

Lincoln's Kind of "Soldier"

By Thomas DiLorenzo August 12, 2020

A neighbor of mine who is unfamiliar with my career and writings recently thought he could stump me with the question of who was Lincoln's first choice as commanding general of the Union Army in the "Civil War." He mistakenly thought he would surprise me with the answer of Robert E. Lee. Yes, Lincoln did offer the job to Lee on the recommendation of his real first choice, General Winfield Scott (Known to the troops as "Ole Fuss n' Feathers" because of his penchant for decorating his hat and uniform with colorful bird feathers). The aged Scott gave way to George McClellan in November of 1861, something that Lincoln would soon regret.

The first major battle of the war, the First Battle of Bull Run, was a spectacular defeat for the U.S. Army, which was sent hysterically fleeing back to D.C. under bombardment. According to James Robertson's fascinating biography of Stonewall Jackson (*Stonewall Jackson: The Man, the Soldier, the Legend*), near the end of the battle Jefferson Davis himself appeared on the battlefield and was approached by a little-known Confederate officer named Thomas Jackson. Jackson said to his president: **"Give me ten thousand men and I will take Washington."** At that point Davis knew next to nothing about the man who from that day on would be known to the world as "Stonewall" Jackson, and so he declined. (Jackson was an eccentric physics professor and artillery instructor at VMI before the war). Had Davis accepted the offer the war could very well have ended the next day.

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The war was all downhill for Lincoln for the next year, at which time he decided that George McClellan had to go. McClellan was eventually replaced by Major General Ambrose Burnside, who promptly led the Union Army to another catastrophic defeat in the Battle of Fredericksburg in December of 1862. But Burnside was not

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Lincoln's first choice at that point, either. His first choice was the Italian militarist Giuseppe Garibaldi (See Rory Carroll, "Garibaldi Asked by Lincoln to Run Army").

Lincoln wanted the Italian militarist to command the U.S. Army because he had recently commanded an invasion of Sicily to force it to merge with Northern Italy and be ruled by one king, his boss King Victor Emmanuel II. At the time Sicily was not just an island but all of Southern Italy - Calabria, Lucania, Basilicata, Campania, Puglia, Abruzzi, and Molise. This "southern kingdom" was the wealthiest of all the Italian regions and one of the wealthiest regions of Europe.

Like Lincoln, Victor Emmanuel II wanted to be king of a large empire, and federalism or states' rights stood in his way. Garibaldi was his henchman who forced Sicily and the rest of Italy to come under the monopolistic, dictatorial rule of Victor Emanuel II. According to Italian historian S. Ben Piazza (Garibaldi, Italian Unification, and Sicily), Emmanuel was attracted to Garibaldi because of his reputation as "an international adventurer [i.e., mercenary and pirate] and freebooter, better known for his paramilitary forays and *terrorism* carried out *against civilian populations* in South America . . ." (emphasis added).

Stonewall Jackson : The Man, The Solider, The Legend Robertson, James

Garibaldi quickly raised an army that seized the vast gold stores of Sicily, one of the biggest acts of plunder in all of European history. Much of the loot was shared with Northern Italian politically-connected business supporters of Emmanuel, **much as Lincoln's economic policies were nothing if not a vast expansion of corporate welfare (protectionist tariffs, government-subsidized railroads, government control of the money supply).**

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Southern Italy was plundered and impoverished, just as the American South was by Lincoln's invasion. Late in his life Garibaldi stated that he would never try such a thing again for fear of being "stoned to death" from having caused so much "squalor and hate." It was that very performance, however, that earned him the offer of commanding general of the United States Army by Abraham Lincoln. He was Lincoln's kind of soldier.

At around the same time (Spring of 1862) another foreign military man with a thick Russian accent was rapidly gaining favor with Lincoln. Ivan Vasilievitch Turchaninov was from the Cossack region of imperial Russia and was a member of the Czar's personal protection regiment who had participated in the terroristic crushing of Polish and Hungarian uprisings. He somehow made it to America in 1856 and, lo and behold, became employed by the Illinois Central Railroad where Abraham Lincoln was the general counsel. He changed his name to John Basil Turchin, became a Republican, and was given command of the Nineteenth Illinois Infantry in 1861.

"Turchin" became notorious when in early May of 1862 his troops occupied Athens, Alabama after the Confederate cavalry had vacated the area. He told his men that "I shut my eyes for two hours," by which he meant that they had a license to loot, rape, and plunder; and so they did. **The "sacking of Athens" stripped all of the shops of their wares, and armed robbery of the population was rampant. As was the gang rape of black women.**

When word of this reached Major General Don Carlos Buell, he relieved "Turchin" of his command and commenced court martial proceedings. The presiding judge at the court martial was future president, Brigadier General James Garfield, who said he was "horrified" at how Athens, Alabama was "sacked according to

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Muscovite custom" (Frederick Williams, *The Wild Life of the Army: Civil War Letters of James A. Garfield*, p. 121). The court found "Turchin" guilty and was sentenced to dismissal from the army.

At that point Abraham Lincoln intervened by overturning the conviction and promoted "Turchin" to brigadier general instead, **a move that was ratified by a vote of the Republican-controlled U.S. Senate. This sent the message to all other Union Army officers that this is how the war is to be waged - against civilians, Russian style.** And so it was, for the next three years. It is little wonder, then, why historian Lee Kennett, in his biography of General Sherman entitled *Marching through Georgia*, would write that **had the Confederates won the war, "they would have found themselves justified . . . in stringing up President Lincoln and the entire Union high command for violation of the laws of war, specifically for waging war against noncombatants."**