

Detour to Disaster

General John Bell Hood's
"Slight Demonstration" at Decatur
and the Unravelling of the
Tennessee Campaign

Noel Carpenter



Savas Beatie
California

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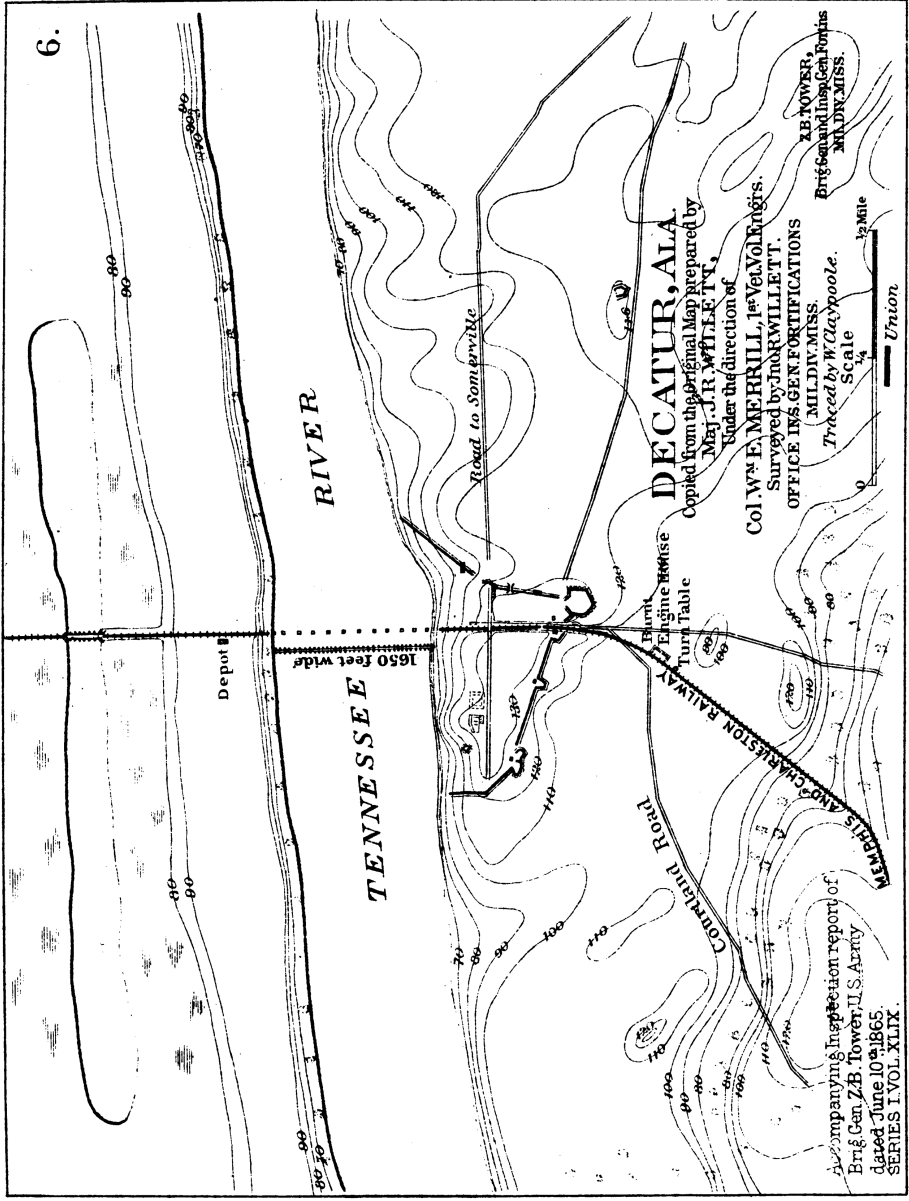
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For Daddy, with love.



TENNESSEE RIVER

DECATUR, ALA.

DECATUR, ALA.

Copied from the original map prepared by
Maj. J. R. W. F. I. F. I. V.

Under the direction of
Col. Wm. E. MERRILL, 1st Vet. Vol. Engrs.

Surveyed by J. H. WILLETTS
OFFICE INS. GEN. FORTIFICATIONS

MIL. DIV. MISS.
Traced by W. C. Laypoole.

Scale 1/4
1/2 Mile

Union

Accompanying Inspection report of
Eng. Gen. Z. B. Tower, U.S. Army
dated June 10th 1865.
SERIES I VOL. XLIX.

Z. B. TOWER,
Brig. General Ins. Gen. Fortifs.
MIL. DIV. MISS.

C O N T E N T S

Foreword to the Savas Beatie Edition	vii
Foreword to the 2000 Edition	xi
Author's Preface	xii
CHAPTER ONE	
Prelude — Fall of Atlanta	1
CHAPTER TWO	
Hood Turns North	10
CHAPTER THREE	
Tennessee Campaign Strategy	21
CHAPTER FOUR	
Testing Decatur Defenses	41
CHAPTER FIVE	
Vacillation, Fort Reinforced	64
CHAPTER SIX	
Counterattack Stalls Demonstration	93
CHAPTER SEVEN	
Counting Railroad Ties Toward Tuscumbia	121
CHAPTER EIGHT	
A Reckoning	130
CHAPTER NINE	
Epilogue	152
Appendix A: Organization of the Army of Tennessee	157
Appendix B: Fords and Ferries on the Tennessee River	161
Appendix C: Evacuation Order	164
Notes	165
Bibliography	178
Index	187
About the Author	202

I L L U S T R A T I O N S

FIGURE 1 — Gen. John B. Hood	77
FIGURE 2 — Brig. Gen. Robert S. Granger	78
FIGURE 3 — Gunboat <i>General Sherman</i>	79
FIGURE 4 — Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Cheatham	80
FIGURE 5 — Lt. Gen. Alexander P. Stewart	81
FIGURE 6 — Maj. Gen. Samuel G. French	82
FIGURE 7 — Maj. Gen. William W. Loring	83
FIGURE 8 — Lt. Col. W.F. Prosser	84
FIGURE 9 — Col. Charles C. Doolittle	85
FIGURE 10 — Capt. Edward C. Tarrant	86
FIGURE 11 — Sgt. Joel D. Murphree	87
FIGURE 12 — Col. Thomas J. Morgan	88
FIGURE 13 — Lt. Col. Henry C. Corbin	89
FIGURE 14 — Pvt. R.H. Nations	90
FIGURE 15 — Lt. Daniel P. Smith	91
FIGURE 16 — Pontoon Bridge at Decatur	92

M A P S

Decatur, Alabama	frontis
Hood's March to Decatur and the Tennessee Campaign	xiv

F O R E W O R D
TO THE SAVAS BEATIE EDITION

Much has been written about Confederate General John Bell Hood's tenure as commander of the Army of Tennessee from outside Atlanta in mid-July 1864 to the end of the disastrous Tennessee Campaign five months later. The Tennessee offensive ended in defeat at Franklin and Nashville, with the remnants of the army limping back to Mississippi, never again to be a major factor in the war. One might argue that too much has been written about the Tennessee Campaign. There is some fine scholarship and literature available about it. Several influential books that have shaped public opinion about the operation, however, are based upon false assumptions, bias, and the outright fabrication of events.

Strong arguments can and have been made that the overly ambitious move into Tennessee was doomed from the start. Many modern authors brush aside General Hood's postwar explanation and take an opposing view of his rationale while questioning his competence to accomplish the mission. In *John Bell Hood and the War for Southern Independence* (1982), historian Richard McMurry — by comparison with most other historians a generally sympathetic and careful Hood scholar — labeled the Tennessee Campaign an “unrealistic dream.” In a later publication McMurry described it as “probably the most poorly planned and executed major campaign of the war.”¹

¹ Richard M. McMurry, *John Bell Hood and the War for Southern Independence* (University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 167; Richard M. McMurry, *Two Great Rebel Armies: An Essay in Confederate Military History* (University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 130-131.

In their treatment of Hood's Tennessee Campaign entitled *Five Tragic Hours: The Battle of Franklin* (1984), Thomas Connelly and James McDonough seemed to concur with McMurry, writing "[T]he difficulties and outright errors in such a plan were so profuse," they concluded, "that the scheme would have made a textbook study at West Point." Likewise, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian James McPherson depicted Hood's late 1864 plan to press into Tennessee as one that "seemed to have been scripted in never-never land."²

Many blame the Tennessee failure on Hood's delay in launching the invasion. The delay allowed Union General George Thomas time to consolidate, assemble, and train forces in Nashville strong enough to stop, and then nearly destroy, Hood's veteran army. William T. Sherman had provided Thomas with only John Schofield's 25,000-man veteran corps, with another 20,000-man force to be sent east to Nashville from St. Louis. This dearth of manpower compelled Thomas to train and organize Nashville quartermasters and U.S. Colored troops into infantry regiments.

Surprisingly little has been written about Hood's delay, other than it was caused by the young army commander's indecisiveness. According to Wiley Sword's *The Confederacy's Last Hurrah: The Battles of Spring Hill, Franklin, and Nashville* (1993), Hood's superiors were "livid," "frustrated," and "exasperated" at Hood's "woeful indiscretion and careless planning in the management of his army." In fact, supplies for Hood's

² James Lee McDonough and Thomas L. Connelly, *Five Tragic Hours: The Battle of Franklin* (University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 15; James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 811.

invasion were the responsibility of General Richard Taylor, in whose department the Army of Tennessee moved in preparation for the strike at Nashville.³

In 2007, an important but little-known monograph by amateur historian Noel Carpenter was quietly self-published by his family after Mr. Carpenter's passing. The book, originally published as *A Slight Demonstration: Decatur, October 1864: Clumsy Beginning of Gen. John B. Hood's Tennessee Campaign*, might rightly be called a micro-history. Most such books focus on minor or obscure incidents within the framework of a larger event. The minute details are often interesting, but they rarely have a major impact on the scholarship and literature of the larger event. Such is not the case with Carpenter's study.

Hood's delay in launching the Tennessee Campaign, as highlighted at Decatur, Alabama, on October 26 through 29, 1864, was the result of his constant change of plans dictated by the lack of supplies. It was also due to the absence of General Nathan Bedford Forrest's cavalry, which was ordered to report to Hood on October 21, but did not fully arrive until November 14.

The series of failures of Hood's 1864 Tennessee Campaign began not at Spring Hill, Tennessee, on November 29, but six weeks earlier on the plains of northern Alabama. Hood's original post-Atlanta plan to invade Tennessee was to cross the Tennessee River at Guntersville, Alabama, and then march west to Tusculumbia, where supplies for the invasion would be

³ Wiley Sword, *The Confederacy's Last Hurrah: The Battles of Spring Hill, Franklin, and Nashville* (1993), 65, 70, 74, 75.

waiting. Reports of stronger than expected Union defenses at Guntersville forced Hood to change his plans and move to Decatur, which, according to intelligence, had only a small garrison of 1,750. Hood tested the Decatur defenses for three days before yielding to the defiant bluecoats and striking west to attempt a crossing at Courtland. By this time there were no supplies, and the whereabouts of Forrest's cavalry was still unknown.

Hood arrived at Courtland on October 29. Still without supplies, Hood moved out the next day for Tusculumbia, which he reached on November 1. He decided to wait there for Forrest and supplies before continuing on. Forrest and his horsemen arrived three weeks later, and Hood started the invasion on November 22. General Thomas, meanwhile, organized and trained in preparation to meet the oncoming Confederates.

Thanks to Noel Carpenter, Civil War scholarship now has a meticulously researched and efficiently presented chronicle of the crucial events that have been heretofore overshadowed by the bookends of the Atlanta and Tennessee campaigns. This new printing by Savas Beatie of *Detour to Disaster* will gain a wider audience than the first privately printed edition.

Stephen M. Hood

Author of *John Bell Hood: The Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of a Confederate General* (2013) and editor of *The Lost Papers of Confederate General John Bell Hood* (2016)

F O R E W O R D
TO THE 2000 EDITION

The author of this contribution to the study of Civil War history was my father, Noel Carpenter. He did not live to see it in print, but he did complete the manuscript before his death in December of 2000 at age 82. He might have wanted to do more wordsmithing, but nevertheless I hope he would have been happy with how his book turned out. (Actually I can picture his face lighting up like a football stadium.)

The only editing I did was for grammatical continuity.

Carol Carpenter Powell

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

For the past twelve years I have been pursuing a curiosity about the Civil War action in Decatur, Alabama, which took place a few blocks from my home and in many of the places where I played as a boy. My main interest was the fighting on the ground as the soldiers saw it. Endless searching for this scarce lore turned up facets of the engagement of more significance, and I began to agree with Colonel Doolittle's belief that it deserved more attention than it has received in the war's history. I decided to write about it, and this account is the result.

General Hood's changes of strategy that brought him to Decatur made the events at this stage of the Tennessee Campaign a turning point with many important implications. His own account of those developments hints of rationalization and leaves his true intentions still unclear. General Sherman, as he tried to find a way to cross the river and reach Nashville, was trying to withdraw from the area and get back to his plan for crossing Georgia, while General Thomas desperately sought to form a defense line in Tennessee. The interaction of these strategies on two fronts in this classic setting where the river, the railroads and the telegraph lines played such a large part, makes this affair a case study for students of strategy. General Hood's confused battlefield tactics and the many problems that engulfed him at Decatur seemed to foretell the future of the campaign.

The circumstances of this early part of the Tennessee Campaign invite second-guessing of the decisions of both General Hood and General Sherman. I have tried to avoid

doing that and will leave it to the reader to decide what would have happened if Hood and Sherman had done this or that thing differently. Both of these generals made mistakes that are forcefully revealed in this account. Since his campaign failed, General Hood's mistakes are more notable but my judgment of his performance is tempered with empathy because of the difficulty of the circumstances he faced.

The people who helped me with this manuscript by encouragement and other more direct ways are too numerous to mention fully. With apologies for omissions, I wish to thank Maurice J. Jones, an expert on the subject, who led me to some rare sources and generously gave access to his own manuscript; the late Winston S. Garth, Jr. and A. Julian Harris who gave me valuable source books; Rev. William D. Simrell for long and continual encouragement; the University of Texas at Austin libraries and the Interlibrary Loan Service for superior service; Carol and Gary Powell, my daughter and son-in-law, who gave me guidance and encouragement; and last but not least, my wife Betty, who put up with papers and general clutter for a good many years.

Noel Carpenter

Austin, Texas

October 2000

Prelude — Fall of Atlanta

GENERAL JOHN BELL HOOD'S STRATEGY FOR THE opening move of the Tennessee Campaign in 1864 was plausible, even promising to some observers — “dashing in the extreme,” in the words of Lord Wolseley, General Viscount, Adjutant General of the British Army.¹ He would cross the Tennessee River at or near Gunter'sville and capture the railroad junction at Stevenson. From this key position he could march to Nashville and defeat Maj. Gen. George H. Thomas while blocking reinforcements from General Sherman's main armies at Gaylesville, Alabama. When he abruptly diverted to Decatur on 23 October after one day's march from Gadsden, his plan began to unravel. So many problems developed from the new route that the stout resistance put up by the fort at Decatur seemed to tip the scales against a river crossing there, and he abandoned this strategy. It was a turning point that changed the nature of the campaign and momentarily caused Hood to despair of ever reaching Nashville.

In some other campaign or some other war this four-day fight might be counted as a major event. In fact, General Granger's estimate of Confederate casualties would place it among the 149 important battles of the war as measured by casualties. But not in the desperate mood of the Tennessee

Campaign. In the company of the catastrophic battles at Franklin and Nashville, it has been almost forgotten in the battle lore of the war. While it doesn't rank high for combat action, it must be near the top of the scale in terms of the complexity of the military problems faced by the young Confederate commander and in the weight of its consequences. The troubles with grand tactics, supply, transportation, artillery, cavalry and communications that converged on the Army of Tennessee at Decatur would have challenged the shrewdest of generals. To a lesser degree this could be said of Sherman's calculations for balancing his forces between the defense of Tennessee and his campaign across Georgia. General Thomas' problem was simpler but, for him, intractable: he had to have reinforcements to be able to stop Hood from reaching Nashville, while Sherman stubbornly held on to two-thirds of the Union's western armies for his own purposes. Hood's reputation among his critics as a sort of bungler began here, yet Sherman virtually escaped censure for erring at the same time on a grander scale by leaving General Thomas in a position from which only the fortunes of war saved him.²

At the time the Army of Tennessee reached Decatur, the fort there was only a few months old and the defensive works were still being perfected. Early in 1864 General Grant was commander of the Union's Military Division of the Mississippi at Chattanooga. In his plans for a spring offensive against Atlanta he wanted to improve his tenuous supply lines from Nashville, which depended almost entirely on the single-track Nashville-Chattanooga railroad. To prepare for an alternate route he gave Brig. Gen. Grenville M. Dodge at Athens

the responsibility for keeping the rail line open from Nashville to Decatur Junction and from there to Stevenson. For this to be successful, General Dodge knew he would need to capture and control the town of Decatur to help defend against the frequent Confederate cavalry raids being made against the railroad north of the river. On 7 March he led a brigade of infantry from Athens on a night crossing of the river just upstream from Decatur and easily captured the town the next morning. He designated the post as Detachment, Fourth Division, Sixteenth Army Corps, and put Brig. Gen. John D. Stevenson in command. General Stevenson immediately laid a pontoon bridge anchored to the pilings of the burned-out bridge on the Memphis and Charleston railroad line. By 23 March he had constructed two artillery redoubts and evacuated the citizens (see Appendix C). Later the town had been encircled with a breast-high embankment and an outer defense line of rifle pits with two fortified positions for artillery on the east side.³

On 9 March General Grant was promoted and given command of all Union forces. He chose Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman to replace him as commander of the Military Division of the Mississippi, made up of the Union's western armies — Army of the Ohio, Army of the Tennessee and Army of the Cumberland, each with two corps. Grant quickly broadened his spring offensive plans to include attacks against the Confederate forces on all fronts. In one of the two largest offensive thrusts, he would supervise Maj. Gen. George G. Meade's Army of the Potomac in an attack on Gen. Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia with Richmond as the objective. Simultaneously, General Sherman was to push his armies

against Gen. Joseph E. Johnston's Army of Tennessee in Georgia to break it up and sever the Confederacy on a line to Mobile or Savannah. Grant launched his attack across the Rapidan River on 4 May and struck at Lee in some of the bloodiest battles of the war — The Wilderness, Spottsylvania, New Market, Cold Harbor and several others. Lee repulsed his direct attacks, inflicting heavy Union losses, but he continued to move around Lee's right flank. Finally Lee fortified at Petersburg, and Grant's offensive ended. This thirty-day campaign had cost 50,000 Union and 32,000 Confederate casualties. Both armies were tied down in a prolonged trench warfare which continued almost to the end of the war. Although he hadn't taken Richmond, Grant had succeeded in immobilizing Lee and preventing any cooperation between him and the Army of Tennessee.⁴

Meanwhile, General Sherman moved his army from Chattanooga on 16 May to Dalton, Georgia, where the Army of Tennessee had been in winter camp, and struck at Johnston in the battle of Rocky Face Ridge. Outgunned and outnumbered two to one, General Johnston began a defensive campaign in which he slowly fell back toward Atlanta, giving battle from prepared positions only when it was advantageous. He continued this pattern, inflicting punishing casualties on the Union forces in battles at Resaca, Newhope Church, Kennesaw Mountain and Big Shanty. Confederate President Jefferson Davis grew increasingly dissatisfied with these Fabian tactics until finally, with the army in distant sight of Atlanta, he made the grave decision to relieve Johnston in mid-campaign. His choice of a replacement commander was shocking to the men and officers of the army who loved and

trusted Johnston. Passing over Lt. Gen. William J. Hardee, the senior and most respected corps commander, he picked Lt. Gen. John B. Hood. Hood had a record for boldness and aggressiveness and was a strong believer in offensive tactics, just what the president believed was needed. At 33 Hood would be the youngest full general in the Confederacy. (This was a temporary rank in the Provisional Army, Confederate States pending confirmation of promotion in the regular CSA by the legislature. It was not confirmed by the war's end.)⁵

Hood's distinguished combat record as commander of the renowned Texas Brigade at Second Manassas and Antietam and of a division at Gettysburg and Chickamauga had made him a Confederate hero. He had earned a reputation as the bravest of the brave. The sling holding up his withered left arm and his empty right trouser leg testified to the wounds he had received at Gettysburg and Chickamauga. When he rode his horse "Jeff Davis" he needed the help of two aides to mount and then be strapped to the saddle. Although he was in pain most of the time it didn't seem to dull his determination. But most of his officers and men were less impressed with these charismatic qualities than they were concerned with another persistent reputation he had for rashness and immature judgment.⁶

True to President Davis' expectations, Hood attacked the Union army in three major battles on the outskirts of Atlanta in late July — Peachtree Creek, Decatur (Battle of Atlanta) and Ezra Church. In ten days he had lost 18,000 casualties, nearly one-third of the force he had taken over. These valiant efforts only delayed Sherman's larger army. Hood was forced

to withdraw to the south on 31 August, leaving Atlanta in Union hands. Paradoxically, up until this loss, it was said the Confederacy was as near to independence and a kind of victory in the war as it had ever been. The huge Union casualty lists which had filled northern newspapers for months so appalled the northern people that Lincoln's defeat in the approaching election was a near certainty. Democratic candidate George B. McClellan was heavily favored to win the presidency on a platform which seemed to promise a cease fire and negotiated peace. When Sherman announced his victory — "Atlanta is ours and fairly won" — it was like a tonic to the people.⁷ Public opinion swung in support of the war, and Lincoln's opposition vanished almost overnight.^{7a}

For this victory General Sherman became the man of the hour. He had accomplished a major step in Grant's objective to further divide the Confederacy. The capture of Vicksburg in July 1863 had already cut away the Trans-Mississippi states, Louisiana, Arkansas and Texas, from the western arena. Now, with the Union in possession of Atlanta, one of the two rail lines supplying food to Lee's army was closed, and Sherman was within reach of both Mobile and Savannah. Union soldiers enjoyed a brief period of fame while they turned to the easier duties of occupying Atlanta and absorbing the fresh regiments and supplies pouring in.

General Hood fell back to Lovejoy's Station, then on 19 September to Palmetto, thirty miles southwest of Atlanta. Here his battered army camped for nearly two weeks while he waited for supplies to be accumulated at Blue Mountain near what is now Anniston, Alabama. Due to the heavy casualties in the battles around Atlanta, it was an army much diminished

from its former strength, and there was almost no hope of reinforcements. Clear signs of low morale showed in the men. Their uniforms were ragged and threadbare, and thousands were bare-footed. Hood's quartermaster, Col. M.B. McMicken, had destroyed his reserve supply train while withdrawing from Atlanta. Eighty-seven carloads, including twenty-eight cars of ammunition, were lost. Hood blamed this on Colonel McMicken's drinking habits. A seven-dollar pay raise from eleven to eighteen dollars a month had been authorized in June, but the men hadn't been paid since February anyway. Desertions were at a high level as many men, believing the cause was hopeless, went home to take care of their families.⁸

Despite these signs no one doubted that this was still a powerful army of patriots and hardened veterans. "There were no sick, and the health of the Army was admirable. The men had learned to take care of themselves under the most trying circumstances and were capable of almost any amount of endurance. I doubt if the ranks of any army were ever composed of better material or could be more relied on in an emergency."⁹ Such was the assessment of Brig. Gen. Arthur M. Manigault of Lee's Corps.

Sherman made no effort to pursue him, and Hood let his men rest at Palmetto while he tried to develop some plan to rescue the Confederacy. With pitifully few alternatives open to him he chose one which would have an immediate effect on Sherman's operations and some promise of reversing his victory at Atlanta. Sherman was at the end of a 105-mile supply line over a one-track railroad from his supply depots in Chattanooga and Nashville. Every day 130 carloads of supplies had to come down this track to sustain the Union

army. Without them Sherman would be crippled. Hood decided to move north and attack this line to force Sherman to turn back on him. He expected Sherman to divide his army to do this, leaving a considerable part of it in Atlanta. With their strengths more nearly equalized he hoped to bring on a battle near the Alabama line and defeat Sherman "in detail." He outlined his plan in a dispatch to Richmond on the twenty-second.¹⁰

President Davis came to Palmetto on 25 September to inspect the Army, and Hood had a chance to present his proposed strategy at length. The president approved of the plan and made it official by letter from Montgomery on the twenty-eighth, but by then he had hedged a bit. He wrote that he had decided to combine the forces of Hood's Department of Tennessee and Georgia with those of Lt. Gen. Richard Taylor's Department of Alabama, Mississippi and East Louisiana. He expected to appoint Gen. P.G.T. Beauregard to head the new command, which would be designated as the Military Division of the West. The Army of Tennessee would then be under a single theater commander along with Maj. Gen. Nathan B. Forrest's cavalry corps and Brig. Gen. Phillip D. Roddey's cavalry division. Davis' instructions to Beauregard, however, were equivocal and seemed to make him more an advisor than a commander. Since Hood had already discussed his plans with the president, Beauregard was inhibited and unsure of his authority over Hood's course.¹¹

The president had hoped in this way to add Beauregard's mature judgment to Hood's aggressiveness, but this was not to be. Hood was to ignore or avoid Beauregard's guidance almost from the start. In the days after this, President Davis made

several public speeches pretty much revealing Hood's plan, along with some elaborations of his own. This information reached General Sherman almost immediately from newspaper accounts and from a spy who was present when the president addressed Hood's men.¹²

For the next three weeks General Hood moved the Army of Tennessee northward. Bit by bit during this time he developed the strategy of what was to become the Tennessee Campaign. While reluctantly pursuing Hood, General Sherman concentrated more and more on his own plan for cutting loose from his supply line and moving across Georgia.