

The Richmond Raid and Grant Takes Command

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In early March 1864, an ill-considered plan to raid the Confederate capital came to an inglorious end. Encouraged by reports that Richmond was largely undefended except for militia, Union officials hoped to free northern prisoners incarcerated in the city and also spread word of President Lincoln's recent Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction. Papers later found on the body of one of the raid's leaders indicated that the Federals also planned to burn Richmond and capture or kill Confederate civilian leaders, but it appears unlikely that higher ranking Union leaders had authorized those actions. President Lincoln and General George Meade disavowed any knowledge of those objectives and some historians have determined the papers to be forgeries.

General Judson Kilpatrick commanded about 3,500 cavalrymen selected for the operation, which included a 500 man force under Colonel Ulric Dahlgren, which was to actually free the Union prisoners in Richmond. The Federals conducted diversionary operations near Charlottesville and Madison Court House to distract southern forces from the main objective. The expedition left Union lines on February 28, with Dahlgren soon separating from Kilpatrick to perform his mission. The former would cross the James River and approach Richmond from the rear, while the latter destroyed portions of the Virginia central Railroad and skirmished with Confederate defenders to the north. Confederate cavalry under General Wade Hampton soon harassed Kilpatrick's command, forcing the Union general to escape eastward down the Virginia peninsula. Dahlgren, meanwhile, had trouble fording the James and also attempted to escape. On the morning of March 2, Confederates attacked a portion of Dahlgren's force, killing the

young colonel and capturing many of his men. The survivors eventually reunited with Kilpatrick's command. The raid had succeeded in damaging the Virginia Central Railroad and various storehouses, but it had failed in the objective of releasing Union prisoners. The subsequent controversy over the authenticity of the papers found on Dahlgren's body overshadowed all other aspects of the operation.

Also in early March 1864, the final steps occurred that would place Ulysses S. Grant in command of all Union military forces. Having experienced enormous success in the war's western theater, most recently in conducting operations that lifted the siege of Chattanooga, Tennessee, Grant was the obvious choice for General-in-Chief. On March 1, President Lincoln had nominated Grant for the newly-authorized rank of lieutenant general, and the Senate confirmed the nomination the following day. On March 3, Grant received orders to report to Washington to receive his new commission.

The president, who had not yet met the general, held a reception in Grant's honor at the White House on March 8. As described by historian E.B. Long, the East Room "echoed with cheers and handclaps as a rather squat man in a disheveled major general's uniform stood on a sofa Both [Grant and Lincoln] appeared somewhat embarrassed, and little was said, but a working relationship was unobtrusively being formed." The next day Lincoln officially presented Grant with his lieutenant general's commission at a White House ceremony, and the two men met privately and discussed upcoming operations. The new General-in-Chief soon traveled to meet with Army of the Potomac commander General George Meade, informing Meade of his plans to maintain his headquarters with the Army of the Potomac while simultaneously directing the actions of the other Union armies. In little more than a year, the no-nonsense Midwesterner would bring about the defeat of the Confederacy.