
General John Bell Hood: His Leadership During The 1864 Tennessee Campaign

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John Bell Hood was one of the Confederacy's best brigade and division commanders. However, when promoted to army command in 1864, many of the qualities that served him well in his previous position turned out to be a detriment. Hood's performance was a classic case of an individual promoted into a position beyond his abilities. Hood's drive to invade Tennessee and proceed through Kentucky to eventually meet up with General Robert E. Lee failed. Setbacks at Spring Hill, Franklin, and Nashville resulted in the destruction of the Army of Tennessee. Although Hood inherited a difficult situation, considering the state of the Army of Tennessee, his failings as a commander precipitated this disaster. He could not hold Atlanta through the 1864 election and his aggressiveness certainly sped up the loss of that city and created the hopeless situation of the army. All of his bravery and aggressiveness came to naught during the 1864 Tennessee campaign.

Hood was a fighter whose troops respected and admired him. His qualities of physical bravery, aggressiveness, superb combat leadership, and intuitiveness, made him a fine regimental, brigade, and division commander.¹ He distinguished himself in several campaigns and battles, including the Battle of Gaines's Mill, Second Bull Run, Antietam, Gettysburg, and Chickamauga. Soldiers followed him into battle eagerly. Chaplain Nicholas A. Davis of the Texas Brigade described General Hood in glowing terms: "His commanding appearance, manly deportment, quick perception, courteous manners and decision of character, readily impressed the officers and men, that he was the man to govern them in the camp and command them on the field."² Chaplain Davis said when Hood was promoted to general in 1862 he did not display "that official vanity and self-importance" that could come with such a position, and although a rigid disciplinarian, "he is as much admired and esteemed by the men in his command as any general in the army."³ Hood rose through the ranks quickly. By 1864, Hood was serving as a commander under General Joseph Johnston during the battles for Atlanta—the Confederacy was in trouble.

Union General William T. Sherman was on the verge of taking Atlanta and

General Johnston seemed unable, or unwilling, to stop him. Confederate President Jefferson Davis saw Atlanta as vital to the Confederacy. He knew that it had “tremendous transportation and manufacturing importance”⁴ and “even greater significance to the morale of both sides,” and Johnston’s constant defensive delaying actions frustrated him. Davis decided to replace Johnston with Hood. In only three years, Hood had risen from first lieutenant to full general in command of the Army of Tennessee.⁵ Confederate Secretary of War James Seddon telegraphed Hood and told him: “You are charged with a great trust. You will, I know, test to the utmost your capacities to discharge it. Be wary no less than bold.”⁶ However, wariness was not Hood’s style—boldness was. In any case, the situation he encountered was grim.

Hood did fight aggressively, but, considering his very difficult position, quickly lost Atlanta. Hood lingered north, attempting to disrupt Sherman’s lines of communication and logistics, but Sherman’s army was too powerful to attack. Sherman soon realized that he was wasting time trying to pin Hood down. “It was clear that Hood had no intention of staking everything on a major battle in northern Georgia, and it was equally clear to Sherman that it would be counterproductive to continue chasing him into northern Alabama.”⁷ As such, Sherman planned his famous march through the south. Not only was Hood not strong enough to stop Sherman’s army, he was also too far away. With this in mind, Hood decided on a different strategy—an invasion of Tennessee to put pressure on the Union army and possibly force Sherman to backtrack. In his words, “I continued firm in the belief that the only means to checkmate Sherman, and cooperate with General Lee to save the Confederacy, lay in speedy success in Tennessee and Kentucky, and in my ability finally to attack Grant in the rear with my entire force.”⁸ Did Hood have alternatives?

Hood did not really have any good choices at this point. He could have followed Sherman and harassed the Union army on its march through the South. The problem with this was distance. Hood was trying to disrupt Sherman’s lines of communication away from Atlanta. By the time he realized Sherman’s intent, Hood was three hundred miles away. It would have required a forced march with an ill-equipped and tired army to catch up. This was not a good option. He also could have stayed where he was, but inactivity would have diminished the morale of his army. Perhaps he could have marched directly towards Virginia to help Lee against Grant, but that does not seem to have been discussed. Without the transportation hubs of Atlanta and Chattanooga, this would have been a logistical nightmare. It seems the invasion of Tennessee was the best of a group of bad options—none with much hope

of success. The key was to conduct a lightning campaign, quickly and decisively defeating the Union in Tennessee. Afterwards, he could move on to Kentucky and maybe Ohio, with the intent to eventually relieve the pressure on Lee. However, Hood did not conduct a lightning campaign.

By the time Hood really got going, it had been eleven weeks since the fall of Atlanta. Delays in river crossings and logistics plagued Hood's army.⁹ This allowed the Union to better ready itself for the campaign. However, Hood outmaneuvered Union General John Schofield, who was waiting on the banks of the Duck River as his superior, General George Thomas, had requested. Hood got around him.¹⁰ Most of Hood's army was now near Spring Hill in a position to cut off Schofield's lines of communication and his retreat route.¹¹ The Confederates seemed finally poised for victory, as they had a stronger force than Schofield had and were between Schofield and Thomas. If they could destroy Schofield, they might have a chance against Thomas. This was Hood's plan, but it never happened.

Though trapped, Schofield managed to escape through Hood's lines. A variety of factors caused the errors, including the lack of precise information about Schofield's positions, lack of communication among Hood's subordinates, and poor staff work.¹² Hood said that he did not want to waste time to stop and reconnoiter because he was afraid that Schofield would escape his trap. Therefore, he did not know exactly what Schofield was doing. Additionally, there seemed to have been some confusion as to the orders given.

Hood did not generally give orders from the front lines. He gave them from his headquarters and it appears he did not know exactly where his men were or in which direction they faced. He also did not realize that some Union troops had already made it into Spring Hill. Hood blamed it all on his commanders. He said his orders were perfectly clear and said that he twice ordered Benjamin Cheatham to ensure he took the pike at Spring Hill.¹³ He concluded that his orders had been "totally disregarded."¹⁴ Some of this is true. Schofield reported that there were several attacks on the small force Schofield had sent forward to protect Spring Hill, but they were "feeble and repulsed."¹⁵ There were spirited attempts by the Confederate cavalry to disrupt the line, but without infantry support, they were unsuccessful. Hood's commanders, including Generals Nathan B. Forrest and Cheatham, never bothered to report to Hood that there were some Union forces in Spring Hill already. Perhaps if they had, Hood would have ordered a general assault on Spring Hill, or moved above it to block Schofield there. Because Schofield's men were not where Hood thought they were, his orders to subordinate commanders

confused them and actually had effects detrimental to Hood's overall plan. The bottom line is, Hood needed to be on the front lines to understand the situation and position his men. Because he was not there during the critical last two hours of daylight, the last chance his army had to maneuver, his subordinates made poor decisions that produced negative results. Most of Schofield's army was able to sneak past Hood's camped army at night, passing within 600 yards.¹⁶ When Hood and his army woke up, Schofield was gone. This was demoralizing for Hood's men.

Lieutenant R. M. Collins, from the 15th Texas Regiment, Granbury's Brigade, Cleburne's Division, saw the Union troops retreating and said, "We were all astonished at our line not being thrown across the pike, capturing this whole train and completely cutting off Schofield's retreat."¹⁷ He went on to say that "Generals Hood, Cheatham, [William B.] Bate and others in high places have said a good deal in trying to fix the blame for this disgraceful failure; but the most charitable explanation is that the gods of battle injected confusion into the heads of our leaders."¹⁸ Hood was furious. He later said, "The best move in my career as a soldier, I was thus destined to behold come to naught."¹⁹ However, the key point remains that at a crucial time Hood was not at the front and did not closely supervise his corps commanders. His orders were not clear and his staff seems to have totally broken down.²⁰ The result was a sound plan executed badly.

When Hood got to Franklin after the Spring Hill debacle, he decided on a frontal attack. His commanders were astonished and protested that an assault would be hopeless. He also told them that there would not be time to wait for the artillery nor General Stephen D. Lee's corps to deploy.²¹ This meant that the army would have to attack over two miles of open ground (for comparison's sake, the much-better known Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg had been one mile) without one of their corps or their artillery.²² The result was that 19,000 infantry attacked in lines so thin that there were no reserves, and they did so without artillery support.²³ It was "one of the most fierce and bloody battles of the war."²⁴ Hood's army assaulted the Union lines again and again and actually broke through at a few points, but after hours of furious fighting, they were not able to defeat the entrenched Union army. Hood meant to renew the attack in the morning, but Schofield slipped across the river during the night.²⁵ Did Hood have alternatives at Franklin?

Hood's cavalry commander, General Forrest, thought the army had an alternative. He knew this country well and believed he could cross an upstream ford and the army could go around Schofield's dug-in forces and flank him as they had done (or tried to do) at Spring Hill.²⁶ Perhaps this would have been successful,

perhaps not. General James H. Wilson reported to General Schofield that at one point Brigadier General William Jackson's division of Forrest's cavalry crossed the river at Hughes' Mill, and that General Edward Hatch whipped him badly and drove him back across the river; so maybe Forrest would not have been successful.²⁷ However, Forrest had generally been able to defeat the Union cavalry, and later Schofield said, "Wilson is entirely unable to cope with him [Forrest]."²⁸ In the end, Hood said the nature of the position was such that a flanking movement was "inexpedient" and decided to attack before Schofield could "make himself strong."²⁹ He told his troops that if they could defeat Schofield at Franklin nothing would prevent them from going to the Ohio River.³⁰ Hood said later that his commanders agreed with the assault on the defensive positions at Franklin and that they would have succeeded if two of Lee's divisions had been able to engage before nightfall.³¹ His men disagreed. Collins said, "Why Hood made this fight, when he could have flanked the enemy out of their position in three hours, is a mystery that will be satisfactorily answered when we all shall have crossed to the other side. Gen. Hood was doubtless a brave, good man, but he lacked a great deal of being a military genius."³²

If Hood had been able to flank Schofield, instead of smashing his army against an entrenched enemy in a frontal attack, which resulted in such a terrible loss, he may have been able to defeat Schofield and prevent him from reinforcing Thomas at Nashville. This probably was his only chance of success. Even if Hood had succeeded in breaking Schofield's line at Franklin and defeated him, the Union army could much more easily afford the losses than Hood's army. Frontal attacks on dug-in armies had proved costly throughout the war. Hood lost about seven thousand men at the Battle of Franklin that he could not afford to lose. He lost sixty-six officers above the rank of captain including twelve general officers killed, wounded, or captured—leadership that was already scarce before the campaign.³³ Schofield now had more troops by himself than Hood, and when Schofield joined forces with Thomas at Nashville, Hood was heavily outnumbered.³⁴

Ten days after Hood's self-proclaimed "victory" at Franklin, he reported to have 18,342 infantry left.³⁵ Hood said that he realized that his army was too small to attack the Union troops dug in at Nashville, but also felt it was too small to go around it and cross into Kentucky. He felt his only choice was to dig in, repulse the inevitable Union attack, and then follow up on this victory by entering Nashville "on the heels of the enemy."³⁶ However, Hood's army was too small for even this. Days went by as he waited for the attack. In the meantime, a heavy storm passed

through dropping rain, snow, and sleet.³⁷ This was just another detriment for the poorly equipped Confederate army, many of whom had no shoes or other warm clothing. Ten days later, Thomas's Union troops attacked. On the second day, they overran the Confederate positions and Hood "beheld for the first and only time a Confederate Army abandon the field in confusion."³⁸ The Army of Tennessee "disappeared as an army organization."³⁹ Could Hood have used a different strategy?

Perhaps Hood could have bypassed Nashville. Union General Ulysses S. Grant was afraid that Hood would do exactly that and get north of the Cumberland River. Grant said, "If he did this, I apprehended most serious results from the campaign in the North, and was afraid we might even have to send troops from the East to head him off if he got there."⁴⁰ This may have been a better option than laying siege to one of the most heavily fortified cities in the country that protected an army much larger and better equipped than Hood's. However, Hood's decision proved wrong, and the enemy destroyed his army. Was the disaster of the Tennessee campaign Hood's fault? It is possible that Hood's aggressive character made him unsuitable for commanding an entire army.

Hood was possibly too aggressive for this position. There were clues from both Confederate and Union leaders. When Davis decided to replace Johnston as commander, he telegraphed General Lee to ask Lee's opinion. In Davis's telegraph he stated, "Johnston has failed, and there are strong indications that he will abandon Atlanta. . . .It seems necessary to relieve him at once. Who should succeed him? What think you of Hood for the position?"⁴¹ Lee replied by telegram the same day, "It is a bad time to release the commander of an army situated as that of Tennessee. We may lose Atlanta and the army too. Hood is a bold fighter. I am doubtful as to other qualities necessary."⁴² Davis also sent General Braxton Bragg to Atlanta to review the situation. Bragg wrote back to Davis, and although General William J. Hardee outranked Hood, Bragg told Davis, "If any change is made Lieutenant-General Hood, would give unlimited satisfaction, and my estimate of him, always high, has been raised by his conduct in this campaign. Do not understand me as proposing him as a man of genius, or a great general, but as far better in the present emergency than any one we have available."⁴³ Along with the Confederate leaders' lukewarm endorsements of Hood, Union leaders also had opinions of Hood's style.

Some Union generals actually welcomed the arrival of Hood as commander of the Army of Tennessee. When General William T. Sherman heard Hood had taken over the Confederate Army, he said, "Hood is a new man and a fighter and must be watched Closer [sic], as he is reckless of the lives of his men."⁴⁴ Schofield,

Hood's roommate at West Point, told Sherman that Hood was "bold even to rashness, and courageous in the extreme."⁴⁵ Grant said that the very fact that the Confederates would change commanders in such a situation indicated a change of policy to a more aggressive one, "the very thing our troops wanted."⁴⁶ It seemed that both the Union and the Confederacy had what they wanted—a Confederate general who would fight. However, would he do other crucial tasks well?

Some of the things that allowed Hood to be an effective leader of smaller units led to his downfall as leader of the Army of Tennessee, including "emotionalism, impatience, lack of attention to obstacles, planning, and detail."⁴⁷ He "had no real interest in or appreciation for the essential but tedious staff work."⁴⁸ In fact, he relieved his chief of staff and never hired another or reassembled his staff.⁴⁹ So badly had Hood's administration declined that one officer said that "it was soon impossible to determine if orders issued by Hood reached even the corps commanders."⁵⁰ Often, as at Spring Hill, "he ignored the staff work, unit coordination, and flexibility of maneuver so necessary for complex offensive operations."⁵¹ This lack of communication was a crucial factor in the debacle at Spring Hill. Hood also had physical issues that hampered communication.

As a result of wounds he received at Gettysburg, Hood had a withered, useless arm. Furthermore, he lost a leg, amputated up to his hip, from wounds received at Chickamauga.⁵² To allow him to ride a horse, two aides strapped him into a specially made saddle. He did not have the mobility required to closely supervise a complicated battle.⁵³ Time and again, good plans ended in disaster because Hood was not there to ensure his orders were understood and carried out. In battles around Atlanta, the same problem had cropped up. Hood did not learn from these mistakes.⁵⁴ By being away from the battlefield, Hood was not cognizant of fast-developing battlefield situations.⁵⁵ Between the lack of administration and Hood's absence at critical times, it is no wonder that his orders at Spring Hill were confusing.

The matter of logistics was another problem. Hood planned operations and started to execute, only later discovering that there were no adequate logistical facilities. Unbelievably, as he kicked off his campaign into Tennessee, he actually ordered, "all railroads within forty miles of Atlanta be taken up at once."⁵⁶ In doing so, he destroyed his own line of supply. With poor staff communication and terrible lines of supply, his army was severely hampered and unprepared for the cold of November and December when they shivered outside of Nashville, suffering through an ice storm. Many had no shoes and their supplies were meager. Hood's failures put his army into desperation.

The general morale of the army was another problem upon which Hood actually had a negative impact. Hood took over an army from a popular general. The army believed the more experienced corps commander, Hardee, was a better candidate for promotion than Hood.⁵⁷ Hood did not do much to improve his relationship with his men. Although he wished to imitate Lee's tactics, he did not accept blame as Lee did. After each defeat, Hood placed blame on his commanders and his men. Because he believed that Johnston had instilled a defensive mentality in them, he did not seem to respect them.⁵⁸ He also compared the army unfavorably to the Army of Virginia and hinted that they lacked the will to fight that the eastern armies had.⁵⁹ Hood was convinced that the army had fought defensively for so long it had lost its edge. In his own words, the appearance that his army seemed "unwilling to accept battle unless under the protection of breastworks, caused me to experience grave concern. In my inmost heart I questioned whether or not I would ever succeed in eradicating this evil."⁶⁰ He believed he did his best to combat this tendency. Indeed, Hood stated, "The valor displayed at Franklin, and which deservedly won the admiration of the Federals, was caused by the handling of the troops in a directly opposite manner to that of General Johnston."⁶¹ In other words, the army only fought well because he handled them aggressively. However, Hood also lambasted the army's "disgraceful effort" and added to his reputation as a butcher that sent men on suicide missions, helping to cement his unpopularity with his soldiers.⁶² Nevertheless, many of Hood's problems resulted from the Confederacy's existing ailments.

This was not 1861. Even the Army of Northern Virginia under Lee refrained from the aggressive fighting style Hood promoted. For example, when pinned up in Petersburg, Lee used a strategy more similar to that of Johnston. The Confederate armies did not face demoralized Union armies with unsuccessful leaders such as McClellan and Burnside; they were dealing with large, experienced, well-supplied armies with excellent leaders such as Grant, Sherman, and Thomas. It is debatable whether Hood would have done any better against Sherman even if Hood had command of the army instead of Johnston when Sherman entered Georgia. It is also debatable whether he could have beaten Thomas even if he had defeated Schofield. The Union army was large, well led, and well equipped. Finally, and possibly most importantly, Hood had lost the trust of his men.

Because of his inauspicious beginnings as an outsider, brought in to replace a popular general and command the army, Hood never fostered a positive relationship with his men. Sam Watkins, who lived through the campaign, said:

I have never seen an army so confused and demoralized. The Whole [sic] thing seemed to be so trembling and tottering. Every soldier mistrusted General Hood's judgment. The officers soon became affected with the demoralization of their troops and rode on in dogged indifference. The once proud Army of the Tennessee had degenerated into a mob. Our country was gone, our cause was lost."⁶³

Hood's actions demoralized instead of rallying his army and in the end, the army ceased to exist as an effective fighting force.

John Bell Hood was one of the most successful Confederate brigade and division commanders of the Civil War. However, as the general in command of an entire army, he was not successful. This resulted in the destruction of the Army of Tennessee in 1864. Hood's personal qualities of aggressiveness and valor and President Jefferson Davis's selection of Hood to replace Johnston as commander of the Army of Tennessee did not play out well in the environment of 1864. Hood's decision to invade Tennessee to take Nashville and enter Kentucky and ultimately link up with Lee at Petersburg, though questionable, was probably the best option. He hoped to force Sherman to backtrack and help Lee defeat Grant. However, Hood's drive to take Nashville failed at Spring Hill, Franklin, and Nashville, resulting in the destruction of the Army of Tennessee. There were different actions that Hood could have taken that may have resulted in a better outcome. Hood's aggressive tendencies may have worked well for him as a lower-level commander but did not work for the Army of Tennessee. Hood's deficiencies in staff work, communication, logistics and his inability to be present ensured poor results. Hood's manner of leadership had a detrimental impact on the morale of the army and he had a poor relationship with his subordinates. In 1864, the situation Hood encountered was almost hopeless. He had very little room for error. Unfortunately, he made many errors that resulted in the destruction of the Army of Tennessee and his reputation as a general. John Bell Hood was a "fine combat leader in situations where his bravery and example could inspire his followers to deeds of great valor,"⁶⁴ but he rose to a position where combat leadership was not enough. He neglected things such as reconnaissance, logistics, and staff work that made him unable to successfully implement a sound plan. He realized too late that a fighting spirit is not the only quality that makes a military leader successful.

Notes

1. Richard M. McMurry, *John Bell Hood and the War for Southern Independence*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1982), 123.
2. Donald E. Everett, ed., *Chaplain Davis and the Hood Brigade: Being an Expanded Edition of the Reverend Nicholas A. Davis's The Campaign from Texas to Maryland, with the Battle of Fredericksburg* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1962), 148.
3. Ibid.
4. Steven Woodworth, *This Great Struggle: America's Civil War* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2011), 285.
5. David Coffey, *John Bell Hood and the Struggle for Atlanta*. (Abilene: McWhiney Foundation Press, 1998), 57.
6. United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1881-1901), vol. 38, pt. 5, pp. 885 (Hereinafter cited as OR; except as otherwise noted, all references are to Series I).
7. Earl J. Hess, *The Civil War in the West: Victory and Defeat from the Appalachians to the Mississippi* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 253.
8. John Bell Hood, *Advance and Retreat: Personal Experiences in the United States and Confederate States Armies*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 273.
9. McMurry, 167.
10. OR, vol. 45, pt. 1, pp. 145.
11. Woodworth, 321.
12. Hess, 253.
13. Hood, 285.
14. Ibid., 297.
15. OR, vol. 45, pt. 1, pp. 147.
16. Ibid., 150.
17. R. M. Collins, *Chapters from the Unwritten History of the War Between the States*. (St. Louis: Nixon-Jones Ptg. Co., 1863), 244-245.
18. Ibid., 246.
19. Hood, 291.
20. McMurry, 174.
21. Ibid.

22. Thomas Lawrence Connelly, *Autumn of Glory: The Army of Tennessee, 1862-1865*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 503.

23. Ibid.

24. OR, vol. 5, pt. 1, pp. 501.

25. McMurtry, 176.

26. Connelly, 503.

27. OR, vol. 45, pt. 1, pp. 150.

28. Ibid., 1168.

29. Hood, 338-339.

30. OR, vol. 45, pt. 1, pp. 150.

31. Hood, 338-339.

32. Collins, 249.

33. Paul H. Stockdale, *The Death of an Army: The Battle of Nashville and Hood's Retreat*. (Murfreesboro TN: Southern Heritage Press, 1992), 2.

34. Ibid.

35. Hood, 298.

36. Ibid., 299.

37. OR, vol. 45, pt. 1, pp. 152.

38. Hood., 303.

39. OR, vol. 5, pt. 1, pp. 503.

40. Ulysses S. Grant, *Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant* (Old Saybrook, CT: Konecky & Konecky, 1999), 566.

41. OR, vol. 52, pt. 2, pp. 692.

42. Ibid.

43. OR, vol. 39, pt. 2, pp. 714.

44. Brooks D. Simpson & Jean Berlin, eds., *Sherman's Civil War: Selected Correspondence of William T. Sherman, 1860-1865* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 676.

45. Coffey, 56.

46. Grant, 435.

47. McMurray, 123.

48. Ibid., 159.

49. OR, vol. 39, pt. 1, pp. 804. McMurray, 159.

50. McMurry, 153.

51. Connelly, 153.

52. Ibid., 430.

53. Coffey, 71.

54. McMurry, 174.

55. Connelly, 153.

56. OR, vol. 39, pt. 1, pp. 801-2, 805.

57. Coffey, 61.

58. James McPherson. *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 812.

59. Connelly, 431.

60. Hood, 273.

61. Ibid., 140.

62. Coffey, 106.

63. Sam R. Watkins, "Co. Aytch," *Maury Grays, First Tennessee Regiment, or a Side Show of the Big Show*. (Nashville: Cumberland Presbyterian Pub. House, 1882), 100.

64. McMurry, 190.

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