

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

A Long and Bloody Task: The Atlanta Campaign from Dalton Through Kennesaw to the Chattahoochee, May 5-July 18, 1864

By Stephen Davis

“The approach of warm weather told us that our work for the summer would soon commence, but I do not think anyone had a thought that the task would prove so long and bloody.”¹

The “Atlanta” Campaign might be a misnomer, if only because in his instructions to Major General William Tecumseh Sherman, Grant never mentioned the city at all. “You I propose to move against Johnston’s army, to break it up and to get into the enemy’s country as far as you can,” Grant wrote on April 4, 1864 “inflicting all the damage you can against their War resources.”²

Grant’s confidential letter to Sherman further underscores what both Union generals had by now agreed upon, as the war entered its fourth year: damaging the Rebels’ war resources was just as important as breaking up their major armies. Hard war had begun to be practiced by Union forces in the summer of 1862. Now Sherman, as much as Major General Phillip Henry Sheridan, had emerged as one of its principal practitioners.

Sherman relished his assignment—up to a point. This he acknowledged in his reply to Grant, April 10. “I am to knock Joe Johnston,” he wrote, “and do as much

¹ William T. Anderson, ed., “The Civil War Diary of Captain James Litton Cooper, September 30, 1861 to January 1865,” in *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (June 1956): 162.

² Grant to Sherman, Apr. 4, 1864 in United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 32, part 3, p. 246 (hereafter cited as *O.R.*, I, 32, pt. 3, 246).

damage to the resources of the enemy as possible.” Sherman had shown a few months before that he knew how to do the latter. With an army of 26,000 he had marched across the width of Mississippi, from Vicksburg to Meridian and back again, destroying rail facilities, factories and shops, and randomly damaging civilian property as well. “Despite orders issued by the corps commander, Major General James Birdseye McPherson, prohibiting the burning of private homes and property,” Clay Mountcastle has written, “the Yankees did just that. The officers made no concerted effort to prevent it.”³

The part of his assignment that Sherman didn’t particularly care for was Grant’s instructions to “break up” the Rebel army in north Georgia, commanded by General Joseph Eggleston Johnston. Time and again—at Shiloh, Chickasaw Bluffs and Missionary Ridge—Sherman had shown that he was at best a mediocre battle commander. Hence his preference to merely “knock” Joe Johnston.⁴

But at least Sherman and Grant, close friends, agreed on their general goals.

Not so with Joe Johnston.

After Johnston took command of the Army of Tennessee from General Braxton Bragg in late December 1863, the Confederate leadership—President Jefferson Davis, General Bragg (now the president’s advisor) and War Secretary James Alexander Seddon—began to hound him to take the offensive into Tennessee before the Federals could launch their own spring campaign. Johnston repeatedly refused: the enemy outnumbered him; the Tennessee country was rough and barren; he lacked sufficient wagons and animals to carry supplies. Johnston eventually won by simply waiting until Sherman launched his campaign, which he did on May 5.

Sherman clearly had the numerical advantage. His forces assembled as an army group: 110,000 men, 254 cannon split into the Army of the Cumberland (Major General George Henry Thomas—61,600 infantry); Army of the Tennessee (Major General James B. McPherson—22,300 infantry) and Army of the Ohio (Major General John McAllister Schofield—9,200 infantry). Thomas’ army was by far the largest (IV, XIV and XX Corps). McPherson had the XV and XVI Corps. Schofield’s “army” was really only the XXIII Corps. Cavalry, mostly in Thomas’ army, numbered 12,400. 4,500 artillerymen served 254 guns.

General Johnston had half that strength on April 10. The infantry and most of the artillery were divided into two corps, commanded by Lieutenant Generals William Joseph Hardee (21,947 officers and men present) and John Bell Hood (22,953). Headquarters staff and cavalry (8,959) made for a total of 54,500 men, plus 144 field pieces.

³ Sherman to Grant, April 10, 1864 in *O.R.*, I, 32, pt. 3, 313; Clay Mountcastle, *Punitive War: Confederate Guerrillas and Union Reprisals* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 88.

⁴ Grant to Sherman, April 4, 1864 and Sherman to Grant, April 10, 1864 in *O.R.*, I, 38, pt. 3, 724-5.

Johnston had tipped the government off to his defensive strategy in the epistolary back-and-forth with Davis et al. “I can see no other mode of taking the offensive here,” he had written on January 2, “than to beat the enemy when he advances, and then move forward.” When Sherman began to advance, Johnston would fix his army in a strong defensive position and hope to be attacked.⁵

For his part, Sherman had no intention of wasting his strength in the kind of bloody attacking battles Grant would soon launch against Lee’s army in Virginia. Rather, he would approach the Rebel line, spar at it with bombardments and reconnaissance-in-force by Thomas and usually Schofield, while using McPherson’s army as the column of maneuver—sending it around Johnston’s flank (usually the Confederate left) to threaten the railroad that both sides used as their supply line, the Western & Atlantic, which ran 138 miles from Chattanooga to Atlanta.

Sherman’s tactics worked beautifully.

During the winter, Johnston had arrayed his army north of Dalton, and west of it along a long, imposing Rocky Face Ridge. Sherman spent a few days demonstrating against the Rebel position while McPherson’s army flanked it by marching through Snake Creek Gap, a dozen miles south of Dalton on May 9. When it emerged from the gap, McPherson’s advance was less than six miles from the W. & A. But he hesitated to push forward. A disappointed Sherman reinforced his column and McPherson again threatened the Rebel left flank. Johnston had to retreat in the night of May 12-13.

To this day historians discuss how and why Johnston could have left Snake Creek Gap unguarded. The renowned Ed Bearss once gave a talk to the Chicago Civil War Roundtable asking this question. Johnston’s myopia, he reasoned, was all the more baffling as the general’s background had been in topographical engineering, and the Confederates had had at least four months to reconnoiter the area of Dalton before the spring campaign began.

Johnston took up a new position at Resaca, sixteen miles (by railroad) south of Dalton. Here again Sherman kept Johnston busy with brisk assaults on May 14-15 (with Confederates delivering a few of their own). The Federals took a couple of key positions, but for the most part the Confederates held their lines and thus technically won a defensive tactical victory. Casualties for the two days of fighting led to about 4,000 Federals hors de combat, and probably close to 3,000 for the Confederates. The key event, however, was when a Union division of McPherson’s managed to cross the Oostanaula River well to the west of Rebels’ left flank. This lodgment forced Johnston to order his army once more to retreat during the night of May 15-16.

The Confederates were giving up ground, but gaining strength. Earlier in the year the Richmond authorities had promised Johnston reinforcements if he would assume offensive operations. Now, recognizing the importance of holding Sherman back from

⁵ Johnston to Davis, January 2, 1864 in *O.R.*, I, 32, pt. 2, 511.

Atlanta, they began to send more troops to the Army of Tennessee. After Sherman shifted forces from Mississippi to his army group, Lieutenant General Leonidas Polk's Army of Mississippi should logically follow—and it did. By the third week in May Polk's three divisions had joined Johnston, essentially becoming his third infantry corps. Garrison troops from Charleston, Savannah and Mobile were also sent, such that the Army of Tennessee's returns on June 30 showed 62,747 officers and men present for duty. Joseph E. Johnston's Army of Tennessee was now the largest in the Confederacy, stronger than Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia.

Johnston's troops marched through Calhoun and Adairsville, with army engineers unable to find ground suitable for another defensive line. Near Cassville, more than twenty miles south of Resaca, Johnston finally found a place to fight—and not just defensively. From Adairsville two roads lead toward Atlanta. Johnston figured that the enemy would use both; the likely separation of Sherman's forces gave him the idea of an attacking battle. Hardee's corps would take the longer route, via Kingston, leaving a "plain, well-marked trail" along the way to lure the Yankees into following with their main force. Johnston placed his other two corps, Polk's and Hood's near Cassville. When the second Federal column approached on the direct road from Adairsville, Polk would hold it at bay while Hood marched around to the enemy's left and launch a flank assault. Johnston was so confident of his prospects for victory that on the morning of May 19 he issued a stirring battle-order to his troops. "Soldiers of the Army of Tennessee," it read, "by your courage and skill you have repulsed every assault of the enemy.... You will now turn and march to meet his advancing columns. Fully confiding in the conduct of the officers, the courage of the soldiers, I lead you to battle."⁶

As it turned out, he did not. True, only two of Sherman's six corps (Hooker's and Schofield's) approached Cassville on the direct road. On the morning of May 19 as he led his troops out toward their attack positions, Union cavalry appeared on Hood's right flank. Not knowing their strength, Hood cancelled the movement and sent word back to headquarters. A disappointed Johnston refused to believe Hood, and to the end of his life claimed that Hood had been spooked by phantom troops who never existed. (Historians today, finding proof in the *Official Records* of Colonel Edward Moody McCook's cavalry division nearing Cassville, side with Hood.)

Nevertheless, Johnston had no choice but to accede to Hood's field decision. He ordered Polk and Hood to a line on high ground south of Cassville as Hardee marched in to join them. When the Federals came up and started to shell it, some of Polk's and Hood's troops came under enfilading fire. That night the two generals warned Johnston that if the enemy attacked the next day, they would not be able to hold the line. A reluctant Johnston ordered another nocturnal retreat. The next day, May 20, the army crossed the Etowah and engineers burned its two bridges. Within the first three weeks of the campaign, Johnston had given up thirty-five miles of territory and two of the three major river barriers impeding Sherman's advance to Atlanta.

⁶ Stephen Davis, *Atlanta Will Fall: Sherman, Joe Johnston, and the Yankee Heavy Battalions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 53; General Orders, May 19, 1864 in *O.R.*, I, 38, pt. 4, 728.

Up to now, officers and men of the Army of Tennessee had not grumbled much about their commanding general giving up territory to the Yankees. “All in pretty good spirits up to falling back from Cassville,” wrote Lieutenant Thomas B. Mackall, nephew of Johnston’s chief of staff, Brigadier General William Whann Mackall. “But night retreat after issue general order impaired confidence.”⁷

Jefferson Davis was not pleased. After Johnston wired Richmond about his retreat from Resaca, the president replied that he read the news “with disappointment.” He reminded his general of the reinforcements which had been sent him, adding his hope that they would lead to “important results.”⁸

Johnston retreated across the Etowah River on May 20, his engineers burning the rail and wagon bridges behind them. He took up position along formidable Allatoona Mountain, where a 175-foot gap allowed the W. & A. to run through. Sherman knew the place, however, from pre-war travels and determined to avoid testing the position.

Sherman gave his men a few days’ rest and resupply, then on the May 23 began sending them across the Etowah west of Allatoona. For the only time in the campaign, he was leading his army group marching away from the railroad, toward the town of Dallas.

Johnston figured out his adversary’s objective and drew his army up in a six-mile line extending eastward from Dallas. Hood’s corps held the Confederate right, around New Hope Church. On May 25, with his armies drawing close to the Rebel line, Sherman ordered Major General Joseph Hooker’s XX Corps to attack the enemy in its front. The Federal attack that afternoon fell on Major General Alexander Peter Stewart’s division. The Confederates had had time to fortify for battle; pickets brought in a prisoner who announced that Hooker’s infantry was heading their way. Thus prepared, Stewart had little difficulty repelling the enemy assault. “It is fun for our troops to stand in their trenches and mow down their lines as they advance,” Lieutenant Andrew J. Neal later wrote. Confederate artillery was also effective. Union Brigadier General Alpheus Starkey Williams, one of Hooker’s division commanders, lamented that the Rebels “poured canister and shrapnel from all directions except the rear.” Hooker’s repulse at New Hope Church brought 1,665 killed, wounded and missing. Stewart lost 300 to 400 men in this small but morale-building Confederate victory.⁹

Another Confederate victory came two days later, when Sherman ordered another attack. In this one, Brigadier General Thomas John Wood’s division was to find and strike the enemy right flank. However, the Confederates were extending their line to the

⁷ Richard M. McMurry, “The Mackall Journal and Its Antecedents,” typescript, courtesy of author, entry of May 20. Lieutenant Thomas B. Mackall kept a journal during the campaign which remains largely unpublished. As an officer on Johnston’s staff, Mackall recorded many details not found elsewhere in the literature. The journal reposes at the Earl Greg Swem Library, College of William and Mary.

⁸ Davis to Johnston, May 18, 1864 in *O.R.*, I, 38, pt. 4, 725

⁹ Albert Castel, *Decision in the West: The Atlanta Campaign of 1864* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 225; Milo M. Quaife, ed., *From the Cannon’s Mouth: The Civil War Letters of General Alpheus S. Williams* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1959), 312.

east just as Wood was trying to outflank it. Sherman was impatient for the attack to begin, so Wood ordered a brigade, Brigadier General William Babcock Hazen's, to move forward. The Federals advanced around 5:00 p.m. through thick woods, The Confederates ahead of them, of Major General Patrick Ronayne Cleburne's division, had not had time to dig in. But the Southerners had no trouble repulsing Hazen's attack. Wood belatedly called in another brigade, but it too was repulsed. Lieutenant Ambrose Gwinnett Bierce of Hazen's staff later called the futile assault of May 27 "the Crime at Pickett's Mill." Northern casualties in the battle numbered 1,565: 230 killed, 1,016 wounded and 319 missing. Cleburne reported 85 dead and 363 wounded, to that should be added some 150 cavalymen who fought out on the Confederate right flank for a total of some 600 casualties.¹⁰

Yet the next day, the tables turned. Johnston suspected that Sherman was sidling back to the railroad, so he ordered Major General William Brimage Bate, whose division held the Confederate left near Dallas, to launch a reconnaissance-in-force that would ascertain the enemy's strength. The Federals—Major General John Alexander Logan's XV Corps—were dug in and ready. The Confederates suffered a short, sharp repulse that cost 600 to 700 casualties; Logan lost 379 men.

Sherman, like many another Civil War general, liked to boast of his successes and stay mum on his failures. Accordingly, in his campaign report he mentioned the "terrible and bloody repulse" of the Rebels at Dallas. But as for New Hope Church and Pickett's Mill, where his own forces had been repulsed, he merely stated, "In making our developments before the enemy about New Hope many severe, sharp encounters occurred between parts of the army, details of which will be given at length in the reports of subordinate commanders."¹¹

Johnston's officers and men were heartened by their stand at the Dallas-New Hope line. "Our army was never in better spirits," wrote a Mississippian on May 29. The brass in Richmond, however, was not impressed. On June 4 Bragg slipped a note to President Davis: "the condition of affairs in Georgia is daily becoming more serious."¹²

Sherman had suffered a couple of repulses, but he won the larger point. When he got his army group marching eastward back toward the railroad, he had maneuvered the Rebels off Allatoona. On June 3 Johnston's army began sidling toward the railroad as well. The Confederates took up a new position running east from Lost Mountain, not quite ten miles from Dallas. Their new line encompassed Gilgal Church at its center, and anchored on the right at Brush Mountain. Out in front was a three hundred-foot tall

¹⁰ Brian M. Thomsen, ed., *Shadows of Blue & Gray: The Civil War Writings of Ambrose Bierce* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2002), 225; Cleburne report, May 30, 1864 in *O.R.* I, 38, pt. 3, 724-5; Brad Butkovich, *The Battle of Pickett's Mill: Along the Dead-Line* (Charleston SC: History Press, 2013), 155-6.

¹¹ Sherman's report, September 15, 1864 in *O.R.* I, 38, pt. 1, 66.

¹² Richard Walpole to "Dear Anna," May 29, 1864, Bomar Family Papers, MSS 86, box 1, Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University; Bragg to Davis, June 4 in *O.R.*, I, 38, pt. 4, 762.

eminence called Pine Mountain. Johnston placed an infantry division, Major General William B. Bate's, there.

Sherman rested his troops for a week, then on June 10 started marching them toward the Rebels. As the Federals approached, General Hardee worried that they might surround and cut off Bate's salient. He asked Johnston to accompany him there on the morning of June 14. General Polk accompanied them. The group of officers began drawing artillery shells from below, and were cautioned to disperse. Polk tarried awhile, surveying the ground, when a shell passed through his chest, killing him instantly. A grieving Johnston wired Richmond of the army's loss, and Sherman soon learned of Polk's death. "We killed Bishop Polk yesterday," he telegraphed Secretary Stanton on the 15th. Johnston appointed Major General William Wing Loring, senior division commander, to temporary command of Polk's corps; Lieutenant General A. Peter Stewart would eventually take it over.¹³

The Confederates withdrew from Bate's salient on the night of June 14-15. The next day Sherman ordered his troops to press the Rebel position. An advance against the Confederate center led to a small battle at Gilgal Church, where Maj. Gen. Patrick Cleburne's men had little difficulty in beating the enemy back. "We repulsed him as usual," wrote Major Calhoun Benham, "we were in works."¹⁴

Federal shelling of his lines and threatening moves toward his flanks led Johnston to order a withdrawal from his Lost Mountain-Brush Mountain line. On June 18, he wrote his wife Lydia, confessing he had not found a way to counter Sherman's "Engineering system." That night, amidst a drenching rain, the Confederate army slogged into a new position which the engineers had anchored at Kennesaw Mountain. Hood's corps held the right,¹⁵

Sherman drew up to the Rebels' position, and sent Schofield's army probing around the Confederate left. This movement, as well as the enemy's by-now established practice of flanking by his right, led Johnston to anticipate another turning movement. So, in the night of June 21-22 he shifted Hood's corps from the right to the left. Shortly after taking position as the army's new left flank, skirmishers brought in word that Yankees were ahead in the area of the farm owned by Valentine Kolb. Hood ordered two of his divisions to attack. The Confederates found the enemy dug in, with artillery, and ready for them. The predictable bloody repulse cost a thousand Confederate soldiers to about 230 Federals. Hood has been criticized for ordered the attack, but his defenders argued that the sharp offensive move halted the enemy's flanking maneuver—which it did (Schofield concluded he could not move farther to the right without overstretching his line). For the record, Johnston never criticized Hood for the battle of Kolb's Farm, June

¹³ Sherman to Stanton, June 15, 1864 in *O.R.*, I, 38, pt. 4, 480.

¹⁴ Sydney C. Kerksis, "Action at Gilgal Church June 15-16, 1864," in Kerksis, comp., *The Atlanta Papers* (Dayton, OH: Press of the Morningside Bookshop, 1980), 861.

¹⁵ Johnston to Lydia, June 18, 1864 quoted in William J. Cooper, Jr., *Jefferson Davis, American* (New York: Knopf, 2000), 483.

22, even though the corps commander did not alert army headquarters before launching it.

“I perceived that the enemy and our own officers had settled into a conviction that I would not assault fortified lines,” Sherman wrote in his campaign report, so he resolved to do that very thing. Looking ahead, we can count the five times when Sherman ordered infantry assaults in the Atlanta Campaign: Resaca, New Hope Church, Pickett’s Mill, here at Kennesaw Mountain, and later at Utoy Creek. It was this attack-decision, though, upon which he wrote most extensively in his campaign report, seeking to justify it.¹⁶

An army to be efficient must not settle down to a single mode of offense, but must be prepared to execute any plan which promises success. I wanted, therefore, for the moral effect to make a successful assault against the enemy behind his breast-works, and resolved to attempt it at that point where success would give the largest fruits of victory.¹⁷

On the morning of June 27, after a preliminary bombardment, about 8:00 a.m. Federal infantry assailed the Confederate line at two points. The first was the high ground west of Kennesaw Mountain known as Little Kennesaw and Pigeon Hill, held by Major General Samuel Gibbs French’s division. General McPherson would coordinate this part of the attack. The second target was in General Thomas’ sector: a salient in Hardee’s line manned by Major General Benjamin Franklin Cheatham’s division, which has since been known as Cheatham’s Hill.

Against French, three brigades of Logan’s XV Corps advanced on Little Kennesaw and Pigeon Hill, while McPherson’s two other corps skirmished with the Confederates at Big Kennesaw as diversion. After overrunning the Rebel skirmish line and taking 150 prisoners, the Federals came up against sustained musketry and artillery fire—French had two batteries atop Little Kennesaw. Few Federals even got close to the main Confederate line, from which Southerners rolled boulders down on the Federals. They were repulsed in less than an hour, but some couldn’t safely retreat.

“We were in a bad fix,” wrote Theodore Upson of the 100th Indiana. “We could not go ahead and could not get back.” “The Johnnys...yelled and threw stones at us” until darkness allowed them to slink back to their lines.¹⁸

XV Corps casualties in its failed assault totaled 603 killed, wounded and missing. The demonstrating XVI and XVII lost another 257 men. Confederates atop the two

¹⁶ Sherman report, Sept. 15, 1864 in *O.R.*, I, 38, pt. 1, 68.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Oscar Osburn Winther, ed., *With Sherman to the Sea: The Civil War Letters Diaries and Reminiscences of Theodore F. Upson* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1943), 116.

Kennesaws and Pidgeon Hill lost about 200, mostly the skirmishers captured in the initial Union advance.

Three Federal brigades from the IV Corps and two from the XIV attacked the area around Cheatham's salient. As McPherson's had, Thomas' troops overran the Confederate skirmishers and captured some of them. Cheatham's division took the brunt of the assault; Cleburne's to its right was only partly engaged. Cheatham's troops manned their trenches resolutely in the face of this onslaught; men to the rear loaded rifles and passed them up to the firing-line.

A few Federals managed to charge up to the Confederates' parapet before being struck down. One of them was Brigadier General Charles Garrison Harker. "I shall not come out of this charge today alive," he had earlier predicted. He was right. Harker, at the front of his troops, managed to reach the Confederate parapet when he was shot through the chest.¹⁹

The two-hour Federals' assault was a failure. Their casualties numbered 1,478 (654 in the IV Corps, 824 in the XIV). Later that day a brush fire broke out in front of Cleburne's works, endangering the wounded Federals who still lay on the ground. "Boys, this is butchery!" cried out Colonel William H. Martin of the 1st Arkansas. Martin raised a white cloth, secured a truce, then ordered his men over the parapet to help the enemy retrieve their comrades.²⁰

This story has become part of the legendry surrounding the battle of Kennesaw Mountain, but at the time not all Southerners expressed such concern for the fallen foe as did Colonel Martin. A press dispatch about the battle appeared in Southern newspapers under the headline, "Confederate Victory Near Marietta! The Yankees Roasting!"²¹

Historians have come to accept casualty figures for June 27 as nearly 3,000 Federals and 600 Confederates, which conforms to the usual ratio of attacker-to-defender in Civil War frontal assaults against entrenched veteran infantry.

Sherman never expressed regret for his decision to order the attacking battle. Two weeks afterward he wrote General Halleck, "The assault I made was no mistake." He felt he had to convince his men and the enemy's they were wrong if they thought "that the assault of lines formed no part of my game."²²

¹⁹ Russell W. Blount, Jr., *Clash at Kennesaw: June & July 1864* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 2012), 95.

²⁰ W. T. Barnes, "An Incident of Kennesaw Mountain," in *Confederate Veteran*, 30, no. 2 (February 1922), 49.

²¹ W. T. Barnes, "An Incident of Kennesaw Mountain," *Confederate Veteran*, 30, no. 1 (January 1922): 49; "Confederate Victory Near Marietta!" *Columbia South Carolinian*, June 29, 1864.

²² Sherman to Halleck, July 9, 1864 in *O.R.*, I, 38, pt. 5, 91.

Yet true to form, when the roads dried Sherman found ways to flank the Rebels from their Kennesaw line. Johnston withdrew his army in the night of July 2-3 to a position which the engineers had laid out seven miles to the south, in the area of Smyrna Camp Ground. On July 4 Thomas' and McPherson's troops launched two demonstrations on the enemy line while Schofield took his army around the Confederate left. Flanked again, the Confederates withdrew that night to one last position on the north bank of the Chattahoochee, the last river barrier between the Yankees and Atlanta.

Residents of the city were understandably alarmed. "Speculation was rife yesterday," commented the Atlanta *Intelligencer*, "to establish the reason for our retreat. To-day it is more eagerly agitated—what will we do next? Our street Generals have it that we will be flanked to the Gulf."²³

Joe Johnston was breaking a basic tactical maxim: don't take a defensive stand with a broad, deep river at your back. "No general, such as he, would invite battle with the Chattahoochee behind him," Sherman had written Thomas. Yet as Richard M. McMurry notes, Johnston had done that very same thing earlier in the campaign, when he posted his army at Resaca with the Oostanaula behind him.²⁴

In this case, Johnston knew that crossing the last river barrier before Atlanta would send shock waves to all observers—including his superiors in Richmond. Thus, when the army's chief of artillery, Brigadier General Francis Asbury Shoup, offered to construct one final defensive line on the north bank, Johnston agreed. Shoup used a thousand slaves to build his line, which featured three dozen earth-and-log forts connected by rifle pits and artillery redans. It was this position into which the Confederates filed on the night of July 4-5. Creating more anxiety in Atlanta, on July 5 Johnston ordered all munitions machinery to be sent by train to other cities. Most army hospitals were also ordered to be loaded up and sent to Macon.

President Davis was most fretful. He wired Johnston on July 7, "The announcement that your army has fallen back to the Chattahoochee renders me more apprehensive for the future." The general did nothing to allay Davis' fears in his reply of the next day. Saying nothing about any plan to drive Sherman back, Johnston asked if the government could not send a strong cavalry force out of Alabama or Mississippi to break Sherman's railroad supply lines in Tennessee.²⁵

Sherman never assaulted Johnston's river line. As he had repeatedly done, he intended to flank the enemy out of position. But this time there was a twist. Almost every time he had earlier outflanked Johnston's army, he had done so by extending his right, threatening the Rebels' left. This time he planned to do just the reverse. He sent McPherson downstream, shelling Rebels guarding the various ferries and threatening to

²³ "The Position," Atlanta *Intelligencer*, July 5, 1864.

²⁴ Richard M. McMurry, *Atlanta 1864: Last Chance for the Confederacy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 114.

²⁵ Davis to Johnston, July 7, 1864 in *O.R.*, I, 38, pt. 5, 867.

cross well to the south of Johnston's line. This was a feint, but it fooled Johnston, who sent much of his cavalry downstream.

There, Thomas was demonstrating noisily on July 8 when Schofield moved on the Federal left to find a crossing point of the river. At Isham's Ferry, about seven miles northwest of the railroad bridge, the Federals found only a few Confederates on the other side. A regiment paddled across, drove them off, and secured the other shore. A pontoon bridge was soon laid down and Brigadier General Jacob Dolson Cox's division began to cross.

Johnston did not attempt to rush a column to Isham's to beat the enemy back across. On July 9, he simply issued orders for the army to quietly retreat across the Chattahoochee that night.

On the morning of July 10 Sherman sent to Washington the good news that the Confederates had burned the river bridges and withdrawn to the south side. Johnston's telegram to General Bragg that day was decidedly not good news, which began to sink down among the officers and men. "We feel much dejected and low spirited at our prospects," wrote Captain W. L. Trask in his diary on July 10. That same day Private Robert Patrick of the 4th Louisiana recorded, "I don't believe Johnston can hold Atlanta."²⁶

For a week after his troops' crossing, Sherman let men rest and resupply before he began his next move against Atlanta. For his part Johnston was content to hold his forces in a defensive line south of Peachtree Creek, a stream flowing westward into the Chattahoochee, awaiting developments.

The army's retreat justifiably alarmed President Davis. A series of events in the second week of July brought the president—assuming he had not already been thinking of it—to the point of deciding whether to relieve General Johnston from command.

First off, the president needed more information, so on July 9 he instructed his military advisor, General Braxton Bragg, to travel to Atlanta, meet with Johnston, and report back.

On July 10, Georgia Senator Benjamin Harvey Hill, fresh from an interview with Johnston the week before, met with Davis and Secretary Seddon in Richmond. Hill related his conversation with the general, emphasizing a key point. "And I understand you to say, General Johnston," as Hill remembered it, "that Sherman cannot be defeated except by the proposed attack in his rear, and that this work must be done by Forrest or Morgan or by some such force?" When Johnston said yes—knowing that Hill would be

²⁶ W. L. Trask war journal, May-September 1864, typescript at Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park; Larry M. Strayer and Richard A. Baumgartner, eds., *Echoes of Battle: The Atlanta Campaign* (Huntington, WV: Blue Acorn Press, 1991), 201.

traveling to the capital to report on this meeting—he was essential signaling the administration that he had no means of defeating Sherman.²⁷

Even with this information, Seddon told Hill that the president was still reluctant to fire Johnston. The general, however, weakened his standing further when on July 11 he telegraphed Richmond, recommending that the thousands of Union prisoners being held at Andersonville (110 miles south of Atlanta) should be transferred to safer places.

This prompted Davis to seek the advice of his most trusted general, Robert E. Lee. “General Johnston has failed, and there are strong indications that he will abandon Atlanta. He urges that prisoners should be removed immediately from Andersonville,” the president telegraphed on July 12. “It seems necessary to relieve him at one. Who should succeed him? What think you of Hood for the position?”²⁸

Davis suggested Hood for two reasons. Lieutenant General Hardee, senior corps commander, had already turned down the army command after Bragg was relieved. And Hood promised to deliver the attacking battles which the crisis now seemed to demand.

Lee telegraphed a reply which the president would not have liked, advising against changing army commanders in the midst of a campaign. Then, as for Hood, he commented, “Hood is a bold fighter, I am doubtful as to other qualities necessary.” Later that night, in a letter Lee elaborated on his thoughts. Switching army commanders was “a grievous thing.” Hood was “very industrious on the battlefield careless off.” Then he added, “Genl Hardee has more experience in managing an army.”²⁹

Davis replied to Lee the next day, essentially affirming that Johnston would have to be relieved. “The case seems hopeless in present hands,” he wrote. Others in Richmond were coming to the same conclusion. Colonel Josiah Gorgas, chief of ordnance, entered into his journal on July 13, “Everybody has at last come to the conclusion that Johnston has retreated far enough.”³⁰

Yet Davis put off taking action until he heard from his military advisor. On July 13 Bragg arrived in Atlanta and, just from the panicked civilians seen boarding trains in the depot, he concluded, as he wired the president, “Indications seem to favor an entire evacuation of this place.” He then rode to army headquarters, learning there that Johnston was allowing Federal infantry corps to cross the Chattahoochee at their leisure.³¹

²⁷ Hill to Seddon, July 14, 1864 in *O.R.*, I, 52, pt. 2, 706.

²⁸ Davis to Lee, July 7, 1864 in *O.R.*, I, 38, pt. 5, 867.

²⁹ Davis to Lee, July 12, 1864 in *O.R.*, I, 52, pt. 2, 692; Lee to Davis, July 12 (telegram, 8:45 p.m. and letter 9:30 p.m.), in Douglas Southall Freeman and Grady McWhiney, eds., *Lee's Dispatches: Unpublished Letters of General Robert E. Lee, C. S. A. to Jefferson Davis and the War Department of The Confederate States of America 1862-1865*, Putnam's 1957 ed., (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1915), 282-84.

³⁰ Davis to Lee, July 13, 1864 in *O.R.*, I, 52, pt. 2, 692; Sarah Woolfolk Wiggins, ed., *The Journals of Josiah Gorgas, 1857-1878* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 121.

³¹ Bragg to Davis, July 13, 1864 in *O.R.*, I, 38, pt. 5, 878.

While Bragg held further meetings with the commanding general and his officers on July 14, Davis met with his Cabinet. Seddon and Secretary of State Judah Phillip Benjamin argued forcefully that Johnston must be relieved. When the president called for a vote, it was unanimous. Davis ended the meeting by saying, “Gentlemen it is very easy to remove the Genl. But when he is removed his place must be filled and where will you find a man to fill it?”³²

Bragg spent part of July 14 meeting with Hood. Before he left the next day, Bragg wrote a long report of what he had learned, essentially arguing that Johnston would have to be replaced. He also solicited from Hood a memorandum in which Hood advocated attacking the enemy to drive him back. Bragg entrusted both documents to a staff officer travelling back to Richmond. Bragg himself went on to Alabama on a tour of inspection.

Bragg’s and Hood’s missives would not have arrived in the capital before July 17 or 18, but the president could not wait. Bragg’s telegrams from Atlanta had reported Sherman shifting his forces across the Chattahoochee, threatening the city further. Davis forced Johnston’s hand with a telegram sent on July 16: “I wish to hear from you as to present situation, and your plan of operations specifically as will enable me to anticipate events.” Later that day Johnston wired back a most nebulous response. Because he was outnumbered, he wrote, “my plan of operations must, therefore, depend upon that of the enemy. It is mainly to watch for an opportunity to fight to advantage.”³³

Most puzzling of all was this: “We are trying to put Atlanta in condition to be held for a day or two by the Georgia militia, that army movements may be freer and wider.”³⁴

Johnston’s telegram may be considered his death-wish, an invitation to be relieved of command. His defenders to this day argue that the general in the coming days planned to attack Sherman’s forces as they crossed Peachtree Creek, five miles north of the city. If Johnston had indeed intended to do so, he most certainly should have informed the government. Having failed to do that, he could not have been surprised when, on July 17, a telegram arrived from Richmond relieving him of command.

Lieutenant General Hood, promoted temporarily to general, would take charge of the Army of Tennessee. In a message to Hood on the night of July 17, Secretary Seddon acknowledged the odds confronting him: “position, numbers and morale are now with the enemy.” At the same time Seddon conveyed the government’s hopes for the new commander: “It may yet be practicable to cut the communication of the enemy or find or make an opportunity of equal encounter whether he moves east or west.”³⁵

³² Seddon to Walthall, Feb. 10, 1879, in Dunbar Rowland, ed., *Jefferson Davis Constitutionalist His Letters, Papers and Speeches*, 10 vols. (Jackson, MS: Printed for the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1923), 7:320.

³³ Johnston to Davis, July 16, 1864 *O.R.* I, 38, pt. 5, 882-3.

³⁴ Davis to Johnston and Johnston to Davis, July 16, 1864 in *O.R.*, I, 38, pt. 5, 882-83.

³⁵ Seddon to Hood, July 17, 1864 in *O.R.*, I, 38, pt. 5, 885.

John B. Hood had his work cut out for him, as did William T. Sherman.
