Conflict and Controversy
in the Confederate High Command

Davis, Johnston, Hood and the Atlanta Campaign of 1864

UNEDITED EXCERPT

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To my mother and father

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Acknowledgments

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Chapter 1

Structural Damages

Braxton Bragg's resignation in early December 1863 left Jefferson Davis with a quandary. Lieutenant General William Hardee, the army's most senior officer after Bragg's resignation, appeared the logical choice, and consequently Davis made an effort to secure his services as the new commander for the Army of Tennessee. To Davis's surprise, Hardee declined a permanent appointment, as he felt unable to serve the Confederacy successfully in that capacity. Instead, Hardee wished to remain in his present post as a corps commander and promised to faithfully serve Davis's future appointment to command the army. Hardee did accept temporary command of the army until the president could find a replacement. Davis hoped to convince Hardee that he should consent to the promotion and sent an aide, Preston Johnston, to persuade him to assume permanent command, but Hardee still refused.[1] Hardee's decision to decline the president's offer left Davis with few viable options to replace Bragg.

The structure of command within the Confederate military required that Davis give primary consideration to officers bearing the rank of full general, for which only four candidates, other than Bragg, were qualified. The list included Samuel Cooper, Robert E. Lee, P. G. T. Beauregard, and Joseph E. Johnston. Samuel Cooper was already sixty-five years old and had spent the war in an administrative capacity rather than commanding troops in the field. His advanced age and lack of battlefield experience made him a poor choice. With so few options available

1 *O.R.* vol. 31, pt. 3, 765; Hudson Strode, *Jefferson Davis: Confederate President*, 3 vols. (New York, 1959), II:502–503.

to him Davis briefly considered P. G. T. Beauregard for the vacancy. In fact, on December 3, 1863, Robert E. Lee proposed that if Beauregard were considered a suitable candidate for the position, Gen. Jeremy F. Gilmer might replace him as commander of the forces around Charleston.[2]

A long-standing feud, however, between Davis and Beauregard stemming from a disagreement after the First Battle of Manassas remained an obstacle to Beauregard's appointment. The quarrel had begun over the Confederate inability to take advantage of the victory at Manassas. It intensified during Beauregard's tenure in the Western theater in 1862 when Beauregard ordered a withdrawal from the fight at Shiloh despite the protestations of his subordinates. Soon thereafter, Beauregard retreated from Corinth without a fight and with no explanation. Then, in mid-June, he decided to vacation at the Bladen Springs resort north of Mobile. He claimed his poor health required attention, though he failed to ask the president for permission. Davis took the opportunity to remove Beauregard from command of the army and replaced him with Braxton Bragg.[3] Thus, Davis had already removed Beauregard as commander of essentially the same army, the Army of Tennessee, that in the wake of Bragg's departure needed a new chief. The elevation of Beauregard to the office would have placed Davis in the awkward position of admitting a mistake for relieving him in 1862. As a result, Davis was undoubtedly inclined to look elsewhere for Bragg's replacement. Though Davis generally exhibited poor management skills with individuals he found personally disagreeable, Beauregard's recalcitrant behavior warranted the president's ire.

After considering his options for a day or two, Davis decided to offer command of the Army of Tennessee to Robert E. Lee. Lee showed little enthusiasm at the suggestion. He responded that he would take the position "if desired," but that he doubted the wisdom of such a transfer. After all, he cautioned the president, the Army of Northern Virginia might suffer as a result of his departure. Notwithstanding Lee's objection, Davis ordered him to travel to Richmond in hopes that he could be convinced to assume command in Tennessee. During the week following Lee's arrival in the Confederate capital, he and Davis discussed the available alternatives for Bragg's replacement. After persuading Davis that he should remain in Virginia, Lee proposed that Beauregard assume command in the West. Davis declined and Lee suggested that Davis consider Joseph E Johnston for the position.[4]

2 Thomas Lawrence Connelly, *Autumn of Glory: The Army of Tennessee, 1862–1865* (Baton Rouge, 1971), 282; *O.R.* vol. 31, pt. 3, 779.

3 *O.R.* vol. 10, pt. 1, 410, 467, 569; Woodworth, *Jefferson Davis and his Generals*, 104–106.

4 Woodworth, *Jefferson Davis and his Generals*, 257–258; *O.R.* vol. 29, pt. 2, 866.

In addition to Lee, a number of other luminaries favored Johnston's appointment. On December 8, Davis's close friend Gen. Leonidas Polk recommended that the president offer Johnston the command. Polk cited support for Johnston from the army, as well as the country as a whole, and hoped that Davis could magnanimously look beyond his unpleasant past with the general. Brigadier General William Mackall, Johnston's close friend and subsequently his chief of staff, confirmed Polk's assessment of the mood of the army. Mackall wrote Johnston on December 9 that "the army wants you," and that "even Bragg's friends say that your presence would be worth 10,000 men."[5]

Politicians too hoped that Davis might appoint Johnston to command the army. Davis's secretary of war, James A. Seddon, voiced approval for Johnston's candidacy. In fact, a majority of the president's cabinet concluded that Johnston should replace Bragg. Furthermore, Johnston enjoyed a number of supporters in Congress, including Senator Louis Wigfall, who lobbied for Johnston's appointment. On one occasion Wigfall and several other legislators met in Seddon's office and solicited for their candidate.[6]

Friendship with Johnston was not the only motivation for Wigfall's efforts. In addition to his relationship with Johnston, Wigfall had developed considerable animus toward the president. The two vehemently disagreed over a bill Wigfall had introduced in the Senate in the fall of 1862 that permitted army commanders to choose their own staff officers. Because the officers would be awarded the rank of brigadier general, the proposal broke with the tradition that granted the power to appoint general officers to the president. Though the bill passed both houses of Congress, Davis vetoed it, thereby giving birth to a feud. Prior to the president's veto of the staff bill, the two men had enjoyed a close working relationship; Wigfall had routinely voted for confirmation of presidential appointments, for example. After the president's veto, however, Wigfall immediately changed course and challenged Davis's appointees regardless of their qualifications. The two disagreed on other matters as well, including military strategy and, in particular, the defense of the Trans-Mississippi. Wigfall hailed from Texas and thought the president too careless in his approach to the security of his state. The various disputes culminated

5 *O.R.* vol. 31, pt 3, 796–797; William Mackall to Joseph E. Johnston, Dec. 9, 1863, W. W. Mackall Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.

6 Woodworth, *Jefferson Davis and his Generals*, 258; Gilbert E. Govan and James W. Livingood, *A Different Valor: The Story of General Joseph E. Johnston, C.S.A.* (New York, 1956), 238; Wigfall and Johnston were so close that the general had spent time convalescing in Wigfall's home after sustaining a wound at the battle of Seven Pines in June of 1862. See Craig Symonds, *Joseph E. Johnston: A Civil War Biography* (New York, 1992), 177; Connelly, *Autumn of Glory*, 282.

in Wigfall's accusation that Davis had engaged in "petty tyranny and reckless disregard of law and contemptuous treatment of Congress."[7]

Wigfall found several accomplices in his dispute with Davis including Senators Henry S. Foote of Tennessee and William L. Yancey of Alabama, who put aside their prewar quarrel to unite in opposition to the president. Consequently, a small but influential opposition to the president was in place by the close of 1863, particularly after the military reversals at Gettysburg, Vicksburg, and Missionary Ridge during the course of the year. A number of Johnston "supporters" emerged from this group and though they had no personal affinity for Johnston himself, they used the occasion as an opportunity to rile the president, who was known to have a strained relationship with the general. As a result, the congressional coalition that clamored for Johnston's appointment to command the Army of Tennessee was a combination of pro-Johnston and anti-Davis men. Their efforts proved successful as the president felt significant political pressure to appoint Johnston to command. With no other alternative and support for Johnston so strong, Davis ordered him to assume command of the Army of Tennessee, encamped at Dalton, Georgia, on December 16, 1863. On December 21, Richmond socialite and close associate of the president, Mary Boykin Chesnut, confided in her diary that "certainly Jeff Davis did hate to put Joe Johnston at the head of what is left of [the Army of Tennessee]."[8]

Johnston and Davis: A Marriage on the Rocks

The breakdown in command that ultimately doomed the Confederate efforts during the Atlanta campaign in 1864 had deep roots by the time Davis appointed Johnston to lead the Army of Tennessee. While his new appointment pleased Johnston, his optimism was tempered by what he expected to be a poor working relationship with the Confederate president. They had known each other during their time as cadets at the United States Military Academy at West Point, but their relationship while attending the academy remains something of a mystery. There is no credible evidence that the two developed a rivalry at that juncture, though there were spurious allegations that hostility arose from competition for the affection of

7 Symonds, *Joseph E. Johnston,* 178; Alvy King, *Louis T. Wigfall: Southern Fire-eater* (Baton Rouge, 1970), 159, 161, 178.

8 Foote and Yancey had clashed over the efficacy of secession prior to the war. See Symonds, *Joseph E. Johnston*, 179; Woodworth, *Jefferson Davis and his Generals*, 258; Davis, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, II:547; *O.R.* vol. 31, pt. 3, 835–836; Woodward, *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, 509. Chesnut's entry for December 18 opined that Lee was responsible for Johnston's appointment, though editor C. Vann Woodward noted that no other source made that claim.

a local young lady.[9] In all probability Johnston and Davis graduated from West Point harboring no ill will toward each other.

The first signs of a rift emerged over the issue of rank in the aftermath of the war with Mexico. Johnston entered the war as a captain, but his gallantry on the battlefield earned him two brevet promotions. First, at Cerro Gordo Johnston's superiors awarded him a brevet promotion to lieutenant colonel, thereby skipping over the rank of major. After the battle at Chapultepec Johnston again earned a brevet, which he thought made him a full colonel. After the war, Congress passed a new law providing that officers from the regular Army who had earned brevet promotion during the conflict, even in volunteer regiments, ought to retain their promotion on a permanent basis. Believing that the second brevet entitled him to the rank of colonel, Johnston was disheartened to learn that the *Register of Officers* listed him as a lieutenant colonel. The War Department claimed that Johnston's first brevet warranted the rank of major rather than lieutenant colonel, and that his superiors had made a mistake in granting him the higher rank after Cerro Gordo. Accordingly, his second brevet promotion only entitled him to the rank of lieutenant colonel. Johnston appealed the decision in March 1849, but then Secretary of War William L. Marcy rejected Johnston's petition, a ruling later confirmed by the Senate.[10]

Johnston refused to let the matter rest and on July 11, 1855, presented his case again, this time to the new secretary of war, Jefferson Davis. Davis determined that "the case had been decided by his predecessors and could not be reopened." Davis reaffirmed that decision in January 1856 when Johnston once again argued his cause.[11] Johnston's persistence demonstrates that he genuinely felt entitled to the rank of full colonel. The fact that Davis had twice rejected the argument surely irritated Johnston, but there is no record that this initial disagreement over rank led to open hostility between the two men.

In 1860 Johnston applied for the position of quartermaster general in the United States Army. His primary competition for the position was Albert Sidney Johnston (no relation), who enjoyed Jefferson Davis's support. It is uncertain whether Joseph E. Johnston learned that Davis backed another candidate, but considering the manner in which gossip traveled in social circles it seems likely that he did. If so, Johnston could not help but harbor at least an inkling of resentment

9 Govan and Livingood, *A Different Valor*, 14–15.

10 Symonds, *Joseph E. Johnston*, 89.

11 "Report on the Claim, April 15, 1858, of Lt. Colonel Johnston, 1st Cavalry, to the rank of Brevet Colonel," Papers of Joseph E. Johnston, box 1, folder 3, Swem Library, The College of William & Mary.

toward Davis. After all, Davis had twice rejected Johnston's application for the rank of colonel and subsequently had supported a rival candidate for the office of quartermaster general. Despite Davis's backing of an alternative aspirant, Johnston's friendship with John B. Floyd, who in 1860 held the position of secretary of war, landed him the office.[12] The promotion, however, did not elevate Johnston to a permanent rank of general within the army, as it only constituted a staff rank. Accordingly, Johnston remained a lieutenant colonel. The distinction between Johnston's staff rank and his line rank eventually became a factor in the pair's relationship after the first battle of Manassas.

Just prior to the battle at Manassas, Johnston sent a telegram to Davis requesting that the president identify whether he or General Beauregard would command once their forces were on the same field. Davis responded: "You are a General in the Confederate Army possessed of the power attaching to that rank." Davis then referred to Beauregard as a brigadier general, thereby implying that Johnston outranked Beauregard. The communication gave Johnston the impression that only Davis, as commander-in-chief, held a higher rank in the Confederate Army. Only days after the battle, however, Johnston felt his status challenged when Dabney Maury arrived at his headquarters with orders from Robert E. Lee that appointed him Johnston's adjutant general. Johnston asserted that the order was an "outrage," as he outranked Lee and despite his friendship with Maury he could not permit such a usurpation of his authority.[13] Johnston's animated reaction demonstrates a highly developed sensitivity over the matter of rank that likely dated to Davis's support for Albert Sidney Johnston's candidacy as quartermaster general, or perhaps even earlier to Davis's decision regarding Joseph E. Johnston's brevet rank.

In the following days the dispute over rank became even more intense. During that time Johnston received communications from Lee on formal stationery with a heading: "Headquarters of the Virginia Forces." Apparently a member of Lee's staff had crossed out Virginia, implying that Lee commanded all Confederate forces. Johnston complained to Adjutant and Inspector General Samuel Cooper that the orders were "illegal" and, therefore, he could not obey them. Johnston's telegrams to Cooper subsequently found their way to Davis's desk and aggravated the president. Davis attached a one-word endorsement to each communication, stating only:

12 McMurry, "The Enemy at Richmond: Joseph E. Johnston and the Confederate Government," 6; Connelly and Jones, *The Politics of Command*, 56–57; Symonds, *Joseph E. Johnston*, 91.

13 *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, VII:254; Govan and Livingood, *A Different Valor*, 65, 66.

"insubordinate."[14] Though each man was clearly agitated by the other's conduct, their relationship had not yet become irreconcilable.

Still, the hostility continued to mount when the president officially decreed Johnston to rank fourth among full generals in the Confederate Army. In March 1861 the Confederate Congress had passed a law that established the criteria for ranking officers in the Confederate Army who had previously served in the United States Army. Section 5 of the law provided that: "the commissions issued shall bear one and the same date, so that the relative rank of officers of each grade shall be determined by their former commissions in the US Army." Davis implemented the law in August, after Johnston's protestations against Lee's "illegal" behavior. When Davis sent his nominations to Congress he assigned effective dates for each of the candidates, a clear violation of the statute that required the commissions to "bear the same date." According to Davis's submission, Samuel Cooper was the senior general with a rank to date from May 16. Meanwhile, Albert Sidney Johnston's rank was dated May 30. Both Cooper and Albert Sidney Johnston had been colonels in the US Army with Cooper's rank predating that of Johnston's. Davis next assigned an effective rank for Robert E. Lee to date from June 14, while Joseph E. Johnston's rank was dated July 4. Both Lee and Johnston had held a line rank of lieutenant colonel prior to secession, but Davis's assignment of dates meant that Lee was now the senior officer of the two. Only Beauregard, previously a major, lacked seniority to Joseph E. Johnston under Davis's interpretation of the law.[15]

The fact that Davis held this interpretation of the law might well have its origins in Johnston's "insubordinate" communications with Cooper in July. Otherwise, there was no reason to grant seniority to Lee over his fellow former lieutenant colonel Johnston. Davis's ranking of the generals by date conflicted with the statute upon which he based his authority. Moreover, the statute made no distinction with respect to staff grade or line grade. Because Joseph E. Johnston had held a commission as a quartermaster general in the US Army, the statute entitled him to the senior position in the Confederate Army. The most reasonable explanation for Davis's action is that Johnston's communications with the administration over the course of the previous month had irritated the president enough that he determined to take punitive action. A secondary reason for Davis's actions might have been that he hoped to make certain that Joseph E. Johnston would never outrank his close friend Albert Sidney Johnston, or for that matter Robert E. Lee,

14 Symonds, *Joseph E. Johnston*, 126; *O.R.* vol. 2, 1007; *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, VII:335.

15 *O.R.* ser. 4, vol. 1, 164; Govan and Livingood, *A Different Valor*, 67; Woodworth, *Jefferson Davis and his Generals*, 176–177.

with whom he had developed a close working relationship while organizing the Confederate Army.[16]

Johnston balked at Davis's decision to rank him fourth among the generals. According to Johnston, his staff rank as a brigadier general entitled him to the most senior rank among those becoming full generals in the Confederate service. Johnston believed that Davis had snubbed him by failing to recognize him as the senior officer and angrily wrote Davis a letter expressing his indignation. Johnston's letter, dated September 12, conveyed his "surprise and mortification" at the president's interpretation of the law. He further claimed that the "proceedings are in violation of my rights as an officer" and asserted that "notwithstanding these nominations by the president and their confirmation by Congress, I still rightfully hold the rank of first general in the Armies of the Southern Confederacy." After making an impassioned argument as to why his rank as quartermaster general made him the senior ranking Confederate general, Johnston concluded that the president's interpretation "is a blow aimed at me only." Johnston later charged that Davis's interpretation had been "illegal and contrary to all the laws enacted to regulate the class of officers concerned."[17]

Davis considered Johnston's tone shocking. He read the communication to his cabinet and complained of its "intemperate" nature. Davis's terse response two days later suggests that the dispute over Johnston's rank had, by this time, produced a degree of mutual enmity between the two men. Davis called Johnston's language "unusual" and his arguments "utterly one-sided," and as "unfounded as they are unbecoming." In his postwar memoir Johnston attributed the origins of Davis's open antagonism toward him to their conflict over Johnston's place in the pecking order of the Confederate high command.[18] Nevertheless, despite the developing hostility between Davis and his general, the president retained enough faith in Johnston's abilities as an officer to keep him as commander of the Confederacy's primary eastern army.

If the question of rank was the genesis of the feud between Joseph E. Johnston and Jefferson Davis, it was not the only reason for their truculent association that eventually led to a collapse in leadership during the campaign for Atlanta. A dispute concerning strategy and tactics during the course of the war's first three years also added strain to their relationship. Johnston's evacuation of Harpers

16 McMurry, "The Enemy at Richmond," 7.

17 *O.R.* Ser. 4, vol. 1, 605; Johnston, *Narrative of Military Operations*, 71–72.

18 Cooper, *Jefferson Davis, American*, 364; *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, VII:340; Johnston, *Narrative of Military Operations*, 73. Johnston's claim was based on information gleaned from mutual acquaintances in Richmond.

Ferry in June 1861 was the first of several episodes in which he and the president clashed over strategic and tactical matters. Before he left for Harpers Ferry in May , Johnston met with both Davis and Lee, who informed him of the importance of the assignment . They considered the position a "natural fortress " that commanded the entrance to the Shenandoah Valley from both Pennsylvania and Maryland and, consequently, a vital point of defense. Upon arrival at Harpers Ferry, Johnston made a reconnaissance of the surrounding area and came to a strikingly different conclusion. Both he and his engineers determined that the position "was easy to turn or invest ," and thus offered none of the natural advantages that Lee and Davis had suggested.[19]

Johnston had good reason for concern , as the town of Harpers Ferry stood at the base of three imposing hills. Bolivar Heights, the least impressive of the three , peaked 200 feet above the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers that bordered the town. Maryland Heights rose 840 feet above the rivers , while Loudoun Heights loomed 954 feet above any troops garrisoned in the town. If the enemy gained possession of one or more of the heights and placed artillery there , Johnston 's command might have been trapped. Furthermore , the Potomac River was fordable at more than a dozen places , which meant that a Federal column could capture Winchester and thereby control the railroad and isolate any garrison remaining at Harpers Ferry. As historian Craig Symonds notes, Johnston would have needed to defend all three heights as well as all of the fords if he hoped to retain possession of the town.[20]

The political tension in Virginia exacerbated Johnston 's problems . Loyalties to the Confederacy on the border were tenuous , and many Virginia troops under Johnston's command remained faithful to the Union. On the same day that Johnston arrived at Harpers Ferry, May 23, the people of Virginia ratified the articles of secession . Those with pro - Union sentiment quickly deserted , significantly weakening the force Johnston commanded. As a result, Johnston's entire command numbered only 5,200 men . To make matters worse , he discovered they were poorly equipped ; some had arrived with no weapons , and those with muskets had no more than fifteen rounds of ammunition.[21]

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19 Johnston, *Narrative of Military Operations*, 17.

20 Symonds, *Joseph E. Johnston*, 104.

21 Govan and Livingood, *A Different Valor*, 37; *O.R.* vol. 2, 880–881; Symonds, *Joseph E. Johnston*, 103.