INSIGHTS

Character, Warrior Identity, and Moral Leadership: Union Colonel Charles Gilpin at Monocacy and in Peace

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No human endeavor matches combat for intensity, lethality, horror, and exhilaration, or more severely tests the character upon which effective command leadership depends. Character has been described as a deep quality that is inextricably linked to virtue, a conception especially relevant to officers because law alone cannot govern every moral demand of command.[1] As history has shown, the ability to inspire others can be exploited for the darkest of purposes; for that reason, character, leadership development, and the acceptance of responsibility for others' lives must be considered together.

Although the Civil War offers many case studies in this process, Colonel Charles Gilpin is particularly instructive. Significantly older than most Union officers and lacking previous military training, he nonetheless became an impressive combat leader. Examining his growth in uniform and postwar advocacy for African American equality through the literature of battle, the historical scholarship on Reconstruction and race, and research on veterans'

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powerful warrior identity and survivor obligation helps to clarify the relationship among character, combat leadership, and moral responsibility.[2]

Soldiers' Pride

When asked about his war experience, Sixth Pennsylvania Cavalry Sergeant Louis J. Boos, whose right forearm was amputated after being shot at Todd's Tavern, Virginia, on May 7, 1864, encapsulated the profound transition from civilian to soldier: "I do so with feelings of pride and wonder at the many trials through which I have passed, and which have better enabled me ... to bear the crosses of this life upon coming home to live as a private citizen."[3]

In 1994, the results of a study of male World War II and Korean War veterans, 40% of whom had been in combat, precisely matched what Boos expressed. Psychologists Carolyn M. Aldwin, Michael R. Levenson, and Avron Spiro III found the positive consistently outweighed the negative, with 11 desirable effects of service in the military reported by 90% or more of the men. These included "broader perspective," "became more independent," "positive feelings about self," "value life more," and "clearer direction and purpose in life."

Interpreting their findings, the authors concluded: "Apparently, combat exposure inoculated some ... against future stress ... Other men spoke of their battlefield promotions and ... pride in discovering that they could successfully command and protect other men. They felt that if they could cope with war, they could cope with anything."[4]

These results closely correspond with the Israel Defense Forces Unit of Military Psychology's study of Yom Kippur War veterans' "most frightening aspect of battle." Rather than death, limb loss, or other injury, the greatest fear of lieutenants, captains, majors, and senior noncommissioned officers was "letting down" those who depend upon them.[5]

Warrior Identity, Posttraumatic Growth, and Survivor Obligation

Contrary to interpretations that emphasize combat's destructive emotional effects,[6] what Boos, Aldwin, Levenson, and Spiro described are components of an evolving warrior identity, characterized by psychiatrists Samuel L. Bradshaw Jr. and James B. Horne and psychologist Carroll D. Ohlde in 1991.[7] This self-esteem, which is sustaining during armed conflict, underpins the personal and occupational success that has been characteristic of American veterans after they leave the service.

It is also consistent with posttraumatic growth, epitomized by White and Black Union veterans, who pursued unprecedented political activism through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and troubling widespread acceptance of the Lost Cause. As I argue in *One More War to Fight*, that civic engagement was often connected to how veterans perceived their service, survival, and ongoing obligations to fallen comrades.[8]

The following case study of Colonel Charles Gilpin, who commanded a Union Maryland Infantry regiment, exemplifies how soldiers' pride, a potent warrior identity, and personal character are all vital to the development of leadership in war, and, along with posttraumatic growth, in civilian life. For contemporary character and leadership education, Gilpin's case suggests that steadfastness, moral purpose, and responsibility for others may matter as much as prior formal military training in the making of an effective combat leader.

A Prominent Citizen Goes to War

By September 26, 1861, Charles Gilpin of Cumberland, Maryland, had led a successful tanning business and "large mercantile trade" for years, and was a happily married father of four young children. That day, he chaired a meeting that elected him and 12 others as representatives to a county convention of loyal citizens, across party lines, to maintain "the Constitution and the Union ... until the

rebellion which now unhappily exists, shall have been effectively subdued." But Gilpin's commitment didn't end there, as the 49-year-old left his family on January 30, 1862 to enter military service for the first time as Captain, Company D, Third Regiment, Potomac Home Brigade (PHB) Infantry, Maryland Volunteers.[9]

Assigned to the Mountain Department, the regiment fought the Army of Northern Virginia three times before being transferred to the Middle Department, and clashing with them again over September 13–15 at Harper's Ferry. After the besieged Union garrison surrendered, the Third, paroled upon exchange, was tasked with guarding the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) Railroad.

Promoted to lieutenant colonel in September 1862, Gilpin was leading the regiment on June 28, 1863, when it arrived at Elysville, where, as the *National Tribune* reported, "Two important iron bridges crossing the Patapsco [River] ... were threatened with destruction by [Jeb] Stuart's cavalry ... advancing on the right flank of the Army of the Potomac toward Pennsylvania." The B&O being the "principal route of supply and communication between Washington, Baltimore and ... Meade's army," Gilpin and his men saved the bridges, a considerable achievement done without "much personal danger and hardship."

Continuing to guard the railroad in Maryland up to Monocacy Junction, the Third PHB saw little action from fall 1863 through early spring 1864. Then, after his April promotion to colonel, Gilpin and the regiment would face their greatest challenge of the war.[10]

Jubal Early Invades Maryland on the Way to Washington

In early July, Major General Lew Wallace's situation was perilous as he awaited Confederate Lieutenant General Jubal Early's acclaimed Second Corps. Having cleared the Shenandoah Valley of Union troops per General Robert E. Lee's orders, they were now advancing through Maryland towards their ultimate objective, Washington, DC.

Lacking accurate intelligence from his superiors, Wallace stated it plain: "The task we then assumed was not an easy one. All Maryland from the Monocacy River to the Chesapeake Bay, and beyond to the sea ... to keep [by] ... the small total of troops left me by General Grant [which] was many times divided and widely distributed ... the operation was like gleaning in a lean field a second and third time."

Including Gilpin's Third PHB, "twenty-three hundred effectives" constituted Wallace's Eighth Corps. To make matters worse, the Eleventh Maryland and both Ohio National Guard regiments were "'hundred days' troops,"[11] and he had no cavalry. Luckily for Wallace, that lack was more than filled when the battle-tested Eighth Illinois, fresh from stalking Confederate Partisan John Singleton Mosby and his Rangers, arrived essentially out of nowhere on July 6.

Their commander, Lieutenant Colonel David Clendenin, immediately agreed to serve under Wallace, even though he and his 230 officers and men were in the Army of the Potomac, neither one had authorization for the arrangement, and they were complete strangers. Nonetheless, by following their instincts in an exigent situation, two citizen volunteers whom war, character, adversity, and leadership had transformed into exceptional professional soldiers forged a critical partnership.

Wallace then rode to meet "the officers of the several commands," where Brigadier General Erastus B. Tyler, the able First Separate Brigade leader, introduced him to Gilpin: "noticing his quiet manner, veteranish complexion, iron-gray hair, and the evident pride he took in his command, I set him down as one happily described by the French, 'Father of the Regiment'. ... I was not mistaken in judgment."[12]

July 7: The Battle Above and Through Frederick

Armed with key information Clendenin obtained the morning of July 7 by reconnaissance northwest of

Frederick, Wallace sought to reinforce Tyler, whom he had sent to "command at the stone [Jug] bridge on the Baltimore pike," by directing him "to put Gilpin's regiment and [Captain Frederic W.] Alexander, with three guns of his battery, on the [railroad] cars and hurry them to Frederick. West of the town Gilpin was to take position to cover it, and be ready to support Clendenin, slowly falling back."

Wallace's orders to Gilpin were crystal clear: "Upon your arrival at Frederick assume command of the post and organize your forces as far as possible. Should it become necessary to evacuate Frederick you will fall back upon the Baltimore pike and hold the crossing of the Monocacy at all hazards."

At 4:00 PM, Gilpin wired Tyler from his headquarters near Frederick: "The enemy have opened fire, and we are replying. We have sent all the horses we can obtain. Can you send all my regiment to me!" One hour later, "The enemy are pressing us, and the Eighth Illinois Cavalry have expended nearly all their ammunition. The telegraph operator has run away. What shall we do in the emergency!"

In his next dispatch, Gilpin coolly told Tyler that his command had "taken position on the hill, west of town; the enemy in full view, and have plenty to do. They are supposed about 800 strong"; at 6:15 PM, he sent this update: "Unless we are re-enforced immediately, both in men and ammunition, we will be forced to fall back on Monocacy .... The enemy are moving to our left and trying to get onto the National road .... Send ammunition by all means for infantry, artillery, and Sharps carbines. Our men fight well."

Wallace, unsure whether Gilpin could hold on, then "noticed a sudden reawakening of the fight ... the artillery and small-arms firing swelled, ... and became continuous ... Gilpin had charged the enemy and was driving him back towards the mountain." As for Clendenin, once "Colonel Gilpin ... came up, and being senior officer, took command of all the forces," the Eighth Illinois leader "moved to our left and with my cavalry dismounted engaged the enemy, fighting continually until dark, repulsing them effectually."[13]

Beyond their usual outstanding performance, the presence of Clendenin and his regiment surely had a galvanizing effect on the much less experienced Eighth Corps officers and men. Given the circumstances, the leadership displayed by Gilpin, and the dogged valor of his troops in locking horns with first-rate Army of Northern Virginia soldiers, were both exceptional, and superior officers gave them due credit.

At 8:40 PM, Wallace wired Gilpin from Monocacy: "You have behaved nobly," and in his battle report, Tyler would write: "Colonel Gilpin and Lieutenant-Colonel Clendenin conducted themselves in the most gallant manner, deserving great credit for their skill and efficiency from first to last. These officers speak in very high terms of the officers and men under them, and they deserve it all."

In his own August follow-up report, Wallace said "The forces opposed ... were about equal in number, yet [Frederick native Brigadier General Bradley] Johnson had the advantage; his men were veterans, while Gilpin's, with the exception of Clendenin's squadron, had not before been under fire, a circumstance much enhancing the credit gained by them."

On July 7, Wallace wired Lieutenant Colonel Samuel B. Lawrence, running the Middle Department for him back in Baltimore: "Think I have had the best little battle of the war. Our men did not retreat, but held their own. The enemy were repulsed three times." At 11:00 PM, he proudly informed Army Chief of Staff Henry W. Halleck of the Rebel attack "with infantry, artillery, and cavalry" that was "handsomely repulsed" in "a severe fight, concluding at dark."[14]

July 9: The Battle of Monocacy

With Wallace reinforced by the arrival of Brigadier General James B. Ricketts's Third Division of the Army of the Potomac's renowned Sixth Corps, the stage was set for the main event, with three Third PHB companies "posted to defend Crum's Ford – midway the stone bridge and railroad," and "Gilpin held in reserve at the railroad." Wallace's outnumbered and outgunned soldiers somehow held off the Confederates until he had no choice but to "burn the wooden bridge and the block-house at its further end, thus releasing the force left to defend them, I put into the engagement every available man except Tyler's reserves."

When Wallace later "saw the third line of rebels move out of the woods and down the hill" and "right after it came the fourth," he knew the die was cast: "I ordered General Ricketts to make preparations and retire to the Baltimore pike." About 4:00 PM, the Union retreat began, with retention of the stone bridge so imperative that Tyler "galloped [there] ... and took the command in person." He would later note that "Colonel Gilpin's regiment, with the three companies of the First Maryland Potomac Home Brigade that were assigned him, although serving in detachments along an extended line, fully sustained the enviable reputation they had won on Thursday."

Wallace pondered the human cost, "a heavy loss, illustrating the obstinate valor of the command. I am satisfied, however, that the casualties of the rebels exceeded mine ... Orders have been given to collect the bodies of our dead in one burial ground on the battle-field, suitable for a monument upon which I propose to write: 'These men died to save the National Capital, and they did save it.'"[15]

By delaying Jubal Early for a crucial 36 hours, Wallace and his pieced-together army had done their utmost to prevent the Rebels from capturing Washington, and forcing Abraham Lincoln's evacuation 4 months before the vote on his re-election.

Their work in Maryland complete, the Third PHB moved into Virginia and fought at Snicker's Gap on July 18. Having joined Major General Philip Sheridan's Army of the Shenandoah, the regiment participated in four August engagements before it was again assigned to the Department of West Virginia.

From there, the regiment mustered out on May 29, 1865; Gilpin was already home, having left January 2 upon expiration of his 3-year term of service. Months earlier, Gilpin and his men, without firing a shot, had carried out another critical responsibility that demonstrated how drastically the views of those who fought for the Union had changed.[16]

A Border Slave State's Soldiers' Vote for Freedom

By early 1864, Maryland had reached a crossroad that mirrored what the nation itself was confronting. Responding to Governor Augustus W. Bradford's advocacy for a constitutional convention to abolish slavery, in February the state legislature enacted bills calling for a popular vote. On April 6, Marylanders, including Gilpin, who had been granted leave of absence to go home to vote, approved the call for convention by a 2:1 margin, and selected delegates for the historic meeting to convene on April 27.[17]

At the convention, all aspects concerning the vote of Marylanders in active federal military service were specified, though none applied to the ineligible 8,718 enlisted men in United States Colored Troops regiments. Overseeing the October election on adoption or rejection of the new constitution, state officers, and congressional representatives would be Wallace's Eighth Corps and Middle Department.

On October 22, the DC *Evening Star* reported "all uncertainty" stemming from delayed receipt of "official returns of the [soldiers'] vote" was "removed by the arrival to-night of the commissioner sent to collect the

vote in Sheridan's army"; as expected, "Several organizations, including the 3d regiment, in Western Virginia" would "considerably increase the majority." Slavery's death knell in the state of Maryland was declared by Bradford on October 31, the constitution to go into effect the next day proclaiming its abolition, with "all persons held to service or labor as slaves ... hereby declared free."

When the votes were tabulated, it was evident that the state's White soldiers had swung the election. Of the 29,799 voters who opposed the new constitution, just 263 were soldiers, versus the 2,633 soldiers among all 30,174 who supported its passage, a scant difference of 375 votes. Maryland civilians had rejected the new constitution by 1,995 votes (29,536 versus 27,541), but the 10:1 approving soldiers' vote provided a decisive 2,370 majority for its adoption.[18]

Gilpin's Postwar Life

Having survived war, personal tragedy struck Gilpin in January 1866 when Charles Jr., age 12, broke through the ice while skating on the frozen Cumberland River and drowned before help could reach him. Overcoming the loss, by 1870 Gilpin remained a successful merchant who shared a full household with his wife Julia, two grown daughters, two sons (14, and Charles A., 3), and two live-in female domestics.[19]

Like so many other Union veterans, Gilpin knew that the Civil War's "unfinished work" had changed from freedom to equality, and turned to politics. One of four Allegany County Radical Republicans voted into the House of Delegates in November 1866, his and another colleague's unseating by the Committee on Elections in February 1867 disappointingly overturned their majority.

In the 1872 presidential election, Gilpin, "an intelligent gentleman, a fluent and popular speaker," served as a district elector on the Grant Two Term Republican ticket. On November 2, the *Catoctin Clarion* further reported on a highly attended Mass Meeting and Torch Light Procession where "The Emmitsburg delegation ... include[d] many 'American colored fellow-citizens'." Gilpin, after "rapturous applause," spoke "for over an hour on the political situation, touching upon various points."

In April 1873, his contribution to Grant's successful campaign and Lloyd Lowndes's congressional election was acknowledged with a presidential appointment as Surveyor of Customs for the port of Baltimore. During Lowndes's 1874 victorious re-election run, he and Gilpin paid special attention to African American voters; four years later, Gilpin was among Allegany County front-runners for the Republican congressional nomination, which he did not receive.[20]

Over the next decade, the colonel remained a stalwart progressive and one of Cumberland's most respected citizens. In 1880, to aid in establishing the Union Street School's proposed public school library, he readily accepted an invitation to discuss "Macbeth," including "the great moral truths embodied in the tragedy."

That same year, after removal from his Customs House position by President Rutherford B. Hayes, Gilpin became president of the Central [James A.] Garfield, [Chester A.] Arthur and [Milton] Urner Committee, and leader of the anti-Hayes election faction. The Republican campaign events were characterized by a high percentage of Black participants, who in some cases outnumbered Whites—Gilpin's intimate involvement in these biracial events included speaking.

On October 31, the *Cumberland Civilian* extensively covered a Republican demonstration for Garfield, in which Gilpin played a major role. Predominantly

peaceful, it was marred by an ugly incident. When "the Cumberland colored club became separated by a train" from most marchers, a melee ensued, in which "some half-dozen pistol-shots were fired and several colored men were wounded." Amid claims and counterclaims, the *Civilian* stated outright that "responsibility for the disturbance rests with the law-breaking Democrats who interfered with the orderly right of men to parade our streets."[21]

By 1888, retired from business, Gilpin lost his oldest daughter Mary to pneumonia. Just two months later, he finally ran again for office, only to lose the Cumberland City Clerk election to the Democratic incumbent; 8 days later, he delivered the featured address at the Memorial Day program.[22]

Then, in a tragic irony, he was taking his usual morning walk on February 27, 1889 when, as the *Martinsburg Herald* reported, an "express train on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad was entering Cumberland at a very rapid rate, being about thirty minutes late, [when] it struck Colonel Charles Gilpin with great force, and caused his death, after he had suffered terrible agony for about seven hours."

According to the *Cumberland Daily Times*, the 76-year-old Gilpin never regained consciousness, dying "without ... recognition of any member of the family or friends." The Elkton *Cecil Whig*, "pained to note the terrible accident," then said: "We were associated closely personally as well as officially for a number of years with Col. Gilpin and can testify to his high character both as a gentleman and an officer."

Having held a special meeting to make funeral arrangements, his Grand Army of the Republic Tyler Post comrades attended en masse the following afternoon, joined by Gilpin's family, the pallbearers who included later governor Lownes and other Republican luminaries, and additional mourners.

Ever since, the headstone of this admired moral leader in war and peace reads simply yet eloquently:

"COL

CHAS GILPIN

3RD MD. P.H.B. INF."[23]

Being under fire had not changed Gilpin's character; rather, it was the qualities and sense of responsibility he brought to military service that fostered learning, personal growth, and his development as a leader of men. Having run a profitable business for decades, he joined the Union army from a border slave state, and went to war at an age nearly double that of the average Northern soldier. His character, commitment to defending the republic, support for slavery's destruction, and command ability enabled someone with relatively little battlefield experience to rise to the occasion when his troops, and the country, depended on him most. The words on Charles Gilpin's grave reflect the warrior identity and sense of obligation that spurred his continued devotion in civilian life to advancing what he had fought for in uniform.

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