

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Grand Review

By **W. Dennis Keating**, Cleveland State University

By the end of May 1865, the American Civil War had ended with the surrender of the Confederacy's armies, the disintegration of the Confederate government, the capture of Jefferson Davis (May 10), the assassination and burial of President Abraham Lincoln, and the succession of Andrew Johnson to the presidency. Before the demobilization of the Union volunteer units, General Ulysses Grant's aide Horace Porter recounts: It was decided that the troops assembled at Washington should be marched in review before being mustered out of service.¹ The Grand Review was ordered by President Andrew Johnson, both to honor the troops and improve the morale of citizens still mourning the death of Abraham Lincoln.

May 23 was designated for the Army of the Potomac led by Major General George Gordon Meade and May 24 for the Army of the West (the Armies of Georgia and Tennessee) led by General William Tecumseh Sherman. They would march down Pennsylvania Avenue from the Capitol before reviewing stands and past the White House. A banner adorned the west portico of the Capitol and the Treasury Department that read "The only national debt we can never pay is the debt we owe to the victorious Union soldiers." The two main stands were filled by high government officials led by President Johnson, his cabinet, other politicians, the U.S. Supreme Court, and Union Commander in Chief U.S. Grant and other military figures. The main stand was decorated with flags and banners commemorating major battles of the war. There were also stands for wounded and sick veterans. About 2,500 school children were assembled at the Capitol to sing: "When Johnny Comes Marching Home", "Victory at Last", and "The Battle Cry of Freedom." Along the marching route Army bands would accompany the troops. Photographers Matthew Brady and Alexander Gardner captured the pageant. Brady photographed Sherman and his staff at his studio before the march.

Walt Whitman eulogized the marching Union veterans in his poem titled "The Heroes Return":

¹ Horace Porter, *Campaigning with Grant* (New York: The Century Company, 1897), 505.

Pass, pass, ye proud brigades, with your tramping sinewy legs, With your shoulders young and strong, with your knapsacks and your muskets;

How elate I stood and watch'd you, where starting off you march'd, Pass-then rattle drums again,

For an army heaves in sights, O another gathering army, Swarming, trailing on the rear, O you dread accruing army,

O you regiments so piteous, with your mortal diarrhoea, with your fever,

O my land's maim'd darlings, with the plenteous bloody bandage and the crutch, Lo, your pallid army follows.

But on these days of brightness, On the far-stretching beauteous landscape, the roads and lanes,

The high-piled farm-wagons, and the fruits and barns, Should the dead intrude?

Porter described the scene:

The whole city was ready for the most imposing fete-day in its history. Vast crowds of citizens had gathered from neighboring States. During the review they filed the stands, lined the sidewalks, packed the porches, and covered even the housetops. The weather was superb.²

Notably absent among the Union commanders were General Philip Henry Sheridan (sent to Texas to command troops along the border with Mexico to guard against any threat from French Emperor Maximilian's troops) and Major General George Henry Thomas (commanding troops in the West). Also notably absent were units of the U.S. Colored Troops (USCT), many of whom were still on active duty. There would later be a separate review for some of them held in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania on November 14, 1865. During the Grand Review, the military trial of the conspirators charged with Lincoln's assassination was suspended.

At 9:00 a.m. on May 23, a signal gun began the Grand Review. First came Meade, leading 29 regiments of cavalry, 33 batteries of artillery, and 180 infantry units, nearly 80,000 soldiers in all, of the Army of the Potomac. Missing was the 6th Corps, still on duty in Virginia. It

² Ibid., 505-6.

would have its own review later on June 8. Major General Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain described the order of march of the army:

The formation was in column by companies closed in mass, with shortened intervals between regiments, brigades, and divisions; the company fronts equalized to twenty files each, so the number of companies corresponded to the total numbers of the regiment, some having twelve or fifteen companies, so many had gathered now for the grand muster out.³

Chamberlain, the professor from Bowdoin College whose 20th Maine performed heroically in defense of the far left wing of the army on Little Round Top on the second day of the 1863 battle of Gettysburg was a much wounded general by the war's end. He was selected by Grant to take the surrender of Robert E. Lee's defeated Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox Court House in April, 1865. Chamberlain described his troops of the 5th Corps in preparation for the review:

In my command we were well aware of quite an anxiety among officers and men of the army to generally to look their very best, and more, too, on this occasion; for new uniforms, sashes, epaulettes, saddle housings, and other gay trappings, almost disguised some of our hardiest veterans, who were not insensible to the new orders of spectators before whom they were now to pass their ordeal.⁴

Meade saluted the main stand even before most of the dignitaries had arrived and then joined them to salute his army, which would take another six to seven hours to pass in review.

Cavalry led the Army of the Potomac. Leading the cavalry was the young cavalier Major General George Armstrong Custer. Porter described his appearance:

Conspicuous among the division commanders was Custer. His long golden locks floating in the wind, his low-cut collar, his crimson necktie, and his buckskin breeches, presented a combination which made him look half general and half scout, and gave him a daredevil appearance which singled him out for general remark and applause.⁵

His troopers wore red ties in honor of Custer. Custer provided the first drama of the event, as described in the *New York Times*:

³ Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, *The Passing of the Armies* (New York and London: G.P. Putnam & Sons, The Knickerbocker Press, 1915), 249.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Porter, *Campaigning*, 507.

Custer rode a powerful horse [named Don Juan], restive, and at times ungovernable. When near the Treasury Department, the animal madly dashed forward to the head of the line. The General vainly attempted to check his course, and at the same time endeavoring to retain the weight of flowers which had previously been placed upon him. In the flight, the General lost his hat. He finally conquered his horse and rejoined his column. Passing the President's stand, he made a low bow, and was applauded by the multitude.⁶

Chamberlain described in detail the march of his command:

The flag of the First Division, the red cross on its battle-stained white, sways aloft; the hand of its young bearer trembling with his trust, more than on storm-swept fields. Now they move – all – ten thousand hearts knitted together. Up the avenue, into that vast arena, bright with color -flowers, garlands, ribbons, flags, and flecked with deeper tones....Around us and above, murmurs, lightnings, and thunders of greetings.⁷

Chamberlain describes receiving a wreath of flowers and his nervous horse (who had been shot down three times under him in battle). He concludes:

These were my men, and those who followed were familiar and dear. They belonged to me, and I to them, by bonds birth cannot create nor death sever. More were passing here than the personages on the stand could see. But to me so seeing, what a review, how great, how far, how near! It was as the morning of the resurrection.⁸

Chamberlain also described in detail each of the units of the Army of the Potomac and their commanders.

Amidst the cheers and flowers, Sheets noted:

Nothing touched the hearts of the spectators so deeply as the sight of soldiers carrying old war flags. These precious bullet-ridden, battle-stained war remnants brought tears to some eyes, and many people broke through guards and rushed into the street just to press their lips to the fabric.⁹

⁶ D. Reid Ross, "Civil War Grand Review", (History Net, December 9, 2015) <https://www.historynet.com/civil-war-grand-review/>, accessed February 5, 2024.

⁷ Chamberlain, *Passing*, 256.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁹ Georg R. Sheets, *The Grand Review: The Civil War Continues to Shape America* (York, Pa: Bold Print, 2000), 49.

The remnants of the Irish Brigade wore sprigs of boxwood in their caps as they had in December 1862 at Fredericksburg when the Irish valiantly charged the Confederates behind the wall on Marye's Heights. Also colorful were some Zouave units. Porter remarked:

[W]hen it [the pageant] had faded from view the spectators were eager for the night to pass, so that on the morrow the scene might be renewed in the marching of the mighty Army of the West.¹⁰

Sherman's two armies had marched from North Carolina, where General Joseph Eggleston Johnston's army had surrendered [at Alexandria,] to where they camped at Alexandria across the Potomac River from Washington City. They had traveled a great distance in the March to the Sea through Georgia from Atlanta to Savannah and then through the Carolinas and they presented a different appearance than that of the Army of the Potomac. Sherman remarked to Meade:

I'm afraid that my poor tadder-demalion troops will make a poor appearance tomorrow when contrasted with yours.¹¹

Sheets noted:

When Sherman's soldiers received orders to apply for new uniforms to wear at the Grand Review, most objected because they did not want to pay for a new outfit just before heading home. Some of the soldiers eventually relented, but at the last moment, many refused to wear the new uniforms and simply packed them away.¹²

A more serious problem emerged when hostility grew before the march between the two armies and later as Chamberlain recounted:

After this review, things were not so pleasant as they might be in our big camps along the [Potomac] river. At first, the greetings were such as good fellowship and novelty of intercourse prompted. But we were soon made aware of a feeling we had not before suspected on the part of many of our comrades of the Western army. We certainly had never had an intimation of it among the many Western men in our own army. There

¹⁰ Porter, *Campaigning*, 509.

¹¹ Sheets, *Grand Review*, 51.

¹² *Ibid.*, *Grand Review*, 37.

seemed to be a settled dislike to us, blatant at least, among Sherman's men. In a certain class their manner was contemptuous and bullying.¹³

On the second day of the Grand Review, it was the Westerners who thrilled the massive crowds. Sherman led around 65,000 men of the Army of Tennessee's 94 infantry regiments led by "Black Jack" Logan and the Army of Georgia's 86 infantry regiments led by Major General Henry Warner Slocum:

The crowd quickly began comparing these soldiers to those who marched the day before. Sherman had less artillery and very little of his cavalry while Meade's army had only part of its infantry. The Western men were taller, with fewer boys and scarcely any foreigners. Their stride was about six inches longer – more of a left-and-right-and-left-and-right-and-left – yet they stepped in unison. Their yellow and red beards and light hair were worn long. One could not distinguish officers from men, except by their uniforms. Eastern men wore the close-fitting skull cap [kepis]; the Western men the soft slouch hat. The Easterners were exact, prim and stiff; the Westerners easy, carefree, independent and pioneerish.¹⁴

Ross described Sherman's troops thusly:

Lean, rough-looking, hard as iron, and sunburnt, they were all muscle, gristle, and bone, and looked like frontier soldiers. They were taller, leaner, and younger than eastern men, who dubbed them 'Sherman's Mules.' They wore tattered, loose, dirty blouses instead of trim jackets, and ragged pants tied around their legs. Many had dirty locks hanging to their shoulders and shaggy beards. Beautiful they were not, but impressive they were.¹⁵

Sherman led his troops along with Major General Oliver Otis Howard, now head of the Freedmen's Bureau, who had just been replaced by Major General John Alexander Logan as commander of the Army of the Tennessee. Sherman insisted that Howard ride with him:

His soldiers hardly recognized Uncle Billy. His hair was cut and he was wearing a new uniform. Throughout the war, Sherman had dressed no better than his men.¹⁶

¹³ Chamberlain, *Passing*, 283.

¹⁴ Sheets, *Grand Review*, 61.

¹⁵ D. Reid Ross, *Lincoln's Veteran Volunteers Win the War: The Hudson Valley Ross Brothers and the Union's Fight for Emancipation* (Albany, NY: Excelsior Editions: State University of New York Press, 2008), 347.

¹⁶ Sheets, *Grand Review*, 58.

Sherman saluted the wounded Secretary of State William Seward as he watched the parade.

As his army approached:

[Sherman] turned in his saddle and looked at his troops... 'The sight was magnificent', Sherman recalled. 'The column was compact and the glittering muskets looked like a solid mass of steel moving with the regularity of a pendulum. It was the happiest day of my life.'¹⁷

As Sherman approached the main reviewing stand, a band played "Marching Through Georgia."

Another difference in the armies appeared both in the front and also in the rear of Sherman's units, as described by Horace Porter:

Each division was preceded by a pioneer corps of negroes, marching in double ranks, with picks, spades, and axes slung across their brawny shoulders, their stalwart forms conspicuous by their height. But the impediments were the novel feature of the march. Six ambulances followed each division to represent its baggage-train; and then came the amusing spectacle of 'Sherman's bummers,' bearing with them the "spoils of war." The bummers were men who were the forerunners, flankers, and foragers of the army.¹⁸

Following them were many animals loaded on pack-mules and a procession of fugitive blacks. Another unusual sight was the army's favorite nurse Mother Mary Anne Bickerdyke riding at the head of the XV Corps.

Once Sherman reached the main stand to take his place with the other dignitaries, there was high drama reflecting the bad feelings of Sherman toward Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. During the March to the Sea, an incident occurred on December 9, 1864 at Ebenezer Creek, Georgia that reflected Sherman's opposition to protecting fugitive slaves following his army. The rearguard of the army removed a pontoon bridge across the swollen river that left hundreds of these refugees facing recapture by Confederate cavalry. Instead, many tried to swim to safety, leading to hundreds of deaths, including many women and children. Sherman did not apologize for the decision, leading to a visit to Sherman by Stanton in January 1865, after Sherman arrived in Savannah. Stanton convened a meeting with Black religious leaders and Sherman. As a result, Sherman issued an order in response to their call for land for the freed slaves that set aside about

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Porter, *Campaigning*, 511.

400,000 acres along the Atlantic coast to be divided into 40-acre plots for farms. President Johnson would later order this confiscated land to be returned to its former owners.

Sherman's resentment of Stanton would be further magnified because of his terms of surrender of Joe Johnston's army. Sherman and Johnston went beyond Grant's terms of surrender to Robert E. Lee and his army. Stanton denounced Sherman's action, rejected the surrender terms, and sent Grant to correct Sherman and the agreement with Johnston.

When Sherman arrived on the stand, Stanton arose and stood between President Johnson and Sherman's close friend Grant. Sheets describes what happened next:

Sherman moved toward Stanton. This was the man who had embarrassed him in Savannah when Stanton told him to arrange the meeting with 20 black men; the man who accused Sherman of seeking the presidency; the man who approved Halleck's order for Sherman's officers to disobey him; the man who let loose the press against Sherman after the Johnston surrender; the man who refused to apologize after implying that Sherman was a traitor. The crowd near the reviewing stand pushed forward, focusing on the two men. Ellen Sherman and Julia Grant watched intently, for they knew the hatred that Sherman harbored toward Stanton. Sherman's face, marked by a dark scar, was crimson. His red hair seemed to stand on end. Stanton, now erect, cautiously extended his hand. Sherman, with fire in his eyes, refused to acknowledge it and quickly moved to his 'sworn friend' Grant.¹⁹

Thus, this quickly ended their brief confrontation, acknowledged by Sherman in his postwar memoir.

For many of the soldiers, the march became a sad moment as they remembered dead comrades from past campaigns. Brian Jordan wrote:

While marveling at the endless rows of blue coats, Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Lyman, who served as General Meade's chief of staff during the war, perhaps inevitably visualized how much grander the demonstration might have appeared if only the organizers could have resurrected the dead.²⁰

Bret Harte honored these feelings in his poem "A Second Review of the Grand Army" (eight stanzas long, four included below):

¹⁹ Sheets, *Grand Review*, 60.

²⁰ Brian Matthew Jordan, *Marching Home: Union Veterans and Their Unending Civil War* (New York: Liveright: W.W. Norton, 2015), 18.

I read last night of the Grand Review
In Washington's chiefest avenue,
Two hundred thousand men in blue,
I think they said was their number,
Till I seemed to hear their trampling feet,
The bugle blast and the drum's quick beat,
The clatter of hoofs in the stony street,
The cheers of the people who came to greet,
And the thousand details that to repeat,
Would only my verse encumber,
Till I fell in a revery, sad and sweet,
And then to a fitful slumber.

And I saw a phantom army come,
With never a sound of fife or drum,
But keeping time to a throbbing hum,
Of wailing and lamentation:
The martyred heroes of Malvern Hill,
Of Gettysburg and Chancellorsville,
The men whose wasted figures fill
The patriot graves of the nation.

And so all night marched the Nation's dead,
With never a banner above them spread,
Nor a badge, nor a motto brandished;
No mark-save the bare uncovered head
Of the silent bronze Reviewer;
With never an arch save the vaulted sky;
With never a flower save those that lie
Of the distant graves-for love could buy
No gift that was purer or truer.

So all night long swept the strange array;
So all night long, till the morning gray,
I watch'd for one who had passed away,
With a reverent awe and wonder,
Till a blue cap waved in the lengthening line,
And I knew that one who was kin of mine
Had come; and I spake-and lo! That sign
Awakened me from my slumber.

These veterans also remained saddened by the absence of their dead commander in chief Abraham Lincoln.

Several weeks after the Grand Review, the order came to demobilize most of the troops, who were then mustered out. Joshua Chamberlain concluded his account by saying that the Army of the Potomac would ‘live on’.²¹

In fact, led by Logan and others, former Union soldiers formed the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR). It had many local branches and held annual national gatherings over the decades following the Civil War. The GAR was best known for its creation of Decoration Day, now known as Memorial Day, to honor those who served in the Union armies.

In September 1892, 350,000 members of the GAR attended their annual encampment in Washington, D.C. On September 20, around 80,000 Union veterans paraded down the same route taken in the May, 1865, Grand Review. On May 19, 1990, there was a 125th anniversary re-enactment of the Grand Review in Washington, D.C. in which African-American re-enactors of Company B of the 54th Massachusetts (the Black regiment featured in the film *Glory*) participated. On May 17, 2015, there was a re-enactment of the Grand Review in Washington, D.C. as part of the 150th anniversary of the 1865 Grand Review.

²¹ Chamberlain, *Passing*, 300.