

# A Date that Won't Live in Infamy: May 15, 1861

Michael Conlin

May 15, 1861. When it comes to the history of Connecticut and the Civil War, this is not a date that immediately comes to mind, even for those familiar with the era. A picture of Connecticut on this day, however, reveals a state that was colored with resolution, dedication, and commitment to the cause of Union. One month removed from Lincoln's call for 75,000 soldiers to suppress the southern rebellion, it was apparent that the majority of ordinary Connecticut citizens had jumped right into the struggle for Union.

During these early weeks of the war, citizens of Connecticut stepped forward to serve their country as soldiers. Lincoln's call for volunteers on April 15, 1861 led the state to quickly fill three infantry regiments in less than one month. The First Connecticut Volunteer Infantry arrived at the nation's capital on May 13, 1861, while the Second and Third regiments followed on May 14. They represented only the vanguard of 55, 864 Connecticut men who would fight in the Civil War, a staggering 47 percent of the state's men of military age.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Blakie Hines, *Civil War Volunteer Sons of Connecticut* (Thomaston, ME: American Patriot Press, 2002), 20, 61, 78; Matthew Warshauer, *Connecticut in the American Civil War: Slavery, Sacrifice, and Survival* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 5.

The spirit of commitment these early volunteers displayed was succinctly captured in the poem “The Boys of ’61,” penned in 1904. The author, Octavius Bartlett, sought to remember the veterans’ sacrifice at a time when their numbers were rapidly dwindling:

Where are the boys of ‘61  
Who sprang to arms at Sumter’s gun  
Who rallied at the swift alarm  
From factory, the store, or farm!  
Where are the braves whose youthful feet  
With martial step, trampled down the street  
In quick response to Lincoln’s call  
And bade farewell to loved ones all!

Two million men survived the fray  
Not half the victors live to-day  
Death calls their names, they answer here  
Their ranks grow thinner every year.  
For they are falling, falling fast  
A few short years will claim the last  
So give them courage and good cheer  
And honor them while they are here.<sup>2</sup>

In some sense this poem’s focus on heroism and sacrifice at the expense of slavery or other root causes of the war reflected the pervasive reconciliationist mood of the turn of the century. It must also be said, however, that its portrayal of Connecticut’s marshal mood in 1861-its commitment to save the country they believed imperiled-is spot on.

The burden of the war was not just carried by the volunteer soldiers in 1861. The people of Connecticut also stepped forward to help the soldiers and their families. For example, the citizens of Litchfield raised \$5,000 for soldiers from their town in early May of 1861. Also, on May 11, a group of Hartford ladies met “to prepare articles for the volunteers.” Similarly, on May 13, the Hartford Committee of Relief approved \$700 to be given to the needy families of volunteers. In addition, some women volunteered to help soldiers in a more hands-on way. Miss Hattie Spencer of Southport and Mrs. Frances E. Vailey of New London were among many

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<sup>2</sup> Octavius Bartlett, “The Boys of ’61,” 1904, *East Windsor Historical Society*.

women from around the country who “overwhelmed” the Surgeon General with requests to be nurses.<sup>3</sup>

As one might expect, Hartford’s pro-Lincoln, Republican Party mouthpiece, *The Hartford Daily Courant*, trumpeted Connecticut’s commitment to the Union cause. Its pages were packed with various forms of propaganda meant to galvanize home-front morale and belittle the efforts of secessionists. “Every day increases the relative power of the North,” they wrote on May 15, 1861, “as contrasted with the half-fed, half-armed, ill-disciplined, and ignorant hordes who comprise the army of the Confederate states.” Two days earlier, it printed the following blurb about Confederate President Jefferson Davis: “We don’t know where he is on earth, but we know where he ought to be, and where he will be after he leaves earth. If not, what’s the use of having such a place?”<sup>4</sup>

Another manifestation of Connecticut’s commitment to the Union cause was war poetry. “No Flag but the Old Flag” by Jenny M. Parker of Rochester, New York, which was published in *The Hartford Courant* on May 10, 1861, is a representative example among many in the week leading to May 15, 1861. In trying to galvanize the public, Parker hammers home the idea that citizens of the North need to defend their country against the “traitor” who sullies the sacred banner that was purchased with the blood of their revolutionary fathers:

No flag but the old flag-the red, white and blue,  
With stars of a Union unbroken and true;  
Arise and defend it! Ye sons of the brave,  
Whose blood bought banner your valor must save.

Wo! Wo! To the traitor who drags to the mire  
The flag crimsoned deep with blood of his sire;  
If he rouse up the legions on land and on sea,

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<sup>3</sup> *Hartford Daily Courant*, May 10, 1861; *Hartford Daily Courant*, May 11, 1861. *Hartford Daily Courant*, May 14, 1861. *Hartford Daily Times*, May 13, 1861.

<sup>4</sup> “The Prospect,” *Hartford Daily Courant*, May 15, 1861; *Hartford Daily Courant*, May 13, 1861;

Who are ready to die for the Flag of the Free!<sup>5</sup>

It is perhaps not surprising that the state's Republicans would circle the wagons after Fort Sumter and rally behind the Republicans Lincoln and Governor Buckingham, but the opposition mouthpiece, *The Hartford Daily Times*, the city's Democratic paper, was moved by war-fever as well. On May 15, the paper reprinted a resolution from Tammany Hall, the New York City bastion of The Democracy, which stated, "That this rally for the country is nobly and wisely made by our whole people, irrespective of party organizations, and without regard to past differences of opinion or action, for the purpose of sustaining the Government."<sup>6</sup>

In some editorials during early May of 1861, the state's Democrats tried to maintain their commitment to the war, while at the same time distancing themselves from the Republicans. This balancing act led them to employ some rather impressive mental gymnastics. In one editorial on May 11, 1861, the *Hartford Times*, in speaking of the seceding states, said the United States should, "let them go in peace; and in peace let us do what war, and blood and mourning all over the land, will not permit us to do-build up a great Free State Republic..." In the *very same editorial* though, they go on to say, "We are at war: and our sincerest desire is to sustain the government in every just measure calculated to save or strengthen Union: and if secession is ended, and all of the States secured to the Union, none will rejoice more than ourselves. But during the war we are with the North in sympathy and in hope." The war, it seems, enjoyed a degree of bipartisan support in Connecticut at this early stage, even if some of its adherents were put in a difficult spot.<sup>7</sup>

Often times, images can capture the mood of a state and tell us a great deal. One prominent example was the Kellogg Lithograph "The Eagle's Nest," which expressed both the

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<sup>5</sup> Jenny M. Parker, "No Flag but the Old Flag," *Hartford Daily Courant*, May 10, 1861.

<sup>6</sup> "Tammany Hall on the War," *Hartford Daily Times*, May 15, 1861.

<sup>7</sup> *Hartford Daily Times*, May 11, 1861.

patriotism of Connecticut citizens as well as their anti-southern sentiment. The image showed a majestic eagle spread over a nest of eggs wrapped in an American flag. Each egg bore a name of a state, but the eagle's claws were pointed squarely at the "southern" eggs, which were cracked and had various unsavory creatures emerging from them. The creatures (bears, rats, lizards, etc.) represented prominent southern leaders (e.g. Jefferson Davis, Alexander Stephens, etc.). A banner in the eagle's mouth proclaimed, "Annihilation to Traitors." Underneath the title of the image, the Kellogg brothers put the famous Andrew Jackson quote, "The Union! It must and shall be preserved." With that, they claimed the mantle of the southern, Democratic Party founder for the Union. It therefore represented a shot across the bow at both southerners and Democrats. Images such as this were a reflection of citizens' attitudes, but they also helped to galvanize public opinion behind the war.<sup>8</sup>

It is true that there were those in Connecticut who were decidedly anti-war. An unknown person raised a peace flag in East Windsor in the days leading up to May 15, 1861, and on May 10, 1861, *The Hartford Times* published an 1851 quote from J. K. Paulding, who said "*Neither force nor coercion can preserve a Union voluntarily formed on the basis of perfect equality.*" (Italics in original) The peace flag was removed by young men from East Hartford though, and *The Hartford Times* published Jenny Parker's patriotic "No Flag but the Old Flag" right next to Paulding's quote. These signs of dissent might be seen in retrospect as the seed for a later, more virulent peace movement, but on May 15, 1861, it was Connecticut's commitment to the Union war effort that held sway.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> E.B. & E.G. Kellogg, "The Eagle's Nest," *Connecticut Historical Society*, 1861.

<sup>9</sup> For the East Windsor peace flag, see "State Items," *Hartford Daily Courant*, May 16, 1861; For the J.K. Paulding quote, see *Hartford Daily Times*, May 10, 1861; Jenny M. Parker, "No Flag but the Old Flag," *Hartford Daily Times*, May 10, 1861.

