

ASSUME THE MANTLE: STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP IN THE CONFEDERATE WEST

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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by

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At the onset of the American Civil War, senior military leaders on both sides faced a strategic environment that was permeated with volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. In no area was this more the case than in the Confederacy's Western Theater. As the principal Confederate army in the west, the Army of Tennessee bore the primary responsibility for executing the Confederacy's strategy in that theater. During four years of war, two western generals would not only command that army but also be responsible for the entire theater: Albert S. Johnston and Joseph E. Johnston. But what strategic leadership did they provide? What conceptual, technical and interpersonal leadership competencies did they display? Their collective abilities (or lack thereof) to serve as strategic leaders significantly influenced the war's outcome. In light of our current fight in Afghanistan, in which we have had four commanding generals in as many years, it is worthwhile to examine the Western Theater's strategic leadership.

ASSUME THE MANTLE: STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP IN THE CONFEDERATE WEST

The test of merit in my profession, with the people, is success. It is a hard rule, but I think it right.

—Albert Sidney Johnston

The effectiveness of an army is dependent on numerous factors, none of which is more intriguing than leadership. During the Civil War, the Confederate Army of Tennessee's fate was influenced by no less than five generals who varied widely in their temperaments and capabilities. Each leader, for good and ill, left a legacy that molded the character of the Army. Two notable commanders of that army were its first and last: Albert Sidney Johnston and Joseph E. Johnston.

Although no officer could have been prepared to lead the large armies that the Civil War would produce, Sidney Johnston possessed unique qualifications. Like many future generals, he was a West Point graduate. But unlike most, he had a breadth and depth of experiences that prepared him to lead at the strategic level. He served as Chief of Staff to BG Henry Atkinson in the Black Hawk War (1832); Aide de Camp to General Sam Houston during the Texas War of Independence (1836); Secretary of War for the Republic of Texas (1838); Regimental Commander under General Zachary Taylor in the Mexican War (1846); Commander of the 2d Cavalry Regiment (1855); selected by President Buchanan to lead the Utah Expedition against the Mormons (1857); and Commander of the US Department of the Pacific (encompassing California, Oregon and Washington – 1860)¹. Of the officers in the US Army who had ever commanded a unit even as large as a brigade, Johnston was the only one who was still young enough for active duty in the field.² Over a period of 30 years, he developed expert knowledge of

his profession, and his service was a calling.³ He was one of the few Confederate officers who could be considered a true professional before there was an actual profession of arms.

It was no surprise, then, that in 1861 Jefferson Davis selected Johnston to command the entire western theater of operations. For all practical purposes, Davis served as his own Secretary of War, especially early in the conflict. In addition, he did not establish a position for general-in-chief until the end of the war. He therefore assumed the primary responsibility for developing Grand Strategy. Initially, that strategy was to defend across as broad an area as possible, and protect and preserve the territorial integrity of the Confederacy. The Confederacy was anxious to prove its legitimacy among other nations, and legitimate nations did not allow their territory to be overrun by invading armies.⁴ He also had to reassure those on the fringes, who were most susceptible to switching loyalties, that he could protect them. Within the framework of his grand strategy, President Davis divided the nation into military departments, each bound by particular geography.

For the western department (not including the area west of the Mississippi River), Sidney Johnston had full authority to develop his own theater strategy, in what was the epitome of a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environment. Unfortunately, he initially had fewer than 20,000 men to protect a 500 mile line, facing an enemy that had greater than twice his strength. His need to protect the troop-recruiting, food producing and manufacturing areas forced him into a strategy of dispersion as a prelude to any ideas of a more mobile defense.

On assuming command, Johnston's first strategic leadership challenge was to adjust and properly balance his defensive line, and he based his decisions on logistical, operational and political factors. He inherited a situation with an unbalanced focus on the Mississippi River defenses, due to pressure from the Mississippi River bloc of politicians.⁵ Also, the center of his line, Nashville, was south of his flanks (Cumberland Gap in the east and Columbia, Kentucky in the west), putting him on exterior lines. After scanning his environment, he recognized that Nashville was his geographic center of gravity. It was the major center for manufacturing, transportation, ordnance assembly, and food and equipment storage. However, Johnston was not allowed to utilize the Nashville depots - those supplies were reserved for forces in Virginia, and therefore his command was forced to live off the countryside.⁶ In order to subsist, and to provide any measure of defense in depth while operating on interior lines, he pushed up his center and established his headquarters in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

By establishing his headquarters in Bowling Green, Johnston could protect and provide some sense of legitimacy to the Confederate Government of Kentucky, his native-born state. He also hoped to gain political support from secessionists in central and western Kentucky, encouraging his Kentucky-born subordinates to rally and recruit the populace. Unfortunately, Johnston and his successors were guilty of being over-reliant on optimistic assessments from political and military exiles whose beliefs were contrary to the current climate. The groundswell of Confederate sympathy among Kentuckians would never materialize.

With the disposition of his forces reorganized, Johnston began to focus on building the strength of his command. There was no central recruiting pool from which

he could draw, so he would have to negotiate with multiple state and local governments in order to fill his ranks. To facilitate this, he co-opted the influence of political and business leadership by placing the exiled Confederate Governors of Kentucky and Missouri, as well as an executive from the Memphis & Charleston railroad, on his personal staff.⁷

Early communication with these external audiences was more important at this stage than internal communications.⁸ Therefore, upon arrival at his new headquarters, he first turned his attention to the local population. He spared no time in establishing his vision and a sense of urgency. When speaking to the public, he addressed them as “fellow soldiers of the Reserve Corps.” This was a people’s war, and the whole population would be called upon to maintain it. His terminology was intentional, and the local press took note of the timing and tone of his remarks.⁹ He kept on message with his strategic communications by reminding everyone of the urgent situation they faced – they were in a crisis that would require sacrifice. In addition to maintaining a dialogue with the people, he understood the criticality of communicating upward.¹⁰ Within four days of assuming command, he was providing feedback to President Davis, providing rationale for his strategy and specifying his requirements.¹¹

Johnston issued a call for 30,000 men from Tennessee and 10,000 each from Arkansas and Mississippi. He coordinated with the governors of Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, Mississippi and Kentucky for resources and mutual cooperation.¹² Disappointingly, the states were lethargic in filling Johnston’s recruitment needs, and he reluctantly decided to reduce the enlistment term from the duration of the war to only 12 months.¹³ The policy of accepting only volunteers was failing, both in the west and east,

and Johnston realized that if the Confederacy did not enact conscription, a significant portion of his western army would melt away. The incessant problems with recruiting finally prompted Davis to recommend conscription to the Confederate Congress, which passed several weeks after Johnston's death.¹⁴

Johnston needed time build his force, and he bought as much time as possible by conducting a strategic deception, using all forms of psychological operations including quick-strike cavalry raids, false leaks to the press, and publicizing orders to fictitious units. For several months his strategy worked, practically freezing the Union forces in place. Ironically, his deception strategy worked too well in that it also convinced the local populace that the Confederate forces were robust enough to provide them protection. As a result, local governments and those of the other states had little sense of urgency to provide additional forces. Sadly, it would require the loss of Tennessee for the South to be shaken out of its complacency.

Losing Tennessee may have ultimately been inevitable, but it began because of the rivers. Johnston quickly recognized the strategic significance of the Mississippi, Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers and the necessity of protecting them, but in the confusion of his first few months in an enormous command, he did not show the ruthlessness necessary to make his wise plans become a reality.¹⁵ No defense in depth was possible without control and protection of the rivers, since they pierced the heart of Johnston's area of responsibility and limited his maneuver room; and he incorporated naval assets into his strategy by designing a delayed defense of the Mississippi river using a small fleet of Confederate gunboats under Commander George Hollins.¹⁶

The most ideal locations to defend and control the rivers were in Kentucky, but the political status of Kentucky all but paralyzed his western strategy.¹⁷ Because of Kentucky's previous neutrality, the Confederates could not build river defenses at more strategic locations inside that state – instead, they had to settle for the best positions they could find in Tennessee (Fort Henry on the Tennessee River and Fort Donelson on the Cumberland). By the time the Confederates violated Kentucky's neutrality, they were too late to derive any real advantage from doing so – there was no time to build additional forts.

Johnston could have concentrated his forces at Donelson to outnumber and defeat Grant's army (which is what General Halleck feared) or he could have left a small token force to hold the fort until he withdrew the bulk of his army intact. He chose neither, and instead committed almost 17,000 soldiers to defend a position that he thought gunboats alone could destroy. However, had he wholly uncovered his front to defend Donelson, General Buell may have marched directly on Nashville. It was as if his mind told him that Donelson was hopeless but his heart told him to fight there. In this example of problem management, there were no "right" answers, and each decision had potentially catastrophic outcomes.¹⁸

Ultimately, Johnston was indecisive regarding the defense of Fort Donelson. The strategic consequences of that campaign were the most important of the war to that point. Nearly a third of his forces in the Tennessee-Kentucky theater were *hors de combat*, and the remainder of his effective fighting force was divided.¹⁹ The complete command of Union gunboats and transports on the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers made it necessary for him to evacuate Nashville and, by doing so, the entire state of

Tennessee. After the loss of Fort Donelson, the media in the south declared him incompetent and cried for his removal.²⁰ To his credit, Johnston made no excuses and, as Lee would do after Gettysburg, offered to resign. Davis refused, knowing there was no better leader fit for the command.

It is debatable whether Johnston could have ever successfully defended such an expansive area, considering his lack of personnel, weapons and transportation assets. But he could have at least kept his army intact. Following Jominian concepts, he could have concentrated his forces using interior lines in order to attempt to defeat the enemy piecemeal. Instead, he lost both territory and a significant portion of his command. The forces he lost at Donelson may have made the difference in the outcome at Shiloh.

With the loss of Tennessee and the concept of a static defense destroyed, Johnston was at least free to develop a more mobile strategy. In the period prior to the spring of 1862, a Fabian strategy was neither needed nor practicable - prior to that time, Union forces were unable to gather enough strength to effectively initiate and maintain an offensive. Additionally, the western Confederate forces had neither the personnel, equipment nor training to conduct any form of counter-offensive. Johnston's consolidation in Corinth, and his attack at Shiloh, would be the first demonstration of what would become the Confederacy's "offensive-defensive" strategy.²¹ This new strategy did wonders for morale and command climate.

Johnston tapped in to his command's morale by communicating directly with his soldiers. His words often revealed a keen understanding of the culture of his command. Eighty-two years before Eisenhower spoke to his troops on the eve of the Normandy invasion, Johnston addressed his soldiers prior to Shiloh.

I have put you in motion to offer battle to the invaders of your country. Remember the precious stake involved; remember the dependence of your mothers, your wives, your sisters, and your children on the result. The eyes and hopes of eight million people rest upon you. You are expected to show yourselves worthy of the women of the South, whose noble devotion in this war has never been exceeded in any time.²²

In creating a positive command climate, along with motivating soldiers, strategic leaders often spend a great amount of energy managing egos.²³ This was especially the case for Johnston, in that his two most ranking subordinates (P.G.T. Beauregard and Leonidas Polk) had among the largest egos in the Confederacy. To compound the problem, he didn't have the latitude nor the time to hand pick his subordinate commanders, and for political reasons he could not relieve some of them either. The Confederate government, desperate for leaders in the field and to an extent hamstrung by its states' rights ideology, was forced to accept the offerings of the states, regardless of talent or experience.²⁴ Those that did have experience often brought with them old concepts of war that did not necessarily translate to the conditions they were facing - very few leaders had the mental flexibility to make the adjustment.

Johnston did, however, have the authority to cross-level and re-organize his subordinates in order to minimize the damage of the incompetents and maximize the impact of those with talent. For example, he selected Earl van Dorn to command the forces west of the Mississippi, and provide unity of command over the units of Generals Price and McCulloch. Unfortunately, he did not show the same wisdom when choosing the leadership for protecting Forts Henry and Donelson. He most certainly erred in neither going to Donelson himself nor sending there a commander with the rank and prestige necessary to ensure prompt actions – perhaps Beauregard or Hardee. Instead

he sent three commanders of nearly equal rank to make up what became a divided and ineffective triumvirate of command.²⁵

In his attempts to focus on the larger strategic aspects of his Departmental Command, he did not properly supervise his subordinates. In not following up on his orders, he failed to initially understand the rule that “what gets checked gets done.” Lee was just as guilty of putting too much trust in his subordinates, as were Presidents Lincoln and Davis, but they would all learn from their mistakes. At the time, there was no centralized selection board or officer development program to build a bench of qualified officers, so leader development was primarily a process of trial and error.

After grossly misjudging the leadership structure at Donelson, Johnston adapted and began to make sound decisions in the management of his subordinate leaders. He used Bragg’s organizational and training abilities, and Hardee’s tactical skills in the preparation for the battle of Shiloh. He included his subordinate leaders in the decision-making process for all of his key decisions, and after gathering input from everyone, he made the final decisions.

In an era when contemporaries acknowledged numerous senior leaders as being incompetent, self-serving and toxic, Sidney Johnston was respected by friend and foe alike: President Zachary Taylor said he was the finest soldier he ever commanded; Jefferson Davis felt that he was the greatest general of either side; General Winfield Scott described him as a godsend to the Army; General John B. Hood was deeply impressed by his exalted character; and General William Sherman thought of him as a “real general”.²⁶ General U.S. Grant, his primary foe in the Winter-Spring of 1862,

thought he was a man of high character and ability, even if at times he could be vacillating.²⁷

Johnston made a number of serious miscalculations and errors of judgment during his brief tenure in high command, but he also adjusted. As much as anyone, he understood and interpreted the volatile and complex environment that he faced. He was able to shape the form and direction of his organization and influence external actors toward accomplishment of those objectives.²⁸ He had the flexibility to adapt his strategy and maximize his resources, demonstrating a strong capacity for growth. Great strategic leaders such as Lee, Grant and Sherman all had the time to recover from early blunders and demonstrate their true talents. Unfortunately, Johnston did not live to have that chance.

We will never know what Sidney Johnston's full potential could have been, but he did embody many of the characteristics of a strong strategic leader. In only six months, he transformed his organization from a disparate group of semi-autonomous units into a more cohesive and functional command. He established a sense of urgency, brought groups together as teams and communicated a vision and strategy.²⁹ He had the misfortune to come early to high command, and to find himself in an America where no soldier had ever seen as many as 15,000 men in one body.³⁰ As the highest ranking general to be killed in the war, he died with the true potential of strategic leadership unrealized. His successors, however, all survived the war and had ample opportunity to define their legacy.

After Sidney Johnston's death, President Davis abandoned the concept of a Western Department. But by late 1862, the conflict had grown so large that Davis

realized he needed a different command system, and reverted to a geographical command similar to what Sidney Johnston had originally commanded. He therefore needed a general who could provide strategic direction in the West and develop a unity of effort in such a vast theater of operations. For such a daunting task, he chose Joseph E. Johnston, former commander of Lee's Army of Northern Virginia.

Like Sidney Johnston, Joe Johnston came to the Confederate army with broad military experience, having served in the cavalry, artillery and topographical engineers. Graduating from the United States Military Academy in 1829, he was appointed a second lieutenant in the 4th U.S. Artillery. He received a brevet promotion to captain for his actions in the Seminole Wars and his explorations of the Florida Everglades. During the Mexican-American War, Johnston won two brevets at both Cerro Gordo and Chapultepec. He was engineer on the Texas-United States boundary survey in 1841 and was chief topographical engineer of the Department of Texas from 1848 to 1853. He then served in California and was appointed brigadier general and Quartermaster General of the U.S. Army in 1860. He would become the first West Point graduate to be promoted to a general officer in the regular army, reaching a higher rank in the U.S. Army than did his classmate, Robert E. Lee.³¹ He also understood the personal pain of combat, being wounded 7 times against Indians and Mexicans before the Civil War, and wounded twice in 1862 at the Battle of Seven Pines (Fair Oaks). He was completing recovery from those wounds when Davis selected him to command the Department of the West.

On the surface, Johnston appeared to be a logical choice. But despite the excellent credentials and vast experience, his personality would unfortunately mitigate

any potential he may have had for success, beginning with his strong sense of pride. This was not an uncommon trait of the time, especially for a Southern gentleman, but it was so dominant in his character that it was often mistaken for pretentiousness. This special vanity contributed to his first serious breach with Davis in 1861 over the relative rank of the Confederate generals. President Davis appointed all five full generals on the same list released on the same day. As Johnston understood the policy, he should have been ranked first, instead of fourth, among the five full generals, since he had held a higher rank in the U.S. Army than any of the others. But instead of asking Davis about his rationale for the decision privately, and in person, he wrote a bitter letter to the President in protest. Davis felt that Johnston had crossed the line into insubordination, and a lack of trust was created that was never repaired. This lack of mutual trust would dramatically influence Johnston's effectiveness for the remainder of the war.

On accepting command of the West, Joe Johnston inherited a situation not unlike Sidney Johnston had inherited a year earlier - an expansive region comprised of several semi-independent armies, and a mission to protect as much territory as possible. Johnston recognized the faulty structure of having either side of the Mississippi river commanded by separate departments, and immediately recommended a unity of effort between forces on both sides of the river. Davis, however, did not support this plan, and this left Johnston with control of only those forces east of the Mississippi.³² The two main armies in his Department were Braxton Bragg's Army of Tennessee and John Pemberton's Army of Mississippi. Positioning his headquarters in Chattanooga, his primary concern was how to coordinate mutual support along some measure of interior lines, with both his Tennessee and Mississippi armies vulnerable. More importantly, he

had to determine which army and which region had priority. Should he reinforce Bragg from Pemberton's army, or Pemberton from Bragg's?³³ President Davis and Secretary of War Seddon would not commit to an overall prioritization within the theater, but insisted that Vicksburg could not fall.

Moving his headquarters to Jackson, MS, Johnston lobbied for a quick concentration against Grant's army, even if that meant a temporary abandonment of Vicksburg and Port Hudson. After defeating Grant, they could then re-occupy Vicksburg at their leisure. Davis, however, still insisted on a policy of static defenses of key locations and ordered Pemberton to hold Vicksburg, fearing that temporary evacuation would lead to permanent abandonment. Without consulting Johnston, Davis ordered a division of Bragg's army to reinforce Pemberton at Vicksburg, believing that holding Vicksburg was more important than middle Tennessee. Pemberton was caught in the middle of conflicting guidance between his immediate commander and his commander in chief - as a result, Grant was able to deter Johnston's small force and then turn and lay siege on Vicksburg, ultimately capturing Pemberton's force.³⁴

With the loss of Vicksburg, and Pemberton's army, Davis once again abandoned hopes of an effective departmental structure in the West. Why did Johnston fail so dramatically? As a strong advocate of coordination and unity of effort, this command should have been ideal for Johnston. Unfortunately, he could not grasp the nature of this type of command or in turn seize upon the inherent authority within it. Regarding the Army of Tennessee, Davis made the specific point of clarifying Johnston's authority by stating, "As that army is a part of your command, no order will be necessary to give you

authority there, as, whether present or absent, you have a right to direct its operations and do whatever else belongs to the general commanding”.³⁵

There were definitely tremendous political and logistical hurdles that he would have to overcome in order to be effective, and Davis only made matters worse by providing vague guidance and allowing the separate armies to report directly to Richmond, leaving Johnston out of the loop. This violated the concept of Johnston having complete authority over his forces. As a result, Johnston did not have the necessary intelligence to make informed decisions on the proper disposition of forces. But Johnston made no apparent effort to overcome these issues, and instead resigned himself to becoming nothing much more than an advisor. His role as department commander would remain administrative in nature unless he took the initiative, which he was reluctant to do. He admitted as much when stating, “The world has produced few men competent to command a large army when present with it, and none capable of directing the operations of one hundreds of miles off; still less one capable of doing both at the same time.”³⁶ Because of his viewpoint on his own authority, the west had an excess of commanders with no overall direction or strategic policy.

Johnston also refused to take any initiative or ownership in the command climate of his subordinate commands. A case in point was the political and personal infighting within Bragg’s Army of Tennessee in early 1863. As Department Commander, Johnston made no proactive attempt to resolve the leadership crisis. Even after Davis pleaded with him to weigh in on the issue and even take direct command if necessary, Johnston was noncommittal. Johnston would eventually take command of the army, but not until nine months later, at which time the Army of Tennessee’s morale was completely

ruined.³⁷ Ultimately, the failure of the Western Department was a result of the wrong commander with the wrong boss in the wrong theater: Johnston was unwilling to take responsibility of a theater as large and varied as that of the west; Davis was never truly ready to relinquish control of the theater; and the logistical realities made effective command of such a vast area difficult if not impossible.³⁸

Did Johnston truly understand the freedom of his choices, and view the position as commander instead of coordinator? He believed in the sanctity of armies, and assumed the inferiority of any general not directly leading troops. He therefore totally missed the point of his job and wasted its chances. He never ordered or directed, but merely suggested and hinted. It appeared that he wanted the glory of army command more than the responsibility of theater command.³⁹

Surprisingly, Johnston would soon get his wish. By December of 1863, the outlook in the Western Confederacy was bleak. The Army of Tennessee, the sole remaining effective force in the region, had squandered the successes of Chickamauga by suffering a tremendous setback in Chattanooga. Braxton Bragg's leadership had poisoned the morale of the entire army, and it needed someone who could re-establish some *élan*. Unfortunately, there was only one Robert E. Lee, and he could not be spared from Virginia, so Davis reluctantly brought back Joe Johnston.

Although Johnston was suspicious of Davis' motives, he relished the opportunity to lead soldiers again. And in this role, he had a big challenge. In January 1864, he still counted over 13,000 shoeless men in the infantry and artillery alone. The rate of venereal disease, average of 1 in 183, was the highest of any Confederate army. Johnston responded by issuing an order that all women in the vicinity of his camps who

could not give proof of respectability and livelihood be transported to other parts.⁴⁰

Johnston also introduced variety into his soldiers' meals, ordering tobacco and whiskey to be issued twice a week, and procuring cured bacon and ham instead of rotten beef. He issued a universal amnesty to all soldiers absent without leave and instituted liberal furlough programs while promptly executing deserters, the combination of which dramatically reduced desertion rates.⁴¹

As a result of his focus on the structural, logistical, training and disciplinary needs of the army, by the spring of 1864 the Army of Tennessee was reborn – both spiritually and organizationally. Out of the rubble of the Missionary Ridge disaster, Johnston restructured the army's fifty-five thousand officers and men into one cavalry and two infantry corps. He instituted chain-teaching training programs for his subordinate leaders, conducting tactical and operational training for his brigade and regimental leadership. He also conducted division and corps battle drills as well as small arms and artillery training.⁴²

Whatever else may be said of Joe Johnston, he was a commander whom men were willing to follow and trust - a marked change from the dissent that permeated all levels of the army under Bragg's leadership. Bonded with a sense of family, the soldiers used that imagery when referring to Johnston – calling him “Uncle Joe”, similar to the “Marse Robert” sobriquet given to Lee by his Army of Northern Virginia soldiers. As one soldier stated, his soldiers were to him his children and they were never needlessly sacrificed.⁴³

Having successfully rebuilt his army, the question soon became: what would he do with it? After several months in command, Johnston had yet to develop any

deliberate plan for a future campaign, other than maintain a defensive-offensive posture in Dalton, Georgia. Davis wanted Johnston to assume the offensive and push Sherman back into Tennessee, but Johnston insisted that his army was in no position to conduct such a campaign – his army was outnumbered and out-equipped. Instead, Johnston prepared for a delay and defend strategy, similar to the one he used two years earlier on the Virginia Peninsula. He would wait for Sherman to make a mistake, and then attack. Sherman would soon oblige him by seizing the initiative.

As soon as Sherman's advance started, and before the retreat from Dalton began, Johnston suggested the movement of Nathan Forrest's cavalry into Middle Tennessee to disrupt the Union logistics tail.⁴⁴ He understood that Sherman's success depended on secure lines of communication, and that the railroad was his lifeline. The Union forces, however, realized this and successfully kept Forrest preoccupied in Mississippi. As a result, Johnston reverted to his strategy of withdrawal. He conducted a series of actions in which he prepared strong defensive positions, only to see Sherman maneuver around them. Although his Fabian generalship earned the admiration of his soldiers, one general's successful delaying action is another's successful turning movement. The end result had Sherman's forces on the outskirts of Atlanta.

Johnston conducted an almost flawless retreat, losing fewer men than Sherman and maintaining his communications throughout the campaign. From Dalton to the pause before Kennesaw Mountain, the campaign had lasted just a month – the same month in which Grant had fought and flanked Lee back from the Rapidan to Cold Harbor and the Chickahominy.⁴⁵ During the campaign, he demonstrated that he was at least the equal of Lee as a defensive tactician. Against an army twice his size, he remained in

contact, striking at the enemy while preserving the strength and morale of his own forces. But whether he possessed other qualifications requisite in an army commander quickly became debated, as the Confederate government became increasingly more frustrated and alarmed.

In order to lead an organization, one must first preserve its existence – and Johnston strongly felt that the continued existence of his army was more important than protecting territory. But despite the tactical brilliance of his campaign, Johnston made practically no attempt to communicate his strategy or plan to either the Confederate government, the people of Georgia, or to his own senior subordinate commanders. He made no plans to utilize the militia forces, nor did he attempt to incorporate the Georgia state troops into his plans even after Governor Brown offered their use.⁴⁶ As a result, the officials of Georgia, seeing slices of their territory given up and their principal city threatened, strenuously urged Johnston's removal. Davis was extremely reluctant to remove an Army commander in the middle of a campaign, but was quickly running out of options.

Like Lincoln, Davis preferred generals who would fight. And since Johnston was known for his reluctance to hold ground for its own sake, Davis was unsure whether or not he would fight to defend Atlanta. The strain between him and Davis was so strong that every communiqué between the two was scrutinized for hidden meanings. For example, Johnston sent a message requesting the evacuation of the prisoners at Andersonville because he was concerned that Sherman may attempt to liberate the prisoners with his cavalry. Davis, however, interpreted the request as an indication that

Johnston intended to evacuate Atlanta.⁴⁷ As a result, Davis made one of his worst mistakes in relieving Johnston in favor of John B. Hood.

Johnston's failure as an army commander was not a result of his lack of military skills or leadership abilities. In fact, Grant and Sherman had nothing but praise for his strategic vision and operational acumen, and both were overjoyed when Hood replaced him.⁴⁸ He had fought his army wisely, taking care of his men and protecting as much territory as he could, without fighting decisive battles in which all might be lost. His policy was probably the best that the South could have used, in attempting to protract the war long enough to wear down the morale of the North.⁴⁹ But Johnston was both unwilling and unable to communicate his policies to his stakeholders, and therefore never inspired the confidence necessary in a strategic leader. If Johnston had clearly explained his plans for holding Atlanta, it is doubtful that Davis would have removed him. But his sullenness and distrust (bordering on paranoia) colored his decision making.

After the near destruction of the Army of Tennessee in the battles of Franklin and Nashville, Hood was relieved and Johnston once again took command of its remnants. Robert E. Lee, as the new General-in-Chief, recalled Johnston for one last opportunity to lead. His command theoretically included three Confederate armies, the primary being the remnants of the once formidable Army of Tennessee. With the few forces he had remaining, Johnston skillfully delayed and parried Sherman's forces up through the Carolinas, again keeping his army intact. But by this stage, Johnston's "Army" could hope to be nothing more than a harassing force. And when Lee finally surrendered his Army of Northern Virginia, Johnston followed suit. After three separate days of

negotiations, Johnston surrendered the Army of Tennessee and all remaining Confederate forces still active in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.

Historians continue to debate Joe Johnston's abilities and overall success as a general. At the operational level, he had an excellent sense of what was in the "art of the doable" and a solid grasp of Jominian warfare. He had superior organizational skills and understood the technical aspects of warfighting. He realized, as did Lincoln and Grant, that the Confederate centers of gravity were its armies. But although many of his ideas and actions were militarily sound, Johnston was half-hearted in making his strategic case to his commander in chief, and made little attempt to reconcile with Davis the military necessity of preserving the mobility of his forces with the political necessity of protecting key terrain.

Lacking a sense of his broader surroundings, he also committed the unforgiveable blunder of allowing himself to become a figurehead for those factions that were opposed to Davis' administration. He did not seem able to understand, or willing to appreciate, the political and diplomatic aspects of the conflict. In many ways, Johnston shared characteristics with Union general George McClellan: both were excessively proud, quick to take offense, and ill-mannered with their superiors. In sum, they were temperamentally unsuited for strategic level leadership, and both were relieved of their commands as a result.

Joseph Johnston ultimately failed as a strategic leader due to his lack of initiative and vision, and his inability to effectively communicate and negotiate. He undermined any level of trust by continually failing to keep Davis and his administration informed of his plans and openly complaining about perceived slights. The public animosity was so

severe that one diarist commented, “The President detests Joe Johnston for all the trouble he has given him, and General Joe returns the compliment with compound interest. His hatred of Jeff Davis amounts to a religion. With him it colors all things.”⁵⁰ And with him, the last of the major Confederate forces would cease to exist.

Leadership was only one of many aspects that influenced the outcome of the Civil War, but its role was significant. Success in the Confederate West would require leaders who could assume the strategic mantle by combining tactical and operational skills with an ability to communicate and understand the complexity of the broader environment. Sidney Johnston possessed these qualities, and more importantly he demonstrated the flexibility, adaptability, and awareness needed to lead in volatile and ambiguous situations. His death left a tremendous void that Joseph Johnston was unable to fill. He never demonstrated an ability to develop beyond his level of comfort or to learn from his mistakes. As a result, it was only a matter of time before the Confederacy’s bugles would blow no more.

Endnotes

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