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Honor from the Trenches: Why Confederate Soldiers Fought at Petersburg

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Honor from the Trenches: Why Confederate Soldiers Fought at Petersburg

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ABSTRACT

The Siege of Petersburg, fought from June 1864 until April 1865, led to the eventual surrender of Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia and the end of the American Civil War. Just as important, however, is its role as a case study for soldierly motivation during the war. Historians of this time period often emphasize the high rate of desertion from the Confederate Army at Petersburg and how it affected the war’s outcome. While desertion played a decisive role at Petersburg, the soldiers who decided against desertion tell a story that is just as important. This paper attempts to explain why roughly 30,000 of Lee’s soldiers in the trenches at Petersburg chose to continue fighting during a time when thousands of other Confederates risked desertion instead.

What motivated these soldiers to stay? To answer this question, this paper primarily uses letters sent between Confederate soldiers defending Petersburg and their loved ones in states around the Confederacy. Like all armies, the Army of Northern Virginia at Petersburg featured a diverse group of individuals, each with different backgrounds and life stories. Yet, the sources all demonstrate certain commonalities that have allowed for important conclusions about the army as a whole. For example, nearly all of the soldiers showed the most concern about the fate of their family, property, and home communities, rather than their actual safety and well-being.

To the Confederate soldier, honor was everything, and their interpretation stemmed from their ability to provide for loved ones while defending the well-being of the local community from which they came. Men faced with the decision to desert or to fight on looked most of all to preserve honor. Those who deserted often did so to return home. Likewise, the letters from the soldiers who chose to stay and fight often show that they did so in order to defend the well-being of their family and property against both real and perceived threats at the end of the war. They made the difficult decision to stay and fight during the last days of the war for honor’s sake.
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This M.A. Thesis is dedicated to my parents, John and Theresa Hussey, who have helped me countless times along the way.
The crisis of our fate is rapidly approaching, and men's minds are harassed with doubts, fears, and perplexity. The weak are for submission and those who have more fortitude are affected by the fears of the timid. A few men remain strong and if they have them conceal their fears. Are the names of the illustrious dead to go down in history as traitors, instead of patriots?

-Confederate General Josiah Gorgas, diary entry from Richmond, March 6, 1865

A few weeks before the end of the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln held a meeting with Ulysses S. Grant, William Tecumseh Sherman, and Admiral David Porter on board the River Queen docked at City Point, Virginia. Discussing plans for peace, Lincoln expressed the tragic nature not only of the end of the Civil War but of all wars, when he asked: "Must more blood be shed?" Sherman's answer was expectedly pessimistic when he characterized Robert E. Lee as a "real general" who "would not await the inevitable conclusion but would make one more desperate effort" to avoid having to surrender. While this prediction proved true, it was not only Lee who continued to fight, but thousands of others in his army – men who refused to give up when a decisive military victory was impossible. At Appomattox Courthouse, only hours before Robert E. Lee eventually surrendered, "more blood was shed" during vicious fighting that cost the country roughly five hundred more fatalities, many of them occurring only moments before peace was restored.

Each of the men present for the fighting at Appomattox Courthouse tells an important story about the war. Those who lost their lives that morning mark

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the unaffordable cost of the war’s final stages, when each minute threatened further violence in a country longing for peace. In *Why Confederates Fought*, Aaron Sheehan-Dean writes that “war, perhaps more than any other human activity, invites explanations that ignore individuals.” His observation is an important one that calls to attention the countless decisions and actions made by common citizens forced to exist during times of war. At a minimum, for a war to occur there must be individual combatants who are motivated to kill. Likewise, for a war to end, individuals must somehow be motivated to stop killing. During the final months of the Civil War in Virginia, thousands of Confederate soldiers in the Army of Northern Virginia had to decide whether to desert the trenches or to continue fighting Grant’s army. Many of these soldiers, for various reasons, chose to stay. In fact, there were roughly 28,000 Confederate soldiers present for the surrender at Appomattox Courthouse, and this number does not include those who were either captured by Union forces, died, or were otherwise incapable of marching with the army during its escape from Petersburg. While other Confederate armies remained in the field after Lee’s surrender, these soldiers were the last hope for Southerners who still dreamed of independence. What forces motivated these individuals to stay in the trenches when thousands of others chose to desert instead?

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Motives are always difficult to ascertain, especially in a situation as chaotic as war. Further complicating matters is the fact that no soldier acted in a vacuum. Instead, each man had to decide to either stay or desert over time, based upon imperfect information, and in a world full of onlookers who included friends, family members, fellow soldiers, and commanding officers. We may never fully understand why individual Confederate soldiers at Petersburg acted as they did. Efforts to do so, however, allow for a better understanding of the end of the Civil War in Virginia; they help to explain both why there was a desperate retreat from Petersburg, and why General Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia did not resort to guerrilla warfare as Union leaders greatly feared at the time.

Bruce Catton described the orderly outcome of Lee’s final retreat as an “unbelievable way to end a civil war, which by all tradition is the worst kind of war there is.” Such a belief is certainly common among historians. That the soldiers who overcame immense hardship to continue fighting – when desertion was a serious albeit dangerous option – peacefully returned home after their surrender at Appomattox Courthouse is a testament to the leaders of both armies and their terms for peace. The chain of events ending at Appomattox Courthouse, however, also highlights the feelings of uneasiness and mistrust that were common among Confederate soldiers concerning the potential consequences of a Union victory. In 1865, Abraham Lincoln described the troops who continued to resist as “deluded,” recognizing the fatal misunderstanding between Confederates who were still suspicious of the Union army’s intentions and the

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6 Catton, Never Call Retreat, 456.
Federal leaders who continued to push for reunion and emancipation as their conditions for peace.⁷

A significant portion of these soldiers in the Army of Northern Virginia at the end of the war viewed the continuation of military duty as the most honorable option available to them. Historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown defines an antebellum, southern version of honor as "essentially the cluster of ethical rules, most readily found in societies of small communities, by which judgments of behavior are ratified by community consensus."⁸ The decisions to stay or leave the trenches included this definition of honor and caused Confederate soldiers to be most concerned about how best to secure the rights, welfare, and respect of their families and the local communities they came from. The soldiers who stayed were as tired of war as the rest of the country and made their decisions reluctantly, but they often concluded that duty in Lee’s army remained the most honorable choice.

By the beginning of 1865, these soldiers found themselves caught between a cherished past and a rapidly changing present that included the federal government’s embrace of the elimination of slavery as a war aim and devastating invasions by Union armies throughout the Confederacy. Fears concerning the future and the war’s eventual effects upon southern homes and communities added to the uncertainty of combat itself. In such an existence, it is not surprising that many rumors about the war spread rapidly in Petersburg’s trenches. Southern honor, according to Wyatt-Brown, initially developed to give

⁸ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South (Oxford: Oxford University, 1982), xv.
meaning to lives and “provided a means to restrict human choices, to point a way out of chaos.”9 At Petersburg, however, Lee and his soldiers could not escape the chaos, and their concerns about honor further complicated their situation. Nevertheless, thousands of these soldiers fought on to defend themselves, their families and their beliefs by placing their faith in General Lee, the army, and – on the most practical level – a struggle to defend the important railroad junction at Petersburg against a much larger Union force.

9 Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor, 114.
1. “Chained Down”

When the Civil war entered its fifth, and what would turn out to be its final year, the nature of the conflict had escalated into something noticeably different than in earlier stages of the fighting. Whether or not it had become a “total war” or a “modern war” is debatable, but it had reached a new level of ferocity that served to bring the Confederate experiment to the brink of failure. In Virginia, the armies of Lee and Grant fought the bloodiest campaign of the war. At earlier points, combat had been just as lethal as it became on the road to Petersburg, but it had never been as protracted. In his memoirs, Ulysses S. Grant said that the campaign had encompassed the most “desperate fighting as the world has ever witnessed; not to be consummated in a day, a week, a month, or a single season. The losses inflicted, and endured, were destined to be severe.”¹⁰

Grant’s campaign would, along with other offensives throughout the South, spur the collapse of the Confederacy and bring an end to the war. The battles leading up to the Siege of Petersburg cost Lee roughly 33,000 casualties. Further casualties at Petersburg were irreplaceable for a Confederate army that had lost the ability to recruit new soldiers.¹¹ The Confederacy not only began the war with a smaller population than Union states, but many of the Southerners affected by war also lost enthusiasm for the Confederate cause during the years leading up to the clash at Petersburg.

Furthermore, the effects of the Siege of Petersburg on the Army of Northern Virginia were paralyzing. The most obvious result was in the attrition of

its size and strength. Many months of heavy casualties and the effects of
disease and sickness left the army with too few men to defend a rapidly
lengthening line of defense. Confederate General Cadmus M. Wilcox recorded
that his men sometimes stood thirty paces apart in order to defend their
section.12 The historian Douglas Southall Freeman characterizes the Army of
Northern Virginia’s predicament by the summer of 1864 as being “chained down
and unable to employ the offensive strategy that had won it many battles.”13

Along with external pressures that included Union military successes in
other regions and Abraham Lincoln’s re-election in 1864, the time Confederate
soldiers spent in the trenches defending Petersburg caused high rates of
desertion. More so than any other battle, the Siege of Petersburg prompted the
choice between desertion and persistence. Out of an army that entered the
trenches at Petersburg with roughly 50,000 men, one well-researched estimate
claims that between 7,000 and 8,000 Confederate soldiers deserted during the
final three months of the siege alone.14 One brigade of South Carolinians,
initially numbering around 1,000 men at the beginning of August, 1864, lost 104
soldiers to desertion during the war’s final eight months.15

Desertion from the army had always been a problem for the Confederacy,
but the hard fighting of 1864 served to accentuate its effects on the shrinking

12 A. Wilson Greene, Breaking the Backbone of the Rebellion: The Final Battles of the Petersburg
Campaign (Mason City, Savas, 2000), 282.
13 Douglass Southall Freeman, Lee’s Lieutenants, vol. 3 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001),
541.
14 John Horn, The Petersburg Campaign: June 1864 – April 1865 (Cambridge: Da Kapo, 1993),
217.
15 J.F.J. Caldwell, The History of a Brigade of South Carolinians: First Known as “Gregg’s” and
Subsequently as “McGowan’s Brigade” (Dayton: Morningside, 1992), 221, 256. Initially published
in 1866 in Philadelphia, Caldwell wrote the majority of this unit history at Petersburg at the
insistence of his commander, Brigadier General Samuel McGowan.
army. Foreshadowing the future, Lee wrote to Jefferson Davis before the
renewal of fighting in 1864 that "desertion and absence without leave are nearly
the only offenses ever tried by our courts. They appear to be the only vices in
the army."\textsuperscript{16} During the Petersburg Campaign, desertion also became the
foremost signal of a deteriorating Confederacy. While there were many reasons
that thousands of soldiers deserted from Petersburg, the failing war effort was at
the root of this increase. Historian James McPherson broadly concludes that
"the rising southern desertion rate was primarily a result of defeat, not a cause."\textsuperscript{17}

First of all, the siege directly affected the physical condition of the soldiers,
serving to test the limits of human agony and endurance. One particular
hardship concerned the clothing and shelter of the army during its final winter.
The military historian J. Tracy Power found that "the lack of adequate clothing,
shoes, and blankets was often cited as a major reason for the increased number
of desertions as winter set in and some soldiers went over to the enemy to
acquire them." Other Confederates, unwilling to desert, on one occasion
attacked a group of Union pickets for no other reason than to steal their
"overcoats, shoes, and blankets."\textsuperscript{18} One South Carolinian described the pain
involved when he wrote that "shoes were scarce. More than once a soldier left a
bloody track on the frozen picket line."\textsuperscript{19} Fuel shortages only made the situation
worse. According to Joseph Glatthaar, hospitals in Richmond no longer had

\textsuperscript{16} Glatthaar, \textit{General Lee's Army}, 408.
\textsuperscript{17} James McPherson, "American Victory, American Defeat," \textit{Why the Confederacy Lost}, ed.
\textsuperscript{18} J. Tracy Power, \textit{Lee's Miseries: Life in the Army of Northern Virginia from the Wilderness to
Appomattox} (Chapel Hill: UNC, 1998), 223.
\textsuperscript{19} Caldwell, \textit{The History of a Brigade of South Carolinians}, 255.
enough wood or coal to keep their buildings warm.\textsuperscript{20} The lack of proper clothing and materials during the Petersburg winter, along with a seemingly endless struggle against the Army of the Potomac, caused many Confederates to desert, and these hardships became an obstacle that many others either overcame or died trying.

Hunger was an equally significant problem for the soldiers. While the siege did not completely isolate Richmond from the outside world, it applied enough pressure to slowly reduce the soldiers’ rations. Occasionally the men would write positively about what they had to eat, as when Fred A. Brode, a Louisiana soldier, wrote to his sister enthusiastically about his Christmas Day dinner in 1864.\textsuperscript{21} When rations were adequate, as they were that day, morale was naturally higher. Dinners such as the Christmas feast, however, quickly became the exception. By the beginning of 1865, troops rarely received more than some bread or cornmeal for their rations. Lieutenant J.F.J. Caldwell recorded in his unit’s history that “it was amusing, as well as sad, to see the delight of the troops over a drop of comfort. All this time the enemy drank coffee, ate fat, fresh beef, and good bread.”\textsuperscript{22} Nutritional deficiencies caused a scurvy epidemic as well as a high number of pneumonia cases.\textsuperscript{23} Nathaniel Venable Watkins of the 14\textsuperscript{th} Virginia Infantry wrote in January 1865 to his wife that the rations had “considerably reduced. I fear the number of desertions will

\textsuperscript{20} Glatthaar, \textit{General Lee’s Army}, 448.
\textsuperscript{21} Cpl. Fred A. Brode to his sister Josephine Trenchard, 27 December 1864, \textit{Brode Papers}, Museum of the Confederacy Archives (MOC), Richmond, VA.
\textsuperscript{22} Caldwell, \textit{The History of a Brigade of South Carolinians}, 255.
\textsuperscript{23} Glatthaar, \textit{General Lee’s Army}, 446.
J. Tracy Power writes of the army’s response to its soldiers’ complaints that “commissary officers often responded to such reports with various explanations that were technically correct but displayed little sympathy for the plight of the soldiers in the ranks.” While these hardships helped to cause widespread desertion and the eventual Confederate defeat, the soldiers who stayed somehow developed the ability to overcome them in order to base their decisions upon matters other than day-to-day survival and comfort.

The best example of this characteristic is the way soldiers responded to news about Union victories across other regions in the South as well as the war’s political implications. Because the Confederate soldiers at Petersburg maintained the ability to think in strategic and political terms, incoming news rather than the daily misery of trench life caused the most fluctuation between hope and despair among soldiers manning the front lines. They understood that the lack of proper food and clothing was a national phenomenon and was largely a consequence of the naval blockades as well as the campaigns of Sherman and Union General Philip Sheridan in other theaters of the war. News updates on these events served to squeeze hope out of the Confederate people as well as the men in Lee’s army.

Another example involves the 1864 Union presidential election. James McPherson writes that the “election was a referendum on the war and emancipation. No one could be entirely sure what the consequences of a

\[24\] Capt. Nathaniel V. Watkins to his wife, 19 January 1865, Watkins Papers, Swem Library Special Collections (SWEM), College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, VA.

\[25\] Power, Lee’s Miserables, 224.
Democratic victory would be. To the soldiers in the Confederate trenches surrounding Petersburg, Lincoln’s re-election would protract an already lengthy war whereas his defeat might help the Confederate cause. In an episode that served as a microcosm for the war as a political conflict, Confederate and Union pickets carrying on a peaceful conversation outside Petersburg once broke into a fight after one of the Southerners called Lincoln a “damned abolitionist.”

The strength of Democratic Presidential candidate George McClellan was promising enough to prevent many Confederates from deserting throughout the fall, and it made politics the central focus of those who endured the miseries of trench life on a daily basis.

In this hopeful climate leading up to the Presidential election of 1864 rumors circulated through the Army of Northern Virginia that peace might come soon. From the trenches on July 26, 1864, Fred A. Brode wrote home to his sister, Josephine Trenchard, that he hoped “this fall will decide the fate of this war, and give peace once more. I should not be surprised if the next Presidential Campaign will settle this thing. I do not believe that the people in the North will stand it much [longer]. They are getting tired of the war I think.”

Shortly after the Democratic national convention in 1864, Nathaniel Watkins wrote home excitedly curious about what his wife thought of McClellan while explaining his own approval of the nomination. Much to many of the Confederate soldiers’ disappointment, Lincoln was re-elected on November 8, 1864. Afterwards, some

28 Fred A. Brode to his sister Josephine Trenchard, 26 July 1864, MOC.
29 Nathaniel V. Watkins to his wife, September 10, 1864, SWEM.
soldiers began to doubt that there could ever be peace, as when Luther Swank of Virginia wrote home that “Old Abe is elected again and all hopes of an honorable peace are yet far in the distance.”30 Others somehow managed to twist the news optimistically, as when one Virginian believed that Lincoln’s “election will cause a revolution in the North West, while McClellan, if elected, will be able to rally more men to the army.”31 Power explains that such optimism remained among Confederate soldiers, “perhaps as much to reassure themselves as to convince their families and friends.”32

The most important result of Lincoln’s re-election in 1864 was the affirmation that the war would continue until the Union was restored. From the Confederate trenches, the results of the November elections triggered mostly pessimism. Captain Elmore Hall, for example, wrote home to his father that “We are in for four years more – Well, I can stand it, and on my own account don’t dread it at all, but I do feel for the many in our country who will suffer from it.”33 While Hall believed he would persevere, many in the army did not. The news of Lincoln’s re-election along with the coming of cold weather sent waves of surrendering Confederates to Union pickets. One Confederate soldier informed another that he would be deserting, because “A. Lincoln is elected for four more years” and that “he could not stand the idea of hardship of four more long years of war.”34

30 Luther L. Swank to his sister Kate, 19 November 1864, Library of Virginia Archives (LOV), Richmond, VA.
31 Aaron Sheehan-Dean, Why Confederates Fought, 175.
33 Ibid., 218.
34 Ibid., 219.
One reason that desertion became especially problematic for the Confederate government at Petersburg was the mindset of the individual soldier. Joseph Glatthaar believes that “Confederates came from a society that encouraged independence and independent-mindedness.” Because of this characteristic, Lee always had a difficult time “breaking soldiers of the practices of leaving the line with wounded comrades, just drifting away from combat because they did not feel like fighting, or plundering in the midst of battle.”

In the final months at Petersburg, particularly after the re-election of Abraham Lincoln, soldiers not only deserted more frequently, but an increasing number simply went over to the Union army. That so many of them left for enemy lines at this time also forced both armies to make important decisions regarding the actions of these soldiers. These men did not leave directly for home, but instead risked immediate surrender to enemy forces, in many cases to avoid being arrested by other Confederates for desertion.

The most obvious cause of this phenomenon was the failure of the Confederacy to provide for the army. By the end of the war, writes Bruce Catton, “The Confederacy was visibly failing – in manpower, in rations, in equipment.” One Federal officer reported that forty deserters came to his lines over a span of forty-eight hours, noting that this statistic was about average. One of these deserters was sixty years of age and immediately began cursing the Confederacy in front of a group of Union soldiers. “When these men talked about the Southern cause, it was said, they would remark that it was a rich man’s war

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35 Glatthaar, General Lee’s Army, 466
and a poor man’s fight.”\textsuperscript{36} To many Union observers, it was simply war weariness and contempt for the Confederacy that drove these men to desert and surrender. While these issues undoubtedly motivated Confederates to leave their trenches, the growing trend was also a result of a Union strategy to communicate their merciful plans for peace to the Confederates defending Petersburg.

The men who voluntarily surrendered were a valuable asset to the Union army in many ways. First of all they provided Federal officers with significant intelligence regarding the size and morale of Lee’s army. Second, the Union army promoted Confederates’ desertion as a weapon by directly appealing to additional Confederate soldiers to desert and surrender. In August 1864, Grant issued his \textit{Circular No. 31}, “which stated that rebel deserters could not be enrolled, drafted, used as substitutes, or otherwise recruited into the United States Army.” Going even further, he also offered the deserters (along with Southern civilians) high payments for weapons, ammunition, animals, and others supplies. Last, and most important, he agreed to transport new defectors back to their homes if the territory was under Union control. Added to this promise were generous job offers on the railroads or in telegraph offices behind the front lines.\textsuperscript{37}

Before these offers, Grant had also stopped the exchange of prisoners in order to further wound the Confederacy’s supply of soldiers. In contrast to capture, voluntary surrender offered what a P.O.W. camp could not: peace, food, 

\textsuperscript{36} Catton, \textit{A Stillness at Appomattox}, 652-653.

\textsuperscript{37} Mark A. Weitz, \textit{A Higher Duty: Desertion among Georgia Troops during the Civil War} (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2000), 57.
money, and the possibility of going home permanently to friends and family. To communicate his message to Confederate soldiers, Grant took advantage of the interactions formed between opposing men on picket duty, which tended to be relatively peaceful throughout the war. How well the message passed through Confederate trenches is difficult to determine, but Grant’s merciful offers fell in line with Federal peace plans and seem to have been one of the few avenues that Lincoln’s government used to communicate directly to the people Lincoln himself described as “deluded.” The soldiers who actually made it to Union lines during this time validated a strategy that helped end the war with less bloodshed than might otherwise have ensued. According to historian Mark A. Weitz, writing specifically about Georgian deserters, these men helped to “seed occupied areas in the South with reconstructed soldiers, who might make the transition of its civilian population easier once the war [ended].”38

Part of Grant’s order that would have been most appealing to the Confederates was his promise to send deserters home after taking an oath of loyalty to the Union. The ability to return home to take care of families was the highest and most honorable priority for many men, especially as families and farms threatened to fall apart in the final year of the war. For example, Annie Evans, anticipating the coming of Sherman’s army, wrote to her husband at Petersburg: “I can hardly tell you my anxieties and fears for a few days past. I feel sometimes almost ready to faint by the way – so much excitement, so many thousand rumors, and so much turmoil every way.”39 Another wife wrote to her

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38 Weitz, A Higher Duty, 58.
39 Glatthaar, General Lee’s Army, 449.
husband simply: “I want you to come home as soon as you can after you get this letter.”

Letters from wives and other family members had a profound influence on soldiers, but the eventual absence of letters caused by Union occupation made the pull of home even stronger. Sherman’s March in particular forced many Confederates out of the trenches to search for answers about their families.

Internal pressures faced by soldiers in the Army of Northern Virginia—mainly lack of food, supplies, and equipment—laid the foundation for a high rate of desertion at Petersburg. Concerns about friends and families back home, however, had a stronger influence over the soldiers who eventually deserted. Also, external events such as Sherman’s March often became the tipping point for many deserters. While there were soldiers of every type who deserted, those who earned less money, who did not own slaves, who were fighting closer to home, and who had children deserted at a slightly higher rate. The best conclusion about both deserters and non-deserters, though, comes from Ella Lonn’s 1928 study of Civil War desertion: “All Southern soldiers had a strong consciousness of themselves as free moral agents; they were wholly unaccustomed to acting on any other than their own motion.”

By 1865, however, Confederate soldiers choosing to desert from the Army of Northern Virginia would find it more difficult to act on “their own motion.” Some even concluded that desertion was too much of a risk and decided to stay for this

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41 Ibid., 109-110.
reason alone. In the past, men who were caught deserting could expect a death sentence, but were more often sentenced to hard labor or a forfeiture of pay. In the spring of 1864, Lee began to see that changes were going to be necessary when he wrote to Jefferson Davis about deserters, "It is certain that a relaxation of the sternness of discipline as a mere act of indulgence, unsupported by good reasons, is followed by an increase in the number of offenders." From the perspective of the Confederate leadership, the war had always been about getting soldiers to fight. Consequently, during the Siege of Petersburg, the minds of the individual Confederate soldiers became the primary battleground. Lee had to motivate his soldiers to continue to kill the enemy, while Grant was doing his best to convince them of the merits of surrender.

Here, the conflict between military and domestic needs was unavoidable. By the final year of the war, more families were suffering than ever before, yet the Confederate armies were still in need of every man who could fight. In the past, state governments had focused much of their recruiting efforts on assuring soldiers that their families would be taken care of. As late as April 1864, at least one Alabama county continued to recruit volunteers by raising funds for families left at home. In the ideal Confederate world, armies would have had enough soldiers to defend farms and plantations while those plantations sustained the

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44 Bessie Martin, *Desertion of Alabama Troops From the Confederate Army: A Study in Sectionalism* (New York: AMS Press, 1966), 168. Named the Central Aid Society of Talladega, the organization promised to donate $20,000 annually to families whose men left for war. During the final year of the war, they no longer had the ability to support at least 3,979 individuals then in need and had to rely on taxation rather than voluntary contributions.
welfare of local families. Instead, families and plantations alike suffered from the pressures of war. Volunteers continued to join and many soldiers continued to fight, but it had also become obvious that neither local organizations nor the government had the ability to support the families of soldiers.

A similar strategy meant to benefit the families at home was the furlough system. Before Petersburg, Lee often granted furloughs to soldiers as a way to raise the morale of his troops, especially veterans and those dealing with family crises at home. Many historians have concluded that the Union army’s promise of a thirty-day furlough was reward enough to impel a majority of Union veterans to re-enlist and “hazard three years more of hell.”45 But the Confederacy could not afford to have soldiers go on furlough from the trenches of Petersburg. In addition to creating immediate manpower shortages, the lucky few soldiers who left Petersburg on furlough often remained home illegally for the remainder of the conflict. In 1865, only one in every 100 soldiers received a furlough, and these soldiers had to be from regions of the Confederacy not yet taken by Union armies (the latter encompassing parts of South Carolina, North Carolina, Louisiana, and Virginia). Lee did, however, offer furloughs to soldiers who could somehow recruit new volunteers from home, though this was virtually impossible by 1865.46Unable to send soldiers home or support the families of soldiers, the Confederate government needed new methods to prevent desertion. Confederate leaders such as Lee and General James Longstreet concluded that the threat of punishment was their only choice.

One Confederate deserter, whether correct or not, put into words the Confederacy’s greatest predicament after Union cavalry captured him in the Shenandoah Valley: “Large numbers of Lee’s army are deserting daily; sometimes as many as 200 a day. At least half would desert if they had the opportunity.”

This soldier’s belief that many in the army could not desert might have had something to do with Lee’s attempts to change the way his army functioned. During World War II, Soviet leadership coerced its troops to fight the Germans by placing a rank of machine guns behind them during battle. Although soldiers in the Army of Northern Virginia rarely experienced such extreme treatment, many of the changes were made with similar purposes in mind. Lee and Longstreet obviously understood the importance of limiting every opportunity that their men had to escape the military—especially while Grant was running a successful campaign to incite desertion from the Confederate trenches. The picket line was where the Confederate army decided to focus its efforts to stop desertion, largely because Grant’s tactics were proving successful. Writing home in the summer of 1864, Brode described the normal process of trading with Yankee pickets: Confederates would give Union men tobacco while receiving coffee in return. But on this day, he wrote, “even this has stopped, and I am very glad of it, as it gives the men too much chance to desert. Any man going in front of the line of pickets is to be shot.”

How many of these deserters were shot at Petersburg is unknown, but the new rule was especially noticeable to Union soldiers in opposing trenches. Bruce Catton concludes that “heavy firing on the

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47 Power, Lee’s Miserables, 236.
48 Cpl. Fred A. Brode to his sister Josephine Trenchard, 27 December 1864, Brode Papers, MOC.
picket lines was always taken to mean that the enemy was trying to keep deserters away.⁴⁹

After Longstreet recovered from wounds that he received at the Battle of the Wilderness and returned to duty, he advised and implemented further changes to fight desertion. He first ordered that abatis (large, sharpened obstacles) be placed in front of his own picket lines to block the interaction with Union soldiers where possible. He also positioned his most disloyal units across from Union colored regiments, because few Confederate soldiers were willing to suffer the supposed dishonor of surrendering to them. In addition to these measures, Longstreet warned his soldiers that “remedies of the most severe kind are required to keep the army together this winter.”⁵⁰

Lee also took more extreme measures to, as Glatthaar writes, “change the culture of his army.”⁵¹ In his General Order No. 8, Lee warned that “The penalty for advising or persuading a soldier to desert is death.”⁵² Later, he appointed what were called “fire closers.” These men wore special badges and received orders to prevent straggling during marches; they would stand behind their own soldiers in the trenches “with loaded guns and fixed bayonets.”⁵³ Like Soviet soldiers during World War II, the Confederate soldiers, during what became the final two months of the war, theoretically faced the threat of immediate death from men within their own army if they attempted to desert.

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⁴⁹ Bruce Catton, A Stillness at Appomattox, 652.
⁵⁰ Glatthaar, General Lee’s Army, 435.
⁵¹ Ibid., 455.
⁵² Power, Lee’s Miserables, 262.
⁵³ Glatthaar, General Lee’s Army, 455.
The changes in the Army of Northern Virginia, however, were often ineffective. Often, soldiers refused to fire on their comrades or “deliberately fired away from them.” Moreover, a sympathetic understanding of desertion existed among the men, as demonstrated by comments made by enlisted soldiers about an Alabama Captain’s desertion: “Captain Reaves was not disloyal. He is like many another man.”

Virginian John J. Trainer made light of a desertion attempt in which “some of our boys would holler over to them [the Union army] that here is your peace commissioners.” Even so, as Glatthaar observes, “the mere fact that the Confederacy had to post pickets in the rear of the army spoke volumes.”

A code of honor that prioritized the family and local communities initially served to motivate men during times of chaos. At the end of the Civil War at Petersburg, however, honor only caused confusion for Confederates faced with the decision to leave the trenches for home. Just as men in the trenches often forgave those who deserted, deserters also felt badly for those they left behind. One group of North Carolinians left a note before parting that “explained their reasons for leaving, asked their comrades to forgive them, and said they intended ‘to take 60 days furlough’ and return, assuring that they meant ‘no crime’ by their actions.” For many, there was no longer an honorable course of action, only a difficult decision among equally dishonorable outcomes.

54 Glatthaar, General Lee’s Army, 451.
55 John J. Trainer to his sister, February 10, 1865, Trainer Papers, LOV.
56 Glatthaar, General Lee’s Army, 451.
57 Power, Lee’s Miserable, 261-262.
The term desertion carries with it connotations of cowardice and disloyalty. Yet it is possible, especially given the unusually high rate of desertion over such a short span of time at the end of the Civil War, that the majority of Confederate soldiers came to respect the need for deserters to reach their families as an act no less noble than fighting. Some men may have stayed simply because they did not think they could make it home, or because they feared being shot by a fellow Confederate while attempting to flee. After all this, though, the Army of Northern Virginia still remained a product of its own people and produced an environment in which desertion was difficult to prevent. As the Union army gained the ability to threaten the safety of every family in the South, Confederate soldiers often deserted without losing the respect of the men who decided to stay.

Confederate soldiers in Lee’s army took pride in free will: they did not want to be “chained down” by either the Union Army or their own leaders as they were at Petersburg. When they felt that their service to the government or to the military no longer offered an honorable means to defend friends and family at home, many deserted. As one anonymous man complained to Georgia Governor Joseph Brown: “Must myself and my wife have our hearts torn from us, dripping with patriotic blood?” 58 One deserter made clear his opinion regarding honor when he wrote, “I love my country as dear as anyone, but am unwilling to sacrifice domestic happiness to good public opinion. Anyone that would do it is unworthy of either.” 59 For many, however, the decision was more difficult. While

58 Weitz, A Higher Duty, 121.
59 Glatthaar, General Lee’s Army, 411.
those who stayed and those who deserted acted differently in the end, their motivations often revolved around the ability to maintain independence and defend honor. Above all, both deserters and non-deserters were conscious, and often critical, of the weaknesses and failures of a Confederate government that could no longer support or defend its people from the chaos of war.
2. Honor before Peace

As the Confederate and Union armies settled in for a siege in front of Petersburg during the final half of 1864, political events and elections came to reflect the will of many Confederate people to carry on a faltering war effort. Just as Lincoln’s re-election at the end of 1864 signaled a Union commitment to victory, Confederate elections during that time reveal much about the resolve of civilians and soldiers to continue resisting. The 1864 North Carolina gubernatorial race between the incumbent Zebulon Vance and William Holden, for example, turned into a contest exclusively focused on war and peace. Vance, though a persistent critic of Jefferson Davis and the government in Richmond, nevertheless promised a commitment to Confederate independence: “No reconstruction or submission, but perpetual independence.” On the other hand, Holden and his supporters ran on a peace platform, acknowledging that “if the people of North Carolina are for perpetual conscription, impressments, and seizures to keep up a perpetual, devastating and exhausting war, let them vote for Governor Vance.”

James McPherson characterizes this election as “the most serious internal threat to the Confederacy” up to that time in the war and writes that Holden’s plans might have led North Carolina back into the Union. Instead, the population of North Carolina showed a determination to continue fighting the Yankees and voted overwhelmingly for Zebulon Vance. Furthermore, of the 15,033 soldiers who voted in the election, 13,209 decided to support Vance – the

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candidate who "would fight the war to the finish" in order to secure an honorable peace.62 These soldiers from North Carolina were tired of war, but a considerable majority remained unwilling to give in to Union demands. For these individuals and many other Confederate soldiers defending of Petersburg, fighting the war remained the most honorable choice.

The men of the Army of Northern Virginia held diverse opinions about the war. Yet there were common strains of thought that existed among those who decided to stay. Many of them concluded for various reasons that military duty in the Confederate army was the best way to defend their homes and families from the increasingly aggressive tactics of the invading armies of the Union. In his influential book about Civil War soldiers, For Cause and Comrades, James McPherson admits that there were soldiers who became "negative, cynical, and callous" as the war progressed, and that "without question there was a decline in the romantic flag-waving rhetoric of the war's first two years." Yet McPherson concludes that "this is not the whole story. Indeed it is not even the most important part of the story."63 Pointing out continued enthusiasm for the war until the very end, historian Jason Phillips similarly recognizes that many soldiers "saw and fought a war radically different from the one we imagine in retrospect.” Calling these soldiers “diehard rebels,” Phillips believes not only that many Confederates desired to fight it out until the end, but that they expressed a

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“resilient ethos” and a “culture of invincibility”\textsuperscript{64} Just as thousands of soldiers chose to desert from Petersburg for the honorable defense of loved ones at home, many others chose to stay with the Army of Northern Virginia for the same reasons. Of these, many even believed that they could still win the war.

One important reason for misplaced Confederate confidence was General Lee. As long as Robert E. Lee, called “Uncle Robert” or “Marse Robert” by his soldiers, was in command, there would be Confederate soldiers willing to overcome hardships and fight to the finish. His ability to keep an army of thousands in the field during the final months of the war affected events as much as any other factor. At Petersburg, Lee became representative of the many men who did not desert him, and those same men shared a desire to emulate the unwavering sense of duty apparent in their general. Most important, Lee became a final but potent symbol of hope for soldiers and civilians alike who wanted to believe that independence was still possible. Author Clifford Dowdey believes that, during “the months of long agony while the Confederacy was disintegrating around the Richmond-Petersburg stronghold, there were thousands of soldiers with Lee who never believed they could be defeated with Uncle Robert.”\textsuperscript{65} One Alabama soldier wrote home that “we are not a frade of the Yankees while we have old General Lee to lead us in the fites.” Another relayed to his family that “what Marse Robert says is gospel in this squad – the A.N.V.”\textsuperscript{66} At the beginning of 1865, the Richmond \textit{Examiner} reported: “We hear from all parts of the

\textsuperscript{64} Jason Phillips, \textit{Diehard Rebels: The Confederate Culture of Invincibility} (Athens, University of Georgia, 2007), 2-8.
\textsuperscript{65} Clifford Dowdey, \textit{Lee’s Last Campaign: The Story of Lee and his Men Against Grant – 1864} (Boston: Skyhorse, 1960).
\textsuperscript{66} Power, \textit{Lee’s Miserables}, 298.
Richmond lines that the appointment of General Lee to the command of all armies of the Confederacy has been the cause of great reanimation in the army.  

One soldier who stayed with General Lee until the end was Carlton McCarthy, who later wrote a memoir about his experiences as a private in the army. A vivid description about what the soldiers thought of their commanding general arose from events shortly after the surrender at Appomattox Courthouse. McCarthy recalled in 1882 that "not a man was heard to blame General Lee. On the contrary, all expressed the greatest sympathy for him and declared their willingness to submit at once, or fight to the last man, as he ordered." During both the siege and the escape along the Appomattox River, the soldiers experienced numerous hardships. While soldiers continually blamed the Confederate government and its leadership, few ever blamed Lee. In fact, as McCarthy wrote, "At no period in the war was he held in higher veneration or regarded with more sincere affection." For many soldiers fearful about what the future might bring, Lee's presence made the Army of Northern Virginia and its long network of defenses appear as the final bulwark of a society torn apart by war. He not only avoided denunciation by his men, but became an example of duty and honor to men faced with life-threatening decisions.

While Lee was one powerful source of Confederate hope, there were other reasons why many soldiers maintained a positive outlook at Petersburg. Whereas events during 1864 and 1865 caused many to desert, other soldiers

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found the ability to cope by believing certain rumors that have proven untrue in retrospect. Charles Baughman of Virginia, on October 4, 1864, wrote to his father about a story concerning Sherman’s army in Atlanta, “We heard here last night that [Joe] Wheeler had compelled Sherman to evacuate Atlanta and that he [Sherman] was retreating to Chattanooga.” Such a rumor may have given Baughman and others hope that Lee’s army could break out and force Grant’s army to retreat in a similar manner while also calming fears among soldiers with loved ones in Georgia and other parts of the Deep South.

Sherman never withdrew as Baughman had believed. Yet, as Sherman’s army moved relatively unopposed through Georgia and into the Carolinas, optimistic rumors never faded among Confederates. Instead, these rumors continued to affect Confederate soldiers forced to decide whether to fight on. A letter written from Nathaniel Venable Watkins to his wife in February predicted that he thought Sherman would run into a “trap of some kind” that would finally “destroy his army.” Less than two weeks before Lee evacuated Petersburg and Richmond, Private Edward Armstrong of North Carolina wrote home to his cousin that he had heard that Confederate General Joseph Johnston was about to “whip Sherman,” that Johnston would “no doubt” receive reinforcements, and that Sherman would never be able to march through their home state as easily as he had through South Carolina. Sherman’s success proved to be an instrument of psychological warfare that convinced many soldiers defending Petersburg to desert, but it was not as effective against Lee’s army as one might assume.

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69 Charles Baughman to his father, 4 October 1864, MOC.
70 Nathaniel V. Watkins to his wife, 23 February 1865, SWEM.
71 Edward Armstrong to his cousin, 22 March 1865, MOC.
Those who stayed despite the overwhelming success of Sherman’s march did so by investing hope in mostly false information. The high number of references to Sherman’s army by Confederate soldiers at Petersburg depicts the environment they lived in – one in which men sought but often could not obtain definitive answers about the fate of families, land, and property back home.

Soldiers also expressed optimism because they did not want to believe that their sacrifices had been for nothing. In March 1864, Richard Brooks wrote to his mother responding to a rumor that the army would soon evacuate Petersburg: “Now I cannot believe that General Lee will give up a place he has spent so much time and labor on, and has rendered almost impregnable.”

Having to admit defeat after nearly four years of bloodshed was difficult for many of the men. Charles Baughman’s letter to his wife demonstrates the power of individual investment and sacrifice, “We have no idea of submitting after having underwent all the hardships and dangers of the last four years,” he wrote. Such an expression was not uncommon from the soldiers who stayed, and this attitude made defeat an unacceptable option. While men continued to fight at Petersburg in the belief that the war would still be won, many also grasped every opportunity to remain optimistic in order to avoid having to declare that their efforts had been futile. In many cases, they also hoped to buoy the spirits of loved ones back home who were beginning to lose hope.

Loyalty to Robert E. Lee as well as this desire for victory also helps explain the strong support among troops at Petersburg for the planned

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72 Richard Brooks to his “Ma,” 4 March 1865, Brooks family Papers, LOV.
73 Charles A. Baughman to his wife, 19 January 1865.
recruitment of African-American soldiers into the Confederate army. When the
disastrous manpower shortage finally forced lawmakers to pass the measure on
March 13, 1865, some of Lee’s soldiers could not be convinced to fight alongside
former slaves, as when one North Carolinian wrote, “I hope they will not send
[African-American soldiers] to the Army for I don’t want to fight with the
negroes.”74 Many of them, however, cited Lee’s influence when describing their
opinions. Charles Baughman wrote simply, “Give Lee negro soldiers if he
wants.”75 A fellow Virginian noted, “I believe there will be a majority for putting
them in as soldiers. Gen. Lee is in favor of it I shall cast my vote for it. I am in
favor of giving him anything he wants in the way of gaining our independence.”76
During the final weeks of the war, most soldiers — one man estimated “nine
tenths of the army” — came to agree with opinions such as these.77 While many
in the Army of Northern Virginia were pragmatic enough to understand the need
for black soldiers, especially as desertion increased, it still remained a delicate
issue in all corners of the Confederacy. Given the significance and timing of the
decision, “Marse Robert’s” influence over the opinion of his own men on the
issue of African-American soldiers is undeniable.

Although many of Lee’s troops eventually came to support the arming of
slaves to fight for the Confederacy, the war itself forced all soldiers to confront
important racial issues and cultural values. One such soldier in the Army of
Northern Virginia predicted that there would be “an awful shaking of the nation”

74 Jeff Toalson, No Soap, No Pay, Diarrhea, Dysentery & Desertion: A Composite Diary of the
Last 16 Months of the Confederacy from 1864 to 1865 (Lincoln: iUniverse, 2006), 346.
75 Charles Baughman to his wife, 19 January 1865, MOC.
76 Silas Chandler to his wife, 21 February 1865, Chandler Papers, LOV.
77 Power, Lee’s Miserables, 253.
when black bondage disappeared.\textsuperscript{78} Confederate troops at Petersburg reveal a fragile period of transition caused by the destruction of slavery during the war. One significant example occurred in front of Petersburg after the Battle of the Crater on July 30, 1864, a battle in which a black Union division made one of the failed attacks against the remnants of a blown up Confederate trench. Showing what the war had become along with what the future might hold, Anthony Sydnor Barksdale wrote home to family in Louisiana that “the slorter of negroes was awful...It gows mighty against our boys to take negro prisoners. They would never do it, if General Lee had not ordered it to be done.”\textsuperscript{79} African-Americans fighting at Petersburg served to intensify the conflict in the minds of the Confederates, and it may have provided the motivation necessary to remain in the army during the final months of the war.

Other episodes of this nature occurred between Lee’s men and black soldiers during their interaction as pickets. While white soldiers from both armies tended to minimize the violence on the picket line whenever possible, Confederates deliberately escalated the violence when entrenched across from colored units. Alabamian Samuel Pickens recorded in his diary that “the Yankee lines are [two miles] distant along here. There has been no picket-firing except when the Yanks put negro pickets on & then our boys opened on them and kept it up till they were taken away the next day.”\textsuperscript{80} During one period of the battle, Union General Ambrose Burnside’s IX corps experienced “vicious” fighting on a

\textsuperscript{78} Chandra Manning, \textit{What this Cruel War was over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War} (New York: Vintage, 2008), 172.

\textsuperscript{79} Anthony Sydnor Barksdale to his sister Omis, August 1, 1864, MOC, spelling as in original.

\textsuperscript{80} G. Ward Hobbs, \textit{Voices from Company D: Diaries by the Greensboro Guards, Fifth Alabama Infantry Regiment, Army of Northern Virginia} (Athens: University of Georgia, 2003), 341.
daily basis after Confederate soldiers learned that the corps contained a division of African-American soldiers.\textsuperscript{81} Slaveholding soldiers may have had the strongest motive to fight and preserve an institution that had made many of them wealthy, but Confederates who did not own slaves still felt the need to defend racist values by escalating the level of violence at Petersburg. Confederate General James Longstreet, as noted earlier, placed his weakest units across from black Federal soldiers to persuade his men to stay in the trenches. For reasons such as these, had it not been for their own manpower deficit, Longstreet, Lee and other Confederate leaders might have viewed the presence of African-Americans in the Union army as an ironic contributor to soldierly motivation and discipline.

The South’s history of slavery affected the actions of Confederate soldiers in the trenches also by providing a powerful image of what submission to another looked like. That consciousness motivated many to continue fighting. Sergeant Andrew Sydnor Barksdale believed that, even if “The North tells us if we come back in the Union every state should have its rights,” he would still not approve of peace because “[the North] would then commence their deep scheming to get us bound both hand and foot.” His rhetoric related surrender to enslavement, and he ended the letter with even stronger words: “So now boys of the South take fresh courage and let’s fight to the last for Dixie.”\textsuperscript{82} One North Carolinian writing to his brother warned of what he saw as the most dishonorable of consequences when he wrote that a Union victory would “set [the black man] free, put him on

\textsuperscript{81} Catton, \textit{A Stillness at Appomattox}, 597.
\textsuperscript{82} Andrew Sydnor Barskdale to unknown, August 1864, MOC.
equality with you, [allow him to] eat with your Daughter at Church or elsewhere if she resists it or insults the Black Scoundrel she is arrested...and taken to prisen."83 Using vivid language to describe their worst fears, these men fought under the suspicion that military surrender would also result in the surrender of their cherished status as free men.

Terms such as “subjugation” or “submission” came to describe the consequences of peace without honor. Charles Baughman, writing home about his desire for an “honorable peace,” represented this feeling. “On the peace question,” he wrote, “it is true that some of the men are discouraged and ready to give up, but that feeling is not as widely spread as some persons say. The great majority of us are determined never to submit.”84 At nearly the same time, Silas Chandler also wrote from the trenches that “I look upon subjugation as being the next thing to death.”85 In a letter designed to cheer up his “despondent” wife, D.C. Snyder warned that, “If the cause of the South is lost, all freedom of thought and speech is lost and we go back into the old monarchical forms of government.”86 Soldiers at Petersburg continually linked defeat with subjugation or even enslavement to the conquering Federal armies. These worries, especially among soldiers who stayed to fight at Petersburg, stemmed from a fear of dishonor – a realistic threat to white men who grew up in a slave society in which males of a different skin color did not own property, could not care for their families, and thus lacked the entwined virtues of independence and manhood.

83 Manning, What this Cruel War was Over, 169.
84 Charles Baughman to his father, 6 February 1865, MOC.
85 Silas Chandler to his wife, 21 February 1865, LOV.
As the war progressed, events seemingly reinforced these suspicions held by Confederate soldiers at Petersburg and served to create a caricature of the Northern soldier as a dishonorable plunderer. After hearing news that the Union army was once again in his hometown of Fredericksburg, Virginia, cavalryman Marshall Decker became especially worried about his wife. “I fear you have been stripped of the little you had. I think it is perfectly unnecessary to destroy the property of noncombatants and far worse to take from the mouths of the old and helpless.”87 In a similar letter eight days later, he described the Yankees’ “wanton destruction” as “barbarous,” added that “God will reward them their just deserts” for their “black deeds of plunder,” and cautioned his wife to “keep out of their sights. Don’t expose yourself to the gaze of such a rabble.”88 After hearing stories about the consequences of defeat in other parts of the South, many Confederate soldiers saw no other way to avoid such a fate than continued military resistance, if for nothing else than as a method of revenge.

Even as soldiers deserted during Sherman’s March or while Sheridan’s army destroyed crops in the Shenandoah Valley, others decided that the Army of Northern Virginia was the only organization left that could defend against Union “barbarity.” In doing so, they attached personal honor to military duty. After learning about Union cavalry movements in the Shenandoah Valley, Captain James Whitehorne asked his sister, “did the Yankees during the dusk raid get to our house? Write to me at once and let me know if they got there.”89 Robert Pooler Myers, a surgeon from Georgia, recorded in his diary during October,

87 Marshall Elton Decker to his wife Alphia Ellen, 2 June 1864, Decker Papers, LOV.
88 Ibid., 10 June 1864.
89 James Whitehorne to his sister, 8 July 1864, Whitehorne Family Papers, LOV.
1864, that the enemy had “destroyed everything in their way – burning Mills, barns, fences and also all the private property they could put their hands on – even to wearing apparel of women and children,” a dishonorable trait if there ever was one. 

By the time of the Siege of Petersburg, the war’s carnage was expanding to directly affect a greater number of communities in the South, and one important element of southern honor, writes Wyatt-Brown was “honor as immortalizing valor, particularly in the character of revenge against familial and community enemies.”

As fears became reality for soldiers at Petersburg – after countless stories of the sufferings of helpless women, children, and elderly reached the trenches – many of them chose what they viewed as the honorable path and stayed in the army to defend the white South against the specter of debasement and tyranny. With each new Union military success, honor’s demand that individual soldiers continue risking their lives, grew even stronger for many.

Describing this phenomenon as the “powerful inertia generated by the war,” Aaron Sheehan-Dean explains that “Union depredations exacerbated already deep-seated antipathies toward the North that formed a component of [white Southerners’] attachment to the Confederacy.”

The communication between civilians and soldiers during this stage of the war became particularly important as rumors could provoke a variety of emotions and actions. Writing to his son, a private at Petersburg in February 1865, Davis M. Wood averred that he did not believe in “Yankee sincerity.” He also urged his son to “endure

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90 Personal diary of Robert Pooler Myers, 16th Georgia Infantry, MOC.
91 Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor, 34.
92 Sheehan-Dean, Why Confederates Fought, 181-182.
bravely” and avoid the “trashy” northern newspapers because “they are corrupt in style and unfit for a Southern Man to read.”93 Andrew R. Barber wrote home to his cousin in Dublin, Virginia: “I have just read a letter from Bro. Gabl. & Daughter Mollie giving account of depredations &c of the Yankees. They now know & feel what I knew & was made to feel nearly four years ago – only they have never been made to suffer from the vandals as I have suffered.”94 Barber, a dedicated secessionist from the beginning, described the growing contempt for Federal forces as the war escalated to directly affect a greater number of civilians. One wife wrote to her husband about General Sheridan’s scorched earth policy in the Shenandoah Valley that the “Yankees behaved very shamefully to Mrs. Sturman – took every eatable out of her house – meat, lard, and everything – More rapes committed on [the] nicest ladies.”95

Because soldiers concerned themselves with the welfare of local communities, the white women of the South had as powerful an influence on the final fate of Lee’s army as the individual soldiers themselves did. The first priority of every soldier who had loved ones at home was to ensure their safety. In an undated letter written from Petersburg to his wife Ella, A.E. Decker concluded: “I am dependent on thee therefore I hope and pray you will take special care of yourself.”96 Worried that he might never see her again, William H. Bowling wrote to his wife two weeks before the Confederate evacuation of Petersburg that he would be sending her a ring to keep any future suitors away from her should he

93 Toalson, No Soap, No Pay, Diarrhea, Dysentery & Desertion, 325.
94 Andrew R. Barber to his cousin Mary Anna Silbert, 23 October 1864, Valley Personal Papers, UVA, http://valley.lib.virginia.edu/papers/A7511.
95 Toalson, No Soap, No Pay, Diarreah, Dysentery, and Desertion, 199.
96 A.E. Decker to wise his Ella, undated, Decker Papers, LOV.
never return home, because he expected that boys would "be flying a Round" her. As rumors rose about the potential evacuation of the Confederate capital, Charles Baughman became concerned about whether his family would leave the city, "[If you have to evacuate], do you think it would be admirable for you, mom, and [his sister] Minnie to stay in Richmond?" Amid crisis and uncertainty, Confederate soldiers at Petersburg revealed apprehension not only about their own welfare, but especially the fate of Confederate women.

Relations with civilians at home became important for preserving not only individual honor, but the family’s reputation as well. During the winter of 1865, for example, Silas Chandler wrote to his wife to express his worries about the future of his family: "If I were to desert it would be a disgrace on me and my children forever." In their letters, some of these men displayed concerns about the participation of other family members in the war. In a November message to his sister, Fred Brode wrote that a boy in the family named Lucius should sign up to join the army now that he was older. He even stated that "anyone under the age of conscription and coming from enemy lines [such as parts of Louisiana] has the privilege of joining [any regiment] he chooses." Brode was interested not only in further recruitment but also in preserving the honor of a younger family member. Similarly, Baughman helpfully responded to his father’s disappointment that he was too old to join by telling him that he should not feel ashamed about claiming exemption, as "his health would not have lasted long in

97 William H. Bowling to his wife, 19 March 1865, William H. Bowling Letter, LOV.
98 Charles Baughman to his father, 25 January 1865, MOC.
99 Silas Chandler to his wife, 25 January 1865, LOV.
100 Fred A. Brode to his sister, 5 Nov 1864, MOC.
the trenches.”  Here, Baughman acknowledged that his father was not acting with dishonor by not serving in the military.

In these instances, letters from Petersburg to families show a strong and supportive connection between soldiers on the front lines and civilians at home. In different instances, and especially during the war’s final months, other soldiers began to feel powerfully disconnected from civilian society. Many letters written from the trenches at Petersburg exhibit a strong discontentment, bordering on hatred, regarding the population at home. Nathaniel Watkins wrote to his wife that the South should send all able-bodied men to Petersburg at once because there were “Thousands at home now.” He continued with harsh words about the South as a whole: “I wish every man, woman, and child in the South would forget how to pronounce the word [peace]...time for people to suffer a few hardships the army has been bearing for years.”

Just as women who remained loyal to the Confederacy helped motivate soldiers to stay in the trenches, supposedly disloyal women caused the soldiers who stayed at Petersburg much anxiety. J.F.J. Caldwell noted at the beginning of 1865 that “the very women began to fail us,” explaining that the “bloodshed had sickened them; their losses and their wants had become irritating to them. They began to complain, they lost heart, and, as a class they finally sat down and left us to ourselves.” In the same letter in which Baughman eased his father’s concerns about honor, he also ascribed dishonor to sister: “I suspect she is becoming like the rest of the girls, all of whom seem to prefer cowards to brave

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101 Charles Baughman to his father, 14 October 1864, MOC.
102 Nathaniel V. Watkins to his wife, 19 January 1865, SWEM.
103 Caldwell, The History of a Brigade of South Carolinians, 250.
Support from home naturally decreased after military failures at Petersburg and elsewhere, and the letters of loyal men in the trenches portray a divided white population in the South that had a negative influence on the army’s morale. Many of those who stayed relied upon soldierly devotion to best defend their honor and were unforgiving when they believed the civilian population failed to appreciate their sacrifices.

In his book about Civil War society, *Embattled Courage*, Gerald F. Linderman writes about the contrast between civilian understandings of the war and the reality of the conflict for soldiers, especially during 1864 and 1865. Generally speaking, according to Linderman, there are “two wars:” one experienced by civilians and the other by combatants. Secondly, as the war progresses, these different experiences by different groups in society can eventually “jeopardize soldier morale…and the cohesiveness of the nation’s military forces.”

While such a gulf in experience may have been more profound in the Union, whose states remained mostly untouched by large-scale military confrontations, the Confederate army still experienced difficulties of this nature. One letter written from the trenches at Petersburg in January 1865 mentioned Confederate soldiers rejoicing about the news of Union victories. The same letter also targets other white Southerners, perhaps of a more privileged class, by claiming that “Only fat cats want war to [the] bitter end.” Whatever forces motivated this man and his comrades to continue to do their duty in the

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104 Charles Baughman to his father, 6 February 1865, MOC.
106 EBS to his wife (no further identification of either), 17 January 1865, University of Duke, Durham, NC.
Confederate army despite their bitterness, his letter to his wife indicates a divide within the Confederacy at the end of the war that undoubtedly affected the soldiers in the trenches. Even among Confederates who remained within the Army of Northern Virginia late in the war there were some who seemed paradoxically to openly reject the idea of “fighting to the last for Dixie.”

At least as important, however, were the soldiers who banded together to defend the Confederacy while civilian support fell. Unlike the soldiers who grew despondent at Petersburg, some soldiers, according to Sheehan-Dean, felt motivated by the differences between soldiers and civilians. “One of the many paradoxes of the war in Virginia, was that the sense of persecution, almost living martyrdom, that many Confederate soldiers felt by 1864 imbued them with new resolve even as it isolated them from the people whom they fought to protect.”

Not only did soldiers defending Petersburg worry about the welfare of themselves and of loved ones back home; the conflict of opinion over the war effort also complicated decisions about whether to stay or to attempt desertion. For many of these soldiers, the growing diversity of opinion throughout the South provided an opportunity to declare their loyalty to the Confederacy during its weakest hour.

Beginning in January 1865, Confederate units began coming together in order to sign resolutions in which they declared their loyalty and willingness to continue fighting the war. Many of these declarations were published in newspapers in order to inspire civilians to continue supporting the army and its efforts to fight the Union forces. Published on January 28, the 1st Virginia Cavalry addressed their “friends at home” and their “comrades in arms,” stating

that “it would rather become us, if we are free, to prepare vigorously for another year of war” and that “such a course alone will lead to a speedy, lasting, and honorable peace.”⁹⁸ A particularly powerful resolution by the Palmetto Battery from South Carolina read:

We desire peace on no other terms than our recognition as an independent nation; that we will endure all hardships, dangers and suffering; and rather than submit to be the slaves of a Northern despot, we will fall with our backs to the field and our faces to the foe like Leonidas and his three hundred Spartans, who are still free in their proud charnel at Thermopylae.⁹⁹

J.F.J. Caldwell summarized his brigade’s February statement by recalling:

We had determined to carry on the contest as long as it should be at all possible, and we desired General Lee, the Congress, and the people of the South to know it; and therefore we did not hesitate to publish resolutions of as warlike a tone as the most ultra-secessionist could demand. But we were obliged to feel that the nation was on the point of submission, which required to be sustained in its position by a half-famished, half-naked army of fifty thousand men.

Upon adoption of this resolution, General McGowan, the brigade commander, visited his soldiers to give them a rousing speech that also served, according to Caldwell, to “animate” the troops.¹¹⁰ The resolutions did not put an end to desertion in the ranks. However, stemming from the ranks of soldiers themselves, they represent many soldiers’ continued commitment to the cause as well as their desire to rally civilian support by publicly declaring the noble intention of self-defense.

Passing these resolutions also made the decision to stay and fight an easier one for men who could not know the true intentions of their fellow soldiers,

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⁹⁸ “Spirit of the Army,” Richmond Enquirer, 28 January 1865.
⁹⁹ Ibid., 18 February 1865.
¹¹⁰ Caldwell, The History of a Brigade of South Carolinians, 262.
or as one man explained to his wife, “I can’t see what the men are thinking about.” Wyatt-Brown writes that oath-taking was relied upon as a “bond in lieu of family obligations and allegiances.” When the army’s many individual units adopted resolutions during the final months of the war at Petersburg, they added the tradition of oath-taking to build camaraderie and keep the army together. No Confederate soldier who stayed to fight at Petersburg wanted to have the experience undergone by William Myers from North Carolina when he woke up in January 1865 “very much surprised” to find that all of his friends had deserted in the middle of the night. The 1865 resolutions helped soldiers communicate with the civilian population, but also served to mitigate the mistrust among soldiers forced to question one another’s willingness to continue fighting for an honorable peace.

Many in Lee’s army at Petersburg spoke often of their desire for an “honorable peace.” They may not have been able to define the term, but their words and actions hint that honor was far more important than peace. From the trenches of Petersburg in January 1865, one such Confederate expressed inner conflict about the end of the war. He clearly desired an “honorable peace or none,” but also wrote about having heard that “[the North] will acknowledge our independence and [we will] form an alliance with them to uphold the Monroe Doctrine. That is, help them drive the French out of Mexico and the British out of Canada.” This hopeful story shows that Confederate soldiers might stay on

111 Silas Chandler to his wife, 21 February 1865, LOV.
112 Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor, 34
113 William L. Myers to his wife, 12 January 1865, LOV.
114 Luther L. Swank to his sister, 29 January 1865, LOV.
the front for honor’s sake even as they could be as desperate for peace as any other rational American by that point in the war. It is an important opinion because it represents the confusion of those who stayed as they tried to reconcile their need to defend honor with their desire for peace.

The aspiration for an honorable peace also became the foundation for the events at Appomattox Courthouse. Of those Confederates who decided to stay at the Siege of Petersburg, many eventually had no choice but to evacuate the defenses when Union forces broke through Confederate lines southwest of Petersburg on April 2, 1865. On that day, Lee made the decision to give up the Confederate capital along with Petersburg in an attempt to join with the remnants of Johnston’s army to the South. A week later, however, Lee found his army cut-off almost devoid of supplies at Appomattox Courthouse. Lee finally surrendered. At such points in history, times when war and peace blend together, events become largely unpredictable. Luckily for the country as a whole, the two armies that gathered for the famous surrender at Appomattox Courthouse understood one another well enough to make a successful transition out of war. The events following the surrender of Lee’s army in April 1865 reveal the main concerns that had characterized Confederate soldiers at Petersburg throughout the siege.

First of all, many who remained in the Army of Northern Virginia at the end of the war were motivated to continue resisting if necessary. Robert Stiles recounted the army’s escape from Petersburg as a relief, conveying yet another rumor about the Confederate army drawing the enemy into a trap away from the
trenches. He compared his situation to a story of a child attempting to build up the courage to jump from an elevated bluff and the advice he gave the adolescent, “Don’t you see – the jumping-off place is not the end of all things? Never say die! If you must leave your present position and jump off, do it like a man and make the best of it. The end is not yet.” While Stiles likely exaggerated his feelings while writing his memoir years later, it is still interesting that he remembered about the escape from Petersburg his determination to fight on “like a man.” Willing to risk everything to secure honor, soldiers carried on their military duty when the potential consequences of surrender seemed worse than death. Given the motivation of many in Lee’s army to continue against overwhelming odds, how did the end occur in such an abrupt and peaceful manner?

One sure answer is starvation. Many of Lee’s men could not physically escape surrender or continue to battle the Union army. A more fulfilling explanation of why soldiers present at Appomattox went home quietly, even after being fed, concerns the understanding the two armies had of one another. The soldiers certainly came to dislike one another during the final, violent year of the war in Virginia, but Lincoln, Grant and the Army of the Potomac understood that the Confederate soldiers who remained desired an honorable peace or “none at all.” The peace process went smoothly, then, partly because Grant allowed the Southerners finally to separate individual honor from military duty. Contrary to their worst fears, Confederate soldiers were not forced into servitude and were not required to give up their land to a conquering army. During the surrender at

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Appomattox Courthouse, the fears that had motivated Confederate soldiers to reluctantly continue fighting quietly vanished. Instead, soldiers peacefully went home as free men, guilty of no crime, and free to raise and provide for their families once again. Many of them even managed to come away with horses and mules, a necessity to rebuild farms that had been ruined by war.

More than to anyone else, however, it was left to General Lee to persuade his men of the merits of their terms for surrender. He understood that he had loyal followers who needed assurance that they had maintained honor – that they could walk home after a military defeat without shame. In his famous farewell address to the Army of Northern Virginia on April 10, 1865, General Lee touched the heart of the issue by writing,

> After four years of arduous service marked by unsurpassed courage and fortitude, the Army of Northern Virginia has been compelled to yield to overwhelming numbers and resources. I need not tell the survivors of so many hard fought battles who have remained steadfast to the last that I have consented to this result from no distrust of them. You will take with you the satisfaction that proceeds from the consciousness of duty faithfully performed....

Lee understood that honor had motivated his men to fight during the gloomiest days at Petersburg. His farewell address not only allows one to better understand the Army of Northern Virginia at the time of its defeat; the message also attests to the important role that notions of honor had played during the war and would continue to play in the years thereafter.

Especially during the desperate weeks at Petersburg, Lee could always sympathize with his men on the issue of honor and reputation. During the final

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116 Robert E. Lee, *Farewell Address to the Army of Northern Virginia*, 10 April 1865, Appomattox Courthouse, VA.
day of fighting around Petersburg on April 2, 1865, Robert E. Lee provided rare insight into his own conflicted thoughts after the death of Lt. General A.P. Hill. When Hill failed to rally his men and delay the successful Union assault, he was shot through the heart and killed instantly. After survivors reported the death to Lee, he replied solemnly, "He is at rest now, and we who are left are the ones to suffer." Lee, whose decision whether or not to continue fighting carried the most influence on the future of the country, expressed the conflicted state of mind felt by all individual Confederate soldiers who were suffering in a state of uncertainty at Petersburg. They wanted to escape the privations and violence of war, but they also could not risk the dishonor of submission. Lee’s surrender came later than it needed to, but it also secured both peace and honor for 28,000 Confederate soldiers in the Army of Northern Virginia.

However, the war did not end on April 9, and there remained tens of thousands of Confederate soldiers still unwilling to submit to the Union armies, including soldiers who had decided to stay and fight at Petersburg. Alabamian Samuel Pickens was one of the thousands of Southerners captured by Union forces a week earlier on April 2, 1865, who refused to take the oath of loyalty to the Union. Instead of going home to friends and family in Alabama, Pickens believed his honor continued to be at risk, so he lived in a prisoner of war camp for an entire month before Federal officials could convince him to take the oath and accept release. To him and the many other Confederate soldiers who resisted even after the bitter end, "yankee" victory still threatened dishonorable results.

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Upon hearing the news that Lee’s army had finally surrendered, Pickens titled his diary entry from prison on April 10, 1865 “Horror of horrors.” A month later, he continued to be suspicious about taking the oath of loyalty and wrote in his diary from prison worried that the Federal government would “publish to the world that [former Confederates] took the [loyalty] oath voluntarily” and that they would use this to prove that “the poor deluded, ignorant creatures were duped, misguided and forced into this war.” History teaches that soldiers had little to fear once they finally surrendered to Grant’s army, yet this fact was not obvious to the many soldiers who risked their lives to avoid taking an oath of loyalty to the United States. Many of them equated surrender with dishonor and remained stubbornly opposed to taking an oath that by some standards would have sent them home with more honor than they could have hoped for while entrenched at Petersburg.

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118 Hobbs, *Voices from Company D*, 370.
119 Ibid., 377.
Conclusion

Published histories by white Southerners during the months and years following the war often focused on the soldiers who followed Lee obediently during the Siege of Petersburg, rather than upon topics of treason or slavery. In later years, veterans re-attached personal honor to military duty by glorifying Lee’s soldiers as a unified group with a virtuous cause. Jubal Early, a commander of soldiers who never gave in to Union pressures until the final surrender, contributed to this legacy of the Army of Northern Virginia when he gave a speech honoring General Lee in 1872. In the speech he stated his memory of the surrender: “The remnant of the Army of Northern Virginia fell back, more than one-hundred miles, before its overpowering antagonist. Finally from mere exhaustion, less than 8,000 men with arms in their hands, of the noblest army that ever fought in the tide of time were surrendered at Appomattox to an army of 150,000 men.”

In offering such a dramatized view of the moment, Early’s speech emphasized the honorable characteristics of military valor and undaunted courage – a legacy that would be embraced by as well as attached to the soldiers who fought under Lee at Petersburg. In reality, the Army of Northern Virginia continued to fight at Petersburg in 1865 because men with conflicted hearts and minds were understandingly confused about what kind of future peace would bring to their families and communities. Notions of honor had only served to intensify the confusion at Petersburg.

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Today, 150 years removed from a terrible Civil War, it is interesting to ask how and why Americans remember the war. How is it that a country so divided in a war that cost the United States roughly two percent of its population can continue to honor men who chose to secede from and fight against their country? To answer this question, one cannot ignore the final months of the Siege at Petersburg that led to the surrender at Appomattox. The Confederate soldiers who stayed to fight at Petersburg exemplify the types of questions Americans must confront when attempting to understand the Civil War. In one sense, these soldiers prolonged a war in defense of an immoral cause. From another perspective, they overcame unimaginable hardships to do their duty and defend their honor. J. Tracy Power concludes his book by stating that “those who persevered from the Wilderness to Appomattox... set a standard that is a fitting testament to the resiliency of the human spirit, that quality that above all others made the Army of Northern Virginia such a cohesive community of men and such a formidable body of soldiers.”

The Siege of Petersburg solidified this legacy of the Confederate soldiers in the Army of Northern Virginia. Yet, it is also important to remember the divides within the army and the Confederacy as a whole, which caused everything from desertion to persistence, from pessimism to unfailing confidence. Leaders of both North and South understood that many of the Confederate soldiers left standing at the end continued to fight from the trenches, because it was their last hope for honor in a world full of unimaginable unknowns. To understand the end of the war, it is necessary to study the men who never deserted at Petersburg.

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121 Power, Lee’s Miserables, 321.
Similarly, to understand how Americans remember the Civil War today, one cannot overlook Lee’s band of followers and the prestige they won during peace. For better and worse, those who stood fast in defense of Petersburg managed to achieve the peace *with* honor that they had fought for.
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