Decorated Envelopes as Weapons of War

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On September 22, 1864, North Carolina Governor Zebulon Vance wrote to his old friend and mentor, the former governor David Swain:

“I never before have been so gloomy about the condition of affairs . . . The army in Georgia is utterly demoralized; and by the time President Davis, who has gone there, displays again his obstinacy in defying public sentiment, and his ignorance of men in the change of commanders, its ruin will be complete. They are now deserting by hundreds. In short, if the enemy pushes his luck till the close of the year, we shall not be offered any terms at all.

“The signs which discourage me more than aught else are the utter demoralization of the people. With a base of communication five hundred miles in Sherman’s rear, through our own country, not a bridge has been burned, not a car thrown from its track, nor a man shot by the people whose country he has desolated. They seem everywhere to submit when our armies are withdrawn. What does this show, my dear sir? It shows what I have always believed, that the great popular heart is not now, and never has been in this war. It was a revolution of the Politicians, not the People . . .”

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The Great Popular Heart. Wars are won and lost not only by the clash of arms, but also in the hearts of the people, both on and off the battlefield. In the American Civil War, decorated envelopes played a significant part in influencing those people’s hearts.

The Confederacy had a head start in envelope propaganda.

Slide 1 – This March 20, 1861, cover from Augusta, Georgia, to England is the earliest use of a Confederate flag cover I have documented, just 16 days after the Stars and Bars was dedicated.

Slide 2 – My April 3 cover from Charleston to Malden, Massachusetts, is fairly typical of the way pictorial pro-Confederate patriotism appeared in the mail before the war began.

But that advantage was lost after the surrender of Fort Sumter, and all but disappeared after Manassas, the first major battle of the war.

Slide 3 – This October 21 cover represents the peak of Confederate pride in battlefield victories as expressed on envelopes.
Compare that to the Union side. Every dramatic event became the subject of a pictorial envelope, reproduced by the tens of thousands.

Slide 4 – During the bombardment of Fort Sumter, Confederate gunners shot down the Stars and Stripes. Peter Hart snatched up the flag, climbed the mast, and nailed it back in place. Someone in Miamiville, Ohio, mailed this cover less than a month after the event it pictured.

Prints of that heroic civilian volunteer high on the flagpole, braving cannon fire to keep the flag flying, became iconic even without a caption. In today’s lingo, it “went viral” and persisted for all four years of the war. If a picture is worth a thousand words, an icon might be worth a thousand pictures. That’s how the image of a man named Hart came to symbolize the Union’s Great Popular Heart.

Think of Iwo Jima or the Red Flag over the Reichstag.

The first lesson to learn about these unconventional weapons is the importance of effective pictorial subject matter.

The Confederacy had no heroic pictorial icon comparable to Peter Hart, but a handful of pro-Confederate labels and envelopes have this design altered to show the Stars and Bars, sort of like painting a Rising Sun on the United States Marines’ Mount Suribachi flag.

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Slide 5 – [Ellsworth]

Now consider the fatal clash at Alexandria between pro-Confederate innkeeper James W. Jackson and Union Army Col. Elmer Ellsworth on May 24, 1861. Ellsworth had cut down a Confederate flag flying over Jackson’s hotel; Jackson shot Ellsworth to death; Sergeant Francis Brownell, a member of Ellsworth’s regiment, killed Jackson.

Some traditional historians who consulted newspaper accounts, editorials, and doggerel tributes reported that each side had gained its first great martyr. Envelope tributes told a different story. Just one week after the altercation, the New York Times carried five advertisements for Ellsworth envelopes. One distributor offered 12 different designs. This episode shows that besides subject matter, speed of execution is important, point two in the effectiveness of envelopes as propaganda weapons.

“No event of the war was given more publicity in the form of designs on envelopes,” wrote Josephine Cobb. I know of 150 different envelope tributes to Ellsworth; but not one for Jackson. Here are a few examples.

I recognize Ellsworth’s face,
Slide 6 – and even Brownell’s, but I have no idea what Confederate martyr Jackson
looked like. I doubt the Richmond editor who wrote “The blood of the first Martyr has
flowed” would have recognized his hero.

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Slide 7 – [contraband]

On May 24, the day that Ellsworth and Jackson were killed at Alexandria,
General Benjamin Butler issued his order that declared escaped slaves who sought refuge
at Fortress Monroe as “Contraband of War.” He refused to surrender them to their owners
— the first instance of effective emancipation by a Union commander.

This caricature was an instant hit in the North, widely copied by other artists and
printers. I’m aware of two covers with that identical imprint canceled June 8, and I own
one canceled June 10. A 1942 article in The Stamp Specialist illustrated one with a May
cancellation that might be genuine.

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Slide 8 – [devil on cotton bale]

French scholar Michel Fabre wrote, “[C]aricature constitutes the section from
which the historian can glean the richest information.” Not just historians. During World
War II, a young U.S. Army intelligence officer named James Lively studied Civil War
cartoons to discover the most effective subjects for wartime psychological operations,
because a caricature’s “impact is swift and lasting.” “The propagandist-cartoonist works
with the symbols of his trade to confirm and guide those already predisposed toward his
objectives and in addition to proselytize new adherents.”

One of Lively’s examples was use of a devil as a “reprehensible and intolerable”
symbol.

Slide 9 – Charles Magnus used a devil for treacherous Confederate Tennessee; but

Slide 10 – he used only virtuous images for Eastern Tennessee, where Unionism
prevailed.

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Cultural historian Stephen W. Berry wrote, “[T]he South’s iconographic history is
sad in a way; the Confederate flag never really stabilized in a single design, [and] its
abortive Don’t-Tread-On-Me snake was quickly snapped up in the eagle’s beak in Union
cartoons. . . .”
Slide 11 – Here’s my favorite example of that imagery, by Harbach & Brother of Philadelphia.

With this envelope I can demonstrate the third and fourth characteristic aspects of effective envelope propaganda: perseverance and geographic spread. Surviving covers show that mailers in locations from Atlantic seaboard to Midwest prairie states sent this print to their correspondents for more than a year after its first appearance.

The earliest example has a July 3, 1861, Philadelphia cancel, mailed to Abraham Lincoln, probably by one of the Harbachs. After that, July 23, from Alexandria to Philadelphia; August 9, used at Westtown, New York; September 3, from Thomastown, Connecticut, to Dover, Vermont; December 9, from Fort Wayne, Ind., to North Bend, Iowa; May 12 (probably 1862) from Andover to Hartford, Connecticut; and August 28, 1862, from Willimantic to New Haven, Connecticut.

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Point five is feedback and reinforcement. Pictorial propaganda both promoted enthusiasm for the war effort and reflected it, in an ever-widening ripple as it spread. Sometimes cause and effect can be difficult to differentiate.

Slide 12 – [Frank Beard drawing]

In the spring of 1861, an 18-year-old Ohio boy named Frank Beard drew this cartoon, which showed Union General-in-chief Winfield Scott as a bulldog guarding a meaty bone labeled “Washington,” and Jefferson Davis as a lean hungry hound hoping to swipe the morsel. Beard captioned the picture with a taunt to Davis, “Why don’t you take it?” He had it lithographed and sold copies for 10 cents each.

Slide 13 – Before long, copies appeared on envelopes and in illustrated newspapers all across the country, with no credit to the artist. Here’s an example mailed from Philadelphia to Liverpool, England, canceled June 18.

Slide 14 – Having lost control of his cartoon, Beard sold publication rights to Cincinnati publisher James Gates.

In a November 1928 article, legendary stamp and cover collector Edward S. Knapp studied a variety of different renderings of the cartoon on envelopes. He found one version printed in the June 8 issue of *Harper’s Weekly*, and an almost identical envelope print canceled June 14, so he mistakenly deduced that *Harper’s* was the original source.

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Take note that my examples thus far are drawn from a time when the South had no shortage of paper, ink, printing presses, wood engraving materials, or editorial enthusiasm. Nashville and New Orleans had not yet fallen; secessionist spirits were still high. Even then, passionate Confederate patriotism seldom appeared as printed pictorial icons.

Slide 15 – The volume of colorful decorations on Union envelopes used by civilians began to wane in 1862, but sutlers who provided wares, including stationery, to soldiers in the field, sold envelopes and writing paper with pictorial designs that often took note of a unit’s combat service. This New Orleans example is from 1863 or 1864.

Slide 16 – Here’s another regimental design, mailed at Baltimore. Envelopes like this continued to appear for the duration of the war.

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Unlike the monochrome illustrated newspapers, envelope propaganda often displayed patriotic colors. Circulation was personal, interactive, and above all, free and democratic. As Josephine Cobb wrote, anyone with $20 in 1861 (equivalent to $400 or $500 today) could buy a small press and print his own. The federal government could and did tell Fletcher Harper what he was allowed or forbidden to print in his newspaper, but no one could control the hundreds of patriotic envelope publishers scattered throughout the land.

Patriotic envelopes were not the only weapons in the war on the home front, but they were far more effective than historians have yet reported. This evidence suggests that the Union cause had captured the Great Popular Heart long before ballots were cast in the 1864 presidential election.

To explain Governor Vance’s despair after Sherman’s men had captured Atlanta, the eminent Southern historian James W. Silver wrote, “[W]e must admit that the Confederacy, probably some time after Gettysburg and Vicksburg, lost the will-to-live. The means for an aggressive, well-organized, and sustained attack on popular opinion, seemingly unnecessary in 1861, were not present in the rural, individualistic, almost frontier South. . . . One of the tragic failures of the Confederacy lay in the unsolved problem of civilian morale.”
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