

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Battle of Stones River

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After the Battle of Perryville, Kentucky in October 1862, Confederate General Braxton Bragg retreated with his Confederate soldiers back into Tennessee, eventually making his headquarters at the town of Murfreesboro, south of Nashville. The retreat not only cost most of Bragg Tennessee but sowed dissension and discord amongst his command. His most senior commanders, represented personally in Richmond by Major General Leonidas Polk, lobbied Confederate President Jefferson Davis for Bragg's removal. Davis held firm by his friend Bragg, and kept him in command despite his growing unpopularity with all levels of his army.¹

Meanwhile, the victorious Union commander, Major General Don Carlos Buell, failed to follow up the victory and was relieved from command before the end of the month. In his place, U.S. President Abraham Lincoln chose Major General William Starke Rosecrans, known by the nickname "Old Rosy" to his men, to command the main Union Army in Tennessee. Rosecrans' new army came to be known as the Army of the Cumberland. Rosecrans had just won two small victories in Mississippi at Iuka and Corinth in September and October respectively. Although his immediate superior, Major General Ulysses S. Grant, criticized him for his slow pursuit after both battles, Rosecrans nevertheless was a winner known for being much less conciliatory towards rebels and slaveholders than Buell. Rosecrans's good friend in the Administration, Secretary of the Treasury and fellow Ohioan Salmon Portland Chase, encouraged him to "endorse heartily" the Emancipation Proclamation and to get his men moving as quickly as possible.²

Having assumed command of his army in Kentucky in late October, Rosecrans ordered the army to advance on Nashville. It was slow going but eventually the army made its way to its new camp, where it remained for most of the months of November and December. Part of the army's slowness in advancing was due to the difficult terrain.

¹ Peter Cozzens, *No Better Place to Die: The Battle of Stones River* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 7-11; Grady McWhiney, *Braxton Bragg and Confederate Defeat*, 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 1:312-36.

² Cozzens, *Stones River*, 12-16; William M. Lamers, *The Edge of Glory: A Biography of General William S. Rosecrans, U.S.A.* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), 171-80; Salmon P. Chase to William Starke Rosecrans (WSR), October 25 and December 11, 1862, William S. Rosecrans Papers, University of California at Los Angeles Archives (hereafter UCLA).

Another explanation is that the army was badly disorganized after the battle of Perryville and Buell's departure. Yet another is that Rosecrans hoped for quite some time that the rebels under General Bragg would advance closer to Nashville where he could then beat them without having to worry about the wear and tear of searching them out and fighting them in mountainous terrain. Bragg, for his part, was content to let Rosecrans make the first move.³

Pressure to advance continued to build especially after Major General Ambrose Everett Burnside lost the bloody battle of Fredericksburg, Virginia, and Grant failed to capture Vicksburg, Mississippi, at the end of 1862. Lincoln and the North desperately needed some good news in the wake of these embarrassing defeats, and all eyes turned to Rosecrans as the general to deliver a battlefield victory. Union General Henry Wager Halleck warned Rosecrans of Lincoln's impatience, stating "twice I have been asked to designate someone else to command your army." Still, Rosecrans refused to advance before he felt ready. Finally, on the day after Christmas, with much of Bragg's cavalry off on raids behind Union lines, Rosecrans felt that he could safely advance. Rosecrans's men slogged through the forty miles between Nashville and Bragg's army concentrated near Murfreesboro.⁴

Rosecrans planned for his right to hold Bragg at bay while his left swung across Stones River and into Murfreesboro. Bragg had decided on the exact same strategy as Rosecrans, to hold on his right while attacking with his left. On December 31, 1862, the Confederates attacked first and soon shattered the Union right and threatened to cut off Rosecrans's line of retreat and supply to Nashville. Only the determined resistance of General Phillip Henry Sheridan's men and the sheer exhaustion of the attacking Confederate troops prevented Rosecrans from suffering a terrible defeat. The battle was incredibly fierce with Rosecrans riding to and fro with his staff attempting to stabilize the Union lines and constantly exposing himself to enemy fire. Bullets frequently came close to hitting him and members of his staff. Although Rosecrans himself emerged unscathed, his aide-de-camp, Lieutenant Colonel Julius Peter Garesché was decapitated by a cannonball that narrowly missed killing Rosecrans himself. Several other staff members were wounded or killed near Rosecrans that day, but Rosecrans managed to stabilize both his right and left and save the army from near disaster to fight another day. As journalist Whitelaw Reid remembered, "[Rosecrans] stemmed the tide of retreat, hurried brigades and division to the point of danger, massed artillery, infused into them his own dauntless spirit, and out of defeat itself, fashioned the weapons of victory." From the very start of the campaign, enemy cavalry had constantly threatened Rosecrans's flank and rear, making the Union position seem even more vulnerable after the day's fighting had finished.⁵

³ Lamers, *Edge of Glory*, 181-90; Cozzens, *Stones River*, 14, 18-21; WSR to Sylvester, December 15, 1862, Rosecrans Papers, UCLA; McWhiney, *Braxton Bragg*, 337-8.

⁴ Cozzens, *Stones River*, 26-28, 45-46; Lamers, *Edge of Glory*, 196-202.

⁵ Cozzens, *Stones River*, 76-166; Lamers, *Edge of Glory*, 208-34.

The battle had gone badly for the Army of the Cumberland, and General Bragg was confident that the federal army would retreat shortly. That night Rosecrans and his staff met to discuss strategy. While some were for an immediate retreat to Nashville others refused to offer an opinion, merely promising to support whatever decision Rosecrans made. Accounts vary as to Rosecrans's determination to fight or retreat, but after a personal reconnaissance of his lines along with Major General David Sloane Stanley, Rosecrans determined to hold and give battle the next day. "Go to your commands and prepare to fight and die here," Rosecrans told his generals. Bragg, still hoping the federals would retreat of their own accord, did not attack. This reprieve allowed Rosecrans time to send for fresh supplies and ammunition from Nashville while shoring up his defensive position in anticipation of Confederate attack the next day.⁶

On January 2, 1863, Bragg launched an abortive attack on the Union left. Rosecrans had reinforced the position, and his men easily repulsed the Confederates who were badly bloodied by Rosecrans's massed artillery. Rosecrans's men counterattacked, driving the attacking Confederates from the field by nightfall. Thoroughly beaten and deciding to take advantage of heavy rains that raised the height of Stones River, Bragg decided to retreat. Rosecrans, a devout Catholic, wrote his wife, "Thank God and our Lady for the victory." Soon the rest of the United States too would be giving thanks to God and Rosecrans, for his victory was the first good news for the Union cause since Antietam and Perryville.⁷

The victory might have been greater had Rosecrans more vigorously pursued Bragg's demoralized army. Certainly bad weather, unfamiliarity with the terrain, severe casualties, and continued inferiority in cavalry can explain Rosecrans's inability to pursue Bragg in the wake of the battle. In his official report, Rosecrans blamed a lack of supplies and the death of many of his artillery's horses for his inability to pursue Bragg further than a few miles, stating "farther pursuit was deemed inadvisable". Nonetheless, coming on the heels of failures at Fredericksburg and Vicksburg, Rosecrans's victory was a cause for celebration throughout the North. It also helped the United States reputation abroad, particularly in England, which had been considering intervening in the war. Lincoln wired his personal thanks to the Army of the Cumberland, telling Rosecrans, "God bless you and all with you." The president assured him of the "nation's gratitude" for Stones River. Secretary of War Edwin McMasters Stanton promised to do whatever he could to help Rosecrans in the future. "Your country owes you an immense debt," wrote Chase. "God grant that you may quadruple the obligation."⁸

Congratulations for the successful army commander continued to pour in from across the country. *Harper's Weekly* stated that as "a strategist Rosecrans has proved

⁶ Cozzens, *Stones River*, 167-76; Lamers, *Edge of Glory*, 234-9.

⁷ Cozzens, *Stones River*, 177-204; Lamers, *Edge of Glory*, 239-43; WSR to Ann Rosecrans, January 20, 1863, Rosecrans Papers, UCLA.

⁸ "Report of Maj. Gen. William S. Rosecrans, U.S. Army, commanding Army of the Cumberland on the Battle of Stones River," February 12, 1863, <http://www.civilwarhome.com/stonerros.html> accessed February 1, 2015. Cozzens, *Stones River*, 204-7; Lamers, *Edge of Glory*, 245-7; Chase to WSR, January 6, 1863, Rosecrans Papers, UCLA.

himself second to none.” Comparing him to Napoleon Bonaparte, the *New York Times* gave credit for the victory wholly to Rosecrans’s generalship, stating. “Whatever his future may be, it cannot be denied that at the present moment Gen. Rosecrans, if success be the standard, stands at the very head of the Union Generals.” Meanwhile, the *Catholic Telegraph*, edited by his friend Reverend Edward Purcell and the general’s brother, Bishop Sylvester Horton Rosecrans, praised his “great victory” while a Philadelphia editor credited the general’s religion for his latest victory declaring “the nation owes to the great element of his character this latest and greatest victory of the war.” The soldiers of the Army of the Cumberland too rallied behind their new commander, with one general declaring, “If I was to fight a battle for the dominion of the universe, I would give Rosecrans the command of as many men as he could see and who could see him.”⁹

Meanwhile, Bragg retreated his troops about thirty miles south of Murfreesboro to a new position along the Duck River. He tried to make the best of a bad situation by emphasizing to his superiors the success of the first day of the battle while emphasizing the large number of casualties inflicted on his opponent. Not only did he have to weather the criticism of the Confederate press, but Bragg’s second major defeat and retreat in only a few months again led his subordinates to lobby President Davis for his removal. As one Confederate observer noted: “It is quite manifest that there are deep quarrels in [Bragg’s] army, and that Bragg is cordially hated by a large number of his officers.” Out of loyalty to his friend, Davis again refused, allowing Bragg to remain in command for a future clash with Rosecrans. Both generals were content to avoid another major campaign until June. Just as the good will Rosecrans had won from his important strategic victory at Stones River was about to run out with his superiors. Rosecrans forced Bragg to retreat once again by outmaneuvering him in the Tullahoma Campaign. Bragg’s men would finally get their chance to avenge themselves that September at the Battle of Chickamauga.¹⁰

⁹ Cozzens, *Stones River*, 206-7; Lamers, *Edge of Victory*, 247; *Harper’s Weekly*, January 17, 1863; *New York Times*, January 7, 1863; *Catholic Telegraph*, January 7, 1863; *Catholic Herald*, January 31, 1863.

¹⁰ “Report of General Braxton Bragg, C. S. Army Commanding Army of Tennessee on the Battle of Stones River,” February 23, 1863, <http://www.civilwarhome.com/stonebrg.html> accessed February 1, 2015; McWhiney, *Braxton Bragg*, 374-80.