

**Part II: The Slide into War; 1859 – Fort Sumpter 1861**  
**Building a Military Force**  
*By Ed Kennedy*

**The Pre-War Environment through 1861**

John Brown was hanged in December 1859 and his raid caused rage and panic throughout the North and South. In the North the raid focused the population on the abolitionist agenda and in the South the focus was on preventing a slave rebellion and securing protection against further excursions with similar intent. Yet with all rhetoric, most felt this crisis would also pass.

The issue of excessive tariffs on Southern states was debated hotly and was considered as important an issue as the slavery issue. Southern states were forced to pay 75% of the Federal taxes that were then used primarily in the North rather than the South, causing increasingly hard feelings. The imposition of the huge Morrill tariff on 1 April 1861 signaled to Southerners that they would be subjected to duties of significant consequences as a result of economic greed by the largely northern Republicans.

The major dilemma approaching the end of the decade was the 1860 Presidential election. The Republican party offered Abraham Lincoln of Illinois for President and Hannibal Hamlin for his Vice President, the Southern Democrats offered John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky and Joseph Lane for his Vice President, the Constitutional Union party offered John Bell of Tennessee for President and Edward Everett for his Vice President, and the Northern Democratic Party offered Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois for president and Herschel V. Johnson for his Vice President. The South's greatest fear was Lincoln. His name did not appear on the ballot of most Southern States and when he won, the road to secession was clearly open and the number of states seceding grew rapidly. Only seven Southern states initially seceded when Lincoln won the election, thus dragging the US Army into the fray.

The U.S. Army was largely divorced from the political actions occurring in the late 1850s. It was the natural consequence of the Constitutional restrictions followed by the professional Army. However, there occurred talk at the officers' messes regarding politics, Army officers were held by their oaths and honor from participating or interfering in politics. In Kansas, still the edge of the frontier, the Army was engaged in attempting to assist civil authorities in keeping the peace and maintaining neutrality while doing so. Fort Leavenworth became important not only as a depot for supplies going west, but as a base of operations for Regular Army troops maintaining the peace on the Missouri-Kansas border area. Much of the border fighting occurred between Fort Leavenworth and Fort Scott, Kansas located four days ride to the south on the Kansas-Missouri border.

In the late 1850s, the US Army was stretched very thinly across the country with an end-strength of only 16,000 men (less than half of NYC's police department today). Units were garrisoned in small company-sized detachments of 60-100 men in forts that were widely dispersed. A chain of

installations ran from Fort Snelling near the Canadian border to the Rio Grande River connected by the “Military Road”. It essentially established the western frontier. Units rarely combined together except for major operations such as the Mormon expedition of 1857 where only 1,500 troops were involved, one of the largest concentrations of troops since the Mexican-American War ten years prior.

There were arsenals and fortifications in the seceding states located both in the state interiors and along the 3,000(+) miles of Southern coastline where there were a number of key forts guarding harbors. As each state seceded, the state governments expected the Federal installations in their states to be abandoned by the Federal government and if not, the states seized them. The Federal soldiers manning the garrisons were allowed to leave and were escorted out of the states. The major exception was Fort Sumter although it was not the only one.

When the War Department began reacting to the events at Fort Sumter, the Regulars left the western forts to return to the east. Initially, state militias took their places. States quickly tried to form units to replace the Regular US Army units with mixed results. Where there were no state militias to occupy the forts, they were abandoned to the Indians. Militias gave way to volunteer units where they could be formed. They were armed and equipped by the US government. One such unit, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Colorado Cavalry, was one of the state volunteer units guarding settlements in the West. It never left Colorado and was involved in the “Sand Creek Massacre” of the Cheyenne in 1864.

General Winfield Scott (US Army 1808-1862) was the Commanding General of the Army in 1861. He was an ageing, rotund veteran of the War of 1812, Mexican-American War, and numerous conflicts with Native American Indians. He was referred to as “Old Fuss and Feathers” for his insistence on proper military etiquette, and as the “Grand Old Man of the Army” for his many years of service. Scott began consolidating the Regular Army to focus on training by abandoning western forts and distributing experienced leaders to various posts, camps, and stations. He also developed the strategy of blockading Southern ports that became known as the “Anaconda Plan”.

General Scott divided the country into geographic/administrative areas to aid the War Department in command and control of Union forces, initially referring to them as a Military Division. The Military Division was a collection of Departments reporting to one commander (e.g., Military Division of the Mississippi, Middle Military Division, Military Division of the James).

Because many of the senior military leaders in the South had served in the US military before the war, they naturally adopted many of the same organizational structures and titles that the Union side did. The manuals were re-written and were published virtually identical to those used by the US Army.

US military Departments were organized in a defined geographic region and responsible for the Federal installations and the field armies within their borders. It was more common to name Departments for rivers (such as Department of the Tennessee, Department of the Cumberland) or regions (Department of the Pacific, Department of New England, Department of the

East, Department of the West, Middle Department). The Departments, administrative Divisions, and Districts would be modified a number of times over the course of the war. This caused frustration with a number of politically appointed generals who dealt with the convoluted chain of command by bypassing it.

### **Operational and Tactical Organization of Armies**

The principle fighting force was an “Army” (a tactical organization) usually, but not always, assigned to a District or Department. The Army (example: The Army of the Ohio) was divided into tactical organizations known as “corps” (normally two or more), and each subsequent subordinate formation would be composed of two or more formations; i.e., the corps was composed of divisions the division of regiments, the regiments divided into companies. To add confusion, regiments and battalions were used interchangeably even though a regiment might be sub-divided into battalions (several companies less than the 10-12 of the regiment).

The formations and their composition were based upon military formations designed, tested and adopted during the Napoleonic era. They were taught at West Point and other military schools as Napoleon was, oddly enough, considered the ultimate military model. Although Napoleon was defeated by the British and a Coalition, the US Army became enamoured with all things French. French was taught at military schools. Uniforms incorporated French aspects that influenced uniform designs until the 1870s when France fell to the Prussians. Several of the manuals in use by the US Army were virtually direct translations from the French manuals and the Army shamelessly copied the drawings of French soldiers to illustrate the US manuals. Unfortunately, the tactics of the Napoleonic era were also adopted. They failed to consider the improvements in artillery and infantry weapons technologies which accounted for the devastating attrition on the battlefield when they were used with out-dated tactics. The Mexican War (13 years prior to the War Between the States) influenced many Army leaders who had served then returned to civil life. They were not cognizant of how much had changed in weapons technology in the intervening years.

While General Winfield Scott provided the initial war guidance to expand the Union Army, the Confederate Army had no similar position and depended upon the former Secretary of War and militia volunteer colonel, President Jefferson Davis. Both Scott and Davis depended upon graduates and former graduates of West Point for the expertise and experience necessary to organize, train, and fight. The South also possessed the talented graduates of other military academies such as the Virginia Military Institute and the Citadel whose graduates were to fulfill important roles. President Davis was compelled to initially depend upon each states’ militia to provide forces for defense of the South. It was evident that militias would not work in the coming conflict.

Both sides had a similar problem with forming armies. While the US had a significant head-start with the Regular Army, it also had the infrastructure already in-place to administer it. The Confederates had no such advantage. Both sides had militias but they had become more of social organizations than

military ones except on the western frontier. The Confederates formed a very small number of "Regular Army" units, never as many as the US Army had, but the overwhelming preponderance were volunteer units.

In April 1861, with the firing on Fort Sumter by artillery forces of South Carolina, the militias proved to be completely insufficient. The impending invasion of the South by the Union Army of almost 191,000 soldiers changed everything. The US Regular Army stayed relatively small and was not a fraction of the size required. Both sides, in the American tradition, resorted to forming larger armies based on volunteers. This tradition extended back to colonial times when forces were formed by citizen soldiers. Of course, the militias were quickly incorporated into the volunteers. Both sides began recruiting state volunteer units according to requirements levied on them from their respective governments. Regiments were numbered in order of formation and their state name appended to their nomenclature. As examples: 110<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania "Volunteers" (Infantry Regiment), 56<sup>th</sup> Virginia Volunteer Infantry Regiment, their numbers reflecting the sequence in which they were authorized by their states.

Confederate military units were similar too, but slightly smaller than their Union Army counterparts. They just did not have the resources to fill the ranks and outfit their units to the same numbers the Union Army could. Confederate infantry regiments were established with 10 companies instead of the 12 in Union Army infantry regiments. Artillery batteries in the Confederate Army only had four guns to the six in Union Army batteries. The size of the units on paper looked impressive but by the second year of the war, it was very common in both armies for infantry regiments to form with only 50% or less manpower due to losses, mostly by disease. The regiment, on paper should have had 1,046 men in the ranks. The average in May 1863 was 530. They decreased more as the war continued with the average a year later being 440 men in the ranks.

War fever gripped the men of both sides in 1861 and volunteers, eager to fight, enlisted by the thousands. By the end of the first year, things would change significantly, the realities of a long conflict tempered the initial excitement and for the first time in American history, a military draft was instituted ---- by the Confederacy.