

This clip recreates the trial of Major Henry Wirz who was the superintendent of a prisoner-of-war camp - located in Andersonville, Georgia - at which many Union prisoners died.

The only soldier executed for war crimes, resulting from the American Civil War, Wirz was accused - among other things - of breaking the moral law.

Questions to ponder, regarding this clip, include these:

- Was Henry Wirz required to obey orders even if he morally disagreed with them?
- When is a soldier required to obey (or not obey)?
- If Wirz could be tried on moral grounds, for not disobeying his superiors and their orders, why were other soldiers not tried on similar grounds?
- Was Wirz singled out because of the horrific conditions at the Andersonville prison camp?
- Would the Wirz case have been handled differently had he been a Union officer and the prisoners-of-war were Confederate soldiers?

After the trial was over, and Wirz was condemned to hang, Louis Schade - one of his lawyers - wrote a letter to then-President Andrew Johnson. Requesting clemency for his client, Schade used these - among other words - to describe what had happened during the court martial:

[T]his commission, before which the prisoner has been tried, has in many instances excluded testimony in favor of the prisoner, and, on the other hand, admitted testimony against the prisoner, both in violation of all rules of law and equity. That the whole country knows.

Every lawyer in this city and elsewhere has regarded this and the treatment the counsel suffered at the hands of the president of the commission and the judge-advocate with indignation and as an insult to the profession. My former colleagues, Messrs. Hughes, Denver, and Peck, [who had also been representing Wirz] left for that reason, and then I would have followed their example had not the prisoner had my word of honor not to forsake him. (Official Records, Series 2, Volume 8, p. 773).

As he did not grant clemency for Mary Surratt, President Johnson did not grant clemency for Henry Wirz.

This clip, from the 1970 PBS broadcast "The Andersonville Trial," features Richard Basehart (as Henry Wirz) and William Shatner (as the Army's prosecutor, Lt. Colonel Chipman).

Credits:

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Media Stream



Union Prisoners at the Andersonville Camp

Image, Courtesy U.S. National Archives.

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Andersonville Prison - Video Tour

Clip of the Andersonville Prison video tour, online courtesy National Park Service.

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