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“How Does It All Sum Up?”: The Significance of the Iuka-Corinth Campaign

Timothy B. Smith

A perplexed Ulysses S. Grant no doubt cringed when he read the latest telegraph from his departmental commander Henry W. Halleck. “You will immediately repair to this place and report to these head-quarters,” the July 11, 1862, note stated in its entirety. Many things no doubt went through Grant’s mind, including that he was possibly in trouble yet again. Halleck had shelved Grant twice, once after Fort Donelson and then again after Shiloh. Although Grant had been reinstated after each episode, their relationship simmered with the warming weather that summer. Grant could only guess what he had done now.¹

To Grant’s great surprise, his arrival at Corinth and Halleck’s headquarters did not portend another demotion, but rather a promotion of sorts. President Abraham Lincoln himself had called Halleck to Washington, and Grant, as the department’s second in command, would take over in the Mississippi Valley. Yet even in that ostensible promotion, Halleck sought to undermine Grant, first asking Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton if Grant should take command or if an outside general would be brought in, perhaps planting the idea in Washington minds in case they had not thought of it before. Then, when it became clear Grant would succeed him, Halleck did not elevate Grant to his old command in charge of the Department of the Mississippi; he merely expanded Grant’s original District of West Tennessee to include a slightly larger geographical region.²

Still, Grant’s elevation to command in the Mississippi Valley in mid-July 1862 symbolically ushered in major changes on many levels. For Grant personally, he entered a period in which he would grow

¹ *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880–1901), series 1, vol. 10, part 2: 90–91, 98, 101–2. Hereafter cited as *OR*.

² John F. Marszalek, *Commander of All Lincoln’s Armies: A Life of General Henry W. Halleck* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 130; *OR*, 1, 10, 2: 90–91, 101–2.

the most as a military commander; he would move from the static army commander role he had performed at such battles as Fort Donelson and Shiloh to a true regional commander, coordinating multiple armies and fronts and performing numerous larger administrative and public relations duties. Also, heavy action soon developed as Confederate forces in Mississippi began to advance trying to retake their lost territory; Confederate generals would certainly test Grant's ability as a larger strategic commander. In addition, the softer side of war also became more of an issue as changing federal policies regarding civilians, slaves, and morale also shifted during this time. Grant, it seems, was growing as a commander, and with him the Union war effort was maturing as well. All these changes were evident in Grant's district in north Mississippi as action picked up in the fall of 1862 around the critical crossroads of Corinth, Mississippi.³



The fall 1862 campaign around Corinth had its antecedents months earlier, when the small northeast Mississippi town served as one of the main Confederate troop induction centers in the state. Sitting as it did at the crossing of two of the western Confederacy's most important rail lines, the Mobile and Ohio and Memphis and Charleston, Corinth quickly became a haven of concentration, supply, and transportation. It just as quickly became a target for the ever-advancing Federals. After breaking Albert Sidney Johnston's defensive line in the west at Forts Henry and Donelson, the Federals continued up the Tennessee River, intending to break the rail lines on either side of Corinth while ultimately taking the crossing itself. The plan was delayed in April by a massive Confederate counter-offensive that resulted in the cataclysmic battle at Shiloh and then by what one Confederate general termed as "those tedious days of Halleck's approach to Corinth." Halleck was ultimately successful in late May, and during the following summer portions of Grant's Army of the Tennessee and William S. Rosecrans's Army of the Mississippi at Corinth endured heat, Confederate raids, lack of water, and major command change such as the

³ For an excellent biography of Grant, see Brooks D. Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph over Adversity, 1822–1865* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000).

one that sent Halleck to Washington and made Grant commander of the entire area.⁴

As expected, the Confederate high command in the west did not give up despite being pushed back into the lower-slave states. Braxton Bragg gambled on a roundabout turning maneuver that saw most of his army move to Chattanooga via Mobile and thence into Kentucky. When Bragg left the Mississippi Valley, he posted a small portion of his original army, mostly those troops brought over from the trans-Mississippi by Earl Van Dorn and Sterling Price, in Mississippi to block the Union advance down the valley, especially toward Vicksburg. The small body of troops in Mississippi, further divided under Van Dorn and Price, were to defend the lower valley but also to support and partake in Bragg's advance to the east. The Missourian Price was to move from his north-Mississippi position across the Tennessee River and join with Bragg "on the Ohio and there open the way to Missouri." Price set off in September, but made it only to Iuka in the extreme northeastern corner of the state. There, the Tennessee River blocked his advance long enough for the Federals to react.⁵

William S. Rosecrans formulated a plan by which one wing of the Federal army would hold Price in place while the other, led by Rosecrans himself, would march around Iuka and cut off the Confederate retreat from the south. Unfortunately for the Federals, Rosecrans ran late and only attacked near dark on September 19. Grant and his commanders to the north were supposed to advance and aid Rosecrans when he attacked, but they never did. Grant later claimed the wind was blowing in "the wrong direction to transmit sound," but more probably, Grant and his officers came to the conclusion that Rosecrans could not attack that late in the day. Either way, Price held on during a couple of hours of bitter fighting south of Iuka, long enough to allow night to fall and his army to escape by one single unguarded road. Price retreated to the Tupelo area while the Federal commanders cast blame on each other. The ever-learning Grant was realizing just how difficult multiple army maneuvers were on a large strategic canvas.⁶

⁴ A. P. Stewart to William H. McCardle, April 30, 1878, William H. McCardle Papers, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

⁵ *OR*, series 1, volume 17, part 2. For Bragg's campaign, see Kenneth W. Noe, *Perryville: This Grand Havoc of Battle* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001).

⁶ U. S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles L. Webster and Co.,

The dust settled for two weeks as Price caught his breath after the near-disaster, and Grant commanded his broad district from Corinth to Memphis. He moved his headquarters to centrally-located Jackson, Tennessee, some say to get away from Rosecrans, whom he was growing to dislike. In Jackson Grant oversaw major parts of his armies at Memphis under William T. Sherman, at Corinth under Rosecrans, and in the center at Bolivar under Edward O. C. Ord.⁷

The Confederates were not about to let Grant get comfortable, especially when Price and Van Dorn united at Ripley in north Mississippi. Van Dorn was adamant about advancing into west Tennessee and Kentucky, paralleling Bragg's advance and winning glory on his own. But he first had to neutralize Corinth's major garrison; he realized "the taking of Corinth was a condition precedent to the accomplishment of anything of importance in West Tennessee." Van Dorn planned to feint toward Bolivar and then turn quickly and sweep down on Corinth from the northwest. He intended to overpower the town's defenses with speed and surprise, but neither worked for him as his army trudged slowly toward Corinth in the first days of October. Federal patrols and pickets located the Confederate Army miles out from Corinth, allowing Rosecrans to concentrate his divisions inside the town's defenses. The Union's discovery of Van Dorn allowed Grant to send reinforcements from both Bolivar and his own location at Jackson.⁸

In the fighting on October 3–4 that was amazingly similar to Shiloh six months earlier, Van Dorn attacked on the first day and drove Rosecrans's troops through their camps and into a final line around the town. Van Dorn, much like Beauregard at Shiloh, called off the last advance, thinking he could finish the next day. Van Dorn attacked on the second day, but found Rosecrans's Federals well protected behind major earthworks north and east of town. Confederates under Price

1886), 1: 244; Peter Cozzens, *The Darkest Days of the War: The Battles of Iuka & Corinth* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 74–126; Lesley J. Gordon, "I Could Not Make Him Do As I Wished": The Failed Relationship of William S. Rosecrans and Grant," in *Grant's Lieutenants: From Cairo to Vicksburg*, Steven E. Woodworth, ed. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 109–27.

⁷ For a revisionist view of the Grant/Rosecrans relationship, see Frank P. Varney, *General Grant and the Rewriting of History: How the Destruction of General William S. Rosecrans Influenced Our Understanding of the Civil War* (El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2013).

⁸ *OR*, series 1, vol. 17, part 1, 377; Timothy B. Smith, *Corinth 1862: Siege, Battle, Occupation* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 137.

drove through the Union line on the eastern flank, taking the small fort named Battery Powell and surging into town. Others in the center managed to temporarily break the Union line at Battery Robinett and to skirt eastward through a relatively undefended creek valley and into the heart of Corinth. Fighting raged as far south as the Tishomingo Hotel at the railroads' crossing, but Federal counterattacks drove the southerners out and stabilized the line at all points. The heavily bloodied Confederates retreated, having failed in their attempt to take Corinth. The defeat doomed the larger advance into Kentucky.⁹

Even worse for Van Dorn, he now had to get his army to safety, which required that he escape the same way that he came in. His route brought the reinforcements Grant had sent to Corinth into play, and while the small contingent under James B. McPherson from Jackson barely caught up with the retreating Confederates, the other force from Bolivar was much better positioned to make a difference. Van Dorn's army had crossed both the Hatchie and Tuscumbia rivers on their way to attack Corinth, and now the Confederates had to re-cross both to get the army and the massive wagon train to safety. While the Confederate rear guard held off McPherson at the Tuscumbia River crossing, Ord's brigades from Bolivar arrived at the Hatchie crossing and blocked the escape route. Van Dorn barely held Ord's troops off at the Hatchie on October 5 while the rest of the army and the wagons made their escape across the river to the south at Crum's Mill. Van Dorn's bone-weary and bloodied army then marched to safety while Rosecrans and Grant argued over pursuit. It was the second near disaster for many of the Confederates, but escape they did, to become the core of the army that would again defend the Mississippi Valley and Vicksburg.¹⁰



A grateful Abraham Lincoln wrote Grant soon after the fighting ended, asking, "How does it all sum up?" Though it was comparatively small, the campaign in Mississippi nevertheless produced large results. On the strategic level, the failed invasion of west Tennessee in support of

⁹ Smith, *Corinth 1862*, 152–275.

¹⁰ Thomas E. Parson, "Hell on the Hatchie: The Fight at Davis Bridge, Tennessee," *Blue and Gray Magazine* 24, no. 4 (Holiday 2007): 6–24, 43–51.

Bragg's Kentucky push and the unsuccessful invasion of Maryland left the Confederacy on the defensive on all fronts, especially in the critical Mississippi Valley. The net result was worse for the Confederacy along the Mississippi than anywhere else. In Virginia, Lee was able to ensconce his army behind the Rappahannock River line while he received the re-infusion of thousands of troops that had refused to march into Maryland. While the political results of the Antietam campaign, including emancipation and the blow to Confederate foreign recognition, are unmistakable, the strategic outlook was not altogether changed in the East by Lee's invasion. The middle Tennessee strategic situation was not changed that much and slightly favored the Confederacy. While Bragg's invasion of Kentucky had certainly been turned back, the net result of the campaign was a unification of Confederate forces in middle and east Tennessee and the retaking of large swaths of the state.¹¹

In contrast, the Union strategic situation in the Mississippi Valley was altogether enhanced by the fall campaign. Despite close calls at times, the Federals managed to hold every piece of territory they started with while delivering a significant military blow against the enemy. While the fall campaign was admittedly a defensive Union victory that netted little gain, it nevertheless held the line, and that line became extremely important just months later and into 1863 when the Federals continued their advance toward Vicksburg. In that sense, the seemingly moribund defense of the status quo in Mississippi was in fact a huge boon for the Union because the status quo was maintained on the Confederacy's weakest front.

In addition, the strategic situation on the Union side rested in the hands of a much wiser commander, Ulysses S. Grant. Although he had stumbled in the pincer attempt at Iuka and had been awkward in attempting to catch the Confederate Army retreating from Corinth, Grant nevertheless came out of the fall Mississippi campaign with a strategic victory in which he lost little. Grant managed to hold all his territory, to stop a combination with Bragg's forces, to prevent the Confederate invasion of west Tennessee and western Kentucky, and to defeat decisively the enemy in pitched battle although a subordinate was in tactical command for the battle. In the midst of it all, Grant was learning to juggle a larger command of multiple armies and posts.

¹¹ *OR*, series 1, vol. 17, part 1, 160.

These skills, first learned in west Tennessee and north Mississippi in the fall of 1862, served him well later in central Mississippi and Virginia.¹²

The social changes wrought by the fall Mississippi Valley campaign were also enormous. As the Federal line from Memphis to Corinth became more stabilized, Union officers, namely Grant, began to incorporate into their districts the major changes occurring in Federal policy toward slaves and civilians. As the war zones became increasingly enlarged, the Lincoln administration saw it had to take the fight to the people and developed policy that would eventually lead to the famed “total war” activities of 1864 and 1865. The gloves slowly came off in north Mississippi during the fall of 1862. The continually shifting administration slave policy provided major change for the north Mississippi area. As Lincoln declared the freedom of slaves in areas still in rebellion, Grant concentrated them into contraband camps and began their enlistment in the United States military.¹³

Often overlooked as the backwater of the war in 1862 and certainly overshadowed by Lee’s and Bragg’s invasions, the fall 1862 campaign in the Mississippi Valley nevertheless provided major victories in the Union war effort. Of all three major fighting areas, the net result, certainly militarily, was the starkest in Mississippi, which was the weakest area of the Confederate defense. Moreover, the Union’s most successful general was on this front gaining valuable experience in a larger theater of command. His success spelled difficult times for the Confederacy’s future.

¹² For Grant’s development, see Michael B. Ballard, *U.S. Grant: The Making of a General* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).

¹³ Smith, *Corinth 1862*, 276–302.

