

by DAVE KOPEL, PAUL GALLANT AND JOANNE EISEN

AMBROSE E. BURNSIDE

GENERAL, GOVERNOR, SENATOR, CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVIST
AND FIRST PRESIDENT OF THE NRA

HE WAS THRICE elected governor of Rhode Island, and afterwards twice chosen to serve in the United States Senate. He was one of the few in his time to consider the black man the equal of the white man, and to favor equal opportunity for all. He was a clever inventor who developed a fine military rifle. He had a most spectacular set of whiskers, the nickname for which remains a staple of today's tonsorial lexicon.

If you like to wear "sideburns," then you owe a small debt to General Ambrose Burnside, who popularized wearing whiskers without a beard. If you love civil rights, then you owe a great debt to Burnside, for he was a founder and the first president of the largest civil rights organization in the world: the National Rifle Association.

THE KINDNESS OF FRIENDS | Ambrose Everett Burnside was born on May 23, 1824, in Liberty, Ind. The east-central Indiana of Burnside's youth was a well-established Quaker stronghold.

Although Burnside was not a member of the Society of Friends, he was deeply influenced by Quakers and became a man known for his

kindliness and compassion. His biographer, Benjamin Perley Poore, wrote: "Kindness was the means to all his ends—and to every one, on every suitable occasion, he preached kindness."

To many of the Indiana Quakers and their neighbors, freeing the slaves seemed to be the kindest thing a person could do. Near Burnside's home lay Fountain City, home of the Quaker Levi Coffin. The home was known as the "Grand Central Station of the Underground Railroad."

As workers on the Underground Railroad, the Quakers and their abolitionist friends violated federal and state laws, and conspired with armed groups. While the Quakers did not typically carry arms, conductors on the Underground Railroad certainly did.

When the Civil War came, the Philadelphia Quakers generally chose not to fight. But according to Indiana Gov. Oliver P. Morton, Quakers in his state enlisted at a higher proportional rate than any other denomination.

So the community that nurtured the young Ambrose Burnside shared a special dedication to kindness, and therefore to civil rights—and thus a

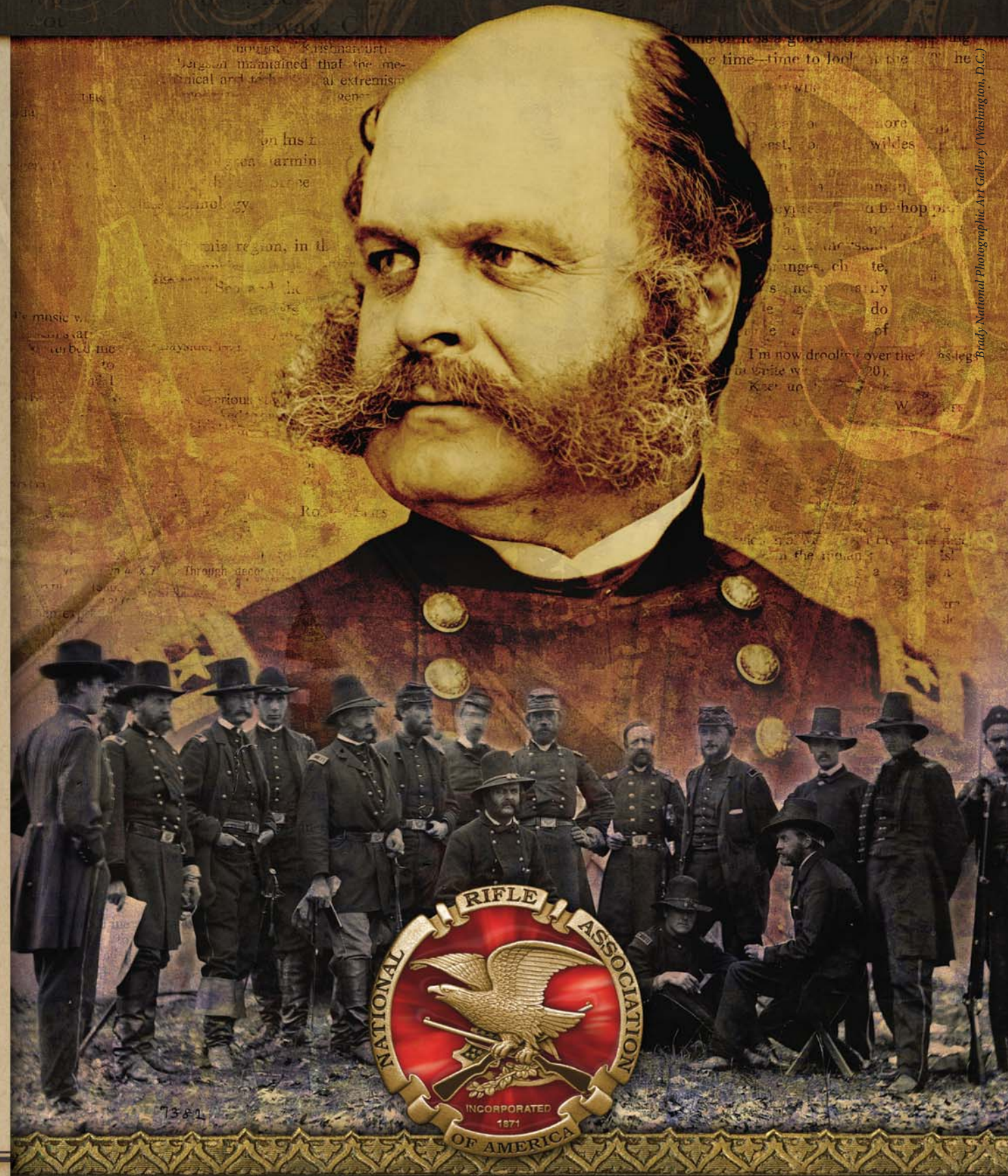
willingness to break the law and to fight when absolutely necessary.

By the time the Quakers of Burnside's youth were enlisting in the Union Army, Burnside had already invented one of the guns that would help the Union win the war.

THE INVENTOR | As a teenager, Burnside apprenticed for a tailor. However, at age 19, his hopes were realized when he was offered appointment to West Point. After graduating in the class of 1847, Lieutenant Burnside accepted a commission in the U.S. Artillery in Mexico—just as the war was ending.

He was then stationed in New Mexico, and in 1849 served in a war with the Apache Indians. Burnside and the U.S. forces prevailed, and the Apaches signed a peace treaty in 1851.

During the Apache war, Lt. Burnside was wounded by an arrow in his neck. He recognized a serious disadvantage that U.S. soldiers faced against the Indians. At close range, the U.S. cavalry was very effective with its sabers. At longer range, Indians with bows could produce a much more rapid rate of fire than could U.S. cavalry carrying muzzle-loading carbines. The Colt



six-shooter revolver would eventually prove a very potent weapon in the hands of U.S. cavalry, but it had not yet been widely adopted.

So in October 1853, Burnside resigned his commission from the army and, with borrowed money, established the Bristol Rifle Works in Bristol, R.I. He aimed to create a lightweight, faster, durable breech-loading carbine. Burnside's carbine was patented on March 25, 1856. In the summer of 1857, a board of military officers at West Point evaluated several new carbines and unanimously agreed that Burnside's was the best suited for military service.

earned reputation for bravery, military ability and administrative talents of a high order . . . ”

However, as a Union general, Burnside never rose to the outstanding level of Ulysses Grant, Winfield Scott Hancock or Philip Sheridan—to name three generals who later succeeded Burnside as presidents of the National Rifle Association.

Burnside was a deliberate, methodical thinker. Because he could spend several years slowly refining and perfecting his carbine, he invented a great gun. In contrast, during wartime, as battle conditions rapidly deviated from what had been anticipated, Burnside could

Confederate forces, now low on ammunition and depleted by casualties, began to withdraw.

Burnside finally succeeded in taking the bridge, but his remaining troops—also suffering casualties, exhausted and low on ammunition—were unable to advance. If Burnside's troops had not been expended so unwisely in the assault at the bridge, they might have been able to win the day decisively, and to destroy General Robert E. Lee's army before it could retreat.

Antietam was the single bloodiest day in American military history. It was a Union victory, for Lee's advance into Maryland was repulsed.

Fredericksburg, of several dozens of the clumsy wooden scows with which the army built its pontoon bridges.”

However, the pontoons arrived eight days late.

While Burnside waited for the pontoons to arrive, Gen. Lee exploited the delay to position his 78,000-man Army of Northern Virginia on high ground around Fredericksburg. Burnside should have known that he could not now succeed in dislodging Lee's troops, but he did not alter his battle plan. The five-day battle of Fredericksburg, Dec. 11-15, 1862, resulted in terrible Union losses. Burnside withdrew, defeated.

Five weeks later, with Lee still entrenched at Fredericksburg, Burnside—following Lincoln's orders—attempted to move his army to a more advantageous position. A torrent of rain turned the roads to mud, rendering them impassible. But Burnside would not disobey Lincoln's orders.

The wagons carrying pontoon bridges and artillery pieces sank immobilized into the mud. Burnside's “Mud March” had to be abandoned. On Jan. 25, 1863, Burnside was relieved of his command of the Army of the Potomac and placed by Lincoln in command of the Department of the Ohio.

BATTLE OF THE CRATER | Many historians point to the siege of Petersburg, and the July 30, 1864, Battle of the Crater as low points in Burnside's military career.

In April 1864, Burnside was placed under Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, who was now commanding the Army of the Potomac. Grant moved the Union Army to Petersburg, the second-largest city in Virginia, and a major Confederate industrial center. A lengthy siege began on June 15, 1864.

In order to break the stalemate at Petersburg, Burnside ordered a tunnel to be dug beneath Confederate fortifications, which was then loaded with explosives.

Burnside had been extensively drilling his “colored” troops to take the lead upon the detonation of the explosives. The plan was that, following the explosion, these troops would forge ahead to the left and the right of the resulting crater to capture the high ground behind the Confederate lines.

It was Burnside who, earlier, had asked the secretary of war to organize a new division of black troops, for which he received permission. *The Providence Journal* would later note about Burnside: “One of the first of the regular army officers to approve heartily of Mr. Lincoln's emancipation policy, he was also one of the first to favor the arming of black troops, and one of the most successful in training them for action.”

Although ready for battle, the black troops in the Union army were underutilized, relegated to the role of laborers or guards. At Petersburg, Burnside had determined that these black troops, under Gen. Edward Ferrero, would be the ideal choice to lead the charge after the explosion.

A victory at Petersburg could have smashed Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. The road to Richmond would have lain wide open, and the war would have ended in 1864, with black troops winning the decisive engagement of the battle that decided the war.

Burnside knew that both officers and men of the “colored” division were extremely confident in their ability to succeed in their mission at the mine. Col. Henry G. Thomas, commander of Ferrero's 2nd Brigade, recalled, “Both officers and men were eager to show the white troops what the colored division could do.”

John Cannan, who authored a detailed analysis of the Battle of the Crater (*The Crater*, 2002), commented:

“Once Burnside's entire force was in the key position, the African American

division might then sweep forward into Petersburg itself. It was a bold gambit, but the tactics were sound. The only problem was that Burnside had committed himself to a plan without the approval of his superiors.”

At the last moment, General Meade, who was known to be prejudiced against blacks, insisted that the charge be led by white troops. Meade told Burnside: “I cannot approve of your placing the negro troops in advance, as proposed in your project. . . [b]ecause I do not think they should be called upon to do as important a work as that which you propose to do, certainly not called upon to lead.”

In testimony given in the aftermath of the resulting fiasco, Gen. Grant would explain: “General Burnside wanted to put his colored division in front, and I believe if he had done so it would have been a success . . . ”

Burnside reluctantly acquiesced because Gen. Grant sided with Meade. At the last minute, Burnside, by the drawing of lots, chose Gen. James Ledlie's division to lead the assault. However, Ledlie became inebriated, as should have been expected from his past behavior. Without effective leadership, Ledlie's men charged directly into the crater instead of flanking it, with disastrous results. The Confederates regrouped and picked off Ledlie's men as if they were targets in a shooting gallery. The black troops, sent in last as the defeat progressed, also suffered serious losses.

Had Meade and Grant backed up Burnside's plan, the Civil War might have ended in the summer of 1864, instead of the spring of 1865. Many thousands of lives could have been saved. And perhaps if the Battle of the Crater and the Siege of Petersburg had been won by a vanguard of “colored” troops, more Americans in the post-war era would have treated people of color with the same respect that Ambrose Burnside did.

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Today, bigots such as Michael Moore spread lies attempting to link the National Rifle Association with the Ku Klux Klan. » The NRA's Articles of Incorporation were notable for what they did not contain: exclusionary clauses. » In the very segregated Washington, D.C., for the 1930s and 1940s, the NRA club would be the only integrated place where a young black man could go and feel fully welcome.

Despite the favorable review, Burnside's company went bankrupt from a combination of factors: insufficiency of orders for the gun (the antebellum U.S. cavalry was tiny), poor finances and the Panic of 1857—a depression which began in August of that year.

The Burnside carbine was to become known as among the best of all cavalry carbines used during the Civil War, and some 55,000 were used during the conflict. But by that time, the factory Burnside had founded was no longer his. Burnside's rifle was used by the U.S. Army from 1861-1876.

CIVIL WAR | When the Civil War broke out, Rhode Island Gov. William Sprague delegated the task of leading a state regiment to Burnside, for he had, as his biographer Poore noted, “a well-

not quickly improvise or adapt his carefully devised battle plans.

And more than once he had to carry out impossible orders. For example, at the battle of Antietam (Sept. 17, 1862), Union commander George McClellan ordered Burnside to cross Antietam Creek, over what is now known as Burnside's Bridge. Burnside realized that the attack was suicidal, but he followed orders that never should have been issued. A small force of Georgian troops mowed down Union troops as they advanced toward the bottleneck created by the bridge.

Earlier, Burnside had wisely sent some troops north and south along Antietam Creek in search of a safe place to ford. However, because of the difficult terrain, the men were delayed in fording the creek and in rejoining the battle. When they did, the

Nevertheless, Antietam was the last straw for President Lincoln, who for months had been exasperated with McClellan's torpor and repeated refusal to press forward. On Nov. 8, 1862, Lincoln replaced Gen. McClellan as commander of the Army of the Potomac with a reluctant Ambrose Burnside.

Burnside knew he was expected to act immediately, and he ordered his 115,000-man army to begin a winter offensive aimed at the Confederate capitol of Richmond. But first, they had to cross the Rappahannock River at Fredericksburg.

As historian Bruce Catton (*Army of the Potomac: Glory Road*) noted:

“[I]t was not at all a bad program which Burnside had mapped out. Its execution, however, depended on the immediate appearance, on the Yankee side of the river opposite

NRA Presidents *from page 47*

***A RACIALLY DIVERSE
MILITARY*** | In 1877, Rhode

Island's Sen. Burnside—who was now the second-ranking member of the Senate Committee on Military Affairs in Congress—declared his opposition to segregation in the military: “The colored man should be allowed to enlist in any arm of the service he may choose, if he is found by the recruiting officer to be a suitable man, and that he should be assigned by the proper authorities to the corps for which he is best suited, and in which his services will most conduce to the public good.”

Burnside was many decades ahead of his time. Not until Harry Truman's presidency were the armed forces integrated.

Sen. Burnside also proposed a program of affirmative action. In those days, education of any sort had been difficult for blacks to obtain and, in many states, had even been illegal. Burnside suggested that the president should appoint promising young black men to West Point, bypassing an entrance examination that they could not pass.

Burnside was aware that few black cadets were appointed to West Point, and they suffered ostracism by almost all the rest of the corps. When 18-year-old Johnson C. Whittaker entered the academy in 1876, he was only the third black cadet ever. One spring day in 1880, Whittaker was found tied to his bed, unconscious, and bloody from severe cuts. Although a court of inquiry ruled that Whittaker's wounds were self-inflicted as an attention-getting ploy, Whittaker persisted in his attempt to clear his name and requested a court-martial.

Former Union General Winfield Scott Hancock, who would soon become the NRA's sixth president, led a national

campaign to support Whittaker's right to the judicial hearing he so badly wanted. Nevertheless, the result was a second guilty verdict against.

When Burnside learned of the mutilation of Cadet Whittaker, he was horrified. Burnside, who loved his alma mater, advocated the closing of West Point if blacks could not be protected during their studies.

THE FIRST CIVIL RIGHTS ORGANIZATION | And so it should be no surprise that, when America's oldest civil rights organization was incorporated on Nov. 17, 1871, the signature of Ambrose E. Burnside was the first on the list of incorporators. And when the new civil rights organization elected its first officers, the directors chose Ambrose Everett Burnside as the first president of the National Rifle Association.

Today, bigots such as Michael Moore spread lies attempting to link the National Rifle Association with the Ku Klux Klan—a terrorist organization that attempted to undo the results of the Civil War by keeping blacks in a state of *de facto* slavery. To the contrary, the NRA was founded by Union officers who aimed to protect American liberty by fostering voluntary training in the responsible use of arms.

The NRA's Articles of Incorporation were notable for what they did not contain: exclusionary clauses. In contrast to many of the other organizations and clubs created in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the NRA had no restrictions on membership based on race, sex or religion.

The NRA quickly grew into the governing organization for the shooting sports in the United States. Its policy of complete integration contrasted markedly with the racist policies of other sporting organizations, such as the U.S. Lawn Tennis Association, the Professional Golf Association, the New York Athletic Club (for track and field), the Amateur Athletic Union (same)

and the League of American Wheelmen (bicycling).

When Ambrose Burnside founded the National Rifle Association in order to promote rifle practice, he probably never foresaw that his little organization would eventually encompass all the shooting sports, and would grow into the most powerful lobby in the world.

Burnside surely would have been pleased had he been told that one day, there would be an NRA shooting range and club in Washington, D.C. And that in the very segregated Washington, D.C., for the 1930s and 1940s, the NRA club would be the only integrated place where a young black man could go and feel fully welcome. At least that was the experience of Richard Atkinson, a black man who grew up in the District during those years, and who later was elected a director of the National Rifle Association.

As NRA president, Burnside was instrumental in the organization's purchase of "Creed's Farm," conveniently located just east of New York City. The NRA's new shooting range at "Creedmoor" became the host of the first true national competition in target shooting.

Sen. Burnside died in September 1881, in Providence, a few months after the beginning of his second term in the Senate.

As a Civil War general, Ambrose Burnside surely did not rank with his greatest contemporaries. But as a defender of the rights of black people, he had very few peers in the military. His kindness, humility and good judgment repeatedly earned the endorsement of the people of Rhode Island. And in founding the National Rifle Association in 1871, Ambrose Burnside began to accomplish the project he had begun at Petersburg in 1864: to prove to the world that free, armed black Americans possess the character, courage and skill not only to be entitled to full legal civil rights, but to be fully accepted in every social sphere. 