federal prisoners both in Richmond and at the Confederate prison camp at Belle Isle on the James River. Dahlgren was made Kilpatrick's second-in-command and given a column of cavalry, with which he was to enter Richmond and free all the Union prisoners he could. Joseph Galloway noted that Kilpatrick had about 4000 cavalry for the raid and said "The next day Dahlgren split off, taking 460 men wide to the west, aiming to cross the James River 25 miles above Richmond and push on the city's lightly defended southern portals. Kilpatrick was to strike at the northern approaches while Dahlgren freed the prisoners."

The whole thing went awry from the start. It was February and the James River was too high for a crossing, and Dahlgren ran into Confederate militiamen. He tried to hook up with Kilpatrick, who had actually gotten as far as Richmond's outer defenses. By that point, though, Confederate resistance had begun to solidify and so the gallant Kilpatrick tucked tail and ran, leaving Dahlgren to whatever fate he might encounter. During the attempt to fight his way out of the Confederate net, Dahlgren was killed. When the fighting was over, a 13-year-old member of the 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:

JUDSON (KILL-CAVALRY) KILPATRICK

> 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 it must be destroyed and Jeff Davis and Cabinet killed." Here Dahlgren gives us a perfect insight into the Yankee worldview: 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 Meade 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 a frantic scurrying of Yankee generals trying to "cover their sixes" as the saying goes. Naturally, Kilpatrick, when called on the carpet, swore that the papers were Confederate forgeries and said he never issued any such orders. General Meade, according to Virgil Carrington Jones in *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. 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) worldview, one has to question that assertion. Over the years since this episode, authors have written on both sides of the subject. Duane Schultz, writing in *The Dahlgren Affair*, seemed sure the papers were Confederate forgeries. However, historian Stephen W. Sears, writing in the Summer 1999 issue of *Columbiad*, took issue with that contention and felt the papers were genuine—and possibly the brainchild of one Edwin M. Stanton. 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 Stanton responsible for the missing pages in John Wilkes Booth's diary. If only the ashes in Stanton's fireplace could be resurrected and given voice, what tales they might tell!

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

Editor's Note: As may be expected, the Yankee historian, James M. McPherson, contests the genuineness of the Dahlgen papers. Steven W. Sears, in a scholarly study, refutes McPherson and concludes that the papers were indeed real, and further, that their subsequent publishing in the Richmond Examiner (1 April 1864) may well have contributed to John Wilkes Booth's assassination of Lincoln. Read the paper by Sears here.

About the Author

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