THE JOHNSON'S ISLAND PLOT (part 1) - Uncertainty in 1864 leads to change of rules

BY RANDY KOCH

The Confederate White House.

Optimism sprang anew as temperatures warmed, birds chirped, and flowers bloomed, welcoming another spring's arrival. However, in 1864, attention focused on the cloud of uncertainty hovering above the Confederacy, as the war entered its fourth year.

The previous July, Yankees smashed General Lee's northern invasion at Gettysburg while General Grant cleared the final primary obstacle in the Mississippi River by capturing Vicksburg. In northern Georgia, General Sherman now eyed Atlanta's vital railroad hub.

Even more critical than the South's diminishing geography was her lack of men to fill the dwindling ranks and diminishing supply sources for those soldiers. The manpower disparity widened, as formerly enslaved people and free blacks, in addition to the constant stream of European immigrants, continued refilling the Union ranks.

Toward the end of April, Confederate President Jefferson Davis and Secretary of State Judah Benjamin met again with peace emissaries, Jacob Thompson and Clement Clay, to discuss a solution. During this final meeting, just prior to the commissioners departure to Canada, they finalized strategy for a broad based plan, eventually known as the Northwestern Conspiracy, which could very well change the tide of war.

Sever the head of the Yankee serpent, the Southerners believed, and the enemy would lose their sense of direction, and in short order—the war. The Southerner's diabolical plot focused upon a series of clandestine operations designed to create havoc far behind the Union lines, build discontent with the Lincoln administration, and even refill the ranks of their shrinking army.

While the North's vast industrial complex continued supplying its numerically superior army and navy, the cost of war in dollars and blood was taking takes its toll on the Northern populace. If a Democratic peace candidate could unseat the Republicans and Lincoln in the fall election, Southerners believed independence could become a reality.

However, covert activity had long been perceived as diametrically opposite the Southerners' chivalrous images of themselves. Attitudes changed in the late winter of 1864, with the discovery of alleged orders captured during a bungled Union raid, igniting the controversy known as the Dahlgren Affair. The instructions apparently ordered the release of Union POW's incarcerated in

Richmond prisons, the capture of Confederate heads of state, and even the sanctioned elimination of the those civil leaders if capture proved impractical.

If the Confederates chose to fight the war under these new rules endorsed by the enemy, a number of avenues opened to assail the Yankees.

That summer the Rebels attempted but failed to send a parcel, containing unwashed blankets used by small pox victims, to the Lincoln White House. In October, Confederate operatives robbed two banks and set fire to the small town of St. Albans, Vermont. On Thanksgiving weekend, five fires simultaneously ignited in New York City hotels, in an attempt to burn the city. Near Buffalo, in early December, Southern agents attempted to free high-ranking Confederate officers by derailing a train suspected of transporting them from Johnson's Island to Fort Lafayette in New York City.

The most ambitious plan called for releasing Confederate soldiers from northern prisons. If successful, these freed men could replenish the South's thinning ranks, not to mention the chaos thousands of newly freed soldiers roaming through enemy territory would create. The latter action could even draw Union troops away from the lines facing Robert E. Lee in Virginia.

Camp Chase, in Columbus, held as many as 9400 prisoners. In Indianapolis, Camp Morton confined over 5000. Johnson's Island at one time incarcerated 3250 officers, which proved very appealing.

All eyes focused intently upon Camp Douglas and Chicago, not only because of the 12,000 rebel prisoners, but more importantly, because the city would serve as the site for the 1864 Democratic National Presidential Nominating Convention. A massive escape coinciding with the convention, would endorse the vocal wing of the party's claim that the Union not waged a constitutionally illegal war, but also one both bloody and futile.

The contingent of Confederate peace commissioners took full advantage of Canada's geographic location to cautiously launch operations into the northern United States. The South still longed for recognition from Great Britain, forcing operations to move ahead delicately, so as not to jeopardize existing relations with the British. Equally cautious, Northern agents suspicious of Southern agents avoided aggressive actions which might antagonize the British.

Richmond designated Jacob Thompson, former Secretary of the Interior under President Pierce, the civilian head of the entire operation from New England to the Mississippi River. Captain Thomas Henry Hines served as military leader and answered directly to Thompson.

Union forces captured Hines, a Kentuckian, along with many of Morgan's raiders, during their foray into Ohio in the summer of 1863. Many credited Hines for engineering the daring escape which freed John Hunt Morgan and others, including Hines from the Ohio State Penitentiary in Columbus, later that year.

Each bloody battle in 1864 served to magnify Southern weaknesses while intensifying Northern disenchant with the escalating war. The Confederate contingent sailed toward Canada, confident conditions favored a successful launch for the Northwest Conspiracy, commencing with the Democratic Convention convening in Chicago that summer.

This is the first installment of three articles, documenting the failed plot to free Confederate prisoners from Johnson's Island on September 19, 1864.