



Confederate Generals in the Trans-Mississippi

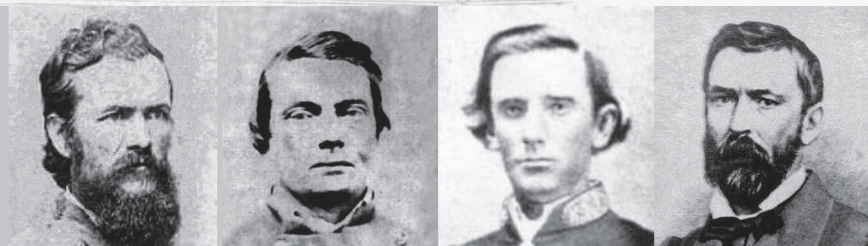
VOLUME 3

Essays on America's Civil War

Edited by Lawrence Lee Hewitt and Thomas E. Schott

With a Foreword by Daniel E. Sutherland

The Western Theater in the Civil War • Gary D. Joiner, Series Editor



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The Western Theater in the Civil War series seeks to emphasize an emerging trend in the historiography of the nation's greatest conflict: a more general recognition that events in the West, far from being a sideshow to storied campaigns in the East, were, in many ways, even more decisive in the outcome of the war. Among the works that will be produced are scholarly monographs, biographies of leaders who need reconsideration, and edited collections that present up-to-date scholarship in this rapidly developing field.



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*In honor of
Arthur W. Bergeron Jr.
and
Steve Edward Bounds*

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Foreword

HERE IS THE QUESTION: DID THE CONFEDERACY LOSE THE TRANS-MISSISSIPPI BECAUSE OF incompetent generals or because of the unique circumstances and conditions confronting those officers? The question is worth asking for reasons far beyond individual reputations. It is tied to the historical image of the Trans-Mississippi. Long dismissed as a backwater by students of the conflict fixated on the Eastern Theater, serious consideration of the war west of the Mississippi River—why it was fought, how it was fought, what was at stake—has never received the attention it requires. The region was clearly not as strategically as important as Virginia, where both Federals and Confederates saw Richmond as the ultimate prize in the war. But then students of the Western Theater insist, and not without reason, that the course of the war in the Confederate “Heartland” demands attention. The war was won and lost in the “West,” they say, a curious geographical designation for a region located entirely east of the Mississippi.

Yet, when considering the merits of Confederate generalship, it seems clear that each theater of war required distinctly different leadership abilities. In the East, with Richmond the undisguised end game, massive armies were locked in grand climactic battles, albeit in a relatively small geographical area. The West had its own share of titanic battles, but what most determined strategic ends there were the vastness of the territory and the enormity of its long and vulnerable lines of communication and supply. The Confederates were on the strategic defensive in both theaters, but commanders in the West had nowhere near the number of men required to secure the region. Could Robert E. Lee have prospered in such a command? Were his talents suited to it? Would Braxton Bragg have shone brighter in Virginia? More to the point, could either Lee or Bragg have bettered the efforts of someone like Edmund Kirby Smith in the Trans-Mississippi?

The Trans-Mississippi fell somewhere between the Eastern and Western theaters in size, but it also experienced, as William C. “Jack” Davis has noted, a “different kind of war.” At least three essential factors shaped that war. Most obvious was its distance from Richmond, including its separation

from the rest of the Confederacy by the Mississippi. The reality of that distance shocked the nation following the Battle of Wilson's Creek, Missouri, in August 1861. The fact that men had fought and died so far from the main centers of population, commerce, and political power made clear that the war would not be confined to Virginia. With proportionately higher casualties than at the Battle of First Manassas, Wilson's Creek also confirmed that the fighting would be far bloodier than anticipated. Yet, the theater remained remote from the priorities of Confederate political leaders. Requirements for men and equipment became increasingly hard to justify. Even had the government wished to invest more resources, the region was simply less accessible.

A second fact of life for Confederate generals in the Trans-Mississippi was that the Union army and navy gained a foothold in the region sooner than in the rest of the South. Any realistic hope of a significant Confederate presence in Missouri died at Pea Ridge, Arkansas, in March 1862. Little more than a month later, New Orleans fell. When the Federals then captured Helena, Arkansas, in July, they were well and truly planted in the Mississippi River Valley. From that moment, Confederate commanders in the Trans-Mississippi were in the business of ousting—not simply halting—an enemy that was closing from two directions. Consequently, strategic objectives were far more complex than those east of the river, or, indeed, from what they had been for any American general since the War of 1812.

Third, and most important, the Trans-Mississippi war was not a struggle of grand armies in decisive, Napoleonic-style battles. The theater's two largest battles were fought at Pea Ridge and Westport, in Missouri, with the two armies, in both instances, totaling no more than 30,000 men. Rather, priorities and realities were shaped by the irregular war. Of course, guerrilla bands roamed free in every part of the South and many parts of the lower Midwest, but the Trans-Mississippi arguably witnessed the most intense and long-lived guerrilla conflict. No army general on either side had been trained to wage such a war, either in quashing enemy guerrillas or in limiting the inevitable excesses of their own irregulars. The Federals proved more adept at it than the Confederates, but only by inflicting terrible punishments on both the guerrillas and their civilian supporters. Would Lee or Bragg have been up to that task in Arkansas or Louisiana?

So, what of the Confederate commanders who did confront these challenges? There seems little to define them as a group. Even the eight men examined in this volume, representing less than a tenth of all general officers who led troops in the theater, had little in common. They were born in seven different states, all of them east of the Mississippi, although five men were living west of the river when the war started. Discounting Tom Green, who was forty-seven in 1861, their average age was thirty at the start of the

conflict. Only three men were West Pointers, the others being lawyers, politicians, and planters. They were mobile, too. Only three of them spent all or most of the war in the Trans-Mississippi, and despite the fact that the majority survived the conflict, only two men lived there after the war.

All that said, these splendid essays do reveal a common thread in the military careers of their subjects: Despite the unique circumstances facing them and the disadvantages that hampered their efforts, each man acquitted himself as well as most generals on either side. It is also clear that these men were not the ones responsible for the collapse of the Confederacy.

Daniel E. Sutherland
Fayetteville, Arkansas
August 11, 2017

Preface

THE TRANS-MISSISSIPPI REGION HAS BEEN THE MOST NEGLECTED OF THE GEOGRAPHICAL regions in Civil War historiography. The opposing governments during the war are at least partially responsible. Both Washington and Richmond viewed western military campaigns “as if through the reducing end of a telescope,” according to one historian.¹ Not until Robert L. Kerby’s *Kirby Smith’s Confederacy: The Trans-Mississippi South, 1863–1865* in 1972 did a scholarly study of the Confederate Trans-Mississippi Department even exist.² In the latter two decades of the twentieth century, historians began recognizing that military events in that region did, in fact, influence operations east of the Mississippi.

Among many historians, the Confederate Trans-Mississippi Department was reputedly a dumping ground for generals who had failed east of the river or whom President Davis wanted to shield from controversy.³ It is hardly any wonder, then, that scholarly biographies of the top Confederate commanders who served there are limited.

The reputation of the Trans-Mississippi Department as a dumping ground doesn’t stand much scrutiny. Jefferson Davis did not regard it as such. The man who commanded there for most of the war—Edmund Kirby Smith—received his assignment because he was a personal favorite of the president and considered competent by many. Similarly, how to construe the transfer of Richard Taylor, a former brother-in-law of Davis and a recognized, talented general, to Louisiana? Of the twelve top-ranked generals ordered west of the Mississippi, only one—Benjamin Huger—seems to have been sent there because of his alleged battlefield shortcomings. A majority of the brigadier generals making that trek had unsullied reputations, but several men among them clearly lacked talent as commanders or seem to have been bunglers.

Major Generals Simon B. Buckner, John H. Forney, Sterling Price, and John A. Wharton all either requested assignment to the Trans-Mississippi or were requested by Kirby Smith. Van Dorn ordered Thomas C. Hindman Jr. west of the Mississippi. The president eventually replaced Hindman with

Theophilus H. Holmes, not because of his ineptness, but because he spooked Arkansas politicians, and Holmes was the only more senior officer available. John B. Magruder had been ordered to the Trans-Mississippi well before sullying his reputation during the Seven Days' Battles. We don't know why John G. Walker was sent to the Trans-Mississippi. General Robert E. Lee wanted him to stay with the Army of Northern Virginia, but Davis evidently did not. All these generals had talent except for Holmes and possibly Price.

Of the brigadiers transferred to the Trans-Mississippi for other than health reasons, Thomas J. Churchill, St. John R. Liddell, Evander McNair, Samuel B. Maxey, Jerome B. Robertson, and James E. Slaughter had requested transfer or received leave to go west of the Mississippi. Richard M. Gano fabricated his diagnosis of an enlarged heart in order to secure a leave in the Trans-Mississippi. Allen Thomas's Brigade had been captured at Vicksburg and reformed in Louisiana after their exchange, so he went there to resume command. Braxton Bragg transferred William Preston, a personal enemy, to the Trans-Mississippi. The Trans-Mississippi, "the junkyard of the Confederate army"? Hardly, given a close analysis of these generals and their reasons for being there.

Several Trans-Mississippi Confederate generals had great ability; others were colorful, fearless characters whose bravery endeared and inspired their men. Still others disdained recklessness, such as Brigadier General Henry H. Sibley, who always seemed to remain just out of harm's way during a battle. This cadre featured men of unique status among Confederate generals, the "walking dead," for whom the Trans-Mississippi was a literal graveyard. Brigadier General Lucius M. Walker died as a result of a wound in a duel with a fellow general (Major General John S. Marmaduke), and Major General John A. Wharton was murdered by a fellow Confederate officer, Colonel George Wythe Baylor, during a "personal altercation."

Only two men commanded at least a division in the Eastern, Western, and Trans-Mississippi theaters. The first, Earl Van Dorn, shouldered his greatest responsibility and suffered his most humiliating defeat in the Trans-Mississippi. Plucked from command of the Department of Texas to head an infantry division in Virginia, he wasn't Davis's first choice to bring order to the chaos in the section of Department No. 2 across the Mississippi. In "Major General Earl Van Dorn and 'a Most Unpromising Field for Operations': Observations on Confederate Generalship in the Trans-Mississippi," Joseph G. Dawson III focuses on how America's military system and Van Dorn's own experiences influenced his battlefield performance in 1862.

Hamilton P. Bee is all but forgotten among Confederate generals—his brother at least gave Stonewall Jackson his nickname. Bee commanded the District of Texas for a day, and much of that state in various sub-districts for most of the war. Unpopular with the citizenry, he served two years as a

Confederate brigadier before engaging the enemy in battle. As a field commander, he lived up to the title Richard H. Holloway chose for his essay; “He is the poorest excuse for a Gen that I ever saw.”

In “The Pallbearer of the Confederacy: James Fleming Fagan,” Stuart W. Sanders describes a solid commander who experienced some ups and downs. The Kentucky-born Mexican War veteran farmed in Arkansas before entering the Confederate army. After service in Virginia and the Western Theater, he resigned over a conflict with General Braxton Bragg. Returning home, he rejoined the army as a brigadier general, saw action at Helena, Marks’ Mill, Fort Davidson, Mine Creek, and the Camden Campaign, and was promoted to major general for his overall performance.

Jeffery S. Prushankin’s “‘I feel my responsibilities are great’: Edmund Kirby Smith in 1863” begins with a largely overlooked fact. In the weeks between his acceptance of the assignment in the Trans-Mississippi and his arrival there, the War Department significantly altered his command. The entire Trans-Mississippi region became his responsibility, instead of just Texas and southwestern Louisiana. Kirby Smith faced an administrative nightmare—Richmond-backed subordinates and outraged-at-Richmond regional politicians—that would continue beyond 1863.

In “Brigadier General William Robertson Boggs in Louisiana,” Richard H. Holloway describes an utter anomaly among Civil War generals: a West Point graduate with a distinguished pre-1861 Army career who never led Confederate troops in battle. His checkered career early in the war culminated when Kirby Smith secured his promotion to brigadier general and assignment as his chief of staff, and during the war’s hectic final weeks, Boggs briefly commanded the District of Louisiana.

Stonewall Jackson taught Richard Taylor how to be a hard taskmaster. After the war Taylor ranked Tom Green among Nathan Bedford Forrest, Jeb Stuart, and Wade Hampton as outstanding Confederate cavalry commanders. Curtis Milbourn describes the beginning of Green’s rise to such exalted company in “Louisiana, Spring 1863: Ascending to Command—Tom Green.” Green’s performance along Bayou Teche foreshadowed greater things to come as commander of all Taylor’s cavalry.

Paul Scott’s subject, “Major General John Austin Wharton: Planter, Lawyer, Politician, and Soldier,” was a renaissance man. Two other more flamboyant citizen soldiers, Nathan Bedford Forrest and John Hunt Morgan, overshadowed Wharton’s solid performance as a cavalry commander in the Western Theater. Like Forrest, Wharton quarreled with Joseph Wheeler, which in Wharton’s case led to his promotion to major general and eventual transfer to the Trans-Mississippi. He succeeded Richard Taylor as commander of the District of Louisiana in 1864 and commanded a cavalry corps before being shot dead by a fellow officer.

Appropriately, the final essay, not only of this volume but of the series, discusses Richard Taylor. Unquestionably the most formidable army commander to serve in the Trans-Mississippi, Taylor is best remembered for his memoirs, *Destruction and Reconstruction: Personal Experiences of the Late War*. In “1864 vs. 1879: Richard Taylor in Fact and Memory,” Richard Holloway focuses on unsuccessful Confederate efforts to move troops east of the Mississippi River in 1864. Taylor’s memory, it turns out, was as faulty as Ulysses S. Grant’s has proven to be. The story of the all-but-forgotten undertaking is told here for the first time based on previously unpublished documents.

In addition to the essays on the generals, we wanted from the very beginning to assist researchers interested in the Confederate high command in the Trans-Mississippi. To fulfill that goal, we planned an appendix for each of the three volumes, dealing respectively with: the generals, the armies, and the geographical departments. The latter, unlike the version that appeared in *Confederate Generals in the Western Theater*, has been expanded to include all districts, some unofficial districts, and one sub-district. And beyond the commanders and geographical boundaries, we have included detailed explanations of why and how regarding some of the changes to both.

The study of all these generals in gray helps us reach a better understanding of Civil War generalship and of how battles and campaigns turned out as they did. Sometimes Confederates’ defeat on the battlefield came from their own actions, rather than the actions of the enemy, and the battlefield—not the home front—determined where the Confederacy lost its bid for independence. Possibly a majority would disagree with our contentions; some may wish to give the Federals the credit. However, the argument that matters on the home front ultimately brought the Confederacy to defeat is unconvincing. This explanation has resonated among historians since the 1980s, but its saliency has begun to fade. Lorien Foote’s contention in 2017 that what existed in the Confederacy had nothing in common with the American home front in subsequent wars is supported by the scholarship of Daniel Sutherland, Barton Myers, and Stephen Ash among others.⁴

The additional insight these eight essays provide into the Confederate high command should help us inch closer to determining how the South lost the Civil War.

On behalf of our readers, we want to proffer our thanks to the editorial staff at the University of Tennessee Press for permitting us to forgo what’s unfortunately become current practice to promote readability and enhanced historical value. In this volume, military ranks are always capitalized and never abbreviated, numerals are used in unit designations, and Confederate brigades, divisions, and corps are always referred to by their commander’s name. While the Union army numbered all of these units throughout the war, the Confederacy never adopted a uniform standard, an inconsistency that has proven troublesome for historians and confusing for readers.

Unit nomenclature was even more confusing in the Trans-Mississippi. Forces were scattered over a vast territory, coming together only to confront a Federal incursion or to launch an offensive. When united, ad hoc divisions were created temporarily, thrusting the ranking officer into an unaccustomed command level over units they might never have served with before. For example, at the beginning of the Battle of Mansfield, Colonel Henry Gray Jr. commanded Mouton's Brigade, while Brigadier General Jean Jacques Alfred Alexandre Mouton commanded Mouton's division.

Collectively, our subject is the Confederate high command in the Trans-Mississippi Theater. Literally anything that enables the reader to better follow the bewildering changes in that system and how often a unit went into battle under someone other than its official commander is beneficial. So, rather than befuddle readers with perplexing numbers or confuse them as to who actually commands a unit at a particular time—and *because our subject is the generals*—we have made one exception to their traditional historical rendering. Confederate brigades, divisions, and corps, as was typical, are designated by the name of their official commander throughout the volume, i.e., “Bee's Brigade,” “Major General James F. Fagan's Division,” “Lieutenant General Simon B. Buckner's Corps.” If, however, “brigade,” “division,” or “corps” appears in *lowercase*, it means that the unit's commanding officer is only temporary. This enables the reader to immediately know that “Bee's Brigade” means that Bee is present with his troops and “Bee's brigade” means that Bee is temporarily not in command.

Lastly, Edmund Kirby Smith has his last name rendered as “Kirby Smith” in this volume. That was how he desired it, but the Army's implacable bureaucracy had different ideas. Kirby Smith's children solved the problem by adding a hyphen, as Louisiana State University did when it erected its largest dorm, Kirby-Smith Hall. We have followed the general's own wishes.

Notes

1. Alvin M. Josephy, *The Civil War in the American West* (New York, 1991), 157.
2. Robert L. Kerby, *Kirby Smith's Confederacy: The Trans-Mississippi South, 1863–1865* (New York, 1972).
3. See, for example, Albert Castel, *General Sterling Price and the Civil War in the West* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1968), 141–42, and William C. Davis, *Jefferson Davis: The Man and His Hour* (New York, 1991), 461. How the seventy-three generals who served in the Trans-Mississippi received their assignments is detailed in the appendix of volume one.
4. Lorien L. Foote, “Rethinking the Confederate Home Front,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 7, no. 3 (Sept. 2017), 446–65; Daniel E. Sutherland, *A Savage Conflict: the Decisive Role of Guerrillas in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill,

NC, 2009); Barton A. Myers, *Rebels against the Confederacy: North Carolina's Unionists* (New York, 2014); Stephen V. Ash, *When the Yankees Came: Conflict and Chaos in the Occupied South, 1861–1865* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1995). Others include Lisa Tendrich Frank, Noel C. Fisher, Jonathan Dean Sarris, Margaret M. Storey, and Brian D. McKnight.

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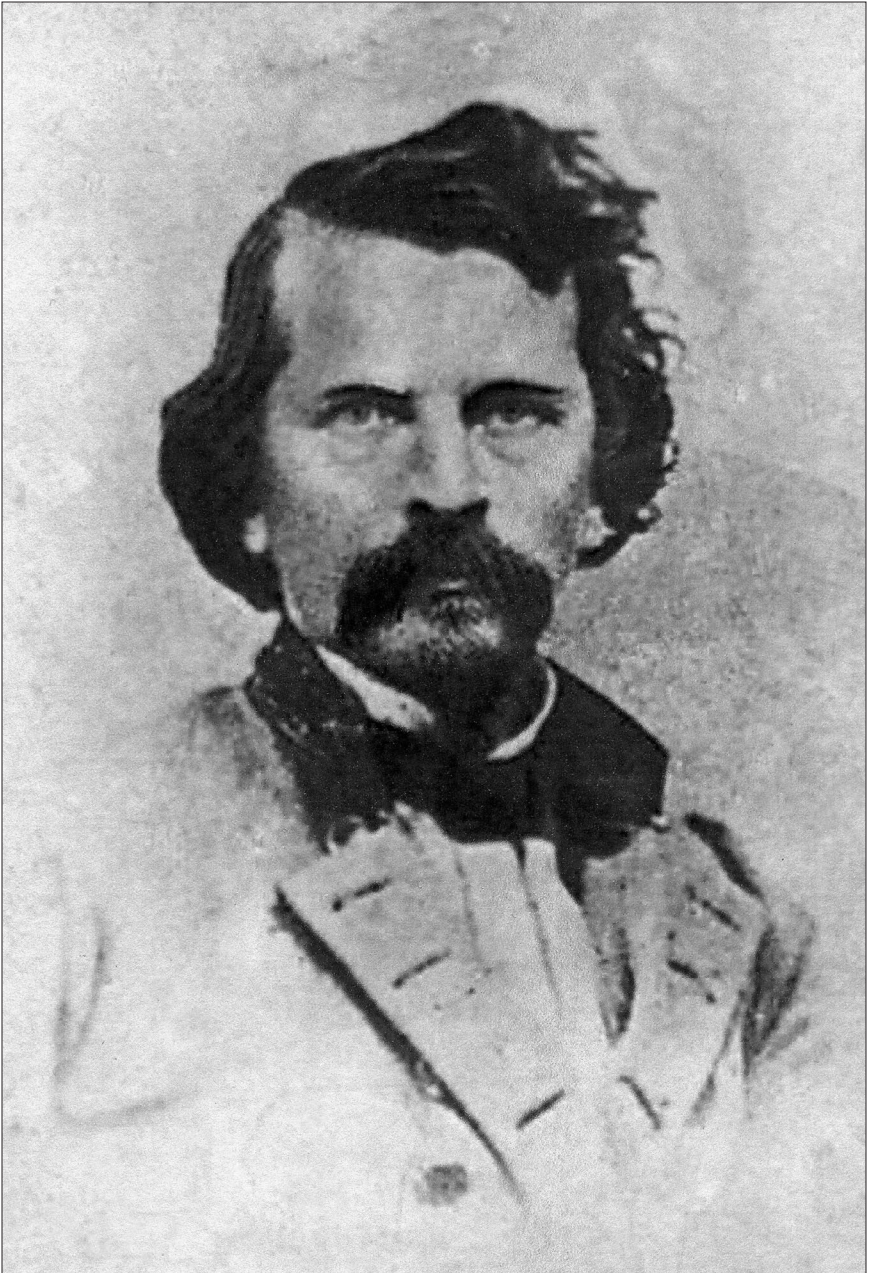
BECAUSE THIS VOLUME BRINGS OUR SERIES ON THE TRANS-MISSISSIPPI CONFEDERATE generals to a close, we wish to express our gratitude to all who have supported the project since its conception by Art Bergeron a decade ago. As part of The University of Tennessee Press's *The Western Theater in the Civil War*, Scot Danforth and Gary Joiner have been mainstays through all three volumes, as have so many of the staff at the press through the years. A special thanks to Dan Sutherland for providing the foreword and our authors, veterans and newcomers as diverse as their subjects.

Gary also provided several maps for this volume, as he did for the first two. Contributors Jeff Prushankin, Curtis Milbourn, and Paul Scott rendered invaluable assistance beyond their essays, and Richard H. Holloway allowed us to reproduce photographs from his personal collection. William C. "Jack" Davis also made one of his photographs available and Lauren Jarvis, Joel Draut, and Lorien Foote aided us in various ways. Our thanks to all of you.





Confederate Trans-Mississippi Department. Map by Charles Gear.



Major General Earl Van Dorn. Courtesy of Lawrence Lee Hewitt.

Major General Earl Van Dorn and “a Most Unpromising Field for Operations”: Observations on Confederate Generalship in the Trans-Mississippi

Joseph G. Dawson III

EARL VAN DORN MADE AN IMPRESSION ON EVERYONE HE MET. THOUGH AVERAGE IN height for men in the 1860s (perhaps five feet, eight inches tall), he wore his chestnut hair fashionably long and cultivated a luxurious mustache with goatee. Described by a loyal staff member, Van Dorn’s handsome face, with “clear blue eyes, [and] his firm set mouth,” radiated charm and self-confidence. Acting with flair, “lithe and graceful” on foot or mounted on horseback, he exuded the martial panache so captivating to Confederate civilians, especially the ladies. Altogether, he was a “fascinating gentleman.”¹

Van Dorn held major Confederate leadership positions in all three theaters of the Civil War. His greatest level of responsibility was commander of the Trans-Mississippi District of Department No. 2, the region that General Braxton Bragg called “a most unpromising field for operations.”² And Van Dorn suffered his greatest disappointment in the Trans-Mississippi at Elkhorn Tavern, Arkansas. In the Eastern Theater he had served as a division commander, one of the key field officers in the organization that Robert E. Lee later renamed the Army of Northern Virginia. He served in a variety of questionable assignments in the Western Theater: first, as commander of a corps-sized unit, then of a district comprising parts of two states, and then fighting a battle for the vital railroad junction at Corinth, Mississippi. Finally, he led a capable cavalry unit conducting effective raids.

Van Dorn compiled one of the most controversial records of any Confederate general. To be sure, he accrued creditable service as a satisfactory

administrator in the Trans-Mississippi District and as a cavalry commander. This essay considers key aspects of Van Dorn's generalship until 1862 and the steps leading to his transfer to the Trans-Mississippi early that year. A combination of factors prompted President Jefferson Davis in awarding assignments to Van Dorn: his personal impressions, pressures from state and Confederate politicians, and, importantly, the available pool of generals. Part of Davis's great challenge as commander in chief was matching senior military personnel to the Confederacy's leadership needs.³

Enrolling at the US Military Academy at West Point, New York, in July of 1838, Earl Van Dorn reflected his rural upbringing near Port Gibson, Mississippi, where he was born September 17, 1820. His father, an attorney, wanted more for his son than local schooling and sent him to matriculate in Baltimore, Maryland. Expressing an interest in the army, Van Dorn gained the approval of Secretary of War Joel R. Poinsett for an at-large appointment to the US Military Academy. The Mississippi cadet personified impetuous southern youth. Although he demonstrated exceptional horsemanship, his low marks revealed academic deficiencies, and his misconduct tallied enough demerits to bring him to the edge of dismissal. He slipped to a low spot and was ranked fifty-second out of fifty-six graduates in the class of 1842.⁴

Years later, Van Dorn served as a Confederate general along with several of his classmates, all of higher class rank: Gustavus W. Smith, Mansfield Lovell, Alexander P. Stewart, Daniel H. Hill, Richard H. Anderson, and Lafayette McLaws. Two steps behind Van Dorn walked James Longstreet, who ranked fifty-fourth.⁵

Completing West Point's rigorous program in the nineteenth century, young officers expected to go to America's frontiers or coastal defenses. Van Dorn's low class rank meant sewing on the bugle insignia of an infantry officer. He probably preferred the frontier, but he drew a coastal post in the South with the 7th Infantry Regiment in Louisiana and Alabama, where he spent the next three years. Near Mobile, he met Martha Caroline ("Carey") Godbold, and they married in 1843. The couple eventually had two children.⁶

While Carey went to live with her parents, in 1845 Van Dorn moved with his regiment and half the US Army to Texas; the next year war ignited between the United States and Mexico. The lieutenant fought in several major battles, including Monterrey in northern Mexico. Under Major General Winfield Scott's leadership in the Mexico City campaign, Van Dorn marched into some of the war's crucial battles, such as Cerro Gordo, Contreras, Churubusco, and Chapultepec. Twice cited for gallantry in action, he earned two brevet promotions and also survived multiple wounds from Mexican bullets.⁷

After the Mexican War ended in 1848, Van Dorn deployed in the Third Seminole War in Florida (1849-1850) and thereafter chaffed through several administrative assignments. In 1855, Secretary of War Jefferson Davis

created the new 2nd Cavalry Regiment, and Van Dorn earned a spot in the prestigious unit. Promoted to captain, he returned to the Texas frontier to command a cavalry company, serving with the regiment's first-rate leaders, Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston and Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Lee. Van Dorn's best days as an army officer were as a cavalryman. He rode on several patrols searching for Comanche Indians. Building command experience, Van Dorn once led an unusually large detachment of eight companies ("troops" in the cavalry) in a notable engagement against the Comanche, in which he was twice wounded and forced to convalesce weeks at home in Mississippi. His well-deserved promotion to the rank of major came in June 1860.⁸

Abraham Lincoln's election in America's momentous 1860 presidential election spawned the secession crisis. South Carolina seceded from the Union in December, and other states were certain to follow. This confronted military officers with a question: would they prioritize their loyalty to the US Army and their future there, or would they choose loyalty to their state and the possibility that secession meant civil war? In the 2nd Cavalry, the sectional animosities broke into the open.⁹

A devoted Mississippian, Van Dorn placed his attachment to his state above his 18 years in the army and West Point education. On January 9, 1861, Mississippi became the second state to secede. Four other states followed her out that month: Florida, Alabama, Georgia, and Louisiana. Texas soon followed. Van Dorn resigned his US Army commission on January 31. A few days earlier, the state's two US senators had resigned their seats. One of them, Jefferson Davis, remembered Van Dorn as "among the first [of their state] to leave the service of the United States, and came to offer his sword to Mississippi." The Mississippi secession convention appointed Van Dorn one of the state's four brigadier generals, subordinate to Davis, its lone major general.¹⁰

In the midst of the secession crisis, the generals had to work closely with Mississippi's governor, John J. Pettus. Southern and northern governors, though not listed in a chain of command, possessed executive authority to recruit soldiers, allocate arms and equipment from arsenals, and set up camps to train state regiments before they went into national service. Davis generously recalled that Van Dorn assisted him and the governor and "commenced recruiting men for the anticipated war." He "was associated with me in the organization of the army in Mississippi, immediately after the secession of our State," Davis also recalled, "and I was sincerely attached to him." Preparing their state's defenses, Davis and Van Dorn built a cordial, even warm, working relationship.¹¹

Delegates from the first six seceded states began meeting on February 4 in Montgomery, Alabama, to form a new southern confederacy. Among their many significant actions and decisions, a number impinged directly on Davis and Van Dorn.

Van Dorn and Davis shared points in common as the Confederacy came into existence: both were Mississippians, Military Academy graduates, Mexican War veterans, and state military officers. But major differences also separated them: first, Davis was more than a dozen years older, and had graduated West Point fourteen years before Van Dorn, in the class of 1828. Further, as a colonel, Davis had commanded hundreds of men in a volunteer regiment in the Mexican War, while Van Dorn typically led fifty to one hundred as a lieutenant. Finally, Davis had held the cabinet position of secretary of war, making him, in effect, the civilian who administered the entire US Army, from 1853–1857, years Van Dorn spent as a company grade officer. When the Confederate Provisional Congress selected Davis to be president and commander in chief of the new nation's armed forces, he vacated the post of Mississippi major general, and the state Secession Convention chose Van Dorn to fill the vacancy. That promotion elevated Van Dorn's status and helped his case for a high rank should he join the Confederate Army.¹²

Doubtless Davis and Van Dorn were on friendly terms, but it was an avuncular sort of relationship. It is difficult to call them "friends" in the sense as would be the case for men either closer in age or colleagues working in settings where seniority was not so stark. But both men referred to the other as "friend." For example, writing to his wife in February, 1861, Van Dorn said that Davis had been "very much pleased" at his election as brigadier general of state troops, "and showed me the great kindness . . . of asking me to dine with him. . . . *He is without a doubt a strong friend.*"¹³

Davis reciprocated the feelings. The president recalled the younger man's attributes positively but in a more restrained tone: Van Dorn "was an educated soldier, had served with marked distinction in the war with Mexico . . . often noticed in official reports for gallantry and good conduct." After that war he had gone on with "like activity and daring" to service on the Western frontier and in Indian warfare.¹⁴ Davis wanted his new army filled with officers of Van Dorn's proven martial qualities.

The Confederate War Department appointed Van Dorn to the rank of colonel of cavalry on March 16, 1861. Based on his previous posting in Texas, it dispatched Van Dorn on a recruiting trip to the Lone Star State, where during his brief stay he gathered a few enlistees. Presently wiser heads in Montgomery realized Van Dorn could render more valuable service elsewhere, and he was soon on his way back to the capital for another assignment.¹⁵

Apparently Van Dorn was handed his new orders on April 11, the same day Secretary of War Leroy Pope Walker wrote to Louisiana's governor, Thomas O. Moore, informing him of Van Dorn's assignment to command the defenses of New Orleans. Departing Montgomery by riverboat, Van Dorn found a telegram waiting for him when the vessel docked at Selma ordering him to return to Montgomery. Fort Sumter had been fired upon, and

a shooting war necessitated Van Dorn's reassignment. Returning to the capital, he met with Davis, who told him to return to Texas "to raise an army" to "intercept and prevent the movement of the US troops from the state." Booking passage on a riverboat to start his journey, Van Dorn recounted that the president favored him when he "walked down to the boat with me to see me off," declaring that Davis wished him "'good-by' and added 'God bless you,' with a warm grasp of the hand." In Van Dorn's emphatic opinion, "he [Davis] is a great and good man." Van Dorn meant to "win honors and reputation and a name" in the war that loomed ahead. Now instead of supervising forts near the Crescent City, he would be commanding troops in the Trans-Mississippi's Department of Texas.¹⁶

Arriving in Galveston on April 16, Colonel Van Dorn logically located his headquarters in San Antonio, a city of major military posts since Spanish colonial times. The colonel learned that "upon my shoulders rests all the responsibility" for operating a large department. At least, he enjoyed the advantages of the metropolis in Texas. San Antonio's population of eight thousand totaled twice that of Austin, the state capital. As Van Dorn described to his wife, "a thousand duties and a thousand annoyances" filled his days. He was "much on the go . . . buying and supplying provisions" and inspecting forts and units. Confederates had rounded up dozens of Federal soldiers, and Van Dorn placed them in a temporary prisoner compound. As the state's senior military administrator, he described himself "as restless as a panther caged, in an office."¹⁷

Van Dorn's new assignment required him to work with Texas governor Edward Clark, who quickly signaled his concerns about his state's defenses to the new commander. All borders of Texas warranted protection, but the Gulf Coast took priority, followed by the Rio Grande to the south and the Red River to the north. The governor insisted: "you will use your best efforts to put Galveston in an efficient state of preparation to meet any attack which may be made upon it," but the state's "general military defence" also called for attention. Justifying Clark's worries about the coast, on April 19 Lincoln had ordered the Union Navy to enforce a naval blockade from Virginia to Texas. Beginning with small numbers of vessels, the steadily growing blockade squadrons focused on major southern ports, including Galveston.¹⁸

Van Dorn's inspection trip to Galveston reassured the governor and the island's residents that he heeded their concerns, but cannon and equipment shortages plagued the port's defenses. To remedy this situation, Clark informed Davis that he proposed taking guns from interior US Army posts and mounting them in the coastal forts. Later that summer, Confederate cannon crews exchanged "several shots" with Federal ships blockading the port city.¹⁹

That summer the Confederate army expanded, and it required more generals. President Davis clearly understood the challenges these appointees

faced. He later told Arkansas governor Harris Flanagan that “officers who had never previously exercised high command are called upon to bear great responsibilities.”²⁰ The War Department dispatched new generals to command brigades (about 4,000 men), divisions (about 15,000), and corps (upwards of 35,000), as well as administer districts or departments, geographical areas having varying numbers of troops. Officers commissioned since 1840 became prime candidates for generalships. Most of them, however, possessed little or no command experience above the company (about 100 soldiers) or regiment (700–1,000 men) level. Yet under the demands of war, such officers became brigadier generals in both armies. Brigades contained multiple regiments. Brigadiers also commanded military districts, comprising parts of a state, or, like Van Dorn, commanded departments, comprising one or more states. Commensurate with his command of a military department, Van Dorn received notice of his promotion to the rank of brigadier general in June 1861, before his 41st birthday. By then he had wearied of the desk-bound duties of departmental command and expressed his desire for more “active service suitable to my age and inclinations.”²¹

The Confederacy’s haphazard enlistment procedures consumed Van Dorn’s and Clark’s time, and multiple recruiters complicated the competition for soldiers. Some men with political connections secured permission from the War Department or the president to raise their own regiments. But they knew governors approved rendezvous sites where enlistees trained, and they also decided when state units were ready for Confederate service. For example, Davis had endorsed a risky venture for Brigadier General Henry Hopkins Sibley to lead an expedition to invade the Federal Territory of New Mexico. Governor Clark informed Van Dorn that he had “designated twenty companies” (up to two thousand recruits, if the companies were at full strength) for Sibley’s Brigade, but no doubt after he got to Texas, Sibley would want more. Meanwhile, Texans demanded that the governor and Van Dorn replace the US Army troops at forts that had guarded the state’s interior against Indian raiders. The governor told Van Dorn that frontier residents fretted over “the presence of Indians” and reported the “commission of depredations.” Texans not only worried about dangers to their state, but Clark reminded President Davis that Van Dorn’s department formed part of the Confederacy’s exposed far western frontier.²²

By the time of Clark’s reminder, Davis already had determined that the Confederate army would defend the entire nation. He refused to willingly cede *any* state to Federal encroachment, indeed not even “an acre of Confederate soil.” If resources permitted, Davis planned to order tactical offensives to regain any lost territory. He termed his controversial plan an “offensive-defensive strategy.”²³

In mid-August, just days after the first big battle in the Trans-Mississippi at Wilson’s Creek, Missouri, Van Dorn put aside issues of coastal forts, com-

peting recruiters, and raising regiments when new orders detailed him to the Confederacy's primary army in the Eastern Theater, located near Manassas Junction, north of Richmond, Virginia, the new Confederate capital. Brigadier General Paul O. Hébert, an officer with a reputation in military engineering and politics, replaced him.

For five months in the Trans-Mississippi, Van Dorn had adequately fulfilled his duties and maintained good civil-military relations with Governor Clark. Louisiana's Governor Moore proposed to meet with Van Dorn and told Davis of "the necessity of having an officer here who . . . [demonstrated] youth, energy, and military ability." In his initial assignments, Van Dorn contributed to establishing Confederate authority in the Trans-Mississippi.²⁴

Travelling by coach and train, Van Dorn crossed the breadth of the Confederacy. In such haste to get to what he hoped was command of a cavalry division, he asked his wife to excuse him for not taking time to visit her or the children. In late September 1861, two months after the war's first major battle at Manassas, he stepped off a train into bustling Richmond. Army units marched through the streets. Officers, politicians, contractors, office-seekers, and clerks from government bureaus hustled purposefully about their business. Then Van Dorn learned of his assignment—not cavalry, but an infantry division initially comprised of nine regiments from Mississippi.²⁵

His division was in the corps of one of his nation's heroes, General P. G. T. Beauregard. Van Dorn had joined the Confederacy's largest army under the direction of another Confederate hero, General Joseph E. Johnston, who showed his early positive regard for Van Dorn, classifying him among several "competent men for the grade" of major general, including Gustavus W. Smith and James Longstreet.²⁶

Van Dorn served in a prestigious post, but Davis's approval of Gustavus Smith to a better one, command of the other corps in Johnston's army, irked him. Van Dorn narrowly outranked Smith, one of his peers in their West Point class. So he complained directly to Davis. In a gently worded letter, briefer and less contentious than he wrote to other complainers, the president explained some of his recent senior officer assignments. Understanding his fellow Mississippian's wounded pride, Davis advised Van Dorn that while "soldiers are properly sensitive, . . . you must not permit scratches to be mistaken for scar bearing wounds." He signed the letter, "Your friend, Jeffn Davis." Covering his hurt feelings, Van Dorn participated in good-natured jocularities among the army's senior officers. Over dinner and drinks in the evenings, old classmates shared war stories. And on one occasion, Van Dorn, Smith, and Longstreet entertained colleagues Johnston and Beauregard by singing songs, even standing on a table to belt out a raucous rendition of one tune.²⁷

Meanwhile, both armies in the East attended to the basics of winter quarters: improving their camps, maintaining arms and equipment, and conducting reconnaissance. Although he appeared self-confident, Van Dorn

had things to learn about handling a division, and weather occasionally allowed training for combat. Officers and soldiers both needed pre-combat training, or “drilling.” Once soldiers became familiar with how to load and carry their rifles, “drills” were serious business, although soldiers on both sides griped about them constantly. Entire units practiced dozens of times the fundamental evolution of moving their outfits from marching columns to battle lines. Soldiers “drilled” to react promptly to the shouted orders, drum rolls, and bugle calls that relayed directions from commanders to change the direction of battle lines, halt, and advance at different speeds. Continuous drilling familiarized officers and their soldiers with each other and built mutual confidence for the combat sure to come.²⁸

Van Dorn already knew the elementary basics of drilling at the company and regimental levels. However, maneuvers for a division, a collection of regiments and brigades that had to function in concert, were more complicated. Brigade and regimental commanders also had to understand their battle orders. How far was the division marching and how long would it take for those thousands of men to reach their destination? How did factors such as terrain, road conditions, weather, and soldiers’ rest and nourishment affect a march? Moreover at corps and army command levels, to determine any unit’s readiness for combat, officers such as Johnston and Beauregard preferred to personally meet division and brigade commanders to observe or receive reports on the units’ training and *esprit de corps*. From Virginia through Tennessee and across to Arkansas, Federal and Confederate generals and soldiers knew it was only a matter of weeks before the seasons turned and campaigning commenced.

Then Van Dorn’s posting changed yet again. West of the Mississippi, acrimonious contention among senior volunteer officers for command led President Davis to pluck Van Dorn from the East and make him leader of a major field army plus an expanse of territory called the Trans-Mississippi District, Department No. 2, as well.²⁹

Why did Davis pick Van Dorn? Several factors apparently converged. Although he had commanded a division for less than four months without experiencing combat, the same could be said for other officers. Van Dorn’s promotion to major general on September 19 appeared appropriate; some colleagues and peers received a similar promotion around that same time.³⁰ His status as a division commander also confirmed Davis’s confidence in him. The president personally appointed officers promoted to brigadier and above. And Van Dorn was not without experience. Serving as department commander in Texas during 1861 introduced him to organizing forces, allocating resources, building relationships with subordinates, and interacting with civil leaders. His antebellum record in Texas gave him additional familiarity with that state and, of course, his combat credits in Mexico also worked

in his favor.³¹ Moreover, Van Dorn was from Mississippi, and the president naturally favored West Point graduates for high command above those he called “‘path-finders’ or holiday soldiers.”³²

Up to 1861, most US armies had been smaller than those of European nation-states. Early in the American War for Independence, George Washington, an experienced regimental colonel from the French and Indian War, commanded forces totaling 20,000, his largest army of the Revolution. Sometimes his army numbered 14,000 men or less, even much less. At the important battles of Trenton and Princeton, for example, Washington led only 2,500–5,000 soldiers. Civil War armies equaled or surpassed those under Washington. Armies at the Battle of First Manassas numbered around 30,000. These large armies soon required more generals than there were West Point graduates. So both presidents sometimes authorized command of brigades and divisions to “natural soldiers,” exceptional officers without formal military education or experience who seemed to grow into command or possess by instinct combat leadership qualities. However, neither Lincoln nor Davis ever expected to put non-West Point graduates at corps or army command.

The Revolution and the War of 1812 produced some commanders who won praise as natural soldiers: Washington, Nathanael Greene, Daniel Morgan, and Andrew Jackson, for example. And although they still expected some “natural soldiers” to emerge or for political appointees to gain commissions during the Mexican War, Americans had high expectations for West Point graduates based on their records in that conflict. Consequently, due to their education, training, and years of army service, West Pointers were logical choices to lead brigades, divisions, corps, and armies, no matter what units they had commanded prior to 1861.

Various criteria have been applied when evaluating generals. Most had to demonstrate some basics, such as reasonably good intelligence, enough schooling to permit effective written and verbal communications, and, if not West Point graduates, some practical experience acquired through the militia, volunteer Mexican War service, frontier Indian fighting, or in the Civil War’s first months. Superior generals possessed other crucial qualities above the basics: stamina and good health, for example, for extended weeks of arduous field service. And above average military analysis skills to realistically appraise their own as well as enemy units and make decisions under pressure. Van Dorn’s reassignment to the Trans-Mississippi challenged him on all those counts. The best generals also possessed “*character*.” Character combined all of the above factors, plus the ability to inspire experienced or egotistical subordinates of any age and determination and willpower to attain his own goals. This was a grey area for Van Dorn. He lacked experience dealing with older subordinates, but determination he had in abundance.³³

The classic Prussian military writer, Carl von Clausewitz, called elements that hindered or blocked generals from achieving their goals “friction”—and several such elements came into play in Van Dorn’s Trans-Mississippi District, some that might have been anticipated, but others that were unexpected. The weather created various frictions. In the upper South, winter produced freezing temperatures, icy streams, and snow-covered roads, limiting movement of men and animals. Heavy rains washed out bridges, converted placid streams into torrents, and turned roads into muddy quagmires. Friction had many guises. Shortages of drinking water and food and lack of sleep reduced soldiers’ effectiveness. Digestive problems afflicted soldiers and sometimes dysentery plagued their camps. Diseases such as smallpox, cholera, malaria, and yellow fever threatened soldiers’ health, and generals recognized that nineteenth-century doctors seemed to operate in the dark. Logistics presented more possible frictions. Quartermasters and commissaries miscalculated the quantities of necessary supplies or failed to deliver them for various reasons. Spoilage ruined food for men and fodder for horses. Enemy raiders set fire to supply depots. The list of frictions seemed endless.³⁴

Any of the above might be anticipated, but Clausewitz also designated “inertia” as a special form of friction: internal factors in a commander’s own army. For a dozen reasons, units arrived late. Units started marching after the appointed hour, took longer than expected to reach their destination, or deployed slowly, putting an attack behind schedule. Inaccurate maps sometimes diverted troops or supply convoys away from their objectives. Scouts or messengers got lost, captured, or killed. Subordinate commanders misunderstood orders when messengers delivered them, or the orders were unclear to begin with. Reluctant, recalcitrant, or obstinate subordinates sometimes failed to carry out the commander’s intent. Armies might not do what the general planned. Any of these elements of friction caused problems, but a good general had to anticipate and expect difficulties. Working with his staff and subordinates, a great commander, even amidst battle’s chaotic conditions, needed to overcome at least some friction.³⁵

Jefferson Davis considered several officers for command of the theater and its army. He sidelined two volunteer generals (to be discussed shortly) to concentrate on two West Pointers, though early in his search he likely considered at least one other. The first, Henry Heth, finished thirty-eighth and last in the Military Academy Class of 1847. Arriving to Mexico after combat concluded, he served capably on the frontier in the next decade. Resigning from the US Army after his home state of Virginia seceded, Heth received Confederate commissions, colonel in 1861 and brigadier general in January 1862, at age thirty-six. However, western state politicians preferred someone more closely associated with their region. The Missouri congressional delegation met with Davis to endorse Sterling Price, a politician-turned-general.

Evidently, the congressmen had disparaged Heth as a “West Point Cadet.” Davis bristled at this, defending Heth as the personification of an officer with a “military education and experience in war.” Davis’s choice of Heth for the Trans-Mississippi was one of his earliest attempts to nationalize the assignment of generals without giving priority to region or home state. Nevertheless, the president backed off and did not insist that Heth take the post.³⁶

Next, Davis turned to Braxton Bragg. Born in North Carolina, Bragg finished at West Point fifth in the Class of 1837. He distinguished himself in combat in the Mexican War and rose to lieutenant colonel in the US Army before resigning his commission in 1856. Bragg settled in Louisiana, a state situated mostly west of the Mississippi. Forty-five years old in 1862, Bragg earned the reputation as a firm disciplinarian. Using only six or eight weeks of concentrated effort, he accomplished wonders instilling discipline and drilling volunteer troops for combat.³⁷

Davis’s invitation to Bragg meant that Bragg would assume command of the hodgepodge of Confederate troops in the Trans-Mississippi and become the “master mind to control and reduce it into order and convert it into a real army.” Bragg replied to the invitation with stark candor, indeed with such a realistic and prescient evaluation of the Trans-Mississippi that it should have given Secretary of War Judah P. Benjamin and Davis pause before they chose any inexperienced general—and such officers were in short supply in 1862. Bragg explained:

[S]o little [has been] done in organization and instruction [drilling for combat], that the prospect of retrieving our ground [in Missouri] is most gloomy. Troops so long accustomed to the freedom and license [lack of discipline] they have enjoyed will be more difficult to command than raw men. . . . Without a base of operations, in a country poorly supplied at best, . . . with an unclad, badly-fed, and badly-supplied mass of men, without instruction [raising pre-combat drilling a second time], arms, equipments, or officers, *it is certainly a most unpromising field for operations.*

Unsurprisingly, Bragg then refused the Trans-Mississippi assignment to remain in Pensacola and improve the coastal defenses of Florida and Alabama. Soon enough, he seized another opportunity, becoming corps commander in General Albert Sidney Johnston’s army as it prepared its counterattack into Tennessee.³⁸

Beyond Bragg and Heth, a pair of additional volunteer generals then serving the Trans-Mississippi advanced impressive credentials. The first was a man beloved by many Texans, the talented “natural soldier” fifty-year-old Ben McCulloch.³⁹ Veteran of combat against Mexicans, Indians, banditos,

and outlaws for years, his record prompted Davis to commission him a brigadier general in the Confederate Army in May 1861. Three months later he was leading CSA forces gallantly at the Battle of Wilson's Creek to hold Missouri for the Confederacy. But in Jefferson Davis's eyes, McCulloch's lack of education and uneven military experiences did not comport with the idea of commanding an army of 15,000 when a West Pointer, such as Van Dorn, was available.⁴⁰

Sterling Price, the second most notable volunteer commander in the Trans-Mississippi, had accomplishments both as a soldier and politician. At fifty-three years of age, Price had served as colonel of a volunteer regiment in Mexico, general in the Missouri militia, a state legislator, congressman, and governor of Missouri from 1852–1856. As commander of the Missouri State Guard, Price and his militia troops served under McCulloch at Wilson's Creek. All these credentials supported his commission as Confederate major general on March 6, 1862. However, Price's personality rubbed some the wrong way. He sometimes appeared arrogant instead of confident, vain instead of capable. Natural rivals, he and McCulloch never got along.⁴¹

Compared to these officers, Van Dorn was equal or better. Although McCulloch and Price had fought at Wilson's Creek, neither had directed a major department. Both lacked the primary credential in the eyes of Jefferson Davis—they were not West Point graduates. Thus, from several angles, Davis's choosing Van Dorn for a major army command appeared reasonable in January 1862.

Though he would be subordinate to Sidney Johnston on the eastern side of the river, returning to the Trans-Mississippi put Van Dorn in charge of a sprawling military district, not just one state, as in 1861. He once more began to deal with state politicians, and state governors scrutinized his actions and pronouncements to determine how they helped or hurt their state. Although Texas was not in his district, the War Department authorized him to draw troops from there. Early on, he described his department, mood, and strategic goal for his wife: "I have Louisiana, as far south as Red River, Arkansas, the Indian country west of Arkansas, and the state of Missouri for my district. A large command. . . . I am now 'in for it' . . . to make a reputation and serve my country conspicuously or to fail. I must not, shall not, do the latter. . . . I must have St. Louis—then Huzza!"⁴²

From the outset, Van Dorn's second assignment in the Trans-Mississippi tested all aspects of his generalship, as it would have tested any of the eligible officers. Before engaging the Federals, Van Dorn expected headstrong subordinates to set aside their disappointed ambitions and support him as their superior. While gauging the readiness and strength of his assembling army, information came to him about the enemy army and its commander, Samuel Curtis. This set Van Dorn another raft of intelligence responsibilities:

evaluating credibility of those sources, collating information, and estimating the enemy's capabilities and intentions—accurately.⁴³

En route and soon after arriving, Van Dorn formulated plans and began contacting those able to provide help. He wrote Texas governor Frank Lubbock, asking him to send troops. "It is not presumed that the coast of Texas will be invaded this winter," he told him. Arkansas governor Henry Rector issued a proclamation favorably responding to the general's "requisition" for raising more regiments. Rector and Van Dorn wanted the new units to assemble at Pocahontas, Arkansas, near the Missouri border. Quoting Van Dorn, the governor adopted the general's plan "to drive the enemy from the down-trodden State of Missouri." Sending Confederate troops into Missouri would keep Arkansas out of the Federal orbit, Rector thought. In two letters to Sterling Price, Van Dorn explained his goals in Missouri and suggested potential dates to assemble their forces—between March 20 and April 1. So it looked like early April before a campaign would begin, permitting Van Dorn a few weeks to organize his army and conduct combat drills.⁴⁴

Upon arriving in the Trans-Mississippi, Van Dorn focused on a campaign into Missouri, but other options beckoned. One was to stand on the defense and await the Federals' next move—a choice not to his liking. Another option came from Beauregard: to transfer Van Dorn and the bulk of his army to consolidate forces under Beauregard's command in Mississippi, presumably leaving only a thin defensive line in Arkansas.⁴⁵

Beauregard offered this option because the status of the war had changed in the West. Ulysses S. Grant's Union army had captured Forts Henry and Donelson (February 6–16), shattering Sidney Johnston's Confederate defensive perimeter near the Kentucky-Tennessee border. Grant's army rolled into Tennessee, driving toward Mississippi. Johnston scurried southward to link up with Beauregard near Corinth, Mississippi, where they planned to counterattack Grant near Shiloh, Tennessee. Shifting to Corinth would have temporarily made Van Dorn a subordinate general in Johnston's army. As a practical matter, such a major troop transfer required several days, perhaps up to two weeks or longer. Troops had to march to the river and arrange for boats—there were no bridges over the Mississippi. But merging these forces would give Confederates a strong counterattacking concentration. To complete a timely transfer, Van Dorn had to issue orders by mid-March, little more than a month after he arrived in Arkansas.

Each of these options had merits, but Van Dorn's Missouri campaign plan dovetailed with Davis's "offensive-defensive" strategy to recapture lands lost to the Union. Mounting a tactical offensive could put Missouri under Confederate control. Rector of Arkansas supported that campaign, as did Missouri's governor, Claiborne Jackson, a secession proponent, and Sterling Price, Missouri's foremost general.⁴⁶ A tactical offensive into Missouri also

served Van Dorn's own goal for drawing the greatest favorable attention to himself. In the Eastern Theater, the Confederacy was holding firm. By contrast, recent Confederate reversals west of the Appalachians had lost Kentucky, much of Tennessee, and Missouri to the Federals, a distressing trend. Winning victories on both sides of the Mississippi, Sidney Johnston and Van Dorn could turn the direction of the war.

Lubbock answered Van Dorn's call for troops from Texas, urging the department commander General Paul O. Hébert to send two regiments from North Texas to join Van Dorn's army. But he wrote Benjamin and Van Dorn that the general's goal to assemble new regiments in northern Arkansas by March 1 was unrealistic. And he again complained that the competing recruiters the War Department had authorized earlier were causing "much confusion."⁴⁷

Some Texans enlisted in response to Lubbock's "Proclamation to the People of Texas," but Van Dorn was going into combat with the existing army of 16,000 men. Unevenly trained and armed units from Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana served under Ben McCulloch, while Sterling Price led the similarly ill-prepared Missourians. Besides these, three under-strength regiments of Indians, mostly Cherokees, recruited by Brigadier General Albert Pike, were available. Van Dorn, an experienced Indian fighter himself, and other Confederate officers rightly questioned how the undisciplined but enthusiastic Indian recruits would contribute in a conventional battle. Reconnaissance, flank attacks, or pursuit were possibilities, but Van Dorn recognized that the tribesmen were "intended for defense" in the Indian Territory or to patrol "the Kansas border."⁴⁸

Although Van Dorn incorrectly concluded that the Federal army probably outnumbered his own, he rejected waiting additional time to impart more training in his army. Indeed, surprising news had arrived that Brigadier General Samuel Curtis had pushed his army south into Arkansas. To counter him, Van Dorn pushed the timetable for his offensive up from March 20, or even April 1, to early March. Accompanied by some aides, he left his headquarters in Pocahontas on February 20. Whereupon friction intruded. Winter still prevailed, and on the way to meet the army, Van Dorn contracted chills and a fever so debilitating that he traveled slowly in an ambulance. This illness clung to him for days, perhaps diminishing effective decision-making.⁴⁹

Still ill, on March 2 the general entered the Confederate camp near Strickler's Station, south of Fayetteville, and met with McCulloch and Price the next day. Studying maps and discussing the condition of their soldiers, McCulloch, the untutored volunteer, suggested waiting a few weeks to drill the troops. Van Dorn's mind was not on assessing training and equipment. Rather, he simply expected too much of an army uniting before his eyes. So he ignored McCulloch and ordered his army to advance only two days later. The miserable weather continued. Rain, sleet, and snow soaked and chilled

the general and his soldiers, many of whom had no tents, and made cooking, sleeping, and certainly comfort near impossible. Hoping to catch the Federals by surprise, Van Dorn pushed himself and his men relentlessly, and dozens of soldiers dropped out by the roadside, sapping his army's strength. Three days later, on March 6, the tired, hungry, and wet Confederates drew near Curtis's Union army. But there would be no opportunity to rest before the battle.⁵⁰

Armed by credible intelligence about the Confederate advance, Curtis brought together some of his army's units in Arkansas. To maintain Federal control over southern Missouri, he had garrisoned several sites, reducing his army to less than 11,000 men. Laboring in the winter weather, Curtis's men dug rifle pits and cannon emplacements on Pea Ridge, a promontory a few miles from the crossroads village of Elkhorn Tavern. Hours of effort resulted in an imposing defense.⁵¹

Not devoting time to gather intelligence about Curtis's dispositions and defenses, Van Dorn wanted to boldly assail the Union flanks and perhaps even reach into the enemy rear. Van Dorn divided his forces into two wings and sent them on exhausting night marches to curl around the Yankee flanks. Soon such distances separated the two wings that Van Dorn lost central control of the operation. His plan, though, was still feasible if subordinates executed it expeditiously—and if the Federals remained in their original positions. But Union scouts informed Curtis about Confederate movements, and his officers and soldiers exerted remarkable efforts rearranging their units to meet the oncoming threat.⁵²

On the morning of March 7, Van Dorn, who accompanied Price's wing, directed Price to attack the Federal left flank. Friction intruded again. Price took longer than expected to get into position. Around 10:00 a.m. major combat erupted about two miles east of the tavern along a line of Union positions. Van Dorn's vantage point did not give him a full view of the battle area. Price's troops charged twice and were repelled each time. Showing remarkable determination, the Missourians broke through on their third assault and began to edge around the Union flank. With nightfall approaching and victory in sight, other Confederate units pressed their attacks. But heavy Federal artillery and rifle fire ripped apart the Confederate lines.⁵³

Meanwhile, Van Dorn had neglected to send staff officers to keep in contact with McCulloch, but he received reports of difficulties from his other wing. West of Elkhorn near Leetown, McCulloch had advanced on the Federal right flank, encountering blasts of enemy artillery fire. Infantry joined the battle, and the fighting intensified. Pike's Indian regiments attacked in support and gained ground, that is until Union artillery shells plunged down on the Cherokees, terrifying them, fragmenting their regiments and ending their contribution to the battle. Undismayed, McCulloch focused on his

