Army Heritage Center Foundation
Telling the Army Story... one Soldier at a time

Voices of the Past

CIVIL WAR

Highlights:

- The South was devastated by war.
- The Army had little experience in post-war occupation or reconstruction.
- The Army acted quickly to restore order and to provide humanitarian assistance.
- As reconstruction began many Southerners asked for military control because they trusted the Army more than the civilians from the North.

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The Occupation of the South

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(Richmond, 1865) Union soldiers in the southern United States at the end of the Civil War faced a situation that might seem hauntingly familiar to those who have served more recently in places like Bosnia, Iraq, or Afghanistan. There were large areas of great devastation, rubbled cities, neglected farms, hunger, a fractured and demoralized society in chaos, with hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons (including newly-freed slaves and soldiers just released from the disbanded Confederate Army), and little remaining civil government. In short, there was little-beyond the Union Army-to prevent the entire region from slipping away into post-war anarchy.

At the national level, most planning had focused on winning the war, not on what would follow. In the absence of a coherent national plan, and with limited experience and no formal doctrine on the subject, the Union Army did what Soldiers have always done-they adapted to the situation and found ways to accomplish the mission. From the earliest occupations in 1862 (Nashville, New Bern, New Orleans, Norfolk, and Memphis), the army built upon its military occupation experiences from the Mexican War (1846-48), and worked to find approaches that would work in the southern states as they fell. The specifics of how they did this varied, but a closer look at the situation in the fallen capital of the Confederacy, Richmond, Virginia, offers a good example.

On April 3, 1865, six days before the surrender of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox, two divisions under General Godfrey Weitzel, commanding general of the Twenty-Fifth Corps of the Union Army, occupied Richmond. By order of General Robert E. Lee (who realized his lines were broken and Richmond was lost), the Confederate Army had retreated from the city the night

Ruins of Cary Street, Richmond. Photo Credit: U.S. Army Military History Institute, MOLLUS-MASS Collection

General Godfrey Weitzel, commanding general of the 25th Corps of the Union Army. Photo Credit: U.S. Army Military History Institute, MOLLUS-MASS Collection

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

- Abraham Lincoln

before, leaving instructions for the mayor to surrender the next morning. When Weitzel's Union soldiers arrived, they found a city on fire and a civilian populace without the will or means to stop either the flames or the extensive looting that accompanied them.

There was no Army doctrine for Stability Operations, but the way forward was clear – Weitzel's priority was to restore order, and his soldiers quickly made the transition from combat to stability. They stacked arms in the city square and went to work with bucket brigades to save what they could. By the first evening, the fires were out, order was restored, and the city was secured against further violence.

Humanitarian assistance was the next priority. Much of the populace was starving and in a generally desperate condition. A military relief commission established procedures to distribute food to thirty districts in the city. Hunger persisted as a problem for months, but the aid distribution system worked to prevent tragedy. Of particular note was the recognition and acceptance of local expertise. Two civilians were assigned to each district-many with experience in local charity work.

Other challenges were much more complex. Perhaps the most immediate task with long-term implications was the restoration of agriculture. There were only a few weeks left to plant crops for the growing season, and the fields around Richmond were greatly neglected. The situation was not only a matter of tending the fields and doing the planting, it also involved labor issues – the slaves were now freedmen, and their labor was no longer mandatory or free. The Army had to assume the role of jobs bureau and facilitate a new relationship that could get the crops planted while protecting the rights of former slaves. To encourage freedmen to return to the farms they had previously worked, the Army tied distribution of food rations for able-bodied workers to their willingness to work. At the same time, the Army had to ensure that the landowners paid these returning workers appropriately (sometimes even designating what that wage should be) and treated them as the free men they now were. To further boost the system, the Army disbursed abandoned, captured, and excess property- government horses and mules in particular-to the populace. The results of the agricultural effort were effective, at least in the short term-the 1865 crop was generally good and famine was averted.

Rebuilding local agriculture and labor systems was an important step towards restoration of much larger regional and national systems like transportation, commerce and banking, and the broken economy in general. There were great needs in many other areas, as well-reestablishing the court systems, local law enforcement, local political systems and elections-to name a few. Nearly all of these tasks were beyond the current expertise of the Army that was tasked to address them. But as has been the case so often, the Army did address them because, especially in the first years of the reconstruction, it was the only organization that could. It is interesting to note that many southerners recognized this as well. They wanted and asked for military control of their areas at the

Ruins of Gallego Mills, Richmond, VA. Photo Credit: U.S. Army Military History Institute, MOLLUS-MASS Collection

The Occupation of the South

beginning of the reconstruction, rather than civilian government. Whatever their other thoughts about the Army, they knew that it could provide security, and that it was their best chance for fair treatment and protection from exploitation.

As Reconstruction in the South progressed, other forces came into play. There were political battles over how much aid to give and for how long and fierce arguments over the terms of reconciliation, and over the proper balance between the desire to punish and the need to rehabilitate. A large and rapid drawdown of forces hindered the Army's ability to maintain order, a persistent insurgency developed against the enforcement of federal laws, especially with regard to civil rights, and opportunists from both the North and South spread corruption. The legacy of those later years of Reconstruction stayed with the South for many decades. However, the experiences of the Army in the first years of Reconstruction were foundational to its future experiences with military government, reconstruction, and stability operations in general-themes that persist to the present.

ABOUT THIS STORY: Many of the sources presented in this article are among 400,000 books, 1.7 million photos and 12.5 million manuscripts available for study through the U.S. Army Military History Institute (MHI). The artifacts shown are among nearly 50,000 items of the Army Heritage Museum (AHM) collections. MHI and AHM are part of the U. S. Army Heritage and Education Center, 950 Soldiers Drive, Carlisle, PA, 17013-5021. Website: www.carlisle.army.mil/ahec

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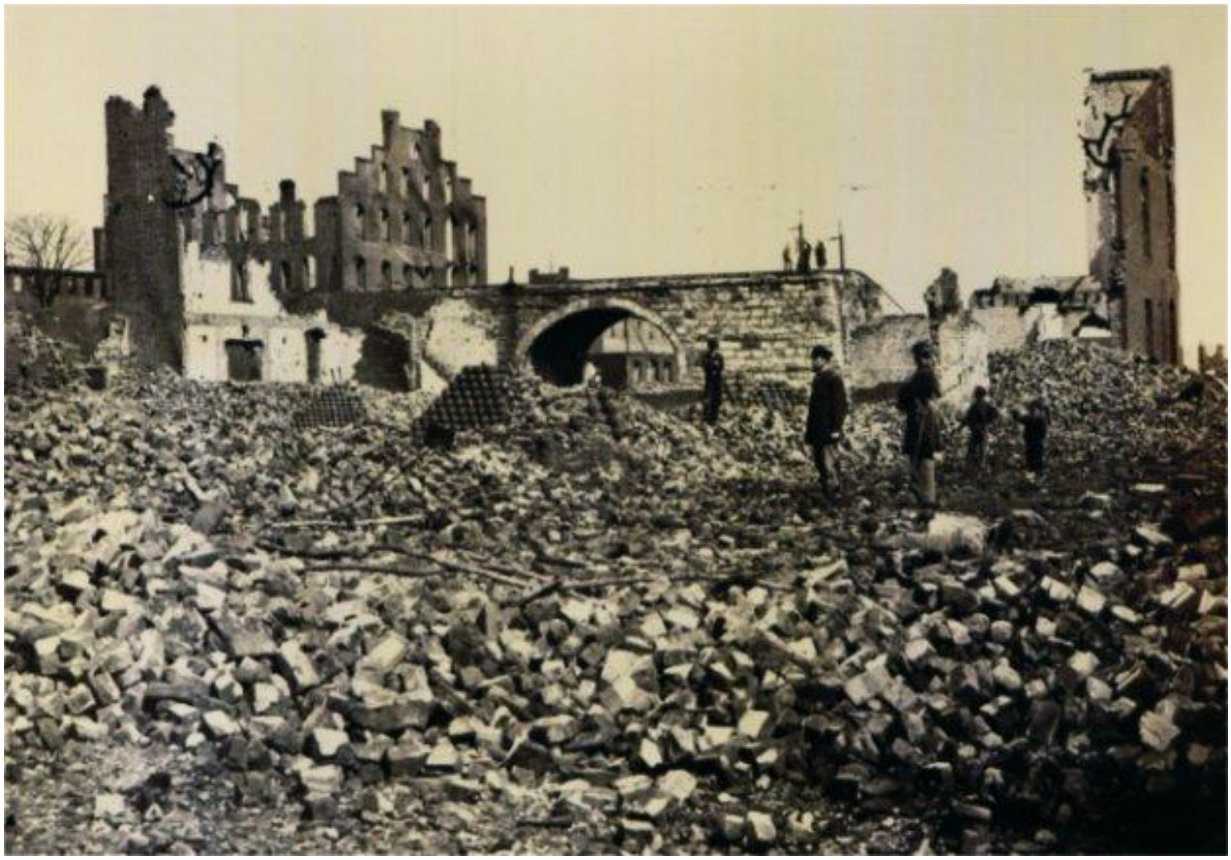

The ruins of the Richmond and Petersburg Railroad bridge in Richmond, Virginia, at the end of the American Civil War stood as a reminder to the nation that there was much to rebuild. Photo Credit: U.S. Army Military History Institute, MOLLUS-MASS Collection