Charles J. Stillé,  
"Angel of Consolation"

As the year 1862 drew to a close, President Lincoln might well have wished that the Republican national convention, two and a half years before, had nominated some other candidate to carry the party's banner into the political battle of 1860. The death of a son, a succession of military defeats, and rancorous debates behind the lines among radicals, moderates, and Southern sympathizers over an Emancipation Proclamation that seemed to free no slaves and to please no faction, all contributed to produce a gloomy atmosphere that pervaded the White House and the nation at large.

Was Abraham Lincoln chosen to be the last President of the United States of America?

The autumn elections in the North "showed clearly" that voters were opposed to emancipation and were dissatisfied with the administration's conduct of military affairs;\(^1\) and, as if to justify these feelings, General McClellan's "slows" during the bright Indian summer of November were replaced only by the equally inept folly of Burnside's rashness at Fredericksburg in December.

In the White House, Lincoln's private secretary, John G. Nicolay, wrote late in December that he was unable to say "when all this is to cease or be changed." He could only hope that victory would finally come "when Providence interferes to give our generals a little sense or skill." There was nothing wrong with the Federal army. The troops were "well placed and well supplied." What was lacking was competence among the generals. To Nicolay, "military genius is not as plenty as blackberries in our armies." But, perhaps influenced by Lincoln himself, Nicolay nevertheless concluded that "my faith is yet unshaken, and my ardor unquenched. We must and will succeed."\(^2\)

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The war effort never suffered from a lack of suggestions as to how to improve the military situation. While Nicolay could only pray for divine assistance, there were others who had concrete plans not necessarily based on providential interference. Gershom Martin, an Illinois newspaperman, had a scheme for destroying Southern resistance which was ultimately forwarded to the White House for the President’s inspection and instruction.

Martin (1826–1894) was an Ohio native, a farmer’s son who had left home when he was twelve years old and walked to Illinois. There he worked as a mule driver on the Illinois and Michigan Canal and later learned to set type, becoming “a tramp printer” and working on a number of small Illinois newspapers. Eventually, after the Civil War, he became a newspaper publisher and owner. Raised as a Democrat, Martin remained one throughout his adult life, standing loyally by its principles, except the “pro-slavery ideas that for a time characterized a great portion of that party.”

“Gersh” Martin, this Illinois “half printer, half editor, and wholly individualist,” was apparently one of those delightful characters common in journalism a century ago. He was against temperance and puritanism, was “seldom sober,” and anticipated the “yellow journalism of Pulitzer and Hearst by about three decades.” That such a strong individualist should voice opinions as to how the Civil War should be conducted is not really surprising. Certainly, Eastern newspaper editors in this era were never bashful about dispensing free advice on military matters. Horace Greeley had established the precedent in 1861 with his cry, “On to Richmond!” Gershom Martin’s contribution was a four-page memorandum entitled The Military Route to Richmond, which in time reached the desk of the President.

3 Earnest Elmo Calkins, They Broke the Prairie: Being Some Account of the Settlement of the Upper Mississippi Valley by Religious and Educational Pioneers, Told in Terms of One City, Galesburg, and of One College, Knox (New York, 1937), 358.
4 Portrait and Biographical Album of Knox County, Illinois (Chicago, 1886), 358.
5 Calkins, 358.
6 Gershom Martin, The Military Route to Richmond (Chicago: privately printed, Dec. 22, 1862). Copy in the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection, XCVI, 20322–23, Library of Congress. No covering letter was found with this copy. Moreover, there are no original copies of the memorandum in the Chicago Historical Society, the Lincoln National Life Foundation of Fort Wayne, Ind., the Lincoln Collection of Lincoln Memorial University, or the F. Lauriston Bullard Collection of Lincolniana at Boston University. Apparently, the work was not distributed to the public generally.
In *The Military Route to Richmond* Martin began his advice with the complaint so frequently uttered by Northerners that disloyal influences were responsible for Federal debacles. He had watched, he explained, with the "intensest interest and anxiety" the unfolding of events during the past sixteen months, and had studied "with the closest scrutiny" the ill-fated attempt of the Army of the Potomac to capture Richmond during the Peninsular Campaign. Even though he was disturbed by the "clamors of an ignorant and mercenary press, and the howlings of corrupt and treacherous politicians," he felt that the American war effort at the close of 1862 should have been more successful than it was. "With the largest army and unlimited resources, why has not success attended our arms?" Martin asked. "Why is it," he continued, "that our armies are now back on the same camping grounds they occupied last winter, and the rebels in stronger force than ever before in Virginia?" "Why is it that at every plunge the North has gone deeper and deeper, and that now another repulse stuns the public senses?"

The answer to these questions was simple: the generals were at fault. The government could make amends, however, and crush the rebellion by following the military advice of Gershom Martin. Those who once more urged a return to the Peninsular route to Richmond Martin could only castigate as "fools and traitors." His solution was a different route, "the only one upon which Federal victories are to be won"—the "military line of the Shenandoah Valley and the Blue Ridge." Union forces would thus attack Richmond from the southwest. But Martin's assurances that Washington would be safe from Confederate attack during this wide flanking movement would hardly satisfy military men or the Commander in Chief.8

Martin's scheme possessed doubtful value either as a basis for military strategy, or as an antidote to the gloom that enveloped the North late in 1862. Too many people were ever ready to tell the government and the army what to do. What was needed in this critical period was somebody to remind the people what they were expected to do.

About the same time that John G. Nicolay was finding Northern prospects at best dim, and Gershom Martin was dispensing worthless
military information, Charles Janeway Stille sent President Lincoln a copy of the pamphlet he had originally written to encourage himself. Published in December, 1862, *How a Free People Conduct a Long War* helped bolster Northern confidence.

A native of Pennsylvania, a graduate of Yale College, and a lawyer, Stille was always more interested in history and literature than the law. When the Civil War broke out, he became a member of United States Sanitary Commission, and later, as corresponding secretary of its executive committee, played a prominent role in the successful Sanitary Fair in Philadelphia in 1864, which raised a million dollars for the Commission. Stille later wrote the official *History of the United States Sanitary Commission* (1866). Shortly after the war ended, he was named professor of English literature and belles lettres at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1868, he was elected tenth provost of the University, and two years later became the first incumbent of the John Welsh Chair of History and English Literature. As a historian, he won fame as author of *Studies in Mediaeval History* (1882), *The Life and Times of John Dickinson* (1891), and *Major-General Anthony Wayne and the Pennsylvania Line in the Continental Army* (1893).

Although Stille distinguished himself as a member of the Sanitary Commission, as a teacher, college administrator, historian, and later as president of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, his most noted achievement was his thirty-nine-page pamphlet, *How a Free People Conduct a Long War*. The work won the praise of both the President and the American public, and, according to one historian’s estimate, was worth “half a dozen brigades to the North.”

Some thirty years after writing the pamphlet, Stille prepared a memorandum explaining that “in common with all well-wishers to the national cause” he had been profoundly discouraged by the slow

progress being made to destroy the Confederacy. To bolster his waning confidence, he had turned to history. In the events of the Peninsular campaign in Spain during the Napoleonic wars he saw both in the conduct of the British government and in the movement of British troops a striking similarity to the Northern position in the Civil War. "In the success of the English surrounded as they were by a sea of troubles, I tried to find encouragement & consolation & to convince myself that as England had emerged triumphant, that we might not be overcome by similar difficulties."  

Americans were becoming painfully aware, as the year 1862 came to a close, that their war to save the Union would be a long one.

The feeling of the Northern people at that time was one of wounded pride, & unlooked for disappointment. We had all been taught that if we once put forth our full strength the rebellion would be speedily crushed. Hence when our progress seemed checked, there was a universal complaint against the government and the generals of the Army because it appeared that they had not known how to make use of the vast resources placed at their disposal. It was natural that people should turn to history to discover under what conditions of discouragement other countries had carried on long and successful wars for the upholding of a great principle.  

Early in December, Stillé spoke to Henry W. Bellows, Unitarian minister and head of the United States Sanitary Commission, of the Peninsular War and its similarities to the American conflict. Dr. Bellows was struck with the resemblance in many respects, "or rather with the want of initiative by which both were conducted," and urged Stillé to illustrate the parallel in pamphlet form, believing that such a sketch "might prove useful." Not very confident that many people would find interest in an appeal to a history with which they were not familiar, Stillé wrote his essay "with some misgivings" and ordered a printing of only seventy-five copies. The pamphlet was an instantaneous success.

Very greatly to my surprise it was at once regarded, particularly by educated men both here [in Philadelphia] and throughout the country as ex-
plaining the true cause of our difficulties, and it was spoken of as having
given to patriotic hearts every where fresh ground for hope and encourage-
ment. I was held up as a sort of "Angel of consolation" whose mission it was
to encourage others. No one seemed to know that it was written "in the
depths of a Divine despair" with the hope that I might convince myself that
I should not yield to despondency. The most remarkable thing about the
pamphlet & its wide distribution was the false light which it threw upon my
own feelings & hopes.15

In his pamphlet, Stillé began by suggesting to his readers that
because Americans had hitherto known little of the "actual realities
of war on a grand scale" many saw in the violent opposition to the
administration and in the slowness of the progress of the army "signs
of hopeless discouragement." But the past could show that these were
simply "inevitable incidents" of wars conducted by "free people."16
Americans could find reassurance in the history of another free
people and their difficulties in similar circumstances:

If we, then, in our dark hours, are inclined to doubt and despondency as
to the final result, let us not forget the ordeal through which England suc-
cessfully passed. We shall find that, in the commencement, there was the
same wild and unreasoning enthusiasm with which we are familiar; the same
bitter abuse and denunciation of the government at the first reverses; the
same impatient and ignorant criticism of military operations; the same
factions and disloyal opposition . . . ; the same . . . predictions of the
utter financial ruin of the country; the same violent attacks upon the
government for its arbitrary decrees, and particularly for the suspension of
the writ of habeas corpus; the same difficulties arising from the inexperience
of the army; and the same weakness on the part of the government in not
boldly and energetically supporting the army in the field. These are some
of the more striking parallelisms between the Peninsular War and our own
struggle. . . .17

15 Ibid. The pamphlet was not only popular during the Civil War, but impressed at least
two twentieth-century students of the period, Carl Sandburg and F. Lauriston Bullard. Carl
Sandburg, Abraham Lincoln: The War Years (New York, 1939), II, 202-205; Joseph George,
Jr., "F. Lauriston Bullard as a Lincoln Scholar" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, 1959),
148-149, Boston University Library.
16 Charles J. Stillé, How a Free People Conduct a Long War: A Chapter from English History
(Philadelphia, 1862), 1. In many of the later editions the page numbering differs slightly. All
references in this paper are to the first edition.
17 Ibid., 7-8.
Stillé wanted Northerners to keep in mind that their armies would require both time and battle experience before they could develop into a truly efficient military machine. Free men cannot be transformed into a well-disciplined army overnight. "A little reflection and candor," he cautioned, "might perhaps teach us, as it did the English, that nothing can compensate for the want of experience." He further warned that "every allowance" must be made "for disasters where it is necessary to educate both officers and soldiers in the actual presence of the enemy."

The military system taught at West Point, Stillé suggested, while adequate for qualifying officers for staff duties, seemed to fail in preparing officers to work with volunteer soldiers, young men imbued with a democratic spirit of individualism. The system of discipline emphasized at West Point was that of the regular army, a system modeled upon the English, "which is, with the exception of that in use in Russia, the most brutal and demoralizing known in any army in Europe." Independent-minded Americans could not be disciplined by the same methods used in class-conscious Europe. As a result, when West Pointers were suddenly placed in important positions of command, they discovered that the system they had been taught was wholly "out of place in securing the efficiency of a volunteer army." Officers began to wonder if the volunteer army could ever be recast in a professional mold. But, with the passage of time, the generals came to understand their men, and the volunteers began to see "something of the military system which seemed at first so irksome and meaningless. . . ." With better, and mutual, understanding, "the advance of the army in the essentials of discipline . . . [was] proportionately rapid."\(^{18}\)

The North needed time. Stillé wanted his readers to remember this point. However, this time should not be used by factions to denounce the war effort of the government and military leaders. Again, the Napoleonic era could serve as a striking parallel. Stillé quoted from the *Annual Register* for 1812 to show the affinity of views of some opposition leaders in England to those of the Copperhead faction in America. "Omitting the old fashioned drapery of the proper names,"

Stillé suggested, the reference in the *Annual Register* could easily apply to the Vallandigham clique in the North:

It may be remarked as a most singular circumstance, that those persons in this country who profess to have the greatest abhorrence of ministerial tyranny and oppression, look with the utmost coolness on the tyranny and oppression of Bonaparte. The regular opposition do not mention it with that abhorrence which might be expected from them; but the leaders of the popular party in Parliament go further. They are almost always ready to find an excuse for the conduct of Bonaparte. The most violent and unjustifiable acts of his tyranny raise but feeble indignation in their minds, while the most trifling act of ministerial oppression is inveighed with the utmost bitterness. Ready and unsuspecting credence is given to every account of Bonaparte’s success; while the accounts of the success of his opponents are received with coldness and distrust. Were it not for these things, the conduct of Mr. Whitbread and his friends would be hailed with more satisfaction, and inspire more confidence with the real lovers of their country; for they deserve ample credit for the undaunted and unwearied firmness with which they have set themselves against abuses and against every instance of oppression.\(^9\)

Besides informing them that time and unity were required for ultimate victory, Stillé reminded Northerners that only victories on the battlefield would solve the problem that had brought on the conflict. “In military success alone,” he correctly insisted, “is to be found the true solution of our whole difficulty, the only force which can give vitality or permanence to any theory of settlement.” Those who were muttering that the war was a failure, and that some kind of national convention composed of representatives of both North and South should be called to provide a peace settlement, were not contributing to the national effort. “As the matter now stands,” with the forces of rebellion still unconquered, “it is idle to hope for either peace or safety until the question of military superiority is unmistakably and definitely settled.”

To increase military efficiency it was necessary, Stillé maintained, to support not merely an improvement of the condition of the army, but equally as important, to sustain the government “in its general policy of conducting the war.” Thus, those “who influence public

opinion” should consider it their duty to support the Lincoln administration.\(^{20}\)

As Nicolay had implied, many Americans suspected that the South would never be conquered, at least not without divine intervention. In area the Confederacy was enormous. Could the North ever supply enough garrisons to keep the entire area and population in subjugation? Stillé presented some views that would help win him the title “Angel of Consolation.” All the talk about the hopelessness of conquering and subjugating the South was based upon “very vague notions of what conquest and subjugation signify.” Even intelligent men in the North had been imposed upon by this boast of the “rebels and their sympathizers.” The question was too frequently asked in the North: Has anyone ever heard “of subjugating twelve millions of people determined to be free?”

Using history to supply the answer, Stillé insisted that in both ancient and modern times there were many instances “of the only sort of conquest or subjugation which any sane man proposes shall be submitted to by the South.” Federal garrisons need not occupy the whole South. The solution was much simpler and more direct—and one Lincoln always kept in mind, even though several of his generals never fully appreciated it—“destroy the only support upon which . . . [the South’s] arrogant pretensions are based, namely, its military power.” Thus the proper objective of Northern armies was not the capture of geographical locations, not even the city of Richmond. Its task was merely to destroy the Confederate army. With the enemy army vanquished, “what becomes of all the rest?” he asked; with those forces still intact, “where is there any hope of permanent peace and safety to us?” Stillé’s definition of war was “an appeal to force to settle questions of national interest which peaceful discussion has failed to settle.” An army was only another argument, “the ultima ratio, which, if successful in decisive battles, must give the law to the conquered.” Could any American doubt, Stillé reasoned, that decisive victories over the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia and the rebel forces in the Mississippi Valley

\(^{20}\) *Ibid.*, 28–29. For the “the war is a failure” theme among many Democrats, see Heseltine, 273–321.
would cause the Jefferson Davis government to implore "in unmistakable accents peace on our own terms?"\textsuperscript{21}

These military victories would come if Northerners would only grant their leaders time, and themselves remain united. In his concluding paragraph, Stillé reiterated his plea for unity:

Let us recognize with confidence as co-workers in this great object all, never mind what opinions they may entertain about the causes of the war, and the new issues which its progress has developed, who desire in all sincerity, no matter from what motive, the success of our arms. . . . The only possible hope for the South is in our own divisions. Let us remember that with success all things are possible. . . . With success in the field, we should not only disarm the rebellion, and rid ourselves forever of the pestilent tribe of domestic traitors by burying them deep in the political oblivion which covers the Tories of the Revolution, . . . but also force public opinion abroad, whose faithlessness to the great principles which underlie all modern civilization has been one of the saddest developments of this sad war, to exclaim at last, "Invidiam gloriā superāsti."\textsuperscript{22}

Unfortunately, the Civil War era was not a period during which Americans would be known for unity of action. But Stillé's words did bring hope and inspiration to many people during the winter of 1862-1863 when the fortunes of the Union were seemingly at their lowest point.

Of the seventy-five original copies of the pamphlet, Stillé forwarded one to President Lincoln. Unlike the Martin item which only contained advice the Commander in Chief did not need, the Stillé essay presented elements of truth that greatly impressed the harassed President—so much so that he read the thirty-nine-page pamphlet at least twice within a few days. Lincoln's copy was mailed to him on December 27. Two days later, his friend Senator Orville H. Browning of Illinois visited the White House and later noted in his diary that the President, during the course of their conversation, took up the Stillé pamphlet, saying that "it was the best thing he had seen on the subject" and that "he would read some of it to me." Once the President commenced reading, he apparently could not stop and "read the entire pamphlet."\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{21} Stillé, 36-37.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 38-39.
\textsuperscript{23} Orville H. Browning, The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning, 1850-1864, ed. by T. C. Pease and James G. Randall (Illinois State Historical Collections, XX) (Springfield, Ill., 1925), 605.
How a Free People Conduct a Long War so impressed Lincoln that within a few days after he had received the pamphlet he wrote Stillé expressing his enjoyment in reading it.

Executive Mansion,
Washington, December 31, 1862

C. J. Stillé, Esq.
Sir:
Your letter of the 27th and pamphlet were duly received, and for which please accept my sincere thanks. The pamphlet is far the best production upon the subject it treats which I have seen. The reading, and re-reading of it has afforded me great pleasure, and I believe also some profit. May I express the hope that you will not allow your pen to rest?

Your Ob't Serv't
A. Lincoln

Lincoln’s commendation, along with encouragement from several friends, convinced Stillé that he should have more copies printed and distributed. According to his own count, the pamphlet went through at least thirteen different editions and was reprinted in ten Northern newspapers. As noted above, one historian valued the work as equivalent to half a dozen brigades, and contemporary opinion considered it equally important. “That work was a moral tonic to me and to many others,” declared the Reverend H. Clay Trumbull, a chaplain at Port Royal. In his memorial address on Stillé, Robert

24 Stillé MSS. This letter was not included in the exhaustive Rutgers University Press edition of The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, and so far as is known, has never appeared in print. A reference was made to it in a memorial address on Stillé in 1900, and again in 1940 in a history of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. [Robert Ellis Thompson,] “Proceedings of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania on the Death of Charles Janeway Stillé, LL.D., President of the Society, Held May 21, 1900,” The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, XXIV (1900), x; Hampton L. Carson, A History of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia, 1940), II, 82. Later, in 1956, William Q. Maxwell, in his volume on the Sanitary Commission, mentioned the pamphlet and that it “won Lincoln’s admiration,” but he did not refer to the letter. Maxwell, 200. Presumably, therefore, this is the first time the letter has been published.

Not allowing his pen to rest, Stillé also wrote a second pamphlet, Northern Interest and Southern Independence, a Plea for United Action (1863), which never received the same popularity accorded his first work. Chronicle of The Union League of Philadelphia, 1862-1902 (Philadelphia, 1902), 154; Lippincott, 103.

25 Estimates of the number of copies printed vary from 250,000, according to Stillé, to half a million, according to later writers. Stillé MSS; Thompson, x.

26 Stillé MSS.
E. Thompson noted that he had been "assured by some whom it reached as they labored or fought at the front" that Stille's pamphlet was "an event of the war." It not only passed from hand to hand among the officers, but was also read by the soldiers, at times aloud for the benefit of those who could not read. Moreover, it was translated into several foreign languages spoken by American troops.27

George Templeton Strong, Stille's co-worker on the Sanitary Commission, received a copy of the pamphlet at the same time Lincoln did, and his reaction was similar to that of the President. Strong described the work as "a clever pamphlet" which compared conditions in America to "blunders, imbecility, failures, popular discontent, financial embarrassment, and so on," in England during the Peninsular War. He concluded that Stille "makes out a strong case in our favor," and that the work should be reprinted: "there are many feeble knees in this community that want to be confirmed and corroborated."28

In another entry in his diary, Strong attests to the high regard in which Stille was held by the administration as a result of his publication, even though the appointment he mentioned never materialized:

There is talk in the Cabinet of an Emancipation Bureau which will be needed, if not needed already. Horace Binney was proposed as its chief, but conceded to be past active service, an octogenarian retired from public life. Then they talked of Stille—"C. J. Stille of Philadelphia, who has written that admirable pamphlet," and so on. I don't know whether they agreed about anything or anybody, but that Stille was brought forward and discussed is certain. It's a hopeful sign. It shows that government is feeling about for strong and honest men wholly outside of party lines. Stille is a quiet reading man, wholly unfit for the difficult and most delicate duties such a position would throw on him. . . . Nevertheless, the fact that he has been talked about for high public office because he has published a valuable paper on a national subject, and for no other reason whatever, is a most weighty fact and full of encouragement.29

The influence of Stille's pamphlet also attracted the attention of the opposition in the North. The Boston Courier, noted for its rabidly

27 Thompson, x.
29 Entry for Jan. 16, 1863. Ibid., III, 288.
Democratic point of view, commented that although the work had received popular favor in New England "rather beyond its substantial merits," it nevertheless was a "production of considerable ability."\(^{30}\) In a letter to Stillé, an editor of the *Courier* explained that he was doubtful that the Confederacy could ever be conquered, because Southerners—"men, women, and children"—were determined to face extermination "rather than come back into the Union."\(^{31}\) The pamphlet had not convinced him.

But many other Northerners, perhaps better disposed to believe in the ultimate success of their arms, were convinced. For them, *How a Free People Conduct a Long War* "invigorated desponding courage, . . . inspired countless sermons, . . . pointed the way to success."\(^{32}\) It gave them hope when people as highly placed as John G. Nicolay began to doubt; it offered sound advice when too many newspapermen, like Gershom Martin, were advancing impossible solutions. Perhaps, appearing as it did in that dark December, 1862, *How a Free People Conduct a Long War* was really worth many more than half a dozen brigades to the Union cause.

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\(^{31}\) George S. Hillard to Charles J. Stillé, Mar. 7, 1863, Stillé MSS.

\(^{32}\) Carson, II, 81.