



HER War

Just how much **can a girl get away with?**

By Stephanie McCurry

Defiant Rebel women were sure they'd be exempt from reprisals for their insolence. They were wrong

When the Civil War began, no one—neither politicians nor military men—expected to have to contend with women. War, like the politics that made it, was men's work; women were innocents to be protected. This idea was as old as Sophocles' *Antigone* and expressed a deep human reluctance to see women as parties to war. "We do not make war on women and children," an Illinois private proclaimed in 1862. "The women are entitled to protection even if they are the wives and daughters of rebels." The Civil War record holds abundant evidence of that mythic need, of soldiers' faith that women were not the enemy.

But part of the war's untold story is how that evidence accrued in the record—as a litany of painful betrayals. For in ways no one anticipated, the war involved a series of startling confrontations

with women acting in openly partisan methods: as spies, informers and "enemy abettors," members of Unionist bands and recruiting networks, Confederate collaborators, and harborers of deserters and guerrillas, even as soldiers in the ranks. Sometimes the military cost of women's actions was just too obvious to ignore. No one had given much thought to women—to the value of their loyalty or capacity to commit treason—but there it was, and it soon posed a serious challenge to both governments and armies.

What to do with treasonous Southern women was the question Union occupy-

ing officers faced all over the expanding territory of the South in early 1862.

At Winchester, Va., for example, which changed hands more than 70 times during the war, Maj. Gen. Nathaniel P. Banks and Brig. Gen. Robert H. Milroy faced a daunting challenge from women like Cornelia Peake McDonald, who was eventually forced out of Union lines for a variety of militarily damaging activities, including running a Confederate mail, spy and POW assistance network from her home in town.

In the spring of 1862, a cordon of Federal power already rimmed the

Confederacy. The belligerent population to be controlled was growing fast. Until then, Confederate women in the path of the Union Army had every expectation of receiving protection. But by April, Southern women's reputation for "violent secessionism" was surging and Union officers grew less indulgent. "How do you account for the violent proclivities of the sex?" one naval officer wondered in a letter to his wife. "I look at them and think of fallen angels."

The real wake-up call was what happened in New Orleans, when that pro-secession Deep South city fell to Federal guns. Then "the ladies" went out to do battle with Maj. Gen. Benjamin Butler and the Yankee army of occupation. For three or four days city streets were empty. Like the men, the women laid low—fearful, as was everyone, of mob violence. But then they emerged to engage the enemy with public actions calculated to signal contempt for officers, soldiers and the Union government. Elegantly dressed girls stormed off street cars when Federal soldiers boarded, flung themselves into the gutter to avoid passing soldiers on the sidewalk, switched their skirts aside as soldiers passed, and, so Butler said, whirled on their heels in disgust as he approached—presenting him with a full view of their backsides. They emptied chamber pots on the heads of troops passing under their balconies. And they indulged a lot of crude, provoking, treasonous talk, too.

But if all of this was just "annoyance," as Butler wrote, troops found it

difficult to endure, and threatening to military discipline and civic peace. For Butler the last straw was the ladies' habit of spitting in the officers' faces. Butler saw that as a clear military threat: "We were 2500 men in a city of 150,000 inhabitants, all hostile, bitter, defiant, explosive, standing literally in a magazine, a spark only needed for destruction." Spitting on his soldiers could be that spark; how long could his men be expected to tolerate the insults before one snapped, precipitating violence and requiring him to clear the streets with artillery fire? "This is what I feared," he said—and the howl that would come up about how "we had murdered these fine women."

His solution was so creative and offensive to settled gender views that its propriety is still passionately debated. From a strictly military viewpoint, the appropriate response was "arrest and transportation." After all, Southern men sat in military prison for less. But

Butler did not want to make martyrs. He wanted a directive that would execute itself. So, on May 15, 1862, he issued his infamous General Orders No. 28: When "any female shall by word, gesture or movement, insult or show contempt for any officer or soldier of the United States, she shall be regarded and held as liable to be treated as a woman of the town plying her avocation." Thus Butler called their bluff, forcing them to police themselves or to sit in the municipal jail with the other "women of the town." Ladies who did not act like ladies would be held accountable.

The order outraged almost everyone

■ Southern women in occupied cities were forced, like men, to take the oath of allegiance to the United States government to retain their right to remain in Union territory.



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in the Confederacy, many in the Union and even some in Lord Palmerston's Cabinet in London. Mary Chesnut, the famed South Carolina diarist, saw it as an invitation to rape. The mayor of New Orleans turned it into an affair of honor. General P.G.T. Beauregard used it to rally the troops at Corinth, Miss., and John Hunt Morgan to recruit in Kentucky. One British lord called it an act "of barbarism akin to Ghengis Khan."

But Charles Francis Adams, the American consul in London, made a different point. New Orleans women, he said, took Union soldiers' public deference as such a matter of course they had presumed on it. Unlike European women who sought "severe seclusion" to protect themselves from invading armies in that continent's many 19th-century wars, New Orleans women instead took to the streets to wage battle. Adams' point highlights the level of political immunity Confederate women routinely felt and the level of protection they expected—even when engaged in public acts of treason.

New Orleans marked a turning point in which Union officers got a rude awakening about women's capacity to wage war and the necessity of engaging them as the enemy. Confederate women learned, too, about the tough accountability to which they would henceforth be held. □

Stephanie McCurry is a professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania and author of Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South.