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Not Written in Letters of Blood: The Forgotten Legacy of the Army of the Cumberland

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“Not Written in Letters of Blood: The Forgotten Legacy of the Army of the Cumberland”

There is a chapter missing in the annals of Civil War history. The story of an entire army, and the thousands of men that comprised it, is not being told. That army is the Army of the Cumberland, which teeters on the verge of being lost to history due to three main factors: poorly timed defeats and victories in battle, personal feuds and politicking between Union officers, and the undue emphasis of Civil War historians on Southern Romanticism.

While the largest Union army of the war, the Army of the Potomac, has received dozens if not hundreds of publications written about it in the last few decades, the second largest army, the Army of the Cumberland, has garnered no such attention. For proof, look no further than books about the Battle of Gettysburg (in which the Army of the Potomac took part), which number in the thousands. While Gettysburg does represent one of the Union’s finest victories of the war on its bloodiest battlefield, the Battle of Stones’ River (in which the Army of the Cumberland took part) has received less than half a dozen full volumes written about it, despite it being a significant Union victory at the cost of the highest casualty percentage of the entire war.

To uncover why it is the Army of the Potomac has been remembered so thoroughly while the Army of the Cumberland has not, both armies need to be examined through their leadership, battles fought, and the soldiers themselves.

The Army of the Potomac lacked respectable leadership for the first half of the war. Its founder, George B. McClellan, while organizationally brilliant, failed miserably during his Peninsular Campaign and barely won at Antietam (though the battle was won more *in spite* of his leadership than because of it). His successor, Ambrose Burnside, displayed his incompetence through a horrible mauling at the Battle of Fredericksburg. In his footsteps came Joseph Hooker, who was trounced almost as badly at the Battle of Chancellorsville. Finally came George Meade, the fourth and final commander of the Army of the Potomac, who won at Gettysburg but became little more than a figurehead after Ulysses S. Grant came east to supervise the army in 1864.

The performance of the soldiers wasn't quite as poor as its commanders. Though some of the men did wilt away in battles like Second Bull Run and Chancellorsville, most of the time they performed admirably, such as when they made assault after assault on Marye's Heights at Fredericksburg or the Sunken Road at Antietam. The grit and determination of the soldiers of the Army of the Potomac showed that their own commanders didn't deserve them, nor did those soldiers deserve the defeats their officers so graciously handed to them time after time.

The Army of the Cumberland didn't struggle quite as badly when it came to commanders. When the army was still referred to as the Army of the Ohio, it was commanded by Don Carlos Buell. While Buell was not a particularly brilliant man, he did come to Grant's aid and save the Battle of Shiloh for the Union, and he forced Confederate General Braxton Bragg's Army of Tennessee out of Kentucky, despite tactically losing at the Battle of Perryville. After Buell was replaced because of Perryville, the army found its principal commander, who would bring the soldiers together into a fully functioning and successful military unit. That commander was William Starke Rosecrans. Rosecrans would lead the Army of the Cumberland to victory at Stones' River and Tullahoma, before being defeated at the Battle of Chickamauga. After

Chickamauga, Rosecrans was replaced by George Thomas, who led the army to victory at Missionary Ridge, Franklin, and Nashville. All totaled, the Army of the Cumberland earned more victories and less defeats than the Army of the Potomac by a wide margin.

This was due at least in part to the gallantry and valor of the Cumberlanders, whose fighting performance was similar to their Eastern counterparts. Still, the two armies were more different than alike. One of the differences between the two is that the Army of the Cumberland had a distinctly Western flavor. While the Army of the Potomac was made up of gentlemanly Pennsylvanians, New Yorkers, and East Coasters who had worked in shops and on fishing boats, the Army of the Cumberland was comprised of farmers and woodsmen from Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, and Illinois. Officers like McClellan and Hooker believed in a high degree of pomp and circumstance, but Western commanders like Buell, Rosecrans, and Thomas had no time for such triviality. As the men in the army of the Potomac wore elegant little French caps called kepis, the Westerners wore large-brimmed slouch hats to keep the sun off of their necks and out of their faces. However, certainly the biggest difference between the two is that the Cumberlanders found more success in battle and had better leadership than their peers in the hard-luck Army of the Potomac.

This leads to an intriguing dilemma. If the soldiers of both armies were equal in fighting skill and performance in battle, and the Army of the Cumberland was largely more successful than the Army of the Potomac, why is the latter the one that receives all the attention?

The answer could lie in the timing of those victories and defeats, coupled with the close proximity of Washington, D.C. to the Army of the Potomac. While the Army of the Cumberland's (Army of the Ohio's) first victory at Shiloh was certainly cheered throughout some of the Northern press, it came just as McClellan was leading the Army of the Potomac onto

the Virginia Peninsula, where the newspapers and politicians in Washington focused their attention, believing it to be the campaign to end the war. Similarly, when Rosecrans led the Cumberlanders to victory at Stones' River, it was not enough to lighten the mood that had been dampened by Burnside's disastrous defeat at Fredericksburg a few weeks earlier. It happened again in the summer of 1863, when Rosecrans brilliantly drove Bragg's army completely out of Eastern Tennessee and into Georgia, capturing hundreds of miles of land and the city of Chattanooga without firing a shot. Yet this feat, referred to as the Tullahoma Campaign, ended on July 3, the same exact day the climactic Battle of Gettysburg ended, and just one day before Vicksburg fell to Grant further west, thus it was overlooked by the Northern papers in favor of those two events. Afterwards, when Lincoln wrote Rosecrans of an opportunity for him to end the war, Rosecrans retorted, "I beg in behalf of this army that the War Department may not overlook so great an event because it is not written in letters of blood." Even then, when the events themselves were unfolding, Rosecrans couldn't help but feel that the poor timing of the army's accomplishments were depriving them of their share of the glory.

Perhaps he was right. While it is not sound logic to decisively conclude that the Cumberlanders have been neglected strictly due to coincidental unfortunate timing, the possibility remains very real, and the evidence surprisingly supportive. Still, it is more likely that this is only one of several factors in the absence of material about the Army of the Cumberland.

Another of those factors is the personal feuds between high-ranking Union officers, in particular Generals Grant, Buell, and Rosecrans. The first conflict, between Grant and Buell, came right on the heels of the Battle of Shiloh. To understand this conflict, the battle must first be analyzed to locate the origin of those hard feelings.

The Battle of Shiloh was almost an enormous Confederate victory. Grant's Army of the Tennessee, with its back to the Tennessee River and Pittsburg Landing, had been driven from their tents by a surprise early-morning attack from Albert Sidney Johnston's Army of Mississippi. Grant had allowed his army to become lax, as evidenced by his lazy troop positioning and overconfidence. This almost cost him the ultimate price, the loss of his army.

One of the main reasons it did not was due to the timely arrival of Buell's Army of the Ohio on the field overnight. These fresh troops doubled the size of Grant's force, enabling him to launch a devastating counterattack on Confederate General Beauregard's (Johnston's second in command, who took over following his death the first day of battle) troops, driving the Army of Mississippi from the field. Without Buell's troops, it is unlikely that counterattack could have been made, and it is quite possible that Beauregard could have forced Grant's survivors into the river if the Army of the Ohio had not arrived.

The newspapers were not kind to Grant following the battle, labelling him a drunkard who had been intoxicated during the battle (a charge that is almost certainly untrue). In stark contrast, the press lavished praise on Buell, building him up as a true hero the North needed to win the war. Understandably, Grant was considerably upset by this, and the relationship between the two generals (already testy at best) soured.

Grant had a similar relationship with Buell's successor, Rosecrans. However, one noticeable difference is that while Grant and Buell had never particularly liked each other, Grant and Rosecrans had worked together well and had maintained a fairly cordial relationship prior to the Battle of Iuka.

At Iuka, Rosecrans had been tasked by Grant with defeating Sterling Price's Army of the West in a complex pincer movement. Unfortunately, as Rosecrans' column attacked Price, the other side of the pincer, commanded by Edward Ord, did not budge. The signal for Ord's movement was supposed to be the sounds of Rosecrans' guns, but due to a natural phenomenon called an acoustic shadow, Ord could not hear the guns, despite being only a few miles away. As a result, Ord's column never moved forward, leaving Rosecrans to fight the Confederates alone. Still, Rosecrans defeated Price, and was subsequently hailed by the Northern press as a hero. Meanwhile, Grant was chastised for not sending Ord's column in to assist Rosecrans, and once again questions of Grant's sobriety circulated in the papers, infuriating him. Grant and Rosecrans' once fruitful, genial relationship withered and died.

What does this mean when it comes to the memory of the Army of the Cumberland? Simply put, it means that because Grant would later become the most popular and remembered of the three, Buell and Rosecrans were cast aside in his favor.

While Buell's fate as a neglected footnote was well-earned by a pitiful showing at the Battle of Perryville and even before, Rosecrans' dismissal was the culmination of Grant's personal dislike of him, which happened at the first possible opportunity Grant had been given.

That opportunity began on Independence Day 1863, when Grant captured John Pemberton's Army of Mississippi. Finally, it seemed the tables had turned his way. It was his turn to be the darling of the Northern press, and he was promoted by Lincoln to command the Western armies in Chattanooga, Tennessee that fall. Unfortunately for Rosecrans, the Army of the Cumberland was one of them, and having just been soundly defeated at Chickamauga, Rosecrans knew the time for Grant's revenge had come. Immediately, Grant relieved Rosecrans of command and replaced him with George Thomas. Though a sound choice, Thomas was new

to army command, and thus would be under a heavier influence from Grant, and less likely to disagree with him, a fact Grant was well aware of.

This is the point at which the history books display their true bias. While several pages are spent explaining who Ulysses S. Grant was and list his accomplishments, the only mention Rosecrans or the Army of the Cumberland receives is a passing reference to the Union failure at Chickamauga or a little star on a map denoting the battle's location. In their attempt to make Grant the one true hero of the North, the authors of Civil War volumes and high school history textbooks have painted Grant's peers as being lesser generals than him, regardless of what the truth may be. True, he was one of the more successful Union generals of the war, and he should certainly be set apart from men like McClellan, Burnside, and Hooker, but his faults were clearly present and his comrades like Rosecrans were just as competent as he. Perhaps the biggest difference between the two men is that in his most desperate hour at Shiloh, Grant received help from his allies, while Rosecrans was given no such assistance in his worst performance at Chickamauga.

It is possible that the reason historians and authors have idolized Grant at the expense of his fellow officers is the seeming need to unite behind a singular, dynamic hero. While Rosecrans had won victories early in the war, Grant won almost every battle he fought in from start to finish. No doubt, Rosecrans watched in envy as Grant supervised the Army of the Potomac as it slugged its way towards Richmond through the Wilderness and Spotsylvania. After all, had he been given assistance at Chickamauga a la Grant at Shiloh, it could have been *him* pushing Robert E. Lee into Petersburg. Instead, Rosecrans sat idly behind a desk in St. Louis, and past and modern historians have made him pay for it by excluding any mention of him or his army when writing of Grant's heroism and strategic genius.

Even if Rosecrans himself deserves this treatment, the men of his army do not. Ultimately, it was *his* fault for the defeat at Chickamauga, not the Cumberlanders themselves. Unfortunately, in Grant's quest to bury Rosecrans deep under the shadow of obliviousness, he also buried the soldiers in his army, and many pro-Grant historians have done nothing to alleviate their ongoing struggle for attention. The inability of these and other historians to separate the fates of the soldiers of the Army of the Cumberland from the fate of their commander displays an appalling lack of objectivity and historical credibility. Their quest to form a narrative of an unlikely hero surrounded by incompetent buffoons may sound appealing, but it is simply wrong.

In a similar fashion, Southern historians and their sympathy towards the Confederacy have deprived the Army of the Cumberland from receiving its due respect. Especially guilty are the champions of the so-called "Lost Cause," who maintain that the South was honorable, valiant, and possibly even right in their views on slavery and their motives for fighting. These men, regardless of whether they are right or wrong, have placed too much emphasis on their lionized hero Robert E. Lee and not enough on his less stellar counterpart, Braxton Bragg. To understand why these historians have focused on Lee's army rather than Bragg's, one need not look further than the two men's mentalities and military records.

Robert E. Lee was the epitome of the Southern Gentleman. The son of vaunted Revolutionary War hero "Light Horse" Harry, Lee grew up in his home state of Virginia, serving with distinction during the Mexican War and the Harper's Ferry scuffle with John Brown and his men. When the Civil War broke out, Lee was quickly recalled to Richmond from his post in Texas and assigned a desk job by Jefferson Davis. However, when the commander of the Army

of Northern Virginia, Joseph Johnston, was wounded at the Battle of Seven Pines on the peninsula, Lee was given command.

As commander of the Army of Northern Virginia, Lee excelled. He turned back McClellan's army from the gates of Richmond, ravaged John Pope at Second Manassas, and drove into Maryland, where he lost his first battle at Antietam. Unfazed, he went on to maul Burnside at Fredericksburg and whip Hooker at Chancellorsville, before suffering his greatest defeat at Gettysburg. Still, Lee persevered, stymieing Grant in the Wilderness, at Spotsylvania, and badly defeating him at Cold Harbor, before finally losing in the Siege of Petersburg. On April 9, 1865, the favorite Son of the South surrendered to Grant, ending the war in the Eastern Theater.

Braxton Bragg was the complete opposite of Robert E. Lee. While Lee worked well with his subordinates, had a knack for tactical brilliance, and was the perfect model of the Christian general, Bragg was vitriolic, profane, and tactically dull. As Lee churned out success after success from Virginia, Bragg "snatched defeat from the jaws of victory" time and again in Kentucky and Tennessee.