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Amanda Foreman: Decapitating the Confederacy

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The ruins of Richmond, Va., at the close of the U.S. Civil War in 1865. Andrew J. Russell / Wikimedia / Library of Congress

In the following excerpt from her new book A World On Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War, Amanda Foreman describes the fall of Richmond, Va. in the U.S. Civil War:

At dawn on Sunday, April 2, 1865, Union Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant ordered an all-out attack on Robert E. Lee's Confederate defences near Petersburg, Va., smashing through at almost every point. Lee realized he had to retreat immediately or risk being surrounded and captured. He ordered the troops to evacuate, and sent a telegram to Confederate President Jefferson Davis, advising him to leave the Confederate capital of Richmond. The message was delivered to Davis while he was at church.

Trains were being laid on to take the Confederate Government and the Treasury to Danville, 40 miles southwest of Richmond. There was pandemonium in the city. People were fighting and clawing at each other to escape the city.

The Confederate Navy Secretary had not heard from James Bulloch, the Confederates' chief foreign agent in Great Britain, in weeks. Each day, he had waited for a telegram announcing the arrival of the CSS Stonewall, but despite Bulloch's efforts, the cruiser had only set sail from Spain on March 28. Confederate Navy Secretary Stephen Mallory had no idea of the whereabouts of the CSS Shenandoah (the raider was in the Pacific, near the Eastern Caroline islands, south of Guam), nor did it matter now. Even if Duncan Kenner, Jefferson Davis' special commissioner to England and France, had succeeded in obtaining Southern recognition from Lord Palmerston in exchange for emancipation, it was too late for the Confederacy.

The trains began rumbling out of Richmond at 11 o'clock. First went the government train, followed by the Treasury's, and finally the government archives. Every car was crowded with refugees; more were riding on the roofs and clinging on to the sides. Some of the guards on the trains were boys, barely in their teens.
The last regiments to leave Richmond had orders to destroy the ordnance depots to keep them from enemy hands, and to dispose of the city's liquor supply. In a well-intentioned but disastrous move, the Confederates emptied hundreds of whisky kegs onto the streets. "Women and boys, black and white, were seen filling pitchers and buckets from the gutters," wrote John B. Jones in his diary.

"As I walked up between 5 and 6 in the morning of Monday, the 3rd, to catch the early train," wrote observer Francis Lawley, "a vast column of dense black smoke shot into the air … as the eye ranged backwards along the James River, several bright jets of flame in the region of Pearl and Cary streets augured the breaking forth of that terrible conflagration, which subsequently swept across the heart of the city. As the train moved off from the Fredericksburg depot about 6 o'clock, I parted with Mr. Conolly, the Member for Donegal, who had passed a month in Richmond, and was upon this eventful morning still undecided whether to follow General Lee's army or to strike northwards like myself."

In the commercial district, hardly a single pane of glass remained unbroken, and from Main Street to the canal nearly a thousand buildings were on fire. The bridges were also destroyed. This, together with the "roaring and crackling of burning houses … made up a scene that beggars description and which I hope never to see again," wrote a departing Confederate officer; "a city undergoing pillage at the hands of its own mob, while the tramp of a victorious enemy could be heard at its gates!"

Conolly returned to his hotel at sunrise, shoving at anyone who attempted to get in his way. Hundreds of fires were still burning. He had almost reached the building when he heard a cry, "the Yankees, the Yankees." The city's bleary-eyed residents were astonished to see a combination of white and Negro regiments from the U.S. Army of the James riding through the streets. Many were singing "John Brown's Body" as they marched. The scene helped to make up Conolly's mind: By mid-morning, he was riding for Fredericksburg. Already a Federal flag was hanging from the rooftop of the Capitol.

“The ensign of our subjugation,” lamented a female resident. But its appearance represented salvation just as much as disaster. The U.S. general leading the Federal entrance, Godfrey Weitzel, hurriedly ordered his officers to organize teams of firefighters. The hotels, the banks, the better class of shops, the warehouses, depots and hundreds of private houses were either charred heaps of brick or empty edifices. Fifty-five blocks in the centre of Richmond had disappeared, but Weitzel’s men saved many more.

Hundreds of families collected in Capitol Square, sitting in huddled groups, with the detritus of destruction around them, waiting miserably for the Federals to take charge of their future. Hour by hour, order was gradually restored to the streets. By 10 p.m., when Charles Francis Adams Jr. led the 5th Massachusetts Colored Cavalry into the city, an unofficial curfew made the place seem deserted. “To have led my regiment into Richmond at the moment of its capture is the one event which I should most have desired as the culmination of my life in the Army,” he admitted to his father. “For the first time I see the spirit of the Virginians, the whole people are cowed - whipped out.”

Abraham Lincoln arrived at the city a few hours after Charles Francis Jr., on the morning of the 4th. The black population was anything but whipped out. They clustered about him, shouting ecstatically, touching his clothes and shaking his hand; he protested when some knelt down as he passed. Lincoln entered the Confederate White House and looked around Davis’s office, even sitting in his chair. He seemed tired and worn to those around him. Victory was at hand, but not yet in his hands — not until the surrender of Lee’s army, he reminded a Confederate delegation who called on him to discuss Virginia’s political future. During the afternoon Lincoln toured hospitals and prisons, showing a gentle courtesy to Federals and Rebels alike. He displayed a magnanimity toward the defeated Confederates that was conspicuously absent among his colleagues in the Cabinet.

Lee would be able to keep fighting if he could reach North Carolina and consolidate his army with the survivors of General Joe Johnston’s. He ordered his commanders to head 40 miles west, toward the courthouse at Amelia Springs, where the scattered fragments of the Army of Northern Virginia could regroup and distribute supplies for the long journey ahead. But Grant was in pursuit; his forces moving so swiftly that Quartermaster Sergeant James Horrocks (since his promotion in March) returned from his furlough in New York to find his camp deserted. Not knowing where the 5th New Jersey Battery had gone, he walked into Richmond and spent the night on the floor in one of the bedrooms in the Confederate White House.

“So I had the honor of sleeping in the house of Jeff Davis,” he wrote to his brother, “if there is any honor in that.”