

## **“MY GOD, WE’RE ATTACKED!”: THE FEDERAL COMMAND FAILURE AT SHILOH, TENNESSEE, MARCH-APRIL 1862**

(John Mason)

It was Monday, April 14, 1862. When the morning edition of *The Cincinnati Gazette* hit the streets, citizens were astounded at what they read plastered across the front page. A young reporter, Whitelaw Reid (pen name Agate) had filed a story from the battlefield at Pittsburg Landing, Tennessee, concerning what had previously been hailed as a major Union victory. Agate was reporting it a little differently.

Unfortunately, it was his version that made headlines across the nation. He reported it this way:

Almost at dawn, Sherman’s pickets were driven in, a very little later Prentiss’ were; and the enemy were into the camps almost as soon as were the pickets themselves. Here began scenes which, let us hope, will have no parallel in our remaining annals of the war. Many, particularly among our officers, were not yet out of bed. Others were dressing, others washing, others cooking, a few eating their breakfasts. Many guns were unloaded, accouterments lying pell-mell, ammunition was ill-supplied - in short, the camps were completely surprised - disgracefully, might be added, unless some one can hereafter give some yet undiscovered reason to the contrary - and were taken at almost every possible disadvantage. **2**

This story raised an immediate furor throughout the country. And as is the case any time a disaster strikes, the public looked for someone to blame. In this case, the “someone” was easy, because Agate went on to point out that there had been no evidence of any plan of attack or defense prepared by the commanders. **3**

The charge was made that the Federal Army was nearly defeated at Pittsburg Landing, better known as Shiloh, because it was totally surprised by Confederate General Albert Sidney Johnston’s attack on Sunday morning, April 6, 1862. Much of the blame for that surprise was laid at the feet of the Union commanders in the field, Major General

Ulysses S. Grant and Brigadier General William Tecumseh Sherman. In fact, the army was not surprised that day as much as it was unready. The real surprise at Shiloh was the unpreparedness of the Federal high command. This paper will study this command failure on two levels: strategic and tactical. The results may be surprising.

The seeds of strategic failure were sown on November 9, 1861, when Major General Henry Wager Halleck assumed command of the Department of Missouri from General John Fremont.

People had always expected great things of Halleck. After an outstanding career at West Point, from which he graduated in 1839, Halleck had become one of America's first military intellectuals. In addition to translating Jomini's *Napoleon*, he had also written two scholarly works in his own right, a Congressional paper (*A Report on the Means of National Defense*) which brought him to the lecture circuit, and his famous book, *Elements of Military Art and Science*. **4**

These works reflected the military philosophy Halleck had embraced from his mentor at West Point, Dennis Hart Mahan. Mahan, was a staunch supporter of the Swiss theorist Antoine-Henri Jomini. Given the dubious title of Founder of Modern Strategy, Jomini spent his life attempting to boil the military arts and sciences down to a few invariable scientific principles. In essence, these principles prescribed that victory could only be achieved by an offensive action that massed one's forces against weaker enemy forces at some decisive point. This decisive point is usually defined as the point whose attack or capture would imperil or seriously weaken the enemy, and was almost exclusively either the flanks of an enemy army, or its supply lines. **6**

Halleck embraced this doctrine completely. Throughout his career, his plans would be characterized by careful advances, meticulous planning, and no thought of attack. All movement was considered as a means not to bring on a battle, but rather a concentration on some point that would force an enemy to withdraw from its position. Battles were to be joined only when success seemed certain. The classic Jominian, Halleck always planned his campaigns to concentrate on this vital point. This is what precipitated the Battle of Shiloh.

In the spring of 1862, Halleck saw the railroad nexus in the city of Corinth, Mississippi, as the decisive point in the western theater of war. It was there that the Mobile & Ohio, and the Memphis & Charleston rail systems, the north-south and east-west lifelines of the Confederacy, crossed. In Halleck's mind, this was the point that would most imperil the western Confederacy. As a result, he planned and executed a campaign with only one goal in mind - the capture of Corinth. Shiloh was only an unfortunate incident in that campaign.

It was the Jominian nature of Halleck that brought the campaign about. When he assumed command of the Department of Missouri in November, he viewed his job as reducing chaos to order.<sup>7</sup> A major source of that chaos was the confused command structure of the Federal forces in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri. Halleck was responsible for the area of Arkansas, Missouri, and Kentucky west of the Cumberland River. The rest of Kentucky and Tennessee fell under the Department of the Ohio, General Don Carlos Buell commanding. The geographic boundaries were hazy; the command relationships obscured.

According to Shelby Foote, both of these men were accountable to General-in-Chief George McClellan, but neither to the other, and therein lay the seeds of mischief. Each saw the other as a rival for future command. Due to this jealousy over command prerogatives, conflict was inevitable. As a result, not only was there little coordination between the eastern and western theaters, there was also little cooperation between the two armies resting flank to flank on opposite banks of the Cumberland River.<sup>8</sup>

McClellan and Buell pressed for action in Tennessee - Buell for his own glory, and McClellan to draw off some of Lee's purported 200,000 troops facing him in Virginia. Splitting his forces thusly was anathema to the Jominian dogma of Halleck. Halleck replied that he could not move in Tennessee until he had first secured his base in Missouri. McClellan and Buell continued to push their design, and finally, on January 1, 1862, Lincoln sent Halleck the following message:

General McClellan should not yet be disturbed with business. I think General Buell and yourself should be in communication and concert at once. I write you to-night and also telegraph and write him. <sup>9</sup>

The argument continued. On January 3, McClellan told Halleck that if he would not release his troops to Buell, then he must use them in a movement up the Tennessee/Cumberland River system. Halleck continued to complain - he had neither enough men to make such a commitment, nor did he have the generals to lead them. All he had was Grant, and Halleck thought him brave but reckless. Besides, he had that background. Still, on January 6, 1862, Halleck gave him the go ahead.

Finally, on January 29, Halleck gets information that Beauregard is arriving at Corinth with fifteen fresh regiments to reinforce the Confederate garrison. This forces him to act. After sending Grant detailed instructions on the pending move, he wires

McClellan and asks to be given control of Tennessee to solidify his position and ease the confused command structure. McClellan ignores him, but Buell, realizing a threat to his hegemony, promptly offers to help. Initially, Halleck refuses.

Once the campaign begins however, Halleck changes his mind. Fearful that something might go wrong and reflect badly on himself, he goes back to Buell asking him to demonstrate against Bowling Green to hold Confederate troops there. Now it is Buell's turn to be petulant - he refuses. At this point, McClellan intervenes and orders Buell to reinforce Grant:

Halleck telegraphs that report says 10,000 men left Bowling Green by railroad to re-enforce Fort Henry, and asks for regiments from Ohio. If report true, can you not assist by a demonstration in direction of Bowling Green? Communicate with Halleck and assist him if possible. Please reply. **11**

Buell's responds by sending one raw brigade to the fray.

McClellan is really to blame for this, because at this point, he refused to assume the role of General-in-Chief, and let his subordinates fight it out. Alternately jealous of each other, and never close friends, they welcomed the opportunity to do just that.

Halleck's frustrations illustrate the problems inherent in the command system. In the space of two days, he, Buell and McClellan exchanged some twenty-two telegrams on the state of the campaign.

While all of this political infighting was going on, Grant, or actually Commodore Foote and the Tennessee River, captured Fort Henry. In itself, this would have been all right, but then Grant had the temerity to move, without authorization, and invest Fort Donelson. To Halleck, the embodiment of caution, this showed a degree of decisiveness in a subordinate that could only be termed chancy. He would support Grant with all the

troops and supplies available, but at the same time, wired McClellan that he thought this a reckless move that could result in disaster.

This fear turned to near panic before the fort was finally captured, affecting nearly everyone in the command structure except for Grant and Lincoln. At first, Halleck feared that Johnston would reinforce Donelson with 40,000 soldiers. To combat this imagined threat, he tried to bribe Buell into sending reinforcements. If Buell could spare the troops, he would be given command of the Cumberland River operations, and Grant transferred. In Halleck's mind, this would accomplish two goals simultaneously: first, it would combine armies with him in control, and second, it would get rid of Grant. As it turned out, of course, his fears and solutions were groundless.

When, on February 16, Grant captured Donelson with its entire garrison, Halleck immediately seized the opportunity to proclaim himself the architect of the Federal victory. On February 17, he sent McClellan the following message:

Make Buell, Grant, and Pope major-generals of volunteers, and give me command in the West. I ask this in return for Forts Henry and Donelson. **12**

McClellan again refused his request, so Halleck went to Stanton for assistance. He ignored Halleck's request as well.

On February 26, Grant went to Nashville to discuss further operations with Buell. This was the last straw for Halleck. Obsessed with the fear of being eclipsed by Grant's success, and overly impressed with his own importance in the whole campaign, Halleck acted irresponsibly. On March 3, he wired McClellan that:

his I have had no communication with General Grant for more than a week. He left command without my authority and went to Nashville. His army seems to be as much demoralized by the victory of Fort Donelson as was that of the Potomac by the defeat of Bull Run. It is hard to censure a successful general immediately after a victory, but I think he richly deserves it. I can get no returns, no reports, no

information of any kind from him. Satisfied with his victory, he sits down and enjoys it without any regard to the future. I am worn-out and tired with this neglect and inefficiency. C. F. Smith is almost the only officer equal to the emergency. **13**

McClellan, ever sensitive to potential rivals as well responded:

Your dispatch of last evening received The future success of our cause demands that proceedings such as Grant's should at once be checked. Generals must observe discipline as will as private soldiers. Do not hesitate to arrest him at once if the good of the service requires it, and place C. F. Smith in command. You are at liberty to regard this as a positive order if it will smooth your way. I appreciate the difficulties you have to encounter, and will be glad to relieve you from trouble as far as possible. **14**

Halleck responded immediately. He put General C.F. Smith, whom he secretly deemed the hero of Fort Donelson, in command of the Cumberland expedition. He also notified Grant:

You will place Maj.-Gen. C.F. Smith in command of expedition, and remain yourself at Fort Henry. Why do you not obey my orders to report strength and positions of your command? **15**

Then, as if to drive the final nail in Grant's coffin, on March 4, Halleck wired McClellan that Grant had resumed his old habits. Anyone attuned to the gossip of the pre-war army, as McClellan was, would have immediately understood what this implied.

In Grant's defense, his actions in the aftermath of Fort Donelson were entirely appropriate. He did visit Nashville, but he had sent a message to Halleck's headquarters so informing him. Besides, this was a tactically sound decision to coordinate follow-up moves against a defeated enemy. Even Jomini would have approved. And the charge that Grant was "sitting down without any thought to the future" is totally baseless. Grant was always characterized as a man of action, and Halleck knew this. This was simply a case of Halleck blowing off steam at best, or manufacturing charges at worst. As for not notifying headquarters of his actions, Grant is equally innocent.

The Civil War was the first war in which the telegraph, then less than twenty years old, was used effectively. **16** The Federal high command relied on this instrument to deliver messages quickly and accurately, and few officers used it better than U.S. Grant. In this instance, it was the technology that failed him and caused the problem.

Grant was in the habit of wiring Halleck's headquarters daily as to his operations. Upon capture of Fort Henry, Halleck had ordered the hasty construction of a telegraph line between there and St. Louis to facilitate message traffic. From Cairo, Illinois to Paducah, Kentucky, it ran through the Ohio River flood plain. The river had flooded and the lines had been submerged. As a result, Halleck's messages to Grant had been going straight into the water. **17**

The river was not the only culprit. Years later, Grant would discover that one of his telegraph operators at Fort Henry had been a Confederate sympathizer. This man would screen Union message traffic and lose those messages he deemed of military importance. As a result, Grant's reports of his strength and positions never reached their destination. The operator later disappeared.

This misunderstanding was ultimately cleared up, after Grant demanded a court of inquiry and Halleck received a message from the War Department advising him to either file charges against Grant or let the matter drop.

This message also informed Halleck that McClellan had been relieved from the overall command of the Union Army, and that Halleck had been given control in the west. As a result, he decided that this was the ideal time to let the matter drop. He informed Washington that Grant had explained everything satisfactorily and there was no need for further action. He then put Grant back in charge of the Cumberland expedition.

At the time, Grant thanked Halleck for his support and assistance, and said that under similar circumstances, he would have taken the same actions. Only later did he discover the truth. In his *Memoirs*, Grant bitterly noted that Halleck “did not inform me that it was his own reports that had created all the trouble,” and said that at the time, “I supposed it was his interposition that had set me right with the government.” **19**

These actions served as a brake to Federal action in the Tennessee Valley. For the next several months, movements occurred much more slowly than they would have otherwise. At a time when speedy action was important, Halleck’s actions slowed the Union advance and allowed Albert Sidney Johnston to have the time he needed to gather his forces and make a formidable attempt to recover the west. The Federal high command’s contribution to the campaign had been negative.

But Halleck was not finished yet. McClellan was out of the way, and he had survived Grant’s brashness at Fort Donelson. From St. Louis, he sat back and considered the western theater as if it were a chessboard with Corinth the square needed to force a checkmate.

Halleck saw his plan as a maneuver without risks. He now had three columns with which to advance: Curtis in Arkansas, Grant down the Tennessee/Cumberland Rivers, and Pope down the Mississippi River. Deciding to leave Curtis alone in Arkansas, he would combine the other two forces for one grand stroke. He would combine all of his forces with Smith force in Tennessee. When all was ready, he would take command of the army and lead it to ultimate victory over the Confederate forces. Again, this was Jominian theory at its best.

As Halleck waited for his grand design to come together, he alternately prodded and cautioned his subordinate commanders as to their proper actions. He admonished Smith and Grant not to bring on any engagements until all of the army was in place. He cajoled Buell to hurry and join his forces before the Confederates could attack and destroy them in detail. Halleck was convinced that the Confederacy would be content to wait passively for their inevitable destruction in their positions in Corinth. His constant emphasis on caution and repeated orders to delay an offensive influenced his field commanders into thinking of nothing but restrictions. On April 5, he wired Secretary of War Stanton, I “Want every man we can get. We have in front of us a large part of the Manassas army. It is probable that the great battle of the war will be fought in Southwest Tennessee.” **20**

On March 1, Halleck had ordered Grant to take the army to Eastport, Mississippi, to destroy some Confederate railroad bridges. This, he stressed, was to be a raid and nothing more. Grant was to avoid any engagement with superior enemy forces, and retreat rather than risk a battle. He was there strictly to form a junction for the future movements of the army under Halleck’s personal command. Of course, Grant did not command the expedition. He was replaced by Smith on March 3.

On March 11, more than eighty transports, with their accompanying gunboats, tied up at the landing at Savannah, Tennessee. **21** Brigadier Generals John McClelland, Lew Wallace, and Smith brought the divisions they had commanded at Fort Donelson, although Smith had injured himself boarding a boat (and would later die of a tetanus infection), and his division was now under the command of W.H.L. Wallace. In addition,

there were two new divisions, one under Brigadier General Stephen Hurlburt and one under Sherman.

On March 14, Smith sent Sherman's division ahead to raid Eastport, but rising water forced him to abandon the effort. Sherman was forced to withdraw, and put his troops ashore at the first high ground he found, an obscure little riverboat stop known as Pittsburg Landing. Sherman reported to Smith on the situation. Smith ordered him to return to the landing, assume command of the troops there (now including Hurlburt's division), and post the men into camps. Smith would order the rest of the army up shortly, and then they could carry out Halleck's raid on the railroads.

On March 15, Halleck placed Grant back in command. Grant immediately left Fort Henry for Savannah, but not before receiving repeated orders from Halleck that he was not to bring on any substantial engagements just yet. On March 16, Halleck told him, "My instructions not to advance so as to bring on an engagement must be strictly obeyed. We must strike no blow until we are strong enough to admit no doubt of the results." **23**

On March 17, Sherman submitted a report that said in part:

[I] am strongly impressed with the importance of the position, both for its land advantages and its strategic position. The ground itself admits of easy defense by a small command, and yet affords admirable camping ground for a hundred thousand men. The only drawback is that at this stage of water the space for landing is contracted too much for the immense fleet now here discharging. **24**

When Grant read this, he noted that Smith had apparently concurred on Sherman's decision. Grant had admired Smith since his days at West Point, and he would never forget Sherman's assistance at Fort Donelson. In fact, of all the generals in the theater, Grant had the most faith in these two. If Pittsburg Landing was good enough for them,

then that would be sufficient. He ordered the transports at Savannah to proceed there immediately.

Grant put Sherman in charge of operations at the Landing. On March 17, he instructed Sherman that he had “ordered all troops here to report to you immediately, except McClellan's division. Among those to report you will find a number of regiments not of my command formerly, and consequently not yet brigades Organize them into brigades, and attach them to divisions as you deem best.” **25** Sherman was the main reason the Federal army was encamped at Pittsburg Landing. As its unofficial commander, he was responsible for its organization and defense.

No defenses, especially entrenchments, were developed. When asked about it, Smith had said that, “Our men suppose we have come here to fight, and if we begin to spade it will make them think we fear the enemy.” **26** Grant agreed. He believed that the rebellion was on its last legs, and said, “I regarded the campaign we were engaged in as an offensive one and had no idea that the enemy would leave strong intrenchments [sic] to take the initiative when he knew he would be attacked where he was if he remained.”

**27**

At first, Sherman disagreed. Privately, he was telling newsmen that “We are in great danger here.” He did not voice these opinions to Grant, however, because he was afraid he would be called crazy again. **28** Time allayed his fears as well. By the end of March, he had become complacent as well. This complacency resulted in the tactical command failure of the operation.

Grant had apparently forgotten the lesson he had learned at Fort Donelson, for he failed to consider that the Confederate army might have plans of their own. He allowed

his army to become so offensive minded that defensive preparations were never considered. There were no entrenchments; the camps were laid out with little regard for forming a defensive perimeter if need be; and, pickets and patrols were inadequate for detecting an enemy more than a couple of hundred yards away from the main Federal line. In fact, Grant misinterpreted the Rebel activity he did encounter as a threat, not against Pittsburg Landing, but against Lew Wallace's Division at Crump's Landing about nine miles away. On April 5, he had written Halleck that he had "scarcely the faintest idea of an attack." **29**

Contact with enemy pickets and cavalry vedettes had been constant since March 16 when five companies of Tennessee cavalry had been scattered on the Pittsburg-Corinth Road near Purdy by Sherman's cavalry. On March 31, the 5th Ohio Cavalry skirmished with Confederate cavalry on the Adamsville-Purdy Road. On April 3, Buckland's Brigade encountered Confederate forces about three miles south of their camp. On the 4th, the 72d Ohio had a picket outpost captured by Confederate cavalry. When the 5th Ohio Cavalry investigated, they ran headlong into a Confederate force supported by artillery (probably Cleburn's Brigade waiting in place). Sherman apparently regarded these affairs as minor and made no report to Grant of their occurrence. Grant, when he was informed, considered them nothing more than reconnaissance's in force. No one took the threat seriously.

On April 5, Colonel Jessee Appler of the 53d Ohio reported Confederate activity to Sherman. Sherman responded: "Take your damned regiment back to Ohio. There is no enemy nearer than Corinth!" **30** Like Grant, Sherman had decided that the

Confederate generals would never give up an entrenched defensive position to attack the Federal forces.

By nightfall of April 5, the troops along the line had become skittish. Patrols from Prentiss' Division had twice found signs of enemy activity immediately outside of their lines, and twice been ignored. Finally, about midnight, one of Prentiss' brigade commanders, Colonel Everett Peabody ordered the commander of the 25th Missouri to send out a patrol in the direction of Corinth. At about 5:00 a.m., they encountered the main Confederate line near Fraley Field.

Sherman was up and had eaten his breakfast when the muffled sound of rifle fire first drifted into his camp about 6:30 a.m. At about 7:00, he and his staff rode to the 53d Ohio's position near Rhea Field to investigate. Sherman reined up near the position of Company E on the regiment's right. Noting a body of troops marching diagonally across the far end of the field, Sherman uncased his field glasses to have a look. As he did, skirmishers of the 15th Arkansas emerged from the woods to his right. Noticing a Union officer, they raised their weapons to fire. Lieutenant Ball of Company E cried out a warning at the last moment. Sherman looked up, raised his hand for protection, and said, "My God, we are attacked!" It was too late.

Although the Federal army was not surprised, at least to the degree reported by Agate, their command failures had placed them in an extremely uncomfortable position. Grant has been criticized for not entrenching, not appointing a second in command at Pittsburg Landing while he was at Savannah, and not preparing an order detailing actions to take in case of an attack. For a force camped deep in enemy territory, these were grave errors. Sherman has been criticized for not recognizing what the situation developing

around him actually was. His oversight and failure to report enemy activities is equally egregious. On the tactical level, these men left their troops vulnerable and unprepared for the possibility of combat. Their failure cannot be excused.

But the main fault here lies at the strategic level. It must be remembered - Henry Halleck considered Pittsburg Landing nothing more than a rendezvous point. He would concentrate his forces here, without fear of enemy reprisal, prior to checkmating their western forces with the capture of Corinth.

Consumed by ambition, Halleck had been mired in political maneuvering to ensconce himself as the preeminent military leader of the western theater of war, and perhaps, of the entire Union army. He viewed this campaign in eighteenth century terms, and utterly failed to consider that the Confederacy might take any actions to counter his grand Jominian strategy. He continually cautioned his commanders not to bring on any engagements with the enemy, and told them that retreat was preferable to fighting. In short, he put the army into a frame of mind where combat of any kind was absolutely the last thing they were concerned with.

This was Halleck's campaign from start to finish. Even though Grant and Sherman made a number of tactical mistakes, and should rightly bear some of the blame, theirs was of a much lesser degree. The tone of this campaign was set in St. Louis by the Department Commander.

For all the blood shed at Shiloh, the battle was just an unexpected interruption in the Federals' campaign to capture the vital rail junction at Corinth. That piece of business remained to be finished, and the day after Shiloh, Grant's staff began pulling the army together to get on with the job. **31**



## Endnotes

1. Wiley Sword, *Shiloh: Bloody April* (Dayton, Ohio, 1988), p. 93, hereafter cited as Sword, *Bloody April*.
2. Whitelaw Reid, "The Battle of Pittsburg Landing," *The Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, 14 April 1862, sec. 1, p. 1.
3. Ibid.
4. Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, *How the North Won: A Military History of the Civil War* (Chicago, IL, 1991), p. 54.
5. Sword, *Bloody April*, p. 5.
6. Peter Paret, editor, *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, NJ, 1986), p. 154.
7. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Halleck: Lincoln's Chief of Staff* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1962), p. 11.
8. Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative*, 3 Vols. (New York, 1974), p. 149, hereafter cited as Foote, *The Civil War*.
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10. Sword, *Bloody April*, p. 381.
11. McClellan to Buell, ORA, I, VII: 584.
12. Halleck to McClellan, Ibid., p. 628.
13. Ibid., p. 679.
14. Ibid.
15. Halleck to Grant, ORA, II, X: 3.
16. Thomas C. Jepson, "Crossed Wires", *Civil War Times Illustrated*, December 1994, p. 57.
17. Ibid., p. 58.
18. Ibid., p. 59.

19. Bruce Catton, *Grant Moves South* (New York, 1960), p. 207.
20. Halleck to Stanton, ORA, II, X:93.
21. Bruce Catton, *Grant Moves South* (New York, 1960), p. 210.
22. Sword, *Bloody April*, p. 20.
23. Halleck to Grant, ORA, II, X:32.
24. Sherman to Rwlins, ORA, I, X:27.
25. Grant to Sherman, ORA, II, X:43.
26. Foote, *The Civil War*, p. 323.
27. Ulysses S. Grant, *Memoirs and Selected Letters* (New York, 1990), p. 223.
28. Foote, *The Civil War*, p. 323.
29. Grant to Halleck, ORA, I, X: 89.
30. Sword, *Bloody April*, p. 127.
31. David Nevin, ed., *Time-Life Books: The Civil War, The Road to Shiloh* (Alexandria, Virginia, 1983), p. 155.
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