

# Why Lincoln Wanted an Italian Freedom Fighter to Lead His Army

By

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## Inside History from the History Chanel

Giuseppe Garibaldi is best known for leading military campaigns that helped unify Italy, but the famed freedom fighter came very close to taking another notable assignment. And his brush with the Union blue remains one of the most curious tales of the [Civil War](#).

An Italian adventurer and revolutionary might seem like an unlikely candidate for a Civil War general, but in the mid-19th century, the steely-eyed Giuseppe Garibaldi was an internationally recognized symbol of liberty. A sailor and sea captain in his youth, he had first made his name while serving as a guerrilla fighter in civil wars in Brazil and Uruguay in the 1830s and 1840s.

After returning to Italy in 1848, he became a leading figure in the “Risorgimento,” a movement to expel foreign powers from Italy and unify its various states into one independent nation. Garibaldi and his “Red Shirt” troops eventually battled with Austrian, French and papal forces, but his greatest achievement came in 1860, when he led a band of volunteers known as “The Thousand” on a campaign against the Bourbon rulers of Sicily. Though outnumbered and outgunned, his patchwork army emerged victorious after just a few months, clearing the way for the creation of the Kingdom of Italy under the ruler Victor Emmanuel II.



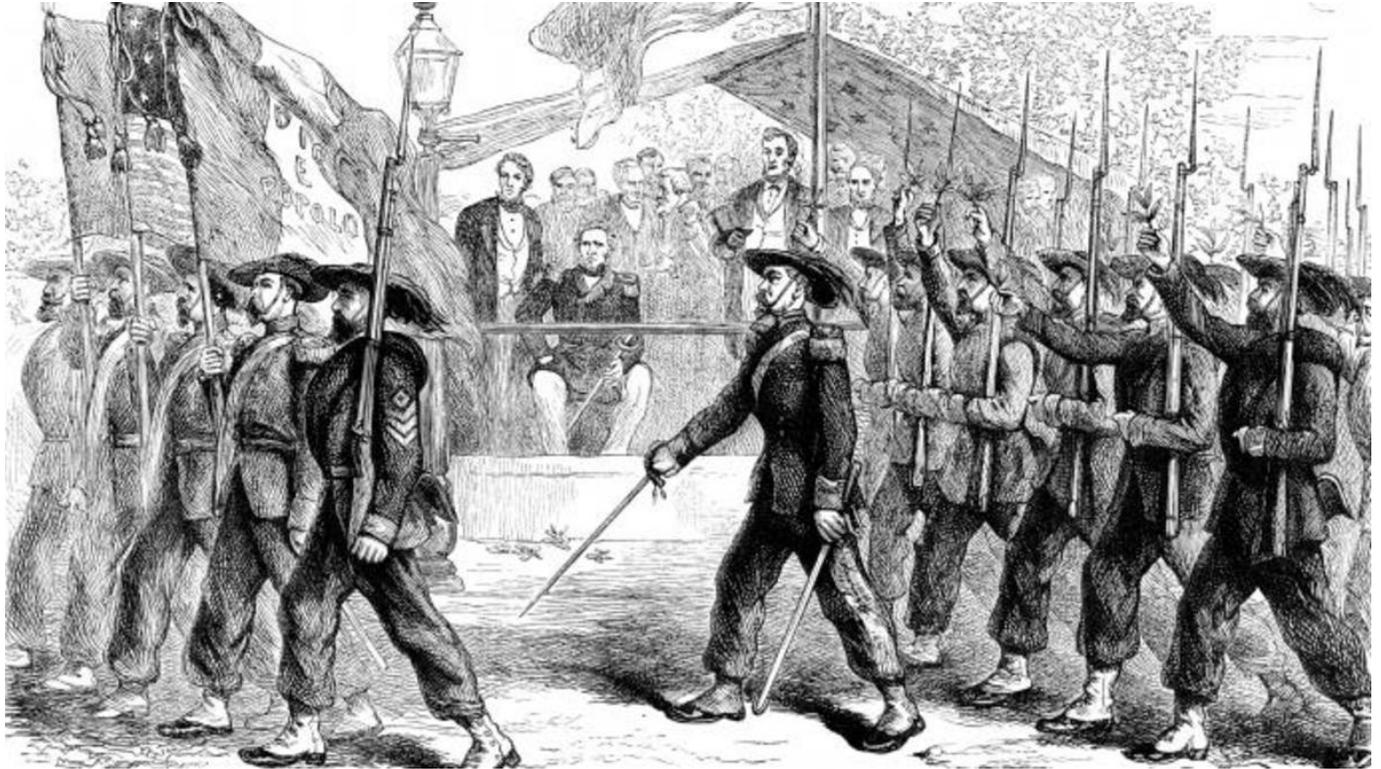
Giuseppe Garibaldi, 1807-1882. (Credit: Universal History Archive/Getty Images)

As a result of his contributions to Italian unification, the man known as the “Hero of Two Worlds” became a military celebrity. Countless dime novels were written about him, and newspapers and magazines chronicled his every move. Garibaldi was particularly beloved in America, where he had briefly lived in the early 1850s. “Few men,” the *New York Herald* had once written, “have achieved so much for the cause of freedom.”

In 1861, as the United States descended into civil war, newspapers began to speculate that Garibaldi might return to America and take part in the struggle to preserve the Union. According to historian Don H. Doyle, a scheme to actually recruit Garibaldi took shape that June, when a U.S. consul named James Quiggle sent a letter to the Italian encouraging him to join Lincoln’s army. “If you do,” Quiggle wrote, “the name of Lafayette will not surpass yours.” The pair proceeded to exchange several letters, including one in which Garibaldi expressed “a great desire” to serve.

Quiggle had not contacted Garibaldi in any official capacity, but he eventually forwarded their correspondence to the [Lincoln](#) administration. After consulting with the President, Secretary of State [William Seward](#) decided that Garibaldi might be a valuable asset. On July 27, 1861, Seward sent a dispatch Henry Sanford, a U.S. government agent in Europe. “I wish you to proceed at once and enter into communications with the distinguished Soldier of Freedom,” it read.

There is no record of Lincoln and Seward's reasoning for courting Garibaldi, but they may have been influenced by the Union Army's lackluster early performances in the field. Federal forces had only recently suffered an embarrassing defeat at the [First Battle of Bull Run](#), and many had chalked the loss up to a lack of leadership. "Washington was desperately looking for competent generals," Italian historian Eugenio F. Biagini has written, "and Garibaldi was one of proven experience and popularity, and had demonstrated expertise in American-style guerilla warfare." Historian Don H. Doyle, meanwhile, has suggested that Garibaldi's appointment might have been viewed as a means of winning support for the Union overseas.



March past of the 'Garibaldi Guard' before President Lincoln. The 'Garibaldi Guard' was the nickname given to the 39th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment that fought in the American Civil War. Many of the regiment's members were Italian Americans who had served under Giuseppe Garibaldi in Italy. (Credit: The Print Collector/Print Collector/Getty Images)

By September 1861, Henry Sanford had made contact with Garibaldi and traveled to meet him at his home on Caprera, a small island off Sardinia. The 54-year-old freedom fighter had previously told an intermediary that he would be "very happy to serve a country for which I have so much affection," but during his sit-down with Sanford, he made it clear that the offer was conditional. Not only did he want full command of U.S. forces, he also wanted assurances that the Union was fighting to end [slavery](#). An ardent abolitionist dating back to his days as a South American guerrilla fighter, Garibaldi was insistent that emancipation of the slaves be central to any conflict with the [Confederacy](#). Without it, he told Sanford, "the war would appear to be like any civil war in which the world at large could have little interest or sympathy."

With Lincoln's [Emancipation Proclamation](#) still a year away, Sanford was unable to quell Garibaldi's concerns about slavery. He also didn't have authorization to offer the Italian anything beyond a commission as a major general with an independent command. The two men discussed the issues for hours, but Sanford ultimately left Caprera without securing Garibaldi's services.

Garibaldi would later tell a friend that slavery had been the main factor in his decision to turn down the Americans. "You may be sure that had I accepted to draw my sword for the cause of the United States," he said, "it would have been for the abolition of slavery, full, unconditional." Still, some historians have since suggested that his refusal was also motivated by a burning desire to complete the unification of Italy, which was still partially controlled by Austrian and papal forces. "Garibaldi probably had no real intention of coming to the United States as long as foreign troops occupied both Venice and Rome," Frank W. Alduino and David J. Coles argue in their book *Sons of Garibaldi in Blue and Gray*.

Whatever his true motivations were, Garibaldi kept flirting with joining the Union even after his initial refusal. When a U.S. official made another unauthorized overture to him in 1862, he once again set the rumor mill turning by expressing a "desire to serve the great American Republic." Newspapers would continue to speculate about his potential recruitment, but the proposed arrangement never came to fruition. Rather than fighting on the battlefields of Virginia or Pennsylvania, Garibaldi spent the rest of the 1860s continuing his quest for the *Risorgimento* in Italy, suffering several wounds along the way.

While he never directly took up the Union cause, Garibaldi still had an influence on the Civil War from across the Atlantic. Along with serving as the inspiration for the "Garibaldi Guard," a regiment from New York composed of Italians and other European immigrants, he was also one of the Union's most vocal supporters abroad. When Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation later took effect in 1863, Garibaldi even wrote the President a famous letter of praise. "Posterity will call you the great emancipator," it read, "a more enviable title than any crown could be, and greater than any merely mundane treasure."