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This study investigates the decisive factors that affected the Confederate command during the Fort Henry-Fort Donelson campaign in February 1862. The thesis is relevant not only to the study of history, but as a series of lessons for senior leaders today.

In the final analysis, the ultimate failure of the Confederates during the campaign can be attributed directly to Albert Sidney Johnston. As the department commander he failed to develop an adequate strategy to meet the invasion of Grant's army or to insure that each subordinate command was prepared. Most damaging of all, Johnston neglected the defenses of the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers, which were the key invasion routes into his department. Johnston also errred badly in his selection of a commander for the beleaguered garrison of Fort Donelson. John B. Floyd's ineptitude and dishonorable acts sealed the fort's fate and assured victory for the North.

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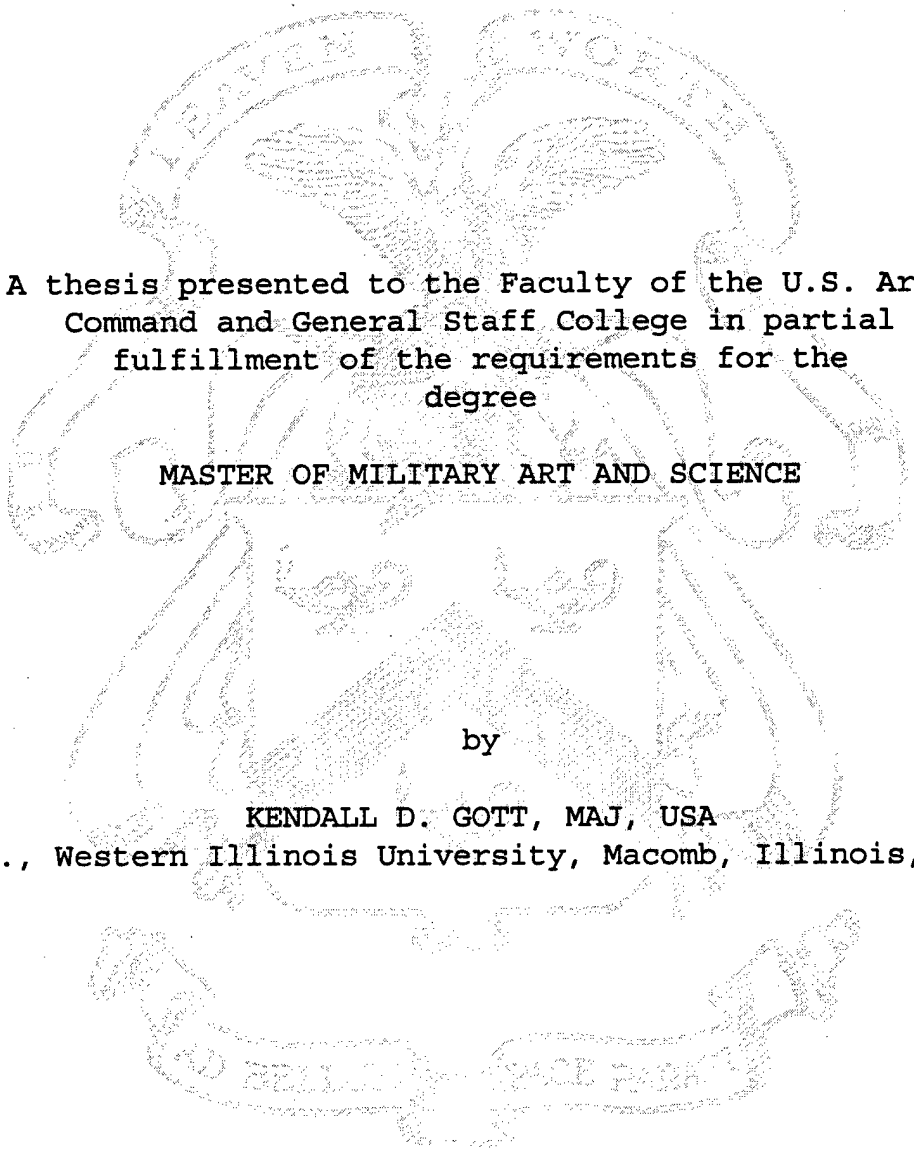

A thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

by

KENDALL D. GOTT, MAJ, USA
B.A., Western Illinois University, Macomb, Illinois, 1983

Fort Leavenworth, Kansas
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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

ABSTRACT

THE CONFEDERATE COMMAND DURING THE FORT HENRY-FORT DONELSON CAMPAIGN, FEBRUARY 1862 by MAJ Kendall D. Gott, USA, 102 pages.

This study investigates the decisive factors that affected the Fort Henry-Fort Donelson campaign in February 1862. The thesis is relevant not only to the study of history, but as a series of lessons for all commanders.

In the final analysis, the ultimate failure of the Confederates during this campaign can be attributed directly to the actions of General Albert Sidney Johnston. He failed to develop an adequate strategy to meet the expected invasion from the North or to insure that each subordinate command in his department was prepared for the onslaught. Johnston also failed to establish a command structure to support his Department. Most damaging of all, Johnston neglected the defenses of the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers, which served as invasion routes through the center of his department

Ironically, one of the worst generals of the Confederacy correctly saw Fort Donelson as the key to stopping Grant and protecting Nashville. Had he been better supported by his superiors and by the officers serving at the fort with him, the Confederates may have won a victory at Fort Donelson and secured the Western Department for several months.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Dr. William G. Robertson for his wise counsel, encyclopedic knowledge, and motivational skills. His candor kept this so-called Civil War "buff" in line and on target.

I would also like to thank LTC Scott Stephenson for his vivid outlook and patience. He is truly the paradigm military historian and C610 instructor.

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INTRODUCTION

> Fort Donelson was not only a beginning, it was one of the most decisive engagements of the entire war, and out of it came the slow, inexorable progression that led to Appomatox.[1]
>
> *Bruce Catton, Reflections on the Civil War*

The campaign on the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers was the first significant victory for the Union during the American Civil War. After a string of Union defeats, the final victory at Fort Donelson had far-reaching repercussions. General Grant's victory was a great morale boost for the North, and an equally devastating one for the South. In one stroke the Confederate defenses in the West were shattered, necessitating the abandonment of most of Tennessee and the state capital of Nashville. Union gunboats were then able to ascend the Cumberland and Tennessee rivers to wreak havoc deep into the Confederate heartland. The disaster at Fort Donelson signaled the beginning of the dismemberment and ultimate defeat of the Confederate States of America.

The Fort Donelson campaign is somewhat forgotten by many historians, yet it deserves careful and deliberate study. It was a small affair when compared to campaigns waged later in the war, and many look upon the campaign as a no-win situation for the South. Out-gunned and surrounded by land and a powerful Union ironclad fleet on the river, how could the Confederates ever have had a chance of resisting Grant's onslaught?

Although the odds were seemingly against the Confederates, defeat by Grant's army and the vaunted ironclads was never assured. In fact, the Confederates had options that would have prevented the disaster, or at least lessened its impact. This thesis will show that the Confederates lost the campaign due to the ineptitude of department commander Albert Sidney Johnston and the senior commanders at the scene. To support this thesis, I will analyze the nature of the Confederate high command during the months leading up to and during the Fort Donelson campaign. Also, an examination of the situation faced by the generals during the campaign itself will show that the

chance for victory was far from over, even after the fort itself was invested by Grant's army.

The Fort Donelson campaign is a story of contrasts in command as well as mobilization, logistics, technology, and human endurance. The story embraces the competition for power and control at higher command levels and the utter collapse of Confederate leadership during the campaign. The shattered myth of General Albert Sidney Johnston's invincibility as the preeminent military man of the age stands in stark relief. The sight of impotent Confederate generalship injects a note of comic tragedy into the campaign, that is illustrated by generals passing command and responsibility for surrendering their army after throwing away victory. In so many ways, Fort Donelson was a brilliantly missed opportunity for the Confederacy to smash an uncertain Union strategic thrust by an untested Yankee general, Ulysses S. Grant.[2]

The Fort Donelson campaign featured four Confederate general officers who directly influenced events and were responsible for its disastrous conclusion. At the top, General Albert Sidney Johnston commanded the Western

Department during the campaign and was directly responsible for the assignment of troops and general officers to the doomed bastion.[3] The senior officer at the fort was Brigadier General John Floyd, a former Governor of Virginia and Secretary of War for the Buchanan administration. Next in line was Gideon Pillow. The second of three commanding brigadier generals at the fort, Pillow had been a major general during the Mexican War, but by many accounts was an inept field commander. Third was Simon Buckner, who had been a junior officer in the Mexican War and had resigned his post as commander of the Kentucky State Guard in favor of a commission in the confederate army. Buckner was arguably the most proficient general at Fort Donelson.

Excluding Johnston, who was not present at Fort Donelson during the battle, the combined experience of the three brigadiers in command far exceeded that of their adversary Ulysses S. Grant. Grant had left the army as a junior officer shortly after the Mexican War and had just recently returned to active duty after years of failing in one private venture after another. At first glance, it would appear logical that the Confederates would have the

edge in leadership. After all, they were fighting on their home ground; and in their unified command, the experience of the combined officers should further add to their advantage.

Unfortunately for the Confederates, Johnston never firmly assigned command to any of the three generals, and the result was disastrous. Due to past personal hostilities and present indecision, the Confederate command took a grave situation and turned it into an absolute fiasco. Yet to fully appreciate the mistakes made during the campaign, a summary of the situation the nation was in shortly after the outbreak of civil war is needed.

The new Confederate States of America was presented with the daunting task of defending itself from an invading army over a vast frontier that stretched from the Atlantic seaboard westward over the Appalachians, across the fields of Tennessee and into the Great Plains. The new nation also had to guard an extended coastline against a nation with an established navy. The new Confederate President, Jefferson Davis, made an early decision to rigidly defend as much territory as possible, rejecting a more flexible defense like those used in previous wars. A new nation trying to

achieve world recognition would not have a strong case if large tracts of its territory were overrun by invaders. The "peculiar institution" of slavery was also a major factor in this defensive policy. Invading armies would provide ample opportunities for slaves to escape, most probably never to return. The South needed to hold to as much ground as it could, even if this meant surrendering the initiative to the enemy.[4]

To do this, Jefferson Davis divided the South into geographical departments to facilitate the raising, equipping, and deploying of forces. The Western Department, or Department Number 2, was bordered on the east by the Appalachians and extended on to the plains west of the Mississippi. The terrain where this campaign was fought was as well suited to military operations as any in the South. The roads were of uncertain quality, so the few railroads became strategically important for moving armies and supplies. Provisions existed among the many farms and plantations throughout the region.[5]

The most important features in this vast department were three large rivers. The furthest west was the

Mississippi; next, the Tennessee, which ran north from Florence, Alabama, to Paducah, Kentucky; and further to the east, the Cumberland, which began in eastern Kentucky and flowed south into Tennessee past Nashville before curving north to join the Ohio near Paducah. Since these rivers ran north and south, they were useless as bulwarks of defense, but instead were ideal invasion routes for an invading army.

In 1861, the inland rivers of the United States were the principal means of transportation of cotton, iron, tobacco, foodstuffs, and manufactured goods among the cities of the North and the South. Railroads were still in their infancy and could not yet match the steamboats' established infrastructure and hauling capacity. Within the rail network there was also a great diversity in gauges which hindered long-haul distances. This left the rivers as the lifelines of the American economy west of the Appalachians. Here, much more than on the eastern seaboard, was a high level of economic interdependence between the North and South.[6]

When the South seceded, the Lincoln administration instantly recognized that control of the inland waterways

was key to the Northern economy as well as to the survival of the Confederacy. The famous "Anaconda Plan" became the Federals' grand design to win the war. This strategy had three elements designed to weaken the South for eventual reconciliation or ultimate military defeat. The first two elements were the creation of an army to operate against the Confederate capital of Richmond and a naval blockade to cut the South off from Europe and any military aid. The third element was based on gaining control of the rivers, thus splitting the Confederate States. Although initially denigrated by the Northern press, the "Anaconda Plan" eventually became the blueprint for the war after the Battle of Bull Run, where it became quite apparent that the war was not about to end as quickly as many believed or hoped.

The Union was not alone in recognizing the rivers as good invasion routes into the Confederacy. The South realized it too, and as soon as Tennessee seceded, Governor Isham Harris ordered likely spots along the streams fortified and blocked. In the case of the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers, very suitable ground was located. Unfortunately, the points were located in Kentucky, whose

neutrality was being respected at this point in the war. Political considerations dictated that the forts be located in Tennessee and as close to the border as possible. In May and June of 1861, construction began on the river forts.

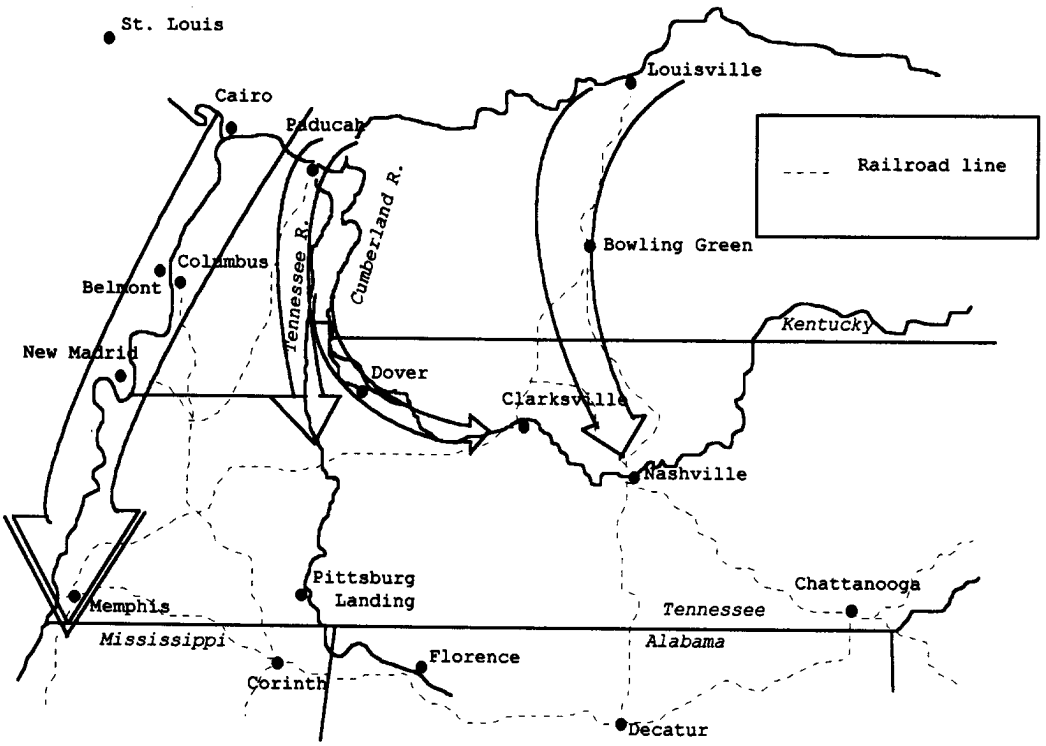

Figure 1. Invasion Routes in the West

Specifically, the loss of the Tennessee River would allow the Union Navy river fleet to isolate western Tennessee from the east and penetrate virtually all the way

to Florence, Alabama. Any such move would threaten the Confederate fortress guarding the Mississippi River at Columbus, Kentucky, the city of Memphis, and the vital rail center at Corinth, Mississippi. Loss of the Cumberland River would spell doom for the key supply and manufacturing center of Nashville and cut off the Confederate Army at Bowling Green. Union control of the Mississippi would effectively split the South in two, and reopen river traffic to the Midwest, linking it to the profitable European markets. Therefore, the defense of the great Southern rivers was key to the ultimate survival of the Confederacy.

Yet not everyone had a full appreciation of the strategic importance of the inland rivers. Far away in Richmond, Virginia, President Jefferson Davis had a different outlook. A study of his dispatches to Johnston in the official records shows clearly that the eastern theater was the main effort for the receipt of arms and troops.[7] There the South would defend its capital from the repeated efforts of the North to capture it. It was also from Virginia that the South could invade the North the quickest, possibly capturing Washington, D.C., and ending the war.

The pleas for reinforcements and action in the West were persistent and increasingly louder over the early months of the new Confederacy. The people of the western states had heard of the Anaconda Plan as well as the river gunboat fleet the Federals were building. Powerful men lived along the rivers and they had a great interest in seeing their property protected from invasion. Soon, Richmond was receiving inquiries from the state governors and the increasingly hostile press. People began demanding more action to defend the western states. Hearing their pleas, Davis began a transfer of several of the Confederacy's most distinguished brigadier generals to the Western Department.[8]

The Confederates lost the campaign due to the ineptitude of Albert Sidney Johnston and the senior commanders on the scene. To show how this happened, chapter two will contain details of the strengths and weaknesses of the Confederate armies in the West from May to September 1862. It will contain a discussion of the defensive strategy, an introduction of some key personnel, and a description of the apparent lack of priority given to this

sector with the high command. Chapter three will include a description of the crucial months of the autumn of 1862 and an examination of the senior Confederate generals who played a major role in the campaign. The department commander, Albert Sidney Johnston, will receive a great deal of analysis, for it was he who developed the strategy and assigned the forces and commanders to the beleaguered forts. Also the personal background of the fort's commanders Floyd, Pillow, and Buckner will be examined. Chapter Four will present the actual campaign for Fort Henry and Fort Donelson, focusing upon the Confederate decision-making process and the actions of the senior leaders present. Chapter five is devoted to a review of the key points of the previous chapters, the analysis of the salient issues, as well as the conclusion.

This thesis is focused on the Confederate command structure and climate, avoiding a detailed and separate analysis of the Union's counterparts. The actions of the northern forces and commanders are presented in a format that will aid in understanding the Confederate generals' decision-making process and actions. It will show that they

failed in their actions and directly caused the defeats at Fort Henry and Fort Donelson. As a study in leadership, this historic campaign is a clear and lasting lesson for today's senior leaders.

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[1]Bruce Catton, Reflections on the Civil War, (New York: Doubleday Publishers, 1978), 74.

[2]Benjamin Franklin Cooling, Forts Henry and Donelson: The Key to the Confederate Heartland (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987), xii.

[3]Steven E. Woodworth, *Jefferson Davis and His Generals*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 51.

[4]Read Ibid., 18-22, for a detailed account of the western region and the strategy Davis used to defend it.

[5]William P. Johnston, *The Life of Albert Sydney Johnston* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1878), 312-314.

[6]Cooling, 1-3.

[7]Typical letters of correspondence are found in *War of Rebellion, A Compilation of Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series I, Volume IV.* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880), 419- 422. (Cited hereafter as OR.) See also Johnston, 328-230 and 341-342.

[8]Shelby Foote, *The Civil War.* (New York: Random House, 1958) 171.

CHAPTER 2

THE CONFEDERATE SITUATION IN THE WEST MAY-SEPTEMBER 1861

> I lose no time in assuring you that the government of the Confederate States neither intends nor desires to disturb the neutrality of Kentucky.[1]
>
> *Jefferson Davis, Letter to Governor Maggoffin*

The South was raising and equipping regiments as quickly as it could during the spring and summer of 1861. Richmond established a quota for volunteers for each state and a flood initially reported for duty. The arsenals of each state were soon empty as they issued all available weapons. However, most often the southern recruits simply showed up with their own weapons. As a result a myriad of weapons were found in any given regiment to include hunting rifles, shotguns, and even antiquated flintlock muskets. The guns were welcome of course, but they compounded the difficulty of supplying ammunition. Some weapons came through the blockade, and gunsmiths began to turn out others. But there were never enough to go around. Many units were without arms at all, and their procurement

distracted their officers' efforts and attention to training and drill.[2] Up to the Fort Henry-Fort Donelson campaign, the southern volunteer was typically miserably armed and equipped. The exceptions were old militia companies or state guard units that were generally armed and equipped fairly well. Most of these units formed the nucleus of the state provisional armies and were later consolidated into the Confederate Army.

Not only were there difficulties in procuring arms, supplies were also a problem. Uniforms, accouterments, tents, blankets, and all the other items to field an army did not exist or were in critically short supply. Particularly at this stage in the war, each state acquired and stored supplies in depots for its own indigenous forces. Equipment, ammunition, and powder manufacturing facilities were built to help meet the demand, and depots created to store them. The depots and manufacturing facilities were situated in cities with available manpower and along rivers or at railroad terminals to provide transportation of raw materials and delivery of finished products. The chief manufacturing centers in the Western Department during this

time were Nashville and Memphis. The former became vital not only to the western theater but was an important supplier to the armies in the East as well.[3] With its war production and railroads linking the East and West, Nashville was a city the South could not afford to lose.

Raising troops and the procurement of arms and supplies were a challenge, but armies needed leaders. The company grade and many field-grade officers were typically elected by their respective units. Confederate general officers were appointed by the president for a number of reasons, and unfortunately not always because of merit or potential. Men of political clout and little military training or ability would make their way into the service. However, contrary to a common misconception that a large segment of the officer corps consisted of political appointees, the vast majority of Confederate generals were military and professional men.[4] The officers with prior experience and West Point diplomas were a valued commodity. They became the nucleus for the senior commanders in both armies and brought with them the traditions and regulations of the service.

One of the United States Army regulations adopted by the Confederate armies dealt with the system of rank. Confusion could exist when two officers of the same rank were assigned to the same unit or locality. The regulations had a system to determine who was senior in position, if not in rank, and thereby in command. It read simply that:

> When commissions are of the same date, the rank is to be decided between officers of the same regiment or corps by the order of appointment. Between officers of different regiments or corps, First: By rank in actual service when appointed; Second: By former rank and service in the army or marine corps; Third: By lottery among such as not been in military service of the United States. In case of equality or rank by virtue of a brevet commission, reference is had to commissions, not brevet.[5]

Confederate general officers had but one system of insignia to distinguish themselves from the field and company grade officers. One general's uniform looked the same as another in theory, regardless if he was a brigadier or full general.[6] It was important to clearly establish just what rank a general held as well as his date of rank when two met on a battlefield, for it would mean who was in command.

The general officers operated within the departmental system of command, which was established by Jefferson Davis to better coordinate the efforts of the states to raise,

equip, and supply armies to the cause. A department commander was given a considerable amount of autonomy to carry out his duties. He was expected to maintain his own administrative bureau for supply, and to raise, equip, and train his own forces. He was free to contact the governors within his department concerning military matters without going through the central government in Richmond.[7] He was also expected to prepare for the defense of his department by building fortifications and assigning units to guard them.

One of the most important tasks facing a department commander was the establishment of effective control of his forces. Means of communication were usually limited and slow. Couriers or mail were the norm, and although the telegraph was revolutionary, it was only as fast or accurate as the operator using it. A commander of forces spread over several states generally needed to be centrally located to communicate efficiently.

The nature of command reflected the nature of communications over the vast distances. Orders often gave subordinates a great deal of discretion, leaving the

subordinate on the scene to make decisions as he saw fit. This system had the merit of being flexible, but it relied on the competency and good judgment of the subordinate on the scene.

The command of the vast Confederate Western Department was initially given to Leonidas Polk.[8] A West Point graduate of the class of 1827, he almost immediately resigned his army commission in order to enter the Episcopal ministry. He rose in the church leadership over the years to become the Missionary Bishop of the Southwest, but chose a more militant role to play at the outbreak of war. A close friend of Jefferson Davis, he was appointed a major general in spite of his scant military experience on June 25th, 1861 and was placed in this very senior position and vital command.[9] Upon arriving in Memphis, he found orders awaiting him to receive the Provisional Army of Tennessee into Confederate service.

When Tennessee seceded from the Union, it raised a provisional army for its defense and appointed a major general to command it by the name of Gideon J. Pillow. An influential man in Tennessee, Pillow had been a brigadier

general during the Mexican War. He had no formal military training and owed his appointment in that war and subsequent promotion to major general to the fact that he was a former law partner to then President James K. Polk. His performance then was clearly a matter of opinion. He was not especially popular with his fellow officers or his commander Winfield Scott, who considered him insubordinate.[10] In fact, Pillow's writings and accusations were instrumental in ruining Scott's presidential aspirations, and he subsequently had no shortage of personal enemies.

Despite these activities, Pillow was a man of great personal magnetism. He was dashing, tireless, fearless in battle, and could inspire troops to heroic acts. He unfortunately had his share of personality faults. As a product of the planter society of the South, he was stereotypically arrogant, rash, dominant, and aggressive. These are not necessarily poor military qualities, but he did lack a sound judgment to direct his seemingly boundless energy.[11] Pillow would be a key player in the following months as well as the Fort Henry-Fort Donelson campaign.

Tennessee's provisional army was absorbed into the Confederate Army within weeks after Polk's arrival in Memphis. Governor Harris urged Richmond to give Tennessee's officers in the old provisional army commissions of equal rank in the Confederate service when possible. Polk recommended to Jefferson Davis the appointment of Pillow as a major general, but Davis was hesitant since he was well acquainted with Pillow's history and personality.[12] Yet bowing to political pressure, Davis appointed Pillow a brigadier general July 9, 1861, and placed him under the direct command of General Polk. Davis did this in essence to keep Pillow on a short leash. He did not want Pillow to launch one of his half-baked offensives that he had been clamoring for since taking command of the provisional army.[13] Pillow, who had a highly developed sense of pride, took the news rather badly He had been a major general in the last war and he took his appointment as a demotion of sorts and an insult. It would become a source of bitter resentment which would develop into open conflict with his superiors as the months wore on.

Meanwhile, Kentucky had tried to maintain a status of neutrality. The state was deeply divided in its sentiments and the pro-Southern governor and the pro-Northern legislature did not want their state to become a battlefield. To prevent this they thought it would be best just to keep both sides out. Lincoln and Davis both realized the strategic importance of Kentucky and did their best not to push the state into the welcome arms of the other side. Both the Union and the Confederates actively recruited in several counties, but otherwise no military forces occupied the state. It was simply assumed by both sides that an invasion by one side would push Kentucky into the hands of the other, and neither adversary wanted to do that. The situation was most favorable for the Confederates, for a neutral Kentucky acted as a buffer zone, buying time for them to raise armies and prepare defenses. It was in the South's best interest to maintain this neutrality as long as possible. [14]

Even with a neutral Kentucky to the north, Governor Harris was rightly concerned for the security of the borders of his state of Tennessee. He did not believe the

neutrality could last forever and ordered likely spots along the rivers fortified and blocked. A surveying team was formed and sent to select defensible ground dominating the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers. The team was headed by Adna Anderson and Major William Foster, prominent engineers in the South, who set upon their work in earnest. They initially did locate very suitable ground to simultaneously cover the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers, but unfortunately it was located in neutral Kentucky. They then focused on surveying possible sites along the Cumberland River, looking at the high ridges and deep hollows near the Kentucky border. In mid-May, down on the west bank of the river not far below the town of Dover, Anderson laid out the water battery of Fort Donelson. The fort was named in honor of Daniel S. Donelson, the state's attorney general and the survey team's senior military advisor.[15]

The two engineers then made their way to the Tennessee River, a scant twelve miles to the west. They again carefully studied the terrain and conducted several surveys along a great length of the river. Since Fort Donelson was being built on the west bank of the Cumberland, they decided

that it would be wise to build Fort Henry on the east bank of the Tennessee. In case of trouble, men from one fort could move to the assistance of the other without having to cross a river.[16] This arrangement also meant an economy of limited manpower. It was unlikely that both forts would be attacked simultaneously, so in effect only one garrison was needed to man both forts.

Unfortunately, the east bank of the Tennessee was low and swampy, not high and dry like the west bank of the Cumberland. Anderson first picked a spot five miles upstream from the final location, but was overruled. General Donelson wanted a more defensible site downstream in Kentucky, but this would violate that state's respected neutrality. Donelson finally decided on Kirkman's Old Landing, in spite of the fact that it was on low ground dominated by hills across the river.[17] Foster and Anderson strongly objected and the head of the Tennessee Army's Corps of Engineers was called in to settle the matter.

Colonel Bushrod Johnson headed the Tennessee Army's Corps of Engineers and was the officer who actually sat in final judgment of both sites' selection. Bushrod Johnson

had graduated from West Point in 1840 and served without distinction during the Mexican War. He resigned his commission after a scandal in his quartermaster department and had taken an instructor post at the Western Military Academy at Nashville. Although a native of Ohio, when war began this luckless man cast his lot with the South.[18]

Bushrod Johnson agreed with Donelson's findings to the surprise of the engineers. He evidently felt that the two mile "field of fire" the site had down the river would offset any disadvantage of nearby terrain. To Anderson's and Foster's lasting disgust, construction on this fort began in June 1861. The post was named Fort Henry, in honor of Senator Gustavus Henry.[19] Many would regret Colonel Johnson's decision, and the fort's location would be a key factor in the coming campaign.

Problems with the location of Fort Henry surfaced early. During the summer a Captain Taylor arrived at Fort Henry to train the new artillerymen. He did not like what he saw. The fort was located at about the lowest spot on the river, and it was virtually ringed by high hills that were well within rifle range. He also noticed mud rings far

up the trees around the fort, and he knew what they were. Those were the high water marks left by the annual Tennessee River floods. He carefully measured the rings and compared them to the height of the fort. Taylor confirmed his findings and his worst fears with local residents. He estimated that in an ordinary February rise the fort would be under about two feet of water. He began to prepare a report on his findings for General Polk.[20]

Meanwhile, General Polk was busy building forts to block a river too. He had occupied and fortified the town of New Madrid, Missouri, in July 1861. It was a good site to prevent Union invaders from descending the Mississippi River, but the Confederates were looking at still another site further upstream. Columbus, Kentucky, was situated on a high bluff over the river and would be an even more formidable obstacle. Polk's subordinate General Pillow was impatient for glory and action and bombarded Polk with proposals and requests for authorization to occupy the place. Polk was eventually persuaded that it was indeed vital to seize Columbus and Paducah as well, in spite of any repercussions of a breach of Kentucky neutrality.[21] Using

slight Union violations of this neutrality as a pretext, Pillow executed Polk's plan and occupied Columbus on September 3, 1861. This unauthorized expedition effectively ended Kentucky's neutrality and set the wheels in motion for a Federal invasion of Tennessee.

Up north in Cairo, Illinois, Brigadier General U.S. Grant had been anxious to move and the Confederate invasion of Kentucky was a blessing. The day after Pillow marched into Columbus, Grant packed some transports with troops, occupied Paducah, and sealed the strategic mouths of the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers. The race to occupy Kentucky was on, and the Confederates had already lost. For although Columbus was a powerful position, without Paducah a Union thrust down the Tennessee River could cut the Memphis and Ohio Railroad and isolate it. Grant began to plan such an operation and to persuade his reluctant chain of command to approve it.

In Richmond, the Confederate government was caught completely off guard by Polk's approval and Pillow's occupation of Columbus. The reaction was confused and indecisive. The Secretary of War ordered the forces

withdrawn immediately, but Polk persuaded Davis to let him stay.[22] Davis reasoned that since the neutrality was irreparably breached, military considerations were now over political ones. Yet without a neutral Kentucky to act as a buffer zone, the weak Confederate line was exposed to attack, and the Northern armies were moving in to occupy as much of Kentucky as possible.

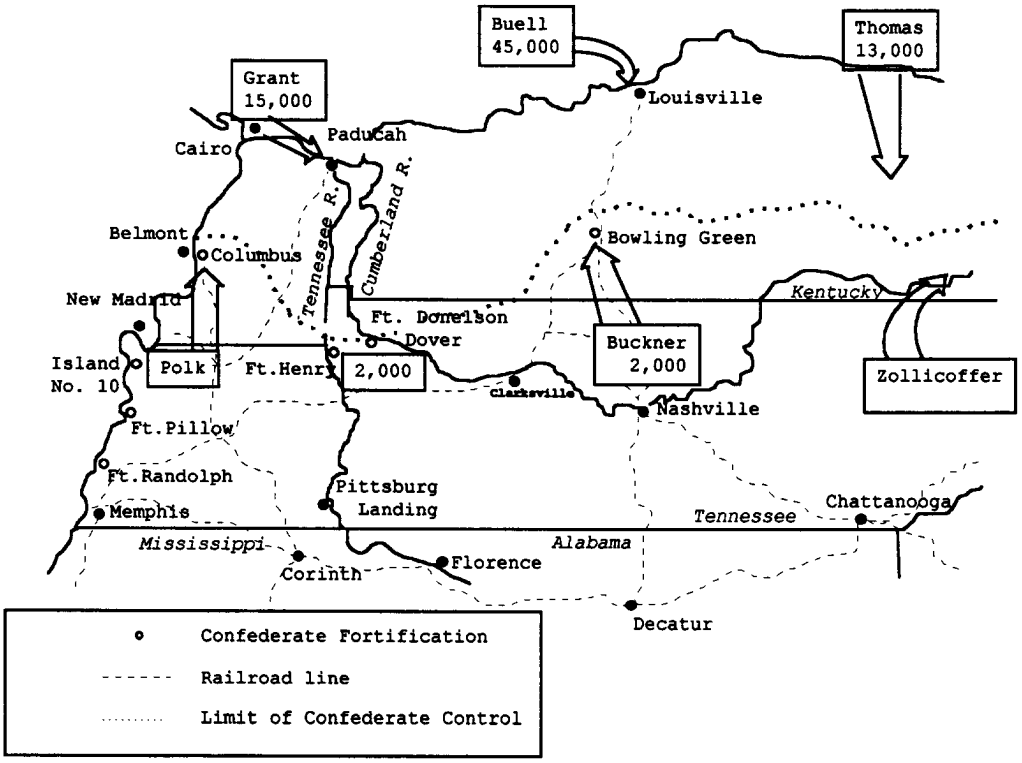

Figure 2. End of Kentucky Neutrality

The summer of 1862 showed few signs of promise for the Confederate command in the West. Leonidas Polk was not up to the daunting task of department commander, and neglected the defenses of the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers almost from the onset. Polk was easily swayed by the dynamic Gideon Pillow, who was also demonstrating he was unsuited for senior command. Both of these gentlemen were essentially political appointees, regardless of their past experiences. Yet despite the indications of incompetence, Jefferson Davis kept both men in their respective positions.

Despite the enormity of the situation and the blunderings of Polk and Pillow, all was not lost. During the long months of the summer, a man had crossed the western frontier from his post in California to answer his new nation's call. Albert Sidney Johnston had arrived.

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[1] O/R, 542

[2]Johnston, 328-333.

[3]O/R, 359-390.

[4]Ezra J. Warner, *Generals in Gray, Lives of the Confederate Commanders* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959), XX-XXII.

[5]Benjamin C. Brown, ed., *Regulations for the Army of the United States* (Albany: Weep, Parsons and Company, 1825), 1-2 (cited hereafter as *Regulations*).

[6]Warner, XXVI.

[7]Thomas L. Connelly and Archer Jones, *The Politics of Command, Factions and Ideas in Confederate Strategy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973) 88-92.

[8]Ibid., 87-92.

[9]Joseph H. Parks, *General Leonidas Polk CSA, The Fighting Bishop* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1962), 173.

[10]Woodworth, 30-31.

[11]Ibid., 30.

[12]Nathaniel C. Hughes, Jr., and Roy P. Stonesifer, Jr., *The Life and Wars of Gideon J. Pillow* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 172-174.

[13]Woodworth, 33.

[14]Foote, 86-87.

[15]Cooling, 46

[16]Ibid., 46-48.

[17]Charles M. Cummings, *Yankee Quaker and Confederate General, The Curious Career of Bushrod Rust Johnson* (Rutherford: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1971), 171-175.

[18]Warner, 157-158.

[19]Cummings, 172.

[20]Hall Allen, *Center of Conflict* (Paducah, KY: The Paducah Sun-Democrat, 1961), 61-62.

[21]Parks, 178-180.

[22]Hughes and Stonesifer, 396-397. See also Parks, 40-41.

CHAPTER 3

THE CONFEDERATE COMMAND in CRISIS SEPTEMBER 1861 TO FEBRUARY 1862

> We must give up some minor points, and concentrate our forces, to save the most important ones, or we will lose all of them in succession.[1]
>
> *P. G. T. Beauregard, Letter to General Johnston*

The key figure in the conduct of the coming campaign was Albert Sidney Johnston. He graduated from West Point in 1826 near the top of his class and served with competence in the Black Hawk War. He eventually resigned after serving eight years to tend to an ailing wife. After she died of tuberculosis two years later, Johnston moved to Texas and enlisted in the new repubic's army. He quickly rose through the ranks, and within a year he was its commanding general. Thereafter he served for two years as the Lone Star Republic's secretary of war. In this position he gained valuable experience in directing fractious volunteer units as well as defending a vast frontier with wholly inadequate resources. During the Mexican War, Johnston initially commanded a Texas regiment, but was made the inspector-

general of all volunteer troops in Zachary Taylor's army. Taylor was so impressed by his performance that he would say Johnston was "the best soldier he had ever commanded."[2] Johnston would also fight alongside a West Point classmate and a good friend Jefferson Davis.

After the war, Johnston tried for three unsuccessful years to earn a living at planting. He rejoined the United States Army and was given command of the famous Second Cavalry Regiment. Sent west, Johnston earned a reputation as a fierce fighter and a great leader of men. In 1857, he was detached from the regiment, promoted to brevet brigadier general, and led an expedition against the Mormons in Utah. In 1860 he was sent to California to assume direction of the Pacific Coast Department. His renown had soared to great heights and many considered him the Army's best general and the likely heir to the aging general-in-chief Winfield Scott.[3]

This was not to be though. When Texas seceded, Johnston resigned his commission and went to see his old friend Jefferson Davis. When he arrived in Richmond on September 5th, Davis was ecstatic. Davis saw that Johnston was the solution to his problems in the West. General Polk

had written earlier to Davis asking him to place Johnston in command of the Western Department, and many others in power and position echoed this sentiment.[4] Davis immediately commissioned Johnston as a full general and his date of rank was back-dated to May 30. This act made him the second highest ranking officer in the Confederacy.

Johnston was to command the Western Department. A review of the official records shows that Davis gave him two missions. First and foremost, he was to defend the western half of the Confederacy from invasion from the North. Second, he was to gain control of as much territory of Kentucky and Missouri as possible. With control of these two states, the South would be much safer from invasion, but would also be positioned to invade the North if it chose. These were big missions and difficult to accomplish at best. But as each week slipped by, the odds grew increasingly against the South.

Johnston was charged to form a great army to defend the vast department and to bring order out of the chaos. It was a daunting task, but Johnston seemed to be a man big enough for the job. He had shown that he could mold the individualistic men of the West into armies that could

fight. He had also served at the highest levels of command in the Republic of Texas and had run a department in the United States Army, even if for only a short time. Most were confident of success. "I hoped and expected that I had others who would prove to be generals," Davis explained, "but I knew I had one, and that was Sidney Johnston."[5] Many others thought so too, and believed that he would be the greatest general of the South.[6] Johnston quickly left Richmond for Nashville and his next assignment. He was enroute to his new post when Gideon Pillow unexpectedly occupied Columbus.

Word of Pillow's invasion reached Johnston while he was in Chattanooga and enroute to Nashville. Since Kentucky's neutrality was effectively over, military, not political, considerations came first. He met with General Zollicoffer in command of eastern Tennessee and ordered him to occupy the Cumberland Gap, the historic gateway into the region. Unfortunately, Johnston was misinformed of Pillow's movements and therefore operated under false assumptions. Johnston thought Pillow was closing in on Paducah and the strategic mouths of the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers. Had that occurred he reasoned, the west flank of his

department would be anchored and the rivers blocked, and Zollicoffer would be the anchor in the east flank. What then remained was to secure the center of the line by moving north from Nashville and occupying Bowling Green, thus blocking the railroad that ran up to Louisville.[7] Johnston scraped up about 4,000 troops that were around Nashville. He then sent the small army north by rail to Bowling Green, which was occupied without opposition on September 18th. The man in command of this little army was Simon Bolivar Buckner.

Buckner was a West Point graduate, earning his lieutenant's commission in 1844. He served with distinction on the Mexican War in Winfield Scott's army and was breveted to captain for his actions in combat. He also became a lasting friend of another young captain by the name of Ulysses S. Grant. When Grant left the army penniless, Buckner loaned him the money needed to return home.

Of more importance, while serving in Mexico Buckner became involved in a feud between Winfield Scott and his rivals over policy and credit for battlefield actions. General Scott was Buckner's true hero, and the young officer defended him against all attacks. However, Buckner made

personal attacks of his own. During the 1856 senatorial race in Tennessee, one of the candidates was a senior officer during the war who took every opportunity on the campaign trail to praise his own achievements and deride Winfield Scott. Buckner would not let attacks of this sort go unchallenged. He wrote a series of editorials under the pen name "Citizen" to the *Republican Banner* of Nashville. The articles were masterpieces of gibes, ridicule, irony, and sarcasm. Buckner made the man appear to be a pompous and arrogant fool at best.[8] The candidate's political aspirations were subsequently ruined by these letters, commonly attributed to Buckner even at the time. Although a few years to pass before Buckner and the candidate would meet again, there would stil be hard feelings over the impact of Buckner's caustic pen. The 1856 senatorial candidate of Tennessee was none other than Gideon Pillow, second in command of the Confederates at Columbus under General Polk.

Buckner was not only known as a political enemy of Pillow, but had a wider and highly regarded reputation as a soldier. Although Buckner left the United States Army after the war in Mexico, he joined the Kentucky State Guard and

quickly rose through the ranks. The governor appointed him as its inspector general in 1860, and he proved himself to be an excellent organizer, although he was known to be very meticulous and deliberate in his decisions. Through his efforts, the Kentucky State Guard became one of the best trained and equipped units in the country, rivaling and often surpassing similar units of the United States Army. His talents were recognized by the Lincoln administration, which offered Buckner a commission as a brigadier general in August 1861. He respectfully declined.[9]

During the months of Kentucky neutrality, Buckner tried to keep Union and Confederate forces out the state with a fair degree of success until Pillow's occupation of Columbus. Buckner used the time to prepare for the eventuality of casting his lot with the South by selling property and getting his personal affairs in order. He had hoped that Kentucky would join the Confederacy, but when that possibility became highly unlikely, he went south into Tennessee to offer his services.[10] He wrote to authorities in Richmond on September 11, 1861, to inquire about the possibility of receiving a commission. He did not have to wait long. Ironically, when he occupied Bowling Green,

Buckner did not yet have a Confederate commission but still nominally held the rank of a brigadier general of the Kentucky State Guard. Johnston had appointed him a brigadier in the Confederate Army pending approval from Richmond, which was effective September 15th.[11]

While the Confederates raised armies and prepared their defenses, the North prepared to invade the deep South. A formidable ironclad gunboat fleet was being built in Illinois and Missouri, and Union camps and forts were springing up all along the banks of the Ohio River Valley. Meanwhile, Lincoln was impatiently calling on his generals to attack, and they in turn were looking for the best way to go about it. In St. Louis, Major General Henry Halleck was forming his own plans to attack down the Mississippi. However, one of his subordinates, General Ulysses S. Grant, thought the quickest and surest way to strike the Confederates was down the Tennessee River with Fort Henry the target.

Grant also realized the significance of the Tennessee River. He also saw great potential in using ironclad gunboats to isolate western Tennessee from the east and allow a land force to penetrate deep into the South.

Reports and gunboat reconnaissance showed that the twin forts upriver were still incomplete.[12] Clearly, the center of the Confederate line was weakest here, and a bold strike up the river seemed to have a good chance of success. Such a move would support the Union's grand strategy of retaking the Mississippi River by threatening the Confederate fortress at Columbus, Kentucky, and subsequently the city of Memphis. A push further down the Tennessee river could also reach the vital rail center at Corinth, Mississippi.

The additional loss of the Cumberland River by the Confederates would allow Grant's rival General Buell to seize the city of Nashville with its key supply and manufacturing centers. If Grant acted fast enough, he could get to Nashville first and cut off the Confederate Army at Bowling Green. In central Tennessee, General Buell had similar plans of his own. He was calling on General Halleck to reinforce him so he could advance directly upon Nashville from his base at Louisville. with or without a coordinated effort, the Union armies were planning to invade Tennessee.

By the end of September, Johnston established his headquarters in Bowling Green, and he saw disaster coming. From the beginning he had too much territory to defend and

too few men with which to defend it. At the anchor of the Confederate line in the West, Polk held Columbus with 12,000 men, while Forts henry and Donelson were still unfinished and undermanned, with no more than 4,000 men between them. There were only 15,000 men at Bowling Green, the strong point in the center of the line, and only a small garrison at Clarksville, a key railroad junction tot he southwest. Zollicoffer and his small army of 8,000 held the east flank of the line at the Cumberland Gap.[13]

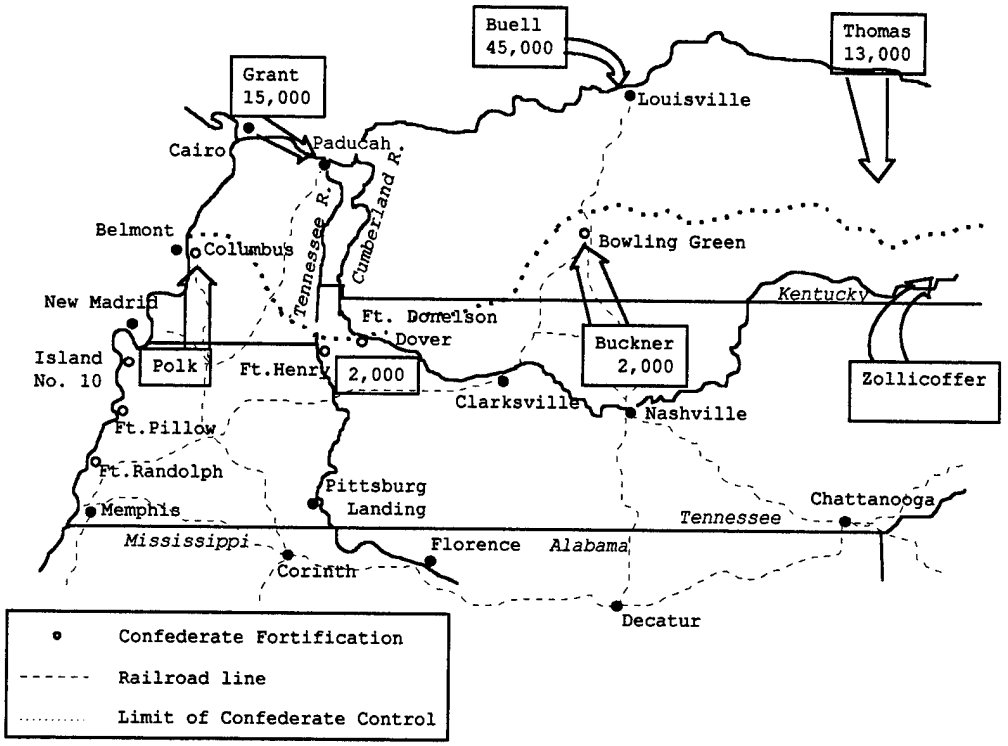

Figure 3. Situation September 1861.

Behind this thin line Johnston believed that Buell was about to attack Bowling Green with 80,000 men. This estimate was far too high, and of the 45,000 troops Buell did have, about one-third were not ready for action. Buell was not confident that he could move south without significant reinforcements, but his aggressive patrols kept the garrison at Bowling Green, and General Johnston in particular, on edge. Over in Cairo, General Grant had about 20,000 men at his disposal, and he was anxious to use them. He would also keep the Confederates alert by his patrols and gunboat reconnaissance up the rivers.[14]

Johnston was painfully aware of the peril and did what he could with what he had on hand. Even casual observation would show that the weak points of this defensive line were the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers. In fact, their construction was far behind schedule. Yet the twin river forts had received little attention since their conception in the early summer months. The official records show that the reports Johnston received of the sites at this time were typically negative in nature. Captain Taylor had reported his findings on Fort Henry to General Polk, and the matter was passed up the chain of command. Johnston dispatched

another engineer to the scene who agreed with Taylor and who also recommended the fortification of a nearby hill across the river. Johnston quickly ordered it done, and work would eventually begin on Fort Heiman. Located on the opposite shore, Fort Heiman was designed to prevent an enemy from occupying the hill and enfilading Fort Henry.

In desperation Johnston turned to psychological warfare to hold off a Yankee invasion. Statements doubling or tripling his strength appeared in all the southern newspapers, and editors hinted at imminent offensives to liberate Kentucky. The effects were mixed. Buell was frozen into inaction and pleaded for reinforcements to stop the anticipated rebel hordes. Ironically, a false sense of security fell over the Confederacy. Johnston's calls for reinforcements went largely unheeded because it was felt any available troops could be put to better use elsewhere.[15]

As the Confederates prepared their defenses, Grant was in motion. Grant had received permission to make a feint towards Columbus to prevent the Confederates from reinforcing their forces in Arkansas against a planned Union operation. It was rumored that the Rebels were crossing the Mississippi River at the steamboat crossing at Belmont and

marching west. Grant promptly loaded three thousand men on transports and headed south under the escort of two gunboats. On November 7, 1861, Grant landed his force on the west bank of the river and routed the Confederates from the field and their camps. However, Polk sent Gideon Pillow across the river with Confederate reinforcements and in turn routed Grant's troops from the field. Grant himself narrowly avoided death or capture.[16]

The Battle of Belmont was an inconclusive affair, but it showed that Grant was willing to fight and was not going to wait for good weather to do it.[17] Pillow personally handled himself courageously, but was rash in his attacks and showed little appreciation for the terrain. Although he had the opportunity to defend from a covered position, he chose to form his lines in an open cornfield. There, he received Grant's attack and then launched an all-or-nothing bayonet attack against his foe, who was using timber for cover. Such tactics needlessly threw away the lives of the men he commanded. Yet it was Pillow and his conspicuous gallantry which rallied the routed Confederates and drove off the invaders. A few days after the battle, General Polk was injured during the demonstration of a cannon. Pillow

would be in command at Columbus during Polk's period of convalescing.[18]

Meanwhile, work on Fort Henry and Fort Donelson continued slowly. The official records show that General Johnston's letters constantly urged his subordinates to construct them promptly and the bureaus to provide the proper armament. But the needs of the country for ordnance were so much greater than the ability to supply it, that Columbus alone was ready. The twin river forts were also delayed from the onset by a lack of slave labor, and the few troops on site were unused to digging and unwilling to build them. The response for additional slaves was slow and feeble, since the planters in the area needed them to plant and harvest the crops.[19]

What was needed at the river forts was firm leadership and unity of control over the defensive preparations. For some unfathomable reason, Johnston never once went in person to inspect the works in the months prior to Grant's campaign. While he had visited all other major forts and commands during his first three months in command, Johnston subordinated the tasks of assessing the situation to

Brigadier General Lloyd Tilghman, who assumed command of both forts on November 17th.[20]

Lloyd Tilghman had graduated from West Point in 1836 and resigned from the army the same year. Until the Civil War, he was employed as a construction engineer on a number of railroads throughout the South. He served in the Mexican War as a captain of volunteers in command of the Maryland and District of Columbia Battalion. A member of the Kentucky State Guard, he followed his commander, Simon Buckner and cast his lot with the South. He received his Confederate commission as a brigadier general on October 18, 1861.[21] As a Kentuckian and an engineer, he was apparently a good choice to supervise both forts' construction, but to say the least, he did not like what he saw on the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers. His reports echoed the concerns of others made of the Fort Henry site, and work was far behind schedule on Fort Donelson.[22]

Overlapping authority, unclear command channels, and conflicting orders became a daily nightmare for Tilghman. Unfortunately, he contributed to this by constantly interfering with the forts' chief engineer, Jeremy Gilmer, by giving advice and countermanding his orders to work

crews. If that was not enough, General Pillow, in temporary command at Columbus, published directives that brought work to a virtual halt. Pillow wanted the engineers to survey Fort Heiman immediately at the expense of ongoing work and suggested that slaves and whites work side by side digging the trenches and batteries. The engineers and white laborers exploded in rage at the notion and only on appeal by Johnston did the work resume.[23]

Through the fall of 1861, the Confederate line in the West held. This was due mainly because the Union commanders were hesitant to move since they believed that they were greatly outnumbered. Albert Sidney Johnston deserves much of the credit. Through guile and bravado, Johnston led his enemy to believe he was far stronger than he was. Unfortunately for the South, the long gray line was anything but strong. Work was slow to complete the forts, and the delivery of supplies and personnel were even slower. The Confederates were fortunate that the Federals had not yet seriously advanced for it would have exposed their weakness. The South had adopted the strategy of a static defense reinforced by a series of forts through the necessity of holding as much terrain as possible. Yet this strategy

yielded the initiative to the enemy, and the Confederate positions were vulnerable to the mobile columns from the north. As the year 1861 closed, the Confederate military situation in the West was at least stable, but this situation was about to change.

The first crack in the defense came not on the rivers, but in eastern Tennessee. On January 27, 1862, Brigadier General Thomas routed Zollicoffer's Confederates guarding the Cumberland Gap at the Battle of Mill Springs. Tactically complete as the Confederate defeat had been, it did not turn out to be strategically disastrous. Crossing the Cumberland, Thomas entered a region more barren than the one he left. Although he put his men on half rations intending to move to Knoxville, poor weather and roads halted his advance. The Federals withdrew, and what was left of the Confederate right wing finally came to a rest at Chestnut Mound, about sixty miles from Nashville.[24]

Another fissure in the Confederate defense was in the Confederate command itself. When General Pillow assumed temporary command of Columbus, he flooded Johnston's headquarters with reports claiming that he was about to be attacked by an overwhelming force.[25] He also proposed a

major offensive to capture Cairo, Illinois, an idea which was quickly scuttled. When Polk returned to duty in December, Pillow found himself a subordinate again and under a man he considered unqualified. The issue came to a head as Pillow publicly and privately complained that Polk failed to support him at Belmont and that he had intentionally and systematically been slighted from the onset by Jefferson Davis. Shortly after Christmas, Pillow resigned in frustration and returned home. However, Pillow was a man of action and could not tolerate sitting at home. With the death of Zollicoffer at Mill Springs on January 19th, Senator Henry suggested that Pillow could be placed in charge of the Confederate forces in eastern Tennessee. Asked to return, Pillow withdrew his resignation. Johnston then assigned him not to field command, but to the supply depot at Clarksville.[26] There Pillow used his great energy and organizational skills to transform the depot into the best one on the Cumberland River. He also put special emphasis on the stockpiling of supplies and ammunition at Fort Donelson.

In Bowling Green, Johnston knew he did not have much time before the Union armies were in motion. Gunboats were

ranging up the rivers probing the forts, and the rivers were rising, allowing clear navigation over the obstructions placed back in the autumn. Johnston called on Richmond to send more troops, and they sent a brigade under the command of Brigadier General John B. Floyd. Richmond also sent the famed General P. G. T. Beauregard, who reached Bowling Green on February 4th.

Beauregard had graduated second in his class at West Point and was an engineer on Winfield Scott's staff during the Mexican War, where he received two brevets for gallantry. He commanded the Confederate forces at Fort Sumter and at Bull Run and was commissioned a full general in the Confederate Army on July 12, 1861. There was some friction between Jefferson Davis and Beauregard, and his new assignment was seen by some to placing him on the shelf. Yet Davis stressed that Beauregard was an able engineer, and since the strategy in the West was defensive, the general could apply his skill in fortifications.[27]

When Beauregard arrived in Tennessee, he was briefed by Johnston and learned to his amazement of the deplorable and vulnerable shape the defenses were in. Beauregard found the Confederates had approximately 14,000 men at Bowling

Green and an additional 11,000 at points southwest of the town. In the center of the Confederate line at Forts Henry and Donelson were 5,500. The force at Columbus on the extreme left numbered 17,000. Thus a line of 150 miles in length was being held by about 48,000 troops. West of the Mississippi in Arkansas, but under Johnston's command, were 20,000 under Van Dorn. Those forces in theory could be brought east across the Mississippi, but politically the Confederates could not abandon Arkansas to the Union forces in Missouri.[28]

Opposing this extended line was an imposing array of Federal armies. Poised north of Bowing Green was Don Carlos Buell with 70,000 men (of whom probably 57,000 were combat ready). In western Kentucky Ulysses S. Grant commanded about 20,000. In Missouri, Henry W. Halleck, who was also Grant's superior, had a force of about 30,000 available for offensive operations.[29] Each Union army appeared to be making preparations to move.

Beauregard was shocked by the Confederate dispositions. Bowling Green and Columbus were salients that protruded north leaving Forts Henry and Donelson behind in the center. This array left the Confederates operating on exterior

lines, thus making it more difficult to shift forces to threatened areas quickly. This military weakness was actually offset somewhat by the connecting railroad from Columbus to Bowling Green. However, the railroad crossed the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers and was protected there only by Forts Henry and Donelson. Also, Johnston did not establish a strategic reserve. Any shifting of troops would weaken the front of another sector. Beauregard proposed to pull out of Bowling Green and heavily reinforce the twin forts. Johnston refused such a move, principally for the reason that retreat from that city would open the direct rail line to Nashville to Buell's army.[30] Perhaps Johnston felt he could react better to any moves made by Grant on the rivers than he could to Buell using the railroad from Louisville.

Ironically, the arrival of Beauregard actually prompted the Federals into attacking. For months Lincoln had heard nothing from his commanders except reasons why they could not advance. Most Union armies were bogged down during the winter months due to the heavy rains and resulting muddy roads. Grant was able to move large forces in his department primarily due to the presence of the Tennessee

and Cumberland rivers. Using gunboats and transports he could advance into the South during the winter in spite of the lack of paved roads or railroads. When the Federals found out about the movement of Beauregard to the western theater, they also heard erroneously that he was bringing fifteen regiments from Virginia with him. But this rumor did prompt the usually slow General Halleck to authorize Grant's plan to strike at the river forts before they could be reinforced with Beauregard's "army."[31]

Halleck had finally come to agree with Grant on the significance and merits of the Tennessee River approach. He was under a lot of pressure from Lincoln to begin an offensive, and Grant alone was reporting as ready to move. Halleck is perhaps best known for his caution, but evidently Grant's gunboat reconnaissance provided him with some fortitude. The forts were apparently unfinished and undermanned. So, wishing to take control of the Tennessee before the arrival of Beauregard and his rumored reinforcements, Halleck ordered Grant into action at the end of January.[32]

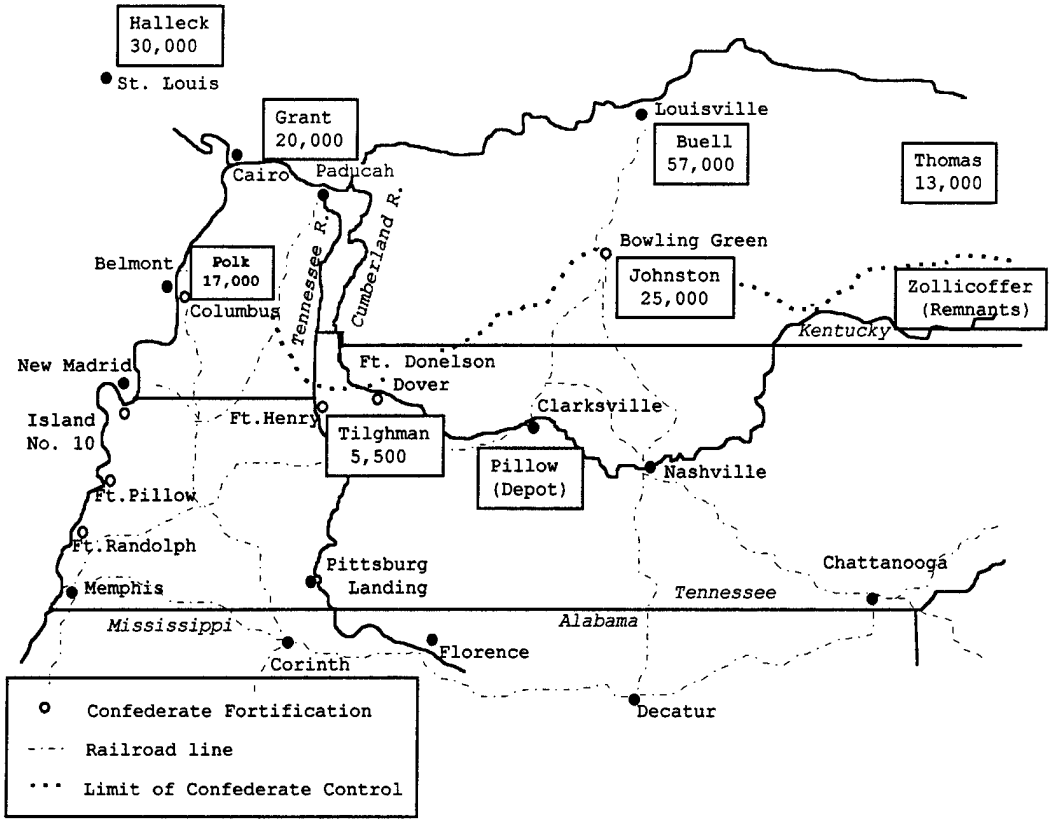

Figure 3. Situation January 1861.

Johnston learned that Grant was in motion and began to shift forces to meet the threat. From Bowling Green, Brigadier Generals John B. Floyd with his brigade and Buckner with the bulk of his division were sent to Russellville. As a result, these units were halfway between Bowling Green and Clarksville and within easy reach of both.

John B. Floyd is the last of the main characters introduced into the campaign. He was a former governor of Virginia and the Secretary of War in the recent Buchanan

administration. He left the Union with his state and was appointed a brigadier general in the Confederate Army with a date of rank of May 2, 1861. When he joined the South, he was bitterly criticized in the North for allegedly transferring large numbers of arms from Northern to Southern arsenals just prior to the war. He was also under a federal court indictment for contracting schemes involving the War Department and Indian Trust bonds in the Interior Department.[33] Floyd believed, and perhaps rightfully so, that he would be tried for treason by a hostile North should he be captured. He was a politician by trade with no formal military training. His experience prior to the campaign was serving for a few inglorious months in the West Virginia campaign under Robert E. Lee before the transfer West. In that campaign Floyd was at odds with a fellow brigadier over the placement of troops. Floyd was tactically wrong, but the other brigadier was junior in seniority. The latter was subsequently recalled to Richmond by the protocol of the day, but Floyd was sent to the Western Theater.[34] Since he was the senior brigadier on the Cumberland by virtue of date of rank, Floyd's responsibilities would greatly increase in

the coming weeks. Unfortunately, in training, background, and temperament, Floyd was completely out of his element.

As January drew to a close, Johnston learned to his dismay that Tilghman at Fort Henry was still pondering whether to fortify the ground across the river. "It is most extraordinary," wrote Johnston. "I ordered General Polk four months ago at once to construct those works. And now, with the enemy on us, nothing of importance has been done. It is most extraordinary." He wired Tilghman: "Occupy and entrench the heights opposite Fort Henry. Do not lose a moment. Work all night."[35] Work as they did, their time was out. Down the river, Grant was on the move.

The months leading up to the campaign bode ill fortune for the Confederacy. Albert Sidney Johnston had expended a great deal of effort in procuring men, arms, and supplies, but had failed to effectively employ the forces he had on had. The forward garrisons at Columbus and Bowling Green were in a precarious position should a Union army breach the western defenses. Johnston also placed his headquarters in Bowling Green. This was the most forward point of the defensive line, which hardly facilitiated his effective control over the entire department.

Albert Sidney Johnston also failed to take advantage of the weeks of quiet after the Battle of Mill Springs to adjust his line. In this interlude there was a chance to shift force commanders at leisure, without the pressures of an advancing Union army. Unfortunately for the South Johnston continued to see Buell's army as the primary threat, in spite of Grant's demonstrated ability to move quickly using the western rivers.

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[1]Harry T. Williams, *P.G T. Beauregard, Napoleon in Gray*. (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press), 1955), 112.

[2]Quoted from Woodworth, 48.

[3]Ibid., 49.

[4]Parks, 179-180.

[5]Woodworth, 30.

[6]Williams, 116.

[7]Woodworth, 52-54. See also Johnston, 308-309.

[8]Arndt M. Stickles, *Simon Bolivar Buckner, Borderland Knight* (Wilmington: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1987), 40-41.

[9]Ibid., 86-87.

[10]Ibid., 89-91.

[11]Johnston, 308-310.

[12]Ulysses S. Grant, *Memoirs and Selected Letters,* ed. John Y. Simon (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 188.

[13]Woodworth, 53.

[14]Cooling, 65-66.

[15]Shelby Foote, *The Civil War, A Narrative, Fort Sumpter to Perryville* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 175.

[16]Grant, 183-185.

[17]Ibid., 149-152.

[18]Hughes and Stonesifer, 204-205.

[19]William P. Johnston, *The Life of General Albert Sidney Johnston* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1878), 423.

[20]*OR, I, IV,* 453. See also Johnston, 415.

[21]Warner, 306.

[22]OR, I, IV, 485-486 Tilghman's letter is typical.

[23]Johnston, 416-417.

[24]Foote. 179.

[25]OR. I, IV, 552. Pillow's letter is evidence.

[26]Hughes and Stonesifer, 206-207.

[27]Williams, 115.

[28]Johnston, 351.

[29]Williams, 116.

[30]Ibid., 117.

[31]Catton, *Terrible Swift Sword* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1960), 14.

[32]Archer Jones, *Civil War Command and Strategy, The Process of Victory and Defeat*. (New York: The Free Press, 1992) 47.

[33]Warner, 90.

[34]Catton, 48.

[35]Johnston, 424-425.

CHAPTER 4

THE FORT HENRY AND FORT DONELSON CAMPAIGN

> I did not come here for the purpose of surrendering my men.[1]
>
> *Colonel Nathan Bedford Forrest, OR*

Grant had been wanting to attack for weeks, and he finally had permission. The day after he got it and before his fickle boss could change his mind, Grant moved south. He shuttled his divisions in the available transports up the Tennessee beginning on February 2d, and in four days he had the bulk of his forces at "Camp Halleck" just four miles north of Fort Henry. The plan was to bombard the fort into submission with the new ironclad gunboats and use his army to block any retreating Confederates from escaping eastward to Fort Donelson. Grant was confident of success since reconnaissance revealed the weakness of the fort's site to fire from the gunboats. The winter rains had raised the river several feet bringing the fort's guns nearly to water level, thus negating any advantage in height.[2]

Upstream, General Tilghman watched the rising waters of the Tennessee and the Union preparations. Combining the two, he decided he did not have a chance. By the time of the attack, he calculated that the water would be flooding the powder magazines and possibly the guns themselves. On February 4th, Tilghman ordered the abandonment of Fort Heiman on the west bank and the next day sent 2,500 men to Fort Donelson. They made their way across the two muddy roads connecting the forts through the rugged country of hills, marshes, and streams under the cover of a driving rainstorm. With about eighty men, Tilghman would stay and buy time for his army to retreat, inflicting as much damage on the Union fleet as possible. He planned to surrender when resistance was no longer possible.[3]

Grant's gunboats and the three infantry divisions left Camp Halleck at 11:00 A.M. on February 6th, and in just over two hours the gunboats pounded Fort Henry into submission. Led by Tilghman, the gun crews made a valiant defense in spite of the flood waters of the Tennessee actually entering the fort proper. The gunboats eventually disabled the heavy cannon of the fort and drove off the crews of the lighter

pieces. Yet the vaunted ironclads suffered too. The flagship USS Essex was heavily damaged, and other boats were badly hit.[4] Grant's infantry was slowed by the rain-soaked roads and failed to block the retreating Confederates' path.

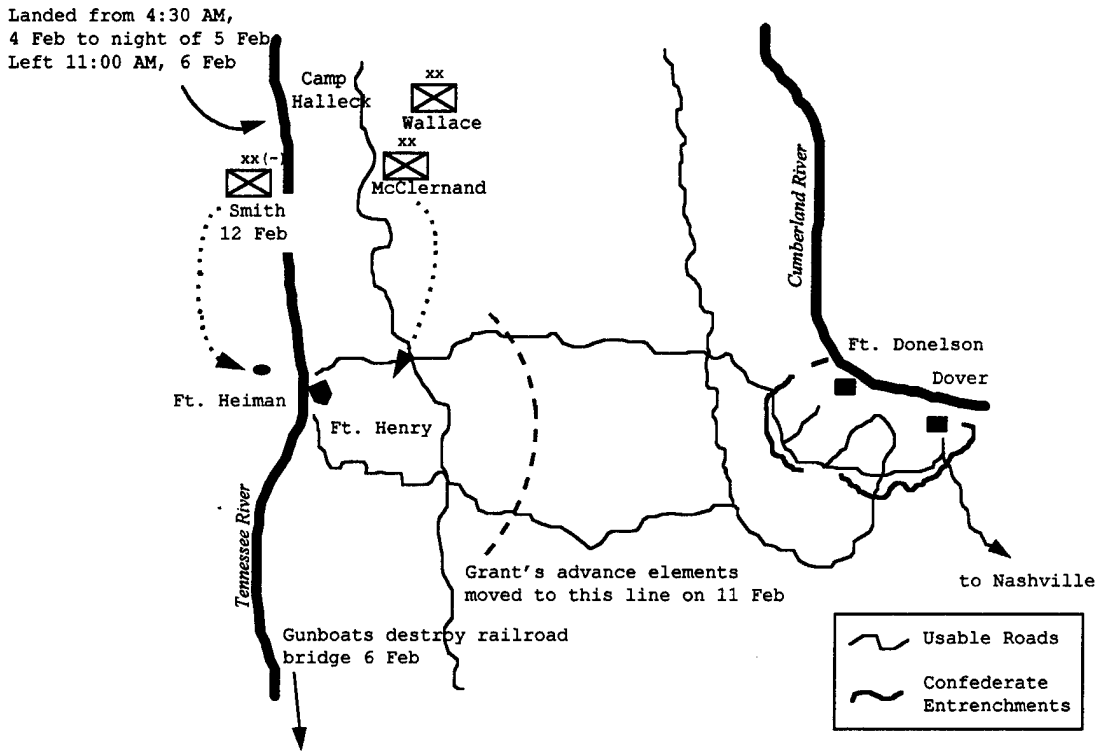


Figure 5. Battle of Fort Henry 4-6 February 1862

Although disappointed in the failure to trap the garrison, Grant was jubilant. Unlike Belmont, this was a clear victory, and Grant wanted to follow it up. He

sent an overly optimistic telegram to Halleck promising that he would proceed to Fort Donelson and force its surrender by February 9th.[5] However, Grant's army needed a few days to allow the gunboats to return to Cairo for urgent repairs, and the rains had made the roads impassable for artillery and wagon trains. A reconnaissance by Grant himself on February 7th came to within a mile of Fort Donelson's outer works, and he began to suspect that Fort Donelson would prove a tougher nut to crack than Fort Henry.[6] While he impatiently waited to make a general advance on Fort Donelson, Grant dispatched two gunboats to ascend the Tennessee to destroy the key railroad bridge of the Memphis and Ohio Railroad and to wipe all Confederate shipping from the river. The gunboats were successful in their mission of destruction, and they spread panic and fear far beyond their actual capabilities. Even the Confederate command was unnerved.[7]

Johnston himself began to overestimate the power of the ironclads, sending a report to Richmond that no fort could stand against them.[8] Also, Johnston's guile and bluff that had held the Federals in check and the Southern hopes high

for so long worked against him. If a handful of gunboats were sufficient enough by themselves to reduce the "powerful" Fort Henry, how could any fort stand up to them?[9] A review of Johnston's dispatches shows that he had received a number of reports over the past months on the readiness of Fort Henry that varied widely.[10] It is logical to assume that he placed at least some faith in its capability since he took no drastic measures to improve its readiness or prepared subsequent defenses.

Nevertheless, the fall of Fort Henry left Johnston in a desperate situation. The Confederates, with numerically inferior forces, were already operating on the line outside of a circle created by the Columbus and Bowling Green salients. The disadvantage of this exterior line was partially offset by the Confederates' control of the railway from Bowling Green to Columbus. But what was feared came to pass. The railroad was cut, Columbus flanked, and Grant was between the major Confederate forces.[11] There was also no strategic reserve to plug the gap. Most everyone expected Grant to move on to Fort Donelson quickly, and there was a general fear that the Union gunboats would appear at any

time and subdue the place just like Fort Henry. Another result of Fort Henry's fall was that General Buell became confident enough to move out of his entrenchments at Louisville. He sent elements forward towards Bowling Green which fixed Johnston's attention.[12]

Johnston knew he had to act quickly, but what was he to do? If he took his entire force at Bowling Green to Fort Donelson, it would leave Buell free to occupy that city and make a drive on Nashville. If he divided his army to keep part of it at Bowling Green, it might not be enough to get the job done in either sector. Johnston met again with Beauregard, and they decided that there were two options. They could concentrate at Fort Donelson immediately and try to destroy Grant before he was reinforced, or evacuate the fort and retreat into southwestern Tennessee. The first choice was a gamble, since if this eastern half of Johnston's severed army was destroyed, the Confederate defense in the West would be shattered. The other choice was not inviting either. Abandoning Fort Donelson outright meant the loss of Nashville and most of Tennessee.

The option of concentrating at Fort Donelson to defeat Grant before the cautious Buell moved had the merit of regaining the initiative. It would also fit Jefferson Davis' strategic concept of defending all territory by counterthrusting against any Union offensive. The rail line at Johnston's disposal could speed the army at Bowling Green to Fort Donelson where Grant could be crushed before he was reinforced into an overwhelming army. Possibly, in spite of the swampy landward approaches, Fort Henry might even be retaken. The most apparent and unimaginative course was to abandon to the Union the line of the Cumberland and Nashville with its precious storehouses, field artillery factory, and arsenals.[13]

Beauregard was initially for taking every man of the Bowling Green garrison into Fort Donelson, which he saw was the next obvious target. Johnston again forbade that, fearing the complete evacuation of Bowling Green would open Nashville to Buell. Instead, he decided to take the middle ground. He ordered Beauregard to Columbus to take charge of the western half of the army. Beauregard was then to leave

enough men to hold the Mississippi forts, and to take everybody else south for an eventual reunion with Johnston.

Johnston then gave the orders to reinforce Fort Donelson. The process of reinforcement was ad hoc at best, and the designation of an overall commander would take a few days. In the meantime, a newly promoted Brigadier General Bushrod Johnson assumed command at Fort Donelson on February 7th to replace the captured Lloyd Tilghman. This was the same Bushrod Johnson who made the final choice for the site for Fort Henry the previous summer. He would exercise command for only a few hours however, for the next day Gideon Pillow was ordered to assemble all of the troops in Clarksville, move to Fort Donelson, and take command. A brigade of about 2,000 men was quickly dispatched, but its commander, Brigadier General Robert Clark, resigned in protest after Pillow commandeered his unit.[14] By the end of February 7th, there were about 7,00 men at Fort Donelson.[15] These troops consisted of the original garrison, the Fort henry garrison, and "Clark's" brigade from Pillow's depot.

General Johnston also ordered Buckner to take his division of some 7,000 men from Russellville to Fort

Donelson. He began to move his forces on February 7th and they began to arrive at Clarksville in force two days later. However, since Pillow still commanded the depot at Clarksville, units that arrived were then shipped on to Fort Donelson under Pillow's standing orders. When Buckner himself entered Clarksvile on February 10th, he discovered that most of his troops were already at Fort Donelson digging trenches.

Meanwhile, Johnston ordered Floyd to take command of the Cumberland River defenses, including the garrison of Fort Donelson. As the senior brigadier general sent to the threatened sector, he was to command. Floyd was also tasked to take his force at Russellville to Clarksville without delay. The separate regiments began their movements quickly and the bulk of Floyd's brigade was in Clarksville by February 8th. Just as Buckner's troops, Floyd's were then shipped to Fort Donelson as quickly as the transports could send them. In the command culture of the day, Johnston gave him some latitude on how he would move his forces. Johnston did not give Floyd complete freedom of movement, however, because he was specifically directed to encamp on the west

bank of the Cumberland. This would leave open the route to Nashville in case of the loss of the fort. What Johnston did not give Floyd was specific instructions on just how he expected Floyd to set up his defense. A review of Johnston's dispatches shows a presumption of a determined defense at Fort Donelson but nothing more. He provided no specific guidance, which the inexperienced Floyd required.

Back in Bowling Green, General Johnston found that after dispatching troops to the Fort Donelson sector there was nothing to keep Buell from getting in behind him. Feeling he had insufficient forces to deal directly with the Union threat, Johnston evacuated Bowling Green. He was abandoning the center of the Kentucky line and planned to center the Confederate defense in his department on the city of Nashville. Unfortunately, no defensive preparations had been made there over the past six months. The city was indefensible.

Albert Sidney Johnston's judgment must now be questioned in detail. If Johnston believed in the invulnerability of the ironclad gunboats, his decision to maintain a large garrison at Fort Donelson seems irrational.

If the ironclads were so powerful, then the garrison was doomed at the outset. Even if the fort was not yet invested by a hostile land force, the running of the gunboats past the water batteries would cut the only convenient line of withdrawal. The retreating Confederates would be forced to march over roads more miserable that the two Grant had to plod along from Fort Henry. Not only would such a route still run the risk of interception or overrunning by the Union army, but the roads led only further into the back country and away from any strategic point of importance.[16]

To Gideon Pillow there was no doubt that the key to defending the Cumberland River was Fort Donelson. While he had not inspected the fort at Dover, his nature dictated that the enemy must be met and stopped at the front line. Tennessee was his home state, and he was doing all he could to prepare for its defense. Pillow was chiefly responsible for the vast amount of supplies sent to the fort, and as regiments from Buckner's division and Floyd's brigade arrived he sent them on to Fort Donelson. Offensive in spirit, Pillow was probably not intending only to hold the fort, but was planning to exploit any possibility of

launching an attack. Pillow may also have heard of his impending assignment to the fort and wanted as large a force as possible to command.[17]

Pillow received such orders from Johnston and arrived at the fort on February 9th. He inspected the defenses and was impressed with the location of the water batteries, noting that the narrowness of the river at this point would probably allow no more than three gunboats to bring their guns to bear at a time. Pillow did not like the fact that, although the lighter guns were mounted, a heavy columbiad and a rifled thirty-two pounder were not. His orders set the work in motion to correct this deficiency. The landward defenses, however, were entirely inadequate. Pillow ordered the digging of earthworks as a priority effort and sent teams forward to fell trees to clear fields of fire and form a sort of crude abatis. Although most of the ground was covered by a thick underbrush that made movement difficult anyway, branches from the overlapping trees were cut and sharpened to hamper an infantry assault.[18] The semicircular earthworks were anchored to the north on Hickman Creek and

to the south on Lick Creek. At this time both were flooded and were a serious obstacle.

As the long day drew to a close, Pillow was still hard at work organizing the defenses and ordering ammunition for the heavy guns from Nashville. Pillow organized his forces and actually took into account the sensitivities of Buckner and Floyd. Although Buckner was not yet present, he was designated commander of the right wing, which was anchored on Hickman Creek and extended southward in a broad arc. This wing consisted of mostly Buckner's troops arriving from Bowling Green. Bushrod Johnson was given command of the troops in the southern sector or left wing, which was composed of the Fort Henry evacuees, the original garrison, and various units arriving from Hopkinsville. The Virginians of Floyd's brigade were arriving, but Pillow did not assign them to either division.

By the end of February 9th, Pillow was beginning to feel better about the state of affairs at Fort Donelson and perhaps for good reason. By the end of the day, the defenses were at least organized if not fully prepared. But that was changing too as the men continued to dig earthworks

and construct obstacles.[19] Morale was improving, the supply system was functioning fairly well, and the reinforcements from Buckner's and Floyd's commands were beginning to pour in. Pillow regained much of his optimism and sent a wire to Floyd stating: "I feel very confident of holding it against assault by the infantry and if I am allowed time to complete the works and mount all the guns I have confidence in being able to resist the attack of their gunboats if they are vulnerable to all metal."[20]

Work on the fort continued throughout the day of February 10th. Although confident of holding Fort Donelson, Pillow showed in his daily dispatch to Floyd on this day that he had given up the notion, for the time being at least, of a drive to retake Fort Henry. His dispatch also showed that he had begun to realize that a land force could cut off his supplies by moving astride the River Road south of the fort. But there was good news too. One of the most welcome additions to the garrison was the 3rd Tennessee Cavalry Regiment under the command of Colonel Nathan Bedford Forrest. There had been few cavalrymen available up to this point and they would be used to acquire additional

information on Grant's movements. By the end of the day there were approximately 11,000 men in the fort.

Simon Bolivar Buckner had arrived at Clarksville on the previous day and met with Floyd to discuss a strategy he had formulated. Buckner proposed that the remaining troops at Clarksville and his original command, which was already at Fort Donelson, be brought back to Cumberland City, which was about halfway between the fort and Clarksville. Pillow's mission would be to fix Grant and hold Fort Donelson as long as possible with only the original garrison and a few additional units. Buckner argued that Cumberland City, not Fort Donelson, was where they should make a determined stand. He argued that a force in Cumberland City could then operate against Grant's line of logistics without fear of being cut off by the gunboats or cut off by land forces as it could at Fort Donelson. In Buckner's plan, Pillow and Fort Donelson would become expendable.

Buckner and Floyd visited Cumberland City on February 10th, and Floyd approved the plan.[21] However, at this late date no defensive preparations had been made there, and the small force envisioned for Fort Donelson would be completely

inadequate for its task of fixing Grant. Yet orders were sent to Pillow to remove Floyd's brigade of Virginians and Buckner's division from Fort Donelson to Cumberland City.

Pillow wanted no part of the scheme since it meant retreating. He saw this plan as another Fort Henry scenario and urged a delay in implementing the plan until he could discuss the matter in person.[22] Floyd apparently did not want to delay what he felt was the inevitable and ordered Buckner to Fort Donelson to supervise the removal of their units. Buckner arrived at Dover the night of February 11th and met with Pillow. Pillow forbade the removal of any troops until he could discuss the matter with Floyd. The next morning, he boarded a steamboat and traveled the fifteen miles to Cumberland City to persuade Floyd to change his mind.[23]

John B. Floyd had a lot on his mind lately. He was unsure of the strategy his superior Albert Sidney Johnston wanted to employ. He had telegraphed him days earlier asking for guidance and for the department commander to pay a visit to the threatened sector of his command. Besides, it would be a natural expectation of the commander in chief

to oversee the front-line situation at the fort himself. But Johnston felt that with the possibility of attack from Buell, many miles to the north, Bowling Green needed his attention more than the immediately threatened Fort Donelson. This reasoning occurred in spite of the existence of a growing corps of over 18,000 Confederates around Clarksville and Dover, whose scattered elements were commanded by separate brigadier generals of differing seniority. Johnston had Major General Hardee at his disposal, who was more than competent to withdraw the army from Bowling Green without his personal direction. Floyd's telegrams irritated Johnston at what he believed were vacillations. The fact was that Floyd was not confident in his own abilities and apparently put his faith and trust to the superior authority and experience of Albert Sidney Johnston to decide what was needed.[24]

On February 12th, Grant was ready to leave Fort Henry and move on Fort Donelson. The gunboats were not yet repaired, but leaving now would give him enough time to completely invest the fort before the planned bombardment would start driving the Confederates out. Grant did not

want another repeat of Fort Henry. At 11:00 A.M., Grant's army began the twelve-mile march towards its objective along the two narrow and muddy roads heading east. As the men marched the February rains slackened and the temperature rose. To the troops, Spring had apparently come early. The line of march was soon strewn with discarded overcoats, blankets, and equipment as men threw them away to lighten their load. They would soon regret this mistake.

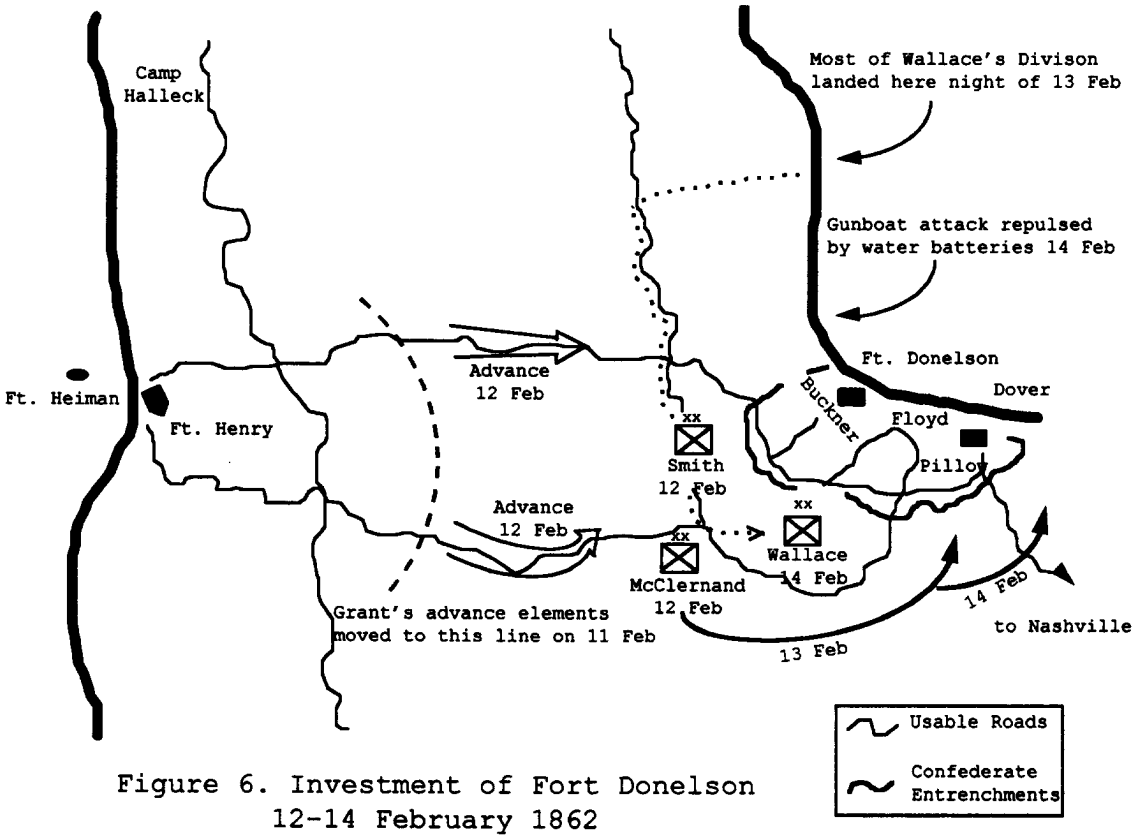


Figure 6. Investment of Fort Donelson
12-14 February 1862

Grant was actually boldly moving in the face of an enemy he knew little about. He had been told by his engineers that the earthworks of Fort Donelson were poorly built, and he had no idea of just how many Confederates were in the rifle pits. Grant did know that Pillow or Floyd was in command and that may have accounted for his boldness. He relates in his memoirs a conversation he had with Buckner that he would have acted quite differently if he knew his old friend was in command.[25] Had the Confederates attacked during his movement, they would have outnumbered him by a substantial margin as they attacked one column and destroyed it before the other could react over the rough and timbered terrain. It was a lost opportunity.

Grant's battle plan was again a simple one. The gunboats in the river would destroy the water batteries, and the artillery on land would bombard the fort from the land side. Surrender should follow quickly, just like Fort Henry. The Union forces maneuvered into position as a division under John A. McClernand formed a line on the right flank facing the town of Dover and as another Union division

under Charles F. Smith took the left flank facing the water batteries. Contrary to his West Point instruction and the established practice in sieges for thousands of years, the inexperienced Grant did not entrench his army.[26] He apparently decided there was no need to build earthworks, for his army would move on to the fort before they were completed. He later inspected his lines and concluded that they were thin in places, particularly on the extended right wing. Grant learned from captured Confederates that there were up to 25,000 men in the fort, although there were actually only about 20,000 by this time. With Smith's and McClernand's divisions he only had 15,000. Against such odds, Grant's recklessness came to an end. He ordered Wallace to bring up his division from Fort Henry, where it had been left in reserve.[27] The Confederates missed another golden opportunity to attack Grant at this time. Perhaps had Pillow been present, instead of off trying to locate Floyd, he would have ordered an attack.

In Pillow's absence the situation at the fort developed quickly as the Union advance drove in the Confederate cavalry and pickets. Although in command, Buckner thought

little of the defensive preparations and was still acting on the assumption that he would withdraw his division and Floyd's brigade as planned. Upstream, Pillow was told that Floyd had returned to Clarksville and was unavailable. He also learned of Grant's advance, whereby he quickly commandeered a steamer and headed back to Dover. Upon arrival, he tersely informed Buckner that his orders for evacuation were canceled and that he should join his division on the line.

Late that evening Pillow telegraphed Cumberland City and ordered up all the remaining troops. He then telegraphed an optimistic situation report to his immediate superior Floyd. Some have said it was downright misleading:

> If I can retain my present force, I can hold my position. Let me retain Buckner for the present. If now withdrawn, will invite an attack. Enemy can not pass this place without exposing himself to flank-attack. If I am strong enough to take field, he cannot ever reach here; not is it possible for him to subsist in the country to pass over, nor can he possibly bring his subsistence with him. With Buckner's force, I can hold my position. Without it cannot long.[28]

Having no confidence in Floyd's judgment, Pillow also sent the report directly to Johnston. His assurances that Fort Donelson could be held eliminated all trust that

Johnston had in Floyd's ability to handle the situation by his own discretion. He immediately telegraphed Floyd and ordered the general and all available forces to the beleaguered fort. Before the sun rose on the next day, Floyd arrived in Dover and assumed command from Pillow. Floyd inspected the works after breakfast and showed some concern over the outer line of trenches. However, for the most part he seemed oddly detached and indifferent, apparently relying on Pillow.[29] No sooner had Floyd inspected the defenses than firing broke out along the line. Grant had arrived in force.

Grant hated to be idle, and adhering to the plan meant waiting on the gunboats to come up the Cumberland River after being repaired. Waiting also allowed the Confederates more time to strengthen their defenses. On the morning of February 13th, he ordered his forces forward to probe the Confederate defenses and the lone gunboat present, the *USS Carondelet,* to challenge the water batteries. The results were not good. The *Carondelet* was heavily damaged after trading shots with the Confederate water batteries. Wallace's division encountered the tangled brush and deep

ravines and was driven back by heavy musket fire. A brigade of Smith's division seized a hilltop in its assigned sector, but it too was driven back. As evening came all of the Union troops began to realize that Fort Donelson was going to be tough. It also began to rain which turned into a driving blizzard as the temperatures plunged. The troops were too near the lines to risk warming fires and by morning they were a miserable lot.

Around 1:00 A.M. on February 14th, the Confederate brigadiers met to decide what to do. They were a diverse assortment. Floyd was essentially a politician in uniform. Pillow was arrogant, egocentric, insubordinate, and dominantly assertive. Buckner was junior, but the most professionally competent.[30] Scouting reports suggested that 15,000 to 20,000 new Federal troops had arrived making the total some 40,000 men, with possibly more on the way.[31] These inflated numbers deflated the Confederate hopes and resolve to defend the fort. The brigadiers decided to break out of their predicament and to march southeastward to Charlotte and then to Nashville to join Johnston.

Pillow was designated to lead the assault, and Buckner would lead the rear guard. Couriers were sent to alert the various units which slowly began their movements to their start points. The Confederates also suffered the cold of the previous evening, since many units were still without their baggage and tents. Hours were spent getting regiments into assault position, but for reasons unknown the word to commence the attack never came. As more hours passed the Confederates stacked arms and built fires to keep warm. By mid-afternoon the chance to launch the attack had passed. There were only three to four hours of daylight left, and there were developments on the river. Word was passed to the troops by Pillow to return to the trenches. Back at the headquarters in Dover, Floyd lost his composure when he found out about the order but eventually calmed down. The Confederates lost a good chance to withdraw from the fort fairly unmolested.[32]

The development on the river was the appearance of the dreaded gunboat flotilla consisting of four ironclads and three wooden gunboats. Their commander Commodore Foote was not as confident of success as he had been at Fort Henry.

He had witnessed firsthand what a heavy gun could do to his lightly armored fleet. His boats were vulnerable to plunging fire, and the crews piled the decks with timber, chains, bags of coal, and just about anything that would offer protection.[33] At exactly noon the ironclad fleet moved within range of the Confederate batteries and continued to within four hundred yards of the fort. The short range improved the poor Yankee marksmanship, but added to the effectiveness of the Rebel guns. The *St. Louis* was hit about sixty times, one shot killing the pilot and wounding Foote himself. The *Louisville* was crippled and the *Carondelet* and *Pittsburg* collided while closing in to protect the other damaged boats. Foote ordered his fleet to withdraw out of range and effectively out of the campaign. The strategy used at Fort Henry did not work, and Grant settled down for a siege.

During the gunboat assault Floyd kept Johnston appraised via telegraph. The reports Johnston received should have caused him to question Floyd's competency and ability to command. In rapid succession, Johnston received

the following dispatches, which are found in the offical records:

> The enemy are assaulting us with a most tremendous cannonade from gunboats abreast the batteries, becoming general around the whole line. I will make the best defense in my power. (Floyd)

> Operator at Donelson says gunboats passed and are right on him. (Trabue)

> The fort holds out. Three gunboats have retired. Only one firing now. (Floyd)

> The fort can not hold out twenty minutes. Our river batteries working admirably. Four gunboats advancing abreast. (Floyd)

> The gunboats have been driven back. Two it is said seriously injured. I think the fight is over today. (Floyd)

Johnston had every right to question just what happened on the river and the status of the fort. The second message was sent by the panicked telegraph operator at Fort Donelson and was passed on by an officer in the adjutant general's office. It of course did nothing to give Johnston any confidence in Floyd. Gideon Pillow sent a coherent report directly to Johnston confirming that the gunboats were driven off and severely damaged, as well as a report that

the Confederates received no casualties.[34] In spite of the confusing telegrams Johnston left Floyd in command.

The morale in the Confederate trenches was high, but it was not the same at the command level. That evening the Confederate brigadiers met in Dover for a council of war. Floyd was apparently convinced that Grant was reluctant to attack by land but could be reinforced over time to overwhelming strength. He also believed Grant had 40,000 men or more moving to surround the fort at that time. In allowing Grant to completely invest the fortress, it was time for the Confederates to either break out or sit out a siege. Floyd argued that the fort would not stand a prolonged siege and called for a breakout. He remembered Johnston's guidance, "If you lose the fort, bring your troops to Nashville if possible."[35] If you can not hold the fort, at least save the army."[36]

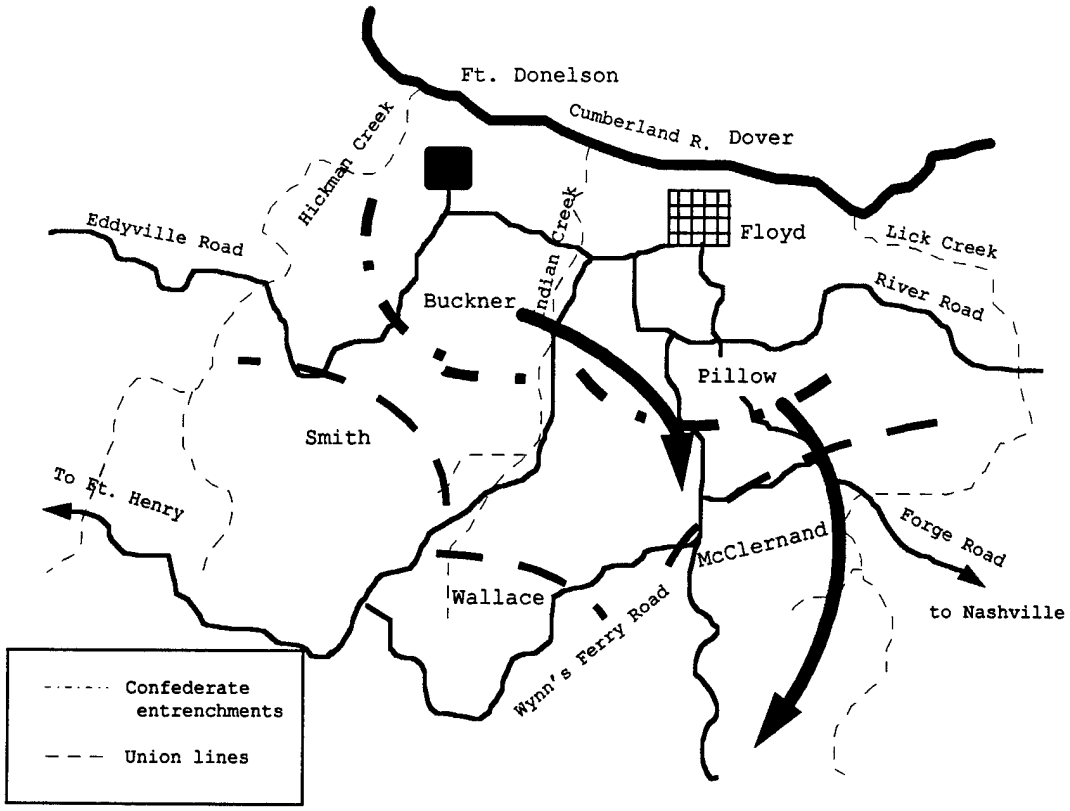
When given the chance to speak, Pillow laid out his views. His scouts reported that McClernand's division was astride both the Forge and Wynn's Ferry roads leading south out of Dover. Pillow was incorrect in his reporting of enemy siege artillery covering the roads in sector as well

as the enemy force dispositions. He believed that the Federals were arrayed in three distinct encampments as opposed to a continuous line. He also thought these "encampments" were also separated by thick tangles of brush preventing the movement of large bodies of troops. Pillow proposed for his wing, reinforced by Buckner's elite 2d Kentucky Regiment, hit the Union right flank guarded by McClernand and roll it back from the river and onto the Union center. When that happened, Buckner would attack and catch the enemy in the flank and rear. Grant would then be pinned against the river.[37]

Buckner next had a chance to speak and immediately vetoed Pillow's use of the 2d Kentucky. He then proposed a modification of Pillow's plan. Pillow would attack as planned, but Buckner's division would play a more active roll. It would eliminate the Union artillery covering the Wynn's Ferry road, thus reducing the load for Pillow and striking the enemy at a more vital point. During the withdrawal phase Buckner would then move in to protect the flank and rear as Pillow and the garrison escaped to the south. Pillow agreed to Buckner's changes and Floyd

authorized the plan. The Confederates would attack at dawn. With good preparations and timing the chances seemed good for success.

In spite of his rank, Brigadier General Bushrod Johnson was not invited to the council of war. With the arrival of Floyd at the fort, Pillow assumed command of the left wing, and Bushrod Johnson became his second in command. He and the brigade commanders were summoned to receive their orders. At least one brigade did not send its commander or a representative. Floyd called the meeting to order, and Pillow briefed the plan, outlining its purpose and the role each unit would play. What was not covered in the briefing was the process of extracting the garrison from the fort. Details for rations, the carrying of blankets and knapsacks, the march order during the retreat, and how and when the actual retreat would commence were just a few of the procedural elements missing.



The Confederate Plan, 15 February 1862

The council of war ended about 1:00 A.M. on the 15th and every officer left with a different impression of what was to transpire. Pillow believed that his troops would return to their trenches after a victory so complete that they could retrieve their equipment at leisure. Buckner thought no one would return to the trenches after commencement of the battle. Thus Buckner's units were to go into combat encumbered by their equipment and haversacks

full of three days' rations. Some brigade commanders returned to their units and failed to give detailed instructions to their subordinate regiments as to their role in the attack. One brigade sent word only to be ready to move at an instant's notice in the morning. Time was running short, for the attack was scheduled for 5:00 A.M., and the brigades were to be on line by 4:30 A.M.

At daybreak on February 15th the Confederates attacked. However, they delayed an hour in order to bring up Davison's brigade, which had only given orders to be ready to move but had not occupied its jumping off point. Chilled by the miserable weather, the Union troops were just rousing and lining up for breakfast when the attack came. Although caught by surprise and disorganized, the first wave of the attack was beaten off by the Federals. Both sides retired a short distance to reorganize. Forrest dismounted his regiment of cavalry, and Pillow rode through his command urging more of his men to the fight. The attack resumed, and while the Union right held briefly, it fell back and then disintegrated when flanked by Forrest's troopers and under the weight of the frontal infantry attack. Running

short of ammunition, the survivors of McClernand's division were thrown back onto the Union center.

By 9:30 A.M. Forrest sensed that the Federals were close to routing and asked his nearby superior Bushrod Johnson for permission to attack the disorganized mass of troops to his front. At this critical point Johnson feared an ambush and perhaps Pillow's wrath for overstepping his authority, and subsequently withheld his permission. Forrest later wrote that had this attack been launched, a victory on the magnitude of Bull Run would have been possible.[38] General Wallace wrote in his official report of the battle that survivors of McClernand's division were streaming through his lines thoroughly demoralized and yelling, "We are cut to pieces!"[39] Sensing disaster brewing, Wallace shifted regiments to support McClernand's defense.

On the right wing, Buckner had positioned his forces according to plan and was ready to begin the assault to support Pillow. However, Buckner did not begin his assault as agreed the previous evening. Instead he deployed his regiments in defense and brought up two artillery batteries

for the purpose of counterbattery fire. Meanwhile, Pillow's division of about 6,500 rifles was up against roughly 15,000 Federals of McClernand's and part of Wallace's divisions. In Buckner's official report he maintained that it was prudent to eliminate the enemy artillery before his assault in order to spare lives and keep his division fresh for the coming task of protecting the escape of the garrison.[40] Yet this unexpected and unauthorized delay put Pillow's division and the entire operation at extreme risk.

Pillow and the engineer Major Gilmer rode over to Buckner's command and found his men still in the trenches and not conducting the assault as planned. Pillow located Buckner, and considering their past they both held their tempers in check. Buckner was obviously irritated and considered Pillow's presence an intrusion. In Buckner's view, Pillow was a fellow commander of a division, nothing more. Buckner explained the delay as he had just conducted a probing attack and was bringing up artillery to silence a Union battery. Pillow then revised the attack plan and instructed Buckner to attack up a hollow, using it for cover, and to maneuver additional forces into the flank and

rear of the Federal position. The subsequent attack proved successful in pushing back the Union line. Apparently Pillow's analysis of the terrain was superior to that of Buckner's.

By 12:30 P.M. the door to freedom was open and it was opening wider. Holding the Union left was Brigadier General C. F. Smith, and he sent what help he could to the right to hold the line. McClernand's men on the right wing were desperately short of ammunition, and unit cohesion was falling apart. Most of the units Smith sent to support the right wing became lost or consumed by the rush of panicked soldiers they were deployed to assist.

In spite of the problems of command the Confederates had achieved their goal so far. It was an achievement worthy of the highest praise for Southern arms. Although miserably armed and ill trained, the Confederate soldiers had pushed their counterparts back some four hundred yards through rugged and timbered terrain. The Union right flank was forced back and Buckner held the route of escape open. All that was left of the plan was to extract all available men and as many supplies as they could carry.

At this moment Pillow made a fateful decision. Acting on his own, without consulting Floyd or Buckner, Pillow ordered his men back to their original lines. Buckner watched the retrograde movement of the Confederate left wing in disbelief and rode to confront the Tennessee general. Floyd was sent for and after a heated discussion with Pillow, he let the order stand. Pillow explained that his men were worn out over the day of fighting, out of ammunition, and bitterly cold. They had not brought their knapsacks as Buckner's men had, and so they were also not ready to begin a march to Nashville.

Pillow may also have thought the day's victory was complete enough to allow an escape at leisure. The Confederates had inflicted over 2,000 casualties and routed four enemy brigades. Both he and Forrest would say that the Federals were too shaken to reinvest the fort quickly. In any case, another opportunity to evacuate the fort had arrived, and it was early enough in the day to do it. Pillow thought it could wait until morning, giving his men a chance to collect the wounded, their equipment, and rations. Unfortunately, the men went all the way back to the trenches

without leaving a screen to keep the escape route to the south open.[41]

On the Confederate left, Grant surmised that the trenches there were thinly manned. An attack against Buckner's old positions gained sections of the ramparts. The Confederates halted any further advance by the Federals and established a new line. Feeble counterattacks by Buckner failed to dislodge the Union troops, leaving them in a better position to attack the water batteries and the interior of the fort. As the day ended, the escape route was still open, but the Confederates showed no intention of using it.

Floyd, Pillow, and Buckner gathered once again in Dover to discuss their options. Pillow and Buckner joined in a heated discussion about the conduct of the battle. Buckner maintained that the object of the operation was attained when the road south was open and that the army should have made good its escape. Pillow maintained the agreement was to return to the camps to retrieve their equipment and withdraw under cover of night. He also proposed that it be now done while there was still a chance to do so.

Scouts reported that the waters of Lick Creek were three feet deep or more and the surgeons felt that the cold waters and chilled air would result in a high death rate for the infantry.[42] There were other reports that the Federals had once again blocked the road, based mostly on the number of fires seen in that direction. Forrest was summoned and was adamant in his opinion of the road being clear of the enemy. He had as late as 9:30 P.M. received word from his scouts that the way to Nashville was clear and supposed that the fires were those of the hundreds of wounded soldiers left between the lines trying to stay warm. Floyd and Buckner believed the road was blocked and nothing Forrest could say would persuade them otherwise.[43]

Pillow did not like the thought of surrender and offered yet another option. Two steamboats had been sent to Clarksville with wounded and were expected back in the morning. He proposed to hold the fort and use the boats to ferry as many men as possible to freedom. Buckner would not agree to the plan. He was certain that Smith's division would attack him at first light, and he felt he could not last for thirty minutes. His men were apparently so

exhausted that they could not march more than ten miles even if they made good their escape. In the end Buckner's despondency infected all present. All of the generals, even Pillow, finally agreed that surrender was just a matter of time and that they should do it as soon as possible to prevent a further loss of life.[44]

Then occurred one of the most historic and amazing examples of a collapse of a command in the annals of American warfare. Floyd, the former Secretary of War, had no intention of staying around for the surrender. Buckner chided him and said that if he were in command that he would share the fate of the army in accordance with regulations.[45] Floyd then passed the command to Pillow who immediately passed it on to Buckner. Buckner sent for a bugler and writing materials and began the process of surrender.

In the morning, Floyd loaded his brigade on two steamboats and escaped to Clarksville. Pillow crossed the Cumberland with his staff using an old scow. As Floyd and Pillow made their escape, a battle-hardened group of cavalrymen under Colonel Nathan Bedford Forrest made its way through a marsh along the river to freedom. On 16 February,

the garrison awoke with high morale and ready to fight again, only to learn of the decision of the previous evening.

Accurate numbers of the Confederates at Fort Donelson are lost to history if they were ever known. It is widely accepted that there were approximately 21,000 troops within the works. About 1,500 were killed or wounded. By noon on February 16th, over 12,000 soldiers of the Fort Donelson garrison surrendered unconditionally to the Union forces.[46] The balance of the forces made their escape with Forrest's cavalry or simply walked through Union lines during the days of confusion after the surrender.

The months leading up to the campaign showed cracks and fissures in the Confederate command. The campaign itself saw its complete disintegration. Albert Sydney Johnston came West bringing hope and optimism, yet he was unequal to the tasks at hand. He had neglected the construction of the river defenses, and more importantly, he failed to assign determined and competent commanders to lead the troops. These two facts became quite apparent in the campaign.

If the department commander failed, the subordinate general officers performed worse. Lloyd Tilghman was a brave and noble officer, but his surrender at Fort Henry deprived the remainder of his command of a leader at its most critical time. Gideon Pillow's abrasive personality destroyed all chance of building an effective team with his fellow brigadier generals. His decision to return to the trenches after the successful attack on the fourteenth was a blunder as well. Floyd was indecisive and weak, leaving him vulnerable to Pillow's proposals. Although regarded as a man of honor, Buckner's reluctance to attack and despondency may well have sealed the fate of Fort Donelson.

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[1]OR, I, IV, 240.

[2]Grant, 189-192.

[3]OR, I, IV, 140. Tilghman's report dated February 12, 1862.

[4]Grant, 202-203.

[5]Foote, 198.

[6]Grant, 196-197.

[7]Stickles, 126-127.

[8]OR, I, IV, 130-131.

[9]Johnston, 433.

[10]Ibid., 424-425. Although reports varied widely, Johnston believed the most optimistic ones. He sent a letter to the Secretary of War dated Nov 8, 1861 saying that Ft. Henry was a "strong work". OR, 528.

[11]Williams, 117.

[12]Stickles, 127.

[13]James Hamilton, *The Battle of Fort Donelson* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Co., Inc., 1968), 41.

[14]Cummings, 188-189.

[15]Hamilton, 45.

[16]Ibid., 41-42.

[17]Ibid., 42-43 See also Pillow's proclamation upon assuming command. OR I, IV, 52.

[18]Hughes, and Stonesifer, 213-214.

[19]Johnston, 423-424.

[20]Hamilton, 52.

[21]Cooling, 132.

[22]Hughes, and Stonesifer, 216.

[23]Ibid., 216.

[24]Hamilton, 79.

[25]Grant, 212.

[26]Regulations, 99-105, See also Jones, 47-48.

[27]Grant 196-198.

[28]OR. I, VII, 868, and 870-71.

[29]Hughes and Stonesifer, 217. See also Hamilton, 79.

[30]Cummings, 193.

[31]Cooling, 149.

[32] Why the attack order was never given is a mystery. Perhaps Pillow was waiting for Floyd to give the order, while Floyd assumed Pillow would do the honors.

[33]Ibid., 153.

[34]OR, I, 22, 611-612.

[35]OR, I, VII, 800-801.

[36]Johnston, 453.

[37]Hughes and Stonesifer, 223-225.

[38]Cummings, 178.

[39]Cooling, 168-170.

[40]OR I, VII, 164.

[41]Hughes and Stonesifer, 229-231.

[42]Johnston, 469.

[43]Henry, 57-58.

[44] Hughes and Stonesifer, 234-235.

[45]Regulations, As a West Pointer, Buckner knew these well.

[46] Johnston, 479.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

> The reports of Generals Floyd and Pillow are unsatisfactory, and the President directs that both these generals be relieved from command until further orders.
>
> H.P. Brewster, OR

The fall of the two forts sent waves of shock across the South, and the reaction was comparable to the North's after the debacle at Bull Run. For the South, the loss of this campaign was not only a tactical disaster, but a strategic one as well. In one stroke the vital city of Nashville and most of Tennessee was lost to the Confederacy forever. Albert Sidney Johnston lost an entire army out of his already thin ranks as well.

The campaign provides a unique and interesting insight into a break-down in command. It is key to summarize at this point the major mistakes that the Confederate command made. For the campaign was not a defeat of a Confederate army, but its surrender by blundering commanders while it still had the will and means to fight.

The strategy of Jefferson Davis was described in chapter 1. The merits of the Confederate strategy to hold as much territory as possible instead of using tactics similar to Washington during the Revolution is an arguable point. The truth is that Davis could not afford to loose territory if he was to maintain an independent nation and its institution of slavery. The strategy of holding all ground was a necessity for the South, and generals, such as Albert Sidney Johnston, were charged to conduct their operations in compliance with it. This thesis will not fault Johnston's reliance on fortifications along likely avenues of approach as his basis for defense. Such fortifications were necessary for such a static defense. This thesis will present key points that Johnston or his immediate subordinates were able to influence.

The first mistakes by the Confederate command were in the placement, design, and priority of the forts guarding the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers. Unlike the forts along the Mississippi, the twin forts were not assigned a dedicated engineer officer to oversee construction until late in October 1861. Ironically, General Polk had three

engineer officers at Columbus alone, and held them there even when the fortifications were all but complete.[1] Fort Donelson would not suffer as much for this as her sister on the Tennessee. The high bluff on the river and the flooded creeks on the landward side provided some natural defense. However, because of unskilled surveying, the fort's entrenchments would span over two miles, far too long for a small garrison to man them.

The key mistake of the engineers was of course the placement of Fort Henry. Located in the flood plain, no amount of work would have made it tenable. Building began in the summer when the waters were low, and the engineers obviously failed to take the winter floods into account. It is generally agreed that few people were expecting a long war at that point, but certainly a structure that would take so much effort would be placed in position to be in service throughout the year. In spite of the reports of its inadequacy, Polk and later Johnston ordered work on the fort continued, instead of building one elsewhere. Fort Heiman was to be built in November, but it was not a replacement to Fort Henry, just a supplement. In the end, Fort Henry was

defeated just as much by the Tennessee River as by ironclad gunboats. Yet, had it been formidable, the possibilities become interesting. Eight thousand additional men were sent to Fort Donelson between February 7 and 14, and more were on the way at the time of surrender. Had Grant been required to lay siege to Fort Henry, a reinforced garrison at Fort Donelson would have been a serious threat to his rear. Perhaps Grant would have had to wait additional weeks for reinforcements or have been defeated at Fort Henry.

Despite the location and construction of the forts, the Confederate soldiers accounted for themselves in an extraordinary manner. Outmanned and outgunned by a mixed array of veteran and novice troops, the garrisons of both forts did extremely well. The ninety men of Fort Henry were able to severely damage the ironclad flotilla while the flood waters were flowing into the gun embrasures. The ill-trained and poorly armed force at Fort Donelson pushed Grant's army to the brink of a rout on the magnitude of Bull Run. So if the Confederate soldiers were able to overcome the odds, then what kept victory from them? Again, it was the Confederate command, and namely Albert Sidney Johnston.

When Johnston assumed command of the Western Department in September of 1861, he had but five months to prepare for Grant's offensive. It was a daunting task, and he used considerable energy in procuring arms, supplies, and troops from the individual states in his command as well as appealing directly to Richmond. He had to be a soldier, diplomat, and politician to raise the army he needed to defend his department.

Johnston was given a great deal of discretion by Jefferson Davis on where to locate his headquarters. For some unfathomable reason he chose Bowling Green, which was actually the front line, instead of a more central location. A central location was important because communications between the scattered garrisons were primarily by telegraph and by mail. The mail was slow, and the efficiency and accuracy of the telegraph was reliant upon the operator. As a department commander, Johnston also was to coordinate its defense with the states' governors and secure arms and equipment from widely scattered sources. Again, a central location is highly desirable. Locating the headquarters on the periphery of the department reduced Johnston's ability

to coordinate his defenses by extending the distances to travel or communicate. In Bowling Green, Johnston's attention and priorities became fixed on the situation to his immediate front. He tended to act more as an army commander than a department commander.

Johnston received a number of conflicting reports of the state of affairs at the two forts throughout the period in question. Many were quite accurate in pointing out the deficiencies in labor, materials, ordnance, and placement. Notable exceptions, particularly one by Senator Henry, stated that Fort Henry was a strong position ready to repel the invader.[2] As all general officers, Johnston had a full schedule. However, he never found the time to inspect these key positions. He did send subordinates to collect information for him from time to time, but when the crisis began he had no personal knowledge of either fort. This lack of knowledge forced him to rely on the officers at the scene to accurately report their status and recommend courses of action. Johnston's lack of first hand knowledge is evident. For example, he did not learn that construction of Fort Heiman had not begun until two months after he

ordered it done. He also believed Fort Henry was the stronger position.[3]

In an era when commanders had to rely upon the good judgment of subordinates to make sound decisions at great distances from headquarters, Albert Sidney Johnston erred badly in the selection of subordinate commanders. Considering the officers he sent to the forts, reliance on their input was asking for disaster. The first general officer to command the forts was Lloyd Tilghman. Interestingly enough, he was not Johnston's first choice, but rather a certain Major A. P. Stewart. Until reminded by Senator Henry, Johnston apparently forgot or did not even know Tilghman was in his command.[4] Yet this man was entrusted to prepare the twin river defenses without benefit of a direct meeting or subsequent command inspection.

In January 1862 Johnston had a number of other generals under his immediate control available to command the forces at Forts Henry and Donelson. Most notably was the "Hero of Fort Sumter" himself, P. G. T. Beauregard. As a full general, he was clearly senior to the brigadiers who would eventually command the fort. He was an experienced engineer

who could have applied his talents well. Beauregard had the faith and trust of the Southern people and the soldiers held him in high esteem. Unfortunately, Beauregard was suffering from a chronic throat ailment. He told Johnston that he could not effectively command in such a condition, but it did not prevent him from accepting command of Columbus a few days later. Perhaps he too felt the fort could not stand up to the ironclads. If so, he probably wanted no part in what he perceived was a no-win scenario.

Another distinguished officer was William J. Hardee, technically commanding the army at Bowling Green. Hardee was a West Point graduate who had served with distinction in the Mexican War. He was respected and widely read. He had revised and updated the United States Army's tactics manual after the Mexican War, a work held as the standard for the current war. As a major general, Hardee was also clearly senior to the brigadiers at Donelson.[5] Johnston could have led the retrograde from Bowling Green himself, as he did, or give this fairly simple task to the senior remaining general officer. Either way, both general officers were not needed at Bowling Green.

As it turned out, Johnston simply sent as many forces as he could spare toward Fort Donelson and left it up to the senior man on the scene to worry about how to use them. Unfortunately, that man was John Floyd. Floyd proved easy to manipulate, first by Buckner at Cumberland City and then by Pillow at Fort Donelson. In fairness, Johnston probably did not know of this weakness since essentially Floyd only passed through Bowling Green on the way to the battle. In any case, there was not enough time to expose this characteristic to scrutiny. Johnston may have known little about the military abilities of Floyd, but incoming telegrams gave little to inspire faith. Floyd often contradicted himself, and the dispatches in the official records show a man who was anything but confident. Yet even on the eve of battle, when Johnston appears to have lost his faith in Floyd, he did nothing to alleviate the command situation.

With Floyd was the dominant and often insubordinate Gideon Pillow. Johnston at least knew Pillow by reputation and had dealt with him when the latter commanded briefly at Columbus. The Buckner-Pillow feud was virtually known to

all, and it is hard to believe that Johnston thought they would be able to put their personal feelings aside. It is also difficult to believe that Johnston thought Floyd was capable of dealing with such an explosive personality.

Simon Buckner most certainly became an acquaintance of Johnston during his months in Bowling Green. Although many see Buckner as the most proficient of the brigadiers at Fort Donelson, he also was slow and deliberate in making decisions. As mentioned before, there was bad blood between Buckner and Pillow. Analyzing the dispatches, after action reports, and the biographies, it becomes clear that the animosity between Buckner and Pillow was a critical factor during the battle. Buckner's conniving to leave Pillow at Fort Donelson while he and Floyd evacuated to Cumberland City compelled Pillow to leave the fort to settle the matter. Just when a determined commander was needed to prevent an uncontested investment, Pillow was fifteen miles upstream. In Pillow's absence Buckner made no effort to improve the defenses, since the only interest he had in the fort was to get his men out. At a decisive moment on February 15th, it was Buckner who hesitated to attack,

allowing Pillow's assault to culminate. This hesitation prevented the Confederates from routing and possibly destroying Grant's army. Also, it was Buckner's infectious despondency late that evening that convinced Floyd and Pillow to surrender, even when there were options to escape or even renew the fighting. Buckner's arguments that his troops were too exhausted to fight or unable to march towards Nashville were weak at best. If he truly believed them he had no appreciation of just how tough a Confederate soldier could be. Seen by many historians today as a chivalrous hero, Buckner was in fact far from it. His hostility toward Pillow, poor battlefield performance, and low morale were key factors in the debacle at Fort Donelson.

The arrogant Gideon Pillow stands as the unlikely hero of the campaign. He alone consistently saw Fort Donelson as the place to defend Nashville and possibly inflict a defeat on the invader. Unfortunately, he had thrown away much credibility in clamoring for various offensives and other schemes. He also never came to terms with Buckner, who at the critical moment hesitated in his attack and cost the battle. To be sure, Pillow had his poor moments. The

abortive attack on the thirteenth as well as the decision to withdraw all the way back into the trenches on the fourteenth are but two examples. Pillow also gave the poor operations briefing prior to the attack on February 14th. The lack of clarity and detail directly resulted in confusion and delay. Yet as the post commander, Floyd was actually responsible for insuring that all of the subordinate commanders understood the mission. Buckner was a West Point graduate and had considerable experience. He too could have positively contributed to the critical meeting as well.

No one can envy the position of any of the brigadiers at Fort Donelson. None of them had time to see the terrain, guidance from above was vague, and the size and composition of the enemy was essentially unknown. Fort Donelson had had a long string of commanders, and the units forming the garrison had never fought together or had time to build confidence in their commander. The Confederates were in a precarious position, but they had chances to stave off disaster and to attain victory.

The Confederate command did not suffer only from the highly individualistic and temperamental personalities of the general officers and the lack of a common vision. The senior commanders also quite simply became despondent over the use of a new technology. The introduction of ironclad gunboats dated back to the Crimean War, but this was their first appearance in North America. When Fort Henry fell to a purely gunboat attack in but two hours, Johnston himself became determined that Fort Donelson had no hope of standing up to them. From that point it seems that Johnston lost his will to put up determined resistance. Again, had Johnston seen for himself just how poorly Fort Henry was constructed, he would have realized that the ironclads were powerful, but not invincible. Surprisingly, Johnston's outlook did not improve with the repulse of the ironclads on the fourteenth.

The harshest criticisms in this thesis are reserved for Albert Sidney Johnston, for as department commander, it was he who was given the task and responsibility to establish the Confederate defenses in the West. Although the placement of the twin river forts was decided before he took command, he was negligent in their construction and manning.

There were also no strategic reserves in the theater, since all available troops were sent to the forward strongpoints.

Furthermore, Johnston allowed a command situation to develop where the senior officer who happened to be present would be in command. As a result, both forts had a string of commanding officers with differing personalities and priorities. When Johnston finally selected a general officer to specifically command the forts, he chose Lloyd Tilghman, a man who was at most his second choice. When Tilghman was captured, Johnston again allowed whoever happened to be the senior man to take command. That man was unfortunately the incompetent and spineless John B. Floyd.

Finally, Johnston positioned himself at Bowling Green. There, he lost the ability to act as a department commander, becoming fixed on the threat of Buell's army moving south from Louisville. Although a possibility, Buell showed few signs of making any determined movement until spring. Events would show that Grant's army was the most immediate threat during the winter months. With his attention focused on Bowling Green, Johnston did not develop a coherent strategy for the defense of his department, nor adequately

share his views with his subordinate commanders. When the defenses began to crumble, his actions and decisions were of an ad hoc nature, leaving his officers confused and unsure.

Historians have the benefit of hindsight, which makes their criticisms easy. However, the Confederacy's best chance of defeating Grant was at Fort Donelson, not at Cumberland City or anywhere else south of the Tennessee border.[6] Gideon Pillow saw this and for once he was right. Grant gave opportunities to the Confederates to defeat him but they were missed or not taken. Consider the possibility of a determined attack on the Federals as they were strung out along the twelve miles of road between Fort Henry and Fort Donelson. Grant would never be weaker than during this campaign, for later he would be reinforced by Buell's army.

With the defeat of the gunboats on the fourteenth, the Confederates also had options they chose to ignore. Deciding that all was lost on the fifteenth, available steamboats could have ferried the bulk of the garrison to safety during the night. The river and rail transportation network was still intact to Bowling Green and Nashville. They could also have brought up more reinforcements for a

renewed fight on the sixteenth. In fact, another brigade arrived at the fort just in time for the surrender. Hardee was moving south from Bowling Green with about 14,000 men. Had they been added to Fort Donelson and Grant defeated, Buell most certainly would have retreated back to the Ohio River and Tennessee would have been saved.[7] Again, the Confederate command failed.

The lessons to be learned from this campaign are relevant for today. The Fort Henry-Fort Donelson campaign shows clearly the importance of a sound command climate, based on each commander understanding the higher echelon's vision. The senior commander must also be in direct charge of events and impose his will upon his unit. The subordinate commanders must know the plan in order to make decisions on the scene that will support it. If there is a personality conflict among the senior leaders, a solution must be put in place to quickly eliminate any chance of it affecting the mission. Also, senior commanders must get to know their subordinates and ensure they are competent.

A commander must also know his enemy and the capabilities of his soldiers. General Johnston thought the

most immediate threat was from Buell in Louisville. He did not have a good picture of Grant's forces and failed to learn the lesson of Belmont, which was that Grant could use transports to move any time of the year. Because he did not know the actual conditions at Fort Henry, Johnston vastly overestimated the capabilities of the Federal ironclads.

This campaign also shows that commanders must have the moral courage to do what is right. The surrender proceedings at Fort Donelson are an obvious example, but there are others. Both Pillow and Buckner failed to put personal feelings aside to defend against a common enemy. Floyd failed to effectively command these two men, and he did not adequately press Albert Sidney Johnston for the guidance and support he needed. As for Johnston, he failed to alleviate the command situation at the forts regardless of political and individual sensitivities involved.

Several ironies resulted from the Fort Donelson fiasco. Although Jefferson Davis relieved Floyd and Pillow from command, the Southern press initially hailed them as heroes for refusing to surrender the fort. Buckner on the other hand, was castigated in the press as he languished in a

Northern prisoner of war camp. Following his exchange, Buckner eventually rose to the rank of lieutenant general by war's end, but he would not have a significant combat command. Floyd would succumb to illness the following year, and Pillow would never have a major command again. The forgotten brigadier Bushrod Johnson would remain obscure, except for a brief moment at Chickamauga.

There was also another irony and tragedy. In but six short weeks after Fort Donelson's surrender, Albert Sidney Johnston would die of his wounds at the Battle of Shiloh. It was a desperate attempt by Johnston to destroy Grant's army before Buell's could join it. However, Grant was reinforced and many of his troops were now veterans. In the bloodiest fight on the continent up to that time, the raw Confederate troops were at the brink of victory when Johnston was mortally wounded. One can only speculate upon the outcome of that battle had the bulk of the 21,000 soldiers of Fort Donelson been present.

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[1]Woodworth, 57.

[2]OR 459-462. Dispatches shown here are typical. Senator Henry's optimistic letter to General Johnston 496-498.

[3]Johnston sent a letter to the Secretary of War dated November 8, 1861 stating that Fort Henry was a "strong work", OR, 528.

[4]OR, 452-454. Senator Henry's letter to General Johnston.

[5]Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, *How the North Won, A Military History of the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 75-76. See also Johnston, 353-354.

[6]Stonesifer differs with this view. In his dissertation he maintains that Buckner's plan to fix the Federals at Fort Donelson and maneuver against Grant's rear from Cumberland City was the correct option. Although intriguing, the terrain south and southwest of Fort Donelson was rugged and unsuitable for movement of such a force. The plan required a dynamic commander, which Floyd was not. The forces left at Fort Donelson would be too few to hold Grant. Also, no preparations had been made at Cumberland City. Simply put, at the time of conception, the plan was already overtaken by events. The place to defeat Grant was at Fort Donelson.

[7]Parks, 209-210.

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