

**STRATEGY
RESEARCH
PROJECT**

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**A FAILURE IN STRATEGIC COMMAND:
JEFFERSON DAVIS, J. E. JOHNSTON AND
THE WESTERN THEATER**

BY

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A Failure in Strategic Command:
Jefferson Davis, J.E. Johnston and the Western Theater

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ABSTRACT

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This paper looks at the decision of Confederate President Jefferson Davis in November of 1862 to appoint General Joseph E. Johnston to command of the armies in the Department of the West and why that decision failed. It addresses three primary reasons for this failure which were Johnston's unsuitability for the position, Davis's inability to allow a subordinate the appropriate freedom to command, and finally, the difficulties with the command structure of the Department of the West.

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THE DECISION

"SPECIAL ORDERS No. 275

ADJT. AND INSPECTOR GENERAL'S OFFICE,
Richmond, November 24, 1862

General J.E. Johnston is hereby assigned to the following geographical command, to wit... General Johnston will for the purpose of correspondence and reports, establish his headquarters at Chattanooga, or such other place as in his judgment will best secure facilities for ready communication with the troops within the limits of his command, and will repair in person to any part of said command whenever his presence may for the time be necessary or desirable.

By command of the Secretary of War:

JNO. WITHERS,
Assistant Adjutant-General"¹

With this, Special Orders No. 275, Jefferson Davis took the first step toward the establishment of a commander to oversee the military operations of the two armies in the vast area known as the Department of the West. The decision to appoint General Joseph E. Johnston to command of this theater of the Confederacy was strongly supported at the time and answered a critical need of the Confederacy. For some time the only coordinating body over the many departments of the South had been the president.² Many believed that an overall commander in the Department of the West was necessary to oversee the implementation of strategy for that area of operations and coordinate the actions of its two

armies. Lacking such a commander, the South was unable to capitalize on its advantage of strategic central position. That the decision failed and was of little real value may be deduced from the poor results achieved during Johnston's time of command. The fact that following Johnston's removal as the Theater Commander he was not replaced reinforces the contention that Johnston was ineffective. Although the Confederacy badly needed someone to coordinate the actions of its largest and most difficult area, Davis's appointment of Johnston to that position was a mistake and failed for several reasons. The reasons for that failure are worth study. First, Johnston was ill-suited for the position of commander of a theater as large and varied as that of the west. Secondly, Davis for all his good intentions, was never really ready to relinquish control of the western theater. Finally, the task itself, given the limitations and circumstance at the time made effective command of that area very difficult if not impossible.

JOSEPH E. JOHNSTON- THE WRONG CHOICE

By December 1862, Joseph Eggleston Johnston was well known to Jefferson Davis due to years of previous association. They were cadets at the Military Academy at West Point together; however, they did not develop much of an association there.³ Both served

in the United States Army during the Mexican War, and later Davis was the Secretary of War when Johnston was appointed as the Quartermaster General.⁴ It was possibly then that the seeds of animosity were planted that would later so cloud the interactions between the two. Johnston could not forgive the support Davis gave to Johnston's rival and Davis's close personal friend, Albert Sidney Johnston, for the position of Quartermaster General. Although J.E. Johnston received the appointment to the position, he viewed Davis's lack of support as a professional affront.⁵ When the South seceded from the Union, both men followed and worked together in the development of the South's plans for defense.⁶ Later as president, Davis appointed Johnston to his first command of the Confederate forces at Harper's Ferry (a considerably important position at the time) and later to his position of commander of all the forces in Northern Virginia defending against the expected Union invasion under George B. McClellan.⁷ Johnston's handling of those forces, his actions around Richmond, and the defense throughout the Peninsular Campaign in the first half of 1862 gave Davis ample opportunity to observe Johnston. Those observations should have given Davis a good idea of the strengths and weaknesses of the man on whom he would later place so much responsibility.

Davis's associations with Johnston should have revealed the following. First of all, Johnston was very secretive and not given to keeping the government in Richmond apprised of his plans or intentions. There was ample evidence throughout the War to support that assessment. Davis was often "in the dark" as to Johnston's intentions and had to go to considerable lengths to determine them. The problem began as early as June 1861 when Johnston was in command of Confederate forces at Winchester. In a letter to Johnston Davis made the following request,

I wish you would write whenever convenience will permit and give me fully both information and suggestions...I am sure you cannot feel hesitation in writing to me freely and trust your engagements will permit you to do so frequently.⁸

Davis must have been considerably frustrated with Johnston to articulate such a request. As the campaign of First Manassas unfolded and the Confederacy attempted to concentrate Johnston's and Beauregard's forces, Adjutant General Samuel Cooper expressed a similar concern when writing Beauregard that "we have no intelligence from General Johnston."⁹ In February 1862 Davis again called upon Johnston to "Let me hear from you often and fully..." and in March, just prior to the beginning of the Peninsular Campaign, "Please keep me fully and frequently advised of your condition, and give me early information..."¹⁰ It was

becoming apparent that Johnston was an uncommunicative and secretive commander.

Later, as the commander of the troops protecting Richmond against the expected invasion of union forces under McClellan, Johnston continued his habit of keeping his plans, if he had any, to himself and only informing Richmond of his intentions when pressured. The Peninsular Campaign offers several examples of the difficulty Davis experienced with trying to keep abreast of developments in the field when Johnston was in command. His frequent withdrawals throughout that campaign continued to catch Davis off guard and surprise and alarm him.¹¹ His alarm is evident even in his letters to his wife. He expressed concern at not being able to understand Johnston's plans for defense even after meeting with him in the field at his headquarters and discussing the issue at some length with the general.¹² On 18 May, Davis was surprised upon riding to Johnston's headquarters to find his Army of the Potomac camped in the suburbs of Richmond. After discussions with Johnston and learning the reasons for the unexpected withdrawal from the Chickahominy River, Davis threatened to replace the general with "someone who would fight."¹³ That, however, had only a marginal effect on Johnston, for over the next few days Davis was still unable to ascertain his intentions through Lee, who had been sent to

communicate with the army commander.¹⁴ Davis was finally pushed to the point of having to make regular trips to the field in order to keep abreast of the situation. Whether we agree with Davis's methods is not the issue, the point is that the Commander in Chief, which Jefferson Davis was, wanted to know what was happening, and his senior commander would not tell him. There can be little doubt in Davis's mind as to the difficulties he would face in that regard when he contemplated the decision in late 1862 to place Johnston in overall command in the west. Perhaps more important than the fact that Johnston was uncommunicative with his superiors was that he was reluctant to work with a higher authority. That became potentially more dangerous and posed greater consequences as the importance of the command increased.

The second factor that made J.E. Johnston a poor choice for command in the west was his propensity for not wanting to take the initiative. He tended to await an offensive move by an opposing commander in hopes of finding an advantageous position or a mistake that he could exploit. In fact, Johnston became known as a skilled and frequent "retreater" who would not initiate a battle or stand and receive one unless everything was perfect.¹⁵ Whether that propensity was the result of excessive caution or an inability to plan, it points to possible

unsuitability for the later position of theater commander.

During his command at Harper's Ferry Johnston recommended to Davis to withdraw his troops from that location. As he put it, "This place cannot be held against an enemy who would venture to attack it. Would it not be better for these troops to join one of our armies ...than be lost here."¹⁶

Arguably Johnston never seriously considered holding Harper's Ferry against any attack, determined or otherwise. His actions begin to hint at two serious shortcomings in Johnston's personality that diminished his effectiveness as a commander. He was unwilling to take risks, and he would not take the initiative. His performance during the Peninsular Campaign confirmed both of those shortcomings and contained several examples of his preference for retreat when faced with an attacking enemy.

The Peninsular Campaign more than any other demonstrated the difficulties Davis would encounter in working with Johnston and the possibility that he would be a poor choice as a theater commander. Throughout the operation Johnston withdrew in the face of Union forces and relinquished valuable terrain and equipment with little or no fight. At Centreville on March 15, he withdrew, with no real plan of where he would establish his next line of defense, from a position his army had occupied for

months.¹⁷ That withdrawal was notable for the large amount of weapons and stores left behind and lost to northern forces.¹⁸ The campaign progressed with Johnston forfeiting Yorktown followed by Williamsburg with little fighting at the former and only a rearguard action at the later in order to allow the logistical trains to escape.¹⁹ All the time Johnston was on the defensive and unwilling to gamble on the possibility of driving McClellan back from his positions. It was fortuitous for the South and Johnston that he was opposed by someone who was even more cautious and unwilling to take risks than himself.

Johnston's subsequent position on the Chickahominy in front of the Richmond suburbs was possibly the result of being forced to stand and accept battle by Davis and Lee, who feared the field commander would sacrifice Richmond without a fight. The fact that Johnston was willing to give up so much equipment, stores, and terrain to the enemy without a determined fight must have troubled Davis deeply. Even after Davis threatened Johnston with relief the commander still had no more definite plan of action than waiting for McClellan's attack in hopes an opening would present itself.²⁰ His lack of initiative and poor planning made him a dubious choice for the position that would, in six months, require a forceful commander with vision in order to gain victory for the South in its Western Theater. Johnston's tendency for

inaction surfaced again during the Vicksburg Campaign when he spent the entire period from the middle of May 1863 until the surrender on 4 July without conducting any real action or developing a substantial plan to improve the situation until it was too late.²¹ Unlike his previous fights at Winchester and on the Peninsula, he was not confronted with an enemy intent on attacking him. Union forces focused their efforts on Pemberton and the defenses at Vicksburg. Therefore, Johnston could not sit and wait for his opponent's attack and then capitalize on a mistake. He had to develop an offensive plan, take the initiative, and attack the enemy. That he was unable to do because he was incapable of offensive action.²²

Finally, Johnston was unwilling to shoulder the responsibility of command and face the possibility that the failure of the Army in the field might be his doing. An illustrative story exists of a grouse hunting trip before the war that included Johnston. Throughout the hunt the others in the group blazed away as birds were flushed, but Johnston, known to be an accomplished shot and never wanting to fail, always found fault with each opportunity to shoot. By the end of the day Johnston had yet to take a shot while the others had bagged several birds.²³ Perhaps that anecdote speaks mostly about vanity, but it also highlights Johnston's tendency to avoid

action if he perceived any risk of failure. The story illustrates Johnston's habit of continually finding fault with every opportunity and not risking his reputation on a less than perfect shot. Whether Davis was familiar with the anecdote is doubtful, but he personally experienced several instances that should have made that characteristic of Johnson's personality apparent. An early example occurred on Johnston's arrival in May 1862 at Harper's Ferry when he quickly decided the position was untenable with the forces he had been given and informed Richmond of that fact.²⁴ Again on June 6, he reemphasized that point with Lee, who responded to Johnston on June 7:

It is hoped that you will be able to be timely informed of the approach of troops against you, and retire, provided they cannot be successfully opposed. You must exercise your discretion...Precise instructions cannot be given you...²⁵

Davis, through Lee, was giving Johnston the responsibility and authority for making the decision whether to stand and fight at Harper's Ferry or withdraw in the face of overwhelming numbers. Johnston, however, was unwilling to be saddled with the burden of ordering a retreat and possibly suffering a blemish on his record. In his view it was better to have a higher authority take responsibility than to be known as the first commander to suffer the loss of such a valuable location to the

Union. That became apparent to those back in Richmond.²⁶

Johnston's actions later in the war when he was assigned as the commander of the Western Theater reflected his overly cautious attitude toward each of his assignments. In November of 1862, on the same day Johnston received his orders assigning him to command in the west he wrote General Cooper to inform him, among other things, that the forces he had were "greatly outnumbered and further disadvantaged by being split by the Tennessee River."²⁷ Although that may be a sound military estimate of the situation, it is significant that Johnston made the assessment from Richmond, where he had been recuperating for the last six months, without having seen his new command. Again during the Vicksburg campaign, upon his arrival at Jackson, Mississippi, Johnston immediately assessed the situation, wired Richmond, and informed them, in typically pessimistic fashion, "I am too late."²⁸ Davis could not have positively known prior to appointing him that Johnston would begin his new command that way. However, considering his past performance and especially his reluctance to defend any of the positions during his retreat through the Peninsula, it should not have come as a surprise. He was not aggressive, and he was not a commander who took the initiative and the fight to his opponent. Instead, he found fault with each command in which he was placed and raised the

issue with his superiors. That way, if he failed, blame could not be placed on him as a commander because victory had been unachievable due to the circumstances. In addition to this, Johnston just did not want the responsibility of command in the West. Throughout the period Johnston was in command, he was in constant correspondence with Senator Wigfall, a political opponent of Davis, attempting to get himself an assignment somewhere else. What Johnston wanted was an army command, preferably his old position at the head of the Army of Northern Virginia, rather than the Western Theater, which he considered no command at all.²⁹ In his correspondence he indicated as much, and it should come as no surprise that as a consequence of his lack of enthusiasm he had little effect as a theater commander.

JEFFERSON DAVIS: THE WRONG BOSS

Although J. E. Johnston may have been the wrong man to be the theater commander in the west, responsibility for the failure of the command arrangement cannot be placed entirely on him. Jefferson Davis in his capacity as the Commander in Chief has to share the blame.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, when the South was looking for someone to lead their cause, there was probably nobody more qualified, or at least apparently qualified, than Davis. It

seemed he had it all. A West Point education made him familiar with many of the prominent men, both military and civilian, who would lead the South in its struggle against the North. He had a distinguished career as an army officer in which he commanded a regiment of Mississippi volunteers in the Mexican War. He was also an experienced politician who had served in both houses of Congress as a senator and congressman from his home state of Mississippi. In addition, he had served on the Military Affairs Committee and was the Secretary of War in the administration of Franklin Pierce. On the surface it would appear that Davis was well suited for the position he so reluctantly assumed on February 16, 1861.³⁰

When compared to his counterpart in the North, Abraham Lincoln, the South seemed to enjoy an apparent advantage in its senior leadership. But in Davis's case his prior experience may have worked against him and clouded his better judgment. By his own admission he would have preferred to have been commissioned in the army of the Confederate States where he felt the most comfortable and where he believed he could make the best contribution to the South. Unfortunately, Davis's experience as a military officer tended to draw him into the details of operations and drove him to concern himself with matters that were best left to the generals in the field. That is

understandable as it was the area where he was most familiar. However, there was a nation to be built, and the South needed a President who could handle the many varying complexities of leadership at the strategic level. They did not need a Commander in Chief who involved himself in operational and sometimes even tactical decisions. Perhaps the most telling examples of that tendency are the actions of the President during and after the battle of First Manassas and during the Peninsular Campaign. Davis, by his own admission, could not content himself with merely waiting in Richmond for news of the success or failure of the Confederate Army in its first real test on the battlefield.³¹ Consequently, he rode out to see what was happening and encountered what he perceived to be stragglers and deserters leaving the action. He attempted to rally them. Later, after the completion of the battle, he met with the two army commanders, Beauregard and Johnston, and attempted to convince them to pursue the defeated union forces.³² During the Peninsula Campaign Davis constantly visited Johnston's headquarters in an attempt to determine what arrangements Johnston had made and what he intended to do. Unfortunately, those visits by Davis were primarily Johnston's fault resulting from his practice of revealing little of his plans and keeping his superiors in the dark. Davis wanted to know what was happening with the Southern

forces and Johnston viewed his queries as an intrusion on his authority as a commander. The president was overly concerned with details and Johnston was overly secretive. Davis, however, did not demonstrate the same method of dealing with commanders in the field in his subsequent relationship with Robert E. Lee. The difference was that Lee frequently corresponded with Davis and kept him informed of the progress of the army. In all likelihood, that was the result of a mutual understanding and trust the two developed during Lee's time as a military advisor to Davis.

Davis's excessive meddling in the case of Johnston was due in part to his own nature and in part to Johnston's personality flaws. Regardless of the reason, Davis's tendency to interfere with Johnston's command would have damaging effects during the campaigns in the West. One of the most illustrative examples was Davis's decision to move 9,000 troops in December 1862 from Braxton Bragg's command in Tennessee to John C. Pemberton's command in Vicksburg against the advice of his commanders.³³ As it turned out, the majority of the forces failed to arrive in time to be of use to Pemberton, and they were no longer available to Bragg, who needed them. Other examples exist. When Grant crossed the Mississippi south of Vicksburg and began his movement north against Jackson, Davis telegraphed Pemberton and reinforced

the need that Vicksburg and Port Hudson must be held.³⁴

Consequently, when Johnston sent his 17 May message to Pemberton to "evacuate Vicksburg", it was ignored and Pemberton remained in the city.³⁵ The result was predictable. The city fell in about 6 weeks with 30,000 troops lost to the Confederate cause in the west. One can argue about the proper tactical response, but Davis had given control of the theater to Johnston without allowing him to exercise that control. What makes this even more ironic is that both Davis and James A. Seddon, the Secretary of War, stressed to Johnston that he was authorized to take tactical command of the situation whenever he arrived in the area of operations.³⁶

Another characteristic of Davis that hampered effective theater command was his reluctance to heed the advice of his commanders in the field. To a degree that can be attributed to his reliance on his own judgment due to his previous military background. Perhaps in the case of Johnston, Davis was also driven by his previous experience with that commander and his propensity for doing nothing. Whatever the reason, Davis was remiss in not allowing his commander to make decisions based on his own judgment of the situation. An illustration of this occurred when Davis ignored the advice of Johnston to consolidate the forces in the Trans-Mississippi with the forces under

Pemberton at Vicksburg to defeat Grant and then combine the latter with the forces in Tennessee under Bragg to move against whatever vulnerability the North presented.³⁷ Johnston's suggestion was sound strategic advice, but Davis ignored it. Davis's decision not to place a priority on either Vicksburg or Tennessee and his orders to Pemberton to defend Vicksburg reflect the same problem.

Along those lines there is another reason to doubt Davis's ability to act as a commander in chief at the strategic level and allow Johnston to act as a theater commander. Davis habitually communicated directly with the subordinate commanders in the field (Pemberton and Bragg) and bypassed Johnston. A review of official correspondence for the period December 1862 through July 1863 in the Western Theater is replete with letters, orders, messages, and reports directly between Richmond and Murfreesboro and Vicksburg and back. It is no wonder Johnston was unaware of critical events in his operational area until well after they happened. What is even more incriminating is that Richmond failed to inform Johnston and his headquarters in Chattanooga of the information they received.

Finally, Davis with all his prior military knowledge and experience was unable to think offensively on a large scale. His concept for the defense in the West was to defend as much

Southern soil as possible and not give up anything without a fight.³⁸ The concept of defending everywhere prevented the South from concentrating at a decisive point, and forced it to yield the initiative to the Union. With the Confederacy's limited manpower pool it could not raise sufficient forces to defend all the Southern states. Consequently, the South was never able to concentrate sufficient combat power in the West and was ultimately defeated, even though the United States War Department reported over 174,000 troops surrendered and paroled in 1865 at the end of the war. In fact, the total Confederate strength at the end of the War was somewhere in the vicinity of 200,000 troops.³⁹

THE WEST: THE WRONG THEATER

One of the most difficult obstacles to overcome in trying to establish an effective theater level command system for the Western Theater was the sheer size of the area of operations. For comparison, the Army of Northern Virginia operated in an area that was significantly smaller than that assigned to its western counterpart. Lee, even during the Gettysburg Campaign never ventured more than 60 miles outside the state of Virginia. On the other hand, over 300 miles separated Murfreesboro and Vicksburg and there was no direct rail line.⁴⁰ The movement of

troops presented a considerable challenge to commanders trying to concentrate forces for offensive operations or to meet the expected attack of an opposing force. The only rail connection between Murfreesboro and Vicksburg ran through Chattanooga, Atlanta, Montgomery, Mobile, Meridian and Jackson.⁴¹ The movement of units could take up to a month with horses and wagons moving overland by road and troops using the circuitous rail route. In fact, it took over 30 days for all of Carter L. Stevenson's 9,000 troops to finally close on Vicksburg once they left Bragg's command in December of 1862.⁴² Consequently, the movement of forces between armies was impractical if faced with an unexpected attack with anything less than two weeks warning. Given the difficulties of lateral reinforcement, Davis's intent to shuttle forces between Pemberton and Bragg should they receive an attack from either Grant or Rosecrans was really an insupportable concept.⁴³

A second factor hampering success in the West was the departmental system of the Confederate States and the boundaries of those departments. The departments (there were six between December, 1862 to July, 1863) were designed to defend their territories and states using the forces drawn from within the department.⁴⁴ Although forces were occasionally drawn from outside a department to augment it for a major crisis or expected

fight, the intent was that each department would defend itself with its own assets. The challenge the South faced was that each department wanted to retain as many troops as possible to protect those territories for which it was responsible. As a result, departments were reluctant to release troops to fight in other areas. General Theophilus Holmes's refusal to provide troops from the Trans-Mississippi to assist in the defense of Vicksburg in December 1862 was an example. The departmental system led to a myopic view of the war by some of the Confederate commanders and may have led to some of the failures they experienced in the Western Theater. Compounding the situation was the fact that the border between the West and Trans-Mississippi ran along the Mississippi River, which was a major line of communication for both the North and South. Davis, possibly as a result of political pressures but more likely due to personal friendship with the commander, never forced the Trans-Mississippi to provide sizable forces for the defense of Vicksburg or to coordinate their operations.⁴⁵ As a result the two uncoordinated departments were unable to prevent Grant from crossing the river north of Vicksburg and then recrossing it to the South.⁴⁶ Holmes, worried that the removal of troops from his department to fight at Vicksburg would result in the loss of Arkansas, never seemed to realize that the loss of Vicksburg and subsequently,

the Mississippi River, would mean that Arkansas and much of his department was lost to the South anyway.⁴⁷ The effect of the departmental system and its resultant dispersal of forces was that of the 174,000 to 200,000 troops that were under Southern command at the end of the war, only 59,000 belonged to the major war effort, the armies of Lee and Johnston.⁴⁸

Finally, the sizable amount of Union forces in the Western Theater made the prospects of success slim. The Union had two armies, both larger than the Confederate army they faced. Their only strategic hope was to beat one Union Army and then quickly reposition to defeat the second. What the South needed was a commander who was bold enough to accept risks and concentrate his limited forces at the critical time and place. They did not have such a commander. Additionally, the South suffered from significant personnel turbulence in the higher command structure of the West. Eight different generals commanded the Army of the Tennessee during the course of the war along with 25 different corps commanders. In no two consecutive campaigns were the army and corps commanders the same.⁴⁹ Obviously not all the turbulence occurred during Johnston's command, but the statistic illustrates some of the challenges the theater presented. Given the fact that in no other instance was a Southern commander placed in command of two armies, it is understandable that the

army and corps commanders were confused about their relationship with Johnston. That confusion created an environment that made any type of theater level command a significant challenge.

CONCLUSION

WAR DEPARTMENT, ADJT. AND INSP.GEN'S OFFICE
Richmond, Va., July 22, 1863

General JOHNSTON, Morton, Miss.:

In conformity with your expressed wish, you are relieved from the further command of the Department of Tennessee, which, as advised by you, is united to that of East Tennessee, so as to extend General Bragg's command over the department of General Buckner.

S. COOPER
Adjutant and Inspector General⁵⁰

With this, the Confederacy ended General Joseph E. Johnston's authority over the Department of Tennessee and his position as a commander of two armies. Jefferson Davis's decision to place Johnston in command of the Western Theater has been called by some "the failure of an experiment."⁵¹ That it was a failure is sure; that the South benefited little from the experience is also sure. Why the experiment failed is the real lesson to be taken from the experience. The unsuitability of the man chosen for the job, the inability of the Commander in Chief to relinquish the controls and authority to a subordinate, and finally the overwhelming challenge and institutional barriers all served to

provide today's leaders with an historical lesson worthy of
critical review.

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