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‘Bully for Garibaldi’

By [DON H. DOYLE](#)

[Disunion](#) follows the Civil War as it unfolded.

The tiny Mediterranean island of Caprera, near Sardinia, was not the sort of place to find an American diplomat in the late summer of 1861, but that’s precisely where Henry Shelton Sanford landed late in the afternoon of Sept. 8. It had been a long, involved trip: he came from Brussels to Genoa by train, secretly chartered a ship to avoid public notice and, on the night of Sept. 7, sailed through the Ligurian Sea to Sardinia. Landing late the next day, he hired a small boat to take him to Caprera, then walked more than a mile on a narrow path across the rocky, windswept island.

Library of Congress Henry Shelton Sanford

Sanford was used to such unconventional assignments: Appointed minister to Belgium by Lincoln, he also served, unofficially, as head of American secret service operations in Europe, running spies, fostering propaganda and planning covert activities. Now, this deliberately anonymous man at this most isolated place was about to meet with one of the most famous people in the world.

He arrived at a rustic whitewashed house built in the style of a hacienda: the house, stables and other structures enclosed a rough dirt courtyard inhabited by animals, including a donkey named “Pio Nono” in dubious honor of Pope Pius IX. Inside the rustic house, amid an array of barrels, saddles and crude furnishings, Sanford waited to meet the “Hero of Two Worlds,” Giuseppe Garibaldi.

For months the European and American press had been alive with rumors that Garibaldi, the celebrated champion of Italian unification, and his Red Shirt army were coming to lead the struggle for America’s reunification. Since June a series of contradictory reports and denials and stony silence from Union officials left the world in suspense. “Garibaldi Coming to America!” “Bully for Garibaldi . . . He Has Accepted,” the headlines exclaimed. “Garibaldi Not Coming,” another newspaper announced with equal certainty. Now Sanford had arrived with an offer, authorized by President Lincoln and Secretary of State William H. Seward, inviting him to serve as major general in the Union Army.

Sanford was dismayed to find the famed general “still an invalid,” recuperating from a prolonged bout with rheumatoid arthritis. However, he knew as well as Lincoln and Seward did that, whatever value an aging Italian general who spoke no English might offer militarily, Garibaldi’s mere “presence” and “gallantry,” as Seward put it, would prove “eminently useful” to the Union cause.

The conversation began promisingly. “I will be very happy to serve a country for which I have so much affection,” Garibaldi replied to preliminary inquiries. He had lived in exile in New York and considered himself a citizen of what he fondly referred to as his “second country.” But what he wanted to hear, and what Sanford could not tell him, was that this would be a war against slavery.

In Garibaldi's mind, victory over the Southern slaveholders would come swiftly; "the enemy is weakened by his vices and disarmed by his conscience," he told his comrades. From there they would go on to vanquish the slaveholders of the Caribbean and Brazil, where millions of "miserable slaves will lift their heads and be free citizens."

Garibaldi's question first arose when James W. Quiggle, outgoing American consul in Antwerp, Belgium, seized a chance at glory by writing an unofficial letter to him in June 1861. "The papers report that you are going to the United States to join the Army of the North in the conflict of my country," he wrote. "If you do, the name of La Fayette will not surpass yours. There are thousands of Italians and Hungarians who will rush to join your ranks and there are thousands and tens of thousands of Americans who will glory to be under the command of 'the Washington of Italy.'" Quiggle offered to join their ranks himself.

Garibaldi responded, "I have had, and I have still, great desire to go ... if your government would find my services of some use." But while willing to fight for America, he was not sure exactly what it was fighting for. "Tell me," he asked pointedly, "if this agitation is regarding the emancipation of the Negroes or not."

Quiggle sent his correspondence with Garibaldi to Seward on July 5, which should have arrived in Washington just before the First Battle of Bull Run on July 21, 1861. It was a day of humiliating defeat for the Union, marked by poor leadership and disorderly (some said cowardly) retreat by Union soldiers.

Earlier, Quiggle's idea of bringing an Italian general to lead a Union Army might have been dismissed as a harebrained scheme, but after Bull Run Seward feared Britain or France might declare support for the Confederacy. He saw in Garibaldi an international hero whose charisma and leadership were desperately needed. After consulting with Lincoln, on July 27 Seward sent instructions to Sanford to meet with "the distinguished Soldier of Freedom" and enlist "his services in the present contest for the unity and liberty of the American People." "Tell him," he instructed Sanford, "that the fall of the American Union ... would be a disastrous blow to the cause of Human Freedom equally here, in Europe, and throughout the world."

Garibaldi had fascinated journalists ever since the 1830s, when he was in exile in South America fighting for the independence of southern Brazil and Uruguay. When the Revolutions of 1848 broke out across Europe, he returned to Italy and led a heroic defense of the Republic of Rome against French and papal forces. He was again exiled, to New York, but later returned to live in isolation on Caprera. Then, in 1860, he led a ragtag army of volunteers known as "The Thousand" in an invasion of Sicily to overthrow its Bourbon rulers. The whole world followed Garibaldi's Red Shirts as they vanquished a large professional army, swept across southern Italy and entered Naples in triumph, all within four months. Precisely as the United States was coming apart, Italy proclaimed its new existence as a united nation. Garibaldi had made Italy; perhaps this remarkable general could help remake the United States.

Garibaldi was reviled by the pope and many crowned heads of Europe, but he enjoyed remarkable popularity among republicans and liberals everywhere. Women adored him; they wore dresses and blouses that imitated the Red Shirt regalia of the Garibaldini. Journalists celebrated the Garibaldi legend in print, shared intimate details of his personal life, and made his image, with his gray beard and mesmerizing gaze, familiar to everyone.

Sanford experienced Garibaldi mania for himself. The night before he left for Caprera, Sanford witnessed throngs of people in the streets of Genoa shouting "Viva Garibaldi!" and singing the Garibaldi hymn. On the main square he viewed a wax effigy of their hero "mounted on a kind of altar surrounded by flags at which people are bringing candles by the hundreds to burn, as you have seen in the churches of patron saints." It was the first anniversary of Garibaldi's triumphant entry into Naples, and all across Italy there were similar demonstrations.

Now, face to face as the evening sun set over the Mediterranean, Sanford and Garibaldi discussed the terms of the offer and the purpose of the war. Garibaldi expected to be offered supreme command of all armed forces. He explained that, like the captain of a ship, he must have complete control and “would be of little use as a subordinate.” This may have been lost in translation, but more likely it was the enthusiasm of Quiggle (whom Sanford blamed) or the blunder of his own advance messenger (which he obscured). Sanford’s careful efforts to explain that the rank of major general “would carry with it the command of a large ‘corps d’armée’ to conduct in his own way” did little to persuade him.

But it was the purpose of the war that seemed to concern Garibaldi most. “Could slavery not be abolished?” he asked Sanford. If it was not being fought to emancipate the slaves, he told Sanford, “the war would appear to be like any civil war in which the world at large could have little interest or sympathy.”

Since his arrival in Europe, Sanford had been trying to tell Seward that Europeans expected this to be a war of liberation, without which they would as soon see the nation fall apart. But to Garibaldi’s question Sanford could do no more than explain Lincoln’s legalistic apology for the federal government’s limited constitutional power to interfere with slavery in the states.

Late that night Sanford went to sleep at Garibaldi’s house still hoping the general might agree to come view the American scene for himself before deciding. They spoke for hours the next morning until Sanford finally accepted that he could give no satisfactory answer to Garibaldi’s question. He left Caprera later in the day for his long journey back to Brussels.

For weeks the story continued to play in the international press, and even a year later rumors revived that Garibaldi might yet come to America. Eventually the story faded from the news, and from historical memory, resurfacing from time to time as little more than a bizarre curiosity of Civil War history.

It was much more than that, for Garibaldi’s question anticipated a fundamental problem the Union confronted in trying to explain its cause to a puzzled world. Was this only a civil war, a purely domestic conflict in a quarrelsome democracy? Was the Union’s goal nothing more than to put down rebellion and protect its sovereignty? Or was there something of real consequence to the world at large? The Union would have to find answers before other powers of the world decided to include the South among the family of nations.

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Sources: H. Nelson Gay, “Lincoln’s Offer of a Command to Garibaldi,” in “Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine,” 75, no. 1 (Nov. 1907); Charles Francis Adams, “Lincoln’s Offer to Garibaldi,” in “Magazine of History,” 7 (Jan.-June, 1908); Joseph A. Fry, “Henry S. Sanford: Diplomacy and Business in Nineteenth-Century America”; Jaspas Ridley, “Garibaldi”; Lucy Riall, “Garibaldi: The Invention of a Hero”; C. Augusto Vecchi, “Garibaldi at Caprera”; Department of State, Diplomatic Correspondence, Despatches from Belgium, Italy; Consular Despatches from Antwerp; Instructions to Diplomatic Officers, Belgium, Italy, Record Group 59, microfilm, National Archives.

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