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The Most Valiant in Defense of His Country: Andrew Jackson's Bequest and the Politics of Courage, 1819–1857

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On June 8, 1845, Andrew Jackson, former president, military hero, and Democratic Party icon, died at his Hermitage estate outside Nashville, Tennessee. Word of Jackson's death spread rapidly across the nation. Democratic newspapers eulogized him as a champion of the common man, while Whig journals adopted a more temperate tone—partisan divisions and political memories still cast a long shadow. Cities and towns held funeral observances to commemorate the General's passing. Jackson's last will and testament, his final message to his countrymen as it were, commanded notice too: Bequests to family and friends included the "elegant" swords awarded Jackson for his various military deeds, no less than four of these, along with the pistols the Marquis de Lafayette presented to George Washington. Equally notable was a gold box bestowed by New York City upon Jackson in 1819, which the General instructed his adopted son, Andrew Jackson, Jr., to give to the New Yorker "adjudged by his countrymen . . . to have been the most valiant in defense of his country and

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our country's rights." Who was the bravest New Yorker? That question Andrew Jackson, Jr., New Yorkers, and indeed many Americans found difficult if not impossible to answer.[1]

The bequeathed gold box represents at first glance a historical bagatelle, a small item of curiosity that left little discernible imprint upon Jackson's oeuvre. No historian has extensively researched the General's will much beyond identifying the recipients. Even Robert Remini, the foremost Jackson scholar, discussed the estate's dispersal briefly in his massive three-volume biography. While Remini noted that none of Jackson's slaves received freedom, perhaps the result of Tennessee's stringent emancipation laws, he never identified the gold-box heir or addressed Jackson's selection criteria. This should not surprise. After all, Jackson's military and political actions more commonly defined him than his choice of heirs. Whether fighting the British, scrapping the Bank of the United States, confronting South Carolina nullifiers, or removing Cherokee Indians, Jackson dominated the national landscape; his accomplishments were grist for academics to mill. The disposition of the General's personal estate, in particular, a small gold snuff box, would seem to represent historical chaff. Better to concentrate on Jackson's decisive decisions, his real national legacy as some scholars might argue, than where his possessions ended up.[2]

Yet a seemingly insignificant gold box does provide an opportunity for assessing larger issues about military courage and public conceptions of heroism. If historians acknowledged the significance of post-Jacksonian Democratic politics, part and parcel of the Second Party System's *sturm und drang*, the General's possessions provide an additional

1. B. M. Dusenbery, comp., *Monument to the Memory of General Andrew Jackson* (Philadelphia, 1846), 409–410; Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Empire, 1767–1821* (New York, 1977), 375; Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Democracy, 1833–1845* (New York, 1984), 483–84, 523–29; Matthew Warshauer, "Contested Mourning: The New York Battle over Andrew Jackson's Death," *New York History* 87 (Winter 2006), 28–66. The full statement in Jackson's will reads "adjudged by his countrymen or the ladies to have been the most valiant in the defense of his country and our country's rights." The "ladies" was a reference to the women of Charleston, South Carolina, who had awarded Jackson a silver vase.

2. Remini, *Jackson and the Course of American Democracy*, 483–84; Jon Meacham, *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House* (New York, 2008), 343–47, draws a textured picture of Jackson's last days but never cites the will.

avenue of inquiry for assessing the politics of military valor as symbolized by a material artifact. Andrew Jackson's larger than life persona endowed his belongings with patriotic significance: One of Jackson's swords, bequeathed to General Robert Armstrong, a valued comrade in arms, merited a solemn presentation to Congress after Armstrong's death in 1855, prompting reverential speeches. Jackson's Hermitage estate, a veritable political shrine, led the Tennessee government to requisition $50,000 to gain title in 1856, lest a threatened sale for debt arise. In an age that valued mementos of the deceased, Jackson's gold box would buff any recipient's patriotic credentials. Indeed, with military medals per se rare, the gold box offered a special form of valorous recognition associated with a recognized figure. Andrew Jackson, Jr., the General's adopted son, would bestow the box, adding "Old Hickory's" blessing by way of proxy.[3]

The gold box further illuminates the criteria as well as the challenge in defining military gallantry. Military valor was highly esteemed, and veterans increasingly honored, by the nineteenth century. Yet, Jackson's choice of words, "the most valiant in defense of his country," upped the

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Neither does Burke Davis, *Old Hickory: A Life of Andrew Jackson* (New York, 1977), 379–86.

3. Cary Carson, "Doing History with Material Culture," in *Material Culture and the Study of American Life*, ed. Ian M. G. Quimby (New York, 1978), notes artifacts "put historians on the scent of something they have not already sniffed out in recorded sources," 42. Also see Henry Glassie, *Material Culture* (Bloomington, IN, 1999), 41–80, for the methods employed to interpret material objects in terms of their varying associations and meanings. For the presentation of Andrew Jackson's sword to Congress, see *Congressional Globe*, Senate, 33rd Congress, 2nd Sess., 902, 930, 940; and "Speeches on the Occasion of the Presentation of the Sword of Gen. Jackson," *Nashville Union and American* (TN), Mar. 8, 1855. The threatened sale of the Hermitage can be found in Linda Bennett Galloway, *Andrew Jackson, Jr.: Son of a President* (New York, 1966), 75–76, 82–83; Matthew Eric Glassman, Congressional Gold Medals, 1776–2014, Congressional Research Service, Apr. 29, 2014, www.crs.gov (accessed Apr. 14, 2015); J. F. Loubat, *The Medallic History of the United States of America, 1776–1876* (1878; repr., New Milford, CT, 1967); Georgia Stamm Chamberlain, *American Medals and Medalists* (Annandale, VA, 1963). Hugh M. Flick, "U.S. Campaign Medals," *Military Affairs* 6 (Winter 1942), 254, notes medals were originally "associated with undemocratic principles." Colleen McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840–1900* (Bloomington, IN, 1986), 17–18.

ante by requiring a most singular instance of heroism far beyond courageous service.

New Yorkers needed protocols for choosing the bravest of the brave while ascertaining the most appropriate venue of military action. The Mexican War furnished the occasion and the First Regiment of New York Volunteers the candidates. The troopers had participated in several battles during General Winfield Scott's 1847 Mexican invasion. Nevertheless, selecting a candidate to accord with Jackson's wishes required gauging valor based on people's memories, corroboration of events, and sometimes unabashed self-promotion. A heroic narrative, if tellingly presented, still needed to be assessed. And who determined the candidate: Would it be Manhattan's municipal government or the New York Volunteers? When Jackson bequeathed his gold box, he wished to thank New Yorkers for their earlier generosity; he could not have foreseen the competing candidates, determined politicos, judgmental Mexican War veterans, and sharp-eyed editors who would jostle over the prize. If "Old Hickory" had once inspired strong, conflicting emotions, so too did his proffered gold box, and neither New York City nor the eventual recipient escaped with reputations intact.[4]

The Jackson gold-box drama thus offers a historical perspective for discerning how a trophy underscored contested, still evolving definitions of valor. While Americans praised bravery and condemned cowardice, bestowing awards and punishments, such verdicts typically occurred soon after an engagement or at war's end, the memory still fresh, the recipient's deeds loudly proclaimed. Commanding officers and politicos commonly supplied the official judgment. Jackson's bequest altered both normal time-lines and protocols. Not only leading military figures and politicians but ex-soldiers and civilians (the "countrymen" cited in the will) would be assessing and debating Jackson's valor criteria years after the Mexican War. Citizens may well have favored ardor-infused courage,

4. John Resch, *Suffering Soldiers: Revolutionary War Veterans, Moral Sentiment, and Political Culture in the Early Republic* (Amherst, MA, 1999); Papers Related to an Award to Ward B. Burnett, MSS Col 4101, New York Public Library, New York City; "The New York Volunteers," *New-York Daily Tribune*, Apr. 13, 1850; *Report of the Committees . . . Prepare and Present Medals to New York Regiment of Volunteers* (New York, 1851); *Documents of the Board of Councilmen of the City of New York* (New York, 1857), 4: 20–22.

as Nicole Eustace has shown for the War of 1812, or accepted that commoners as well as gentlemen could be heroic. Yet the Jackson gold-box debacle transcended these assumptions about emotion-powered bravery and social class. By allowing Jackson's "countrymen" to designate a candidate, the quest for the snuff box turned into a virtual free-for-all, a popular referendum. It became a contest in which valor's qualities eluded ready consensus, and politics trumped character.[5]

The drama surrounding Jackson's gold box played out in several acts, each set against the backdrop of New York City politics. Initially awarded to Jackson himself in 1819 by the Republican-controlled Manhattan Common Council, the city government's legislative body, the box enabled Jackson to thank his benefactors while sidelined Federalists hooted. Not until after Jackson's death in 1845, and the Mexican War's conclusion in 1848, would Andrew Jackson, Jr., and the New York City press publicize the search for the most valiant New Yorker. This initial attempt foundered: Self-promoting veteran (and novelist) Lieutenant Mayne Reid proved unsuccessful in his quest for the box, his application revealing the hurdles underscoring Jackson's criteria. Several years later, the New York Regiment of Volunteers' efforts to elevate their commander, Colonel Ward Burnett, remained stillborn. Finally, when Democratic Mayor Fernando Wood instructed the Common Council to find a worthy candidate in 1857, with Andrew Jackson, Jr., on board to hand over the box, he ignited a spirited public competition featuring political skullduggery, journalistic commentary, and competing contestants. The resulting fracas identified the New Yorker "most valiant in defense of his country." But it also demonstrated the dilemma of defining and awarding valor on a highly visible stage. Politics intruded, and partisan-minded New Yorkers championed (and disparaged) candidates. The prize bequeathed by Jackson extracted a toll on character, revealing valor's high costs in securing the gold-box honor.

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5. See Nicole Eustace, *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism* (Philadelphia, 2012), 36–75; Sarah J. Purcell, *Sealed with Blood: War, Sacrifice, and Memory in Revolutionary America* (Philadelphia, 2002), 5–6, 106–107, 164–73; Christopher J. Lukasik, "The Face of the Public," *Early American Literature* 39 (Sept. 2004), 413–64. Robert E. Cray, Jr., "Major John André and the Three Captors: Class Dynamics and Revolutionary Memory Wars in the Early Republic, 1780–1831," *Journal of the Early Republic* 17 (Autumn 1997), 371–97 for debates about valor's criteria as well as the contested class dimensions of heroism.

The War of 1812 catapulted Andrew Jackson upon the national stage. As a Tennessee politico and planter, Jackson received modest attention; as a southern military commander, his harsh measures against the Red Stick faction of the Creek Nation in 1814 won notice and a Major General's commission. Jackson's 1815 victory over the British in New Orleans enlarged his reputation. News of the Treaty of Ghent, coming upon the heels of Jackson's victory, symbolically joined with the battle in the popular imagination, prompting celebrations. Army and naval heroes had received war-time plaudits, but General Andrew Jackson, "Old Hickory," stood out, earning the thanks of Congress and the Congressional Gold Medal—virtually the only national wartime decoration the early republic sanctioned. Jackson's 1818 military incursion into Spanish Florida failed to diminish his public luster. Not surprisingly, the Common Council of New York City wished to honor the General during an 1819 visit.[6]

The Common Council knew to salute visiting heroes in style. During the War of 1812, the city fathers honored naval captains, who had battled British ships and bested British captains. Dinners, toasts, and praise descended upon victorious captains; Federalists and Republicans fought to lay claim to heroes in a game of political one-upmanship. With Manhattan Federalists numerically reduced and politically cowed, Common Council Republicans controlled the proceedings. On February 19, 1819, the Common Council acknowledged their "deep and grateful sense of the public services of Major General Andrew Jackson," and granted Jackson the freedom of the city in the form of a suitably inscribed gold box. For Jackson, a man who valued honor highly enough to fight duels, the gift reaffirmed his heroic persona. That it came after a bruising Congressional debate over his hanging of two British subjects in Spanish Florida made it all the more timely. Jackson arrived in Manhattan escorted by a guard of honor, accepted the gold box from Mayor Cadwallader Colden on February 23, and thanked the assemblage for

6. Sean Wilentz, *Andrew Jackson* (New York, 2005), 23–26, 30–33, 36–40. John William Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age* (New York, 1962), 7–10, 18–22, 57–63; *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York* (21 vols., New York, 1917), 10: 254–55.

the honor that "will ever be recollected with feelings of the warmest sensibility." The gift, identified as a "gold snuff box," cost the city $275.[7]

Jackson's heroic aura did not escape undimmed. Whatever his military achievements, Federalists and anti-Jackson critics howled when the General thanked his hosts at a celebratory Tammany Hall dinner by praising Governor DeWitt Clinton, not knowing the club and Clinton were at loggerheads. Joseph Rodman Drake, alias the "Croaker," a *New York Evening Post* writer in one of the last bastions of Federalist print culture, also lampooned the city's embrace of Jackson and it proffered freemanship:

> The board is met—the names are read;
> Elate of heart the glad committee
> Declare the mighty man has said
> He'll 'take the freedom of the city.'
> He thanks the council and the mayor,
> Presents 'em all his humble service.

While a later Jackson biographer, James Parton, ridiculed the literary thrust, some Manhattanites evidently considered the General a rustic westerner of uncertain parts and the city's ceremony overbaked.[8]

The gold snuff box might seem a curious award compared to a military presentation sword, but it was rooted in both an older ceremonial

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7. *Minutes of the Common Council*, 10: 254–57, 265–66, 340; quoted in James Parton, *Life of Andrew Jackson* (3 vols., New York, 1861), 2: 559; I. N. Phelps Stokes, *Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498–1909* (6 vols., New York, 1915–1928), 6: 451; Robert E. Cray, Jr., "The Death and Burials of Captain James Lawrence: Wartime Mourning in the Early Republic," *New York History* 83 (Spring 2002), 133–64; Deborah A. Rosen, "Wartime Prisoners and the Rule of War: Andrew Jackson's Military Tribunals during the First Seminole War," *Journal of the Early Republic* 28 (Winter 2008), 559–95; Graham R. Hodges, "Legal Bonds of Attachment: The Freemanship Law of New York City, 1648–1801," in *Authority and Resistance in Early New York*, ed. William Pencak and Conrad Edick Wright (New York, 1988), 226–44.

8. Charles Haynes Haswell, *Reminiscences of an Octogenarian of the City of New York, 1816–1860* (New York, 1896), 101; Parton, *Life of Andrew Jackson*, 2: 559–62, quote on 560; Joseph J. Letter, "New York in 1819: Defining a Local Public in the 'Croaker' Poems of Joseph Rodman Drake and Fitz-Greene Halleck," *American Periodicals* 21 (2011), 50–71.

tradition and in the associations with snuff. New York City had presented gold boxes to worthy personages in the eighteenth century and offered them up to notable individuals in the nineteenth century as an honorarium, the equivalent of the keys to the city.[9]

The snuff box denoted a genteel status more akin to civilian life than battlefield exploits. Nevertheless, people across the class spectrum consumed snuff; men and women used the finely powdered leaves as an inhaled stimulant placed upon the nostrils. Eighteenth-century monarchs gave elaborately ornate snuff boxes in recognition of service. Benjamin Franklin received a jeweled box from Louis XVI in 1785. Other recipients of French monarchial generosity included Silas Deane, Arthur Lee, and Thomas Jefferson. By the early nineteenth century, the snuff box retained a stylish allure, evidenced by accounts of boxes handcrafted with precious metals and studded with jewels. Still, most snuff boxes were simply made, easily carried, and readily used. By the 1830s, if not earlier, they had invaded the United States Senate, with prominent Whigs such as Henry Clay, Jackson's arch-foe, and Democrat Martin Van Buren, a Jackson protégé, partakers of the powdered tobacco. As for Jackson, a man who preferred to smoke or chew tobacco, the gold snuff box became a showcased trophy.[10]

The gold box held a place of honor upon the mantle in Jackson's

9. Stokes, *Iconography of Manhattan Island*, 5: 1721, 6: 388; "Compliment to a Generous Sailor," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Jan. 5, 1850; "General Jackson's Gold Box," *New-York Daily Times*, July 11, 1857, 4. The actual dimensions of the box are 3.75, 2.625, and 1.00 inches, the weight 9.9 ounces, but by the 1850s newspapers would exaggerate its size with estimates from six by four by two inches to as much as ten by seven by seven inches. Notes from the Curator, Andrew Jackson's Gold Box, accessed from Hermitage.com. I am grateful to Ashley Bouknight at the Hermitage for responding to my query regarding the specific dimensions of the gold box on Apr. 4, 2016.

10. Jason Hughes, "Snuff," in *Tobacco in History and Culture: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Jordan Goodman (2 vols., Farmington Hills, MI, 2005), 2: 547–51; Zephyr Teachout, *Corruption in America: From Benjamin Franklin's Snuffbox to Citizens United* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), 1–3, 19, 22–25, 28–30; Mattoon M. Curtis, *The Story of Snuff and Snuff Boxes* (New York, 1935), 79–110, passim. Davis, *Old Hickory*, notes Jackson still "smoked and chewed tobacco and drank coffee freely," despite declining health, 380. For Webster and Van Buren, see "The Cabinet—Past and Present," *Yorkville Enquirer* (SC), Mar. 5, 1857. Also see Isaac Bassett, Senate Snuff Boxes, www.senate.gov (accessed June 1, 2015); "The Days of Snuff and Such," *New York Times*, Dec. 4, 1985.

Tennessee home alongside other awards and gifts. The various artifacts caught the eye of Julian Ann Conner, a genteel South Carolinian, during an 1827 visit: She first saw the brace of pistols given Washington by Lafayette, preserved with "almost sacred veneration" and positioned by General Washington's pocket telescope. Close to them stood a silver vase presented by Charleston women to Jackson, and the gold box. Silver and gold represented intrinsic, trustworthy value to hard-money advocates such as Jackson; their sterling qualities (so to speak) merited display. As a token of respect, the box ranked on a par with Washington's pistols and spy-glass, material links to the valorous founding father. The proudly displayed box was certainly not meant for later generations' use any more than Washington's pistols were meant for antebellum target practice. These were objects to cherish.[11]

The gold box nonetheless stayed more or less forgotten until Jackson's death. Amidst the mourning and memorials, the General's last will and testament offered admirers reminders of their hero. Newspapers dutifully listed the various items detailed in an oft-republished letter supplied by a gentleman in Washington: swords to Andrew Jackson Donelson, Andrew Jackson Coffee, General Robert Armstrong, and Andrew Jackson, Old Hickory's grandson; the Washington pistols to George Washington Lafayette. Washington's pocket telescope had been destroyed in an 1834 Hermitage fire that left every room save the dining room damaged. The gold box and the silver vase were more obliquely cited as "sundry other presents," with the specific instructions for Andrew Jackson, Jr., detailed. However, B. M Dusenbery's 1845 compilation of Andrew Jackson eulogies contained the entire text of the will. Democratic editors and readers also treasured the will as a memorable statement. As one writer opined, "It is in his own steady and firm handwriting, and like all things that ever fell from his pen, breathes the purest paternalism throughout." An Indiana paper extolled the document's passages, insisting that "they cannot be printed too often."[12]

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11. Quoted in Meacham, *American Lion*, 37. See Charles Sellers, *Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846* (New York, 1994), for Jackson's hard-money beliefs, 345–46. It was "solid coin" versus "mercurial paper." Also see Glassie, *Material Culture*, 41–80, passim.

12. Dusenbery, *Monument to the Memory of General Andrew Jackson*, 407–411; David S. Reynolds, *Waking Giant: America in the Age of Jackson* (New York, 2008), 113; "General Jackson's Last Will and Testament," *Columbia Democrat* (Bloomsburg, PA), Aug. 2, 1845; "General Jackson's Last Will and Testament,"

The Mexican War furnished an opportunity to fulfill Jackson's wishes. Invading a foreign country would appear a strange way to discover the New Yorker "most valiant in defense of his country and our country's rights." Yet the initial patriotic fervor swelled national pride to make a military invasion seem an extension of the nation's rights. Manifest Destiny turned territorial aggression into principled defense. States rushed to raise volunteer regiments. Journalists followed the invading American armies. Indeed, with the telegraph's recent introduction, messages from the Mexican front traveled by steamship to New Orleans and eventually by wire along the east coast. Readers devoured war news. While Generals Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott both received Congressional Gold Medals, other officers attained military glory too. As Robert Johannsen noted, states and municipalities seemingly rushed to honor heroic native sons, filling the void left by the deaths of earlier Revolutionary worthies. Illinois saluted the twice-wounded General James Shield. General Franklin Pierce, although collapsing from his horse and afflicted with dysentery, won recognition from the Granite State, assisted by his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne's pen. South Carolina revered and mourned its former governor, the fallen Colonel Pierce Mason Butler, despite his questionable command skills. Parades and flag-festooned streets greeted returning troops across the country, with New Yorkers wholeheartedly embracing the national hero worship.[13]

The First Regiment of New York Volunteers stirred pride among state residents. Colonel Ward B. Burnett, a West Point graduate turned civilian engineer, led the nearly 800-strong First Regiment. Among them

New York Herald, July 19, 1845; "To the Editors of the Enquirer," *Richmond Enquirer* (VA), July 22, 1845; "General Jackson's Will," *Indiana State Sentinel* (Indianapolis), Oct. 18, 1845.

13. Robert W. Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination* (New York, 1985), 108–43; Amy S. Greenberg, *A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, Lincoln, and the 1846 U.S. Invasion of Mexico* (New York, 2012); Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (Cambridge, UK, 2005); Joseph G. Dawson, III "Leaders for Manifest Destiny: American Volunteer Colonels Serving in the U.S.–Mexican War," *American Nineteenth Century History* 7 (June 2006), 257–58; William E. Huntzicker, *The Popular Press, 1833–1865* (Westport, CT, 1999), 98–100.

could be found roughly three hundred American-born soldiers according to one description, with the remainder composed of Dutch, Irish, French, English, Polish, Swedish, Chinese, and Indian volunteers. The same account claimed less than one hundred troopers were actually city-born. The regiment landed with General Scott in Vera Cruz, saw action in several battles, and attained distinction at Chapultepec, as troopers stormed the high stone wall protecting the Mexican Military College. The regiment's military exploits inspired New York City Mayor William Brady and the Common Council to plan a triumphant reception for the returning soldiers. A committee met in 1847 and 1848, agreeing that a "medal should be struck by the Common Council, commemorative of the battles in which our Volunteer regiment has been engaged."[14]

A joyous reception awaited the returning soldiers on July 27, 1848. The regiment had been reduced to three hundred. Death, disease, and discharges had thinned their ranks; some survivors numbered among the walking wounded. Morris Franklin, the Board of Aldermen president, offered words as balm, citing the regiment's battles that "will form a page upon the record of our history, brilliant as the proudest monuments of ancient glory, when Rome stood forth in all her splendor, the wonder and admiration of the world." The presented gold medals displayed the city coat-of-arms on one side and a female figure, the Genius of America, on the other. Colonel Ward Burnett thanked the city, handed over the regimental colors, and supplied appropriate rhetorical flourishes. None could say that New York had stinted on its welcome.[15]

Jackson's gold box went unmentioned during these ceremonies. To raise the issue would perhaps be unseemly. Besides, it fell to Andrew

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14. Albert Lombard, *The High Private with a Full and Exciting History of the New York Volunteers* (New York, 1848), 10; *Reports of the Special Committees* (New York, 1851), 35, 53–55, quote on 55. Ward Burnett, Facts of His Military and Civil History, Papers Related to an Award to Ward B. Burnett, New York Public Library; K. Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War, 1846–1848* (New York, 1974), 313–18; James M. McCaffrey, *Army of Manifest Destiny: The American Soldier in the Mexican War, 1846–1848* (New York, 1992), 182–83.

15. *Reports of the Special Committee*, 63, 65, 68, 129–31, quote on 68. "Report of the Select Committee on the Subject of the New York Volunteers, March, 29, 1850," *Documents of the Assembly of the State of New York*, 73rd Session (Albany, NY, 1850), 6: 7–8, noted many survivors suffered from dysentery or chronic diarrhea, with 105 left from the original 805.

Jackson, Jr., as executor, to decide whether the Mexican War met his stepfather's wishes. Old Hickory's heir and adopted son had proven a disappointment prone to reckless financial ventures and accumulating debts. In fact, the will noted the estate's liabilities were due to the "debts of my well-beloved and adopted son, Andrew Jackson, Jun." Jackson, Jr., however, instructed the newspapers in 1849 to honor his father's bequest. He did not opine how the citizenry would choose such a person—he just assumed, as the elder Jackson had done, that military valor was self-evident when the people passed judgment. Newspapers urged that "preliminary steps may be taken to carry out the patriotic intentions of the Old Hero." New York City took up the cause on April 16, 1849, when the Common Council created a special committee to evaluate applications. The *New-York Daily Tribune* gushed, "Who is to be the lucky candidate? The Box is worth some hundreds and is of course an interesting relic."[16]

Lieutenant Mayne Reid, a First Volunteer Regiment officer, boldly trumpeted his credentials in the *New York Evening Post*, followed by depositions in the *New York Herald*. On May 28 Reid petitioned the New York City Council. Reid's prosaic fusillade captured attention. At the battle of Churubusco, Reid claimed to have inspired the South Carolina Palmetto Regiment, personally taking the standard in hand from their falling commander, leading them and the New York Regiment in a charge. At Chapultepec, Reid announced he led the first fifty men up the walls of the citadel, "seven paces in advance of my comrades," before he "was shot down under the muzzle of the enemy's largest gun. This was the third shot I had received in my clothes and persons." Reid later submitted affidavits from eyewitnesses along with official reports from officers in the *New York Herald*. No one could fault Reid's ardor, the stuff of courage in the minds of many, or fail to notice his descriptive self-serving language.[17]

16. Dusenbery, *Monument to the Memory of General Andrew Jackson*, 407; Galloway, *Andrew Jackson, Jr.*; "Gen. Jackson's Will," *Southern Sentinel* (Plaquemine, LA), Jan. 25, 1849; "Extract from Gen. Jackson's Will," *Wilmington Journal* (NC), Jan. 26, 1849; "Gen. Jackson's Gold Box," *Daily Crescent* (New Orleans), Apr. 27, 1849; untitled, *Orleans Republican* (Albion, NY), Mar. 28, 1849; *Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen of the City of New York*, Vol. 36, Part II (New York, 1849), 943; "Gen. Jackson's Gold Box," *New-York Daily Tribune*, Apr. 17, 1849.

17. "Candidate for Gen. Jackson's Gold Box," *Daily Crescent* (New Orleans), May 28, 1849; Stokes, *Iconography of Manhattan Island*, 5: 1821; "The Bequest

Lieutenant Mayne Reid knew about narratives. An Irish immigrant, Reid had moved through the southern and mid-Atlantic States, honing his literary craft and publishing his first poem in *Godey's Ladies Magazine* in 1843. He regularly shared drinks in Philadelphia with Edgar Allen Poe, who judged Reid a "colossal but most picturesque liar. He fibs on a surprising scale." After a stint of newspaper work in Manhattan, Reid volunteered for the First New York Regiment, secured a second lieutenancy in January, 1847, and supplied "Sketches by a Skirmisher" for the *Spirit of the Times*, a New York City publication. Reid did suffer a serious thigh wound during the assault at Chapultepec, and General Winfield Scott did cite him in dispatches. Yet, while promoted to first lieutenant, Reid later referred to himself as Captain Reid, inflating his rank perhaps as much as he inflated his deeds. South Carolinians considered Reid's claims gross exaggerations. Major A. H. Gladden, former Palmetto regiment commander, sent a letter to the Mayor and Common Council, insisting Reid's claims resulted from a "poetic imagination and fancy, rendered wild in its aspiration after the golden trophy." Reid would write dozens of western or borderland novels, populated by heroic figures, attacking Indians, attractive señoritas, and swarthy Mexicans. As a writer, Reid entertained, but as a claimant for Jackson's gold box, he may have embroidered reality.[18]

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of Gen. Jackson," *Sumter Banner* (SC), Apr. 25, 1849; "Palmetto Regiment," *Edgefield Advertiser* (SC), June 13, 1849; *Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen of the City of New York*, Vol. 37, Part I (New York, 1849), 122; *Proceedings and Documents of the Board of Assistant Aldermen*, Vol. 34 (New York, 1851), 95; Steven Ray Butler, "Away O'er the Waves: The Transatlantic Life and Literature of Captain Mayne Reid," PhD diss., University of Texas, Arlington, 2006, 229–33; "Lieutenant Mayne Reid," *Keowee Courier* (SC), June 16, 1849, identifies Reid's assertions as published in the *New York Evening Post*. On competing notions of manhood and courage, more specifically the contrast between the martial man and the restrained man, see Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Experience*, 12–13, 22–26. Reid clearly leaned more to the martial type.

18. Quoted in Jeffrey Meyers, *Edgar Allen Poe: His Life and Legacy* (New York, 1992), 142; Butler, "Away O'er the Waves," 132–38, 217–18, 230–33, quote from Gladden is on 232. Joan Steele, *Captain Mayne Reid* (Boston, 1978), 21–41; Elizabeth Hyde Reid and Charles H. Coe, *Captain Mayne Reid: His Life and Adventures* (London, 1900), 63–64, 78, 89–93; *American National Biography*, s.v. Reid, Thomas Mayne by Robert L. Gale; "General Winfield Scott to the Secretary of War," Sept. 18, 1847, National Palace of Mexico, in Loubal, *Medallic History of the United States, 1776–1876*, 329. Justin H. Smith, *The War with*

What Reid asserted did not always square with other accounts. The aforementioned affidavits collected by Reid had been openly solicited to promote claims to Jackson's box. Yet Reid's exploits failed to register upon Corporal Albert Lombard, author of a scathing 1848 regimental history targeting several officers, among them Colonel Ward Burnett, as abusive and corrupt. Not only were some officers dishonest, Lombard claimed, but incompetent, cowardly, and unfit for command. Lombard acknowledged that several officers took pride in their duty and earned the men's respect, but he never singled out Reid for praise or condemnation. That Reid failed to impress a company corporal does not disprove his assertions; it may be that Reid simply exaggerated.[19]

As Reid promoted himself, his serialized novel, *War Life; or the Adventures of a Light Infantry Officer*, based upon his Mexican War exploits, began publication in early 1849. The novel apparently enjoyed a modest run. The timing of events remains curious. Could Reid have been attempting to aid book sales? The would-be heir to Jackson's gold box, if successful, might draw greater readership. After all, Reid wrote a romance based on his Mexican War exploits, as an advertisement for the work stated, and Reid's claim to be New York's most courageous war hero might well reflect a romanticized life, in which the persona of officer and novelist blended almost seamlessly together.[20]

Self-promotion and over-embellishment afflicted more officers than Reid. With journalists alongside the troops, publicizing one's exploits sometime proved too tempting to resist despite official army prohibition. General Gideon Pillow, one of President James K. Polk's political appointments, overstepped the line, boasting to his wife about being recognized as the hero of Chapultepec. Bragging to one's spouse did not breach regulations; presenting such claims in the press and minimizing one's commander-in-chief's role did. General Winfield Scott wanted

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Mexico (2 vols. 1919; repr. Gloucester, MA., 1963), 2: 156–57; "Modest Lying," *Edgefield Advertiser* (SC), June 6, 1849, acknowledged Reid's bravery but noted he tended to "display his vanity and weakness in boastful praise of himself." "Report of the Select Committee, 1850," 15, lists Reid's service and injury.

19. Lombard, *The High Private*, 12–15, 22–25, 31–33. Paul Foos, *A Short Offhand Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict during the Mexican War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002), 78–80, 163, accepts Lombard's claims of officers' corruption.

20. Butler, "Away O'er the Waves," 227–30.

Pillow court-martialed. Instead, Pillow survived thanks to his political connections, but his reputation never recovered.[21]

The line between military reality and embellishment perplexed others. Early histories of the war, often puffing up heroic achievements, drew upon various sources. John Jenkins wrote an 1848 history of the Mexican War, covered the battles of Churubusco and Chapultepec, and cited Reid's role—inaccurately having him place the New York Regiment flag atop the Mexican fortress at Chapultepec, a claim that Reid never advanced. But, as Jenkins noted, the letters, newspapers, and public journals he utilized illuminated events less than thought:

> I have often found these, however, conflicting very materially with the official statements and, as, from the nature of the case, was to be presumed, more or less tinged with gossip of the camp. It has, therefore, been sometimes extremely difficult to separate the real from the fanciful; and I can hardly flatter myself with the hope that I have entirely avoided errors.[22]

Perhaps actions speak stronger than words. As Reid published his affidavits in the *New York Herald* in June, he announced plans to join the Hungarian Revolution. Yet he first decamped for England where word of the revolution's failure stopped his quest. Reid preferred not to wait for the Common Council's decision. Or maybe he considered it a pointless endeavor: When his claim went to a "select committee" formed by the Council "that ended the matter," according to the *New-York Daily Times*. The *Indiana State Sentinel* more tartly commented "the lieutenant knew the value of a 'first rate notice' in the newspapers, and like other heroes recounting their own exploits, did not permit his modesty to diminish the embellisments."[23]

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21. Tom Reilly, *War with Mexico! American Reporters Cover the Battlefield*, ed. Manley Witten (Lawrence, KS, 2010), 207–13; Robert W. Merry, *A Country of Vast Designs: James K. Polk, the Mexican War, and the Conquest of the American Continent* (New York, 2009), 363–64, 389–92, 408–410; Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes, Jr., and Roy P. Stonesifer, Jr., *The Life and Wars of Gideon J. Pillow* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1993), 48–49, 63–66, 70–109, passim.

22. John S. Jenkins, *History of the War between the United States and Mexico* (Auburn, NY, 1848), vii for quote, 370–71, 416–17.

23. "General Jackson's Gold Snuff-Box," *New-York Daily Times*, Mar. 6, 1857; "The Hero of His Own Story," *Indiana State Sentinel* (Indianapolis), July 5, 1849; Thomas W. Cutrer, Reid, Thomas Mayne, *Handbook of Texas Online*, www.tshaonline,org.handbook/online (accessed Mar. 30, 2015); Butler, "Away

While Americans honored Mexican War heroes, soldiers who promoted their exploits might exceed valor's boundaries. Reid had emotion enough in his quest for the box—descriptive prose colored his dramatically whipped-up ardor—except he outraged South Carolinians, indignant at his claim to have led southern boys. What did this say about South Carolina's ardor? And what did this say about South Carolina's officers? Nor were other Americans necessarily amused by Reid's overt self-promotion, given his unsuccessful quest for the prize. If heroes were needed to replenish the national pantheon, better to single out regiment commanders or distribute medals and accolades democratically all round to entire units. A lieutenant puffing himself might fail to pass muster.[24]

In New York, however, the First Regiment of Volunteers was not easily forgotten. The medals they received could not heal wounds, cure disease, or guarantee employment. Nor could they forestall death when individuals finally succumbed to injuries or sickness. When concerned state legislators probed the veterans' circumstances in 1850, Colonel Ward Burnett (a West Point officer turned civil engineer) stepped up to speak on his former comrades' behalf. He alerted New York's legislators to the veterans' suffering and to the destitution their widows and children endured. By June, 1850, the legislature approved pensions. Closer to home, Burnett helped organize the regiment's veterans to address issues of common interest. He solicited the New York City Common Council in April, 1853, concerned that with "death thinning the ranks," assistance could not come too soon. Burnett received two hundred dollars for disbursement. If Burnett had indeed purloined regimental funds, as

O'er the Waves," 233–34; *American National Biography*, s.v., Reid, Thomas Mayne; Steele, *Captain Mayne Reid*. Reid, an Irish immigrant, may not have been considered a New Yorker, as per the special committee's instructions. See *Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen*, Vol. 36, 943.

24. Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas*, 108, 141–43; Jack Allen Meyer, *South Carolina in the Mexican War: A History of the Palmetto Regiment of Volunteers, 1846–1917* (Columbia, SC, 1996), 143–52 notes that New York and South Carolina awarded medals to everyone in their respective regiments. No other states apparently issued such awards at war's end.

Corporal Albert Lombard had angrily asserted in his 1848 history, he may have been making amends.[25]

Perhaps Common Council members held similar thoughts. The municipal government had left Andrew Jackson's bequest unfulfilled revisiting the issue in April, 1852, when the Common Council created another special committee on the prize, informing applicants to file application within three months. Manhattan papers announced the news. However, the *New York Commercial Advertizer* opined that one "should suppose that the most deserving would be the last to prefer his claim, since modesty and courage are proverbially allied." Such thinking might have sunk Reid. So who now would boldly assert their claim to be the bravest?[26]

The New York Regiment of Volunteers offered up Colonel Ward Burnett on June 1, 1852, endorsed by eighty-three officers and soldiers petitioning the Common Council committee. Whether Burnett lobbied behind the scenes remains unknown; that Burnett was a staunch Democratic probably helped in a largely Democratic Manhattan. Regiment members never intended to "disparage claims" of other officers or soldiers, yet Burnett, they asserted, was a "good disciplinarian, valiant soldier, and patriotic citizen." The *Commercial Advertizer*'s concerns would be assuaged; the regiment, not Burnett, had submitted the petition, and as the members noted "also through him our whole command" would be honored. Burnett's particular battlefield exploits per se mattered less than his overall leadership. That the regiment members had decided

25. "Are the New-York Volunteers to Be Relieved?" *New-York Daily Times*, Apr. 19, 1853; Butler, "Away O'er the Waves," 219; Meyer, *South Carolina in the Mexican War*, 148, notes the New York medals were table medals not designed to be worn. "The New-York Volunteers," *New-York Daily Tribune*, Apr. 13, 1850; "The New-York Volunteers," June 27, 1850; "News Gatherings," *New-York Daily Times*, Mar. 20, 1852; "Funeral of Lieut. John Wilson, a New-York Volunteer," *New-York Daily Times*, July 14, 1853; "New-York Volunteers," *New-York Daily Times*, Sept. 15, 1853; "Funeral of Two New-York Volunteers," *New-York Daily Times*, Sept. 18, 1854. For Burnett's career path see Burnett, Facts of Military and Civil History, New York Public Library.

26. "Resolutions Adopted," *New-York Daily Times*, Apr. 20, 1852; "The Reward of Valor," *Camden Journal* (SC), June 4, 1852, reprinted *New York Commercial Advertizer* essay.

upon him also supplied an appropriate democratic cast to the proceedings. The *New York Daily Times* acknowledged the Volunteers intended Burnett to receive the gold box not for "superior military experience," but as a "representative of the corp." Just as Andrew Jackson saw himself as the political embodiment of the people, the regiment accorded Burnett a similar distinction—he embodied them in the gold-box campaign.[27]

Regiment members followed custom in singling out Burnett as their commander. In Europe, military medals generally went to high-ranking officers when they were awarded at all; promotions, money, or disability pensions granted by the monarch served to reward the ranks. The Distinguished Conduct Medal and the Victoria Cross would not appear in Great Britain until 1854 and 1856. In the United States, the Congressional Gold Medal went overwhelmingly to generals and naval commanders. In 1846, however, Congress voted gold medals to both officers and common sailors in the English, French, and Spanish navies, but that was because they had helped save crewmembers from the sinking U.S. naval vessel. Congress did enact war-time legislation in 1847 to permit valorous sergeants to receive brevet rank, and courageous privates might earn a certificate of merit plus two dollars extra monthly pay. Nevertheless, the Common Council's select committee lacked the award to give, and a letter on the gold box sent to Andrew Jackson, Jr., never received a response, derailing the venture. Any embarrassment Burnett suffered was perhaps mitigated by the New York State legislature promoting him to brevet brigadier general.[28]

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27. To Aldermen Charles Francis, D. F. Lieman, and L. L. H. Ward, et al., New York, June 1, 1852, Papers Related to an Award to Brig-General Burnett, New York Public Library; "General Jackson's Gold Snuff-Box—Several Competitors for it in the Field," *New-York Daily Times*, Mar. 6, 1857; "Resolutions Adopted," *New-York Daily Times*, Apr. 20, 1852; "Valor to Be Reward," *Fayetteville Observer* (TN), June 10, 1852; "The Post of Engineer at the Brooklyn Navy Yard," *Daily Evening Star* (Washington, DC), July 30, 1853, described Burnett as a "gentleman of considerable reputation," and a "staunch Democrat."

28. Stephen Wood, "Decorations and Medals," in *Oxford Companion to Military History*, ed. Richard Holmes (New York, 2001), 251–53; George Lang, Raymond L. Collins, and Gerald F. White, comp., *Medal of Honor Recipients* (2 vol., New York, 1995), 1: xiii; Congressional Gold Medal Recipients, United States House of Representatives, www.history.house.gov/Institution/GoldMedal (accessed June 1, 2015). Glassman, Congressional Gold Medals, 3; Chamberlain, *American Medals and Medalists*; William Richard Cutter, *American Biography: A New Cyclopedia* (New York, 1916), 7: Burnett, Ward B.; "By Authority,"

Other legislative business may have attracted committee members more. Common Council aldermen and assistant aldermen serving between 1852 and 1854 earned the sobriquet the "Forty Thieves," in reference to their overall pilfering and corruption. City contracts and franchises went up for grabs. A flurry of municipal projects increased spending that often lined the pockets of city officials and their friends in the form of outright payoffs and kickbacks. By contrast, settling Andrew Jackson's gold box on a candidate meant work, especially when confronted by a non-responsive Andrew Jackson, Jr. Sending someone to the Hermitage to inquire about the gold box—was it still there, for instance?—would have involve time and money. There were more attractive political plums in easier reach in 1852.[29]

General Jackson nevertheless enjoyed a certain stature among Americans despite Manhattan's lackadaisical council men. A polarizing political figure, Jackson's legacy flourished among Democrats. In Washington, DC, a statue of General Jackson on horseback graced Lafayette Square Park in 1853, winning praise. New Orleans commissioned a monument to Jackson the military hero in 1856. Next to George Washington no other president and certainly no other military figure inspired such commemoration. Jackson's symbolic aura shone brightest among the Democratic Party faithful even when internal bickering diminished the glow. In New York City, home to Soft and Hard Democrats, Andrew Jackson dinners held on January 8 to commemorate the Battle of New Orleans permitted distinct Democratic factions to hold concerts, raise funds, or sponsor dinners. In 1856 three Democratic entities held separate functions, joined by their claims to be Jackson's heirs if by nothing else. When Mayor Fernando Wood decided to resolve the Jackson gold-box

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Wilmington Journal (NC), Apr. 9, 1847; "Laws of the United States Passed at the Second Session of the Twenty-ninth Congress," *Indiana State Sentinel* (Indianapolis), Apr. 22, 1847; "General Jackson's Gold Snuff-Box—Several Competitors for it in the Field," *New-York Daily Times*, Mar. 6, 1857; "General Jackson's Snuff-Box," *New-York Daily Times*, Mar. 16, 1857; "General Jackson's Gold Box," *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, Apr. 20, 1857, cited the *New York Journal of Commerce*, Apr. 11, which noted Jackson never answered the Common Council letter.

29. Edward K. Spann, *The New Metropolis: New York City, 1840–1857* (New York, 1981), 297–305; Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York, 1999), 822–26.

issue in early 1857, he enabled Democrats to reaffirm their political heritage.[30]

In his annual message Wood emphasized the diminishing number of Mexican War veterans as a reason to award the gold box. The men's "brilliant achievements" meant that one person "from this galaxy of noble spirits" would be "the most valiant and deserving." Candidates for Jackson's gold box would "present official records of their conduct and service." By these means, Wood announced,

> A just competition might be created for the distinction with the selection made before the evidence and living witnesses to the many scenes of heroism which occurred shall have been lost or beyond reach. I suggest that action be taken speedily, and so as to make the selection in time to present the box at the ensuing Fourth of July.[31]

A divisive, ethically slippery figure, Wood could woo both native-born Americans and immigrants when it suited him, occasionally tilting toward reform but always careful to protect his own interests. The gold box represented a small cog in Wood's overall political machinations. He would soon clash with New York State's Republican-controlled legislature over city charter reform, resulting in a restructured police force removed from his oversight. Upstate evangelical interests, meanwhile, would use the legislature to push for Sunday saloon closings—anathema to Manhattan's German and Irish Catholics. Still, the largely Democratic Common Council appointed a special committee in March to make deposition of the box, substituting September 14, the tenth anniversary of the United States occupation of Mexico City, for July 4 as the ceremony date. The Aldermen expected the First Regiment of New York

30. Spann, *The New Metropolis*, 356–57; "History of the Jackson Statue," *New-York Daily Times*, Jan. 22, 1853; "Anniversary of the Battle of New-Orleans," *New-York Daily Times*, Jan. 11, 1854; "Eighth of January. Anniversary of the Battle of New-Orleans," *New-York Daily Times*, Jan. 9, 1856; "Inauguration of the Jackson Monument," *New-York Daily Times*, Feb. 19, 1856; "The Gold Box Presented to General Jackson by the Corporation of New-York," *New-York Daily Times*, Feb. 19, 1857.

31. "The Gold Box Presented to General Jackson by the Corporation of New-York," *New-York Daily Times*, Feb. 18, 1857.

Volunteers, considered by them to be the most courageous state unit, to "decide by their votes" who merited the prize.[32]

The First Regiment now constituted a de facto veteran organization. In New York, the Volunteers pressed for financial assistance, when not attending meetings, funerals, and marches, and Colonel Ward B. Burnett often served as spokesman. Yet having veterans vote upon the gold box presented political challenges. The Whig party may have self-destructed, but many ex-Whigs (along with ex-nativists and ex-Free Soilers) found a home in the Republican Party, with Horace Greeley and Henry Raymond, editors of the *New York Tribune* and *New York Times,* broadcasting their concerns in heavily Democratic Manhattan. The *Times* reported on March 6, 1857, that the Volunteers had yet to take action, adding "no prospect any will be." The paper also ran a piece from the *New York Sun*, a Democratic paper, wherein one William P. Hall, late Sergeant-Major of the United States Artillery, complained that the Common Council's resolution favoring the New York Volunteers disqualified him, a regular soldier, from applying; it also, he added, violated Jackson's selection criteria—that the box go to the most valiant New Yorker regardless of unit. Hall's complaint was a precursor of things to come. By April 23, 1857, the *Times* opined that Andrew Jackson had meant well, "but we cannot help thinking that honors of this sort should never be attempted unless there is some accurate mode of comparing the merits of the competitors for it." Why? Because the gold-box recipient would be criticized, "unless the distinction means that its owner outshone all his fellows." Besides, no nation employed similar protocols: The French, the *Times* asserted, although liberal with military awards, "never tried

32. "Disposition of General Jackson's Gold Snuff-Box," *New-York Daily Times*, Mar. 3, 1857; *Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen of the City of New York*, Vol. 67 (New York, 1857), 287; Terry Golway, *Machine Made: Tammany Hall and the Creation of Modern American Politics* (New York, 2014), 53–59; Spann, *The New Metropolis*, 358–61, 365–86; Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 831–41; L. Ray Gunn, "Antebellum Society and Politics (1825–1860)," in *The Empire State: A History of New York*, ed. Milton M. Klein (Ithaca, NY, 2001), 408–410; Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points: The 19th Century New York City Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum* (New York, 2010), 277–80; Jerome Mushkat, *Fernando Wood: A Political Biography* (Kent, OH, 1990) for the complicated and turbulent politics of New York in 1857.

anything so preposterous as this," whereas the English gave medals to all participants in a particular campaign, as seen in the Crimean War. Other nations lavished military awards for "brave exploits," not "traits exclusive to designees."[33]

Defining what constituted the most singular act of valor spurred further complications for both the Common Council and the Volunteers. The Democrats dominated the Council; the Volunteers had at least two officers, Ward Burnett and Garrett Dyckman, active in Democratic politics. The Volunteers also needed guarantees that Andrew Jackson, Jr., still held the box—understandable given past disappointments. Life had not gone well for Jackson: The man worth $150,000 upon his adoptive father's death in 1845 stood $100,000 in debt a decade later, forcing him to sell the Hermitage. Still, Jackson responded in April to a Common Council appeal, prepared to deliver the gold box to a suitable candidate. "It has been and will be, and is at all times," Jackson wrote, "ready for the patriot whom the corporate authorities of the city or State of New York shall deem fit to receive it." The Committee advertised for people to apply or give testimony. The Common Council also approached Lieutenant General Winfield Scott, the nation's highest-ranking soldier, who informed them he "could not conscientiously select anyone without consulting a number of leaders in the war." He did identify Lieutenant Schuyler Hamilton, his aide-de-camp and Alexander

33. See Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 835–36; Harold Holzer, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press: The War for Public Opinion* (New York, 2014); "General Jackson's Gold Snuff-Box—Several Competitors for It in the Field," *New-York Daily Times*, Mar. 6, 1857; "The Order of the Snuff-Box," *New-York Daily Times*, Apr. 23, 1857. On the regiment as a veterans' gathering, see "The New-York Volunteers," *New-York Daily Tribune*, June 27, 1850; "Military Bounty Lands," *New-York Daily Tribune,* Sept. 19, 1850; "The New-York Volunteers," *New-York Daily Tribune*, Mar. 26, 1851. "New York Volunteers at Albany," *New-York Daily Times*, July 5, 1852; "Mr. Meagher's Lecture for the New-York Volunteers," *New-York Daily Times*, Apr. 19, 1853; "Grand Demonstration at Metropolitan Hall," *New-York Daily Times*, May 26, 1853; "Breveting the Officers of the New York Volunteers," *New-York Daily Times*, July 30, 1853; "New-York Volunteers, Anniversary of the Surrender of City of Mexico, Dinner at the Florence Hotel," *New-York Daily Times*, Sept. 15, 1853; "New York Volunteers," *New-York Daily Times*, Mar. 20, 1856; "Anniversary of the Capture of Mexico—Military Parades, &c.," *New-York Daily Times*, Sept. 16, 1856; "The New-York Volunteers," *New-York Daily Times*, Jan. 21, 1857. Wallace E. Davies, "The Mexican War Veterans as an Organized Group," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 35 (Sept. 1948), 221–38.

Hamilton's grandson, as being "in the hottest of the fight" during several Mexican battles, while supplying a reference to Ward Burnett. But Scott insisted the committee approach other generals, since they held more "immediate supervision of the men under their command."[34]

These other generals responded cautiously to the Common Council query: General James Shields favored Colonel Burnett, yet acknowledged "In doing this he does not mean to settle the question of relative bravery between that gentleman and others, whose conduct in battle did not fall under his observation." General David E. Twiggs announced "that it will be impossible . . . to designate anyone as the most valiant, where all did their duty so well." General John E. Wool could not identify a candidate, having been at just one battle, Buena Vista, while asserting "at least one hundred, if not five times that number, were equally valiant in defense of their country and our country's rights," evoking Jackson's words. Wool added, "To me, it appears an impractical question."[35]

The Gold Box Committee moved ahead despite the generals' comments. The First Volunteer Regiment again nominated Colonel Ward Burnett, but the committee headed by Peter Moneghan, a stalwart Democrat and bookbinder by trade, included William Wilson, a blustering, violent ex-pugilist turned Democratic Party foot soldier denounced by Manhattan diarist George Templeton Strong as an "aldermanic bully." Wilson sprang into action at an early July meeting, noting "certificates of fitness for position were easily procured," a decisive slap at Burnett's nomination, declaring the "Colonel was a political man" supported by various generals "out of courtesy." Wilson persuaded the committee to

34. "General Jackson's Gold Snuff Box," *Memphis Daily Appeal* (TN), Apr. 29, 1857; "That Gold Box—Letter from Andrew Jackson, Jr.," *New-York Daily Times*, Apr. 21, 1857; "New-York Volunteers," *New-York Daily Times*, Mar. 20, 1856; "Sympathy for Walker," *New-York Daily Times*, Dec. 22, 1856; "The New-York Volunteers," *New-York Daily Times*, Jan. 21, 1857. Galloway, *Andrew Jackson, Jr.*, 74–76; Winfield Scott, *Memoirs of Lieut.-General Scott, LLD* (New York, 1864), 500–501. Scott considered Hamilton a "gallant intelligent officer." Also see Timothy D. Johnson, *Winfield Scott: The Quest for Military Glory* (Lawrence, KS, 1998).

35. "That Gold Box," *Wheeling Daily Intelligencer* (VA), May 27, 1857; untitled, *Lewisburg Chronicle* (PA), June 5, 1857, 1; "Gen. Wool on the Bravest Man," *New Orleans Daily Crescent*, May 18, 1857, 1. *Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen of the City of New York* (New York, 1858), Vol. 67, 275–76.

canvas more widely, since "Many a poor fellow with one arm or one leg, was entirely ignorant of the matter."[36]

Ridicule, meanwhile, mounted in Republican circles over the definition of valor, especially among Mayor Fernando Wood's critics. The "bravest in what?" the *New York Tribune* thundered on July 14, 1857: "In fighting and running away? In killing and eating, in killing without eating, or in eating without killing?" The *Tribune* wondered if the committee would vote the now-valued $1,000 box for themselves, "if they can get it." Puckishly, the paper saluted Andrew Jackson, Jr., for retaining the box, since he was "evidently afraid that the box will be boned by that stern soldier Ald. Wilson." As the *Tribune* ironically concluded, "It requires great pluck to be a great rogue. The box for Fernando."[37]

Meeting in late July, the Gold Box Committee listened to applicants and their supporters. At least nineteen people offered some assessment in the official committee report, although newspaper accounts suggest that more spoke. An unidentified witness cited in the *New York Times* claimed Lieutenant Doremus "carried the colors at Churubusco, after six men had been compelled to leave, being wounded." That witness also said Gaines "at Nuova Rancho displayed great bravery," whereas Fairchild was "a brave man but impulsive—but Burnett is a cool, brave man, and a competent man to command a regiment." Private James Hivers agreed and considered Burnett "a cool and collected officer," judging Captain Morgan Fairchild as "sometimes cool but apt to go beyond the discipline of a soldier: he is a sort of rough and ready person." Captain C. H. Innes thought Captain Fairchild more courageous than Colonel Burnett. A letter from Sergeant Charles H. Farrell also considered Fairchild braver, but noted "he would rather for the well-being and harmony of the regiment that the box should be 'pitched in the North River or buried with funeral honors.'" The thinning ranks of surviving veterans did not prompt ready consensus, apparently.[38]

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36. "Who Is the Bravest Man," *New York Morning Express*, July 8, 1857; "General Jackson's Gold Box," *New York Weekly News*, July 25, 1857; David T. Valentine, *Manual of the Corporation of the City of New-York for 1857* (New York, 1857), 53, 56–57; Alan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas, eds., *Diary of George Templeton Strong* (4 vols., New York, 1952), 3: 132; "General Jackson's Gold Box," *New-York Daily Times*, July 11, 1857, 4.

37. Untitled, *New-York Daily Tribune*, July 14, 1857, 4.

38. "The Gold Box Committee," *New-York Daily Times*, July 23, 1857; "General Jackson's Gold Box," *New York Weekly News*, July 25, 1857; *Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen*, Vol. 67, 276–93, passim.

Some witnesses challenged testimony. When a Mr. Mathews announced Fairchild braver than Burnett, because he had not seen the colonel at the battle of Cerro Gordo, Private Alfred W. Taylor, now a brevet major, denounced the statements as untrue, since Burnett "acted nobly and brave." Taylor stated, "all parties connected with the New York Volunteers Regiment thought Burnett the most worthy to receive the gift." Captain Addison Farnsworth appeared voluntarily to refute Burnett's critics, citing the colonel's influence in preventing General Winfield Scott from dispatching the regiment to the Rio Grande theatre. Burnett had organized the regiment, disciplined the troops, and provided "energy," declared Farnsworth. Lieutenant Dardonville, although placing the flag on Chapultepec, wanted the prize for Burnett—not because the colonel was the most valiant, but because he was the commanding officer. John Garrett seconded this argument. Sergeant William D. Parisen, claiming to speak for fifteen privates, championed Colonel Burnett too.[39]

Sergeant William P. Hall, an unsuccessful 1852 applicant, thought "individual service" earned him the prize. Hall touted his promotions and various battle efforts, including when he turned the Mexicans' guns upon them. In response, Sergeant Frederick E. Meyer acknowledged Hall's bravery, but asserted his promotion resulted from too few alternative candidates. Sergeant Reynolds nominated Major Garrett Dyckman, citing his valor against 500 or 600 charging Mexican lancers among other efforts, spurring Alderman William Wilson to question Reynolds. Then Major Dyckman blamed General Shield for forming a line instead of going under the shelter of a building. Reynolds resumed touting Dyckman, who then had Reynolds identify himself as a scout around Vera Cruz, perhaps to establish his credentials. Alderman Wilson read portions of official reports, before Major Dyckman withdrew his application, perhaps in a show of modesty. Corporal Samuel Gardner, who supported Captain Fairchild, announced "As far as bravery went, he, witness, brought home the target (a wound on the nose), and he thought himself as brave as any of them."[40]

Claims and counterclaims, some bordering on the humorous, with

39. *Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen*, Vol. 67, 277–81; "The Gold Box Committee," *New-York Daily Times*, July 23, 1857.

40. *Proceedings of the Board of Alderman*, Vol. 67, 282–84; "The Gold Box Committee," *New-York Daily Times*, July 23, 1857.

allegations and challenges, characterized the unfolding narrative on valor. What people recalled in distinguishing among the claimants shaded the testimony. Colonel Burnett as regiment commander stood out most conspicuously. Major Farnsworth, who offered a "careful analysis" of the claims, according to the *New York Times*, concluded Colonel Burnett was the sensible choice. But valor's definition could not be so easily categorized—some individuals clearly thought coolness preferable to emotion; others just as clearly disagreed. Consensus remained elusive: Chairman Moneghan closed the meeting, as "further discussion was getting warm and personal."[41]

Committee members next met behind closed doors, dramatically altering the selection dynamic. Any advantage Burnett possessed vanished when Sergeant Reynolds trumpeted Major Garrett Dyckman in the private session, supported by three petitions that included thirty-three, thirteen, and five names. Reynolds signed two of the petitions. After urging Dyckman to reapply, the committee chose the major for the prize, citing as a reason that witnesses had detailed his heroic military actions—the exploits against the Mexican lancers, for instance. That the committee chose Dyckman privately (without consulting the Volunteers) raised concerns. That Dyckman, a one-time City Register in 1854, had mislaid or fleeced between $20,000 and $25,000 dollars in official funds during the reign of the "Forty Thieves," prompting an investigation and his resignation, added an additional whiff of scandal. The *Times* later described Dyckman as one of the Council's "own political associates," hinting the proceedings had been compromised, while denouncing the Council's right to make the selection.[42]

Angry Volunteers assembled at the Mercer Street House on August 10 to blast the decision. Brevet Major A. W. Taylor suspected "foul play." Major Gaines accused Dyckman, chairing the present meeting, of appointing "cronies" to a resolution-drafting committee. Sergeant

41. "The Gold Box Committee," *New-York Daily Times*, July 23, 1857. See Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood*, 12–13, 22–29, for opposing slants on courage and manhood.

42. "An Unanticipated Coup D'Etat," *New-York Daily Times*, Sept. 15, 1857; "The City Register-Inquiry Commenced," *New-York Daily Times*, Sept. 27, 1854, "That Gold Box," *New-York Daily Times*, Aug. 7, 1857; "That Snuff Box and the New-York Volunteers," Aug. 11, 1857; "Bravest Man in New York," *Brooklyn Eagle*, Aug. 8, 1857; *Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen*, Vol. 67, 285–93.

Harper proclaimed "General Burnett as brave—yes, braver, and cooler than any man he had ever seen in Mexico." Dyckman asked Captain Fairchild to be chair, and the captain swept aside objections over the award, insisting the committee's decision was final. Hisses from the audience followed. An angry Dyckman responded "Do you think I am a d—d fool?-G-d d—n me if I don't understand myself as well as any of you, and you can't put me down." Burnett supporters had drafted resolutions against the decision, denouncing the Gold Box committee for relying upon "pretended facts which we would have totally refuted." A large majority agreed with three cheers for General Winfield Scott and Ward B. Burnett offered up. Dyckman and several friends had already left.[43]

Determining valor divided Mexican War veterans and city politicos. Narratives of courage abounded yet the protocols for discerning bravery remained uncertain: Did particular exploits qualify a person? If so, how to measure them? Was it the number of acts or their overall significance that mattered more? Would the man with the most supporters be most worthy? And should written declarations or oral endorsements of courage receive greater weight? The issue of emotional ardor versus cool demeanor or battle actions versus soldierly professionalism could not be resolved either. What precisely underscored courage prompted different verdicts: For some, the choice seemed impossible—numerous people had served valiantly; for others, Colonel Burnett as regimental commander provided a solution (of sorts), symbolically embodying the troops—Garrett Dyckman's supporters notwithstanding. The First Volunteers penned a protest acknowledging Dyckman's "many merits as a gallant soldier," but noted "his equals were many." The petition asserted that only Sergeant Reynolds, a member of Dyckman's company, had pushed his candidacy strongly, whereas almost all the other witnesses favored Burnett. For good measure, the petition cited the Common Council resolution instructing the New York Volunteers to select the candidate. The Council still planned to give Dyckman the box, arranging for Andrew Jackson, Jr., to be on hand for the September 14 ceremony.[44]

Andrew Jackson, Jr., may have lacked his adopted father's forceful

43. "That Gold Snuff-Box," *New-York Daily Tribune*, Aug. 11, 1857.

44. To the Honorable Board of Aldermen, City of New York, no date, Papers Related to an Award to Ward B. Burnett, New York Public Library; *Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen*, Vol. 67, 294–99.

persona and political stature, yet in New York on September 14, 1857, he displayed a resolve worthy of Old Hickory. Jackson had intended to deliver the gold box; what he found was a raging controversy. A note from First Volunteer veterans, Henry Gaines and A. W. Taylor, revealing their objections had resulted in a lengthy meeting with Jackson, Jr., the day before. On September 14, Jackson kept the box, informing the Common Council, he did "not regard them as representing the majority of the people of the state," a nice touch of Jacksonian rhetoric worthy of Old Hickory. To have turned over the box, Jackson added, would have violated "my own sense of propriety and deference to the will of my father." Jackson returned, box in hand, to the Hermitage. Indignant Democratic Council members sputtered. New York newspapers crowed. The staunchly Democratic *New York Herald*, noting the Council's annoyance, remarked on September 15, "There is little doubt, however, but that Mr. Jackson's views will be fully endorsed by the public." The Democratic *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* wrote "Mr. Jackson's decision will no doubt meet with approval." And the *Troy* (New York) *Daily Times* claimed the "surrender of the box to him/Dyckman/ . . . would have been an insult not only to thousands of braver ones but to the nation at large, upon whom he was thus to have been palmed off as a model hero." The *Herald* concluded the bravest New Yorker should be for "the heroes to settle the question at their leisure over a few ounces of Irish blackguard."[45]

The gold box finally went to Colonel Ward B. Burnett, courtesy of his faithful subordinates' unceasing efforts. A committee of the New York Volunteers, chaired by Henry Gaines, sent a letter to the Hermitage in November, 1857, signed by fifty-eight officers and privates, along with letters from Generals Pillow, Quitman, and Shields, vouching for Burnett. Additional letters sent in early 1858 contained more signatures; in total, 127 officers and privates had endorsed Burnett, "being all said

45. "The Capture of the City of Mexico, The Gold Box Fizzle," *New York Herald*, Sept. 15, 1857, "Up to Snuff," *New York Herald*, Sept. 16, 1857; "That Snuff Box," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Sept. 15, 1857; "Presentation of the Gold Snuff-Box," *New-York Times*, Sept. 14, 1857, "An Unanticipated Coup D'Etat," *New-York Times*, Sept. 15, 1857; "He Don't Get the Box," *Troy Daily Times* (NY), Sept. 15, 1857; "General Jackson's Gold Box Not Presented," *Nashville Union* (TN), Sept. 22, 1857.

officers and privates now living," except for perhaps twenty or so individuals according to the committee. That convinced Jackson that his adoptive father's criteria had been met. Ironically, neither Jackson nor Burnett participated in the August, 17, 1859, Nashville ceremony, relying on surrogates. Dogged by charges of alcoholism, Burnett escaped lasting professional damage, served during the Civil War, and maintained a certain level of recognition. Yet, the bravest New Yorker found the gold box cold comfort financially: By 1874, Burnett pleaded with Governor Horatio Seymour for an official emolument, citing his service record but too modest (or embarrassed?) to refer to the gold box. After the colonel's death, his widow badgered the government for a larger pension. Valor was its own reward apparently. The gold box continued quietly in the family's possession before being donated to the Hermitage Museum in 2013.[46]

The Jackson gold-box debacle underscored the dilemma of defining valor. Americans in the early republic had come to appreciate that class was no barrier to courageous action while believing that emotion powered brave acts. Yet they also recognized that coolness under fire counted as a form of valor. The vocabulary of valor regiment members constructed at times foundered on these definitions, complicated further by the Common Council's political intervention. Who was the bravest if valor's traits proved multifaceted? When Jackson wrote his will, he may have intended New Yorkers to honor a figure similar to himself: a bold, albeit controversial, commander, whose deeds were easily recognized.

46. Jonathan C. Lemon to Andrew Jackson, Jr., Mar. 9, 1858 and Ward Bennett, Facts of His Military and Civil History, Papers Related to an Award to Ward B. Burnett, New York Public Library; "Award of Gen. Jackson's Snuff-box to Gen Burnett of New-York," *New-York Times*, Aug. 25, 1859, "Obituary, Gen. Ward B. Burnett," *New-York Times*, June 25, 1884, "Mrs. Burnett's Pension Rights—Various Minor Cases Decided," *New-York Times*, Dec. 22, 1885; "Presentation," *Nashville Patriot* (TN), Aug. 18, 1859; untitled, *Nebraska Advertiser* (Brownville), Aug. 11, 1859, 2; untitled, *Bradford Reporter* (PA), Dec. 8, 1859, 2; Ward B. Burnett to Samuel J. Tilden, Nov. 14, 1874, Samuel J. Tilden Papers, Digital Collection, New York Public Library (accessed June 1, 2015); Andrew Jackson's Hermitage, Andrew Jackson's Gold Box, TheHermitage.com. (accessed July 12, 2015).

Yet Jackson's brand of popular democracy, in particular, his last will and testament, declaring the award should go to the man "adjudged by his countrymen . . . to have been the most valiant," turned it into a politically contorted plebiscite. Valor's various facets—ardor versus control, for instance—set the First Regiment Volunteers and the Common Council at odds with each other and sometimes among themselves. Republican and Democratic newspapers entered the fray as well. Valor in the guise of popular sovereignty produced a political quagmire. The Common Council may have voted gold boxes to worthy individuals; they never before asked for candidates to step forward and present their credentials. That Burnett did earn the award in 1859 was due to his fellow veterans, with Andrew Jackson, Jr., convinced that his adoptive father's wishes had been met and that command presence (in this instance at least) equaled valor.[47]

Military medals, General Winfield Scott once asserted, were "among the surest monuments to history, as well as muniments of individual distinction." Andrew Jackson's gold box was not, strictly speaking, a medal. However, it became a symbolic monument to valor that embroiled veterans, politicos, and journalists in a political donnybrook. Andrew Jackson's definition of valor was too singular, too extreme, to be easily resolved when applicants became contestants and New York City aldermen judges. If New Yorkers had waited, perhaps they could have profited from South Carolina's example. The Palmetto State, also named in Jackson's will, had instructions to turn over a silver vase awarded by Charleston women to the individual "most valiant in defense of his country." In 1858, Jackson, Jr., apparently let the governor of the state, Robert F. W. Allston, name a recipient. Allston chose the Palmetto Regiment Veterans Association. The Association, in turn, agreed to maintain the vase "in trust for the last surviving member" of the regiment and his heirs. None had been specifically singled out as most brave including commanding officers. It was valor in a democratic casing, with death the ultimate arbiter.[48]

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47. "Equestrian Statue of Jackson," *New-York Daily Times*, Sept. 8, 1852; "Honors to Captain Creighton," *New-York Daily Times*, Jan. 27, 1853; "Maritime Matters," *New-York Daily Times*, Apr. 17, 1857; "News of the Day," *New-York Daily Times*, Aug. 20, 1857; May 25, 1858.

48. Scott, *Memoirs of Lieut-General Scott*, 386; Meyer, *South Carolina in the Mexican War*, 133–34, quote on 134.