



by Stephan
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A SACRED

Space

In the silent darkness, spread out in the night across the Maryland fields, I see thousands upon thousands of little points of light—small brown bags, each with a flickering candle. One for every dead or wounded soldier both, North and South.

On this first Saturday in December, volunteers have risen early, as they have for the past 15 years, to prepare this one-night citizen ceremony. Elderly widows, retired generals and entry-level clerks place the bags across the Antietam battlefield and light each candle by dusk. The tiny flames float in the dark, their twinkling pattern undulating across the gentle hills; it is a haunting image, profoundly moving.

Most Americans think of D-Day as our nation's benchmark for carnage. Yet that most massive amphibious assault, the product of months of planning by the greatest armies ever assembled, does not begin to compare to the moment-of-opportunity battle fought in a few small farm fields with mostly single-shot muzzle-loaders and horse-drawn cannon.

It was called the Battle of Antietam. The name derived from Antietam Creek, a beautiful winding stream with wooded banks. Because the Union named battles after geographical features and because the North won, the name stuck. But in the South,

it was known as the Battle of Sharpsburg—the Confederacy named battles after nearby towns. By either name, when it was over, 12 hours after it had begun at sunrise on the morning of September 17, 1862, it was the greatest single day of blood sacrifice in American history.

More than three times as many Americans were killed or wounded at Antietam as on June 6, 1944—the so-called “longest day” of World War II. More soldiers, in fact, were killed and wounded at Antietam than during the American Revolution, the War of 1812, The Mexican War (1846-1848) and the Spanish-American War (1898) combined.

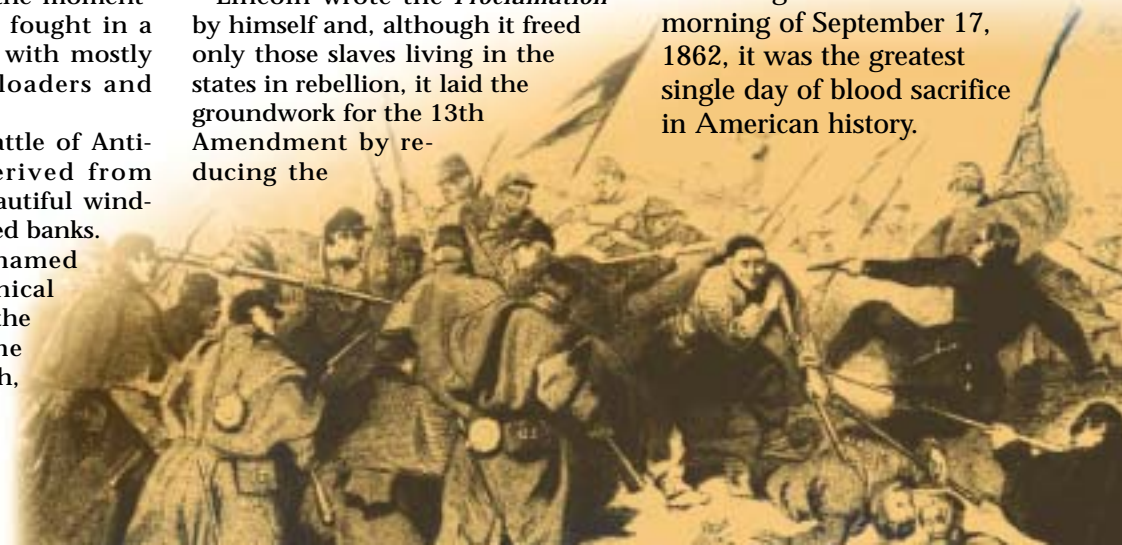
The blood shed that day gave Abraham Lincoln the political security to issue the *Emancipation Proclamation*, the most important statement on the *Bill of Rights*. His edict completed America's *Declaration of Independence*, becoming the defining act of the Civil War.

Lincoln wrote the *Proclamation* by himself and, although it freed only those slaves living in the states in rebellion, it laid the groundwork for the 13th Amendment by reducing the

conflict to its moral essence—slavery. The reward for that act of public virtue was the continued integrity of the United States as a nation. Europe—where slavery was outlawed—could no longer support a Confederacy that made slavery a legal fundamental. America would no longer be pressured by outside sources to split, and the Monroe Doctrine, protecting the New World from Old World incursions, would not cease.

I am drawn back to the battlefield the next day, and in the warm afternoon light it is an intimate landscape, almost unchanged from the day of the battle. It's hard to imagine 160,000 men massing here for a fight. Harder still, as two squirrel's chatter and chase each other across a tree, to imagine the groans of pain, the acrid smell of black powder, the broken men, overturned gun carriages and dead horses that were the battle's physical

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Left: Dead artillery-men lie outside Dunker Church after the Battle of Antietam. The church was the location of some of the bloodiest fighting during the battle. Right: Modern day restoration of the Dunker Church.

aftermath. When it was over, 12,401 Union and 10,318 confederates—22,719 in all—would be dead, wounded or missing.

The Little Church on the Battlefield

This was the farmland of a small spiritual community, the Dunker Brethren, and their church building was the battle's tactical objective. As then, it is a little white brick building with green shutters, a shake shingle roof and a chimney in the center. Two stone steps led up into a single low room, two windows on each wall, two doors and in the middle, an endearing small, black pot-bellied stove. Simple pine benches face a pine table, behind which are two smaller benches. Nothing on the walls, not even a cross. These were people whose spiritual life was internal; their services were meditations. Sitting in the cool, dim quiet of this simple room, the dignity of this dwelling pervades the senses.

This serene space provides the moment necessary to appreciate the battle's mythic quality: A fight over freedom, on land belonging to a sect whose doctrine was rooted in the idea of Christian love.

"The white-washed Dunker Church stood out like a lighted window against the dark green of the West Woods," one veteran said. It was all on a Wednesday, the first time this Civil War touched Northern soil.

The carnage was caused mostly by the field artillery: Horse-drawn

Parrott rifles, Napoleons and 10-pounders, some less than 500 yards from their intended targets. They spewed out hundreds of marble-sized balls of shot. Or if not this, then single projectiles as big as fireplace logs that scythed down corn stalks, men and horses. The sound was deafening. It left stunned any men still standing.

Along the verge of the narrow farm roads, granite, marble and cast-iron monuments sit irregularly in the fields like wayward tombstones. Each marks a company or brigade, enumerating its dead and wounded. There is no doubt: This land is a sacred space.

Many of the soldiers that September morning were teenagers from farms and frontiers but, for all their youth, they were already hardened veterans. Blood and war had taught them about hiding behind rocks, keeping loose ranks, retreating when appropriate. But that isn't how their officers saw the fight.

Weapons of the Battle

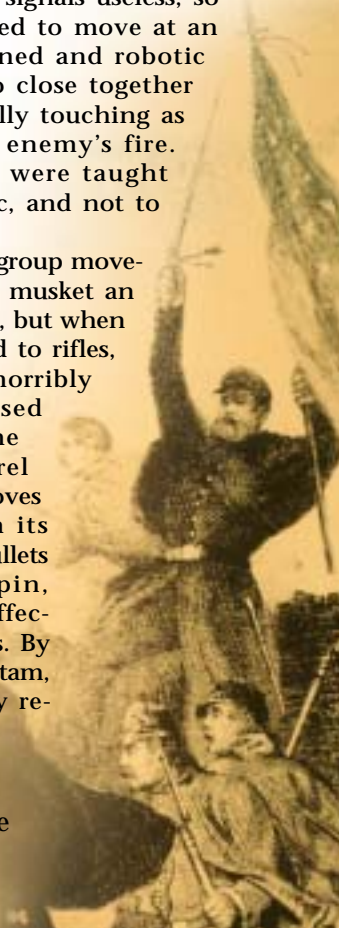
On both sides, particularly before early casualties reduced their number, the officer corps was a product of the Mexican War—West Pointers trained in the Napoleonic tactics built around the limitations of the musket. Muskets were smooth-bore weapons; the long tube of the barrel had no grooves to give a bullet the spin needed to shoot accurately. Its effective range was only about 70

to 100 yards. The Old World solution to these inadequacies was to bunch men close together, to get them all to aim and fire as a group—in essence, to create a collective shotgun pointed at the enemy. If no single bullet could be assured of reaching its mark, a hail of them was sure to hit something. Field cannon interspersed with blocs of muskets was, at the time, the surest offensive tactic.

The noise and smoke this combat produced made voice commands impossible to hear over any distance and hand signals useless, so men were trained to move at an exact pre-ordained and robotic pace, staying so close together they were literally touching as they faced the enemy's fire. Young soldiers were taught to stay in a bloc, and not to run.

These stylized group movements made the musket an effective weapon, but when armies converted to rifles, the tactic was horribly wrong and caused mass death. The rifle's long barrel had parallel grooves spiraling down its length, giving bullets a stabilizing spin, making them effective at 300 yards. By the time of Antietam, rifles had largely re-

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At Antietam National Battlefield a field of hay grows over the 'Bloody Cornfield' where thousands of soldiers lost their lives during the battle.

placed the musket, particularly in the Union army. Yet the mass movement of troops had not altered. Standing on the brow of a low hill where those young men in blue and butternut had stood facing one another, no one could doubt that any man knew what to expect that morning.

A Family Fight

Over the previous 18 days they had fought two pitched battles—South Mountain and Second Manassas—as well as many skirmishes, and they were exhausted and battle-weary. Many Confederates had literally walked through their boots and were barefoot or had only rags

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round their feet. Standing or kneeling in the Brethren's fields, they knew that many of them would die; knew their officers' tactics would kill them, yet they fought anyway. Why? Politicians and commentators had complex arguments involving states' rights and legal claims. For these soldiers it was simpler, and more authentic. In later interviews, and in their diaries and journals, they give two main reasons: They did not want to let down their friends, the men standing to the left and right with whom they had lived and fought and marched; and because, at its deepest level, this was a family fight, brewing for years, that had to be settled.

My 95-year-old mother, who grew up in Kentucky, tells a story of my own family. When war was declared, the family was at dinner. Two great-uncles she would never know stood up, shook hands and left the room; one to serve the Confederacy, the other the Union. Both were killed at Antietam.

The American Civil War was unique. It was a disagreement within one racial family so profound that only war could resolve it. At no other time in history has one race fought a war amongst itself over the status of another race. The unresolved dispute of the Constitutional Convention, and the Constitution's tortured legalism in which a slave was counted as three-fifths of a white man, came down to this battle. These people gathered here, country boys, city workers, many away from home for the first time, speaking the same language, sharing the same roots, prepared to die over the status of black people whom most did

not know, members of a race a surprising number had never even seen.

The Symmetry of Sacrifice

It is hard to get a reliable number on how many slaves arrived first in the colonies and then the states. But most historians accept that from 1700 to 1861 (excluding imports into Louisiana when it was French) the figure was about 400,000 African men and women.

The human cost of men under arms is also hard to pin down, but most scholars believe 618,000 (360,000 Union, 258,000 Confederate) died from battle and disease.

There is a horrible and unacknowledged symmetry of sacrifice here.

George Mason, the father of the *Bill of Rights*, had told his colleagues at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 that slavery was a moral error that would bring "the judgment of heaven on the United States. As nations cannot be rewarded or punished in the next world, they must be in this. By an inevitable chain of causes

and effects Providence punishes national sins by national calamities." Antietam proved the truth of his prediction.

A small bird lands near me, as I am standing where an Ohio regiment stood that morning. There were birds that day as well. The hills and fields look now as they looked then. The scattered farm buildings I can see are the same ones those young boys saw.

Sergeant Thomas F. Galwey of the 8th Ohio Infantry said there was no shelter to be found in the field in front of him, which was speckled with white clover. It was a mystery to him how so many men could fit into so small a space. As he was kneeling in the grass, he noticed that every blade was moving, and he supposed it was the result of crickets disturbed by the battle. When he said this to the man next to him, all he got in return was a mordant laugh. Then he saw that what caused the grass to tremble was not crickets, but the hail of bullets coming toward them as the Confederates advanced.

More than a century later, many may still see only failure in how we as a nation deal with race. But history, I think, will see us mostly moving forward to make real America's most fundamental precept of equal rights. What astonishes is not that it takes sacrifices like Antietam to change the course of history, but that ordinary Americans, mistrusted by politicians and disdained by theorists, have always been prepared to stand and make them. □

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Stephan A. Schwartz is working on a biography of George Mason, to be published by HarperCollins. A Virginia-based writer, Schwartz has written for Smithsonian, Harper's, The New York Times and The Washington Post.