

RETALIATION ON THE RED RIVER  
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Editor's Note: This is part of a biweekly series on Rhode Island's role in the Civil War by former Sun staff writer Sam Simons.

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The war in Louisiana was not going well.

Initially successful in its advance up the Red River in March of 1864, the army led by Union Gen. Nathaniel P. Banks had been repulsed just 50 miles from its objective, Shreveport. Confined to a single road by the swampy bayous of central Louisiana, swamps that the powerful Union gunboat fleet could not penetrate, the 30,000 men of the Army of the Gulf were decisively beaten by the army of Confederate Gen. Richard Taylor at Sabine Crossroads near Mansfield, La.

The retreat soon turned into a nightmare. Transports and gunboats ran aground on sandbars as the water level in the river fell, while Confederate soldiers and their civilian sympathizers fired on the retreating force from the bordering swamps. The Yankees would have to run a gauntlet of Confederate fire for 150 miles back to the mouth of the Red River.

The 3rd Rhode Island Cavalry was one of the targets of the guerillas. Riding on the steamer Superior, about 30 miles from the mouth of the river, three of the cavalrymen were killed and another 11 wounded by gunfire from the unseen enemy. The Confederates felt they were carrying on the tradition of the Minutemen who harassed the British following the battles of Lexington and Concord, but the targets of their fire, including the Rhode Island Cavalry, felt differently - and acted accordingly.

A reporter traveling with the troops reported Lt. Col. Charles H. Parkhurst's response to the incident in the May 6, 1864 issue of the New York Times (reprinted in "The New York Times Complete Civil War"). "Lt. Colonel Parker ordered his men to fire on every white man, woman or child seen on the shore."

"We should look at it, judging the conduct in the context of the times," said Frank Williams, retired chief justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court, an Abraham Lincoln scholar and a combat veteran of Vietnam. "I never went for the term collateral damage, but it happens. I think that's what you got with the 3rd R.I. [Cavalry]"

The Lincoln administration had adopted the Lieber Instructions in 1863. Codified in General Order No. 100, the instructions were a code of conduct on the ethical treatment of civilian populations in occupied territory that would later be used as the basis for the current Geneva Conventions. Specifically, the code allowed for retaliation by gunfire in the event of the violation of the laws of war by an enemy.

The results, reported by the New York Times correspondent, were predictably counterproductive. "Two or three unarmed citizens were fired upon, and fell from their horses. They were doubtless Union men, as all rebel citizens have left that part of the state."

Random retaliation is a reaction that insurgents count on, right up to the present conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Judge Williams believes that Lincoln understood the consequences.

"It causes consequences of inestimable damage," he said. "Lincoln had prepared retaliatory orders in response to the massacre at Fort Pillow, but never implemented them. (Both sides) would have engaged in indiscriminate killing; there would be no end to it."

Northern troops would continue to fight southern guerillas in Louisiana well into the era of Reconstruction, as the region became a hotbed of white supremacist violence that culminated in the Colfax massacre in 1873.

The battlefield of Sabine Crossroads has been protected by the Civil War Trust ([www.civilwar.org](http://www.civilwar.org)). The New York Times Complete Civil War is available on Amazon and at Barnes and Noble bookstores.

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