THE POLITICS OF COMMAND IN THE FORT FISHER CAMPAIGN

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ABSTRACT

For too long historians of the American Civil War have had a Virginia-centrist approach to the study of the conflict. To most of them the war ended in April 1865, when General Robert E. Lee surrendered to Union General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House, Virginia. To others, the war ended officially when Confederate Major General Joseph E. Johnston surrendered to Union Major General William T. Sherman in April 1865, at Bennett Place, North Carolina. It is the contention of this thesis, however, that the outcome of the Civil War was decided before the surrenders at Appomattox Court House and Bennett Place. Union victory was assured on a spit of land at the mouth of the Cape Fear River twenty miles south of Wilmington, North Carolina. It was here, in the cold evening hours of January 15, 1865, that Union forces captured Fort Fisher, effectively sealing Wilmington from the importation of desperately needed foreign supplies, without which the Confederacy could not survive.

But this thesis goes far beyond establishing Wilmington’s importance, and instead focuses on the politics of command between both Union and Confederate commanders that led to failure and victory at Fort Fisher. The dramatic stories of jealousy and rank cronyism from the president down to the brigade level will be analyzed, and a web of events and decisions reconstructed in the hopes of gaining a better understanding of why Fort Fisher, and ultimately Wilmington, fell. It was these personal politics, fed by human failures and frailties endemic to all of mankind, which ultimately led to the loss of Fort Fisher, the city of Wilmington, and the eventually the Confederacy itself.
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Special thanks also goes out to my parents, my brother, and my baby niece—all of whom helped me along the way to maintain a sense of composure in the times of almost endless frustration that come with all worthwhile endeavors.

Finally, I would like to thank all of the other members of my committee including Dr. William T. Fain and Dr. Alan Watson for their guidance and instruction in writing, formatting, and submitting a thesis of first rate quality.
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my God and Savior who alone is “the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Psalm 73:26).
INTRODUCTION

By January 1865, civilians throughout the South were angry. It seemed as if politics, the very thing for which the Civil War was being fought, now threatened to tear the Confederacy apart. After the capture of Fort Fisher, approximately twenty miles south of Wilmington, North Carolina, tempers flared. In her diary, North Carolina diarist Catherine D. Edmondston wrote: “Ah! That Fort Fisher had stood! The elements on our side we might have struck a signal blow. The discontent with the [Confederate] government increases. Revolution—the deposition of Davis is openly talked of. . . . We wait with folded hands what is in store for us. God grant that it be neither emancipation or subjugation.”¹ Politicians, as in all wars, became a source of dissatisfaction and irritation to Americans on both sides of the conflict.

German military theorist Carl von Clausewitz once wrote that “war is not merely a political act, but also a real political instrument, a continuation of political commerce, a carrying out of the same by any other means.”² Clausewitz was one of the first to define war as both an extension of politics and a tool of politicians. Historian James McPherson, whose Pulitzer Prize winning book Battle Cry of Freedom is considered the single best one volume work on the Civil War, mirrored Clausewitz’s dictum, writing: “The Civil War was pre-eminently a political war, a war of peoples rather than of professional armies. Therefore political leadership and public opinion weighed heavily in the formation of strategy.”³ To a generation of twenty-first century Americans used to scandals and political humbugging, this sentiment is not surprising. To an

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earlier generation, whose greatest measure of pride was the extent to which they could channel the political image of the Founding Fathers, this idea of war as politics was profane.

In the 1850s, Americans viewed the coming conflict as a struggle over political rights. But as war erupted in April 1861, particularly in the South, many men viewed it as a proving ground for one’s honor and a rare opportunity to obtain personal glory. South Carolina diarist Mary Boykin Chesnut wrote of this period: “The war is making us all tenderly sentimental. No casualties yet, no real mourning, nobody hurt. So it is all parade, fife, and fine feathers. Posing we are en grande tenue.”

Across the Union, sentiments were similar to those below the Mason-Dixon Line. One Wisconsin politician noted that “It was one of those sublime moments of patriotic exaltation when everybody seems willing to do everything and to sacrifice everything for a common cause; one of the ideal sunbursts in the history of a nation.”

Many Americans could not see the connection between politics and war, as antebellum notions of chivalry, honor, and innocence superseded political savvy and collective cynicism.

In the vast historiography of the American Civil War, this connection between war and politics is really nothing new. Over the past fifty years, military history has seen the melding of political, social, and traditional military history into a collective lens through which historians now examine almost every major facet of battles, campaigns, and wars. Unlike military histories written before the 1960s, it would now seem that the politician is as mighty as the general in battle or at least as important. This thesis does not deviate from this fairly new multifaceted idea, examining the social, political, and traditional military aspects of the campaign to capture Fort Fisher and Wilmington, North Carolina.

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This approach is exploited because it has yielded much in the understanding of war as politics. It has also resulted in an almost cosmic shift in the American consciousness towards war. To modern Americans, war is no longer about glory and honor, or perhaps even victory, and it has come to be viewed cynically (though often justifiably) as a tool by which politicians or political groups extend or promote their agendas. Historians have done a superb job of exposing war as a tool of politics, but they have neglected one important area: the analysis and understanding of the personal politics of command endemic to all military command structures. Though the historiography of the Civil War is rife with smatterings of the role politics have played in command decisions, few have dealt directly with this important subject.

This thesis is intended to deepen our understanding of the role that the personal politics of command have played in the Civil War. For the purposes of this work, “personal politics” is defined as the personal preferences and dictums of individuals that arose from motivations of pride, jealousy, greed, envy, or vanity made explicit in military decisions. Throughout the war, arguably no campaign displayed such blatant personal politics as that of the Fort Fisher battles. From Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis down to the general officers in the field and admirals on the sea, personal politics played a key role in the command decisions surrounding the targeting and capture of Wilmington, North Carolina, the Confederacy's most important seaport by 1863 and it’s most important city by late 1864. These decisions, and the motivations which influenced them, were the natural outgrowth of a war which was decidedly political. The failure of Union politicians and military figures to fully understand Wilmington’s importance is explained in part by personal politics, as was the Confederacy’s inability to understand the necessity of its defense. Furthermore, the Union failure to capture the fort during the first Fort Fisher expedition in December 1864 resulted from two high ranking Union
commanders who allowed personal jealousies to affect crucial command decisions. Finally, the success of the second Fort Fisher expedition was due in large part to the willingness of Union commanders to put aside personal politics, while the egos and grudges between Confederate commanders contributed to the loss of the most important fortification in the Confederacy.

What contribution does this thesis make to the historiography of the Fort Fisher and Wilmington campaigns? On the whole, most extant studies lack the detailed analysis of the personal politics of command in the campaign. This thesis, The Politics of Command in the Fort Fisher Campaign, expands on a subject that has been examined less closely in previous monographs on the battles. The scholarship that has gone into these works (and upon which much of this thesis has been built) stands as a testament to the vast interest in Fort Fisher and its importance to the Confederacy.

First and foremost among the works consulted for this thesis is Dr. Chris E. Fonvielle Jr.’s The Wilmington Campaign: Last Rays of Departing Hope. Fonvielle’s work is by far the most extensive on the Union campaigns to capture Fort Fisher and Wilmington and the Confederate attempts to defend them. It is superb in its analysis of the battle and is the most well researched of all of the books written on the subject. The Wilmington Campaign does not ignore the issue of personal politics of command, particularly as they concerned Confederate President Jefferson Davis and General Braxton Bragg, as well as Major General Benjamin F. Butler of the U.S. Army and Rear Admiral David D. Porter of the U.S. Navy. The main focus of the book, however, is not on the politics of command, but the analysis of Union military operations to capture Wilmington, 1864-1865. That said, The Wilmington Campaign covers the politics of command of both Union and Confederate forces in more depth than any other study.
Complementing Fonvielle’s work is Rod Gragg’s *Confederate Goliath: the Battle of Fort Fisher*. Unlike Fonvielle’s book, *Confederate Goliath* dealt only with the battle for Fort Fisher and not the ensuing campaign to capture Wilmington. Nonetheless, Gragg offers a gripping battle narrative and a glimpse of the personal politics between the Confederate government and commanders at Fort Fisher. Even so, it lacks many of the details on command politics, particularly among Union politicians and commanders.

William R. Trotter’s *Ironclads and Columbiads: The Civil War in North Carolina, the Coast*, is a survey of the Civil War along the Tar Heel coast, from the capture of Hatteras in 1861, to the surrender of Fort Fisher in 1865. Of all the books written about Fort Fisher, Trotter’s deals most extensively with the Confederate politics of command particularly as they concerned Braxton Bragg. One of its most valuable contributions is the final appendix aptly entitled “The Curious Behavior of Braxton Bragg,” in which Trotter seeks to explain the controversial commander’s bungling and erratic behavior during the second battle of Fort Fisher. Point by point, the author discredits Bragg’s defense of his reprehensible actions and his indictment is damning. Much like Gragg’s work, however, Trotter focuses largely on the Confederate politics of command and his analysis is spread thinly throughout the work. The main thrust of *Ironclads and Columbiads* is to explain the battle in a highly readable and concise format—not necessarily to offer explanations for command decisions.

Interestingly, one of the best interpretations of the battle of Fort Fisher was included in Don Lowry’s *Towards an Indefinite Shore: The Final Months of the Civil War, December 1864-May 1865*. The first part of Lowry’s four part study of the last months of the war deals exclusively with the battles for Fort Fisher. Unlike Gragg and Trotter, Lowry’s main focus was on the Union attempts to capture Fort Fisher and not the Confederate efforts to defend it. As far
as the politics of command are concerned, *Towards an Indefinite Shore* focuses almost exclusively on Union failures. Like other books on the subject, the author’s intent is not to analyze the politics of command, and therefore only a hint of their influence is revealed in his book. Nevertheless, Lowry masterfully places the importance of the Fort Fisher campaign into the larger tapestry of the last critical months of the war.

The most recent work dealing with the Fort Fisher campaign is James L. Walker Jr.’s *Rebel Gibraltar: Fort Fisher and Wilmington, C.S.A.* Much like Gragg, Trotter, and Lowry, Walker’s main focus is on the Union campaign to capture the fort. Within this context, he mainly focuses on the personal politics of Confederate command decisions, which are scant and lacking in concrete details. Where his book largely differs from other studies is the greater detail with which he addresses the economic and social impact of blockade running on Wilmington, as well as Fort Fisher’s importance in protecting Confederate commerce vessels that entered the Tar Heel seaport.

In the vein of *Rebel Gibraltar*, Charles M. Robinson III’s *Hurricane of Fire: the Union Assault on Fort Fisher* identifies the significance of Wilmington as a blockade running port and the various attempts made by Union forces to capture it. Robinson’s work is distinctive in its interpretation of the Union high command’s decisions about Wilmington from the beginning of the war, and its explanations for the U.S. Navy’s efforts to capture Fort Fisher and close Wilmington to blockade running. With the exception of Fonvielle’s *The Wilmington Campaign*, most studies of the Fort Fisher battles paid less attention to the U.S. Navy’s role in the campaign than that of the army. Though Robinson’s work is the deepest analysis of personal politics on Union command structure in the Fort Fisher campaign, it still does not go far enough.
Two other books provided context for this thesis. First and foremost was Rowena Reed’s ground breaking study, *Combined Operations in the Civil War*. Reed’s work placed the Union campaigns to capture Fort Fisher into the context of overall Union operational strategy to capture or marginalize key targets on the periphery of the Confederacy and along the Mississippi River. However, it focuses mostly on strategy rather than personal politics, even though Union combined operations were indeed affected by politics and politicians in Washington and on the front lines.

One recent publication, C.L. Webster III’s *Entrépot: Government Imports into the Confederate States*, highlights the great importance of blockade running to the South’s war effort. Webster exhaustively researched the impact of the trade on the Confederacy’s relatively long survival against a foe that enjoyed both superior manpower and resources. *Entrépot* is concise, detailing the month-by-month importation of goods at Southern seaports, including Wilmington. The author concludes that blockade running was far more pervasive and effective than historians had previously documented, and he emphasizes the importance of Wilmington as the Confederacy’s principal blockade running port after 1863—more than any other major seaport including Charleston, South Carolina; Savannah, Georgia; and Mobile, Alabama.

The increasing number of scholarly publications on the Fort Fisher campaign in the past fifteen years is impressive when one considers that previously few general histories of the war included any mention of Fort Fisher. That all changed with James McPherson’s *Battle Cry of Freedom*, which highlighted the significance of Fort Fisher’s capture to Union victory in the war. Still, even the well-received documentary “The Civil War” by Ken Burns made no mention of Fort Fisher or Wilmington at all.
As more works have been written about the Fort Fisher campaigns, few have examined the politics of command. Though interest in strategy and tactics continues to remain high, the importance of personal politics in the outcome of the Fort Fisher battles should not be ignored, having been so influential on military decisions. In the absence of much previous analysis, it was necessary to the development of this thesis to reexamine primary source documents to establish both the presence of personal politics, and how they specifically impacted command decisions on both sides.

The use of primary sources proved to be challenging, in many instances, because certain commanders proved more willing to express their opinions than others. For example, Rear Admiral David D. Porter wrote a naval memoir in the postwar years entitled *The Naval History of the Civil War*, in which he included candid comments about other commanders, particularly Major General Benjamin F. Butler, U.S. Army. In addition, Porter’s *Incidents and Anecdotes of the Civil War* proved to be a treasure trove of valuable information on the admiral’s character and mindset during the Fort Fisher campaigns, further illuminating his tension-filled relationship with General Butler. Butler’s own memoirs, the *Autobiography and Personal Reminiscences of Major-General Benj. F. Butler*, proved to be a work of pretentious scape-goating for his many failures throughout the war. It was highly profitable, however, in understanding the controversial general’s perspective on Admiral Porter, as well as his reasons for the first Fort Fisher expedition’s failure. As far as Confederate commanders are concerned, General Braxton Bragg penned a controversial letter to his brother in which he cast blame on Fort Fisher’s beleaguered garrison instead of himself for its loss while Major General Johnson Hagood’s *Memoirs of the War of Secession* noted the apparent indifference of General Bragg, and his subordinate Major General Robert F. Hoke, to defending Fort Fisher and Wilmington.
In comparison to these often mercurial figures were Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant and General Robert E. Lee, men whose true feelings were more difficult to ascertain. The copious amounts of correspondence contained in The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, and in Grant’s own personal memoirs, demonstrated the propensity of the commander to tacitly criticize others while eschewing personal blame for the failure of the first Fort Fisher expedition in December 1864. The Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant also provided an unflinching glimpse into the psyche of the Union high command in the last few months of the war. General Lee’s correspondence, published in various sources, demonstrated his inability to often be direct in dealing with his subordinates and even President Davis—a shortcoming which would ultimately cost the Confederacy dearly.

In order to better understand the mindset and personality of the various commanders involved in the Fort Fisher expeditions, this thesis also relied heavily upon The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies as well as the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies. These works provided voluminous correspondence and official reports from the U.S. Army and C.S. Army general and field officers as well as the U.S. Navy officers who fought at Fort Fisher.

Rounding out these works were various accounts written of the battles by Brigadier General Newton M. Curtis and an unpublished manuscript by Adrian Terry, brother of the U.S. Army’s expeditionary force commander at Fort Fisher, entitled Wilmington and Fort Fisher—which both give a solid “on the ground” perspective of the two campaigns sorely lacking in Grant, Porter, and Butler’s accounts. Confederate primary source documents also provided a wealth of information on major players—General Braxton Bragg, General Robert E. Lee, and President Jefferson Davis—in the campaigns. Colonel William Lamb, Fort Fisher’s commander,
published accounts of the battles in the Southern Historical Society Papers after the war, which proved crucial in understanding the frustrations that both he and Major General W.H.C. Whiting had in their dealings with General Bragg and politicians in Richmond. Other Confederate accounts of the battles proved scarce.

All things considered, personal politics contributed greatly to the Union’s failure to grasp the importance of Wilmington for most of the war as well as the Confederacy’s need to rigorously defend it, the Union’s failure in the first battle of Fort Fisher, and finally the Confederacy’s loss less than a month later in the second battle. Strategic, logistical, and tactical decisions were all influenced by personal politics. As Clausewitz wrote, in war facts and motives "may be intentionally concealed by those in command, or, if they happen to be transitory and accidental, history may not have recorded them at all. That is why critical narrative must go hand in hand with historical research."6 Thus, the main thrust of this work is to explain how personal politics affected the Fort Fisher campaigns in 1864 and 1865. Though it has been commonplace to explain military failure in terms of incompetency or numerical or material superiority, this thesis seeks instead to understand the underlying motivations that led to the numerous failures that occurred in one of the most important coastal and amphibious operations of the Civil War.

CHAPTER 1: THE FALL OF SATAN’S KINGDOM

As the sun rose on the morning of April 2, 1865, Confederate President Jefferson Davis sat nervously in St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia. For the past four years Davis had led the Confederate States of America through a war which had claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, and yet the killing was still not over. But God’s house was not a suitable place to deal with such matters. It was the first Sunday of the month, which meant that communion was being offered. As the Reverend Dr. Charles Minnigerode read from Psalm 46, the words reverberated in Davis’ ears: “He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth; he breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder; he burneth the chariot in the fire.”7 The choice of Scripture could not have been more appropriate, for only a little more than twenty miles away Davis’ chief military advisor and commander of the Army of Northern Virginia, General Robert E. Lee, was slugging it out in the trenches around Petersburg with Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant and his operational forces, the Army of the Potomac and Army of the James. The Union army, which had waited four long years to take the Confederate capital at Richmond, was now inching closer to the city’s gates.

As rays of light pierced the stained glass windows of St. Paul’s, the president prepared himself for what would turn out to be his final communion at St. Paul’s. As he sat transfixed on the events swirling around him, a sexton tapped Davis on the shoulder and placed a telegram in his hands. As he read the message all of the color drained from his face. It was a note from General Lee: “I think it is absolutely necessary that we should abandon our position tonight. I have given all the necessary orders on the subject to the troops. . . . I have directed General

7. Psalm 46:9 (King James Version).
Stevens to . . . furnish you with a guide and any assistance that you may require for yourself.”

Davis clearly understood the ramifications of Lee’s telegram. If the general evacuated his lines around Petersburg, then Richmond would soon fall. A fellow parishioner, Sallie Brock, watched as the Confederate president folded the note, rose from his seat, and proceeded to “walk rather unsteadily out of the church.” His unexpected departure prompted other government officials to abandon their pews and make their way out of St. Paul’s. Sensing that something was wrong, the congregation grew increasingly uneasy, seeing the president’s impromptu departure as the first hint of Richmond’s impending doom.

Rumors spread quickly through the city’s streets as confused mutterings gave way to outright panic. Richmond’s aristocrats prepared for evacuation almost as soon as they heard the grave news, while ruffians and brawlers took advantage of the city’s unrest. By nightfall, the Confederate capital’s cobblestone streets were filled with riotous mobs bent on stealing scarce goods and provisions which they had long been denied during the war. The poor took what they could not have previously afforded to purchase because of the inflation of Confederacy currency and the scarcity of foreign imports after the fall of Wilmington, North Carolina in February 1865. Before long, looting and rioting led to wanton destruction while hues of orange and red lit up the starry night sky, and the capital burned.

The following morning, as smoke and embers from the previous night’s fires wafted over the city’s streets, Nurse Phoebe Pember watched as Richmond’s mayor, Joseph Mayo, rode out in a carriage towards the advancing Federal army. As he disappeared over the horizon, Pember saw

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9. Sallie A. Brock, Richmond During the War: Four Years of Personal Observation (New York: G.W. Carleton and Company Publishers, 1867), 362 (hereafter cited as Brock, Richmond During the War).
10. Brock, Richmond During the War, 364.
“a single Federal blue-jacket rose above the hill, standing transfixed with astonishment at what he saw. Another and another sprang up as if out of the earth, but still all remained quiet.”¹¹ The grand city of Richmond, the jewel of the Confederacy and a place one man described as “God's City, the place of his peculiar favor,”¹² was now in Union hands. The sight was too much for many citizens to bear. Mary Fontaine, the daughter of a prominent Richmond minister, watched “[a] blue horseman ride to the City Hall, enter, with his sword knocking the ground at every step, and throw the great doors open, and take possession of our beautiful city.” She then watched “two blue figures on the Capitol . . . unfurl a tiny flag,” forcing her to her knees, as “the bitter, bitter tears came in a torrent.”¹³

News of city’s capture was met with shock and devastation throughout the Confederacy. Southerner Myrta Avary wrote: “Richmond was in the hands of the Federals. We covered our faces and cried aloud. All through the house was the sound of sobbing. It was the house of mourning, the house of death.”¹⁴ Mary Chesnut, the prominent South Carolinian diarist observed: “Richmond has fallen and I have no heart to write about it . . . Everything is lost in Richmond . . . Blue black is our horizon.”¹⁵ While Southern belles mourned, Northerners rejoiced as they had not in many years. Word of Richmond’s fall sent “every bell ringing, every flag flying, every heart beating,” reported Harpers Weekly.¹⁶ The “capture of Richmond plucks

¹⁵. Chesnut, Diary From Dixie, 362.
¹⁶. Harpers Weekly, April 15, 1865.
out the very heart of the rebellion,” a *New York Times* editorial declared,¹⁷ and the *Franklin Repository* of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania proclaimed:

> We have had victories before . . . but never has a triumph been achieved so crowning in the measure of its results—so utterly destructive to the country's foes. It leaves them without an army; without a government; without credit; without hope. It is the great retributive stroke which in the full[li]ness of His time, has vindicated Humanity and Justice!¹⁸

This “great retributive stroke” was a defining moment in the American Civil War. The Confederate capital had fallen almost four years to the day of the bombardment of Fort Sumter in Charleston harbor on April 12, 1861. Within a week, General Robert E. Lee would be forced to surrender his beloved Army of Northern Virginia to General Ulysses Grant at Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia, on April 9, 1865. But this slide to the “bitter end” of the Confederacy began long before the capture of Richmond or Lee’s surrender. The Southern war effort arguably ended on January 15, 1865 at Fort Fisher, located on a small spit of land twenty miles south of the port city of Wilmington, North Carolina. When Fort Fisher fell to the Union, one of the final nails in the coffin of “the Cause” was hammered into place with a deafening blow.

News of Wilmington’s fall in early 1865 filled newspaper pages as a war weary public looked wistfully towards peace. By this point, the war had turned mightily in the Union’s favor, strengthened in large part by the capture of Fort Fisher which effectively sealed Wilmington to trade with the outside world. Confederate politicians and commanders sought to mitigate the blow by twisting truth in the name of national security. Confederate commissioner James M. Mason wrote that, “whatever the loss to us, its conquest has been at great cost to the enemy. Yet, beyond the disaster, we are cheered and elevated here by the defiant tone of the South, with renewed declaration of Congress that the war will be prosecuted to independence, at whatever

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¹⁸. “Richmond Has Fallen!,” *Franklin Repository*, April 5, 1865.
Whatever picture politicians and commanders wanted to paint for the fearful public, however, no other place was more important to the Confederacy by late 1864 than Wilmington, and as long as it remained in Confederate hands the war would not end. But if Wilmington was so important for so long, why were no serious attempt made by Union forces to capture it before the last winter of the war?

For most of the conflict, Union commanders and Washington policy-makers concentrated on capturing the Confederacy’s key political symbols: the capital (which moved from Montgomery, Alabama to Richmond, Virginia early in the summer of 1861) as well as the birthplace of secession at Charleston, South Carolina. Consequently, Confederate commanders and strategists put a lot of effort and resources into protecting these cities, to the neglect of more strategically important places like Wilmington, North Carolina. At the root of this misplacement of strategic values were long standing personal politics and inter-service rivalries between political figures and commanders on both sides of the conflict. As the sounds of booming seacoast guns filled the cool night air in Charleston harbor in April 1861, no one could have imagined the magnitude of the tragedy looming on the horizon.

Confederate forces under the command of Brigadier General P.G.T. Beauregard commenced a fierce bombardment of Union forces under the command of Major Robert Anderson, hunkered down inside the brick walls of Fort Sumter on a shoal island in Charleston harbor at 4:30 a.m., April 12, 1861. For the next thirty-four hours, Major Anderson’s men listened to the furious screams of shells arcing overhead and exploding on the fort’s parade ground and against the brick walls. Though they gallantly withstood the bombardment with no

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casualties, the Union garrison was short on rations and supplies and soon forced to surrender.\textsuperscript{20} This bloodless battle was the beginning of a war that would ultimately claim the lives of more than 600,000 Americans.\textsuperscript{21}

In the spring of 1861, General Winfield Scott proposed an operational strategy that was bold and controversial, and which he hoped would prevent any effusion of American blood. Scott’s plan called for enveloping the South by a naval blockade of all of its major seaports while simultaneously conquering the Mississippi River valley. This policy would, at least on paper, effectively bisect the eastern and western portions of the South and seal it from the outside world, denying its armed forces and people the foreign goods they desperately needed to sustain the war effort.\textsuperscript{22} The general understood that the Confederacy could not properly clothe, feed, or equip its military or home front due to a lack of industry.

In 1860, the South possessed a mere 16 percent of the United States’ manufacturing facilities. Ninety-seven percent of the nation’s firearms, 94 percent of its cloth, 93 percent of its pig iron, and more than 90 percent of its boots and shoes were all manufactured in the North. Moreover, the Union possessed almost three times the amount of railroad tracks as that of the Confederacy, and several times the mileage of canals and roads.\textsuperscript{23} Thus, not only did the Union have the ability to produce more finished goods, but it also had a vastly superior system of transportation that enabled those goods to be transported to soldiers on the battlefront and civilians on the home front. Though the South experienced an industrial revolution during the war, as much out of necessity than anything else, it was still not enough to provide for its military or civilians. This meant that the Confederacy would be forced to rely on the importation

\textsuperscript{22} McPherson, \textit{Battle Cry of Freedom}, 333-34.
\textsuperscript{23} McPherson, \textit{Battle Cry of Freedom}, 318.
of manufactured goods from other countries, especially Great Britain and France.

Scott’s plan to systematically starve the Confederacy into submission by naval blockade was sound, but would require great patience—a virtue found lacking among political circles and civilians who expected a quick end to the war. General Scott wrote to Major General George B. McClellan that “The impatience of our patriotic and loyal Union friends . . . will urge instant and vigorous action, regardless, I fear, of the consequences.” 24 The general’s prescient statement rang true, as it was not long before popular opinion and political pressure came to bear on the U.S. president. Horace Greely—a radical abolitionist and publisher of the New York Tribune—had begun a “Forward to Richmond!” campaign and the chorus of “Forward to Richmond!” was heard all across the North. Under mounting pressure, Lincoln instructed General Irvin McDowell, command of the Army of the Potomac, to move his men towards Richmond.

General McDowell urged the President to give him more time to drill his men. After all, thousands had received little or no training. But Lincoln refused, wanting the enemy whipped that summer. 25 When the general protested that his men were too green, the President replied: “You are green, it is true; but they are green, also; you are all green alike.” 26 In July, McDowell’s Army of the Potomac snaked its way towards Richmond. The Northern public would soon be awakened to the searing horror of war. By the end of the battle of Bull Run on July 21, 1861, more than 4,500 dead and wounded men were strewn across the grassy fields near Manassas, Virginia, only twenty-two miles from Washington. It was a resounding Confederate victory, and Lincoln’s first push towards Richmond proved to be an abysmal failure. 27

But McDowell’s defeat did not deter his successors from building their own campaigns around the capture of Richmond. Major General George B. McClellan devoted most of the resources of the Army of the Potomac in the ill-fated Peninsula Campaign to its capture in the spring of 1862.28 As he advanced his forces up the peninsula formed by the York and James Rivers, the Confederate army under the command of General Joseph E. Johnston retreated to the gates of Richmond. Severely wounded at the Battle of Seven Pines on May 31, 1862, President Jefferson Davis replaced Johnston with General Robert E. Lee. “His name might be Audacity,” one fellow officer wrote of the new commander, “He will take more desperate chances, and take them quicker than any other general in this country, North or South”29 Lee soon proved the depths of his audacity, launching a series of bold counterattacks against McClellan and sending his army scurrying back to Washington—a spectacle later referred to as “the Great Skedaddle”. Richmond was saved, provoking a furious President Lincoln to remove General McClellan from command, although he was later reinstated after Major General John Pope’s loss at the second battle of Bull Run in August 1862.

Following the Union stalemate at the battle of Antietam in September 1862, McClellan was removed from command for the second and last time. The exasperated president then selected Major General Ambrose Burnside, a veteran of the Union capture of key cities on North Carolina Outer Banks in 1861, to replace McClellan. The new commander’s plan was similar to that of his predecessors: the capture of Richmond.30 Burnside and his beleaguered army were soundly defeated at the battle of Fredericksburg in mid-December 1862, and the commander was

removed and replaced by Major General Joseph Hooker in January 1863. Arrogant and bombastic, General Hooker was fond of using the phrase “When I get to Richmond.” One day, as he uttered these words at the White House, the president replied curtly: “If you get to Richmond, General . . .” Before he was able to finish, Hooker interrupted Lincoln and said “Excuse me, Mr. President, but there is no if in the case. I am going straight to Richmond if I live.”

Hooker, too, was soundly defeated in one of the most complete Confederate victories of the war, at the battle of Chancellorsville in early May 1863. Predictably, he was removed from command, and replaced by Major General George G. Meade—a mediocre officer at best. Realizing that his new commander lacked aggressiveness, Lincoln replaced him with Major General Ulysses S. Grant in March 1864. Until the time of Grant’s appointment, almost all of the commanders of the Army of the Potomac had made Richmond, Virginia their prime target, which ultimately led to their downfalls.

Richmond was still the most important Confederate target for the Union. With only 100 miles separating it from Washington, it was a thorn in the side of President Lincoln. That glory and honor would come to those who took Richmond was a belief reflected in the correspondence of Union Private James Drake, who wrote: “We all believed that to us—the Army of the James—the glory of capturing Richmond was to [soon] fall.”

Confederate private Herschel V. Johnson sarcastically remarked: “The capture of Atlanta and Richmond is regarded by the authorities of the United States as all that is necessary for our ultimate subjugation.” But if the army was preoccupied with the capture of the Confederate capital, then the navy was likewise consumed

with the capture of its own politically symbolic target: the seaport of Charleston, South Carolina.

On April 19, 1861, President Abraham Lincoln issued the “Proclamation of Blockade Against Southern Ports” in conjunction with General Winfield Scott’s plan to choke the Confederacy into submission, the “Anaconda Plan.” According to this plan, Union gunboats would be posted at the entranceways to major Southern seaports to prevent the export of raw materials from the Confederacy, as well as the importation of manufactured goods from Europe. If any attempt was made by a foreign or domestic power to challenge the blockade, the response by Union authorities was made clear by Lincoln’s proclamation that “if any person, under the pretended authority of the said States . . . shall molest a vessel of the United States . . . such person will be held amenable to the laws of the United States for the prevention and punishment of piracy.”34 In one fell swoop, Lincoln declared that trade between the Confederacy and a foreign nation was unacceptable to the United States. But the South’s very survival depended upon its ability to be cunning in penetrating the Union blockade.

Early in the war, the Confederacy had little reason to worry. Its coastline stretched for more than 3,500 miles and included a dozen major port cities, as well as 180 inlets, bays, and river mouths navigable to smaller vessels. To patrol this vast coastline the U.S. Navy had thirty-six blockaders fit for patrol in June of 1861.35 This amounted to approximately one blockader for every 96 miles of coastline. Rear Admiral Louis M. Goldsborough, commander of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, expressed his frustration to Assistant Secretary of the Navy Gustavus Fox in March 1862, when he noted that with only two vessels blockading Wilmington,
he did “not feel that it is at all sufficiently guarded.” Yet what the naval blockade could not accomplish on its own, the army’s assistance might. By the spring of 1863, combined operations had closed all but two major seaports on the Atlantic coast: Charleston, South Carolina, and Wilmington, North Carolina.

For the first two years of the war, Charleston was the principal Atlantic entrépot of imports from Great Britain. Its dockyards were usually jam-packed with the sleek blockade-running ships that brought in valuable supplies necessary for the South’s survival. To keep the Confederacy well supplied abroad, two agents—Caleb Huse and Edward C. Anderson—were sent to Great Britain to purchase and stockpile war materials. After purchasing the goods, Huse and Anderson had them loaded on ocean-going merchant vessels for transport to neutral ports in the West Indies, Bermuda, Nassau, Cuba, and Halifax, Nova Scotia. From there, supplies were transferred to smaller, sleeker, and faster blockade running steamers that would then attempt a final dash through the Union blockade into seaports stretched along the Southern coastline. Once supplies were unloaded, the runners would then be reloaded with raw materials and sent abroad to continue the trade. In exchange for commodities such as cotton, lumber, and naval stores, the Confederate government imported enormous quantities of rifle-muskets, revolvers, bayonets, cannon, ammunition, swords, medicine, shoes, boots, leather, food, and all sorts of civilian goods.

For much of the war, Charleston was the most important point on the Atlantic seaboard for the importation of foreign goods through the blockade. Approximately 80 percent of the

blockade runners coming into Charleston from the fall of 1861 to the spring of 1863 eluded capture.39 Englishman Thomas Dudley wrote that Charleston’s capture would “be regarded as the deathblow to the rebellion, and do more to discourage those who were aiding the South with supplies and money than any other event.”40 “Fort Sumter was the symbol of the Confederacy,” historian E. Milby Burton wrote, “if Fort Sumter fell, so would the Confederacy.”41 Charleston proved as much a symbol to the Confederacy as it was to the Union, and no armies or resources were withheld to prevent its capture, even when Union forces began siege operations against the seaport in 1863 and its importance in comparison to Wilmington was greatly diminished.42

When Brigadier General P.G.T. Beauregard arrived in Charleston in March 1861, he found “a great deal of zeal and energy . . . but little professional knowledge and experience.”43 Under his leadership, in little more than year Charleston became the most heavily defended seaport in the Confederacy. Its works consisted of an integrated system of approximately 400 cannon forming three interlocking rings of fire, supplemented by two ironclad rams (the C.S.S. Palmetto State and C.S.S. Chicora), torpedoes, as well as various obstructions to block the harbor approaches. By the summer of 1863, Beauregard had 6,500 defenders with which to protect the city and harbor.44 Rear Admiral Samuel Du Pont aptly described Charleston's defenses as “a porcupine hide with the quills turned outside in.”45 To make matters worse for the U.S. Navy, the water approaches to Charleston were so shallow that they prevented deep drafted

40. Quoted in Wise, Lifeline, 122.
43. Beauregard to Walker, March 11, 1861, ORA, 1:274.
Union warships from entering the harbor.\textsuperscript{46} It was a veritable fortress, seemingly impregnable to anything the Union army or navy could throw at it. Yet further north, as Wilmington grew in importance as a blockade running entrepôt, it was not nearly as well defended as Charleston, a glaring omission on the part of the Confederate high command.

Before the outbreak of the Civil War, Wilmington was the busiest seaport and the most populated and cosmopolitan city in North Carolina. Just twenty-seven miles from the mouth of the Cape Fear River, Wilmington was located on a peninsula sandwiched between the Atlantic Ocean to the east and the Cape Fear River to the west. Its importance rested on the fact that it was a port city that had the benefit of strong rail connections throughout the southeast. Three railroads radiated from the town, able to carry heavy freight and large numbers of passengers across the state and into South Carolina and Virginia. The Wilmington and Weldon Railway led northward to Weldon, North Carolina, where it connected with the Petersburg and Weldon Railroad that snaked its way to the town of Petersburg in southeastern Virginia. This railway would be the main artery of supply for Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia by 1864.

Heading southward from Wilmington, the Wilmington and Manchester Railway indirectly linked the Tar Heel seaport to Charleston, serving as a thoroughfare for moving reinforcements between the two cities when either was threatened by attack. It also brought in cotton from across the southeast for export to Europe. Finally, the Wilmington and Rutherfordton Railroad stretched across to the western regions of North Carolina, which meant goods and supplies could be ferried back and forth from the coast to the mountains and vice versa. In addition, several plank roads connected Wilmington to surrounding counties. It was, to say the least, a well-connected and critical port for not only the receipt of goods and supplies but also their transportation throughout

\textsuperscript{46} Spencer Tucker, \textit{Blue and Gray Navies: the Civil War Afloat} (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2006), 238 (hereafter cited as Tucker, \textit{Blue and Gray Navies}).
the region.47

Wilmington also had all of the prerequisites for becoming a haven for blockade runners. Before the war, dozens of steamers and sailing craft operated in and out of the port city exchanging timber, naval stores, and farm commodities for goods imported from the North and from overseas. The resultant steady maritime traffic provided work and profits for local residents, and also demanded the services of a large number of watermen whose expertise would be invaluable when the Cape Fear River swelled with dozens of blockade runners throughout the war.48 Its thriving shipping trade with other states, in addition to good trade routes with Europe and the Caribbean, meant that Wilmington would be vital in the ensuing conflict. It was a city that was primed to become a place of great significance to the survival of the Southern war effort.

But no other seaport would present as much difficulty for the Union blockade as Wilmington. The entrances to the Cape Fear River—the only way to reach the city by ship—comprised two inlets: Old Inlet and New Inlet, both separated by Smith’s Island (today popularly known as Bald Head Island). Though only five miles apart as the crow flies, in order to get from one inlet to the other by sea, a ship had to travel around Smith’s Island for approximately forty miles, usually a six to seven hour voyage.49 This effectively forced the blockading squadron at Wilmington to split into two squadrons, and the bars at both inlets proved too shallow for large gunboats to cross. The heavy guns and batteries guarding the inlets also kept Union ships at a respectful distance of up to five miles offshore, and the city itself was too far inland for Union cannon to reach from the Atlantic Ocean. The only way Wilmington could be captured was if the

fortifications peppered around the mouth of the Cape Fear River were captured, something which required a well-executed joint operation between the United States Army and Navy—two branches with little cooperative experience.\textsuperscript{50}

As far as the Confederacy was concerned, the main difficulty in protecting Wilmington was the lack of troops to garrison the area’s ever expanding network of fortifications and batteries. Though construction began on defenses near the mouth of the river as early as the spring of 1861, they consisted of little more than loosely connected sand batteries and two aging masonry works constructed decades before. The two pre-war fortifications, Fort Johnston, built between 1745 and 1750, and Fort Caswell, constructed 1826-1838, were almost useless due to the recent advances in rifled cannon. The invention of exploding of shells (which by the outbreak of the Civil War had become a science) made masonry forts obsolete as they were easily bombarded into rubble, a fact evidenced by the destruction of Forts Sumter and Pulaski during the war. James D. Bulloch, a secret service agent for the Confederacy, claimed that “up to January and February, 1862, both Savannah and Wilmington could have been entered by the Federal vessels then blockading them.”\textsuperscript{51}

When Colonel William Lamb arrived at Confederate Point above New Inlet on July 4, 1862, he assumed command of a myriad of disconnected sand batteries named “Fort Fisher.” Scattered and weak, they nonetheless constituted the main defensive work guarding the northernmost passageway into the Cape Fear River. The defenses were anemic, Lamb quickly discerned, comprised of only a few elevated sand batteries armed with half a dozen or so large cannon, only two of which were suitable for coastal defense. The colonel later admitted that

\textsuperscript{50} Charles Robinson III, \textit{Hurricane of Fire: The Union Assault on Fort Fisher} (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998), 71 (hereafter cited as Robinson, \textit{Hurricane of Fire}).

“One of the Federal frigates could have cleaned it out with a few broad-sides.” Ambitious and resolute, Lamb determined at once to “build a work of such magnitude that it could withstand the heaviest fire of any guns in the American Navy.”\textsuperscript{52} But first he would need a larger garrison, dozens of heavy artillery pieces, hundreds of laborers, and large quantities of goods and materials. Acquiring these things would prove difficult, but Lamb was not deterred. In just a year and a half, Fort Fisher became the most formidable seacoast fortification in the Confederacy.

As the Confederates strengthened their works, a major chink in the area’s defensive armor became apparent. Until early September 1863, Smith’s Island was unoccupied and unguarded by Confederate forces. Rear Admiral S.P. Lee, commander of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, whose principal area of patrol was the Cape Fear, recognized that the key to Wilmington’s defenses was Smith’s Island. From here, Union forces could establish siege lines against Fort Fisher to the north and Fort Caswell to the west. Captain A. Ludlow Case of the U.S.S. \textit{Iroquois} wrote to Admiral Lee: “I look upon the possession of Smith's Island as of the utmost importance. With it we certainly could control (partially) at least one entrance to Wilmington . . . Without it the expense of keeping up the blockade will be immense as well as very difficult.”\textsuperscript{53} Captain Charles Boggs of the U.S.S. \textit{Sacramento} echoed his comrade, claiming that “Smith's Island is the key of the position, and if allowed to perfect their defenses there no human means can dislodge them.”\textsuperscript{54} Union commanders dawdled, and the island was soon garrisoned by Confederate soldiers who constructed Fort Holmes, a large earthen work built in the vein of Fort Fisher. Union forces would regret their inaction.

When strategists in Washington made plans to capture Wilmington, political authorities

\textsuperscript{53} Case to Lee, May 23, 1863, \textit{ORN}, ser. 1, 9:50.
were disinterested and responded half-heartedly. On May 11, 1862, Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles ordered Admiral Goldsborough, the first commander of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, to prepare for an immediate attack on Fort Caswell protecting Old Inlet. The naval secretary ordered the famed ironclad *Monitor*, fresh from its titanic duel with the C.S.S. *Virginia* at Hampton Roads, Virginia, south to Wilmington to participate in the planned assault.

Meanwhile, Union forces at New Bern, North Carolina, under the command of Major General John G. Foster, prepared and awaited orders. The proposed attack on Fort Caswell and Wilmington called for a joint operation between the Union army, commanded by General Foster, and the navy, commanded by Admiral Goldsborough. As Foster men marched on Wilmington from New Bern, almost ninety miles to the north, Goldsborough’s naval flotilla would bombard the Confederate defenses ringing the mouth of the Cape Fear River.

Problems soon arose, however, over political concerns. The vainglorious Assistant Secretary of the Navy Gustavus Fox wanted the prestige of Wilmington’s capture for the navy. For months, he had been pressuring naval forces up and down the Atlantic Coast to engage high profile targets, hoping that victories would both swell both the navy’s pride and deepen its purse. He informed Admiral S.F. Du Pont of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron that his “duties are twofold: first, to beat our southern friends; second, to beat the Army. We have done it so far and the people acknowledge and give us the credit.”55 Some of Fox’s subordinates parroted their leader’s arrogance. When Admiral Goldsborough informed Fox of his intent to attack Wilmington, he boasted: “I can and will take the forts at Wilmington as soon as I can avail myself of the services of the *Monitor* . . . I want no services, and no assistance whatever from the

55. Fox to Du Pont, June 3, 1862, in *Correspondence of Fox*, 1:126.
Army, in carrying them out, I will garrison with Marines.”

Unfortunately, President Lincoln rescinded Welles’s order to Goldsborough to attack Wilmington, and instead ordered the admiral to move all available gunboats up the James River to assist General McClellan in his Peninsula Campaign to capture Richmond in the spring of 1862. In one fell swoop, Lincoln denied Goldsborough a prime opportunity to achieve victory at Wilmington. This was an egregious mistake on the president’s part, as McClellan’s campaign soon ended in an embarrassing defeat. The extra time allowed the Confederate’s to strengthen Wilmington’s defensive works, and North Carolina’s principal seaport would never again be as ripe for the taking as it was in the spring of 1862.

When Rear Admiral S. Philips Lee took over command of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron from Rear Admiral Goldsborough in September 1862, he attempted to revive plans for Wilmington’s capture. Soon thereafter, however, the Navy Department’s attention shifted southward towards Charleston, while the War Department continued to focus on Richmond. In conjunction with General Ambrose Burnside’s plan to attack the Confederate capital by way of Fredericksburg, Virginia in December 1862, a 10,000-man-force under General Foster at New Bern would advance westward to sever the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad, and then turn southward to strike Wilmington. At the same time, the Monitor would bombard Fort Caswell into submission and attempt to enter the Cape Fear by way of Old Inlet, while conventional wooden warships bombarded Fort Fisher at New Inlet. If the Monitor breached the inlet, it was then to move upriver to attack Fort Fisher from the rear, forcing the closure of both inlets. Contrary to his predecessor, Admiral Lee understood that “The capture of Wilmington will require a military force sufficient to make and maintain a strong siege. It is not a naval measure. An attack from the

56. Goldsborough to Fox, May 21, 1862, in Correspondence of Fox, 1:273.
57. Fonvielle, Wilmington Campaign, 52.
58. Fonvielle, Wilmington Campaign, 52.
water side only, according to our experience so far . . . is not likely to succeed.”

Admiral Lee’s plan appeared sound, but depended in large part on the *Monitor*. Unfortunately for the navy, the *Monitor* sank in a heavy gale off of Hatteras Island, North Carolina as she was being towed towards Wilmington on New Year’s Eve 1862. Unwilling to execute the attack without the famed ironclad, the Union high command scrapped the proposed Wilmington campaign in favor of the more politically inviting target of Charleston. Secretary Fox was eager to shift the navy’s attention to Palmetto State port anyway, arguing that the inlets at the Cape Fear were too shallow for Union warships. He promptly ordered that every gunboat sent to attack Fort Caswell move on to South Carolina. “We should be inclined to skip Fort Caswell”, he contended, “for the Fall of Charleston is the fall of Satan's Kingdom.”

“Satan’s kingdom” had become priority number one of the navy by 1862. However, little progress was made towards capturing it even as 1862 gave way to a new year, a dark period for the Union marked by successive battlefield setbacks. The blockade running port of Galveston, Texas was seized by Union forces in October 1862, only to be retaken by Confederate forces less than three months later, and held until the war’s end. No place of any real importance had been taken by Union forces since Major General Henry Halleck’s capture of Corinth, Mississippi in May 1862. With the devastating defeat of the Army of the Potomac under General Burnside at Fredericksburg in December 1862, disappointment and depression hung heavy like a pall over politicians in Washington, soldiers at the battlefront, and civilians on the home front.

As a result, criticism of the Lincoln administration grew exponentially. The fall Congressional elections indicated the somber mood of the Northern public as many Republican candidates who had been ushered into office with pomp and circumstance in the fall of 1860,

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60. Fox to Du Pont, January 6, 1863, in *Correspondence of Fox*, 1:173.
61. Fox to Du Pont, June 3, 1862, in *Correspondence of Fox*, 1:128.
would lose their seats only two years later. To make matters worse, Horace Greely’s *New York Tribune*, which earlier in the war prompted the “On to Richmond!” campaign, warned the nation in January 1863 that the financial cost of the war threatened to bankrupt the nation within ninety days. Monetary matters were so bad that the U.S. Treasury Department applied to New York lending institutions for $300 million in order to continue financing the war. Bankers complied on the condition that the government understood that this would be its final loan. As conditions continued to deteriorate the *New York Tribune* urged the president to consider negotiating a peace treaty with the Southern states, and other newspapers echoed Greely’s conciliatory call.

Lincoln and his Cabinet were worried, and rightly so. If Union forces did not score a quick and decisive victory soon, chances were good that the war would be lost on the home front instead of the battlefield. Hoping to secure a victory in the Western Theater, Lincoln issued General Order #1 on January 27, 1862, instructing General William Rosecrans, commander of the Army of the Cumberland, to move against Confederate forces entrenched at Chattanooga, Tennessee, while General Ulysses S. Grant campaigned against Vicksburg, the key to controlling the Mississippi River. The order also urged General McClellan to move at once to attack Lee's army in Virginia.

In response, General-in-Chief Henry Halleck informed the president that Union armies were doing everything they could, but were stretched too thin to do much more. The navy fared little better. Admiral David G. Farragut hesitated to move up the Mississippi after capturing New Orleans without the aid of the army, and he declined to attack Mobile, Alabama without the support of ironclad vessels. Pondering his dilemma, President Lincoln recalled Gustavus Fox’s earlier recommendation to go after Charleston, and he soon put pressure on Rear Admiral
Samuel F. Du Pont to attack the Palmetto State port as soon as possible.\textsuperscript{62}

In Lincoln’s mind, a victory at Charleston might well provide the North with the momentum it desperately needed. After all, South Carolina had been the first state to secede from the Union, and the war had begun in Charleston harbor. The city was deemed by Northerners as the “Cradle of the Rebellion,”\textsuperscript{63} and one Union officer later wrote: “[I] trust that the rebellion cannot end until its cradle is in our possession.”\textsuperscript{64} Gustavus Fox urged Admiral Du Pont to move quickly, writing: “We must have Charleston . . . The [President] is most anxious and you know the people are.”\textsuperscript{65}

When joint operations finally began in the spring of 1863, no one could have known that the ensuing campaign would become one of the longest of the war. The deck seemed to be stacked clearly in the Union’s favor, with Admiral Du Pont assembling the most powerful naval armada of the war up to that time. Deeming the capture of Charleston the highest priority, resources were siphoned off from Wilmington, a far more strategically important target by 1863, and sent southward. What many Union leaders did not foresee was the potential political backlash if Du Pont’s fleet failed to capture Charleston.\textsuperscript{66} At the same time, Secretary Gideon Welles understood what abandoning the campaign to capture Wilmington meant to the Union war effort: “I am by no means confident that we are acting wisely,” he wrote, “in expending so much strength and effort on Charleston, a place of no strategic importance.”\textsuperscript{67}

By this point in the war, blockade running at Charleston and Wilmington had changed

\textsuperscript{62} Rowana Reed, \textit{Combined Operations in the Civil War} (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 280-81 (hereafter cited as Reed, \textit{Combined Operations}).
\textsuperscript{64} Drayton to Du Pont, July 2, 1862, in \textit{Correspondence of Fox}, 1:136.
\textsuperscript{65} Fox to Du Pont, September 6, 1862, in \textit{Correspondence of Fox}, 1:154-55.
\textsuperscript{66} Tucker, \textit{Blue and Gray Navies}, 236.
\textsuperscript{67} Gideon Welles, April 20, 1863, in \textit{Diary of Gideon Welles} (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911), 1:276 (hereafter cited as \textit{Diary of Gideon Welles}).
dramatically. From the spring of 1861 to the fall of 1862, “anyone within the Confederacy, England, or the Islands would have readily identified Charleston as the South’s premier port for incoming supplies.” With the U.S. Navy’s ensuing campaign against Charleston, attempting to enter the seaport became far more difficult, as the naval attack settled into a prolonged siege. In response, blockade running captains increasingly shifted northward to Wilmington throughout 1863. When Du Pont’s flotilla arrived at Charleston, the kind of goods being imported there changed. Investors in civilian goods used Charleston as the main port of importation, while government-owned blockade runners—who mainly imported supplies of military necessity—used Wilmington. As a result, “the vast majority of government-owned stores imported in the last two years of the war were brought in through North Carolina.”

Slowly but surely, Wilmington began to supersede Charleston in importance, and despite a temporary uptick of trade in the latter port in 1864, it “took a distant second place” to the Tar Heel seaport in terms of foreign imports.

Between December 21, 1861 and December 28, 1864, 105 blockade-runners made approximately 312 successful trips into Wilmington. A large number of the 782 documented trips into Carolina ports by sailing vessels (largely replaced by the fall of 1862 with the faster, sleeker, steam-powered blockade-runners built in Great Britain) must also be added to this number. Only about fifty-eight blockade running steamers brought in 116 cargoes to Charleston between November 1863 and February 1865. Wilmington was clearly more important as an entrepôt to the Confederate war effort than Charleston by 1863. “North Carolina’s imports constituted a

69. Webster, *Entrépot*, 146.
70. Webster, *Entrépot*, 73.
71. Webster, *Entrépot*, 133.
significant asset to the Confederate war effort,” one historian observed, and “Wilmington’s success as a source for government importation was one of the few consistent bright spots for much of the Confederacy’s existence.”

Despite Wilmington’s ascension as the Confederacy’s principal seaport, its defenses were far weaker than those at Charleston. Even as late as March 1863, General Daniel Harvey Hill, then commander of the Department of North Carolina, wrote: “I have been sadly, sadly disappointed in the works at Wilmington. They are weak, quite weak.” Regardless, Lincoln and his cabinet still thought Charleston might be the boost they needed to help turn the tide of war. For Gustavus Fox, the attack on Charleston had another benefit: its capture would elevate the navy’s standing in the eyes of powerful politicians as well as the Northern people. When Admiral Du Pont voiced his concerns that he may not be able to capture Charleston, Fox insisted that “it may be impossible, but the crowning act of this war ought to be by the navy.”

What he never seemed to understand, both in his bid to capture Wilmington in 1862 as well as Charleston in the summer of 1863, was that without cooperation between the army and navy, neither port would be captured. As both service branches would soon discover, to ignore this wisdom would be to invite certain disaster.

Though much popular and political interest centered on Charleston, the Union army and President Lincoln still focused most of their attention on capturing Richmond. When Major General Ulysses S. Grant became the general-in-chief of all Union armies in March 1864, he was determined, unlike many of his predecessors, to slug it out with “Bobby Lee” in Virginia, and make every move he could to strike the Confederate capital, regardless of casualties. One of the

72. Webster, Entrépot, 102.
73. Webster, Entrépot, 96.
74. Hill to Wife, March 8, 1863, in Daniel Harvey Hill Papers, N.C. Dept. Archives and History, Raleigh, NC.
75. Fox to Du Pont, June 3, 1862, in Correspondence of Fox, 1:126.
deciding factors in Grant’s ultimate success was his growing understanding that in order to win, he would have to cut Lee’s supply lines and starve his army into submission. Thus, he planned a campaign in April 1864 to close the port city of Mobile, Alabama even though it was still less important than Wilmington, as far as blockade-running was concerned. As the British historian J.F.C. Fuller wrote, Wilmington would be a place “the value of which Grant never seems to have fully appreciated.”

Fuller’s assessment proved correct, as Grant’s military operations for most of 1864 were concentrated on Lee at Petersburg. With the commencement of the Overland Campaign in May 1864, the lieutenant general sent the Army of the Potomac across the Rapidan River towards Richmond in an effort to force Lee to come out of his entrenched position, in the hopes of trapping and defeating him. Grant’s ploy did not work, and his strategy still ignored the lifeline of Lee’s army though Wilmington.

As he fought Lee to a stalemate throughout 1864, Grant slowly but surely came to understand Wilmington’s significance. Lee’s army could only continue to fight as long as there was food to eat, clothes to wear, and bullets to kill. Under pressure from Lincoln and Welles, he finally agreed to detach a force of almost 6,500 men under the command of Major General Godfrey Weitzel, in conjunction with the largest naval armada of the war under the command of Rear Admiral David Dixon Porter, to attack Fort Fisher. Personal politics, which had for so long blinded both Union and Confederate officials to Wilmington’s importance, would now lead to one of the most embarrassing, albeit preventable, failures in American military history: the first battle of Fort Fisher.

CHAPTER 2: TO THE CRACK OF DOOM

As the last faint rays of daylight retreated over the horizon on the evening of December 24, 1864, families in Wilmington were preparing for Christmas Eve church services. Loud booms from cannon fire could be heard in the distance, leaving a sickening feeling among the town folk. Meanwhile, just twenty miles to the south, Confederate Lieutenant Richard Armstrong hunched himself tightly behind the revetments of Fort Fisher as shells weighing upwards of 300 pounds exploded around him. Every now and then, Armstrong peered over the fort’s parapet to look at the awe-inspiring spread out before him, what one commander later called “the most formidable armada ever assembled for concentration upon one given point.”

Sixty-four warships bearing almost 630 cannon, under the command of Rear Admiral David Dixon Porter, had pounded the fort since mid-afternoon. The following twenty-four hours saw artillery shells exploding in the fort at a rate of almost two per second, spraying geysers of sand mixed with hot iron fragments everywhere. As Armstrong turned his gaze towards the interior of the fort, he was in utter disbelief at the level of destruction before him. “Never since the foundation of the world was there such a fire. The whole interior of the fort . . . was as one XI-inch shell bursting”, he observed, “You can now inspect the whole works and walk on nothing but iron.”

Meanwhile, four miles north of Armstrong’s position, approximately 500 Union soldiers from the 112th and 142nd New York Infantry regiments under the command of Brevet Brigadier General Newton Martin Curtis disembarked from their troop transports, the first Northern feet to touch the sandy shores of Confederate Point in the campaign. Their objectives were twofold: first, to establish a strong beachhead for an army assault; second, to reconnoiter the area to ascertain whether the fort should be attacked with the 6,000 soldiers still waiting on troop

transports offshore.\textsuperscript{81}

The New Yorkers encountered little resistance during the landing, though less than one mile north of their position 1,200 crack Confederate troops under the command of Brigadier General W.W. Kirkland had recently arrived from Virginia. Kirkland and his men—one brigade of Major General Robert F. Hoke’s division—were to be reinforced by three more brigades that had been detached from R.E. Lee’s besieged army around Petersburg for Wilmington’s defense. So far, Curtis and his men were fortunate. Though Kirkland and his brigade were itching for a fight, they were unprepared to mount serious opposition to the Union landing party.\textsuperscript{82}

Cognizant of their precarious position, Major General Godfrey Weitzel, the expedition’s commander, soon joined Curtis’ reconnaissance force and ordered a strong skirmish line formed to protect the Union beachhead. He also ordered Curtis and a contingent of New Yorkers to proceed southward to scout the fort while additional troops continued to land throughout the day. As Curtis and his men advanced southward, about half a mile from the landing zone it encountered a tiny sand redoubt called “Flag Pond Battery.” Badly shaken by the ferocity of the bombardment, the small Confederate garrison surrendered as soon as they spotted the blue mass heading towards them, preferring to spend the rest of the war in a Northern prison camp to the continued shelling of Porter’s fleet.\textsuperscript{83}

Meanwhile, Curtis and his men continued towards the fort, cutting a telegraph line along the way, and isolating the garrison by severing its main line of communication with headquarters in Wilmington. Colonel Lamb and his men would now have to depend on less reliable means of communication including couriers and the signal corps. As the New Yorkers got within 100 yards


\textsuperscript{83} Fonvielle, \textit{Wilmington Campaign}, 148.
of the fort, they noticed that there was not a single defender manning its walls. When a mounted Confederate messenger attempted to exit the main sally port bearing a note from Colonel Lamb to General Kirkland at Sugar Loaf, one of Curtis’ marksmen shot and killed him. Promptly relieving the dead courier of his horse and dispatches, the marksman rode back to the safety of his lines to deliver the captured messages to General Weitzel. No one in in the fort knew that the enemy was so close.84

As Curtis’ men moved forward and dug within seventy-five yards of the fort’s sloped walls, Lieutenant William H. Walling of the 142nd New York Infantry, looked up and saw one of the fort’s battle flags lying on the parapet, apparently having been knocked down by an exploding naval shell. Making his way through the fort’s palisade fence which had been blown apart in places, Walling ran up onto the fort’s parapet and grabbed the flag, scurrying back to his lines unscathed.85 Hearing of the audacious theft, General Curtis concluded that the works could be taken if he was sufficiently reinforced. He hastily sent a messenger back up the beach to General Weitzel requesting more men.

About half a mile north, the courier found Weitzel standing on a sandy knoll, peering at the fort through his field glasses. As he scanned the land face batteries for evidence of damage to the heavy seacoast guns, his heart sank. “The work as a defensive work,” Weitzel later wrote, “was not injured at all, except that one gun about midway of the land face was dismounted.”86 Porter’s bombardment had done little damage to fort’s artillery and the earthen ramparts, which had absorbed the shells’ explosions. Most of the navy’s projectiles landed harmlessly on the fort’s parade ground or in the Cape Fear River. Under the circumstances, Weitzel believed that a

ground assault would be catastrophic. “It would be butchery to order an assault on that work,” he informed General Butler.  

As the sun began to dip below the horizon, General Curtis and his men still held their position, but were growing increasingly anxious as they awaited reinforcements. Curtis decided to head back up the beach to see what was holding his reinforcements, and when he arrived at the beachhead he discovered that General Butler had ordered the evacuation of all Union forces from the peninsula. He quickly fired off a dispatch to the commanding general:

Your order to retire is held in abeyance that you may know of the true condition of the fort: the garrison has offered no resistance; the flagstaff of the fort was cut by a naval shot and one of my officers brought from the parapet the garrison flag; another officer cut the telegraph wire connecting the fort with Wilmington; my skirmishers are now at the parapet.

As Curtis waited for a response, he marched south to Battery Holland, one half mile above Fort Fisher. It was near Battery Holland that elements of the 117th New York Infantry had accepted the surrender of a battalion of 227 North Carolina Junior Reserves, their commander unwilling to risk the lives of mere boys.

Not long afterward, Curtis received a second order to retire, but dismissed it. He believed that Butler had not yet received his earlier dispatch. Growing impatient with the general’s obstinacy, Colonel Cyrus Comstock, the expedition’s chief engineer, and Brevet Major General Adelbert Ames met with Curtis, who made it clear that he believed the fort could be taken. Ames and Comstock disagreed based on the fact that the fort was still in good shape and almost none of its land face cannon had been destroyed by the bombardment. As the men conferred, a third order arrived from General Butler instructing Curtis to get his men off of the beach at once. Sensing the general’s irritation, the courier informed Curtis that “all the troops which have

landed . . . have been taken on board the ships, and there is no one on land but your force and the flankers and pickets you have left out, and it will be entirely useless for you to expect any assistance.” Though angry and disappointed, Curtis had little choice but to withdraw his men. As they retreated toward the beachhead, the entire reconnaissance party cursed the name of Ben Butler. “Everybody is disgusted,” wrote one New Yorker, and “officers and men express that the fort was ours and that no one but Butler prevented them from taking it.”

This was the inglorious end of the first Union attempt to capture Fort Fisher, which ranked as one of the most embarrassing Union failures of the war. By most accounts, blame for the debacle rested squarely on the shoulders of Benjamin F. Butler, who had never even set foot on Confederate Point.

General Grant was livid when he received the news. “The Wilmington expedition has proven a gross and culpable failure,” he informed the president, “Who is to blame I hope will be known.” Yet the lieutenant general quite likely already knew who was to blame. The fact that General Butler had aborted the mission ran completely counter to Grant’s instructions that if the fort could not immediately be captured, Union forces were to “entrench themselves and by co-operating with the Navy effect the reduction and capture of those places.”

Butler denied that he received the order, telling Admiral Porter on Christmas Day that “nothing but the operations of a regular siege, which did not come within my instructions, would reduce the fort.” Grant’s main objection to Butler was not his unwillingness to attack the fort, however, as much as it was the

89. N. Martin Curtis, “Address to Companions,” Curtis Collection, Chicago Historical Society: 13, quoted in Fonvielle, Wilmington Campaign, 166.


92. Grant to Butler, December 6, 1864, in Simon, Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, 13:71.

withdrawal of his forces after they had already gone ashore. Grant thought that he had made it clear to both Butler and Weitzel that “to effect a landing would be of itself a great victory, and if one should be effected, the foothold must not be relinquished.” What the Union general-in-chief did not know was that Butler had intercepted all the communiqués intended for Weitzel, most of which he apparently never saw.

Grant had had enough of Butler, who had long been a thorn in his side, even before the Fort Fisher expedition. Writing to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, he requested that the controversial commander be removed due to “a lack of confidence felt in his Military ability, making him an unsafe commander for a large Army.” Butler was stripped of his command and ordered back to his home state of Massachusetts, finally ending his controversial military career. Although gone, Butler was not a man to bow out gracefully. For the moment, however, the waves of condemnation that broke over the disgraced commander were enough to keep him quiet.

General Grant was hardly alone in his disappointment with the Massachusetts general. From the upper echelons of Washington down to the lowliest army privates, there seemed to be a general consensus that the failure at Fort Fisher was Butler’s doing. Lieutenant William B. Cushing of the U.S. Navy, who had participated in the first expedition, later wrote that after the evacuation “the indignation of army and navy at this inexcusable conduct of Butler’s was openly and loudly expressed,” and that “we all rejoiced when another attack was ordered, under a man who would not permit great egotism and a jealous temper to make him blind to his duty as a

96. Adrian Terry, Wilmington and Fort Fisher, Terry Family Papers, Yale University Library, New Haven, CT, 19-20 (hereafter cited as Terry, Wilmington and Fort Fisher).
97. Grant to Stanton, January 4, 1865, in Simon, Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, 13:223.
soldier.”98 Even before setting sail from Hampton Roads, Virginia, one New York soldier expressed the general feeling of many of his comrades, writing: “Old Butler is here and will perhaps command the expedition in order to assure its failure.”99

Indeed, “almost everyone had heard of Ben Butler and most—North and South—had definite opinions about him.”100 Butler’s less than sterling reputation preceded him. One historian described him as “a highly effective, if not scrupulously honest, administrator of conquered territory, and a capable military planner, but he was out of his depth as an army commander.”101 His ascension in the ranks of the Union army was the product of a system of political patronage common during the nineteenth century, which often rewarded political influence over fighting ability. If Butler was to blame for the failure of the first Fort Fisher expedition, then by line of reasoning, those who disregarded his past failures and kept him in command—thus allowing him to accompany the Fort Fisher expedition—are also to blame for the catastrophe, including General Grant and President Lincoln.

If not for the seriousness of the mission and the potential loss of life, the relationship between Porter and Butler would have been comical. Though the two could not sit down together to hash out a cohesive plan of attack, they would both support a bold, albeit controversial, scheme to explode a ship laden with 300 tons of explosives at Fort Fisher. The idea was that the concussion from the explosion of the powder boat would flatten the earthworks and stun the

100. Gragg, Confederate Goliath, 37.
fort’s garrison enough to allow sufficient time for Union army forces to land and capture them.\textsuperscript{102}

From the beginning, what would become known as the “Powder Boat Experiment,” was fraught with uncertainty.

Days of poor weather, coupled with delays in preparing the powder boat, plagued the Fort Fisher expedition. By December 15, 1864, Butler and his flotilla of troop transports had reached the rendezvous point off Confederate Point. Porter’s armada, however, was nowhere to be found, having been delayed at Beaufort, North Carolina where final touches were being made to the powder boat. The next three days saw almost perfect weather, sunny with spring-like temperatures and calm, glassy seas—most favorable weather for an assault. Had Porter joined Butler at the rendezvous point on time, the first expedition might have ended differently. One commander later wrote:

\begin{quote}
A very small part of the fleet indeed would have been sufficient for this purpose [landing troops and attacking the fort] as the enemy’s force at this time was exceedingly weak. Had the Admiral and his fleet arrived at the same time with General Butler and his command . . . there seems to be no question but that Fort Fisher could have been taken with little difficulty.\textsuperscript{103}
\end{quote}

Butler could not attack until Porter arrived, however, for his armada was responsible for softening up the works in preparation for a ground assault. When the admiral and his fleet finally arrived on December 18, the weather had taken a turn for the worse, and by the following evening a strong storm hit the coast, tossing seasick soldiers across the lower decks of the transports and wreaking havoc on the navy’s warships. Running low on water and supplies, Butler decided to steam his troop transports back to Beaufort to replenish his stocks, and to give

\textsuperscript{102} Robert M. Browning, \textit{From Cape Charles to Cape Fear: The North Atlantic Blockading Squadron During the Civil War} (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 288-289 (hereafter cited as Browning, \textit{From Cape Charles to Cape Fear}).

\textsuperscript{103} Terry, \textit{Wilmington and Fort Fisher}, 21-22.
his seasick soldiers an opportunity to get on dry land.\textsuperscript{104}

While the army transports lay in anchor at Beaufort, Porter unilaterally made the decision to explode the powerboat before Butler’s return. If successful, all glory would go to the navy, and if it failed, the admiral could easily shift the blame to Butler and the army.\textsuperscript{105} When the U.S.S. \textit{Louisiana} exploded in the twilight hours of Christmas Eve, the report awakened the fort’s garrison, causing no damage to the fort itself. When Butler received word of the \textit{Louisiana}’s detonation, he was furious. Leaving the transports behind, he hastily made his way down the North Carolina coast to confront Porter. Any hope for communication between the two men now disintegrated, and the experiment, thereafter dubbed “Butler’s Folly,” would go down as one of the war’s most comical failures.

Naturally, Butler blamed Porter for the experiment’s failure and, of course, Porter blamed Butler. Later testifying before the Congressional Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, (established in response to the outcry over the expedition’s failure), Butler claimed: “I am still of the opinion that if it had been exploded properly it would have answered the purpose.” The spurned commander went on to remark sarcastically: “the admiral supposed he would blow the fort all to pieces, and be able to land with his marines and take possession of it, so that he could say to General Butler, when he got to Fort Fisher with his transports 'Here general, this is Admiral Porter's fort, taken by him, 'his work;' won't you take it and take care of it?'”\textsuperscript{106}

Butler was further enraged by Porter’s impatience in awaiting the army’s return from Beaufort before beginning his bombardment of the fort. As a result, Butler believed, they had lost

\textsuperscript{104} Fonvielle, \textit{Wilmington Campaign}, 109-113.
\textsuperscript{105} Gragg, \textit{Confederate Goliath}, 49.
the element of surprise. Moreover, Porter’s warships had run low on ammunition, meaning that they might not be able to provide adequate covering fire as the army troops went ashore. The admiral’s decision to begin the bombardment before Butler’s troops had even arrived burned precious hours that could have been used for preparing the troops to land. The bombardment, Porter informed Butler on Christmas Day, could only be maintained for a few more hours before his armada would have to head back to Beaufort for resupply. Thus even as Union soldiers landed on the beach head, there would be little time to properly reconnoiter the fort.

Evidence indicates that on Christmas Eve, Butler had already contemplated aborting the mission if given the slightest excuse. When Captain Oliver S. Glisson of the U.S.S. Santiago de Cuba urged Butler to land more than the 2,300 troops onshore Christmas day, the general remarked that “we had better not land any.” Instead of exploiting the absence of Hoke’s 6,400-man division still en route to Wilmington from Virginia, Butler dragged his feet in ordering the assault and ultimately lost his nerve. Distraught and angry over the powder boat’s failure, Butler decided to cancel the attack after receiving Weitzel’s report that the navy’s bombardment had not sufficiently damaged the works or its ordnance to justify a ground attack. But Weitzel never intimated the need to withdraw from the beachhead, although he believed that the odds were stacked in the defenders’ favor, something which shielded him from General Grant’s wrath after the expedition’s failure.

As Butler’s fleet sailed away on December 27, 1865, a wave of disgust and bitter disappointment seized the hearts of almost all involved, from the lowliest private to the highest commander. One private later wrote:

107. Gragg, Confederate Goliath, 74.
Porter of the Navy and Butler of the Army have become entangled in controversy of rank or jealousy or both and are thus sacrificing our honors as a Nation-exposing us to be ridiculed by the enemy and the World. . . I feel humiliated and wish myself far from here and dissolved of all connection with the service. . . Words cannot do the subject justice, neither can I pen my feelings of exasperation at this dastardly, cowardly conduct of Genl. Butler. . . We can hold the neck of land- Federal Point not only—but occupy the Fort . . . I do not wonder that the war continues and with such leaders it will to the crack of Doom.  

Because the success of the Fort Fisher mission hinged on perfect harmony between the army and navy, the personal grudge between Admiral Porter and General Butler contributed greatly to its failure. Before blame can be properly assigned, however, it is first necessary to determine whether Fort Fisher could have been taken at all if other plans of attack, including General Curtis’, were heeded. If doom was the expedition’s lot from the beginning, then Butler’s part in the catastrophe would prove to be only a contributing factor. 

Admittedly, the task that lay before Generals Butler and Weitzel and Admiral Porter was exceedingly difficult. Nicknamed the “Gibraltar of the South,” Fort Fisher by 1864 was regarded by both Union and Confederate engineers as one of the most formidable defensive structures in the Confederacy.  

Resembling an upside down “L”, it was a two-sided work that stretched across the narrow peninsula of Confederate Point for 500 yards from the Cape Fear River to the Atlantic Ocean, terminating at the Northeast Bastion, and then stretching southward down the shoreline for approximately 1,300 yards. At the far south end of the sea face stood the Mound Battery, which was forty-three feet high and armed with two heavy cannon with a 360° field of fire. 

Built almost entirely of sand and Carolina heart pine timbers, the ramparts of Fort Fisher

rose from twenty to thirty feet high, with intermediate gun chambers separated by traverses which stood nine to twelve feet higher than the fort’s parapet. Each gun chamber contained one or two heavy artillery pieces, for a grand total of forty-four heavy seacoast guns, including a 150-pounder Armstrong rifle-cannon made in Great Britain and imported through the blockade. Underneath the ramparts, “bomb-proof” shelters were constructed where the garrison could take refuge during a bombardment. The thick sandy walls had the advantage of absorbing the impact of heavy metal projectiles, and reportedly no enemy shell ever pierced the shelters.111

North of the land face, dozens of torpedoes (mines) were buried, which could be detonated manually from inside the fort as enemy forces crossed over them. To keep Union warships from entering New Inlet and attacking the fort from the rear (its most vulnerable point), a large earthen work named Battery Buchanan was constructed at the tip of Confederate Point in the autumn of 1864, and armed with four heavy seacoast guns.112 The designer and fort’s commandant was Colonel William Lamb of the 36th Regiment North Carolina Troops (2nd N.C. Artillery), who on the day he assumed command at Fort Fisher on July 4, 1862, decided to “build a work of such magnitude that it could withstand the heaviest fire of any guns in the American Navy.”113 By late 1864, Lamb’s dream had become a reality.

Although formidable, Fort Fisher was by no means impregnable. Lamb had built the fort “solely with the view of resisting the fire of a fleet,” and not necessarily a concentrated ground

111. Henry Rogers was involved in the Union assault during the second attack of Fort Fisher. He wrote “I saw something in Fort Fisher yesterday which illustrated the force of the fifteen-inch shell fired from the monitors during the last engagement. One of these . . . missiles penetrated through from thirteen to fifteen feet of solid earth and sand and spent by the resistance, dropped without exploding inside of the bomb-proofs of the front face of the Fort, which contained at the time several tons of powder.” Henry Rogers, Memories of Ninety-Years (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1928), 114 (hereafter cited as Rogers, Memories of Ninety-Years).
112. Trotter, Ironclads and Columbiads, 326-328.
assault.\footnote{114} Both he and Major General W.H.C. Whiting—commander of the Department of the Cape Fear from 1862 to 1865 and Lamb’s immediate superior—knew that the fort’s average garrison strength of less than 500 men was far too small to adequately defend the work against a concerted ground assault.\footnote{115} Both men’s worst fears—the attack plan for which they were least prepared—was that of a large infantry force attacking from north of the fort while enemy warships attempted to blast their way past the lower batteries near New Inlet to gain access to the river.

After the closure of Mobile Bay, Alabama by Admiral Farragut’s naval task force on August 5, 1864, General Whiting believed that a similar Union assault on Wilmington was imminent, and he alerted his mentor and friend General P.G.T. Beauregard at Charleston of his growing fears: “We are running very dangerous risks,” he stated, “I do not know that the enemy contemplate taking present advantage; but they are fools if they don't, and if they do I assure you that this our last hold on the water will not be able to make the resistance it should do. The garrison of the forts is much too small.”\footnote{116} Indeed, Fort Fisher’s greatest vulnerabilities proved to be both a lack of manpower and quality troops.

During the first attack on Fort Fisher on Christmas Day 1864, the fort’s garrison was reinforced by local units, raising its overall strength to 1,371 men, including 921 regular troops and 450 Junior Reserves.\footnote{117} The Junior Reserve units were created out of desperation by the Confederate Congress in 1864, which conscripted boys from fourteen to eighteen years of age for military service. Their officers were often not much older than seventeen or eighteen years of

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\item 114. Lamb’s Story of Fort Fisher, 2.
\item 115. Lamb’s Story of Fort Fisher, 11.
\item 117. Lamb’s Story of Fort Fisher, 18.
\end{thebibliography}
age themselves. General Whiting despised them, stating that they would “rather interfere than aid . . . the little boys are prostrate with all of the diseases of children and too weak to bear arms. Their officers, made by election, are entirely ignorant.” Of the combined 3,428 Confederate soldiers on Confederate Point in December 1864, approximately 1,340 (or 39%) were members of the Junior and Senior Reserves. Of the remaining 2,088 soldiers, approximately 1,300 of them were members of Kirkland’s brigade, exhausted by their rapid deployment from Petersburg. That left only 788 regular soldiers fit for active duty at Fort Fisher during the first battle. In terms of sheer manpower, General Butler had much more of an advantage than the Confederates. His expeditionary force was comprised of 6,500 battle-hardened veterans of the Army of the James, while Admiral Porter’s task force numbered sixty-four warships armed with almost 630 guns, including the frigate *Colorado*, which had more heavy cannon onboard than all of Fort Fisher.

As for W.W. Kirkland’s brigade stationed at Sugar Loaf, they were in a weakened state during the Christmas attack. The long and arduous trip by rail from Petersburg, Virginia to the Carolina coast had taken a heavy toll on the men who were exhausted. Moreover, General Kirkland did not even have enough soldiers to extend his line across the mile-wide neck of Confederate Point, from Sugar Loaf Hill to Myrtle Grove Sound, a cause of great concern. Writing to his superior in Wilmington, General Braxton Bragg, Kirkland complained: “My ammunition is very short. Have been telegraphed from Fort Fisher for reinforcements, but could send none. What should I do if the enemy land on my left flank?—the road to Wilmington; they will then be in my rear.”

Watching the growing number of Union soldiers landing below his position, Kirkland believed that he was both out-manned and out-gunned: “It would have been

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madness to advanced farther” he claimed, “besides I was fearful the enemy would land a force at [Battery] Gatlin and push up the Wilmington road, which was covered but by one regiment.”

Though it kept most of the Confederate garrison from leaving the protection of the bomb-proof shelters, the navy’s bombardment had done little damage to the fort itself. When General Butler informed David Porter that he intended to withdraw his men from the Cape Fear, the admiral attempted to dissuade him, arguing that his task force had been firing at a slow rate of fire. With a faster rate of fire, he argued, he could “keep any rebels inside from showing their heads until an assaulting column was within 20 yards of the works.” Porter’s definition of a “slow rate of fire” was clearly subjective, as at certain times in the battle Colonel Lamb estimated almost 130 shells landed in the fort each minute. The admiral also informed Butler that he had dispatched many of his larger vessels to replenish their ammunition at Beaufort, North Carolina, should either he or Weitzel decide to resume the operation.

In support of Porter’s argument that an increased rate of fire could have kept Confederate soldiers contained in the bomb-proof shelters is the fact that N. Martin Curtis’ brigade had already advanced to within seventy-five yards of the fort’s walls during the admiral’s “slower rate of fire.” Thus it is plausible that a heavier rate of fire might have given the assaulting force enough time to overrun the fort. Lieutenant George W. Ross, Curtis' aide-de-camp, later stated that he believed “the one hundred and forty-second New York Volunteers could have marched in and taken the work,” while a private in the same regiment testified that “a column of troops could have gone into the works by the sally port. I saw no obstacle to prevent it.”

Confederate forces both above and below Weitzel’s position were comparatively weak,

123. Lamb, Battles of Fort Fisher, 274.
however, and both Butler and Weitzel showed their timidity in the face of odds largely stacked in their favor. The remainder of Hoke’s division, which did not reach Sugar Loaf until days after the Union withdrawal, was smaller than the Union expeditionary force. The ferocity and firepower of Admiral Porter’s heavy guns was far greater than anything Hoke could bring to bear on Weitzel’s position. Whatever the formidity of Fort Fisher’s defenses, Butler and Weitzel had no excuse for evacuating the beachhead.¹²⁶ Further complicating matters, Butler never passed communiqués from General Grant to Weitzel. A member of Grant’s staff, Horace Porter, noted Butler’s deception, when he wrote: “It was found that the written orders which General Grant had given to General Butler to govern the movements of the expedition had not been shown to Weitzel.”¹²⁷

Moreover, on the evening of December 24, when Weitzel and Comstock met with Admiral Porter to discuss the troop landing scheduled for the following day, Porter declined to attempt what may have been the best plan of attack. Both commanders suggested to Porter that his warships run the bar at New Inlet into the Cape Fear River and get behind Fort Fisher, a tactic Farragut had used at both Mobile Bay and New Orleans. But Porter believed that the channel approaching the inlet was too shallow and intricate for his deep-drafted warships, and probably filled with torpedoes and obstructions. He feared losing any ships.¹²⁸ Over the admiral’s objections, Weitzel recommended using converted blockade runners, which were light enough to pass over the bar, but Porter again refused, perhaps more concerned about winning glory for the fort’s capture.¹²⁹ Army planners believed that they would lose no less than 500 men in a direct assault on Fort Fisher, “and that [Porter’s] boat would not weigh in the balance even in a money

¹²⁷ Porter, Campaigning With Grant, 362.
¹²⁹ Gragg, Confederate Goliath, 74.
point of view for a moment with the lives of the men.\textsuperscript{130} Nonetheless, the admiral remained steadfast.

Colonel Lamb now feared that naval forces would try to enter New Inlet under the cover of darkness, bombard the fort from the rear, and land troops on the open west or south side of the fort. His anxiety was well founded.\textsuperscript{131} The rear of the fort was indeed its Achilles heel, as it was an open area upon which Confederate guns could not easily turn to fire. The parade ground and rear of the fort was principally covered by Battery Buchanan which was armed with a mere four guns, and had Admiral Porter been more aggressive, success might have been gained in the first battle. At the very least, the navy should have made the attempt.

Admittedly, when the strengths and weaknesses of each side are considered, a determination of success can hardly be scientific. But the evidence suggests that the Union’s chances of victory during the first battle of Fort Fisher were good. As to the U.S. Army’s role, had Weitzel been in command of Union forces instead of the vacillating and cantankerous Benjamin Butler, the outcome of the expedition might have been dramatically different. Described as an “intelligent, likable young man,”\textsuperscript{132} Weitzel was a good engineer with extensive knowledge of defensive works and who had experience in joint operations.\textsuperscript{133} Coordination between army and navy forces might have also been more harmonious, as he was far more affable than Ben Butler. After the battle, Porter wrote that he was not opposed to General Weitzel “whom I know to be an accomplished soldier and engineer, and whose opinion has great weight with me.”\textsuperscript{134}

\textsuperscript{131} Lowry, \textit{Indefinite Shore}, 59.
\textsuperscript{133} Fonvielle, \textit{Wilmington Campaign}, 68.
\textsuperscript{134} Porter to Butler, December 26, 1864, \textit{ORN}, ser. 1, 11:252.
But General Grant claimed that he had no clue Butler was going to be involved with the expedition until the evening before the convoy set sail from Bermuda Hundred. Yet when General Butler, as commander of the Department of North Carolina and Southeastern Virginia, asked Grant if he could go along, the lieutenant general acquiesced. “The operations taking place within the Geographical limits of his Dept. I did not like to order him back,” he later explained. But Grant knew that Butler was not a reliable commander or a competent battlefield leader, and therefore was reluctant to give him charge of any important military operation. Even before Fort Fisher, when Butler’s men went into battle, Grant usually sent a more experienced corps commander to handle his troops.

So why then did a skilled and adept commander like U.S. Grant allow a bumbling oaf like Benjamin Butler to lead an expedition which necessitated perfect harmony between the army and navy? Once described as a man who had “absolute confidence in his own judgment upon any subject which he had mastered,” Grant surely must have known that allowing Butler to accompany the expedition was a grave mistake. What then is the real reason that Grant allowed Butler to accompany the expedition?

One possibility is that Butler was blackmailing Grant. Brevet Major General William F. Smith, who served under Grant in Virginia, wrote of a curious incident between Butler and the lieutenant general. Grant, who was a notorious drinker in the pre-war army and an alleged elbow-bender during the war, had pledged to reform his ways. According to Smith, one day when Grant arrived at his headquarters at City Point with Butler in tow, the general-in-chief

137. Porter, Campaigning With Grant, 246.
asked Smith for a drink of whiskey. About an hour later, Grant asked for another drink, which made him quite inebriated. When Grant and Butler left headquarters, Smith turned to a staff officer and said: “General Grant has gone away drunk. General Butler has seen it, and will never fail to use the weapon which has been put into his hands.”

Smith later claimed that Grant intended to remove Butler from command long before the Fort Fisher expedition and place Smith in command of the Department of North Carolina and Southeastern Virginia. When Butler caught word of this, he went directly to Grant. According to Smith, the lieutenant general suddenly changed his mind, deciding instead to remove Smith from his command post. The jilted commander later stated that two different sources (one being Grant’s headquarters and one being a staff officer of a general close to Butler) told him that Butler had threatened to publicly expose Grant’s drunkenness. Accusations of drunkenness against Grant were nothing new, but a charge made by someone as politically influential as Benjamin Butler could have been devastating. To further complicate matters, Butler allegedly threatened to reveal something that would have potentially jeopardized President Lincoln’s bid for reelection in the fall of 1864. Smith’s claims, while questionable, corroborate contemporary observations about Butler’s character. As a powerful politician, Butler was someone of whom Grant was wary.

Before the war, Benjamin Butler was a successful Massachusetts lawyer and politician. A staunch Democrat, he got his first taste of political campaigning when he stumped for Martin Van Buren during the 1840 presidential election. Enjoying the rough and tumble nature of politics, over the next twenty years Butler lent his oratory skills to the Democratic Party,

139. William Farrar Smith, From Chattanooga to Petersburg under Generals Grant and Butler (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company: 1893), 175 (hereafter cited as Smith, From Chattanooga to Petersburg).

140. Smith, From Chattanooga to Petersburg, 174-179.
delivering speeches and representing his district in one convention after another. While still a law student, he decided to join the Lowell City Guard, a local militia unit, and through his connections advanced rapidly up the ranks, becoming a full colonel by 1850. Three years later, he had also become an assemblyman at the State House in Boston where he established himself as a formidable debater. Butler was a politician at heart, and when war came in 1861, he was able to worm himself into the position of commanding general of the Massachusetts militia.\footnote{141}

During the secession crisis, beginning with South Carolina’s departure from the Union on December 20, 1860, so many Southern Democrats followed their home states out of the Union that President Lincoln wondered if there would even be a Union left. Meanwhile, many Northern Democrats remained true to the United States, including Butler. Lincoln rewarded Butler for his loyalty by promoting him to the rank of major general of volunteers, becoming the first politically appointed Union general of the war. Lincoln and the Republican party desperately needed any support they could get from Democrats in order to carry out policies the president believed would help to quell the rebellion.\footnote{142} Thus, whenever Butler got involved in controversial matters, Lincoln either looked the other way or quietly transferred the general to a new post. Naturally, the commander from Massachusetts came to believe that he was entitled. “I never read the army regulations,” he once boasted, “and what is more I shan't, and then I shall not know I am doing anything against them.”\footnote{143}

Butler’s first experience in battle came at Big Bethel, Virginia in June 1861, and ended in an embarrassing defeat. The commander’s sheer ineptitude was not lost on anyone, North or South. The problem was that of all of the political generals in the Union army, Butler was

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item 143. \textit{Autobiography of Butler}, 355.
\end{itemize}}
“politically the most untouchable of the lot.”\textsuperscript{144} Though Grant wanted to remove him from command, he had been warned by President Lincoln and Secretary Stanton that “political considerations of the highest character made it undesirable to displace Butler; the administration needed all the strength and could not afford to provoke the hostility of so important a personage.”\textsuperscript{145} Thus partisan politics kept the inept Benjamin F. Butler in command of tens of thousands of men. If President Lincoln would not remove Butler, how then could Grant? The extent of Butler’s power would be measured on the scale of justice and found wanting.

Political matters of national importance aside, Federal forces failed to capture Fort Fisher on Christmas Day of 1864 for other reasons as well. If Butler was an incompetent field commander, then Admiral Porter was the epitome of competence. The admiral grew up in the shadow of his famous father, Commodore David Porter, whose annihilation of the British whaling fleet in the War of 1812 made him a popular war hero.\textsuperscript{146} The younger Porter’s actions in the navy during the Mexican War and the Civil War seemed to demonstrate a propensity for trying to live up to, if not exceed, his father’s fame. Both competent and egotistical, even David D. Porter’s harshest critics had to admit that almost every campaign in which he fought ended in success, including the capture of New Orleans in 1862 and Vicksburg the following year. His success in these campaigns demonstrated his reliability and tenacity, tempered by a propensity for brashness and arrogance. He hated political generals like Ben Butler, and yet as one historian later noted, he “used politics to advance his own career.”

Like Butler, Porter was a master of persuasion who developed close ties with various

\begin{footnotes}
144. Bruce Catton, \textit{Grant Takes Command} (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1968), 146 (hereafter cited as Catton, \textit{Grant Takes Command}).
\end{footnotes}
powerful men, especially Gustavus Fox, yet he also angered Gideon Welles on more than one occasion. As a demonstration of Porter’s political muscle, when Welles tried to strip him of his command after the admiral had criticized high ranking Union leaders, Porter appealed to President Lincoln. His persuasiveness, along with a little help from his friend Gustavus Fox, convinced the president to instead promote Porter to command of the Mississippi Squadron. Welles was miffed at the president’s decision.147

Porter’s arrogance and disregard for political generals soon brought him into direct conflict with Benjamin Butler. One of the greatest contributing factors to the failure of the Fort Fisher expedition was the bitter rivalry and petty personal politics between both men that stretched back years. The tenuous nature of joint operations meant that success would be determined only by the “systematic employment of continuous and overwhelming fire, attained through judicious dispositions involving all arms as a unified whole and constant communication between the ships and the forces ashore.”148 Because each branch of service depended on the other, one mistake could ruin the operation. Since Porter’s bombardment did not properly “soften up” Fort Fisher’s defenses, Butler’s army could not be expected to assault the fort. Also, if Butler did not properly coordinate the army’s amphibious landing with the navy, then the attack would end in disaster. In retrospect, no two officers in the army and navy could have been better predictors of failure when placed together than General Butler and Admiral Porter.

Hostilities had existed between the two men since the joint operation to capture New Orleans in 1862. At the time, Porter commanded a mortar flotilla whose responsibility was to reduce forts Jackson and St. Philip guarding the Mississippi River approaches to the city. As the admiral’s vessels battered the works, warships commanded by Admiral David G. Farragut,

Porter’s older foster brother, ran past the forts to move directly against New Orleans. Following Porter’s bombardment, which greatly diminished the forts ability to defend themselves, General Butler and his men assaulted the works and then moved north towards New Orleans.

As Butler was landing his troops near Fort St. Philip on April 28, 1862, a delegation of Confederate commanders offered the surrender of the forts to Admiral Porter. Butler was incensed, believing that their surrender should have gone to him as the highest ranking officer. Envious of any glory Porter and the U.S. Navy received, he claimed in his battle report that Porter’s flotilla had caused little damage to the fortifications, both of which were “as defensible as before the bombardment—Saint Philip precisely so, it being quite uninjured.”149 Subsequently, Butler provided the media with embellished accounts of his role in the campaign. Before his official report even reached Washington, newspapers had credited Butler with the Crescent City’s capture.150 Being men of the highest degree of vanity and arrogance, both commanders walked away from the battle with wounded pride and bitter feelings, and thus was born a personal grudge that would last for the rest of their lives.

When Porter learned of Butler’s intent to accompany Weitzel during the Fort Fisher expedition, he implored Grant to find another more compatible commander. “When men have had an encounter of sharp words,” he explained to Grant, “they are not likely ever again to be in complete accord with each other.”151 The admiral’s contempt for him was not lost on Butler, who later wrote: “he hated [me] as the devil hates holy water.”152 The lieutenant general was fully aware of the animosity that existed between Porter and Butler. One day while walking with

149. Butler to Stanton, April 29, 1862, _ORA_, ser. 1, 6:505.
152. _Autobiography of Butler_, 819.
Grant at City Point, Porter saw Butler approaching. Turning to the general-in-chief, the admiral implored him: “Please don't introduce me to Butler. We had a little difficulty at New Orleans.” Grant assured Porter that “You will find Butler quite willing to forget old feuds, and as the troops who are to accompany you will be taken from his command, it will be necessary for you to communicate with him from time to time.” But neither Porter nor Butler were willing to set aside their differences, even for the greater good of the Fort Fisher expedition. Grant probably knew better than anyone else that in order for an assault to be successful, it was absolutely necessary to have complete harmony between two service branches. If he did not understand this the first time around, he certainly understood it when the second expedition was launched in January 1865. Grant wrote to Brigadier General Alfred H. Terry, the new expeditionary force commander, that “The most complete understanding should exist between yourself and the naval commander . . . so that there may be unity of action.”

The removal of General Butler from command spelled the death knell of the political general. Historian Bruce Catton once stated “if there ever was a war that met the textbook definition and was simply an extension of politics . . . at the most intensely lived-in levels—it was this one, and nobody but professional soldiers was especially shocked thereby.” Were it not for the political hob-knобbing that kept a commander as inept as Butler in command in the first place, and had the personal egos of Butler and Porter been checked, the Union might have gained a victory at Christmas 1864. But their chance was cast away, along with the lives of good Union men, for the sake of two men’s egos. Grant and Lincoln both determined not to see this repeated, and plans were quickly put into place to send a second expeditionary force to Fort Fisher. If the Union lost the battle of Fort Fisher the second time around, it would be on the field of battle and

155. Catton, Grant Takes Command, 145.
not in the proud hearts of its leaders. Unfortunately, the same could not be said for the
Confederate defenders at Wilmington.
CHAPTER 3: MY BOY, I HAVE COME TO SHARE YOUR FATE

Late on the night of January 12, 1865, Colonel William Lamb made his way up to the observation deck on Fort Fisher’s Northeastern Bastion. As he peered out into the murky blackness of the Atlantic Ocean, the roar of the incoming tide reverberated in the background. Slowly, one by one, little orbs of light began to appear on the horizon. The young commander braced himself—he had been waiting for this moment, one of the most important of his life. At once he steeled his nerves and rushed for the fort’s telegraph office, firing off a message to General Braxton Bragg in Wilmington: “There are a number of signal lights being shown northeast and southeast; they are not the blockade signals, but the old fleet signals.”\(^\text{156}\) The mighty Union armada had returned, and this time they were determined to spill Confederate blood on Confederate Point.\(^\text{157}\)

Lamb had heard nothing from headquarters of the fleet’s approach, and he was furious. The second largest armada assembled during the Civil War had arrived off the North Carolina coast without any warning. The frustrated colonel knew all too well that in the next few hours the U.S. Navy’s task force, again under the command of Rear Admiral David Dixon Porter, would train its 600 heavy cannon on his position. Having endured the largest bombardment of the war just three weeks earlier, Lamb and his garrison would now have to face another relentless pounding by the Union navy. But iron would be met with iron, he determined, and his small garrison immediately began to prepare for battle.\(^\text{158}\)

As sunlight broke over the horizon the following morning, January 13, Colonel Lamb had the fort’s cannon cleared for action. At 8:30 a.m., flashes of light from out on the Atlantic gave way to puffs of smoke as hundreds of projectiles landed on the fort’s ramparts and parade

\(^{156}\) Lamb to Hill, January 12, 1865, *ORA*, vol. 46, pt. II:1043.
\(^{157}\) Fonvielle, *Wilmington Campaign*, 204-205.
\(^{158}\) Lamb, “The Battles of Fort Fisher,” 276-77.
ground. Over the next two days, 19,682 shot and shell would fall inside the fort with deadly accuracy, unlike the first bombardment in December. A Confederate private described the scene: “The air was hot with fire; the earth shook; there was no interval of quiet; all was noise—crash, bang, and crash all the time.” ¹⁵⁹ “One could no longer hear anything,” another wrote, “but one continuous roar that seemed louder than thunder.” ¹⁶⁰

As Colonel Lamb directed the fort’s defense from the Northeast Bastion, Major General W.H.C. Whiting arrived, declaring: “Lamb my boy, I have come to share your fate. You and your garrison are to be sacrificed.” The stunned Virginia colonel retorted: “Don’t say so, General; we shall certainly whip the enemy again.” But Whiting told Lamb that as he left Wilmington, “General Bragg was hastily removing his stores and ammunition, and was looking for a place to fall back upon.” In Whiting’s opinion, the newly appointed commander of the Department of North Carolina had no desire to stand, nor stomach to fight. Both men knew that their best hope for survival was the more than 6,400 troops of Major General Robert F. Hoke’s battle-hardened division entrenched at Sugar Loaf four miles to north. Having finally arrived from Virginia, Hoke’s men could now not be sent into battle without Bragg’s authorization. Considering Bragg’s inaction as Union soldiers landed on Confederate Point that day, this appeared unlikely.

At sea, approximately 9,600 Union soldiers were seasick and itching to get on shore. The new expeditionary force consisted of the 6,500 men of the Army of the James who had been involved in the first attack on Fort Fisher, along with an additional 3,000 reinforcements. This time around, the Union ground force was commanded by Major General Alfred Howe Terry, the able and affable commander of the 24th Army Corps who personally selected by General Grant for this mission. In the lead was Porter’s mighty naval armada, although slightly pared down to

fifty-eight warships, who intended to soften up the fort’s defenses in preparation for the army’s planned assault.

By late afternoon on January 13, 1865, General Terry’s Provisional Corps, as it was officially designated, had landed four miles above Fort Fisher. Almost as soon as they got ashore, Terry sent out pickets to scout a suitable area for a defensive line between the fort and Hoke’s division. Terry intended to use Brigadier General Charles J. Paine’s two brigades of U.S. Colored Troops, 25th Army Corps, Army of the James, to protect the rear of the column that would move south to assault the fort. But Union reconnaissance revealed that the maps showing the area where Terry hoped to place his line were inaccurate, and his men were forced to occupy a position farther south on the peninsula and at a wider point than the commander had expected. As a result, Terry had to deploy an additional brigade to help protect his rear, leaving Brigadier General Adelbert Ames’ division of three brigades, or about 3,500 men, to attack the fort. One of Ames’ brigades was commanded by Brevet Brigadier General N. Martin Curtis, whose men had gotten close to the fort in the previous expedition.

To make a frontal assault on Fort Fisher would be a risky move for Terry, who understood that a three-to-one numerical advantage was crucial for an attacker to take a fortified position.161 The general proved willing to gamble, however, and his plan was simple: Before Ames’ division rushed the fort, Porter’s armada would pound its defenses—taking aim specifically at the land face guns that guarded the open ground over which Ames’ men would advance. By eight o’clock the following morning, January 14, Terry’s rear guard was strongly entrenched behind breastworks facing Hoke’s division. Accompanied by Colonel Cyrus Comstock, Terry personally reconnoitered the fort to the south. Getting within 600 yards of the land face, he was pleasantly surprised by what he saw: almost all of the cannon had been destroyed by Porter’s surgical

161. Trotter, Ironclads and Columbiads, 389.
bombardment, and the commander was convinced that an assault needed to be launched as soon as possible.\footnote{Report of Major General Alfred H. Terry, January 25, 1865, \textit{ORA}, vol. 46, pt. I:396-98.}

That evening, Terry rowed out to Admiral Porter’s flagship \textit{Malvern} to plan a coordinated assault for the following day. In support of the army’s attack force, Porter proposed to send ashore more than 2,000 sailors and Marines armed with cutlasses and revolvers in the hope of forcing the Confederates to stretch their thin lines to the limit. Terry hesitantly agreed to the plan, and the overall combined attack plan took shape: General Ames’ division, led by Curtis’ brigade, would attack the fort’s westernmost batteries near the Cape Fear River, while Porter’s naval party simultaneously charged the fort’s Northeast Bastion, where the land and sea faces joined. Porter’s reason for the naval force’s target was that its “approaches were only partly covered by cannon fire directed from the sea face or the Mound Battery, and because it was close enough to the Army’s thrust to permit good communications between the two forces.”\footnote{Trotter, \textit{Ironclads and Columbiads}, 389-90.} It was decided that both service branches would communicate by signal flags and couriers to properly coordinate the advance.\footnote{Report of Rear Admiral Porter, January 16, 1865, \textit{ORN}, ser. 1, vol. 11:439.} The assault would commence at two o’clock on the following afternoon, January 15, and the signal for the attack would be a concerted blast of steam whistles from the fleet, followed by the shifting of naval shellfire from the land face towards the sea face batteries.\footnote{Trotter, \textit{Ironclads and Columbiads}, 390.}

Realizing their precarious position, Colonel Lamb and General Whiting pleaded for reinforcements from various forts’ commanders in the Cape Fear estuary. About 700 artillerists and fifty Confederate sailors and Marines were dispatched, bringing Fort Fisher’s total strength to approximately 1,550 men.\footnote{Lamb, “The Battles of Fort Fisher,” 277.} But Lamb knew his luck would soon run out. In the December attack, his garrison had sustained less than 100 casualties, while in the first forty-eight hours of

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the January bombardment, he had already lost more than 200 men killed and wounded. Some
died as they attempted to bury their fallen comrades, prompting the colonel to order a halt to
burial details. “The sight of dismembered corpses scattered about on the parapets,” one historian
wrote, “did nothing to raise the garrison’s spirits.” Lamb could only wait and see how his
beleaguered defenders would hold up to the thousands of Union soldiers waiting to avenge their
embarrassing defeat during the first expedition.

On January 15, Terry’s troops and Porter’s sailors and Marines moved into position for
the assault. Tension in the ranks ran high as Confederate artillerists intermittently fired at Union
sailors with the one remaining cannon on the Northeast Bastion. Ensign Robley Evans, of the
frigate Powhatan, wrote that as he and his comrades waited “The shells generally struck short of
us, and would then ricochet down the level beach, jumping along for all the world like rabbits.”
All around them, Evans continued, “Curious little puffs of sand showed where the Enfield rifle
balls were striking, but they only hit a man now and then by accident.”

As Colonel Lamb was returning to the Pulpit battery near the Northeast Bastion, one of
his lookouts spotted the naval column readying for battle. “Colonel, the enemy are about to
charge,” the soldier shouted. Nearby, General Whiting immediately rushed for the fort’s
telegraph office and sent off one last appeal to headquarters in Wilmington:

The enemy are about to assault; they outnumber us heavily. We are just manning our
parapets. Fleet have extended down the sea front side and are firing very heavily. Enemy
on the beach in front of us in very heavy force, not more than 700 yards from us. Nearly
all land guns disabled. Attack! Attack! It is all I can say, and all you can do!

At 3:25 p.m., the Union bombardment ceased and the piercing shrill of steam whistles
filled the air. Ensign Evans and the rest of the Federal naval column lurched forward with a loud

167. Trotter, Ironclads and Columbiads, 391.
168. Robley D. Evans, A Sailor’s Log: Recollections of Forty Years of Naval Life (London: Smith, Elder,
and Company, 1901), 88 (hereafter cited as Evans, A Sailor’s Log).
cheer, headed towards Colonel Lamb and his men. Hearing the signal for the beginning of the Union assault, the fort’s garrison quickly poured out of the bomb-proofs and mounted the ramparts to await the rising blue tide. Most of Lamb’s garrison, which was now down to about 1,500 men, unleashed volleys of rifle musketry into the ill-equipped naval column, whose cutlasses and revolvers proved no match for the accurate British Enfield rifles in the hands of the fort’s defenders.

Only 500 yards from the fort, the naval units became disorganized and the sailors and Marines fused into a large mob. At 300 yards, the seamen dropped to their stomachs as the fort’s remaining cannon opened on them with canister, shredding the helpless tars and leathernecks. Advancing further into the maelstrom of iron and lead, officers tried to rally the faltering men. The awful smack of soft lead against flesh and bone filled Ensign Evans’ ears as he observed “The officers were pulling their caps down over their eyes, for it was almost impossible to look at the deadly flashing blue line of parapet, and we all felt that in a few minutes more we should get our cutlasses to work and make up for the fearful loss we had suffered.”

The ferocity of the Confederate defense was too much, however. Although a few brave seamen managed to reach the Northeast Bastion’s sloping walls before being shot down, the naval attack faltered and then broke. Hundreds of sailors and Marines hastily retreated back up the beach towards the landing zone, leaving behind almost three hundred of their dead and wounded comrades.

A loud cheer erupted among the Confederate defenders as they watched the frenetic retreat. Both Colonel Lamb and General Whiting, who had fought alongside their men, joined in the celebration. But victorious shouts quickly gave way to stunned silence as Lamb turned to his left and, to his amazement, saw Federal battle flags on the fort’s ramparts. Curtis’ brigade of

Ames’ division had overrun the vastly outnumbered defenders in the westernmost batteries, and was now advancing traverse by traverse towards the Northeast Bastion. Colonel Lamb had been so determined to turn back the naval column’s assault that he failed to make sure the western wall of the fort was sufficiently reinforced. The pugnacious General Whiting called on his men “to pull down those flags and drive the enemy from the works.”172 With a loud rebel yell and fixed bayonets, Whiting led his men in a desperate charge towards the approaching Union forces, and blue clashed with gray near the fourth gun chamber. The next five hours bore witness to some of the most gruesome and bloody hand-to-hand combat of the war.

Later that evening, Admiral Porter sat alone in his quarters on board the Malvern off Confederate Point. Just a few hours before, he had watched his naval assault force “swept from the parapet like chaff,” concluding that “the whole thing had to be given up.”173 He anxiously puffed on his pipe as he awaited news from General Terry, having already been cautioned by Gustavus Fox after the first expedition that “The country will not forgive us for another failure at Wilmington.”174 At 10:00 p.m., a signal torch appeared on shore, spelling out “THE FORT IS OUR—,” while a rocket shot up from behind the fort’s ramparts and exploded overhead in an eerie phosphorous glow. Cheers erupted on board the warships as the admiral raced to the upper deck of his flagship to learn that Fort Fisher had fallen.175 One Union midshipman described the scene: “thousands of voices [were] united in tremendous cheering. All the vessels were quickly illuminated, rockets and signal lights were flashing in the air, bells were rung and steam whistles were screaming forth the glad tidings.”176 Aboard the U.S.S. Wilderness, Paymaster Henry M.

Rogers returned to his bunk and excitedly scribbled out a note to his parents: “Greetings! Fort Fisher is ours! Illuminate and cheer as the Fleet is now doing, for a death-blow has this day been given to Secession.”

After two-and-a-half days of heavy bombardment along with more than six hours of brutal ground fighting, Union forces had captured Fort Fisher—a fort so massive and so strong that it was often compared to the indomitable Russian Fort Malakoff at Sebastopol, which during the Crimean War took English and French forces more than a year to subdue. But if Fort Fisher was so strong, then what explains its comparatively quick loss? Furthermore, how could a fortification which was commanded by some of the best leaders in the Confederate army and had taken years to construct, fall at all?

The Confederacy’s strongest seacoast fortification fell in large part because of the personal politics between Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, Zebulon Vance, General Braxton Bragg, and General W.H.C. Whiting. The personal interests and bitter grudges held by these men, who were responsible for defending both the Confederacy and North Carolina, became the stones upon which the hopes of the “glorious Cause” would be dashed. But in the immediate sense at least, the finger of blame for the great loss pointed decidedly at General Braxton Bragg.

Months before the first Fort Fisher expedition, the Confederate high command noted Wilmington’s importance to the survival of the Confederacy, but was primarily concerned with the defense of Virginia and the Western Theater. Meanwhile, blockade running, the lifeblood of the Confederacy, had turned Wilmington topsy-turvy, transforming the relatively quiet seaport into a bustling hub for commercial trade and also bringing with it increased rates of prostitution, gambling, theft, and murder. As blockade running became increasingly vital to the Confederacy.

177. Rogers to his parents, January 15, 1865, in Memories of Ninety Years, 108.
(and consequently to skyrocketing profits), it also became a source of immense wealth for willing investors, who included Colonel Lamb and Governor Vance.\textsuperscript{179}

This fact is surprising when one considers that during the Civil War, arguably no other state in the Confederacy erected more obstacles to the implementation of national policies than North Carolina.\textsuperscript{180} The man most responsible for this dubious distinction was none other than the governor himself, Zebulon B. Vance. A former commander of the 26\textsuperscript{th} Regiment North Carolina Troops, Vance emerged as a popular governor after his election in August 1862.\textsuperscript{181} During his tenure, he grew increasingly concerned with the Confederacy’s seeming inability to supply and equip its forces. His predecessor, Governor Henry T. Clark, had previously made an arrangement with the Davis administration wherein North Carolina would clothe its own troops in return for a commutation of fifty dollars per year for each Tar Heel in the Confederate army. In order to clothe the state’s troops, the governor signed contracts with local cotton and wool factories.\textsuperscript{182} Even so, the condition of the state’s troops remained desperate through 1862.\textsuperscript{183} Exorbitant prices on goods imported by private blockade-runners posed a serious problem for North Carolinians who could not afford to buy them with increasingly worthless Confederate currency.

In the midst of this growing crisis, Vance initiated a state-owned blockade running trade with Great Britain, independent of the national government.\textsuperscript{184} “Extortion and speculation have attained such proportions that I find on investigation,” he claimed in 1862, “it will be impossible

\textsuperscript{179} Browning, \textit{From Cape Charles to Cape Fear}, 251.
\textsuperscript{183} \textit{Western Democrat}, October 28, 1862.
to clothe and shoe our troops this winter without incurring a most enormous outlay and
submitting to most outrageous prices.”¹⁸⁵ Though Vance initially tried a number of temporary
measures to help his troops get through the war’s second winter, including negotiating contracts
and asking for contributions from the state’s citizens, it was clear that a more permanent solution
was needed in order for North Carolina to survive the war.¹⁸⁶

In the fall of 1862, the state legislature appropriated $2,000,000 and employed North
Carolina merchantman John White as its principal procurator of supplies in Europe. Over the
next three years, the Tar Heel state’s blockade running trade would prove more successful than
that of the national government. By January 1864, the state-owned blockade runner *Advance* had
made eight successful runs through the blockade, bringing in tons of much-needed supplies.
Stockpiled in Bermuda, Vance had 40,000 pairs of shoes, 40,000 blankets, vast quantities of
high-grade woolen cloth from British mills, more than 300,000 pounds of bacon, manufacturing
machinery, as well as 112,000 sets of “cotton cards.”¹⁸⁷ These “cotton cards” were devices
which made it possible to spin raw cotton into yarn. The governor encouraged a cottage industry
in the state by distributing the cards to private citizens to clothe themselves and their families. It
also created a large surplus of cotton yarn which the state bought from citizens in order to make
military uniforms.¹⁸⁸

North Carolina’s cotton bonds abroad became highly profitable for investors. For six
dinders, a pound of cotton could be purchased from the state and resold in Liverpool for twenty-
four pence, a profit of 400 percent.¹⁸⁹ The enterprise became so lucrative that Governor Vance

¹⁸⁵. Vance to Edwards, September 18, 1862, in *The Papers of Thomas Ruffin*, ed. J.G. Hamilton (Raleigh:
sold half interest in the *Advance* to Alexander Collie and Company, using the proceeds to purchase one-quarter interest in four other steamships owned by Collie. Even as private trade steadily declined across most of the Confederacy, North Carolina’s continued to flourish. The Davis administration looked on the success of the state’s maritime trade with bitter envy.

By the summer of 1863, national, state, and private blockade running interests began to overlap becoming a source of great divisiveness. Almost every department in the Confederate government made attempts to get involved in the smuggling trade, scrambling to procure scarce supplies from overseas. The Ordnance Bureau, War Department, Treasury Department, and Navy Department all competed for cotton, coal supplies, railroad and ship cargo space, and military supplies in Europe. With the devastating defeats at Gettysburg and Vicksburg in July 1863, however, the Confederacy found itself in a tenuous situation as demand for munitions, food, clothing, and medicine increased at home while foreign confidence in the Confederate war effort diminished. The South’s financial strength in Europe had begun to crumble. In a desperate attempt to counter this eroding confidence overseas, the Davis administration decreed that it planned to impress half of all cargo space on privately-owned or state-owned blockade runners. Any captain or ship owner who refused to obey the directive faced having his ship being seized by Confederate authorities.

North Carolina’s governor was incensed when he learned of the order, informing the secretary of war: “Is it possible that such an unblushing outrage is intended by the Government? I have no comment to make . . . than that I will fire the ship [*Advance*] before I will agree to it.” “The vessels in which North Carolina is interested cannot and will not operate under those terms,” he further informed Jefferson Davis, “the State cannot incur losses for the benefit of the

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whole which are not shared by the whole.”  

There could be no doubt that Vance was a Confederate loyalist who was determined to support the Cause, but as far as he was concerned, North Carolina’s needs took precedence over those of the Confederacy. Though eventually forced to back down, the governor was embittered at the mistreatment he perceived at the hands of Richmond officials. By the spring of 1864, relations between Vance and Davis had deteriorated to the point that the two men exchanged harsh words. Their relationship, so vital to North Carolina and the Confederacy, would not improve as the war progressed.

Both President Davis and General Robert E. Lee were dissatisfied with Vance’s blockade running policy, believing that the majority of supplies imported into the Confederacy by way of Wilmington should go principally towards Lee’s embattled army in Virginia. Yet Vance built North Carolina’s blockade running trade upon the doctrine of state’s rights—the bedrock of the Confederacy, and he used this argument throughout the war in an attempt to circumvent national policies which might negatively impact the state’s maritime trade. The trade not only drove a wedge between Vance and Davis, but would soon also ruin the relationship between the governor and Major General W.H.C. Whiting.

Whiting was one of the Confederacy’s most skilled engineers. As a commander he garnered the unabashed praise of his soldiers for many of the same reasons he evoked the animosity of his superiors: he mistrusted authority and spoke candidly of his superiors’ misgivings, both military and political. Blessed with a sharp intellect, he knew little of humility and often believed he could do a better job himself. At the same time, he was wholly devoted to his men, as they were to him. But his mercurial personality and inflammatory rhetoric were so

ingratiating that Whiting managed to anger both General Robert E. Lee and President Jefferson Davis.

In the fall of 1861, Davis ordered that the Confederate Army of the Potomac (later renamed the Army of Northern Virginia) reorganize its brigades by state—each led by commanders from their home states. Critics of the policy believed that the president had issued the directive in the hopes that troops from his home state of Mississippi would more easily distinguish themselves on the battlefield.\(^{197}\) It was also seen as another example of Davis’ incessant micromanagement which left him, as one historian described it, “buried . . . in the minutiae of his job, making little or no distinction between matters great or small as they claimed his time.”\(^{198}\) When the president made a decision, he often demonstrated great inflexibility, refusing to change his mind even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.\(^{199}\) To make matters worse, Davis believed himself to be a man of substantive martial ability who needed little advice on such matters.\(^{200}\) He was a man who one contemporary correctly described as both “a warm friend and a bitter enemy,” and “a regular bull dog when he formed an opinion, for he would never let it go.”\(^{201}\) These flaws in Davis’ personality would only serve to exacerbate the tension with General Whiting.

As commander of a Mississippi brigade in the autumn of 1861, Whiting vehemently opposed the president’s order to reorganize his men, complaining that he was “not disposed to submit for one moment to any system which is devised solely for the advancement of log-rolling,

\(^{197}\) Gragg, Confederate Goliath, 55.
\(^{199}\) Davis, The Man and His Hour, 693-94.
humbugging politicians,” to which he added resolutely: “I will not do it.”202 Quick tempered and wholly intolerant of opposition, the tempestuous Davis relieved Whiting from command in Virginia. He would never forgive nor forget Whiting’s piercing criticisms or insolence. However, General Lee recognized his abilities as an engineer and sent Whiting to command the District of the Cape Fear, headquartered in Wilmington, in November 1862.203

Soon after arriving in Wilmington, Whiting again landed himself in trouble with government officials. Resolute in his distaste for blockade running, which he blamed for Wilmington’s economic and social problems, agents of the trade and ship’s crews accused him of being a bully and a dictator who “was arbitrary and paid little attention to the suggestions of civilians.”204 When Vance’s office became flooded with letters of complaint, Whiting was forced to leave them alone. The governor may have been upset because some of the business interests Whiting interfered with concerned North Carolina’s blockade running operations.

Things came to a head between Vance and Whiting when the general attempted to shut down a state-owned salt works at Masonboro Sound near Wilmington, accusing many of the workers of being Union sympathizers or military shirkers.205 As a necessary article for curing and preserving meat and fish, salt production also provided the state with a steady stream of income. The governor was incredulous that Whiting would attempt to close the necessary works at Masonboro. “This is a great calamity to our people,” he railed, “I can scarcely conceive of any such emergency as would justify it . . . our people cannot live without the Salt.”206 Vance was most concerned that there might be widespread civilian unrest if supplies of edible meat were

reduced by a lack of salt. Even President Davis feared that Whiting’s actions would deny Confederate armies essential meat products.207 The heated messages exchanged between Whiting and governor ultimately ended with the district commander bowing rather ungraciously to the Vance’s wishes.

In Governor Vance’s eyes, Whiting was an impediment to the state’s successful blockade running trade, and therefore its economic interests and civil order. A further lack of supplies and provisions might create an up swell of anti-Confederate sentiment in the state. The governor realized that he had more of a problem on his hands with Whiting when seemingly endless telegraph messages from the Cape Fear commander streamed into the offices of President Davis, General Lee, Governor Vance, and other various leaders, pleading for reinforcements to bolster the weak defenses around the Cape Fear region. Fort Fisher was only defended by about 500 artillerists and though the fort’s armament had increased from seventeen heavy guns in 1862 to forty-four by late 1864, its ammunition stores consisted of only about 3,600 projectiles, or just seventy-six rounds per cannon.208 Colonel Lamb made no qualms about the fact that he could have “easily fired every shot and shell away [in one] day.”209 Yet Whiting’s pleas to Richmond were received with little sense of urgency.210

His requests for reinforcements only grew more alarmist as the tide of battle turned in the Union’s favor. On August 5, 1864, Mobile Bay, Alabama was sealed by Union Admiral David G. Farragut’s naval flotilla, leaving Wilmington as the last major port open to foreign supplies for the Confederacy. Even with the loss of Mobile, General Lee still refused to immediately send reinforcements to Fort Fisher. While Vance continued to forward able-bodied North Carolinians

208. *Colonel Lamb’s Story*, 23.
209. *Colonel Lamb’s Story*, 18.
to fight with Lee’s forces in Virginia, he was forced to send Home Guard units (men often too old, too young, or too feeble to join the regular army) to Wilmington. By the winter of 1864, it seemed that the only people who recognized the city’s importance were General Whiting and U.S. Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles. “Wilmington remained the only important port where blockade running was in the least successful,” Welles observed, “To close that port . . . would be like severing the jugular vein in the human system.” He further reasoned that the capture of Wilmington was now “more important, practically, than the capture of Richmond.” In the meantime, the city’s most able commander, General Whiting, would further anger the Confederate president who was now determined to be rid of his irritating foe.

In May 1864, General P.G.T. Beauregard, Confederate commander at Charleston, secured a command position for Whiting in Lee’s army at Petersburg, Virginia. This would be the shunned commander’s best chance to redeem himself, as the Confederate army was threatened by the Union Army of the James, commanded by Major General Benjamin F. Butler. Given Whiting’s reputation as irascible, confrontational, and hard-drinking, Beauregard hoped a change of responsibility and scenery would improve his standing. He knew Whiting was both a brilliant and highly competent officer, but he also knew that he lacked the tact and patience necessary to survive the politics of command.

At the battle of Drewry’s Bluff, Virginia, on May 16, 1864, Whiting was entrusted with a delicate tactical maneuver designed to surprise and envelop Butler’s army. If successful, it would be a serious blow to the Union army. But Whiting failed to strike the enemy’s rear at Walthall’s Station, enabling Butler’s army to escape the trap. After the battle, one of Whiting’s critics accused him of drunkenness on the battlefield, a charge he vehemently denied, and those closest

to the commander claimed that he had consumed no alcohol at all. But the damage was done as Whiting’s integrity was once again called into question. To exacerbate the commander’s woes, President Davis, who disliked him to begin with, was visiting the battlefield when the events occurred and received a full, albeit skewed, account of the general’s performance. Dejected, Whiting personally requested that Beauregard remove him from command and send him back to Wilmington.213

Within a few months of the defeated commander’s return to North Carolina, Governor Vance began lobbying Richmond to have Whiting removed as commander of the Department of the Cape Fear. He implored General Lee to replace Whiting with General Beauregard, “not only because of the great confidence felt in him,” he wrote, “but also because of the very little reposed in General Whiting.”214 Having grown tired of Whiting’s insolence and frequent letters of complaint, Vance wanted him dismissed. Fully aware of the Drewry’s Bluff debacle, General Lee replied that even though Whiting was “a man of unquestionable ability, versed in the particular knowledge suited to his position . . . whether he would be able at the required time to apply these qualifications and to maintain the confidence of his command is with me questionable.”215 Lee may have harbored doubts about Whiting, but he understood nonetheless that, aside from Beauregard (who was, according to the Davis administration, desperately needed at Charleston), no one could handle the defense of Wilmington better than Whiting.

Although President Davis micromanaged his administration and rarely consulted his military advisors, he held General Lee’s opinions in high regard. When Lee was criticized early in the war as being timid, Davis stood by him. When Lee’s army suffered terrible casualties at the battles of Antietam and Gettysburg, the president did not waver in his support of his favored

213. Fonvielle, Wilmington Campaign, 83.
commander. Unlike many other commanders, Davis did not interfere with Lee’s administration of the army and he made every effort to give the general whatever he needed to successfully wage his campaigns. “Davis listened to Lee,” wrote historian William C. Davis, “in time taking his counsel almost as if it had come from the lips of [General] Sydney Johnston himself, whom he always believed might have been an even greater general had he lived.” Ultimately, “In the understanding and rapport they achieved, and in the way they cooperated, Davis and Lee formed a civil-military team surpassing any other of the war, even Lincoln and Grant.”

The loss of confidence in Whiting by the Confederate president, the army’s principal general, and North Carolina’s chief executive, was a mighty blow to Whiting’s ability to defend Wilmington. When he requested that two warships stationed at Wilmington—the C.S.S. Tallahassee and C.S.S. Chickamauga—be used in the city defense rather than as commerce raiders, the President Davis’ anger boiled over. In a scathing letter to Secretary of War James A. Seddon, the president wrote that Whiting’s challenge to Confederate policies “evinced both ignorance of the events and disregard for the rights of others on whose services it was no part of his duty to report.” The frustrated commander-in-chief had dealt with Whiting’s antics for long enough, and he believed that now was the time to act.

On October 15, 1864, Davis ordered his personal friend and military advisor General Braxton Bragg to assume command of the Department of the Cape Fear, thus superseding General Whiting. To those he considered his friends, Davis was a man of “unswerving loyalty that made him the truest friend a man could have,” one biographer wrote, and “also made him susceptible to rank cronyism and to manipulation by flatterers if they returned that loyalty.”

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216. Davis, The Man and His Hour, 697.
The relationship between Bragg and Davis’ went back to the Mexican War, 1846-1848, where the two men served together. Though Davis had always thought of Bragg as his friend, it is debatable whether the feeling was mutual.

Davis’ appointment of Bragg to command in Wilmington proved problematic. Bragg had a reputation as an abysmal commander who was deemed by many of his subordinates, superiors, and underlings to be the worst in the Confederate army.220 Though an able administrator, he was known more for his harshness, rigidity, cold nature, and propensity to waver under pressure. Bragg often depended on his junior officers to get him out of battlefield dilemmas and if their attempts ended in failure, they quickly became the targets of his wrath.221 It was seemingly impossible for the general to establish any sense of solidarity among his subordinates, with whom he spent most of his time arguing in vain attempts to force upon them his absolute authority.222 As the commander of the Army of the Tennessee in the Western Theater, Bragg was so disliked by many of his subordinates that they urged President Davis to remove him from command. After years of defending the controversial commander, the president now faced a potential mutiny if he did not act. Davis decided to reassign Bragg, bringing him to Richmond to serve as his personal military advisor—the same position that General Lee once held.223

When Bragg assumed his new command post in Wilmington in October 1864, the Southern public reacted with much more discernment than Davis’ administration. Colonel Lamb later wrote that Bragg’s appointment was a “bitter disappointment to my command,”224 and the Richmond Examiner declared: “General Bragg is going to Wilmington. Goodbye

220. Fonvielle, Wilmington Campaign, 87.
224. Colonel Lamb’s Story, 10.
Even Governor Vance, who was no Whiting supporter, recognized the unfeasibility of the general’s appointment. Writing to President Davis, the governor suggested that perhaps Major General Daniel Harvey Hill, a North Carolinian by birth, would be a more appropriate choice to command the eastern portion of the Department of North Carolina. Hill was an exceptional though not brilliant tactician, most well-known for his harsh criticism of fellow officers. He had even run afoul of the president earlier in the war when he criticized General Bragg.

After receiving Vance’s telegram requesting Hill’s appointment, Davis forwarded the message to General Lee for his personal recommendation. Lee replied “I fear there may be a want of harmony between the two,” and that “while General Bragg is at Wilmington he had better be in command of that whole district.” Lee’s assessment was correct, and Hill probably would have declined to serve under Braxton Bragg anyway. But Lee shirked his one real responsibility; that is, to be completely truthful with Davis. He should have recommended a more capable commander in place of General Bragg, but he did not. Knowing that Davis held Lee’s opinions in high esteem, the general’s word would have been the one thing that could have swayed his opinion. Lee’s reply to Davis’ recommendation demonstrated a fundamental flaw in his command and leadership abilities: he was polite and genteel, prone to being indirect with his subordinates, which sometimes led to confusion and even failure in battle. Lee seemed so unconcerned that he even passively mentioned the fact that Hill had been in “command in North Carolina, but for some cause was relieved.” The commander’s attitude toward the whole affair

225. Richmond Enquirer, October 26, 1864.
227. Davis, The Man and His Hour, 690.
228. Lee to Davis, November 8, 1864, ORA, vol. 42, pt. III:1163
is striking considering Wilmington’s importance to both his army and the Confederacy as 1864 drew to a close. Indeed, Robert E. Lee himself had informed Colonel Lamb that if Fort Fisher fell, “he could not maintain his army.” Most certainly, D.H. Hill was an immensely superior commander to Bragg, so what explains Lee’s aversion to Hill’s appointment as commander of the Department of North Carolina, or at the very least the eastern portion?

Both men were not strangers to personal conflict. Lee allegedly remarked that “D.H. Hill had such a queer temperament he could never tell what to expect from him.” He was well acquainted with Hill’s personality, as he had at one time served as a division commander in Lee’s army. In this position, Hill often made gloomy predictions that the Confederacy would lose the war, something that “annoyed the sanguine Lee, who complained that Hill ‘croaked.’” In battle reports, Hill was always generous in praising merit where he saw it and always generous in berating others for failures or weaknesses. His harshest and most tactless criticisms were directed toward his superior, General R.E. Lee.

After the Battle of Malvern Hill, the North Carolina commander verbally attacked Lee, writing: “Notwithstanding the tremendous odds against us and the blundering management of the battle we inflicted heavy loss upon the Yankees.” Hill also objected when Lee divided his and Major General James Longstreet’s divisions during the Maryland Campaign in September 1862. Writing about the battle of South Mountain, Hill said in no uncertain terms that “Had Longstreet’s division been with mine at daylight in the morning, the Yankees would have been disastrously repulsed,” and that “Had our forces never been separated, the battle of Sharpsburg never would have been fought, and the Yankees would not have even the shadow of consolation.

for the loss of Harpers Ferry.”

It is probable that his criticisms of Lee “aroused feelings that helped give force to Lee’s own criticisms of Hill.”

General Lee understood that Wilmington was a high value target to Union forces, but he continued to focus principally on military operations in Virginia. By October 1864, when Wilmington clearly had become the most important city in the Confederacy, Lee wrote to T.H. Holmes—commander of the North Carolina Junior Reserves—requesting that his young troops join him in Virginia. Lee also planned to ask Vance for more troops, believing that he “takes as deep an interest in the defense of the whole country, as in any part.” This tacitly suggested that a refusal by Vance to send men would be seen as a slight against the Confederacy. Lee clearly viewed Virginia as the locus of the Confederacy’s defense and though the war could not be won without Wilmington staying open to blockade running, Lee and Davis did not do enough to adequately provide for its defense. It was clear from the beginning that Lee’s loyalty lay with his home state more than it did with the Confederacy at large. He determined that where the Old Dominion State went, there he would go also.

The personal politics, petty rivalries, and hurt feelings of President Davis, General Lee, and Governor Vance swirled together into a perfect storm that led to the removal of General Whiting, keeping him from being able to properly perform his duty to defend Fort Fisher and Wilmington. As a result, the inept General Braxton Bragg was placed in command of the most important city in the South by late 1864, the loss of which would spell doom for the Confederacy. To this end, the failures made by General Bragg at Fort Fisher are alarming.

Lee detached one of his finest divisions, commanded by Major General Robert F. Hoke,
to Wilmington, but its appearance meant little if Bragg remained in charge. Hoke’s division sat motionless at Sugar Loaf during the second battle of Fort Fisher. As Terry’s men landed on January 13 to establish a beachhead, Hoke’s men offered little resistance. Even when Bragg made a half-hearted attempt to reinforce the garrison on the morning of January 15, he was so clueless about affairs inside the embattled stronghold that he sent a transport filled with reinforcements in broad daylight during the Union naval bombardment. Less than 500 of Hoke’s soldiers were able to get ashore before the ship was forced to retreat in the face of the heavy cannonade. Another ship that landed farther to the north at Craig’s Wharf was immediately captured by Terry’s men.

On January 14, Colonel Lamb developed plans for a pincer movement against Union forces north of the fort. The plan was simple: Bragg would send Hoke’s division southward to attack the landing parties while Lamb sent most of his garrison northward to trap the Union forces entrenched between them. Because the attack was to occur at nighttime and visibility would be limited for Union gunboats, Lamb believed the operation had a good chance of success. Yet Lamb’s telegraph message to General Bragg in Wilmington elicited no response whatsoever, which spoke volumes.238

Admittedly, Bragg did consult General Hoke about launching an attack against Union forces on the beach, but Hoke had already lost his nerve and he believed that his men were too heavily outnumbered. Perhaps he thought it was safer for his men to remain entrenched between the Federals and Wilmington? Predictably, Bragg let his subordinate make a crucial decision for him, deciding not to attack Terry’s force. He later claimed that “No human power could have prevented the enemy from landing, covered as he was by a fleet of ships carrying six hundred

238. Colonel Lamb’s Story, 24-28.
heavy guns.” Had Bragg agreed to Lamb’s proposed nighttime attack, this contingency would have solved itself. After the war, a Federal soldier told one of Hoke’s veterans that “he thought that if Hoke had advanced Terry would have been beaten.” Historians have since concurred with this assessment, largely placing the blame squarely on the shoulders of Braxton Bragg.

Yet Bragg was not the only one to blame for the debacle at Fort Fisher in January 1865. After all, Davis, Lee, and Vance were aware of the commander’s inadequacies and failures as a commander. If the Virginia media figured it out, then why not seasoned politicians and commanders? Of the fall of Fort Fisher, Catherine D. Edmondston wrote: “It was taken by superior numbers. Altho [sic] Wilmington was swarming with troops & they had ample warning, there were not men enough in the garrison to resist the onslaught upon them. So will it ever be where Bragg commands. Bragg the Unlucky is a Millstone which Mr. Davis persist in tying around our necks!” The loss of Fort Fisher, and subsequently Wilmington itself, was in large part due to the bumbling Braxton Bragg, who never should have held the command in the first place and the stubborn pride of President Davis, General Lee, and Governor Vance did irreparable damage to the Confederacy in its hour of greatest need. After the fort’s ignominious capture, “The financial agents of the Confederate States saw the remittances must cease . . . and they warned those who were charged with the duties of purchasing and forwarding to contract their operations, and to prepare for a final settlement.” The collapse of the Confederacy was only a breath away.

CHAPTER 4: BLOW GABRIEL, BLOW

On the night of January 15, 1865 General Alfred H. Terry fired off a dispatch to General Grant’s headquarters in City Point, Virginia. “I have the honor to report that Fort Fisher was carried by assault this afternoon and evening,” he reported, “We have no less than 1,200 prisoners, including General Whiting and Colonel Lamb . . . I regret to say our loss is severe, especially in officers.”243 The same day, Admiral David D. Porter wrote jubilantly to Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, “Fort Fisher is ours . . . the result is victory, which will always be ours when the Army and Navy go hand in hand. The navy’s loss in the assault was heavy; the army’s loss is also heavy.”244

The admiral’s statement is striking when one considers his initial lack of concern for operational harmony with Benjamin F. Butler, during the first attack. While personal politics and jealousies between the two commanders ultimately led to the expedition’s failure, comparatively speaking, there was an astonishing level of amicability between the two service branches in the second expedition. More specifically, Admiral Porter and General Terry were in complete accord, their command decisions marked by a mutual understanding of each other’s importance, explaining much of the impetus behind the operation’s success. Along with the positive shift in relations among Union commanders, it was the personal politics and vanity of Confederate leaders which ultimately led to the loss of Fort Fisher in the second battle.

Unity of command was not on the forefront of Union commanders’ minds, however. In the span of two days, Union casualties were comprised of 1,341 soldiers, sailors, and Marines. Confederate losses consisted of 486 dead, with 1,546 (the rest of the garrison) wounded or

captured and sent north to Union prison camps.²⁴⁵ Of the approximately 1,121 men sent to Elmira Prisoner of War Camp, almost 46 percent died of disease by war’s end, raising the death rate of Fort Fisher’s garrison to almost 50 percent—one of the highest of the war.²⁴⁶

On January 16, Seaman Kit Kelvin walked through the smoldering remains of the fort, bearing witness to the ghastly evidence of one of the most brutal hand-to-hand battles of the Civil War. Pieces of cannonballs mingled with broken bodies, discarded muskets, bent bayonets, and unsheathed swords, all strewn across the parade grounds and ramparts. Trying to take in the devastation around him, Kelvin later wrote of what witnessed:

Men in all postures, mangled in the head and body, with brains out, but with perfect features, covered with sand and grimed with powder. Arms, legs, hands, faces distorted, swollen, all in the traverses, in the trenches, in green water pools, in the bomb proofs, upon the parapet, on the embankments, here, there, everywhere. Piles of dead men upon which the victorious soldiers were partaking lunch, while, in another place, the same ghastly table was made for the convenience of the euchre players! The carrying past of the wounded, the groans of the dying, and the smell of blood and powder?²⁴⁷

Fellow seaman Joseph Canning, also in the fort, was most shocked by the complacency of many of his fellow soldiers and sailors towards the dead and dying heaped all around. The living paid no mind to the dead, as he watched men playing games and eating lunch with little regard for the fallen on both sides. It was unsettling to Canning to think that such a fate should befall any fellow combatant and “Sailors realized that, amid so much killing, something had died within soldiers.”²⁴⁸ Meanwhile, as seamen and soldiers alike tried to make sense of the carnage, Admiral Porter entertained General Terry on board his flagship *Malvern*. In light of their victory,
Porter described Terry as his “beau ideal of a soldier and a general,” a sharp departure from his own estimation of Benjamin Butler just one month before.

In less than two days, mighty Fort Fisher—the Gibraltar of the South—had fallen into Union hands, in large part because of personal politics which, overcome by the Union high command, still persisted among Confederate leaders. This was the reason Bragg was left in command of so vital a port as Wilmington and this is why Bragg, on the morning of January 16, was forced to telegraph President Davis, Governor Vance, and General Lee: “I am mortified at having to report the unexpected capture of Fort Fisher, with most of its garrison, at about 10’o clock tonight. Particulars not known.”

Stricken by the news, the president replied: “The intelligence is sad as it was unexpected. Can you retake the fort? If anything is to be done you will appreciate the necessity of its being attempted without a moment’s delay.” As Davis grasped the implications of the fort’s fall on the Confederacy’s chances of survival, he panicked. Without Fort Fisher, Wilmington would soon be captured by Union forces and without Wilmington, the Confederacy was doomed—just as General Lee had cautioned.

But Davis still refused to remove Bragg from command in North Carolina. Since his arrival the previous October, Bragg had been complacent about safeguarding the South’s principal seaport. Even during the second battle, he proved nonchalant about reinforcing the beleaguered garrison, responding to Whiting’s pleas with stony silence. He later even denied the need to send reinforcements, writing that up until the Union ground assault, “The reports from the fort were of the most favorable character. Not a gun reported injured, the fort not damaged.
and out loss three killed and thirty-two wounded in nearly three days.” Though an incapable commander, Bragg was a very capable liar.

Bragg’s interpretation of the battle itself was so skewed as to reveal the depths of his dishonesty. “The defense of the fort ought to have been successful against this attack,” he claimed, “but it had to fall eventually—the expedition brought against it was able to reduce it in spite of all I could do.”\(^{253}\) But he had done nothing. Personal politics between himself and President Davis had left General Whiting and Colonel Lamb in a lurch, from which they could not recover. Both men were captured and sent north after the battle, Whiting later dying from dysentery in a prison hospital in New York. John B. Jones, a clerk in the Confederate War Department, wrote in his diary a succinct epitaph: “Gen. Whiting, captured at Wilmington, died of his wounds. The government would never listen to his plans for saving Wilmington, and rebuked him for his pertinacity.”\(^{254}\) Davis and Bragg had essentially delivered Fort Fisher into Union hands and only Whiting, Lamb, and their men, were the only ones who seemed willing to defend it to the end. While Northerners celebrated the fall of Fort Fisher, Bragg was putting plans into action which would bring about the eventual fall of Wilmington itself.

In the early morning hours of the January 16, only hours after the fall of Fort Fisher, Bragg ordered Brigadier General Louis Hébert, commander of Fort Holmes and Fort Caswell at the mouth of the Cape Fear River, to evacuate his defenses and withdraw to Fort Anderson, ten miles north of Hébert’s headquarters at Smithville.\(^{255}\) Fort Anderson, at Old Brunswick Town on the west side of the Cape Fear River, was directly opposite Sugar Loaf where three of Hoke’s four brigades were strongly entrenched. After ordering Hébert to evacuate, Bragg wired General Lee in Virginia: “The fall of Fort Fisher renders useless our forts below. I am accordingly

concentrating on this point [Sugar Loaf] and at Fort Anderson, directly opposite, and will endeavor to hold this line. May not be able to save heavy guns from below.” Meanwhile Hébert’s men spent all day on January 16 destroying the fortifications they had garrisoned for almost four long years, before marching solemnly toward Fort Anderson.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Commander William B. Cushing, a living legend in the U.S. Navy for having recently destroyed the Confederate ironclad C.S.S. *Albemarle*, was ordered by Admiral Porter to scout the Cape Fear estuary. As he rowed towards Fort Caswell on Oak Island, Cushing found the fort completely abandoned, and took the liberty of hoisting the American flag over the demolished works. Two days later, he and his men advanced on Smithville, receiving the surrender of the town from its mayor. The fleeing Confederates had left behind large quantities of stores, provisions, and arms of which Federal forces would soon make good use. On January 19, two boatloads of sailors from the U.S.S. *Wilderness* and *Pequot* landed on Smith’s Island and took possession of Fort Holmes. All of the fortifications below Fort Fisher were now in Federal hands, and the blue juggernaut would soon be heading towards Wilmington. Bragg’s only hope was to use Hoke’s men on Confederate Point and Hébert’s men stationed at Fort Anderson to somehow hold back Terry’s 8,500 men and Porter’s flotilla of gunboats, now making its way up the Cape Fear to begin operations against Fort Anderson.

As the naval ships advanced upstream, Bragg suddenly seemed serious about the city’s defense, if only temporarily. He ordered Wilmington’s defenses strengthened, obstructions and torpedoes placed in the river, and requested heavy ordnance from Augusta, Georgia and Columbia, South Carolina. He even called on the local home guard to prepare for the city’s defense. Bragg’s army, including Hoke’s division on Confederate Point and Hébert’s force at

257. Cushing, *Sea Eagle*, 64.
Fort Anderson, totaled roughly 7,600 men. To command the 2,300 men stationed at Fort
Anderson, General Bragg detached Brigadier General Johnson Hagood, a South Carolinian who
one historian described as “a competent—but arrogant—brigadier” as well as “an indifferent
tactician.” Facing Terry’s 8,500-man force on Confederate Point (with two additional regiments
stationed at Smithville and Fort Caswell), was a frightening prospect for Bragg, and for good
reason. But General Terry, who was anxious to make one final push on Wilmington, was
dissuaded by Admiral Porter who feared that his men would be cut to shreds on the offensive,
thus potentially ruining the campaign to take Wilmington. In the name of operational harmony
Terry acquiesced, and his men began to dig in while they awaited reinforcements.²⁵⁹ Both Union
and Confederate forces spent the following weeks trading pot shots, reconnoitering each other’s
lines, and strengthening their respective breastworks.

The waiting game wore on Bragg’s nerves. On January 19, he ordered lines of retreat
planned for Hoke’s division at Sugar Loaf, as well as Hagood’s command at Fort Anderson.²⁶⁰
Bragg’s instructions did little to inspire confidence among his soldiers and the city’s residents.
Adding to the perception of his lack of concern for Wilmington, Bragg also issued measures to
“remove every bale of cotton stored in Wilmington as fast as transportation by one of the
railways can be procured.”²⁶¹ He seemingly possessed no faith that the city could be defended
and was preparing for its inevitable fall.

As Union forces prepared for the final push on Wilmington, personal politics again
threatened to dismantle the campaign. After the second battle of Fort Fisher, Lieutenant Colonel
Cyrus B. Comstock had been promoted to brevet brigadier general, N. Martin Curtis to full
brigadier general, and Adelbert Ames commissioned to brevet major general. But the arrogant

and self-effusing Ames was furious when he learned that Secretary of War Edwin Stanton’s official report to President Lincoln had omitted his role as commander in the final assault. Stanton instead stated that Curtis, not Ames, had led the attack—information based on General Terry’s initial report to the naval secretary, which was later clarified. Instead of directing his ire toward Stanton, however, Ames was convinced that General Terry had purposefully neglected to credit him.262

There was little time for the officers to settle their differences. General Grant now took the capture of Wilmington seriously enough that he left the battlefront in Virginia to travel down to the Cape Fear to hold a meeting with Admiral Porter and General Terry about the ensuing campaign. The lieutenant general made it clear that he wanted Wilmington in Union hands as soon as practicable, to provide a base of supply for Sherman’s forces who were then planning their advance through the Carolinas en route to Virginia. General Sherman believed that his rapid movement would force Lee to abandon his entrenchments at Petersburg, opening the way for Grant and Sherman to envelop Lee’s army.263 Wilmington would act as a supply and reinforcement base for Sherman as he made his way to Virginia, and its capture was now of immense importance to the Union war effort.264 Grant ordered Major General John M. Schofield and his Twenty-third Army Corps to proceed to the Cape Fear to bolster Terry’s force.265 At the lieutenant general’s request, the U.S. War Department created the Department of North Carolina, placing Major General Schofield in command.266

Schofield was a controversial choice among the other Union commanders at the Cape Fear who considered him prideful and vain, more than willing to use underhanded means for

personal gain. “Schofield’s normal circumspection too often gave way to his vanity,” wrote one historian, as a man who had “elbowed his way up to departmental command.” 267 Both General Terry and Admiral Porter were gravely disappointed by Schofield’s appointment. Terry wondered if Grant thought he was not up to the challenge, despite his recent success at Fort Fisher, and Porter was angry at the obvious slight against Terry. Ames, on the other hand, was ecstatic about the appointment, still reeling from the affront he believed Terry had intentionally committed after the second battle. 268

During February, as Schofield’s Corps advanced toward the Cape Fear and Sherman’s army moved out of Georgia and into South Carolina, Bragg focused on evacuating Wilmington while General Lee tried to figure out how he could stop the rising Union tide sweeping through the Carolinas and Virginia. Though Confederate forces in the Carolinas were both scattered and disorganized, General Lee was still unwilling to detach anymore troops from his command at Petersburg. He was “not a little disturbed . . . as those who knew his condition could not suppose he had any men to spare.” 269 While Bragg and Lee dawdled, Union forces at the Cape Fear finalized plans to strike Wilmington as Major General Jacob D. Cox’s Third Division of Schofield’s Twenty-third Army Corps arrived in early February—reinforcements for General Terry’s Provisional Corps.

Arguably, Bragg believed Wilmington’s fall was only a matter of time. P.G.T. Beauregard at Charleston or even Joseph E. Johnston were both able general officers who could have done a better job than the timid Bragg at defending the city. But Jefferson Davis disliked both men for their obstinacy with him earlier in the war. To exacerbate matters, Bragg refused to

leave the city on his own accord, in part due to his own inflated sense of self-worth. When Davis tried to recall the general to Richmond for some administrative matters, Bragg wrote to General Lee: “My presence here [in Wilmington] is indispensable.” He seemingly just needed an excuse to leave Wilmington, and thus tried to create one. “My absence from here now could only be justified by orders,” he wrote the president. Davis issued the necessary directive, and on February 10, Bragg relinquished command temporarily to Major General Hoke, stating that he had been summoned to Virginia to reorganize his staff.

Bragg’s absence proved to be too little and too late. The same night that he turned over command to Hoke, Generals Schofield, Terry, and Cox convened a council of war and decided to attack with Cox’s 5,000 troops and Terry’s 8,500 men (the remainder of the Twenty-third Corps still en route to the area). While Terry pressed Hoke’s men at Sugar Loaf on the eastern bank of the Cape Fear River, so the plan went, Cox’s men would simultaneously attack Fort Anderson on the western bank. Meanwhile, Admiral Porter’s gunboats would shell Confederate lines on both sides of the river. Over the following two days, as Terry’s men attempted to flank Hoke’s division at Sugar Loaf to no avail, Schofield decided to shift his operational focus across the river.

But General Comstock had come up with an ambitious plan, and Schofield was willing to try it before attacking Fort Anderson. Comstock recommended that while Terry’s Corps attacked Sugar Loaf under Porter’s covering fire, a large detachment would march up the beach under the cover of darkness and, with the aid of pontoons furnished by the navy, cross the undefended Myrtle Sound in the Confederates’ rear. After gaining the mainland, the troops could then attack.

272. Fonvielle, Wilmington Campaign, 340.
Hoke from the north. Upon hearing of Comstock’s plan, Admiral Porter called it “imbecile,” most likely because neither he nor Terry had been consulted by Comstock or Schofield. Nonetheless, the admiral did not challenge Schofield and went about preparing his ships for the movement. Porter’s willingness to look past the slight signaled a shift in his thinking about cooperation between the army and navy.

Comstock’s movement proved to be a complete failure, however, only further delaying the Union’s drive on Wilmington. Hoke had suspected something was up and dispatched a sizable force to oppose the crossing. It did not really matter, as the U.S. Navy was unable to get the pontoons up the coast to enable Comstock’s men to make the crossing in the first place. In the end, Schofield decided to go with the original plan to attack Wilmington by way of Fort Anderson on the west bank of the Cape Fear River. On February 14, as more elements of Schofield’s Corps continued to arrive in the area, the navy transferred General Cox’s division of about 6,000 soldiers across the river to Smithville. The following day, Cox’s division advanced towards Fort Anderson while Porter’s gunboats steamed upriver to shell the fort in an effort to soften up its defenses and distract the garrison from Cox’s movement.

Fort Anderson was constructed much like Fort Fisher: an L-shaped earthen work of elevated gun batteries, its shorter end running parallel to the Cape Fear River while the longer end stretched out for almost a mile. Thirty-foot high traverses were interspersed with ten gun chambers mounting nine 32-pounder cannon, making Anderson a formidable defensive work. Like Fort Fisher, it had one main weakness: its rear was wide open. The far right end of the land face anchored on Orton Pond, leaving that flank vulnerable to a flanking movement. To protect against Cox’s force, General Hagood had only about 2,300 men to protect both the fort and the

western approaches to Wilmington. As at Fort Fisher, Confederate forces were again both outgunned and outmanned.

On the morning of February 18, the concerted Union push towards Wilmington began. Porter’s flotilla renewed its bombardment, and General Hagood estimated that during a twelve hour period, from roughly 6:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., almost 2,723 shot and shell fell on the fort. Surprisingly, only one officer and six men were killed by the naval attack, though the fort was heavily damaged.\footnote{John son Hagood, \textit{Memoirs of the War of Secession}, ed. Ulysses Brooks (Columbia, SC: The State Company, 1910), 333-338 (hereafter cited as Hagood, \textit{Memoirs of Secession}).} Confederate artillerists fired back, but the ferocity of the Union bombardment was so great that the garrison’s return fire was largely erratic, as defenders were driven intermittently into the fort’s bomb-proofs.\footnote{Chris E. Fonvielle Jr., \textit{Fort Anderson: Battle for Wilmington} (Mason City, IA: Savas Publishing, 1999), 72 (hereafter cited as Fonvielle, \textit{Fort Anderson}).} Yet not one of the fort’s guns was put out of action, even though General Hagood later wrote: “The damage to the earthwork was considerable. The wooden revetment had gradually given way; the epaulement was much torn up; in fact, in one place breached nearly to the level of the gun platform; and the traverses knocked out of shape.”\footnote{Hagood, \textit{Memoirs of Secession}, 337-338.} By late evening, Union naval fire slackened. Commander William G. Temple of the U.S.S. \textit{Pontoon}, wrote: “The rebs stand up to their work manfully; but we are too much for them, and hope to drive them out from Wilmington before many days.”\footnote{Temple to Bailey, February 21, 1865, \textit{ORN}, ser. 1, 12:34.} Temple’s account proved to be one of great prescience as the following days proved that “As long as Fort Anderson remained in Confederate hands, so would Wilmington.”\footnote{Fonvielle, \textit{Fort Anderson}, 78.} While Hagood’s men bravely withstood the Union naval bombardment, two of Cox’s brigades had outflanked the fort by going around Orton Pond. Sensing the inevitable loss of his command, General Hagood informed General Hoke at Sugar Loaf of his dire situation, writing: “I must abandon this
position, or sacrifice my command.” While Hoke took Hagood’s recommendation under consideration, the garrison watched and waited for the coming Union juggernaut.

At about 5:00 am on the morning of February 19, skirmishers from the 112th Illinois Infantry advanced on Fort Anderson. Upon entering the fort, they found it hastily abandoned. But they appeared just in time to capture forty or fifty men of Hagood’s rear guard, protecting the Confederate column retreating north to a new line of defense at Town Creek. The garrison’s withdrawal was catastrophic, as Fort Anderson and Hoke’s defensive position at Sugar Loaf mutually supported one another. Hoke was now forced to abandon his lines and retreat back towards Wilmington.

Fort Anderson was the last major defensible work protecting Wilmington from Union assault. Its loss ultimately meant the loss of the city itself, and though two more small battles would later be fought, they were mere rear guard actions meant to hold off the Federal advance until Confederate forces could evacuate from Wilmington. As one Union observer later wrote: “Fort Anderson—which almost as securely and defiantly as Fort Fisher held the mouth of this last breathing-lung of Rebel supply—is now in our possession, without the loss of a boat and scarcely the loss of a man.” With far less loquaciousness, another observer wrote “Fort Anderson is ours. The river is ours. Wilmington is virtually ours.”

Confederate forces left Wilmington behind on February 22, 1865, with Union forces occupying the city that same day. Alfred Moore Waddell, a Confederate veteran, wrote a defining narrative of the mood in Wilmington. As Federal soldiers marched through the streets, Waddell noticed an elderly citizen staring with disbelief at Cox’s African-American troops

283. Fonvielle, Fort Anderson, 82-88.
marching through the city’s streets. As the old man quickly turned away, “with both hands raised and an indescribable expression of mingled horror and disgust [he] exclaimed, 'Blow, Gabriel, blow, for God's sake blow!'”\textsuperscript{286} It would seem that the end of the world had come, or at least the world as South had known it.

\textsuperscript{286} Alfred M. Waddell, \textit{Some Memories of My Life} (Raleigh, NC: Edward and Broughton, 1908), 57.
CONCLUSION:

After four long years Wilmington had finally fallen into Union hands, and the rest of the Confederacy would soon follow. The impact of its loss was felt around the world, as one astute British citizen wrote: “It will be seen, then, how far the South is capable of doing without that which England has hitherto furnished her.” General R.E. Lee’s statement that his army could not survive if Wilmington fell proved prophetic. Only forty-six days after the city’s capture, General Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia, which had expended so much effort in defending Petersburg and Richmond, was forced to surrender to General Grant at Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia on April 9, 1865. Just days before, black and white Union forces marched triumphantly through Richmond’s cobblestoned streets, as President Davis fled the Confederate capital and sought refuge further south.

With Wilmington’s capture, Lee could no longer supply his troops who were half-starved and lacking in both proper clothing and sufficient quantities of ammunition. The capture of the South’s most important seaport was largely the result of personal politics and jealousies which caused both sides to pay a heavy price. The personal politics of President Abraham Lincoln, the successive commanders of the Army of the Potomac, and the War Department and Navy Department led to the allocation of limited resources and manpower to less important targets such as Charleston, South Carolina and Richmond, Virginia. Though politically symbolic, the capture of these cities paled in comparison to that of the South’s most important blockade running entrepôt of Wilmington, North Carolina, strategically and logistically speaking. The lifeline of Lee’s army in Virginia had remained open longer than any other seaport in the Confederacy.

But even when Wilmington was finally targeted by Union forces, the personal politics between General Benjamin F. Butler and Admiral David D. Porter, fueled by both men’s vanity and pride, led to the unraveling of the first Fort Fisher expedition and ultimately to the removal of the most powerful political general of the war. The failure of Union commanders during the first attack proved to be a valuable lesson, however, and the tide would shift during the second expedition when General Alfred H. Terry, who replaced General Butler of the Fort Fisher expeditionary force, made it a priority to get along with Admiral Porter. The two men exemplified a mutual accord and respect of command which was sorely lacking in the first Union assault on Fort Fisher, and which had contributed greatly to the success of the second.

Meanwhile, the politics of command among Confederate leaders, particularly President Davis, General Bragg, General Lee, Governor Vance, and General Whiting, left a bungling commander like Braxton Bragg in command of the South’s most important city, who almost ensured its capture by Union forces in January 1865.

This is not to imply that personal politics tell the whole story of Wilmington’s capture, however. Most certainly, strategy, tactics, and sheer luck, or lack thereof, all played important parts in the fall of Fort Fisher, as they would in all battles during the war. But failure in both the targeting of Wilmington and the execution of the two Fort Fisher expeditions was most often the by-product of personal politics between commanders, which were fueled by personality flaws. Vanity, pride, ego—endemic to all mankind—contributed to the Confederacy’s doom. Were it not for the lessons learned by Union officers after the first expedition’s failure, it is true that, in the words of Ensign Joseph Canning, the war seemingly would have continued “to the crack of Doom.”
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