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Two Years in Blue: The Civil War Letters
of
Joseph K. Taylor

Kevin Murphy

Joseph Knight Taylor, a private and eventually a sergeant in the Union army, was the author of one of the finest set of letters to have survived from the American Civil War. Many kinds of records have provided us with the details of soldier life, but these letters offer more. Taylor was perceptive and articulate, and his letters express many of his values, shed light on the meaning of courage and duty to an ordinary soldier in the ranks, and illuminate the social history of the war.¹ He saw his

¹ Most of the letters were written to Joseph's father, Frederick Taylor, who later collected them and kept the collection until his death in 1901. They remained in the family and during the 1940s Mrs. Ruth Hutchinson Zeissig of Granby prepared a typewritten manuscript of the letters. A copy of this transcript came to Dr. Richard Taylor Highton, a professor of zoology at the University of Maryland, who is the grandson of Frederick Taylor, and a half brother of Joseph. Professor Highton shared the transcript with Dr. E. B. Smith, now professor emeritus at Maryland, who in 1987 brought them to the author's attention in a seminar. The author teaches United States History at Millikin University in Decatur, Illinois, and wishes to thank Michelle Deardorff, Mary Ellen Poole

share of combat, but Taylor's war, like that of many of his comrades-in-arms, was not one of constant campaign and battle, but one of marching and waiting and yearning for home. Since Taylor died of wounds received in battle, his letters provide a perspective on the war that is undistorted by post-war memory.

Taylor was born on December 6 1840, in Granby, Massachusetts. He was the first child of Frederick Taylor and Sarah Hyde Knight. Following Joseph's birth, there came four other children who did not survive, and Sarah died on October 5, 1855, shortly before her thirty-sixth birthday. A year later, Frederick Taylor married Mary Ingraham Cowles of Granby, and five children survived this union.²

Joseph's father, Frederick Taylor, was born on July 28, 1816. He inherited a farm from his father at the age of eighteen, and at thirty he purchased a paper mill and acquired an extensive business. Joseph's mother, Sarah Hyde Knight, was the daughter of a pastor of the Church of Christ in Granby. Frederick and Sarah were married on January 5, 1840, just eleven months before the birth of their first son. Joseph's father achieved a certain degree of prominence in the community. He held a variety of offices, including assessor, selectman, and justice of the peace, and he also was a trustee of the People's Bank in Granby, and a stockholder in other local banks. In his early years, Joseph's father identified with the Whig Party, and later he became a warm supporter of the Republicans. The Taylor family had sufficient means to send young Joseph away to school at the Williston Academy, in Easthampton, Massachusetts, for his preliminary education, and later to enroll him at Amherst College, where he spent a year before enlisting in the army.³

and Paul Moreno, whose comments on earlier drafts improved the final product.

² This information was provided by members of the Taylor family, and is also available in Biographical Review of Leading Citizens of Hampshire County (Boston, 1896), pp. 96-98.

³ Ibid. pp. 97-98.

On the campus of Amherst College, where Joseph Taylor was a sophomore in 1862, as on many campuses throughout the North, war preparation was much in evidence, and the usual college curriculum since the fall of Fort Sumter included a half-hour drill four days a week. Each class became a company, and every man was expected to participate in the drills, during which poles substituted for muskets. While Joseph and his classmates drilled, William S. Clark, professor of chemistry, and Frazer Stearns, the son of the college president, as well as several students and alumni, enlisted in the Twenty-First and Twenty-Seventh Massachusetts Regiments, which were recruited from the Amherst area in the spring and summer of 1861.⁴

By August of 1862, when Joseph enlisted in the Union army, the Civil War was already sixteen months old. A mob had attacked the Sixth Massachusetts Regiment in Baltimore on its way to the capital in April of 1861, and hope of an early victory had vanished with the defeat in July at Bull Run. By the summer of 1862, with the failure of General George B. McClellan's invasion of the South, the magnitude of the war increased. President Abraham Lincoln's initial call for 75,000 men for three months' service had proven grossly inadequate, and his call in July of 1862 for 300,000 volunteers for three years of service underlined the enormity of the task at hand.

Mason Whiting Tyler, who later was to become Taylor's company commander in the Thirty-Seventh Massachusetts Regiment, obtained a commission in July to raise a company of men at his commencement at Amherst College. "Enthusiasm had spent its force," he later wrote, "The glamor [sic] and tinsel of a soldier's life no longer lured to enlistment. Everybody recognized that it was a most serious business. My work was to travel about the country hunting for men of proper age and build to serve as soldiers, appealing to their patriotism and sense of

⁴ Mason Whiting Tyler, *Recollections of the Civil War*, ed. by William S. Tyler. (New York and London, 1912), p. 26.

duty to enlist. It often required several visits to secure one man.⁵

If enthusiasm had spent its force, why did Taylor leave Amherst to fight? He may have had fewer romantic illusions about the war than the 1861 volunteers. Casualty lists from McClellan's peninsula campaign and from the battle at Shiloh were graphic reminders of the reality of war. Although Massachusetts volunteers acquired a reputation for abolitionism among other Union soldiers, and at least one location in Granby was a station on the underground railroad, Taylor clearly did not volunteer to fight to free the slaves.⁶ He took for granted the inferiority of blacks, and the word "abolition" never appeared in his letters. The only time he mentioned an encounter with slavery, he dispassionately related the fact that a certain Dr. Morson had owned fifty-eight slaves, and that all but twelve had run away. When President Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation, Taylor recorded no reaction at all, and when his father encouraged him to apply for a commission in Negro regiment, Taylor replied that he did not want to be regarded as a "pirate" and an "outlaw," in the event of his capture by the Confederates. "My country can have my life if necessary," he wrote, "in noble and honorable strife, but never in that manner."

Taylor felt little need for money, since his father's paper mill in Granby furnished the family a comfortable living. The bounty he received for enlisting was modest, at least when measured against later financial inducements to enlist. Although the national government was considering conscription as a way of providing the manpower necessary to win the war, Taylor could hardly have feared the draft stigma so early, since it was March of 1863 before President Lincoln signed the Enrollment Act. Hatred of the South is notably absent from his correspondence. In his letters, Taylor occasionally poked fun at

⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

⁶ Bell Irvin Wiley, The Life of Billy Yank, the Common Soldier of the Union (Garden City, New York, 1971), p. 41; Granby Bicentennial, 1768-1968 (Belchertown, Mass., 1968), p. 144.

his own provincialism, and perhaps he was prompted by a desire to see something of the world beyond Amherst and his hometown of Granby, which in 1860 was a small farming community with a population of 907⁷

A more complete answer as to why Taylor volunteered and fought in the war lies in a more detailed examination of his attitudes in the context of the values of his time, and especially his sense of duty. Michael Barton, in his book, *Goodmen: The Character of Civil War Soldiers*, developed a general theory of the morality of the age. By examining one hundred diaries of northern and southern soldiers, Barton found that the soldiers emphasized honor, morality, progress, religion, achievement, and patriotism as the most frequently expressed components of a common value system. The two most commonly expressed values were honor and morality. Barton argued that honor, with its roots in medieval aristocracy, reflected exterior traits, or the way one was perceived by others. Morality reflected adherence to certain immutable internal standards and had its roots in Protestantism and the bourgeoisie.⁸ Barton argued that most Victorian-age children, like Joseph Taylor, were raised strictly, but in an atmosphere of warmth. This tended to produce adults who were emotionally inhibited, obedient, rule-enforcing, and who possessed strong consciences. Families interacted nearly all day, parents were consistent and confident in their discipline, and families' religious integration tended to promote obedience and a strong identification of the impact of the child-rearing practices of the day on adult behavior, which was characterized by inhibition and a strong theme of moral control in the culture.⁹

⁷ For a brief sketch of Taylor's hometown, see Esther Synder and Doris Carroll, "Granby," in Lawrence E. Wikander, Helen Terry, and Mark Kiley, The Hampshire History. Celebrating 300 Years of Hampshire County, Massachusetts (Northampton, Mass., 1964), pp. 96-110.

⁸ Michael Barton, Goodmen: The Character of Civil War Soldiers (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1981), pp. 33-36.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 69

Communities like Granby had always been concerned with “ungoverned passion,” and gaining control of it was a central principle in the conscious organization of their institutions. Drunkenness indicated a lack of control, sexual desire was to be restrained, and economy was a moral exercise. Society looked to its leaders as moral exemplars, both in the promulgation of policy and in the particulars of personal life. This sense of duty led northerners to feel obliged to repress the southern “rebellion.” The “union” symbolically represented the balance of appetites and the control gained by securing “one out of many.” Northern soldiers, more than their southern counterparts, may have displayed a laconic restraint in their emotional styles.¹⁰

Many such values and character traits are notably evident in Taylor’s letters. In the New England town of Granby, where he grew up, the church occupied a central place in the lives of the residents, and religion was a central part of Taylor’s life during the war. Taylor spoke often of the frequency of religious services. As late as January of 1864, he gave a detailed description of a camp chapel and specific information on what Biblical verses had been discussed. He expressed disappointment that inspections occurred on Sunday, and he requested that his father send him a hymnbook from which he and his comrades could have “an old-fashioned sing” to relieve their boredom.

His letters suggest that Taylor never swore or drank. He expressed relief in one of his first letters from Camp Briggs to find a relative absence of profanity and throughout the war he reassured his father that he had not succumbed to the temptation to drink. His father rebuked him mildly, however, for taking the lesser evil of smoking. A letter of February, 1863, provides a clue to Taylor’s attitudes of righteousness and restraint. In it, Taylor quoted to his step-mother advice that his father often gave him: “Don’t let your angry passions rise.” Perhaps somewhat surprising is the straightforward demand that Taylor sometimes made to preserve intact the influence of home.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 69-71.

Taylor, like any soldier in the field, constantly asked for more and longer letters from home, but he craved more than the simple pleasure of correspondence. He felt strongly, along with many of his peers, that letters from home countered the potentially negative influence of camp life.¹¹ He criticized his father for not writing enough: "Give us something to read and it will have a great tendency to prevent us from falling into loose habits and laxity of morals." Clearly, the influence from home was powerful, and far from remote.

Unlike many of his comrades, Taylor rarely mentioned the negative influences of the army on his character.¹² Perhaps this was because he was better insulated against the influences of drinking, gambling, and profanity than some of his comrades because of his ties to his church and his general upbringing. Although failure to mention depravity of any kind is not a sure indicator of righteousness, the letters as a whole suggest that Taylor's attitudes toward drinking, religion, and moral deportment in general remained remarkably consistent until his death.

Taylor's regiment, like most regiments in the Civil War, was composed mostly of men from the same area. The atmosphere of the camp was informal by modern military standards, and visitors from home throughout the war were numerous. Often, Taylor could pick up a Massachusetts newspaper and read a letter or an article written by a comrade-in-arms. He felt at home in this environment, and glowingly described the camaraderie of his "mess," and the ease and frequency with which he lent money to officers and enlisted men alike.

Taylor wrote that "superior officers, especially those who owe their positions to wealth and outside influence, regard their men in very much the same light that decent men do their horses." Often soldiers exempted their own officers from

¹¹ Gerald Linderman, Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War (New York, 1987), p. 94.

¹² Wiley, Life of Billy Yank, pp. 247-248.

criticism, but Taylor was vehement in his denunciation of a Lieutenant Harris, with whom he served. He wrote that Harris was caught drawing pay twice in one pay period, and that he had not "a particle of manhood about him." Taylor reserved bitter words for a colonel who failed his standard of character: "The colonel is more than half-seas over again. . . . I hope he is dismissed or promoted, I don't care which." He respected his own company commander, Mason W. Tyler, but even here he distinguished Tyler's "fine qualities as a man" from the fact that he was not, in Taylor's opinion, a very good officer. Cowardice, or perceived cowardice, in an officer was inexcusable, as Taylor's comments on General Thomas H. Neill reveal during the spring campaign of 1864. But he was unreserved in praise of the courageous officers who "remained cool and calm as ever" under fire, such as Captain Eugene R. Allen at Fredericksburg. Taylor later pointed out, however, that Allen was a "notorious libertine" who may have overindulged in the worldly pleasures of New York City while the regiment was stationed there. His judgment of officers whose behavior was not exemplary in public and personal lives tended to be harsh.

The carnage of 1862 dampened the hopeful spirit of the opening months of the war, but Taylor's letters support the argument of historian George M. Fredrickson, who held that many northerners believed that disaster toughened the country's moral fiber. Fredrickson suggested that some intellectuals looked for a closer approximation of a "utopia" which they saw foreshadowed in the national creed, while some hoped for the creation of a society that would reject the more "dangerous aspects of the creed" and return to the sound principles of conservative government. There was consensus, however, that the "conflict would have a salutary effect on the country, and that pecuniary selfishness would be cured by the stern purgative of battle." Charles Eliot Norton stated in 1861 that suffering and loss would be good for the country. Hence, the initial bloody defeats of the Union army allowed the war, and casualty lists, and therefore moral regeneration, to continue. In other words, nothing succeeded like military failure. The New England theologian Horace Bushnell claimed that "Adversity kills only where there is weakness to be killed. Real vigor is at

once tested and fed by it." If the war gave the nation the opportunity for moral regeneration, it offered the individual a convenient way to combine the highest idealism and practical activity. Many of the younger generation of the New England Brahmins rallied to the colors because they had been seeking "something worth doing," and the chance to fight was an answer to their prayers.¹³ Although Taylor was far from an idle elite, he was well-educated by the standards of his time, and such ideas would probably have been familiar to him.

The notion of being tested by adversity, so evident in the intellectual climate of the North, sheds light on Taylor's willingness to enlist. By August of 1862, the eastern army had established a record of almost continuous failure. The end of the war was nowhere in sight, and the virtues that the country required above all else, it appeared, were a willingness to endure and a capacity for suffering. Though nothing could have prepared him for the specific realities of camp and battle, the prospect of a severe test of his physical and moral stamina may have been welcome to Taylor.

Notwithstanding some vacillation over a two year period, Taylor did show a capacity for suffering. On a long march in September of 1862, he declined the assistance of a "a little negro" who offered to carry his knapsack, and he was glad that he did, for he "want[ed] the discipline." On the way to Gettysburg, after marching fifty-five miles in three days, he wrote "I never was in better health and my spirits are correspondingly good." Describing another march, he said, "I can stand anything," and during the killing marches that his regiment made in July of 1864, he justifiably boasted that "None but the very toughest men could stand such marching." In such language, Taylor revealed a sense of renewal after such exertions. His letters hint at the "strenuous life" that Theodore Roosevelt later extolled with such vigor.

¹³ Quoted in George M. Fredrickson, The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union (New York, 1965), pp. 71-74.

Taylor's letters hint at other broad shifts in nineteenth-century American life. The country was moving away from its agrarian roots and toward a new and more collective definition of itself. The letters are an excellent example of the shift from a religious orientation to a more secular and public one. He spent a year at the Northampton religious seminary, and his letters initially refer to religion in a fairly sustained way. But Taylor's wartime experience exposed him the marketplace of war, and he naturally supplemented references to religion with frequent descriptions of Union war efforts that involved organizational and logistical arrangements unheard of in the ante-bellum period. It is clear that Taylor was pleased with the opportunity to display his entrepreneurship in this new context. While working as a quartermaster's clerk at Belle Plain, he remarked, "I bought 350 loaves of bread this morning. . . . I make about a cent and a half a loaf so you see its is a very good speculation. . . . I get a man to sell it for me."

Taylor endured physical hardship, and he also withstood considerable emotional and psychological strain. His letters reveal that he became increasingly hardened to the suffering he saw around him. To be sure, he was familiar with death. He had seen younger siblings and his mother all die prematurely at home. The sight of the dead and injured at a train wreck on his way to the front caused Taylor to write a detailed description of the carnage. He related his impressions of the Antietam battlefield in some detail, but thereafter, as he was exposed to more and more death and suffering, his descriptions grew terse. His account of the bloodletting in the Wilderness was limited t little more than "We have been in a fight and lost 130," and descriptions of soldiers killed by sharpshooters in the trenches at Petersburg were cold and detached: "One man in company G, not more that 4 or 5 feet from me, was killed, and one man in Co. A was shot through the head his this morning."

Historians have noted this change among many soldiers. Gerald F. Linderman's book, *Embattle Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War*, suggested that the soldiers of 1861-1862 became bitter and disillusioned when their initial concept of courage did not stand up in the face of the realities of the war. Linderman argued that many Northerners

fought to put down the south's challenge to a republican government that was the source of freedom, and the destruction of which would mean the loss of personal liberty. This was the "compelling substance" of the word "union" to a northern volunteer.¹⁴

Like Michael Barton, Linderman held that society at large valued manifestations of goodness, religious faith, purity in personal habits, and a mastery of human weakness. The romantic conception of war was one in which individuals maintained control, where courage was a sign of an "ennobling purpose," and where men could prove to themselves and to others that they were men by putting their courage on display on the battlefield. Army life and combat thus became an exercise in courage, not a march to death and destruction. This was reflected in what Linderman called the "language of heroism," which was not a self-delusion but "a fair reflection of the structure of values within which the soldiers thought about the war." With the recruitment of blacks and draftees, however, indiscriminate death caused by disease, and the advent of trench warfare, the original volunteers, among whom Taylor must be counted a member, felt that the tone and quality of their service was gone, and that courage was increasingly useless.¹⁵

Taylor's attitude changed during his service. Some disillusionment and a certain coarsening of attitude was to be expected in a war that by 1864 seemed to be endless, especially in east. Taylor served under four different commanders in the Army of Potomac, and his confidence in leadership was understandably low. The historian Bruce Catton summed up the role of that army as being "inglorious, as men then figured glory. It won no victories and earned no applause; its job was just to hang on and fight and make final victory possible."¹⁶

¹⁴ Linderman, Embattled Courage, p. 82.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 84 and 99.

¹⁶ Bruce Catton, A Stillness at Appomattox (Garden City, New York, 1953), p. 324.

One example of Taylor's loss of confidence was his admiration for "Dunn Browne," a soldier whose letters from the field were published in the *Springfield Republican*. "Dunn Browne" wrote accounts of army life that were filled with sarcasm, and a special target of the letters was the leadership of the army. It was gratifying for Taylor to see sentiments that reflected his own, and he was happy, no doubt, when the folks at home could read such accounts.

Taylor's attitude toward reenlistment demonstrated that there was a limit to his capacity for suffering. While he was away from his regiment in 1863, his company commander, Mason W. Tyler, spoke to him about returning to the ranks where, Tyler believed, the increased hardships would toughen and improve him. Taylor responded that it was "very good logic . . . for a captain," but that it did not apply to privates. He felt that he had already been tested enough by adversity, and he wanted to escape the "gradual wearing down process" that affected men in the ranks. Taylor returned to the ranks in time for the Gettysburg campaign, but the same attitude surfaced again when discussed reenlistment with his father.

By 1864, Taylor was saying plainly that "Honor is not enough to induce me to take an oath to serve three years longer in this war. . . . I am honored now infinitely above the hundreds and thousands of stay-at-homes" His father asked him, "s there less reason for saving our country now than two years since?" But Joseph, facing the spring campaign in a few weeks, replied that he would serve another three years when "those at home have served a three year term." Clearly, he believed that three years in the army amply discharged his responsibility to the nation and his obligation as a man.

But Taylor stayed in the ranks despite his complaints. If the attitudes of its men at arms were crucial to ultimate northern victory, Taylor's letters help to explain how the Union was able to convert its early improvised efforts to crush the rebellion into an organized war to victory.¹⁷ Taylor's adherence to ideas of

¹⁷ For this explanation of Union success see Allan Nevins, The Ordeal of the Union (8 vols., New York, 1947). Charles Royster provides a compelling and complimentary argument in his recent

manliness and public virtue help to explain the North's ability to ultimately wage a sustained total war. Taylor's sense of duty, and that of his fellow soldiers, was the foundation upon the strategy of Lincoln, Grant, Sherman was built -- a strategy that recognized the need to relentlessly apply the North's superior resources until the South was defeated.

There was room for personal ambition in Taylor's concept of duty. He often spoke of his prospects for promotion, and he did not conceal from his father his desire for advancement. Duty, however, clearly prevailed over ambition. He expressed little interest in the pay increase that a commission would bring, and he was critical of anyone who volunteered because of the threat of the draft. He did not think of the army as a place to "lay up money" or to seek personal advantage.

The "language of heroism" that Linderman referred to is present only to a limited degree in Taylor's letters. Describing the charge in Massachusetts troops at Fredericksburg in May of 1863, Taylor said,

It was one of those sights which must be seen to be appreciated. . . . It was exciting I tell you to see them go up in an unbroken line, closing up their thinned ranks as they pressed on. Nothing could resist them. . . . We could see a long cloud of dust arise in the rear as the rebs skedadalled.

But this kind of language was a rarity in Taylor's letters. Perhaps he came to the war with lower expectations; he admired extraordinary coolness under fire, but what he demanded of himself and his officers was not so much exemplary heroism a simple participation. Fredrickson suggested that the ideal of heroism changed to become one of grim and stoic endurance until victory was achieved, and this seems an accurate summation of

book, The Destructive War: William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson and the Americans (New York, 1991).

Taylor's attitude.¹⁸ This did not mean, however, that Taylor became disillusioned because of an earlier romantic concept of war and the applications of courage in combat. On the contrary, his attitudes and values remained remarkably consistent throughout the war. There is faint evidence that Taylor was guided by any romantic ideal of courage, but he knew when courage became cowardice.

Cowards, as Taylor constantly pointed out throughout his correspondence, were the able-bodied men who were not in uniform. He became increasingly critical of these men as the war dragged on. Taylor tried to allay his father's anxiety over his safety by pointing out that he was not "impelled by the instincts of a cowardly soul," and that his father need feel no shame because he had not shown himself to be "pusillanimous." His father responded that it was better to die a soldier's death than to be "sneaking about home," and Joseph heartily agreed with him, stating that he would "not trade places with a single one of the cowardly poltroons who are shaking in their shoes and making money out of [the] gov't." Along with most of the army, Taylor believed that the Union's largely German XI Corps caused Joseph Hooker's defeat at Chancellorsville because it "ran" from the field. But he was also comfortable in saying, "If we had made an attack, our brigade would have been terribly cut up," in reference to General George G. Meade's cancellation of the assault at Mine Run. He did not hesitate to seek shelter or admit his fear during the shelling of Fredericksburg. He censured overt cowardice, but he clearly believed that courage had definite practical limits. Taylor's reference point was the more flexible concept of duty, no the brittle notion of courage as Linderman defined it, which required contempt for danger and exposure on the field. He did not view the practical necessity of dodging bullets and hiding in the earth as cowardly.

Catton and Linderman both held that the presence of draftees in the army in the later stages of the war undermined morale, and Linderman suggested that this contributed to soldiers' disillusion, which resulted in depredations committed

¹⁸ Frederickson, Inner Civil War, p. 167.

against civilians.¹⁹ Yet Taylor often drilled new recruits for his regiment, some of whom undoubtedly were draftees, and he pronounced them "nearly equal" to the old soldiers. It seems that in spite of the attrition of army life, enough of the "volunteer spirit" remained in his regiment to preserve its essence. Further, Taylor apparently felt no guilt when his brigade appropriated sheep, turkeys, and chickens on the march through Virginia; his letters do not suggest that he was driven to commit depredations upon civilians because he was disillusioned and bitter.

Taylor participated in the trench warfare of 1864, but there is no evidence that he thought it demeaned the role of the individual in war. His observations of the trenches and bomb shelters in the spring and summer of 1864 did not allude to any dehumanizing effect on the individual soldier. Taylor accepted without question the reality of the increased killing power of troops in trenches, and he did not believe that his significance was reduced by this development. He believed that by doing his duty and participating, he had an impact on the outcome of the war. Therefore, when trench warfare came, the individual only contributed in a different way. Though subjected to command changes, trench warfare, sickness, useless counter marching, and physical deprivation, his concepts of duty and courage remained the same. If Taylor underwent any change in attitude, it was one of accommodation to the successive shocks of army life, not fundamental disillusion.

The letter represent many of the attitudes of the army as a whole. The morale of the Army of the Potomac, for example, can be traced with considerable accuracy in Taylor's letters. Morale was low in the summer of 1862, because of the defeats in the peninsular campaign and at the second battle of Bull Run. It revived somewhat in September, with the repulse of General Lee in Maryland, but the period following General Ambrose Burnside's defeat at Fredericksburg marked the army's low point. In December, Taylor wrote: "I have seen a great many soldiers

¹⁹ Catton, Stillness at Appomattox, pp. 23-26; Linderman, Embattled Courage, pp. 234-235.

from all parts of the north and I don't remember seeing a single one who did not call himself a fool for enlisting." He was sickened by the "waste of blood and money," and he thought that "the rebels can fight us as long as we can fight them." He also made clear his dislike of the "copperheads," northerners who were opposed to the war, and who clearly supported the Southern cause; in this respect, he typical of many who showed concern about the lack of civilian patriotism.²⁰ The recurring note of mistrust of army commanders was evident in a letter of February, 1863, referring to General Joseph Hooker: "That he is a fighting man, there is no doubt . . . but whether he will remain without the circle of political influence is a matter entirely to be seen."

Although Taylor was away from his regiment until May 1863, he responded well to Hooker's dynamic leadership. Tangible matters such as rations improved, and Hooker restored the army's confidence. Even after the defeat at Chancellorsville, Taylor thought that Hooker had "fairly outgeneralled Lee" and "displayed the qualities of a consummate commander." He added, "If Hooker will only follow them up and give them battle again, I believe he will whip them." Because of Hooker's influence and the victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg in July, morale remained generally high until the Mine Run campaign and the beginning of the winter. It is noteworthy that Taylor referred to the letter of "Dunn Browne" only during the periods of lowest army morale, the winters of 1862-1863 and 1863-1864.

The historian Bell I. Wiley believed that the stalemate in Virginia in 1864 caused discontent to grow once again.²¹ But Taylor's letters do not reflect this. Rather, they show a growing confidence in General Ulysses S. Grant and in his ability to cope with the southern army. "The fact is very evident that our army is too large for Lee to fight," he wrote, "We can flank him in spite of his best endeavors to the contrary. I believe Grant

²⁰ Wiley, Life of Billy Yank, pp. 286-287.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 284

considers Richmond sure and will soon by his plans prevent Lee [from] leaving Va.”

Many of the union soldiers held surgeons in low esteem, and Taylor's attitude was typical²² As a rule, state governors commissioned surgeons, who were often more politically influential than professionally skillful. Soldiers often accused the doctors of inefficiency and inhumanity, and Taylor offered both criticisms. In October of 1862, speaking of a soldier in another regiment, he wrote, “Yesterday he died, doubtless from gross neglect. I tell you some of our army doctors will have a deal to answer for the when the day of reckoning comes.” The following month, he said “I would rather see a bullet coming towards me than a doctor. Our doctors are inhuman. I would rather shoot one than a rebel.” Fear of a visit to the surgeon led many to employ home remedies, and Taylor use “Drake's Plantation Bitters” as an occasional remedy. He often wrote of the condition of his health, doubtless fearful that he might sicken and die, as did so many around him. He finally contracted malaria, a sickness he shared with one out of four cases of illness reported in the Union army.²³

Taylor's descriptions of the bountiful supplies at Belle Plain are a good indication of Union resources, but massive problems of logistics prevented the army from being consistently well-supplied. Like many soldiers, Taylor was forced to supplement his diet by purchasing food, relying boxes from home, and by “appropriating” whatever he could while on the march. The army staples were meat, bread, and coffee, but the condition of the food when it reached the soldiers was often appalling. Taylor spoke of the “fly-blown” meat and the infested bread that the soldiers had to eat, and he often requested spices from home to improve the army fare. The extent of the problem was underlined by his detailed descriptions of the food he ate, particularly when the meals were non-regulation. The pleasure he derived from “bonafide” lemonade and a cup of green

²² See *ibid.*, pp. 130-132.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

apples indicates that the search for decent food never ended. While on detached service at Belle Plain, Taylor regularly informed his father on his weight. Although he joked about his size, Taylor knew that a return to his regiment would mean a return to culinary deprivation. Shortages and uneven supply were not limited to food, for Taylor constantly complained of a lack of tents, and he noted that some of the men were "ragged and barefoot."

Only a small percentage of the union soldiers listed their occupations as "student" on their enlistment papers.²⁴ In that and his literacy, Taylor was exceptional. He poked fun at his father for a spelling error, enjoyed the camp debating clubs, which were called "lyceums," and he boasted to his father that he had "achieved quite a literary reputation." His superiors sometimes took advantage of his facility with numbers and words; they more than once imposed upon him to write out pay and muster rolls. His letters form a valuable record of Civil War experiences precisely because of his ability to communicate.

Taylor's values and sense of duty prompted him to volunteer, and kept him in the ranks while others stayed at home. In an effort to keep veteran soldiers in the army, the federal government offered long furloughs, general reenlistment bonuses, and the status of "veteran volunteer." Linderman suggested that many of the soldiers had developed a fatalistic attitude by 1864, that few thought they would survive the remaining days of the first tours of duty, and that a furlough would at least allow them to see their families once more.²⁵ Although Taylor vacillated on the question of reenlistment, he said, "If the furlough of 35 days could be granted us the present winter, I would [reenlist], otherwise I think not." Further evidence of such fatalism appeared in March, when he wrote, "May my last hour be 'mid the thunder of canon and clash of

²⁴ A complete breakdown of soldiers' prewar occupations is found E.B. Long, The Civil War Day by Day: An Almanac, 1861-1865 (Garden City, New York, 1971), p. 707.

²⁵ Linderman, Embattled Courage, pp. 262-264.

musketry." He died five months later, of a wound he received in a minor skirmish near Charlestown, West Virginia. Taylor did not survive the war, but he left a record that in many ways reflects the military, social, and intellectual history of the war. His commentary sheds light on a nation in transition.