

A Southerner for the Union: Major General George Henry Thomas – A Brief Biographical
Sketch and Analysis of the Causes and Effects of His Decision for the North

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Major General George Henry Thomas: Traitor to the Confederacy or Loyal to the Union?

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Introduction

The Civil War was a conflict that set a country against itself, making sworn enemies out of friends, severing familial bonds, and leaving a legacy that is still evident to this day. There is no better illustration of this conflict than that of the life of Union Major General George Henry Thomas of the Western theater in Tennessee. When the Southern states seceded, each citizen had an important decision to make whether to side with the Union or the Confederacy. For some it seemed an easy decision, whether it meant staying loyal to their state or because they believed in the cause of one of the two sides. However, choosing sides would prove to be a conflict for others, because in many cases they felt split in two: between state and country, family and conscience, friends and conviction, government and beliefs. Thomas was one of those who chose to make the tough decision: to fight for the Union, even though he had been raised in a Southern home. Needless to say, this choice would result in the consequence of not being trusted on both sides of the war: the Confederates would brand him as a traitor, and even his own family turned against him. Meanwhile, those in the Union were wary of trusting him, believing him to be a spy at worst, or a commander that might prove to be hesitant when forced to face his fellow countrymen in battle at best. However, a unique individual emerges in the story of George Thomas, one who overcame prejudice, stood up for what he believed in, and became one of the lesser known heroes of the Civil War.

When most people think of Civil War heroes, several names might come up: Ulysses S. Grant, William T. Sherman, Robert E. Lee, Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson, or Nathan Bedford Forest. The name George Thomas is usually not on that list, although during the war he did earn a nickname similar to Jackson’s: “The Rock of Chickamauga.” Both men won reputations for standing firm in battle, unwavering while chaos was going on all around them. However,

Jackson is the name most people would think of first, but close studies of the Civil War's Western Theater, reveal how significant a role Thomas played. Some even say that he was the "third of the triumvirate who won the war for the Union," ranking him right up there with Grant and Sherman.¹ Those two names are often heard in sequence, as they worked closely together and greatly favored each other's opinions; however, Thomas is not usually listed with them because Sherman and Grant seemed resentful of him. On the surface, Grant would say he thought Thomas to be slow and hesitant in his decision making, and Thomas even earned a nickname for that: "Old Slow Trot," but in those contexts, he was actually being careful and methodical in his thinking. However, Grant's dislike of Thomas and his tactical doctrine could very well have come from a deep-seated prejudice as a result of the latter's Southern upbringing, though he might have never actually said it.

"Old Slow Trot" was actually a nickname Thomas had earned during his career as an instructor at West Point, and then it was a compliment. When he was doing drills with cadets, Thomas would often order a slow trot, which would steady the horses and focus the soldiers before going into a galloping charge.² However, it would be turned into a criticism, Sherman being the first to use it, complaining in a letter to Grant that Thomas was slow in battle. This was because these two men approached battles very differently: While Sherman preferred to remain on the offensive and overtake the enemy; Thomas put more stock in defense and standing strong against an attacker.³ Had Sherman been at West Point to see Thomas's methods of instruction, he probably would have disagreed with their practicality, seeing them as a waste of

¹ Ezra J. Warner, *Generals in Blue: Lives of the Union Commanders*. (Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 500.

² Benson Bobrick, *Master of War: The Life of General George H. Thomas*. (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 2009), 39.

³ Thomas B. Van Horne, *History of the Army of the Cumberland: its Organization, Campaigns, and battles, Written at the request of Major-General George H. Thomas chiefly from his private Military Journal and Official and other Documents Furnished by him*. (Cincinnati, OH: R. Clarke, 1875), iii.

time that could be spent engaging in action. But the cadets, as well as soldiers who would later be under Thomas's command, recognized his wisdom and steadiness both during drill and on the battlefield and respected him greatly for it.

One soldier who later wrote down his experiences with Thomas, was Henry Coppee, recording his views on this man whom Sherman seemed to have regarded as defensive. Where Sherman saw hesitancy and weakness, Coppee saw discretion and strength, and in fact argued that attacking showed a different kind of fault: one of impulsiveness. "A weaker man than Thomas would have yielded to the importunity and attacked before he was ready."⁴ Another officer, who is unnamed, quoted by Benson Bobrick, argued that there was method, reason, and a strategy in the circumstances in which Thomas acted slowly. This soldier claims that in these instances, he still exhibited an air of decisiveness; there was no hesitancy in his efforts, simply caution. "If he moved slowly, he moved with irresistible power; and if he ground slowly, it was like the mills of the Gods."⁵ If there was anything Thomas was not, it was rash, and he would not take a reckless action even when he was commanded to do so. This was one of the main reasons Grant and Sherman would resent him in addition to his Southern upbringing; they thought he was too careful. However, what his superiors found aggravating; Thomas's subordinates would find endearing, for it showed that he cared about them, and valued saving their lives and preserving morale. He knew how to encourage his men, and that would help in

⁴ Henry Coppee, *General Thomas*. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1898), 262. Coppee attended West Point shortly after Thomas graduated, finishing himself in 1845, and then he went on to serve in the Mexican War, where he the two men first met. Later, they were both teachers at West Point, and at the outbreak of the Civil War, Coppee decided to remain a professor of English there rather than get involved in the conflict and having to choose between state and country.

⁵ Benson Bobrick, *The Battle of Nashville: General George H. Thomas and the most Decisive battle of the Civil War*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2010), 95.

the long run in gaining victories, as the men would trust his decisions, and his calmness in the face of calamity gave them courage.⁶

Robert E. Lee is the person that usually comes to mind when thinking of someone who was divided over the war's issues. Like Thomas, he was born and raised in Virginia, a Southern state, and also like Thomas, he despised the practice of slavery and did not believe secession was the answer. However, Lee believed the South had a point in their advocacy for states' rights, and the idea of turning against his state of Virginia did not sit well with his conscience. He had even been President Abraham Lincoln's first choice for the role of leading general for the Union, and yet he turned it down to remain loyal to his state. Thomas's story is quite the opposite though, as he chose to stand by his convictions rather than his state. Some say he did it out of resentment because the Confederacy refused to offer him a generalship, when in fact, he had been offered the position of chief ordnance of Virginia's forces and turned it down, much like Lee's refusal of Lincoln's offer.⁷ Thomas had at one time been interested in a career with the Virginia Military Institute, and had written a letter to them, asking to be considered for a position, and many would claim that as evidence to him being pro-Confederate. However, he had sent that letter on January 18, 1861, three months before Fort Sumter was even attacked, and at that time, only two Southern states had seceded from the Union, and it did not look like the states in the Upper South, Virginia being one of them, would join them.⁸

Needless to say, Thomas's family was not very happy with this decision and essentially disowned him from that very day. They turned his picture to the wall, no longer welcomed him in their home, and even refused to attend his funeral well after the Civil War had been resolved.

⁶ Joseph A. Altsheler, *The Rock of Chickamauga: A Story of Western Crisis*. (New York: D. Dodo Press, 1915), 292.

⁷ Warner, 501.

⁸ Bobrick, *Master of War*, 65.

Thomas was in Harrisonburg, Pennsylvania when he heard news of the attack on Fort Sumter and immediately sent word to his wife and sisters that he was siding with the North. Some believed that he might have made his decision because his wife was from New York, and she exhibited a northern influence over him. In some areas, that may have been true, but the fact that she was not with him when he made the decision wears that argument thin.⁹ This was a decision he made on his own, and he did it knowing full well the opposition he would face from both fronts. On the Northern side of the country things were not better for Thomas, as even Lincoln was hesitant in appointing a Southerner to such a high ranking position in the Union army. Not only that, but several times when Thomas was due for a promotion in rank, he was passed over, presumably due to Grant and Sherman's influences. In some cases, they practically had to be forced to honor or promote Thomas, and when that happened, it was done begrudgingly, as if they were choosing the lesser of two evils.

Though both sides bore no small amount of ill will toward Thomas, he was determined not to let it prevent him from doing his very best for the Union. He showed bravery and heroism in many battles, including Manassas, Mill Springs, Shiloh, Perryville, Stone's River, Chickamauga, Chattanooga, and Nashville. Two of these battles were known as the Union's first victory and its greatest defeat: Mill Springs and Chickamauga, respectively. However, both would be morale builders for the Union troops, not because of victory or defeat, but because of Thomas's calmness in battle. The South won the major initial battle of the Civil War, and that really discouraged the North, and they began to lose hope that they would be able to pull the country back together. Mill Springs in Kentucky may have been a lesser-known battle, and not a very well-known victory, but it was a victory nonetheless, and it did wonders for the Union's

⁹ Ibid., 65.

confidence.¹⁰ Chickamauga, on the other hand, was the Union's worst defeat, and even considered bloodier than Antietam, for though the latter engagement produced more casualties, the former's ratio of casualties to survivors was significantly higher. The Union army was in complete disarray throughout this battle; however, Thomas stood firm, like a rock, even in the midst of a chaotic retreat all around him. As a result, he would earn the nickname the "Rock of Chickamauga," and though the battle was a loss for the Union, the soldiers found encouragement in his steadiness in the midst of calamity.

Thomas had not even been the commanding general of the Army of the Cumberland at the Battle of Chickamauga; William S. Rosecrans held that post, someone who had surpassed him in rank, though he was three years younger and not as experienced. In truth, Thomas had been offered command of the Army of the Cumberland when Don Carlos Buell was demoted, but he refused it, fearing the consequences that might erupt from a change in command in mid-campaign. However, when the campaign was completed and Buell relieved, the position went to Rosecrans, and Thomas became his top subordinate.¹¹ In the midst of one of the Civil War's bloodiest battles, it was not their overall commander in whom the soldiers found inspiration; it was Thomas. In Rosecrans's mind, hope seemed lost, and he had ordered a withdrawal, but Thomas did not see retreat as an option and remained steady enough to earn his most famous nickname. During the battle, the soldiers were immensely discouraged; they were hungry, tired, and had watched their friends die. More than that, they had lost confidence in Rosecrans' ability to command, but in the midst of despair and defeat, they were able to find hope in Thomas.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., 2-3.

¹¹ Steven E. Woodworth, *Six Armies in Tennessee: The Chickamauga and Chattanooga Campaigns*. (University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 3.

¹² Ibid., 144.

Following the battle, Grant was forced to recognize Thomas's skill and promote him above Rosecrans.

Although Thomas had not been in overall command at the Battle of Chickamauga, Coppee argued that the outcome could not be fully understood without his role. He was the three-stranded cord that held the army together and would not be easily broken, exhibiting substantial strength as he remained loyal to his country even if it meant going against his state. "Chickamauga presents such a labyrinth both as to time and space, as to series and groups, that the historian would be irrevocably lost were it not for the threefold clue of magic thread presented by the skill, valor, and endurance of Thomas, which alone gives system and symmetry to the story."¹³ Even Rosecrans, who would find himself a subordinate under Thomas after Chickamauga, could not deny the part he had played in the survival of the Army of the Cumberland. This was one of the few generals who would prove to stand by Thomas and not resent him in any way, but understood that he was the better general and that his Southern upbringing had no influence in his loyalty to the Union. In fact, when Rosecrans delivered his report on the Battle of Chickamauga, he acknowledged Thomas's strength, calling him a "true soldier" and an "incorruptible patriot," conveying gratitude for his wisdom to take control when others had lost it.¹⁴

It was not until after the Battle of Chickamauga that the Union really recognized Thomas's loyalty, and yet the prejudice would still be evident all the way up to the date of his funeral. However, those who were around him long enough found it hard to deny his strength of character and his determination to see to it that the Union triumphed. James A. Garfield, who would later become President of the United States, but at the time, was one of Thomas's

¹³ Coppee, 119.

¹⁴ L.P. Brockett, *Our Great Captains: Grant, Sherman, Thomas, Sheridan, and Farragut*. (New York: C.B. Richardson, 1865), 177.

commanding officers, likened him to a “live oak,” a strong tree that is known for standing firm when others have fallen.¹⁵ Thomas would later go on to display that same kind of stamina at the Battle of Chattanooga, where the Army of the Cumberland was forced to flee after its defeat at Chickamauga. The Confederate attacks in these two battles were very similar in that they were hard-hitting and relentless, but the outcome of Chattanooga was different because someone else was in charge, someone who did not believe in retreat. Thomas held the town with great determination, like a fortress, following Grant’s orders to hold at all costs, vowing he would do so until they starved or until they drove out the Confederates. The Union victory at Chattanooga would prove to be a significant symbol of inspiration for the North as they prepared for the next campaign against Atlanta, and afterward the battle of Nashville.¹⁶

Even General Braxton Bragg, someone who would find himself on the opposite side of the war from Thomas, complimented him on his steadiness and aptitude in command. Granted, this note of approval was given during the Mexican War, long before secession and civil war, but it is still significant that someone who would become an enemy would think so highly of him. At this time, during the Franklin Pierce administration, Jefferson Davis was the Secretary of War, and he asked Bragg to join a new cavalry regiment, but the latter declined, saying that Thomas would be the better choice. Bragg would later say to Sherman himself that, while he did not consider Thomas brilliant, he was an honest and gallant soldier, one that made sound decisions and did not seem to have the ulterior motive of seeking glory to get in the way.¹⁷ Thomas’s subordinates agreed with Bragg and greatly respected their commander, and this was seen in the various nicknames he earned throughout his life. Besides “Old Slow Trot” and

¹⁵ Bobrick, *Master of War*, 74.

¹⁶ Archer Jones, *Civil War Command and Strategy: The Process of Victory and Defeat*. (New York, NY: Free Press, 1992), 180.

¹⁷ Freeman Cleaves, *Rock of Chickamauga: The Life of General George H. Thomas*. (Greenwood Press, 1974), 54.

“Rock of Chickamauga, he also received the following epithets: “Old Tom,” “Old Reliable,” “Old Pap,” and “Uncle George.” All of these were endearing terms and showed that he was a man they looked up to, a commander to which they felt connected. Notice that many of the names had the word “old” attached to them. When the Civil War began, Thomas was forty-five, older than most of his subordinates, and older than many of his fellow commanders. The classification was not meant as an insult that he was slow or weak because of his age, but as an acknowledgement of his wisdom and experience. To his soldiers, Thomas was a father figure, and they trusted his orders, that he acted their best interest, and his Southern upbringing did not matter to them.

Another reason that Thomas was disliked by Grant and Sherman was that at times he seemed insubordinate, the reasons for which were linked to his tendency for caution that came off to them as tardiness in responding to orders. According to Benson Bobrick, although he is not specific, some may argue that Thomas was being stubborn and was responding to their resentment with his own version of the same. However, Thomas considered every decision methodically and refused to act out of panic or impulsivity. In some cases, he believed their decisions unfortunately fell into those categories, and therefore he could not in good conscience follow their directives. Nor was he reticent to profess his contrary views to others, as evident when he told Henry W. Halleck that he was “going to do the right thing by them [his soldiers] no matter what ‘stick’ or fool was placed over his head.”¹⁸ Such remarks and tendencies greatly annoyed Grant and Sherman, especially when Thomas’s insubordination earned him success in battle, for that reflected badly upon their orders. They simply did not want to acknowledge that Thomas’s judgment just might be superior in certain situations, and deep-seated prejudice in their dealings with him was prominent.

¹⁸ Bobrick, *Master of War*, 206.

However, Thomas was not willing to let their discrimination deter him from serving his country or from being a good general to his soldiers. Not only was he wise and methodical in his battle tactics, but he also kept up with new technologies and appropriately integrated them into his strategy. He made special use of the repeating carbine, which greatly helped in his defense of Union strongholds, but would also prove beneficial when he had to take the offensive. His telegraph train was also one of the most refined and efficient of its time, an intricate system that sent messages in a timely manner.¹⁹ While Thomas may not have had confidence in Grant or Sherman and their expertise, he had confidence in his soldiers, in his weaponry, in his country, and in his convictions to stand firm in battle. It was this buoyancy that helped him in Chickamauga to stay put while everyone else was retreating, to be an unwavering force in the chaos that was ensuing around him. He even managed to be an example of courage to his enemies as one Confederate soldier would tell General Joseph Johnston, “[he] did not know when he was whipped.” Johnston however, would counter that in saying that “he always knew very well when he was not.”²⁰

Throughout the Civil War, Thomas was viewed with suspicion by both sides, some thinking him a traitor, others believing him to be a spy, and still others fearing he would falter in battle as a result of a divided heart between his upbringing and his convictions. Many would argue that he made the wrong decision in choosing to fight for the Union, that he should have followed Lee’s example. However, the North might have suffered more serious reverses in the Western theater without Thomas’s services, and the war itself could very well have had a different outcome. It is ironic that he is best known for the Union’s greatest defeat, and yet it is not failure on his part that is remembered, but success in that he was able to stand courageously

¹⁹ Ibid., 145.

²⁰ Ibid., 185.

and be an example to a fallen army. Many suspected his loyalty, while others would not even think of questioning it, for they saw that he was no less a patriot than any of the rest of them, his Southern upbringing notwithstanding.²¹ Throughout his life before, during, and after the Civil War, Thomas's Southern roots clearly influenced his decisions, but it is also evident that he did not see himself as a Northern or Southerner, but a Unionist. He was determined to see his country stay together, even if he had to sever himself from his family in order to fight for that cause.

²¹ Francis F. McKinney, *Education in Violence: The Life of George H. Thomas and the History of the Army of the Cumberland*. (Chicago, IL: Americana House, 1997), vii.

Early Life and Family: Thomas's Southern Upbringing

George Henry Thomas was born on July 31, 1816 at Newsom's Depot in Southampton County, Virginia, nestled close to the site of the famous Battle of Yorktown that ended the American Revolution and a mere five miles from the North Carolina line. His parents, John Thomas and Elizabeth Rochelle, were of Welsh and French Huguenot descent, respectively, and they raised their six children in a prosperous plantation of tobacco, cotton, and corn.¹ The family plantation was over 800 acres worked by a number of slaves, and their prosperity showed in their expansion of the once three bedroom house to accommodate their growing family.² Unfortunately, when Thomas was twelve, his father was killed in a farm accident, and he was left to help his mother run the farm and take care of his younger siblings. Though her children helped, the fact that Elizabeth was able to keep the farm not only afloat but successful was truly an amazing feat. Both parents could be seen in George's personality: his father's steadfast ruggedness and his mother's gentle and patient kindness.³

According to James Garfield, who was acquainted with Thomas before becoming president, the family's ancestry played an important role in that his sturdiness and commitment to education came from his father's side in the British Isles. He also spoke of Elizabeth's family, who had fled to America to escape religious oppression from Louis XIV, saying that the gracious exuberance of the French Huguenots was also a trait inherited by Thomas.⁴ In fact, his mother's line could be traced to George de Rochelle, who found America to be a refuge for Protestants

¹ Benson Bobrick, *Master of War: The Life of General George H. Thomas* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 2009), 4.

² Thomas B. Buell, *The Warrior Generals: Combat Leadership in the Civil War* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1997), 10.

³ Lieutenant Ell Torrance, *General George H. Thomas*. Address to the Minnesota Commandery of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, (March 8, 1897), 3.

⁴ James A. Garfield, *Oration on the Life and Character of General George H. Thomas. Delivered Before the Society of the Army of the Cumberland, Cleveland, November 25, 1870* (Cincinnati, OH: Robert Clarke & Co., 1871), 5-6.

after leaving France.⁵ While his parents may have been glad to put their European ancestry behind them, their future in America was something of which they took special pride. They were especially delighted to be living in Virginia, a crux of the American Revolution and the state that bore several of the country's first presidents. The influence of his Virginia upbringing exhibited itself throughout Thomas's life, although his state and family would later come to disown him upon his decision to go with his country rather than his state upon the outbreak of the Civil War.⁶

Although he came from a southern family that not only condoned slavery, but practiced it, Thomas showed at an early age that he looked at these domestic servants in a different light. He viewed them as human beings that deserved to know the same things he did, and he would show that by coming home from school every day and teaching them what he had learned, even against his parents' requests.⁷ He not only taught them from his academic studies, but also showed the slaves how to read the Bible and told them that it bore the same meaning for blacks as whites. Thomas also found playmates in the slave children serving on his family's plantation and would often be found sneaking snacks to them in the slave quarters or exploring the woods with them looking for raccoons or possums. In fact, it was said of him by his friends that, "He loved the Negro quarters more than he did the great house." That Thomas spent so much time with the family's slaves and viewed them as equals was extremely nonconformist in America's Southern states.⁸

Educating slaves was not only against the wishes of his parents, but it was also forbidden by law in the commonwealth of Virginia, as well as most other slave states during that time

⁵ Freeman Cleaves, *Rock of Chickamauga, the Life of General George H. Thomas* (Greenwood Press, 1974), 7-8.

⁶ Garfield, 6.

⁷ Cleaves, 4.

⁸ Benson Bobrick, *The Battle of Nashville: General George H. Thomas and the most Decisive battle of the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2010), 32-33.

period. Thomas knew he could very well have received punishment for this action, yet he was willing to challenge the mores of his parents and the laws of the state for something he viewed as more important.⁹ During that time in Southampton County, people drew the line at discussing the morality of slavery and instead believed in a tolerance of sorts where each person should believe what they wanted concerning the institution but not impose their views upon others. Teaching slaves might have been illegal, but those who did were often not bothered unless it became an issue in the community. It was up to Thomas's parents to punish him if they did not wish him to be educating the plantation slaves, but when his father passed away, his mother had enough troubles with running the farm and taking care of her other children without adding on the worry of subduing what she may have considered another childish antic.¹⁰

In the community, anyone who prominently opposed the institution of slavery was quickly silenced, whether by mandatory eviction or forcible suppression any conflicting views. One prime example came in 1825 in the form of a Baptist minister named Jonathan Lankford, who proclaimed in the church how saddened he was by the institution of slavery. He was so troubled that he decided he could not preach to such a hypocritical congregation; in his mind they were simply going through the motions of communion and the holy sacraments, and his conscience could tolerate it no longer. However, when he boldly proclaimed slavery to be a violation of God's law, the church elders voted to have him removed from the pulpit.

⁹ Robert P Broadwater, *General George H. Thomas: A Biography of the Union's "Rock of Chickamauga"* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2009), 46.

¹⁰ Ernest B. Furgurson, "Catching up with 'Old Slow Trot.'" *Smithsonian*, March 2007, Vol. 37 Issue 12, p 50-57. http://rx9vh3hy4r.search.serialssolutions.com/?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2004&ctx_enc=info%3Aofi%2Fenc%3AUTF-8&rft_id=info:sid/summon.serialssolutions.com&rft_val_fmt=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:journal&rft.genre=article&rft.atitle=CATCHING+UP+WITH+%22OLD+SLOW+TROT%22&rft.jtitle=Smithsonian&rft.au=Ernest+B+Furgurson&rft.date=2007-03-01&rft.issn=0037-7333&rft.eissn=1930-5508&rft.volume=37&rft.issue=12&rft.spage=50&rft.externalDBID=GSMI&rft.externalDocID=1286881511. (accessed May 13, 2013).

Unfortunately, Lankford consented and lived out the rest of his life as just another farmer and only then was he “a respected member of the community.”¹¹

Although Thomas had grown up in an environment where slave holding was a normal way of life, he did not seem to hold the same prejudices as his fellow Virginians. Not only did he teach his family’s fifteen slaves to read and write; there was also a free Negro by the name of Artise who lived on the plantation and was also tutored by Thomas. This was the man who would later give account of the source of his education. As a child, Artise became one of Thomas’s numerous black playmates, one of the few found after the war willing to give a description of George’s childhood. According to him, George was “playful as a kitten” running with them as he would any other children, playing around the plantation, as well as in the slave quarters. There were times when it seemed he spent more time amongst the slaves in their bunks than in his own family’s manor. At first it did not seem odd, as a master’s children could often be seen playing with the plantation slaves their age; however, Thomas exhibited a graciousness towards them that was uncommon. This was displayed in his endeavor to educate them in reading, writing, and the Bible, even against his parents’ bidding.¹² The 80-year-old Artise spoke of Thomas with great affection when being interviewed, and it was obvious he cherished the time they had as playmates as well as that spent towards the slaves’ education. To them he was a most courteous master, treating them better than they had ever experienced, better than they could have ever hoped in the environment of the antebellum South.

This was a compassion Thomas never lost, as he strove to always do well by his slaves: as a child he played with them, as a boy he educated them, and then finally as a man he provided for them. Even after Thomas left for West Point and then for his military career, when he visited

¹¹ Christopher J. Einolf, *George Thomas: Virginia for the Union* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 18-19.

¹² Bobrick, *Master of War*, 7-8.

he made sure they all had new Sunday suits to wear to church the following week.¹³ He was a patient teacher who took pride in people eager to expand their learning. In the manor and on the plantation, he was just another member of the family, but in the slave quarters, he was a figure of importance, their instructor, and they hung on his every word. The enthusiasm that he had for teaching would follow him for the rest of his life, whether on the plantation, instructing at West Point, or commanding soldiers on the battlefield.¹⁴ From an early age it was obvious that young George had a good heart, as well as an intelligent mind and skilled hands that served him in the practice of various crafts such as saddles and carpentry. From an early age, he took on a most humble task: that of teaching those in a lower station; in this case, those so low on the totem pole of Southern society that most people did not deem their minds worthy of education.

However, Thomas was not conceited and was not looking for praise or recognition, but simply strove to do what he believed was right. This modesty was a trait that he would exhibit throughout his life, one that he would never lose; in fact, he was rather embarrassed by any type of commendation. He was a man who had the strength to stand firm in battle with bullets whizzing around him but shook at a standing ovation.¹⁵ Thomas was brought up in a classic example of a Southern home, where he was taught to respect values such as duty, honor, integrity, and loyalty, which would serve as motivations when he made his decision at the outbreak of war in 1861. However, he was also taught that slavery was a justifiable institution, and yet he had compassion on his family's slaves, deciding for himself that they deserved his allegiance, just as his country did.¹⁶ Thomas was viewed as a "meticulous boy" who was patient

¹³ Einolf, 12.

¹⁴ Cleaves, 204.

¹⁵ Bobrick, *Battle of Nashville*, 33. Bobrick used this in the context of an instance in Congress where Thomas received a standing ovation and his hand literally started to shake. The author seems to marvel over the fact that Thomas could stand firm in battle and yet tremble in the face of public recognition.

¹⁶ Einolf, 11.

with his students, just as he was when making saddles, boots, and other leather goods. He was thorough and methodical, which made him a good teacher to the plantation slaves, and would later make him an exceptional instructor at West Point, as well as a beloved general.¹⁷

Some historians, such as Christopher Einolf, would dispute the evidence found that Thomas educated the slaves on his family's plantation, arguing that he showed no special vested interest in their condition than any other slave owner of that time period. He maintains that, since Thomas was raised in a Southern family and also owned slaves for a good portion of his adult life, that he did indeed condone the institution. Einolf further stipulated that those views did not change until later in the Civil War when, as a general, Thomas was forced to use a black regiment when fighting in the Battle of Nashville. Whites who were born on a Southern plantation had a difficult choice before them when it came to accepting blacks into society and there were few who rose above simply thinking of them as slaves.¹⁸

After the war, when researching how Thomas became a strong supporter of political rights for blacks, Einolf seemed puzzled by something he deemed such a vivid change in a typical Southern-raised slave owner. He believed it curious that the general's views could become so different from that of other plantation owners. However, Thomas had always been different, evidenced by his education of slaves when he was young. His actions for free blacks after the war cannot be explained without looking at his compassionate treatment of enslaved blacks on his family's plantation before the war.¹⁹ Rather, this was an attitude exhibited in Thomas as an adult, when he inherited slaves from his parent's plantation: He did not want to own these people, and yet he was unwilling to sell them for fear of dumping them off onto a

¹⁷ Winston Groom, *Shrouds of Glory: From Atlanta to Nashville – the Last Great Campaign of the Civil War* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 115-116.

¹⁸ Einolf, 13.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 355.

cruel master. He decided instead to instill in them the skills they would need for independence; however, when he granted them freedom, most were unwilling to leave, not wanting to desert such a kind master. In such cases, Thomas officially gave these slaves their freedom, but they stayed on as voluntary servants, free to come and go as they pleased. However, when he moved north where it was illegal to own slaves and yet they still would not leave him, he would send them down to his brother Benjamin in Mississippi for employment, showing that he was always willing to provide for them.²⁰ Two prime examples of this were seen in Thomas's retaining of his body servant and cook, who initially accompanied him to the north. Whereas most Southerners viewed their slaves as essential accessories, he saw them as unnecessary, especially if they could be taught to provide for themselves and then freed to live as they pleased. However, freedom was a hard life for blacks, as they were faced with much prejudice, even in the north, and Thomas realized their best hope was to be provided for by a master who loved them. He did not want to own slaves, but he could not bear to sell them to a master who could potentially be worse or free them to a life of such hardship.²¹

In the August of 1831, when George was fifteen years old, Southampton County, and even his own family plantation, bore witness to Nat Turner's slave revolt. The leader of this insurrection had been a slave on a nearby farm, and with years of anger built up inside of him at how he and his fellow African Americans were being treated, inspired an uprising. For years slave owners had been bringing their black servants to church where preachers would read passages from the New Testament that would encourage the slaves to obey their masters and accept their current status. However, Nat Turner had taught himself to read the Bible and as a result became a religious fanatic, believing he was receiving a divine command to lead this

²⁰ Thomas B. Van Horne, *The Life of Major-General George H. Thomas* (New York, NY: C. Scribner's Sons, 1882), 17.

²¹ Broadwater, 46.

rebellion against the plantation owners and their families. He saw himself and his fellow slaves as likened to the Israelites when they threw off the bondage of the Egyptians. There were also passages in the Bible that he had taken to heart that sentenced death upon those who enslaved their brethren. He took literally verses five and six of Ezekiel chapter nine that none should be spared in the punishment, not man, woman, or child.²² By August 21, he had sixty men who were willing to follow him, their first victims being Turner's master and his family. However, they did not stop there, but spread out across the twenty-seven miles that spanned Southampton County to wreak havoc on all slave owners.²³

As the rebellious band made their way toward the Thomas plantation, George and his family were forced to flee to the county seat of Jerusalem. Though their masters were gone and they had an opportunity to run and join Nat Turner, the Thomas family's slaves stood their ground and put it upon themselves to protect their home.²⁴ One family slave who had been entrusted as the overseer of the farm, Sam, had taken charge, sending his son Leonard to escape with his mother to the house and look after the property until the Thomases were able to return. When Turner stormed onto the plantation and demanded they join his rebellion, they too were forced to flee into the woods to join their mistress and her children in Jerusalem, while Turner moved on.²⁵ However, when they arrived to assure their master that the plantation was safe, they faced another problem: an angry mob of white slave owners who thought any black man they saw was a part of the insurrection. Turner had in fact forced some slaves into fighting with him, as well as having volunteers, so in order to keep their slaves safe, both from Turner and from the

²² Einolf, 19-20.

²³ Broadwater, 6.

²⁴ Bobrick, *Master of War*, 13.

²⁵ Broadwater, 6-7.

enraged whites, the Thomas family allowed the authorities to lock them in the local jail.²⁶ The other slaves of Southampton County had mixed reactions to Turner and his rebellion, as is evident of loyalty seen in the Thomas slaves. Some blacks were not happy with their condition and even resented their masters, but could not imagine rising up against them, especially if they had to resort to murder. Others were afraid of the white man's vengeance, but some actually loved their masters and remained loyal to them to the very end. However, Turner was able to recruit many slaves to his cause who longed for freedom and were willing to kill for it.²⁷

The revolt was far from over, as Turner led his men to take dozens of lives, executing their victims with clubs, knives, and axes in the privacy of their own home, where most people hoped for sanctuary. Their only hope was to form a defense of their own in Jerusalem, and so the Thomas family, with George herding them on, had piled into their carriage and took off down the road. As they were riding however, his mother came to a realization: Turner might have spies posted along the roads to ambush those headed for safety, as he had inspired insurrection across Southampton County. She and her family dared not risk being caught in the open road, for that was the most dangerous place to be; instead, they abandoned the carriage, taking refuge in the fields, swamps, and forests. When the family finally arrived in Jerusalem to join the defense, their clothes were soiled and they were immensely fatigued, but they were safe.²⁸ However, the horror of the late summer insurrection was far from over, as George and his family stumbled upon the panicked white population flooding the streets of Jerusalem. Thomas attempted to remain calm for the sake of his family, as the fifteen-year-old boy was viewed as the man of the house instilled with the responsibility of keeping them safe.

²⁶ Einolf, 4.

²⁷ Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1975), 82.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 3.

Undoubtedly, there was much confusion going through Thomas's mind at that very moment, hearing about the slaughter of his neighbors, the Travises, who had seemed like such good masters to Turner and the other slaves. The white population of Southampton had been taken completely by surprise. As a rural society, the farms were spread out and often isolated, and thus the insurgents were able to ambush several houses before anyone could be warned. The members of the Thomas family themselves had received news only a few mere moments before Turner and his men entered the gates of their plantation, having barely enough time to escape.²⁹ Southampton County was also a deeply forested area, which could provide both protection for the fleeing white families as well as cover for Turner and his men.³⁰

The once peaceful Southampton countryside had become a place of horror and carnage within just a couple of days, and the relationship between master and slave would never be the same again. Any harmony that had existed between slave and master in Southampton County had been destroyed, and any faith masters had in the loyalty of their slaves had been shattered. Southern whites, especially those in Southampton, Virginia, had been utterly repulsed by the ruthlessness of Nat Turner and his men, making them turn upon any blacks they found, whether or not they were a part of the insurrection. As a result, they were determined to see to it that they did not give a similar incident a chance to take place, and thus they were stricter on their slaves than ever.³¹ Although it had clearly been a rebellion against slavery, most plantation owners did not blame the institution for the uprising, but rather the "innate savagery of blacks." They believed the insurrection had further ensured the need for slavery, as well as the need to suppress any thought of emancipation. Any free blacks residing in Southampton County were now afraid

²⁹ Broadwater, 6.

³⁰ Oates, 1.

³¹ Buell, 10.

for their lives, and many felt forced to flee the town as they watched a great number of innocent blacks murdered for the acts of Nat Turner.³²

Nat Turner's insurrection was crushed only a couple of days after it began; however, the duration seemed much longer to the people in Jerusalem. Turner was captured and executed, along with over twenty other rebels, and many other slaves were badly treated from that point on or sold out of the country so as to drive any thought of freedom from their minds. Though the Thomas slaves were credited with refusing to go along in the short-lived revolution, the damage was done and the lives of many Southampton slaves would never be the same. The local plantation owners had thought themselves to be benevolent masters and that all of their slaves were happy and never would have considered rebellion. In some respects they were right, as was exemplified by the slaves on the Thomas plantation, but they also had to come to the realization that Turner and many others like him were unhappy with slave life and were willing to kill for their freedom. In fact, many of the plantation owners in Southampton County, Virginia never felt safe again in regards to trusting their slaves.³³

Before the rebellion, relations between slave and master in Southampton County had been quite different. White plantations owners had been rather flexible with giving their black servants freedom to visit their friends and family members on other plantations. In addition to taking them to church to hear about being obedient, masters often allowed their slaves to hold their own praise meetings. At times it did seem they got a bit carried away in their religious antics, but the slave owners never imagined their slaves capable of organizing an insurrection of such magnitude.³⁴ Some southern whites may have been embarrassed by the institution of slavery before, believing it to be a necessary evil. The practice may have seemed brutal to those

³² Einolf, 21.

³³ Ibid., 4.

³⁴ Oates, 3-4.

in the North who did not need it to survive, but for the southerners who had large plantations to manage, it made sense. Turner's uprising changed many of these views, erasing any forms of benevolence between master and slave and replacing them with feelings of resentment and hate. The army of slave insurrectionists had shown no discrimination, killing compassionate masters as well as cruel ones, convincing the slave owners that their survival was at stake. Black servants were now seen as savage killers who deserved their enslavement, and the institution must remain intact for the safety of whites everywhere.³⁵

By the time Turner's rebellion had been put down, fifty-five whites had been killed, which included a mix of men, women, and children. It also instilled a fear throughout the Southern states, and they were more convinced than ever that African Americans needed to be kept in their place as slaves. If there had been any talk of emancipation before, whether gradual or immediate, there was no thought of it after this horrifying insurrection. Unfortunately, the impact it had upon George Thomas is something the world will never know, as he did not leave any statements as to his reaction to the incident. Instead, the historian is left to mere speculation. What is known is that thirty years later he joined the Union, standing strong for the freedom of slaves and the preservation of the country.

The uprising of 1831 could have turned Thomas into a staunch defender of slavery like many Southerners who had lost friends and family members during those fateful August days. Dozens of people had been killed in the uprising, some of them being Thomas's neighbors and friends, and the cruelty to which they were subjected could have hardened him into a cruel slave owner like many others. However, maybe he saw a deeper meaning in how much these people valued freedom and that they were willing to go to any lengths to get it. The calamity that ensued from Nat Turner's rebellion certainly was not the way to go about it, but he may have

³⁵ Ibid., 19-20.

appreciated their passion and devotion to what they believed.³⁶ Perhaps he realized that all slaves were not like this, as he looked upon those at his own plantation who had stayed true to their masters. They were so eager to learn the academics he had taught them as a child, and the kindness they had received under his family's care caused them to not want to see any harm come upon them. They might have been slaves, but when approached by Nat Turner, they looked potential freedom in the eye and turned it down out of loyalty to their master, deciding to protect their home rather than join the band of rebels to wreak havoc on the town. Whatever his reaction to this insurrection, Thomas's view on slavery was clear, as he deemed it a "peculiar institution" and believed it to be his duty to take part in its end.³⁷

Although he could have stayed on the farm after graduating from the local academy, his family thought he was destined for more, as he was skilled and very observant. Thus, his first job at the age of eighteen was for his uncle, James Rochelle, who lived in nearby Jerusalem and served as the county clerk. However, for Thomas it was an occupation, not a passion, as he sat in that law office and prepared seemingly endless amounts of documents while longing for something more.³⁸ He got his break in 1836, when Congressman John Y. Mason decided to nominate him for an appointment to the military academy at West Point. Mason described Thomas to the school as: "Of fine size, and of excellent talents with a good preparatory education." Thus, George Henry Thomas was accepted and enrolled in West Point in the summer of 1836 where he would study alongside, and even room with, some of the Civil War's most distinguished generals.³⁹ To be accepted into West Point was not necessarily a distinguished honor, but getting through the program was. The only requirements for admission

³⁶ Bobrick, *Master of War*, 14.

³⁷ Furgurson.

³⁸ Cleaves, 8.

³⁹ Buell, 10.

were that a candidate must be able to read, write, and do some arithmetic; however, the academics at West Point itself were so rigorous that only a third of the cadets made it to graduation.

Though this path was clearly what Thomas wanted, he no doubt felt intimidated upon his entrance into this distinguished institution. However, he was encouraged by his family, especially his brother John, to whom he later wrote that he had taken his following advice into account: “Having done what you conscientiously believe to be right, you may regret, but should never be annoyed, by a want of approbation on the part of others.” These were the values upon which he had been raised and were also the morals upon which he would make his stance in the Civil War, even if it caused most of his family to resent him. Upon entering West Point, Thomas had chosen a career as a professional soldier, ready to follow orders and remain faithful to his country, no matter what the cost. In later years he would use these senses of loyalty and discretion to make decisions that, although they were often unpopular and seemingly foolish, were ultimately in the best interest of his military subordinates. Many of his decisions may not have been favored among his family and fellow officers, but Thomas stood firm, and the education on how to do so began at the academy of West Point.⁴⁰

Some of Thomas’s classmates that would later become recognized figures on both sides of the Civil War were Richard S. Ewell, Bushrod Johnson, Ulysses S. Grant, William T. Sherman, and Steward Van Vliet. In fact, when he arrived at the school on June 1, 1836, Thomas discovered that William Tecumseh Sherman was his roommate.⁴¹ During their years as cadets, Sherman and Thomas became good friends, though they were men of two very different personalities and would later grow apart when they served together during the Civil War. From

⁴⁰ Ibid, 10-11.

⁴¹ Bobrick, *Master of War*, 15.

early on in their academic careers, it was evident that Sherman was energetic, impulsive, and talkative, whereas Thomas remained stolid, calm, and deliberate. These differences in temperament would later manifest themselves in how they conducted their armies, and it was their stark contrasts that often caused them to disagree over methods and tactics.⁴²

While in his early twenties, George Thomas at first appearance seemed a handsome young man with a fair complexion, brown hair, blue eyes, and a square jaw. According to fellow cadet William S. Rosecrans, under whom he would later serve during the Civil War, he actually “bore a remarkable resemblance to Stuart’s portrait of Washington.” Early on as a cadet he gained the nicknames “Old Tom” and “George Washington” for his dignified, self-possessed, and steady manner.⁴³ Although Thomas himself did not leave behind any accounts, historians have been able to glean much information in the memoirs of his fellow cadets. From them it has been gathered that he was “reticent and introspective, dignified and serious, a solid man, never hasty in judgment or expression, but always just and considerate of others.” The soldiers who fought both alongside and under Thomas would later describe him in the same way, being grateful for his reliability and easy-going disposition.⁴⁴

During his four years of attendance at West Point, Thomas engaged in various courses that would later help him in his military career, which lasted over two decades. Among them were strategy, tactics, military engineering, the art of mechanical drawing, and the science of ballistics, as well as other subjects that would aid him in leadership in numerous battlefield settings.⁴⁵ Others subjects included astronomy, mineralogy, geology, botany, mechanics, chemistry, topography, and optics. Thomas was a dedicated student who put everything he

⁴² Einolf, 25.

⁴³ Cleaves, 9.

⁴⁴ Henry Coppee, *General Thomas* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1898), 6.

⁴⁵ Bobrick, *Battle of Nashville*, 38.

learned to memory, mastering all of his subjects and storing them away “in the recesses of his great brain” to be used in later years. He seemed to have a better grasp on the subject matter than most of his peers, and what he learned in the classroom he took away and used on the battlefield for many years afterward.⁴⁶

One particular class that would prove to be valuable was that of the science of war, where Professor Dennis Mahan taught the students strategy, tactics, moving men and supplies in such a way as to ensure victory. He emphasized seven primary elements that were essential in a battle that would “validate the selected strategic conception.” First of all, a commander had to assume the initiative, instead of simply waiting for an enemy to strike; however, they also had to assess their opponents with caution, so as to strike at their weakest point. The army must also focus on their attack, concentrating on one wing at a time, and only if they performed adequately could they spread out and overtake the rest of the enemy forces. After that, they must back the enemy into a corner, weakening the opponent’s center and making them unsure of their next move, and then once concentration had been achieved, action could be effectively taken. Following this, they were to give their defeated opponents no rest, following the examples of Frederick the Great and Napoleon Bonaparte, who sought to utterly destroy the enemy. They knew that if they failed to do so, there would always be the chance for another battle in which their opponents might have learned from past mistakes and become a force against which they would not be victorious. Finally, officers had to have confidence in themselves and their men, setting an example for their troops so that they would continue bravely in the fight.⁴⁷ At West Point, Thomas earned an education that prepared him for his decades of military service, using its many lessons in numerous battles. It was the start of a career that would last his entire life through the ups and

⁴⁶ Bobrick, *Master of War*, 18-19.

⁴⁷ Francis F. McKinney, *Education in Violence: The Life of George H. Thomas and the History of the Army of the Cumberland* (Chicago, IL: Americana House, 1997), 19.

downs, the series of promotions and overlooks, and the times of war and reconstruction of a broken country.⁴⁸

Upon the outset of the Civil War, Thomas and his fellow officers would have to make a grave decision, choosing between country and state, family and conviction. Though they were friends at this point, many would become sworn enemies before long, and even those who fought for the same side would find adversaries in their allies, as they came from different states and had conflicting reasons as to which side they decided to join. Once established on their respective sides of the war, many made names for themselves, later becoming distinguished generals on both sides of the conflict. For now, however, in the year of 1840, they were on the same side, many of them going south into the war against the Seminole Indians.⁴⁹ That year Thomas had graduated twelfth in his class of forty-two, while his roommate Sherman had been placed sixth in the class.⁵⁰ Upon graduation, Thomas held the rank of cadet sergeant and was also an honor student, something not very many of his peers had accomplished.⁵¹ As a newly graduated cadet, he squared his shoulders high and set off in service of his country, and thus, he was assigned to be a second lieutenant to the Third Artillery Regiment at Fort Columbus in New York Harbor. However, he only spent a short amount of time there drilling recruits, then Thomas sailed to Florida a mere five months after graduating to take his place in President Andrew Jackson's war to force the Seminole natives onto reservations.⁵² Once in Florida, he was stationed at Fort Moultrie in the familiar company of other graduates, such as Captain Erasmus Keyes, First Lieutenant William T. Sherman, Stewart Van Vliet, Lieutenant Braxton

⁴⁸ William H. Lambert, *George Henry Thomas: Oration Before the Society of the Army of the Cumberland, at Rochester N.Y., September 17, 1884* (Cincinnati, OH: Robert Clarke, 1885), 3.

⁴⁹ Broadwater, 10-11.

⁵⁰ Groom, 116.

⁵¹ Cleaves, 13-14.

⁵² Bobrick, *Master of War*, 23.

Bragg, and Captain Robert Anderson, the latter having been one of Thomas's instructors during his academic career.

Thomas served at Fort Moultrie for three years until December of 1843, when he was stationed to Company C, Third Light Artillery at Fort McHenry on Whetstone Point near Baltimore, Maryland. However, he was only there a mere five months when he was promoted to first lieutenant, and a year later he was commanded to return to his station at Fort Moultrie, where he stayed until the outbreak of the Mexican War, with the exception of a tour of recruiting duty in New York.⁵³ Most soldiers would have hoped to serve at Fort McHenry for a longer period, as Baltimore was reputed for being filled with beautiful women to enjoy. At that time, the size of the American army was greatly limited, thus at social gatherings, officers of any rank were high in demand. No doubt during his time in Baltimore, Thomas was invited to a number of social functions where he could have moved in the circle of high society. However, Thomas held himself as a gentleman of dignity and was, as always, was focused on his military service and spent his time there with integrity until he was stationed back at Fort Moultrie.⁵⁴

As the scattered army fought to subdue the Seminoles, they found themselves outnumbered and at a great disadvantage in the unfamiliar jungle, as the Indians seemed to come out of nowhere when conducting their countless raids upon the fort.⁵⁵ Unfortunately, the Seminole War was protracted because of indifference by government officials who did not realize its impact and thus did not quickly formulate a strategy for victory. Battle after battle, defeats mounted as the casualty list grew at an alarming rate, the newly graduated and inexperienced soldiers facing a foe that knew the territory, which enabled them to set up natural

⁵³ Ibid., 27-28.

⁵⁴ Wilbur D. Thomas, *General George H. Thomas: The Indomitable Warrior* (New York, NY: Exposition Press, 1964), 78.

⁵⁵ Cleaves, 16.

defenses. The Indians could disappear and come back with reinforcements at a moment's notice, and any losses they experienced were insignificant compared to that of the American soldiers. If only the leaders had conducted a more organized campaign with adequately prepared and well-armed men, the Seminole War would have ended much sooner with a lower casualty rate.⁵⁶

Thomas was one of the few that kept his head during these discouraging battles, one prime example being in the midst of an expedition at the crossing of the Concho and Colorado rivers. There he and his unit came upon a group of hostile Indians, and during the course of the subsequent engagement, the major was struck with an arrow that passed through his chin and embedded itself in his breast. Without waiting for the aid of a medic or even a fellow soldier, Thomas removed the protruding weapon and continued fighting until victory had been attained with the Indians' retreat.⁵⁷ As Captain James Garfield observed him over the years, his reports of the young man's actions would be echoed by many more commanders: "I never knew him to be late or in a hurry. All his movements were deliberate; his self-possession was supreme, and he received and gave orders with equal serenity."⁵⁸ In his description of this fresh cadet, Garfield would reference the words of Francis Bacon, saying that rather than being a distinguished genius, he was a man that possessed a roundabout common sense which would take him far. He saw Thomas as an honest man with a sturdy nature who would accomplish anything he put his mind to because he was a hard worker that was methodical, clever, and determined.⁵⁹ This same disposition would become apparent at all of Thomas's posts, and for the short time he was in New York recruiting, he laid out the following philosophy of command in a report to the Adjutant General:

⁵⁶ Thomas, 70.

⁵⁷ Gilbert C. Kniffin, *The Life and Services of Major General George H. Thomas* (Washington, D.C.: Judd & Detweiler, 1887), 7.

⁵⁸ Furgurson.

⁵⁹ Garfield, 7-8.

My experience teaches me that soldiers usually shape their conduct according to the characteristics of their officers and that the reputation of a command for efficiency and skill depends almost entirely upon the interest which their officers take in their instruction. I therefore do not think it advisable or necessary to offer any inducements or rewards to acquire skill. It is sufficient for the soldier to be convinced that his officer takes pride in pointing him out as one of the most skillful and efficient of this command.⁶⁰

Thomas proved to be a valued soldier from the very beginning, dedicated and true, as he was not one to gamble or drink during his off hours. Instead he filled his time with additional tasks from his superiors, taking on roles such as quartermaster, adjutant, and ordnance officer. Thomas was plain and modest, not cocky like many of the other young soldiers fresh out of the West Point academy. The latter would shortly receive a rude awakening to the realities of war whereas the former would take it seriously from the very beginning, continuously exhibiting a disposition higher than his military rank. He was seen as a man committed to his duty, and thus he easily moved up the military ranks in the years before the outbreak of the Civil War.⁶¹ During the Seminole war, Thomas proved his skills in the art of guerilla warfare as he was often at the forefront of the action.⁶² Though many who had graduated with him were not sure about where they were going, and some even resigned from the army shortly afterwards, Thomas knew that serving in the military would become his life, and he went at it with full dedication. Many commissioned officers would view an infantry posting in the Seminole War as beneath them, but Thomas was often willing to do the jobs others would not. Because of this, he was noticed by his superiors, and they saw in him as an exceptional soldier, and thus he was up for several promotions over the years.⁶³ From Florida at the conclusion of the Seminole War, Thomas moved on to serve as an artillery officer in the Mexican War alongside Braxton Bragg and

⁶⁰ McKinney, 67.

⁶¹ Cleaves, 18, 24.

⁶² Bobrick, *Battle of Nashville*, 39.

⁶³ Buell, 11.

Samuel French, against whom he would later fight in the 1860s. During that time he would become well known, and though their opinion would change later on, at this point, Virginia was proud to claim Thomas as one of their own. Upon the end of the war in Mexico, he was presented with an ornate sword of gold, silver, and precious stones as a token of recognition, a weapon which would be prominently be displayed on the mantle of his parents' Virginia plantation.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Groom, 116.

Thomas's Military Qualities

America's war with Mexico began in the summer of 1846, about five years after George Thomas graduated from West Point. Now a lieutenant, he and his Company E of the Third Artillery was commanded to the front in Texas where he fought under the famed Zachary Taylor.¹ During his service in the Mexican War, Thomas's nickname of "Old Tom" that he had gained at West Point carried over, but he also received a new one: Old Reliable. He always seemed to be in the right place at the right time just when his men needed him the most. One example was on Tuesday, September 22, 1846 during the struggle for Monterrey, when the bishop's palace had been taken under siege, but the next day, the Mexicans were finally driven away with Thomas's help. It was his guns and soldiers that helped clear the barricaded streets, and as a result, Taylor promoted him to captain and he received recognition from a number of generals. One commented that Thomas and his men deserved "the highest praise for their skill and good conduct," while another applauded him "for the bold advance and efficient management of the force under his charge."²

The Mexican American War has been characterized by numerous historians like Christopher Einolf as a sort of training ground for many men who would later become generals during the Civil War. During his service in Texas, Thomas skillfully applied the lessons and theories he had learned at West Point, as well as what he had gained from the Seminole War. He saw how essential drill, discipline, supply, and morale were to the development of a company of reliable soldiers. Even if the enemy was stronger in numbers, if they lacked any of these qualities, there was a chance they could be defeated. Leadership on the battlefield meant nothing

¹ L.P. Brockett, *Our Great Captains: Grant, Sherman, Thomas, Sheridan, and Farragut* (New York: C.B. Richardson, 1865), 164.

² Benson Bobrick, *Master of War: The Life of General George H. Thomas* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 2009), 29-32.

if the commander did not have the supplies he needed or if his men lacked discipline. From Zachary Taylor, who was later dubbed “Rough and Ready,” Thomas learned to take chances and be daring in his tactics, but to also pay close attention to supplies and logistics. If a battle was to be won, these were the basic essentials that would achieve victory, being just as vital as the commander’s leadership.³

During engagements such as Monterey and Buena Vista, Thomas stood strong in the midst of seemingly impossible odds. He was firm and dependable, showing that he knew what it took to conduct a good defense, a critical element in the art of war. As he learned from each battle experience, the Mexican American War became Thomas’s trial by fire, and his triumphs foreshadowed the skill he later exhibited in the Civil War.⁴ Although the Seminole War was his first battle experience, the Mexican American War was a conflict conducted on a much larger scale, and Thomas took away more lessons with each battle. From Resaca de la Palma, he learned how crucial a pontoon train was to the pursuit of an enemy, while at Monterrey he realized the danger of maintaining a fortification too long. At Buena Vista and Vera Cruz he saw the vital power artillery could wield when it was utilized in a timely fashion. From Buena Vista in particular, Thomas learned the importance of drill and preparation, no matter how experienced the soldiers may be. He also saw the damage any army can sustain if the troops are not disciplined and orderly when conducting their attack.⁵ These lessons later became the format for his syllabus for the classes he taught at West Point. He had seen numerous battles in the Mexican American War almost lost because of an unorganized and poorly supplied army.

³ Christopher J. Einolf, *George Thomas: Virginia for the Union* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 57.

⁴ Wilbur D. Thomas, *General George H. Thomas: The Indomitable Warrior* (New York, NY: Exposition Press, 1964), 97.

⁵ Bobrick, *Master of War*, 36.

Although the United States came out victorious in this conflict, he still realized that there were mistakes from which future soldiers could learn, and he would be the one to teach them.⁶

Thomas quickly moved through the ranks while serving in the Mexican American War, starting out as a lieutenant, then being promoted to captain after the siege of the bishop's palace, and then to major after the battle of Buena Vista. He had been recognized in that particular encounter by General Taylor for "gallant and meritorious conduct." The promotion had been suggested by Captain Braxton Bragg, to whom the post had been offered previously, but he declined it, claiming Thomas to be the better man for the job. Sadly, any friendship he might have had with Bragg during the Mexican War was lost at the outbreak of the Civil War when they ended up on opposite sides. They eventually faced each other as opposing generals in the Western Theater, particularly in the battles of Chickamauga and Chattanooga. Thomas also received a commendation from Captain William T. Sherman, his former roommate at West Point, who was impressed by Thomas's steadfastness and steadiness in battle, saying that he "more than sustained the reputation he has long enjoyed in his regiment as an accurate and scientific artilleryman."⁷

Zachary Taylor also won great glory at the battle of Buena Vista, where he gained the renowned nickname, "Rough and Ready," as well as the reputation that would contribute to his election as President of the United States in 1848. However, for all of his celebrated accomplishments, Taylor gave much of the credit to other soldiers, Thomas gaining honorable mention. The future president noted that they always seemed to meet with good fortune in battle, with the artillery consistently in the right place at the right time. Without the support of those guns, victory would not have been achieved, and through the entire melee, the soldiers could

⁶ Peter Andrews, "The Rock of Chickamauga." *American Heritage* 41, Issue 2: 83.

⁷ William H. Lambert, *George Henry Thomas: Oration Before the Society of the Army of the Cumberland, at Rochester N.Y., September 17, 1884* (Cincinnati, OH: Robert Clarke, 1885), 6, 9.

hear Taylor shouting “A little more grape, Captain Bragg,” which would later become one of his popular campaign slogans. Thomas also gave an account of the battle of Buena Vista a decade later but would not talk of his own achievements, merely discussing the ten long hours of combat instead. The rank that he was awarded that day was his third promotion in seven years, a considerable but well-deserved accomplishment. By the end of the Mexican American War, Thomas possessed a higher military rank than some of those who later became the Civil War’s most distinguished soldiers, including Robert E. Lee, George B. McClellan, and George Gordon Meade, all of which graduated from West Point before him.⁸

As a result of his wise discernment and accomplishments during the Mexican American War, Thomas received the honor of being presented with a fine sword which was displayed prominently over the mantle in the family’s Southampton plantation. Virginia was delighted to have produced such an esteemed warrior and they were proud at that time to claim him as an example to the rest of their society. He could hardly go home without people recognizing him and praising him for how gallantly he had performed in the Mexican American War. Thomas had conducted himself with grace, integrity, and prudence in leadership, being a soldier who took each stage of battle in stride and pondered each step carefully.⁹ Unfortunately, he would later be chided for some of these same qualities during his service in the Civil War and a state that was once proud to claim him as their own would quickly brand him as a traitor.

Thomas was stationed in Mexico until August 20, 1848, when he crossed the Rio Grande into Texas, his company being one of the first in as well as the last out of the theater of operations. He was then ordered to Brazos Santiago to direct the commissary depot, where he

⁸ Bobrick, *Master of War*, 34.

⁹ James A. Garfield, *Oration on the Life and Character of General George H. Thomas. Delivered Before the Society of the Army of the Cumberland, Cleveland, November 25, 1870* (Cincinnati, OH: Robert Clarke & Co., 1871), 8-9.

served until that December, when he was sent to Fort Adams, Rhode Island, where he commanded Company B, Third Artillery. Then in September of 1849, Thomas was transferred back to Florida, where the Seminole wars had started again. Once there, he went from one post to another, solving local problems and making sure all regiments were well supplied. One man that accompanied him during this time was Captain George Meade, whose job was to assess the ground as they went, seeing if it was viable to establish a chain of forts from the Indian River to Tampa Bay. The responsibilities were tedious, and at times seemed monotonous; however, they worked hard, even at the menial task of gathering rare mineral fragments and flowers. One obstacle was the command of General David E. Twiggs, who seemed to hold a grudge against Thomas from the Mexican American War. He had once praised Thomas for his performance in the battle of Monterey, but later their disagreement over a simple element of protocol drove a wedge between them. In that instance, Twiggs had commanded Thomas to send the mule team he was using to the general's camp; however, Thomas refused, believing they could be of better use pulling artillery. This greatly angered Twiggs, and he was even more infuriated when Thomas went over his head to secure the mules for the soldiers' camp, instead of for the general's personal use.¹⁰

In his involvement with General Twiggs, Thomas would receive a taste of something he would continually experience during the Civil War: men who once praised him later rejected him. Because of his revolutionary decision to become a Southern Unionist, Thomas would have once proud family members disown him and friendships that could have been the stuff of legend destroyed. He could not have known it then, but his falling out with Twiggs was a foreshadowing of the opposition he would face as a Union general from the South. Time and time again, he would have to assess the situation and take charge, even when he did not have the

¹⁰ Bobrick, *Master of War*, 36-38.

authority to do so, and do what he believed was right and in the best interest of his men and his country. One instance in which he faced this kind of decision was in November of 1850, when he set out on a ship for New Orleans, where he was commanding two Third Artillery companies before they moved on to Fort Independence in Boston. One night, when the ship *Thomas Leonard* encountered a violent storm off Cape Hatteras, Thomas was forced to take charge of a drunken captain and his confused crew. The first officer, who had been frantically trying to take control of the situation, desperately appealed to Thomas for help. The latter calmly ordered the captain to be confined to his quarters and the first officer put in charge, and with his help, the ship made it safely out of the storm. Unfortunately, it was not an entirely happy ending, as many of the crew became victims of cholera, and Thomas was forced to report eleven deaths when they finally reached port in New Orleans.¹¹

After the conclusion of the Mexican American War, Congress demobilized much of the army, forcing many regular officers like Thomas to go out in search of civilian careers. Any who lingered in Texas might find some military posting, but it was not likely, for although the Seminole wars had begun anew, the rebellious Indians were quickly subdued. Most of the guns used in the war were stored in the armories and the horses were put out to pasture or sent to the military academies.¹² Thus, in 1851, Thomas returned to West Point, this time as an instructor of artillery and cavalry, where numerous soldiers he trained would also become prominent in the Civil War. Among them were Philip Sheridan, J.E.B. Stuart, James B. McPherson, David S. Stanley, Stephen D. Lee, Alexander D. McCook, John M. Schofield, Oliver Howard, and John Bell Hood. Thomas was a popular professor, known for his fairness and gentle manner, never

¹¹ Freeman Cleaves, *Rock of Chickamauga, the Life of General George H. Thomas* (Greenwood Press, 1974), 47.

¹² Thomas B. Buell, *The Warrior Generals: Combat Leadership in the Civil War* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1997), 24.

taking any action without a just cause.¹³ However, he deviated from the old system quite a bit, as many of his students would soon discover. Emphasis was supposed to be on heavy and mountain artillery, but Thomas made a more personal focus on the cadets themselves, getting to know each of them individually. He cared enough to make sure they had adequate supplies in both classroom and battle, whether it was food, instruction, experience, or textbooks.¹⁴ Thomas also made a move for more time devoted to classroom instruction, substituting it in place of riding practice from December through February. There was a time for practical drilling, but there was also a time to learn about theories and methodologies to be used in the field. He was also thinking in the best interest of the mounts that would have been utilized during riding practice. As the cold weather during the winter months made the ground hard with ice or packed with snow, the horses had to be pushed harder. If classroom instruction was used instead, it would give the animals a rest and also benefit the students' academics. At first, the Academic Board did not approve of this, believing it would actually serve as a distraction to the cadets and that more time should be spent outside doing drills and exercises. However, Thomas convinced them to conduct some research on the benefit of tactical instruction on an equal level with practical application, and they finally permitted the modification.¹⁵

As a cavalry instructor, Thomas gained a new nickname: "Old Slow Trot," quoting the direction he would give students as they prepared for a charge. Young cadets usually began their first lessons of cavalry drill with walks and trots, and then moved on to jumps over various obstacles, eventually progressing to a gallop. They then learned how a horse should be ridden in differing situations, such as small groups as opposed to companies and squadrons. They also

¹³ Bobrick, *Master of War*, 38.

¹⁴ Francis F. McKinney, *Education in Violence: The Life of George H. Thomas and the History of the Army of the Cumberland* (Chicago, IL: Americana House, 1997), 51.

¹⁵ Einolf, 62.

were taught how to maneuver through lines and columns and how to utilize a cavalry saber in a steady manner while riding at a gallop. As he spent time with the horses at West Point, however, Thomas realized that many of them were old and tired, not capable of handling the hard riding many cavalry instructors demanded. If the academy wished for them to last long, the mounts must be used wisely and not have so much strain put upon them. Thus, during Thomas's instruction, when preparing for a charge, he would order the cadets do it at a slow trot.¹⁶ Most expected a gallop to be utilized in a charge, but he realized that no matter how durable the horse, such a rapid pace could only be maintained for a short amount of time before the animals grew tired. A slow trot, on the other hand, was a pace that was steady and could be kept up for a much longer period of time. Also, while Thomas was an exceptional soldier, he was not as fit as the young cadets, and was aware of the weight a body could put upon his mount. He also knew that weight was hard to sustain if forced to do so for long periods of time, especially at a rapid pace. He realized how valuable horses were in battle, thus a soldier could not afford to wear out his mount by galloping, but rather should utilize the steadiness of a slow trot.

This served as a parallel for the young cadets themselves: Those who were impulsive and undisciplined would tire easily and be quickly worn out by the perils of war, but those who took their time and paid attention to detail would endure. During cavalry drill on the West Point grounds, Thomas's ever-consistent voice could be heard, calling for a slow trot, keeping the eager cadets in check.¹⁷ Under the instruction of other artillery officers, the cadets and horses were used to being expected to gallop and were often eager to do so. The mounts had been trained to ride hard by commanders who only had their mind only on the battle, not the people and animals involved. Cadets and horses who rode hard might be useful at first, but before long

¹⁶ Ibid., 63.

¹⁷ Cleaves, 49.

they would wear out if all they did was gallop. Thomas realized that by utilizing a slightly slower but steadier pace, the soldiers and their mounts would last longer in battle. At first some cadets might have resented him for making them slow down, but they would later realize the effect it had and they recognized his compassion for his soldiers. His careful planning would later pay off in the Civil War, as his regiments came out of numerous battles victorious, showing that although it annoyed the impatient, there was something to be said for slow and steady methods.¹⁸

Old Slow Trot was not the only nickname Thomas attained while teaching at West Point; he was also called “Old Pap” and “Uncle George.” These names would stay with him throughout the Civil War as many soldiers looked upon him as a father figure with feelings of admiration, fondness, and respect. Though he never had any children of his own, he was like a father to many of the cadets and soldiers under his care, being more concerned about them than any victory.¹⁹ When students first met Thomas, he often appeared austere and standoffish, and his methods in the classroom and cavalry drills were less than orthodox, but as they observed his compassion, they grew to greatly respect him. They looked back to his heroic record in the Mexican War and were grateful for the professor’s expertise and experience. He also had an impact upon his fellow instructors at West Point. Henry Coppee, who had served with Thomas in the Mexican American War and afterwards taught English at the academy, described Thomas as having a “courteous bearing and kindly spirit toward the cadets” and that “he treated them as gentlemen of honor as well as soldiers.” As an instructor, Thomas was patient with the cadets, exhibiting a cool temper and an attitude of impartiality.²⁰ This attitude would run over to his command in the Civil War as he stood with his soldiers on the front lines of battle. He put

¹⁸ Henry Coppee, *General Thomas* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1898), 182-183.

¹⁹ Cleaves, 121.

²⁰ Einolf, 63.

himself alongside them on their level and yet he stood out with his stern and disciplined demeanor. He did not take part in their times of recreation or share moments of jocularity with them, but he was always there, the ever observant father, compassionately looking out for his soldiers.²¹

Thomas's rapport with his students may have been fatherly, but it was also very formal, which is why he appeared aloof upon the first impression. He did not joke with the cadets and did not often socialize with them outside of class like other commanders. However, he was not conceited, thinking himself better than the cadets, like instructors who lorded their authority during drill. He was also not like those commanders who acted as politicians, making speeches with empty promises of battle glory or instilling false inspiration with bold proclamations. He did not put stock in appearing charismatic by pretentiously dressing in his best uniform or exhibiting flamboyant riding during drill instruction. Instead, he was very down to earth, and while stern, it was obvious he cared about the welfare of his cadets, which would carry over to his soldiers.²² Thomas required his subordinates to behave with the utmost discipline, but he never expected any more of them than he did of himself, and his soldiers were often found following his example. His fatherly concern for others, whether they were peers, superiors, or subordinates, rang clear throughout every phase of his military career.²³ At the academy, "Old Slow Trot" was a term of endearment among the cadets, but unfortunately it would become one

²¹ Gilbert C. Kniffin, *The Life and Services of Major General George H. Thomas* (Washington, D.C.: Judd & Detweiler, 1887), 16.

²² Einolf, 107.

²³ Ernest B. Furgurson, "Catching up with 'Old Slow Trot.'" *Smithsonian*, March 2007, Vol. 37 Issue 12, p 50-57. http://rx9vh3hy4r.search.serialssolutions.com/?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2004&ctx_enc=info%3Aofi%2Fenc%3AUTF-8&rft_id=info:sid/summon.serialssolutions.com&rft_val_fmt=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:journal&rft.genre=article&rft.atitle=CATCHING+UP+WITH+%22OLD+SLOW+TROT%22&rft.jtitle=Smithsonian&rft.au=Ernest+B+Furgurson&rft.date=2007-03-01&rft.issn=0037-7333&rft.eissn=1930-5508&rft.volume=37&rft.issue=12&rft.spage=50&rft.externalDBID=GSMI&rft.externalDocID=1286881511. (accessed May 13, 2013).

of criticism during the Civil War, as other generals dubbed his careful methods to be sluggish and unnecessary. However, while he was an instructor at West Point, Thomas had certainly attained the respect of the cadets he took under his wing. His unique artillery maneuvers and skilled horsemanship “caught every eye,” including that of Robert E. Lee, the superintendent of the military academy. They became close friends in the September of 1852, but unfortunately, due to the war in less than a decade, it was a bond that would not last.²⁴

While a professor West Point, Thomas also met his wife, Frances Lucretia Kellogg, the daughter of Warren Kellogg, a hardware merchant in Troy, New York. Her father had died when Frances was only fourteen, but the business had been maintained, and the family was one of great respect in New York. She attended Troy Female Seminary, receiving an advanced education that was most impressive during that time period. Her cousin, Lyman Kellogg, was one of Thomas’s pupils and she often accompanied her mother and sister for frequent visits to Lyman on the West Point campus. It was not long after they met that Thomas began courting Frances, and his infatuation with her was apparent from the beginning. Even the school took note of this change in their professor’s life, as he began to check out poetry books from the library, not the usual reading for an artillery instructor.²⁵ George and Frances were married on November 7, 1852 in an Episcopal church, a couple very much in love. Unlike most officers who might have married Frances because of her well-known and wealthy family, Thomas truly loved his wife. Being from the North, she might as well have been from a different culture, and her upbringing as opposed to his would later be brought to question in his decision for the Union at the outbreak of the Civil War. Thomas’s family in Southampton disapproved of the marriage from the beginning, fearing that he was losing sight of his Virginian roots. The few times he

²⁴ Bobrick, *Master of War*, 39.

²⁵ Einolf, 65.

would receive leave throughout his military career, they knew most of that time, if not all of it, would be spent with her, thus his visits home would become less frequent.²⁶

Whatever society thought of them, it is evident that their relationship was one of devotion and tenderness, and although they had no children, that did not affect their closeness as a couple. Unfortunately, Thomas's career in the military would often take him away from his wife for months, even years at a time.²⁷ In fact, they were only married a year and a half before he was stationed in Benicia, California in 1854.²⁸ He had received a promotion to captain, of which he was fully deserving, but to get one so early on in his marriage that would require him to be away from his wife for so long was disheartening. His stationing at Fort Yuma in California during the Seminole Wars was at a remote location near the Arizona border at the confluence of the Colorado and Gila Rivers.²⁹ The newly married couple had remained at West Point until the orders came, and as a result of the posting, Thomas was tragically separated from his wife for two years. Granted, the initial separation did make the many others easier to endure as time went on, and during the Civil War, he showed no tolerance for soldiers who tried to desert their posts for the purpose of visiting their families.³⁰

Fort Yuma was a most uncomfortable station, as temperatures often rose above one hundred degrees, and even the shade provided no refuge from the immense heat. It was also in a dangerous position, with numerous Indian tribes nearby who were unhappy with how they were being treated, as they were being pushed onto confining reservations, resulting in numerous confrontations. In one instance during the Seminole Wars, Thomas was patrolling the Brazos

²⁶ Buell, 25.

²⁷ Donn Piatt, *General George H. Thomas, a critical biography* (Cincinnati, OH: R. Clarke & Company, 1893), 71.

²⁸ Bobrick, *Master of War*, 39-40.

²⁹ Cleaves, 51.

³⁰ Buell, 25.

River when some Comanches descended upon him and his company. During the following skirmish, Thomas received his first and only wound in battle, an arrow that went through his chin and into his chest, to which his reaction was to only pause for a minute to pull it out before he continued fighting.³¹ He remained stationed at Fort Yuma for about a year and was often accompanied by a Dr. Murray, who later became surgeon general. During this time, although he often found himself in confrontations with the Indians, Thomas endeavored to learn their language and establish relations with them. Time and time again, he proved that he cared more about people than victory, whether they be his own soldiers or the enemy. He exhibited the qualities of an exceptional commander in that he attempted to relate to people instead of simply seeing them as a mass of bodies under his command. During the spring of 1855 he was honored once again for his gallant service, and the Second Cavalry was reorganized for the promotion of the following men: Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston of Texas, Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Lee of Virginia, Major William J. Hardee of Georgia, and Major George H. Thomas of Virginia.³²

Throughout his military career whether as a soldier or instructor, lieutenant or general, Thomas exhibited exceptional skill in war strategy, and although it was appreciated by his soldiers, his fellow officers were often distracted by tactics they referred to as dawdling. The nickname “Old Slow Trot” would become a form of criticism during the Civil War instead of the term of endearment it was at West Point, and most would not stop to consider the wisdom behind his caution. One reason for his carefulness during the Civil War can be found in an injury Thomas had sustained in an 1860 train accident while on his way to Washington. During one of the train’s stops for water near the city of Lynchburg, Virginia, he decided to step out to stretch his legs. Although he landed on his feet, Thomas misjudged the position of the car he was in and

³¹ Benson Bobrick, *The Battle of Nashville: General George H. Thomas and the most Decisive battle of the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2010), 39.

³² Coppee, 23-24.

accidentally slipped down an embankment, severely injuring his back. Although the pain was considerable, he endured the trip as far as Norfolk before receiving treatment, where he called his wife to meet him. Afterward, the couple spent three weeks with Thomas's family in Southampton while he recovered from the fall; however, his back was never the same.³³

Thomas was incapacitated for nearly two and a half months. The injury sustained greatly aged his appearance and many pictures taken of him afterwards made him seem much older than he actually was, especially during the war's later battles.³⁴

With the accident happening so close to secession and the outbreak of the Civil War, Thomas wondered whether he would be able to continue with his military career, but by the time shots were fired on Fort Sumter, he was ready. His back still bothered him often throughout the war, and many historians, including one his first biographers, Thomas Van Horne, denote that as an explanation for his slowness during numerous battles.³⁵ Christopher Einolf also references this injury as a reason for Thomas's strict requirements for tent accommodations. While many commanders contented themselves with a simple bedroll comparable to a sleeping bag, he insisted on having a bed in order to be well rested for each day. However, there were other comforts Thomas could have demanded due to his back injury, such as better clothes or more substantial food, but a nice cot was his only personal requirement.³⁶ True, his physical carriage was often labored and his movements careful and deliberate, but those were habits that dated before the accident. After all, "Old Slow Trot" was a nickname he had acquired as an instructor at West Point when he was perfectly fit for military duty. This injury may have been a

³³ Bobrick, *Master of War*, 55-56.

³⁴ Thomas, 128.

³⁵ Thomas B. Van Horne, *The Life of Major-General George H. Thomas* (New York, NY: C. Scribner's Sons, 1882), 19-20.

³⁶ Einolf, 246.

secondary factor regarding Thomas's caution during the war, but it was not the primary reason; rather, his carefulness came as a result of his unique views on battle and tactics.

In Thomas's requests for better camp accommodations, he did not limit the demand to his own personal tent, but also for that of his soldiers, particularly in the field hospitals. The medical care received in his camp was the best that any could ask for with well-ventilated buildings and neat rows of beds upon thoroughly scoured floors. The mattresses they used were comfortably filled with fresh straw and were covered with clean sheets and soft pillows. Throughout the war his hospitals were like little towns in and of themselves with 600 horse-drawn covered wagons to serve as ambulances, 400 surgeons, and 3,000 nurses and attendants.³⁷ Thomas's operational doctrine may have seemed annoyingly conventional and even backward at times; however, his camp accommodations were top of the line. Some of his more advanced tactics included his use of map coordinates for battle planning, as well as developing a portable pontoon bridge that would help in crossing rivers. Not only were his hospitals the equivalent of a small town, they were also mobile, a most valuable feature during a campaign that expanded vast distances. He also developed the first mobile command post, moving his headquarters alongside the company of soldiers instead of taking time for makeshift housing that often put local farmers out of their homes as soldiers imposed upon them for lodging.³⁸

Having mobile headquarters allowed Thomas to stay close to his men on the front lines of the battlefield, and he was able to meet their needs as they came along. Many generals remained in the safety of their headquarters while their men went out to fight, but if any problems arose, they were not in a position to implement countermeasures. Thomas wanted to be prepared for battle, but he knew that not every contingency could be predicted, thus he needed to be in the

³⁷ Bobrick, *Battle of Nashville*, 60-61.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 77.

field with his men in case his plans needed adjusting. Once again he showed compassion for his men; with no regard for his own safety he put himself on their level with his tent right on the front lines.³⁹ Thomas also showed a tendency to move his headquarters from camp to camp to observe how each division was doing instead of having subordinates report to him. He found it easier to assess a situation if he saw it for himself and that solutions could be reached more easily if he was actually on the battlefield to execute them.⁴⁰ Along with his mobile headquarters, Thomas also oversaw the construction of a special wagon to accommodate his staff, complete with fold-out desks and awnings that would keep maps and papers containing battle plans dry in inclement weather. He also kept a personal map book in his headquarters containing his own hand-drawn sketches of each campaign he conducted, which were extremely detailed in noting the distances between strategic points, as well as the quality of the roads upon which they traveled. With these features, Thomas's mapmaking department became the most sophisticated topographical organization of any unit in the Civil War, Union or Confederate.⁴¹

It is astonishing how other generals could see innovative methods such as these and still treat his careful planning as slow and unnecessarily cautious. Men like Grant and Sherman would chide him for his addiction to detail; however, it seemed to benefit him time and time again. His careful preparation resulted in victorious battles that featured fewer casualties, something not many Civil War generals could boast. His mobile headquarters may have been crude, but it was practical, and the expertise of his staff made the campaign plans of other outfits seem like child's play. He was not often surprised by the outcome of a battle, as he was well acquainted with modern warfare and could foresee the outcome before it occurred.⁴²

³⁹ McKinney, 251

⁴⁰ Charles King, *The Rock of Chickamauga* (New York: Dillingham, 1907), 180.

⁴¹ Einolf, 223.

⁴² Furgurson.

“Systematic and thorough, his victories were neither successful experiments nor lucky accidents, but the logical result of deliberate plan and of effective execution; his battles were not games of hazard, but problems successfully solved.”⁴³

However, many of these modernizations were improvements upon the foundations left to Thomas by William Rosecrans, the commander he succeeded. A hospital train system had already been established by Rosecrans, utilizing locomotives, train cars, and railroad personnel for the proper care and transportation of wounded soldiers. Thomas merely built upon this with his mobile hospital towns and his collaboration with the Sanitary Committee to acquire the most up-to-date medicines for his men. He also worked to improve the health of his soldiers by establishing cemeteries for those who perished in battle. During war, there was often not time to bury the dead, and many bodies were left to decompose into the earth, the soldiers’ personal effects being sent to their families when possible. However, the countless dead bodies that remained unburied throughout the country caused unsanitary conditions in the camps nearby, thus the national cemetery that Thomas had constructed near Chattanooga also contributed to the health of his soldiers.⁴⁴

Thomas also made sure the food his men received was as fresh as possible under campaigning conditions. They may have at times received hard crusts of bad bread like every outfit, but he saw to it that fresh bread was acquired as often as possible and also requested a variety of foods like canned tomatoes, sauerkraut, and pickles. Some of this food was ordered, packed, and stored by the barrel, and because Thomas took the time to get sustenance that was fresh, his soldiers were better nourished than most, preventing them from catching various diseases common to other camps, such as scurvy. This is a vitamin-deficiency disease often seen

⁴³ William H. Lambert, *Major General George H. Thomas* (Philadelphia, PA: J.H. Culbertson & co printers 1880), 15-16.

⁴⁴ Einolf, 222.

during wartime when food, especially fruit and vegetables, is scarce, causing joint pains, swollen gums, and rotting teeth that usually end up falling out.⁴⁵ Thomas learned from his earlier military experiences in the Seminole wars and Mexico that military leadership was nothing without proper discipline and adequate supplies. The soldiers must be well-fed, well-clothed, and kept in good spirits in order to win battles and he would not stand for quality that was of anything less than the best. He learned that if he wanted to see success from his regiments, he would have to train them from the very beginning into a well-disciplined and organized fighting force. This was a challenging endeavor, considering the fact that many Civil War soldiers came straight off the farm, from cities, or out of the mountains having no prior military training. Fortunately, his time as an instructor at West Point had given him the experience to take raw cadets and teach them the essentials of war from scratch.⁴⁶ Thomas's men were grateful for his expertise and greatly respected his knowledge and integrity, for they saw he was a commander of true competence. These new soldiers may have been raw recruits, but they knew experience when they saw it and they were confident they could trust this compassionate and disciplined commander to bring them safely through the war.⁴⁷

A particular instance during the Mexican American War that would contribute to Thomas's demand for adequate supplies as well as his careful attention to detail was the bombardment of Fort Brown on May 3, 1846. Although Zachary Taylor was a skilled commander, Thomas, then a lieutenant, had watched him spread his lines too far in order to satisfy a political demand rather than a military obligation, according to historian Freeman Cleaves. As a result of the extension, the general was forced to leave the battlefield in order to

⁴⁵ Bobrick, *Battle of Nashville*, 60.

⁴⁶ Einolf, 6-7.

⁴⁷ Archer Jones, *Civil War Command and Strategy: The Process of Victory and Defeat* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1992), 4.

obtain more supplies, subjecting his men to a disorganized frenzy against a better prepared enemy. Although Taylor had trained his soldiers well and they managed to hold the fort, the engagement ended with dire ramifications. It was not looked upon as a victory, for the fort could have fallen at any moment due to the unpreparedness of the American soldiers. If the Mexicans had been any stronger, they could have completely wiped out Taylor's half-starved and beleaguered force. An adequately supplied force would not have necessitated the absence of its commander. Thomas was determined not to let the same thing happen to forces under his command later during the Civil War and thus did everything he could to see that his armies were adequately prepared. He may have rubbed other commanders the wrong way in doing so, but in his mind, he could not risk being caught inadequately prepared in the heat of battle and be forced to improvise. He would rather "operate of fixed principles with absolute readiness," making sure his lines of communication were clear and his food supplies adequate for his campaign. His reluctance to take risks may have cost him recognition throughout the Civil War, but the rewards for his caution came in the respect he received from his men, who recognized his wisdom, even if the administration in Washington did not.⁴⁸

When Thomas assumed command over the Army of the Cumberland after the disaster at Chickamauga, he discovered their defeats had left them in a dire condition. The Confederates had seized control of much of the Nashville and Chattanooga railroad line, which allowed them to confiscate supplies bound for the Union camps. For a time, he was forced to place the army on half rations and sadly watched horses die daily as he contemplated a way to provide for his men.⁴⁹ At times during the war, accommodations for Union soldiers had been considerably lacking, as many were forced to fight without proper shoes or quality coats equipped for cold

⁴⁸ Cleaves, 28.

⁴⁹ Brockett, 178.

weather. In Chattanooga, food, weapons, and shelter supply were also inadequate and thus many generals stood in bewilderment, puzzling over how they would conduct battles with such piddling accommodations. Unlike most commanders who would take what supplies they could get and ran their men ragged, Thomas was appalled by what little his men were expected to fight with and decided to do something about it. He worked through the military bureaucracy to obtain proper supplies, at times having to pledge his own personal credit because not enough was allocated to the company itself. Nearby contractors often only accepted cash and local commissary stores stocked supplies were not nearly worth their marked price. As new recruits poured in, Thomas quickly whipped them into shape, expecting the utmost discipline and not tolerating the slightest insubordination. Some soldiers resisted order and adequate supplies were hard to come by, but Thomas realized that preparedness meant everything in battle and there was no margin available for error.⁵⁰

While other commanders valued the Napoleonic methods of massing forces and utilizing quick movement in confronting the enemy, Thomas favored a more methodical approach. Many generals viewed caution as a weakness and in some ways that may be true if a general was so careful that he became wary of taking action when it was needed. The Union went through several commanding generals before finally settling on Ulysses S. Grant because his predecessors were viewed as too slow and reluctant to press the enemy. Although Thomas was one of the few able to find more success in deliberate maneuvering, he was still resented by his peers and superiors for not moving more quickly.⁵¹ However, because of his strong leadership, the loyalty he needed was found in his soldiers as he trained them to be an invincible defensive

⁵⁰ Bobrick, *Master of War*, 85-86.

⁵¹ Winston Groom, *Shrouds of Glory: From Atlanta to Nashville – the Last Great Campaign of the Civil War* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 11.

force that would hold a line fast until help arrived. In his war reports, Thomas quoted one of his brigadier generals, J.M. Brannan, who seemed to best articulate the endurance of his army:

Nothing can exceed the desperate determination with which the rebels endeavored to gain possession of this point, hurling entire divisions on my small force, in their fierce eagerness to gain a position which would undoubtedly have given them the grand advantage of the day. My troops maintained their ground with obstinacy, evincing great gallantry and devotion, in the most trying circumstances, until reinforced.⁵²

Thomas was a true inspiration to his men, instilling confidence in them as they observed him holding Union lines of defense like an impenetrable rock wall. No matter how overwhelming the situation, he did not panic; no matter how many Union troops fell around him, he remained calm. Other generals like Grant and Sherman may have viewed him as slow to move, but to his men he was immovable, putting up a strong defense in an effort to preserve his forces instead of risking them in a reckless attack.⁵³

⁵² George H. Thomas, *Report of Major General George H. Thomas to the United States Congress Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War* (Milwood, NY: Kraus Reprint Co., 1977), 73.

⁵³ Joseph A. Altsheler, *The Rock of Chickamauga: A Story of Western Crisis* (New York: D. Dodo Press, 1915), 292-293.

Thomas's Decision for the North

By 1861, George Thomas was well-known within the military, both for his devotion in battle during the Seminole War and the Mexican American War, as well as his dedicated service as an instructor at West Point. He was then a distinguished major of forty-five with twenty years of experience in the United States Army and was known tenderly by his students and fellow soldiers as "Old Tom." He was regarded with much respect throughout his state for his proficiency and experience; there was no one better to consult regarding military tactics and artillery. Unfortunately, the Civil War would change all that, as it split the country in two and presented a difficult decision for all Americans, especially Thomas.¹ When the first shots of the war were fired on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, Thomas was in Harrisonburg, Pennsylvania. Upon hearing the news, he telegraphed his wife Frances in New York of his decision to remain a soldier for the United States Army and fight with the Union.

Undoubtedly it was a hard choice for Thomas, to turn against state and family in an oath of allegiance to his country, but he stood firm in his decision, evidenced in the telegraph to Frances: "Whichever way I turned the matter over in my mind, my oath of allegiance to my Government always came uppermost." His wife may not have been a part of the final decision, but she supported him in whatever choice he made. His family in Southampton, Virginia, on the other hand, was outraged and disowned Thomas from that day on, turning his picture to the wall.² In addition to this, his sisters also committed several other acts of blatant rejection, including destroying all his letters and even suggesting that he change his name. When he asked for the sword he had been given after the Mexican American War to be sent to him, they refused.

¹ "Benson Bobrick, *The Battle of Nashville: General George H. Thomas and the most Decisive battle of the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2010), 40.

² Benson Bobrick, *Master of War: The Life of General George H. Thomas* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 2009), 65.

It had been awarded to him by the state of Virginia and since he was deserting that state by fighting for the Union, apparently he had surrendered his rights to such a gift. Some neighbors had the audacity to claim that if he ever set foot in Southampton again, they would execute him with his own sword. However, he would not back down from his decision, committing to serve his flag and the country it represented even though his fellow Southerners seemed determined to see to its destruction.³

From that point on there was a painful separation between Thomas and his family, especially his sisters, who never spoke to him again. The only sibling who would ever talk to him following his decision for the Union was his brother Benjamin. While their relationship may have been mended, Thomas's sisters never forgave him for deserting to the Union.⁴

Secession challenged each citizen of the United States, forcing them to choose between sides that seemed equally compelling, and the results literally split the country in two. It was a hard choice for anyone, but especially for Thomas, having been a distinguished soldier in his country's service for two decades but also being a prominent Virginian. The decision was by no means cut and dry, residing in a gray area of uncertainty throughout the entire country. It was clear his duty could be scrutinized as lying on either side of the war; however, he ultimately assessed that his first obligation was to his country rather than his state.⁵ Thomas was a man caught adrift between two worlds, a vagrant of sorts who never quite fit in anywhere after his decision. He had criticisms and condemnations coming at him from both sides, not being trusted anywhere he

³ Freeman Cleaves, *Rock of Chickamauga, the Life of General George H. Thomas* (Greenwood Press, 1974), 4-5.

⁴ Henry Coppee, *General Thomas* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1898), 2.

⁵ Christopher J. Einolf, *George Thomas: Virginia for the Union* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 8.

went. He had no support in Washington like Grant and Sherman did, and he had no family, with the exception of his wife, supporting him and keeping his spirits up through this hard time.⁶

Thomas became something of a pariah following his decision, not belonging anywhere, being one of the few Southern officers in the United States Army who would not resign in order to join the Confederacy. He was branded as a traitor in the South and a man not to be trusted in the North, and his old school methods of instruction from his time at West Point did not help matters much.⁷ The North looked at his Southern heritage on a Virginia plantation worked by slaves and deemed him a man to be wary of at best and a spy at worst. His former service in the military had him acquainted with various prominent soldiers of the Confederacy such as Braxton Bragg, J.E.B. Stuart, Robert E. Lee, and even President Jefferson Davis. Thomas's connection to these men did not bode well for his being trusted among his fellow Union officers and almost ruled out any chances he would have at promotion. Meanwhile, the South was resentful of Thomas's decision, his family furious, even to the point of rejecting any financial aid he tried to send them. To them he was as good as dead; from that point on his sisters would refuse to admit any relation to the Union general by the name of George Thomas.⁸ "In remaining loyal to his country he gave up home, kindred, and friends, and severed ties which many of us found to be the strongest incentives to duty as soldiers. It is said that his sisters never mentioned his name from the day he refused to join the army of conspirators who sought to overthrow the government."⁹ At the end of the Mexican-American War when Thomas had been presented with the congratulatory saber for his service, his state had been proud to take credit for his strong

⁶ Bobrick, *Battle of Nashville*, 32.

⁷ Winston Groom, *Shrouds of Glory: From Atlanta to Nashville – the Last Great Campaign of the Civil War* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 115.

⁸ Peter Andrews, "The Rock of Chickamauga." *American Heritage* 41, Issue 2: 83.

⁹ Lieutenant Ell Torrance, *General George H. Thomas* (Address to the Minnesota Commandery of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, March 8, 1897), 3.

heritage. Less than a decade-and-a-half later, that same state disowned him as a traitor; the officer once considered nothing short of brilliant was now rejected by his own state and family.¹⁰

Even after the war was resolved, Virginia's bitterness towards Thomas was not, and that grudge held for decades in Southampton. In fact, when historian and fellow Union general Oliver O. Howard was conducting his research to explain Thomas's decision for the Union in 1890, he traveled to Virginia for information. However, when he reached the Southampton plantation where Thomas's sisters still lived, they refused to tell him anything, having disowned their brother years before. Although it was twenty years after Thomas's death, the town was still bitter, and Howard was not able to get any information from the neighbors, for they all considered him an irredeemable traitor.¹¹ However, Thomas unfortunately was not able to find a place for himself amongst Union soldiers either. Even though he had sacrificed his loyalty to his state and even to his family, essentially giving up all to side with the North, they remained cautious when it came to trusting him. They simply could not seem to wrap their minds around the concept that a Southerner would be totally willing to sacrifice all in defense of a union for which not even his own state would fight.¹²

Many people have spent entirely too much time dwelling on Thomas's Southern upbringing and marveling over his desertion of his state in order to fight for the Union. They tend to overlook his loyalty to the United States and his willingness to abandon his state for the sake of his country. The essence of these views can be seen in the following quote from Captain Erasmus Darwin Keyes: "There is a moral in the life and services of Thomas. He was strictly conscientious, he loved Virginia, and his affections for the South were strong. He was also

¹⁰ Thomas B. Van Horne, *The Life of Major-General George H. Thomas* (New York, NY: C. Scribner's Sons, 1882), 9.

¹¹ Einolf, 12.

¹² Robert P. Broadwater, *General George H. Thomas: A Biography of the Union's "Rock of Chickamauga"* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2009), 2.

warm for the Union.” It is noteworthy Keyes’s comments toward Thomas’s allegiance to the North remained brief, but most of his observation concerned his Southern heritage. He, like many others, spent too much time examining what Thomas gave up in rejecting his state instead of focusing on his strong display of patriotism displayed in remaining loyal to his country in a time of immense crisis.¹³ When the Civil War broke out, Thomas had been a member of the military for twenty years, having faithfully served in the Seminole Wars, the Mexican American War, and then teaching at West Point. During those two decades, he had only been on two furloughs and being a soldier was second nature to him. He had spent almost half of his life in service to the United States and he could not dream of doing anything different, even when it resulted in his state and most of his family disowning him.¹⁴

One prominent member of the Confederacy Thomas was well-acquainted with before the Civil War was Jefferson Davis. They had fought together in the Seminole wars and in Mexico, being alongside one another in battles like Buena Vista. In fact, when Davis was the United States Secretary of War, he submitted Thomas’s name for a promotion. It was clear at that time that Davis greatly admired Thomas as a valiant soldier; however it was a friendship that would not last due to Thomas’s decision for the Union.¹⁵

Braxton Bragg and J.E.B. Stuart were two other examples of former United States soldiers who resented Thomas for deserting the Confederacy in order to side with the Union. The former had fought with Thomas in the Mexican American War and had written letters of recommendation on his behalf. In fact, Bragg refused a promotion during that particular war and suggested that Thomas instead receive the position. At the time, while Bragg did not view

¹³ Wilbur D. Thomas, *General George H. Thomas: The Indomitable Warrior* (New York, NY: Exposition Press, 1964), 75.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 30.

¹⁵ Coppee, 24-25.

Thomas to be a brilliant commander, he recognized his potential, telling Secretary of War Jefferson Davis that he was “a solid, sound man; an honest, high-toned gentleman, above all deception and guile, and I knew him to be an excellent and gallant soldier.”¹⁶ Bragg and Thomas could have been very close friends had it not been for the war; as it was, they became rivals in the Western Theater of Tennessee, Thomas fighting for the cause of the Union, but Bragg for a personal vendetta, at least in the case of Thomas.¹⁷

J.E.B. Stuart, on the other hand, had been one of Thomas’s students at West Point, and although their relationship there is not known, Stuart made clear his feelings about his former instructor’s decision. He believed Thomas to be a traitor to the Confederate cause in his service with the Union Army; in fact he considered the act nothing short of desertion. In one instance, Stuart wrote to his wife that he would like to subject Thomas to the same punishment all turncoats deserve: a hanging. However, historian Christopher Einolf makes the conjecture that had Thomas ever been captured by the Confederacy, he would not have been executed, but rather held as a prisoner. He states that officers were more useful as bargaining chips for prisoner exchanges rather than simply throwing them into piles with other casualties of war. However, Einolf also emphasizes how fiercely Stuart bore down on his pen when writing the word “hang,” showing how much contempt he had for Thomas. In this he disproves his earlier argument that Thomas was not likely to be killed if captured. Although a Union officer might be held as a bargaining chip, a traitor was quite a different matter. If they had ever captured Thomas, the Confederate authorities might have held him as a prize like any other Union officer instead of resorting to Stuart’s suggestion. However, it is clear that Stuart viewed Thomas with much

¹⁶ Cleaves, 54.

¹⁷ Bobrick, *Master of War*, 117.

disdain, and he was not the only one; fortunately for the Union however, Thomas never was captured, nor even wounded, during the Civil War.¹⁸

Among the historians who have studied Thomas, there has been much speculation as to his motivation for joining the Union; however, his telegram to his wife may be the most revealing piece of evidence. He considered his service to the government of the United States to be his highest priority. Many Southerners were suspicious of his allegiance, however, believing that he joined the Union out of resentment for the Confederacy after they denied him a commission. One of these people was General Fitzhugh Lee, who published an article in the Richmond newspaper in 1870 asserting this very argument. During the late 1860s, Thomas's loyalty to the nation was the subject of much debate; in fact he passed away while writing a letter responding to one of the many disparaging articles. The debates continued on for years after his passing, as Lee continued to argue that Thomas joined the Union not out of his loyalty to them but out of his disdain for the Confederacy for not offering him a commission.¹⁹ Although the Virginia Assembly considered offering Thomas a position in the Confederate Army, the meeting took place shortly after Fort Sumter and there was no way any proposal would have arrived in Pennsylvania prior to his decision.²⁰

Before Fort Sumter and Virginia's secession, Thomas was offered the position of his state's chief of ordnance. He declined this opportunity, wishing to remain in the U.S. Army as long as Virginia was still a part of the Union. However, when shots were fired on Fort Sumter a month later, causing his state to secede, Thomas remained steady in his decision to align himself

¹⁸ Einolf, 93, 99.

¹⁹ Thomas B. Buell, *The Warrior Generals: Combat Leadership in the Civil War* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1997), 35.

²⁰ Cleaves, 4.

with his country.²¹ According to one of Thomas's fellow instructors at West Point, Henry Coppee, the Confederacy did not make any special offer to Thomas for a commission in their army. Instead, he received a general request from Governor John Letcher of Virginia asking officers who resided in Southern states to resign from the United States Army and enlist in the forces of their various states' armies. There was no one in the North giving Thomas a better offer or even trying to remind him of the oath he had taken to defend his country, but he felt he had an obligation all the same. He did not make his decision in ignorance, however: "He knew that he would receive bitter reproaches from all his Southern relations and friends on the one hand, and suspicions of his loyalty from the authorities at Washington on the other."²²

Another question of his loyalty was Thomas's application for a position at the Virginia Military Institute, evidenced in a letter he had written to the academy's head administrator. Some Southern sympathizers like Fitzhugh Lee claimed Thomas's pursuance of this position as evidence to his allegiance to the Confederacy. However, this took place before Virginia had even contemplated secession and war did not seem within the realm of possibility, according to Benson Bobrick. Thomas submitted the letter on January 18, 1861, and by then, only two states had seceded from the Union, and both were in the Lower South where strong views on slavery and states' rights were prominent. At that time, it did not seem likely that any of the states in the Upper South, including Virginia, would sever their ties with the Union. Furthermore, the war's first shots on Fort Sumter would not come for another three months and most still held out hope

²¹ Ernest B. Furgurson, "Catching up with 'Old Slow Trot.'" *Smithsonian*, March 2007, Vol. 37 Issue 12, p 50-57. http://rx9vh3hy4r.search.serialssolutions.com/?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2004&ctx_enc=info%3Aofi%2Fenc%3AUTF-8&rft_id=info:sid/summon.serialssolutions.com&rft_val_fmt=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:journal&rft.genre=article&rft.atitle=CATCHING+UP+WITH+%22OLD+SLOW+TROT%22&rft.jtitle=Smithsonian&rft.au=Ernest+B+Furgurson&rft.date=2007-03-01&rft.issn=0037-7333&rft.eissn=1930-5508&rft.volume=37&rft.issue=12&rft.spage=50&rft.externalDBID=GSMI&rft.externalDocID=1286881511 (accessed May 13, 2013).

²² Coppee, 28.

that any aggression from early secessionists would be quickly subdued.²³ Virginia in fact, though it would become a prominent focal point during the war itself, it was one of the last states to secede, waiting as long as its administrators thought possible.²⁴ Also, considering Thomas's years of teaching at West Point and his popularity there with students and faculty alike, his looking into employment at VMI should not have been a basis for questioning his loyalty to the Union.²⁵

In fact, the post that Thomas applied for at VMI had been filled and thus he was not offered a position, but instead was given the opportunity of being Chief Ordnance of Virginia. However, accepting that particular position would require him to resign from the army, the only employment he had known for the last twenty years, and Thomas was not about to do that. In his rejection of this position he wrote, "As long as my native State remains in the Union it is my purpose to remain in the army, unless required to perform duties alike repulsive to honor and humanity." Some historians such as Winston Groom use this statement to assert that Thomas did for a time consider aligning himself with the South. In a way it does seem Thomas was stating that if his state seceded, he would leave with it, but he also said that he would not take part in any action that would go against his integrity. As it is, his honor resided with his country and the flag that flew overhead; therefore he would refuse to comply with anyone or anything that asked him to fight against it.

The United States Army was all Thomas had known for twenty years, having served in the midst of numerous difficulties, and he would continue to serve for many more, even if it meant combatting his own state in the process.²⁶ Also, at the time that particular letter was

²³ Bobrick, *Master of War*, 65.

²⁴ Buell, 33-34.

²⁵ Andrews, 83.

²⁶ Groom, 116-117.

written, it did not look as if there was going to be a war, as most people on both sides still hoped a resolution could be reached peacefully. The shots on Fort Sumter in April of 1861 caught the Union by surprise, and even some Southern states were taken aback by the event as well. The North had thought the Southern agitation to be a bluff that would not be carried through, and the some Southern states believed democracy would bring about a situation that would be satisfactory to both parties in the end. However, on April 12, 1861, all those aspirations went up in flames with the remains of Fort Sumter, and the United States at that moment had virtually been destroyed. The war may have been unanticipated, but it thus broke out, and all Americans, including Thomas, had to make a choice. His decision was not an easy one, but once it was made, he never looked back, resolving to fight for his country to the very end.²⁷

Upon his decision to fight for the Union, Thomas was forced to forgo any support he had, as most of it resided in Virginia with people who sided with the Confederacy. Any property he had in Virginia was confiscated, with the exception of his family farm, which his sisters were able to retain because of their allegiance to the Confederacy. According to Francis McKinney, Ohio took on some important administration roles in the Union, and they seemed concerned with only promoting soldiers from their own state like McClellan, Buell, Sherman, Grant, Rosecrans, and Sheridan. Thus, Thomas did not have much political support throughout the Civil War. Even President Abraham Lincoln was wary of Thomas, questioning his loyalty due to his Southern upbringing, opting to “let the Virginian wait” in regards to promotions and commissions of command.²⁸ When General Robert Anderson requested that Thomas be stationed with him in Kentucky, the president hesitated in permitting the assignment. It took

²⁷ Donn Piatt, *General George H. Thomas, a critical biography* (Cincinnati, OH: R. Clarke & Company, 1893), 82-84.

²⁸ Francis F. McKinney, *Education in Violence: The Life of George H. Thomas and the History of the Army of the Cumberland* (Chicago, IL: Americana House, 1997), 93.

character references from both Anderson and William Sherman before Lincoln finally signed off on the posting.²⁹ Whatever his motivation, once aligning himself with the North, Thomas had to show the utmost devotion or risk being suspected as a spy or at the very least, a sympathizer to the Southern cause. Northerners were often wary of Southerners who joined the Union for fear that they would not follow through when they came into confrontations with their friends and families on the opposite side. The country's future was at stake, and there was no room for a margin of error on the part of "lukewarm, half secession officers in command who can't bear to strike a blow lest it hurt their rebel friends or jeopardize the precious protectors of slavery."³⁰

According to General Ulysses S. Grant, the Civil War, or the Southern Rebellion as he called it, was an outgrowth of the Mexican American War a little over a decade earlier. As a result of that particular conflict, America had gained another slave state and further expansion was foreseeable in the near future. The North was trying to balance the number of free and slave states as they were admitted to the country; however, the fear that the institution would one day divide them was always ominously present.³¹ Numerous political factors hung over the conflict, primarily in the context that Abraham Lincoln managed to obtain the presidency without receiving any Southern electoral votes. Many people who had not cared much for politics before were now fully involved as their states were faced with the decision of whether to secede with the Confederacy or remain in the Union. However, Thomas never aligned himself politically, believing it was a soldier's duty to serve his country regardless of the political conflict ensuing all around him. He never identified with Whigs, Democrats, or Republicans, and most likely never cast a vote, and this dislike for politics was evident throughout his entire life. In 1861 he

²⁹ Henry M. Cist, *The Army of the Cumberland* (New York, NY: Blue and Gray Press, n.d.), 236.

³⁰ Archer Jones, *Civil War Command and Strategy: The Process of Victory and Defeat* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1992), 81.

³¹ Buell, 23.

watched with deep sadness as his state seceded and his country was ripped apart by a war of its own making.³²

Thomas did not wish to waste his time with the false diplomacy of a politician; although he was a prominent Virginian, his commitment was to his country. He had been a soldier in the republic's service for the past twenty years and he was not about to change his allegiance now, even with his own state joining the Confederacy.³³ While many decisions in this war were made from the clouded minds of the emotionally hot-headed, Thomas drew his conclusions calmly, with a sound mind. Emotions may have been raging inside of him as he made the difficult choice between state and country, family and conscience, but he subdued them to make a level-headed decision with complete rationality. True to his "Old Slow Trot" nickname, he made his choice not upon impulse and emotion, but rather a process of clear and balanced thinking, fully comprehending the depth of his critical decision.³⁴

With the outbreak of the Civil War, many other Virginians had a difficult choice before them, Robert E. Lee for example. He was another man who no doubt felt torn between his state and his country, his family and his conscience, but unlike Thomas, he chose to side with the Confederacy. He did not favor slavery or secession, but neither could he bear to join a cause that would make him do battle against his native state. Thomas on the other hand ultimately decided to forgo his allegiance to Virginia in order to reaffirm his loyalty to the United States.³⁵ He believed that loyalty to the country, its flag, and what it stood for was the one thing that would

³² James A. Garfield, *Oration on the Life and Character of General George H. Thomas. Delivered Before the Society of the Army of the Cumberland, Cleveland, November 25, 1870* (Cincinnati, OH: Robert Clarke & Co., 1871), 9.

³³ Gilbert C. Kniffin, *The Life and Services of Major General George H. Thomas* (Washington, D.C.: Judd & Detweiler, 1887), 7-8.

³⁴ Piatt, 80.

³⁵ Bobrick, *Battle of Nashville*, 32.

bring those who fought for the Union together.³⁶ Lee however, could not bring himself to do battle against the place that housed his friends, his family, and his home, thus he remained with the South. According to Ernest Furgurson, Lee had a lot more to lose by joining the Union than Thomas did with his small Southampton plantation; at least he had a Unionist wife to support him. However, Thomas sacrificed just as much as Lee would have, perhaps more, as Lee had been offered a commission in the Union Army by Abraham Lincoln and refused it, whereas Thomas was offered nothing and yet offered his services.³⁷

Fortunately, there are some authors who understood the magnitude of stress Thomas was under, one of them being James Garfield. This future president declared that with the act of secession on the part of the Southern states, the Union that was the United States had truly been dissolved. At that point, war was inevitable and the citizens were forced with a grave dilemma. At of the initial outbreak of the war when shots were fired on Fort Sumter, Virginia had not yet seceded; however, Thomas had already made the decision to remain with his country. It was by no means an easy choice for Thomas, as he understood the lasting impact it could have; therefore it was not a decision he made lightly.³⁸ General Irvin McDowell accurately sums up the gravity of Thomas's decision in this way:

It is easy for some of us, born at the North, who have felt that the Union of these States was paramount to every consideration to love the Union and take up arms against her enemies. General Thomas was born in a section of the country where such views were not universal; where those who held them faced political and social death, death without a resurrection. It was therefore, perhaps some struggle for him to turn his head in one direction when his affections, probably, called him in another.³⁹

³⁶ George H. Thomas, *Report of Major General George H. Thomas to the United States Congress Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War* (Milwood, NY: Kraus Reprint Co., 1977), 39.

³⁷ Furgurson.

³⁸ Garfield, 9-10.

³⁹ Thomas, *Indomitable Warrior*, 40-41.

Other historians like Francis McKinney also try to downplay the gravity of Thomas's decision, stating that Lee's ties with Virginia ran much deeper. He puts forth the fact that Lee resided in Arlington for much of his adult life as well as his childhood as evidence of his strong ties to his native state. However, he fails to point out the Lee's extended tours of duty in which he also spent much time in the West. He goes on to point out that Thomas did not often return home once he left for West Point, and the time he did spend there was usually brief. McKinney further stipulates that Frances, being a native of New York, had an influence that steadily pulled Thomas to the Northern cause, whether she was aware of it or not. While she may have had some small effect upon his decision, Frances maintained the claim that they never discussed the matter beforehand, and there is no reason to disbelieve her statement. Clearly the choice was one of difficulty on the parts of both men, and it was one they made with much sorrow; Lee because he was deserting his country to fight for his home state, and Thomas because he was deserting his home state to fight for his country. It is said that Lee made his choice out of instinct because he could not bear to break away from his home state, but Thomas came to his decision out of allegiance to his country. Lee was influenced by his emotions toward his fellow statesmen, but Thomas came to his conclusion through a rational thinking process, finally concluding that he would fight for what he believed was right. According to McKinney, many tend to assert the view that Lee was the one to have made the astute decision while Thomas had made a grave error. However, he does not state a reason as to why other than the fact that the South initially seemed to be winning the war while the North experienced defeat after defeat. There is no disputing the fact, however, that Lee went down in history as the most respected general on either side of the war.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ McKinney, 91-92.

The breakup of the Union was a disturbing event in every American's life, and it forced all citizens to make a crucial decision, but military leaders with a strong heritage and good reputation like Lee and Thomas had an especially critical choice in front of them. They were patriots to the core, loyal soldiers to their country, being devoted to the Stars and Stripes for a number of years, but in an instant all they knew was thrown into a whirlwind of uncertainty. One can only imagine the intense debate that went on in the minds of those like Lee and Thomas, for whichever side they chose would force them to go against something they cherished deeply. These two men could have ended up on the same side; however, they had a difference in priorities even though their convictions were similar. Lee's assessment of the situation was as follows: "He knew they were wrong – indeed criminal, but they were his people [regarding Southerners, particularly Virginians]. He could no more resist this appeal to his heart than he could cease to be Robert E. Lee." Thomas went through a similar debate with himself, but kept his emotions in check, not letting his Southern upbringing sway his decision. Finally, he concluded that it would be more of a disgrace to him to turn his back on his country than his state. Lee and Thomas clearly had different ideas as to the meaning of the word "country," as the former attributed that designation to his state of Virginia and the latter to the entire nation of the United States of America. Many Americans at that time associated themselves with their state rather than the nation itself, and Thomas was one of few Southerners who saw the states as a single unit rather than pieces linked together by a similar form of government. His patriotism did not stop at the state lines, but rather spanned the entire country, and he could not bear to discontinue his service in the United States Army when he was clearly needed now more than ever. He did not agree with Virginia's decision to secede, therefore he regretfully severed his ties with them in order to align himself with the Union.⁴¹

⁴¹ Piatt, 80-81.

Another comparison to be considered is that of George Thomas and Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson who, like Lee, was a Virginian who joined the Confederacy. Clarksburg is actually now a part of West Virginia, but in the time before the Civil War, there was only one Virginia. According to Thomas Van Horne, George Thomas’s first biographer, “No soldier in the Southern army was more earnest in supporting the cause of the South than Jackson, and no soldier in the Northern army was more positive in sustaining the Government and the National unity than Thomas.” While Jackson was sympathetic to Southern traditions and chose to fight alongside his native state, Thomas decided to defend the national cause of keeping the Union together.⁴² Interestingly enough, both Jackson and Thomas came out of the war with similar nicknames: “Stonewall” and “Rock of Chickamauga,” respectively. However, although Jackson fought for the side that ultimately lost, his name is the one most people tend to remember over Thomas. These two men had many similarities, including their Virginian heritage and deep passion for their respective causes, but their views regarding the Civil War were quite different. According to Donn Piatt, Jackson was something of a fanatic and very narrow minded in his views regarding slavery, believing it to be a divinely sanctioned institution. Interestingly enough, Jackson regarded slaves with a fatherly superiority, believing that they needed the white man’s instruction. In fact, he set up a Sunday school for black children in Lexington, much like the tutoring sessions Thomas gave to his household slaves as a child; however, Jackson’s approach was different. Piatt describes it as the blind faith of a bigoted mind, taking on quite a different view from most historians who research Jackson. True, “Stonewall” is often an idealized character in many history books, and his reputation is well-deserved; however Thomas, who achieved feats just as deserving, has received significantly less attention.⁴³

⁴² Van Horne, 32-33.

⁴³ Piatt, 94-95.

In the weeks and perhaps even months leading up to secession and finally war, Thomas had no doubt been asked which side he would join should a conflict arise, and he assuredly mulled over all the implications in his mind. However, he never made an officially professed commitment one way or the other until the first shots were fired on Fort Sumter. Though they could have speculated or even suspected it, his final decision was not known beforehand to any members of his family, not even his wife. Frances later wrote that “There was never a word passed between myself or any one of our family upon the subject of his remaining loyal to the United States government. We felt that whatever his course, it would be from a conscientious sense of duty, that no one could persuade him to do what he felt was not right.” Being in different states when the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter, there was no way any of his family members, including his wife, could have had an influence over his final decision that had not already present prior to that event.⁴⁴ According to William Lambert, Thomas was “among the few who esteemed their country greater than their state; who felt that their oath of fealty to the Government was as binding against treason as it was to service against a foreign foe.” However, Thomas’s decision was of much more difficulty, as the soldiers of this war were not fighting an unknown foe from a faraway country, but their own friends and family members. The decision in this case was more crucial, the critical sacrifices resonating even a hundred years later.⁴⁵

Historian Christopher Einolf does not believe that Thomas made his decision on anything other than his loyalty to the Union. He not only denies any evidence that Thomas as a boy gave lessons to the family slaves, but also claims that he shared the Southern view of black inferiority. According to Einolf, Thomas was opposed to the enlistment of black soldiers after the Emancipation Proclamation, believing them to be second rate; however, there is no evidence to

⁴⁴ McKinney, 89-90.

⁴⁵ William H. Lambert, *Major General George H. Thomas* (Philadelphia, PA: J.H. Culbertson & co printers 1880), 5.

support this conjecture.⁴⁶ This author also claims that during the course of Thomas's experiences with black soldiers, his opinion regarding Negroes changed considerably to the point where he became an avid supporter of civil rights after the war. Despite his Southern upbringing on a Virginia plantation, there is no indication that Thomas regarded the blacks he encountered with any form of hostility. Furthermore, there is more evidence to suggest that he felt a sense of compassion for slaves and their condition, both throughout his childhood and adult life. It is therefore plausible to conclude that his sympathy towards America's black population was present from very early in his life and from there only grew as his interactions with them increased.⁴⁷

Robert Redman makes another conjecture concerning the views of Thomas's wife Frances regarding slavery, claiming that she objected to him trying to sell one of the household servants. He uses this as evidence that she approved of the institution; however, he failed to take into account Frances's upbringing. She was from New York, where slavery was virtually unheard of, and when she married a Southern man, he brought with him slaves he had unwillingly inherited from his Southampton plantation. During their marriage, Thomas may have bought slaves to supply them with a home and good employment until they could be released into society. However, he could not own slaves when living in the North, but they would not leave him, and the couple could not bear the thought of selling them to harsh master, thus his decision to send the servants back to his family in Virginia.⁴⁸

Historian Robert Broadwater disputes this focus on slavery being such an important part of Thomas's decision, saying that his Virginia heritage was more the issue. He reminds the

⁴⁶ Einolf, 4-5.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 7-8.

⁴⁸ Robert Redman, "Major-General George H. Thomas, Practitioner of Emancipation." <http://www.aotc.net/article5.htm>.

reader that although slavery was not a Northern practice, blacks who resided there still faced bigotry and discrimination. Also, numerous residents of the border states like Kentucky and Maryland that eventually went North owned slaves. He further stipulates that, whatever Thomas's views on slavery, they were not the source of controversy confounding his countrymen regarding his decision for the Union. Although slavery was an issue of great importance during the Civil War, the basis of the conflict was in the country's sectional differences. People tended to place their first loyalty to their individual states rather than the United States; taking pride in the heritage they held in their respective section rather than the country as a whole. If a foreigner from Europe were to have visited the United States in the years before the war and asked various people where they were from, they would not have responded with "America" as is common today. They more readily claimed to be Virginians, Ohioans, or South Carolinians rather than Americans. Before the war people said "The United States are," as if they were simply individual pieces of land that occupied the same space on the continent and happened to share the same form of government. It was not until years afterward that people started saying "The United States is," taking into account the entire country. With the outbreak of the Civil War, most American citizens sided with their state, looking more at their immediate obligation to defend their homes and families. The idea that someone would turn his back on his family and his state was unthinkable, the worst form of treachery a person could commit.⁴⁹

Thomas was not the only Southerner to join the North, yet his loyalty to the Union seemed to be put into question more often than that of General Winfield Scott or Admiral David Farragut. He would go down in history for the part he played on one of the Union's greatest defeats at the Battle of Chickamauga, but his role in achieving victory at the Battle of Chattanooga has been all but forgotten. He was a man who did not seem to belong anywhere:

⁴⁹ Broadwater, 46.

his native state had rejected him and his country did not trust him, elaborating on his faults and downplaying his victories. The few times he was offered a promotion it was to replace a commander who was seen as even more incompetent. He turned these opportunities down, as he did not believe he deserved them, but when his service record demanded a promotion Thomas was often overlooked and the honor passed on to others.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, he had no one in the Union who was willing to help him receive the promotions he deserved; any of the Congressmen who would have pleaded his case had joined the Confederacy. He did not have the privilege of enjoying the support of his hometown, as they represented the opposition and had further branded him as a traitor.⁵¹

Secession had broken his beloved country in two, and it seemed Thomas was being pulled from all directions; his decision whether to fight for the Union or the Confederacy a pivotal point in his life. Most of his fellow statesmen had sided with the latter, and as a distinguished and prominent Virginian, he was expected to do so as well. He sadly watched as many of his superior officers resigned their commissions in the United States Army, turned their back on the flag, and took part in the rebellion. However, he could not bring himself to follow in their footsteps, aligning himself against something for which he had so passionately fought over the course of the last two decades. He felt his obligation was to his country and there his duty would remain, no matter what the consequence.⁵² Resignation was something he simply could not fathom doing, and he was astounded with the number of officers that left the United States Army in droves to join the Confederacy. He was even more appalled that their resignations were so easily accepted; it was as if the government was condoning their separation from the Union. Thomas did not even view resignation as an option, believing his obligation to

⁵⁰ McKinney, vii.

⁵¹ Broadwater, 1.

⁵² Torrance, 6-8.

be both moral and legal. It grieved him to see so many of his fellow officers give up on their country for which they had so valiantly fought in the Mexican American War a decade earlier. They had lost their faith in the United States and all it stood for, even to the point of destroying it with their own hands, and though his own state was one of them, he refused to join them.⁵³ The firmness of Thomas's decision was not one that fizzled out as the war went on but remained strong throughout to the very end. He never once regretted his choice, even with the consequence of never again being welcome in Southampton. Even after the conclusion of the war, his resolve had to remain steady, as his family was still bitter for his siding with the Union, and they remained so even to the end of his life.⁵⁴

His decision was made, never to be recalled, and as heretofore he had been faithful, so henceforth was his allegiance to the Nation. He stipulated no price, he sought no reward, he prescribed no conditions, he asked no concessions. His loyalty was genuine and wholehearted, and throughout the war, whether on the Potomac or the Tennessee, or the Cumberland, the country had no servant more devoted, no soldier more patriotic that this Virginian.⁵⁵

⁵³ Van Horne, 27.

⁵⁴ Lambert, *Major General George H. Thomas*, 5-6.

⁵⁵ William H. Lambert, *George Henry Thomas: Oration Before the Society of the Army of the Cumberland, at Rochester N.Y., September 17, 1884* (Cincinnati, OH: Robert Clarke, 1885), 14.

Thomas's Battle Experiences

George Thomas played a pivotal role in a number of Civil War battles, including Mill Springs, Shiloh, Stones River, Chickamauga, Snodgrass Hill, (also known as Horseshoe Ridge), Chattanooga, Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge, and Nashville. While these battles are not as well-known as Gettysburg or Antietam, the part they played was no less important. At the outset of the Civil War, the Confederates seemed to be throwing everything they had at the North and they came out victorious in battle after battle. Many believed the war would be a rather short one, and the Union was greatly discouraged from the very beginning.

The Battle of Mill Springs, which took place in Kentucky on January 19, 1862, was the Union's first major victory, serving as a significant morale booster.¹ In addition to Mill Springs, the battle is also known as Logan's Cross Roads and Fishing Creek. The overall commanding officer for this battle was Don Carlos Buell, Thomas being placed in command of the First Division; however, Buell attributed the victory to Thomas's exceptional skill. Unfortunately, others would try to downplay his role in the battle, one of them being the Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton. His commendation from Washington regarding the battle spoke of an admiration for the quick and determined actions of the soldiers there, but it made no mention of the excellence of Thomas's command. The significant role Thomas had played in the victory at Mill Springs seemed to have gone unnoticed by the Union government.²

Kentucky itself was a critical ground with its declared neutrality and its refusal to cooperate with either side. However, the state government did allow the Union to conduct recruiting campaigns there, and as Thomas was commanding camps for these new soldiers, the Confederates invaded. Although they were taken completely by surprise by this sudden strike by

¹ Benson Bobrick, *The Battle of Nashville: General George H. Thomas and the most Decisive battle of the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2010), 46-47.

² Henry Coppee, *General Thomas* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1898), 59.

the enemy, Thomas skillfully used the battle as a trial by fire to see what these troops were made of. Even in the midst of the spontaneity of the encounter, he was still able to formulate a goal to which his men could aspire: to defend Kentucky and perhaps advance into Tennessee. This objective might seem vague and simplistic, but for Thomas's soldiers, it was motivation enough.³ Although Kentucky was the farthest south the Union army had ventured thus far, President Lincoln was pushing for a move into Tennessee and a drive to Knoxville. However, their limited supplies and the difficulty of the mountainous terrain posed complications for the Union Army. Even in favorable weather the terrain was hard to cross, but in the winter months during which Mill Springs was fought, it was even more formidable to the point where it took Thomas's army seventeen days to travel sixty-five miles.⁴

The Confederate commanders at the battle of Mill Springs were George B. Crittenden and Felix Zollicoffer. Although they were both capable commanders, they were not compatible in the least, and the latter often resented the former being assigned over him. Crittenden often used Zollicoffer to test the waters so to speak, as he initially ordered him to invade Kentucky while he followed close behind. Once he arrived at the scene of the battle, however, Crittenden proceeded to take over command.⁵ Steven Woodworth draws an interesting contrast between Thomas and Zollicoffer, pointing out that while the former was a steady and experienced career officer, the latter was a newspaper editor who was appointed for the political purpose of having a balanced amount of generals from each of the political parties. Zollicoffer was described as spontaneous and impulsive, while Thomas was careful and cautious, and these characteristics displayed themselves prominently in the Battle of Mill Springs. Although Zollicoffer had

³ Christopher J. Einolf, *George Thomas: Virginia for the Union* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 103, 122.

⁴ Jack Hurst, *Men of Fire: Grant, Forrest, and the Campaign that Decided the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 56-57.

⁵ *Ibid*, 59-60.

surprise on his side in his impromptu attack, the fact that it was unplanned worked to Thomas's advantage. A drizzling rain on the cold January morning caused poor visibility for both armies; however, Thomas's regiment set up a strong defensive line that expertly handled the formidable weather. Zollicoffer on the other hand, did not manage his attack well and unwisely left himself in the open where he could easily be fired upon. As a result, he did not make it out of the battle of Mill Springs alive, but was counted among the Confederate casualties.⁶

During this particular encounter, the Confederates made blunder after blunder, ruining their element of surprise by allowing themselves to be spotted by Thomas's cavalry patrol. When the officers realized Zollicoffer had been killed and turned to Crittenden, they found he would not be much help, as they discovered him in a drunken stupor in his tent. Thomas, on the other hand, was able to establish a strong defense that stood firmly in the midst of the pouring rain, fighting off the Confederates with remarkable ease.⁷ Out of many Civil War battles often marked by astonishingly high casualty rates and countless strategic blunders, Mill Springs was a rare exception. On that battlefield, Thomas's forces consisted of a mere 7,000 men going up against 12,000 Confederates; yet they still prevailed, reporting only 246 casualties to the 400 the Southern army had sustained. Not only did they drive the enemy out of eastern Kentucky, but the victory also paved the way for the Northern invasion of Tennessee, opening up the door to many other battles in the Western Theater. Although he is not specific as to the quote's origin, Benson Bobrick cites one writer's assessment of the battle: "There had been 'no tactical mistakes to be remedied by desperate countercharges,' no headlong assaults that would have

⁶ Steven E. Woodworth, *Decision in the Heartland: The Civil War in the West* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008), 10-11.

⁷ Winston Groom, *Shrouds of Glory: From Atlanta to Nashville – the Last Great Campaign of the Civil War* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 117.

wasted lives.”⁸ Granted Mill Springs was a small victory in terms of troops present; however, the number of Confederate casualties was almost twice that of the Union, and the hope that it brought to Northern soldiers was something that could not be statistically measured.

The battle of Shiloh, also known as the battle of Pittsburg Landing, was another Union victory, yet this one came at a great price, the Federal casualty amount of 13,000 in over just two days. Despite the massive loss that had resulted from this triumph, this battle proved to be a pivotal moment in the careers of a number of Union officers, in good ways and bad. Whereas Henry Halleck was appointed to supreme commander over Federal forces in the West and George Thomas an army commander, the later esteemed William Sherman and Ulysses Grant were demoted.⁹ The latter became especially resentful toward Thomas afterwards, for although he had earned credit for the success at Shiloh, he knew it had only been gained due to Thomas’s help. At the end of the first day of battle the Confederates had achieved considerable success and the Union casualty report had been staggering. Conversely, on the second day, the tables were completely turned and Shiloh is now known as a Union victory, however costly it may have been.

Originally, Thomas and his division had not been directly assigned to this battle, being part of Buell’s reserve set to arrive toward the end of the engagement to restore order and allow the army to regroup. However, upon hearing the rumors of Grant’s incompetence over the course of the first day, supposedly due in part to intoxication, Halleck decided to step in and take charge of the situation by putting Thomas in command.¹⁰ In this, he was promoted to the rank of major general, a somewhat delayed acknowledgement of his success at Mill Springs a few

⁸ Benson Bobrick, *Master of War: The Life of General George H. Thomas* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 2009), 97-98.

⁹ Ibid, 112.

¹⁰ Groom, 117-118.

months earlier. Thomas had not been involved with this battle initially, but in the end he played a crucial part in salvaging victory out of a chaotic and bloody battle.¹¹ The battle of Shiloh was the worst engagement the Civil War had seen thus far, and even though the Union was victorious, the fact that the Confederates had managed to launch this surprise attack brought about many questions as to the competence of Grant's leadership. Immediately after the battle, many were calling for Grant to be removed from command due to his ineptitude; however, President Lincoln refused to do so saying, "No I can't do it. I can't lose this man. He fights." Thus, while Halleck could not take away Grant's command, he could promote someone else over him until he had a chance to redeem himself, and that is where Thomas came into the picture.

His assignment to command the Army of the Tennessee was more a result of Halleck's animosity toward Grant than an endorsement from Halleck of Thomas's abilities, however. For his part, Thomas had played no part in the decision to remove Grant from command. He was simply following orders. But the embarrassment of the situation was keenly felt by Grant and would cause strained relations between him and Thomas for the remainder of the war.¹²

Unfortunately, it would serve as a starting point for Grant's antipathy towards him, seeing him as a rival rather than an ally. He resented having to be bailed out at the battle of Shiloh and having a Southerner in command over him, however temporary the situation may have been. Thomas had not sought the position; he was simply following Halleck's orders, but that made no difference to Grant. He also recruited Sherman to join him in his bitterness, and from then on both of them were constantly hostile towards Thomas, construing any differing opinions he expressed as acts of insubordination. The two would constantly belittle the Southern Unionist at any chance they had, sabotaging his many chances for further promotion.¹³

¹¹ Coppee, 76-77, 78.

¹² Robert P. Broadwater, *Ulysses S. Grant, a Biography* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Biographies, 2002), 70-73.

¹³ Bobrick, *Battle of Nashville*, 79-80.

The next major battle of Thomas's career, Stones River, demonstrated his interaction with another superior, William S. Rosecrans, a relationship that was considerably different from the one just described. Throughout numerous battles, Thomas and Rosecrans worked well together, and although the former was the commanding officer, the latter welcomed the former's advice. When Rosecrans had assumed command of the Army of the Cumberland, Thomas was placed under him, commanding the Fourteenth Corps, which was further divided into four divisions. In the days before Stones River, his soldiers saw him as an experienced and diligent commander, and they were grateful for his expertise, a stark contrast to the bitterness he endured from Grant and Sherman. On the first day of battle on Stones River, Thomas's divisions made considerable advances, halting the attack of Braxton Bragg's forces, which had already overrun the Union forces of James Negley and Alexander McCook. "Firm as a rock, they stemmed the torrent of advancing rebels at a time when every moment was of infinite value to the success of the day and the retrieval of the disaster. Again and again were Bragg's masses hurled upon them, but, though sadly thinned, their lines were unbroken."¹⁴ The Confederate general, stimulated by his triumph over Negley and McCook, confidently initiated his final assault at the approach of sunset, ready to take another division as easily as he had the first two. However, Thomas and his brigades remained secure and were able to hold off the Confederate advance until it became too dark to fight and both armies were forced to retire until morning.

Later that evening the Union generals came together in a conference, discussing how they could hold their defense the next day or if they should consider a retreat. Thomas was so worn out from the day's battle that he fell asleep during the meeting, only rousing himself for a four-word input: "This army can't retreat!" However brief it may have been, his statement was the

¹⁴ L.P. Brockett, *Our Great Captains: Grant, Sherman, Thomas, Sheridan, and Farragut* (New York: C.B. Richardson, 1865), 172-173.

final conclusion reached by the end of the night, and thus the army deployed the next morning ready to hold the line.¹⁵ Thomas may not have been much for words, but in many cases his actions spoke for him, or rather his inaction, as he held his divisions firm and they remained immovable against the Confederate bombardment. Although Bragg's forces had prevailed against both Negley and McCook, Thomas refused to be discouraged; in fact, he was determined to see to it that his regiments would not be run over as easily. He would not earn the nickname "Rock of Chickamauga" for another nine months; however it is clear that he was deserving of the designation long before then.¹⁶ It was at Stones River that his ability to establish a firm defense showed apparent, even in the midst of perilous circumstances. Curiously enough, the more formidable the situation became the more calm Thomas seemed to be, as if the mounting chaos reinforced his resolve to maintain order. At the end of the first day of this particular battle, the Union Army had been contemplating defeat, but he would not even entertain the thought, considering it a ludicrous idea. Over the next couple days as Thomas and his forces firmly held the defensive line; General Rosecrans was able "to snatch victory out of defeat."¹⁷

The battle of Chickamauga, which became the main source of Thomas's fame, took place in September of 1863, when Rosecrans ordered him to join the forces of General Thomas Crittenden. That morning Thomas ordered his men to be supplied with twenty rounds of ammunition each so as not to be caught off guard as they made their way to the Chickamauga River. In hindsight, it was fortuitous that he prepared his men in this way, for the Confederate Army of Tennessee under Braxton Bragg was not far away. In fact, they were just on the other side of Reed's Bridge a few miles away from the Union camp at Kelly Farm. Thomas received

¹⁵ Coppee, General Thomas, 100-101.

¹⁶ Robert P. Broadwater, *General George H. Thomas: A Biography of the Union's "Rock of Chickamauga"* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2009), 102.

¹⁷ Lieutenant Ell Torrance, *General George H. Thomas* (Address to the Minnesota Commandery of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, March 8, 1897), 12.

word from McCook that one Confederate brigade had crossed over the bridge, but that a ridge behind them had proceeded to burn, giving the Union forces an opportunity to cut them off from the rest of the army. Upon hearing this, Thomas proceeded to take the initiative and confront the isolated brigade; unfortunately, the enemy was not as inaccessible to their comrades as McCook led Thomas to believe. Before they knew it they were outnumbered and on the run, Rosecrans having ordered a retreat to their stronghold in Chattanooga.¹⁸

Despite the fact that Thomas had been misled when he was informed about the secluded condition of one of the Confederate division, his corps did manage to gain some headway before being overrun. According to the report that he submitted following that day, they were able to closely pursue the enemy and set fire to one of their pontoon bridges. This caused much of the Confederate force to be stranded on the other side of the river and allowed for the Union army to several prisoners.

However, it was not long before the enemy was able to regain their composure and give Thomas the fight of his life that would either make or break his career and be responsible for his recognized place in history.¹⁹ The flow and outcome of the Battle at Chickamauga can be easily compared to that of Gettysburg, as neither side was quite ready for the confrontation, unpreparedness that showed itself evident in the massive number of casualties. In each battle there were times when there seemed to be no leader, thus the subordinate commanders were forced to take charge and their armies suffered from their subsequent blunders. Even though Chickamauga was declared a Confederate victory, they too suffered great casualties; therefore they suffered just as great a loss, if not greater, in light of the Northern morale boost due to

¹⁸ Freeman Cleaves, *Rock of Chickamauga, the Life of General George H. Thomas* (Greenwood Press, 1974), 155, 158.

¹⁹ George H. Thomas, *Report of Major General George H. Thomas to the United States Congress Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War* (Milwood, NY: Kraus Reprint Co., 1977), 147.

Thomas's bold stand. According to historian Francis McKinney, "Lee's army never recovered from its defeat at Gettysburg and Bragg's never recovered from its victory at Chickamauga."²⁰ Chickamauga quickly turned into a battle of bloody chaos as the Confederate forces drove Thomas's attack back, bodies dropping by the thousands in a mass of confused frenzy. The river that ran through the battlefield was rapidly polluted with the blood of the dead and dying as well as the carnage of the bodies that fell in upon being shot. Supposedly the meaning of the Cherokee word for this body of water was roughly translated River of Death or River of Blood; little did the Native Americans know when they named it how much the river would live up to such a designation over the course of this two-day battle.²¹

Chickamauga was one of the bloodiest of the Civil War, and although its casualty numbers did not quite match Antietam's, the percentage of those killed at Chickamauga was greater than any other two-day battle of the war. "The Union army suffered 16,179 casualties, or twenty-eight percent of its total force of 57,840 men; and the Confederates suffered about 18,000 casualties, twenty-six percent of their total force of 68,000. While the Confederate army held the field after the battle, it had suffered more casualties than the Union army, making the victory a costly one."²² Historian Wilbur Thomas makes a note of the intense carnage that seemed to wreck the American soil during the Civil War in general and this battle in particular. Even the worst European battles like Leipzig or Waterloo only turned out about a third of the percentage of casualties that the Civil War battles did. Thomas, in his attempt to offer an explanation for why American Civil War battles were so bloody, did not attribute the gore to any superior weaponry or advanced technological knowhow or even to the different varieties of terrain. He

²⁰ Francis F. McKinney, *Education in Violence: The Life of George H. Thomas and the History of the Army of the Cumberland* (Chicago, IL: Americana House, 1997), 260.

²¹ James Lee McDonough, *Chattanooga: A Death Grip on the Confederacy* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 13.

²² Einolf, 186.

instead gave the credit to the stamina of American soldiers and the stubbornness they exhibited in their refusal to give up even when all odds seemed against them. As the course of the Battle of Chickamauga developed, George Thomas proved to be a soldier in this mold.²³

The Union center was driven back, and even though the left flank was holding for the moment, it showed signs of breaking at any time. Rosecrans soon determined that the battle had been lost and decided to withdraw the army to Chattanooga, but as the soldiers fled their minds could not escape the carnage falling all around them on the battlefield. The entire riverside had become filled with smoke from the flames on the nearby ridge as mass confusion and death took control. However, there was one person who remained calm in the midst of all the chaos of the Battle of Chickamauga: George Thomas. He gathered together what was left of his corps, refusing to surrender, and his confidence gave them the audacity to stand their ground with him despite the odds against their survival.²⁴ Rosecrans had already dubbed the battlefield a lost cause, but Thomas refused to give up hope and continued to stand his ground. The army may have been beaten and overwhelmed, but he was certain that the line could still be held if the soldiers had the proper leader to spurn them on.²⁵ “Inspired by his indomitable will and imperturbable courage, the fast thinning line seemed to grow stronger as contracting it drew nearer its leader.”²⁶

Although the battle of Chickamauga was a tragic loss for the North, historian Archer Jones makes a note of a development in military technology that came out of this particular

²³ Wilbur D. Thomas, *General George H. Thomas: The Indomitable Warrior* (New York, NY: Exposition Press, 1964), 354-355.

²⁴ Joseph A. Altsheler, *The Rock of Chickamauga: A Story of Western Crisis* (New York: D. Dodo Press, 1915), 311-312.

²⁵ Catton, Bruce. “Rock of Chickamauga.” Review of F.F. McKinney’s *Education in Violence*, <http://home.earthlink.net/~oneplez/majorgeneralgeorgehthomasblogsite/id35.html>.

²⁶ William H. Lambert, *George Henry Thomas: Oration Before the Society of the Army of the Cumberland, at Rochester N.Y., September 17, 1884* (Cincinnati, OH: Robert Clarke, 1885), 21.

encounter. He cites the expert use of communication throughout the confrontation by way of telegraphs and railroad lines. Despite the chaos that seemed to overtake the battlefield in a matter of minutes, the calmness Thomas and his men exhibited gave the action an almost Napoleonic tone in regards to the expertise at which maneuvers were being executed. Tactically, victory may have gone to the South, but the North also experienced some significant achievements in both strategy and morale.²⁷ However, even with the valiant stand that Thomas and his men made at the Battle of Chickamauga, soldiers who survived would still look upon those two days with a massive sense of sorrow over the amount of lives lost. An unnamed officer quoted by Benson Bobrick left an account of the slaughter in his diary on Christmas Day 1863 while the Union Army was regrouping in Chattanooga.

Today we picked up on the battlefield of Chickamauga the skull of a man who had been shot in the head. It was smooth, white and glossy. A little over three months ago this skull was full of life, hope and ambition. He who carried it into battle had, doubtless, mother, sisters, friends, whose happiness was to some extent dependent upon him. They mourn for him now, unless, possibly, they hope still to hear that he is safe and well. Vain hope. Sun, rain, and crows have united in the work of stripping the flesh from his bones, and while the greater part of these lay whitening where they fell, the skull has been rolling about the field, the sport and plaything of the winds. This is war.²⁸

Thomas's heroic example may have given the men confidence to withstand the chaos of the Battle of Chickamauga, but once the debacle was over and they were recovering, a gloom about the horror of the day seemed to descend upon them. Those who had survived were weary and beleaguered, not sure how they were going to continue on, but knowing they would have to; as the war trudged on, they would be required to do so as well.²⁹

²⁷ Archer Jones, *Civil War Command and Strategy: The Process of Victory and Defeat* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 176.

²⁸ Bobrick, *Master of War*, 215-216.

²⁹ Charles King, *The Rock of Chickamauga* (New York: Dillingham, 1907), 293.

The battle for Snodgrass Hill, or Horseshoe Ridge as it is better known, is often overshadowed as a part of the Battle of Chickamauga, and only mentioned as the place where Thomas earned his nickname, the “Rock of Chickamauga.” However, it could be construed as a separate battle in and of itself, for it had a different ebb and flow than the defeat of Rosecrans at the River of Death. As the Union forces fled Chickamauga, it was clear Rosecrans was defeated, but Thomas was not, and just like at Stones River, he was determined not to withdraw his forces. With the discouraging view of dead bodies littering the ground below and the confused hysteria of soldiers retreating all around him, he calmly set up a headquarters on Snodgrass Hill just beyond the lines of Brigadier General Charles Harker.³⁰ At that point, a retreat seemed to be the only reasonable course of action opened to them and soldiers began to seek encouragement in how well the withdrawal was faring.

However, as the enemy advanced closer and more soldiers continued to join the dead, the men began to lose heart, until they caught a glimpse of Thomas. The determined general had managed to gather the remaining soldiers and form an impenetrable line that would hold fast against the oncoming Confederates.³¹ He then proceeded to set an example by serenely sitting on his horse at the top of the hill, overseeing the progress of the battle, not even flinching as the bullets whirled around him. Thomas was determined to turn this defeat around and to retain his composure even in the midst of all the chaos, hoping to instill the same tranquility amongst the soldiers. In one instance, upon seeing an aide gallop off with a message he had given him, he called the man back and proceeded to order him to the normal pace of a slow trot so as not to

³⁰ Steven E. Woodworth, *Six Armies in Tennessee: The Chickamauga and Chattanooga Campaigns* (University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 121-122.

³¹ Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, *Pennsylvania at Chickamauga and Chattanooga: Ceremonies at the Dedication of the Monuments* (W.M. Stanley Ray, State Printer of Pennsylvania, 1901), 10.

alarm the other soldiers. This showed not only that his nickname of “Old Slow Trot” was well deserved, but also how he implemented his West Point instruction in battle.³²

Although the federal government in Washington was pleased with Thomas and how he had stood strong and kept a sense of order in the Battle of Chickamauga, they were not very pleased with the blunders of Rosecrans that had resulted in the retreat to Chattanooga. Grant did not like the idea of putting Thomas in charge, for he thought him to be too slow, even if he was a good commander. He was more of a defender than an attacker; however, in the case of the next battle at Chattanooga, that was just what the Union Army would need. Even so, Grant’s decision to put Thomas in charge was one he made begrudgingly, as if he was choosing the lesser of two evils within his own army.³³ Thus, Thomas was promoted to overall commander of the Army of the Cumberland over Rosecrans, a literal switching of rank. Unexpectedly however, the two men were able to retain a good rapport, camaraderie, and even friendship with each other throughout the battles that followed. In the next confrontation at Chattanooga, the Union Army would regain its morale due to the determined command of Major General George Thomas. As he made preparations to fortify the city, he received word from Grant to “hold Chattanooga at all hazards,” to which he stoically replied, “We will hold Chattanooga till we starve.” Fortunately, the complications his army would encounter in the battle that followed would not extend that far; however they did come drastically close to that point.³⁴ Horses were already dropping by the thousands as a result of the cold weather and decreased nourishment, and the soldiers themselves were reduced to half rations.

³² Einolf, 175-176.

³³ Jerry Korn, *The Fight for Chattanooga: Chickamauga to Missionary Ridge* (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1985), 88.

³⁴ Bobrick, *Battle of Nashville*, 78-79.

The only two options that seemed open to the Union Army at that point were surrender or starve, and Thomas was determined not to do the former. They did not have the supplies to fight nor even to retreat, not to mention that there were not enough animals to carry what little they did have. Thomas figured they might as well hold fast right where they were and hope for the best, knowing that if he ordered a retreat, it would result in disorder and chaos that would cause the loss of even more lives, and he concluded that they had already lost enough at Chickamauga.³⁵ The situation of the Army of the Cumberland was truly a dire condition with their supply base being one hundred and fifty miles away, and the railroad, however efficient it may have been, was always subject to Confederate raiding. They were essentially stranded from any help and forced to fend for themselves with what little they had stored away in Chattanooga. Circumstances seemed precarious, but Thomas was determined not to be defeated by them; he resigned to surrender neither to the enemy nor to starvation. There had to be a way out and he resolved to find it; he would not stand idly by and let more of his men succumb to death by starvation. Even if that kind of defeat seemed nobler it would produce the same results as a loss on the battlefield. He would have to execute relief plans quickly before supplies ran out with the men's hope following close behind. "Thomas did not simply await the impending fate, for within a few days after his accession to the command, he had executed plans which relieved his army from its dangerous condition."³⁶

Fortunately, Chattanooga was just the kind of stronghold a determined commander like Thomas needed to turn circumstances in his favor. The town resided on the east bank of the Tennessee River and was surrounded by mountains on both the northern and southern sides. These natural conditions made the city a fortress, enough to make any attacking army wary as

³⁵ Coppee, 163-164.

³⁶ William H. Lambert, *Major General George H. Thomas* (Philadelphia, PA: J.H. Culbertson & co printers 1880), 8.

they crossed the rocky terrain, even if the enemy they were about to face seemed on the brink of defeat. Their approach to the town would be easily spotted, but was also long in the coming so that when General Bragg's troops finally reached Chattanooga their strength would already be exhausted from the long and harsh march. Although Bragg was a capable commander with a slightly larger force, he knew he would be defeated upon his arrival at Chattanooga. Thomas's men may have been lacking in supplies, but there was no shortage of determination, and coupled with the position's natural strengths the Union commander was certain his soldiers could hold the city.³⁷ Bragg was not happy with the assignment to go up against a stronghold such as that of Chattanooga, for it was once a town of great strategic significance to the Confederacy. It was the strongest city in Tennessee, and its loss would be almost as devastating to the South as a defeat at Atlanta or even Richmond. The town housed a railroad junction that brought together the lines of Virginia and Tennessee, and even if the Confederates managed to cut off one or even multiple routes, they could not cover them all. This left at least one path for supplies open for the Union Army, leaving them to the task of determining which one and how to utilize it.³⁸

Bragg had resolved that his best option was to surround the city and cut it off as much as he could in hopes of starving the Federals out. Once the northerners had been sufficiently weakened, he and his army could march in and easily take the city. He was hoping to duplicate what the Union Army had done at the siege of Vicksburg when the roles had been reversed and the Confederates had suffered a great defeat due to lack of supplies. However, as the weeks dragged on and Chattanooga still held strong, Bragg's soldiers could see their triumph dissipating along with the advantage they had gained at Chickamauga. If Thomas had not made his stand on Snodgrass Hill and joined the retreat instead, the Confederate Army could have cut

³⁷ Donn Piatt, *General George H. Thomas, a critical biography* (Cincinnati, OH: R. Clarke & Company, 1893), 365.

³⁸ Woodworth, *Six Armies*, 12-13.

off the beleaguered army before it even reached Chattanooga. His determination gave the North a fighting chance in both battles, and even though Chickamauga was a great defeat, Chattanooga would prove to be an even greater victory for the Union. In the four weeks that the town was held, rations were cut in half and then further reduced to a quarter; however, the men remained in strangely high spirits. They refused to lose hope while there was still a chance; even if it was a slim one, they resolved to hold fast. Eventually their endurance would be rewarded and the Confederate Army finally withdrew to Lookout Mountain where the tables could be turned and the North would be the attacking force.³⁹

Even if a history textbook mentions the battle of Chattanooga, not much space is devoted to the account of this engagement. However, the outcome of the battle was no less important, for holding the town would be the key to further movements into the heart of the Confederacy. If the North could manage to hold the city, it could serve as a new base of operations for the Union Army as it continued to proceed into the Deep South.

The fall of Vicksburg paralyzed the south on the Mississippi, but it shortened its line of battle and concentrated its resources. The defeat at Gettysburg simply restored the status quo at Richmond, while the capture of Chattanooga laid bare the vitals whereby the heart's throbs forced lifeblood through the entire southern system. With its mountain surroundings, Chattanooga constituted at once the gateway and the citadel of the south.⁴⁰

Although Chickamauga had been a considerable defeat for the North, if they could manage to hold Chattanooga, their morale would be regained. Not only could they procure the use of an important railroad junction, it would also give them a fighting chance to drive the Confederates out of Tennessee, securing another state for Union control. Thomas's task was to make his little amount of supplies last long enough to a point where his army could hold the city while the enemy grew weary and vulnerable on the outside. Once the town had been secured, they could

³⁹ Fairfax Downey, *Storming of the Gateway: Chattanooga, 1863* (New York: McKay, 1960), 138.

⁴⁰ Commonwealth, 234.

then turn the tables and confront the Southern Army at their nearby stronghold on Lookout Mountain. This would open up the railroad line to bring in fresh supplies to renew the men's energy and prepare them for continuing their charge on to Nashville.⁴¹

Like Snodgrass Hill, Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge are considered part of the Battle of Chattanooga; however they can be considered separate engagements, for the setting and circumstances had been changed. No longer was Thomas's army hanging on for dear life on the thread of near-starvation; as Bragg had withdrawn his army to regroup on Lookout Mountain, they were able to sneak out of Chattanooga and secure the river and roads that ran through the valley.⁴² Although they were tired from the reduced rations, the determination of Thomas's soldiers would not be worn out. For two days they followed Bragg's army to where they set up camp in the valley, and then for three days they fought hard and were rewarded when Lookout Mountain had been gained for the Union. In this victory they were able to cut off communication between General Braxton Bragg and General James Longstreet and open up the railroad lines to get supplies to the Army of the Cumberland.⁴³ This also gave Grant the opportunity to send in fresh troops led by General William Sherman for reinforcement to a point where they could outnumber Bragg's men almost two to one. The confidence that the Union had lost at the Battle of Chickamauga was now restored and Grant was forced to admit that thanks to Thomas they now had the advantage. Historian Peter Cozzens quotes Grant's Chief of Staff John Rawlins and his joyful account of the victory in a letter home: "With Bragg thus deflated by the absence of Longstreet, and General Thomas augmented by Sherman's splendid fighting corps, I am hopeful of the result." Although this soldier formerly had a reputation for being

⁴¹ McDonough, 44-47.

⁴² Bobrick, *Master of War*, 200.

⁴³ Thomas, *Report*, 156.

restrained in confidence and even pessimistic, he gained a new assurance at the victory the Union Army had seen that day at Lookout Mountain.⁴⁴

From their triumph over holding Chattanooga and the proceeding battle on Lookout Mountain, Thomas's forces continued on to ensure their earlier hold on the capital of Tennessee, the city of Nashville. The actual battle did not take place until a year after the battles for Chattanooga and Lookout Mountain; however it was the next confrontation of significance in Thomas's case. This proved to be a busy time for the commander of the Army of the Cumberland, when military affairs seemed to be in a state of extensive disarray. He would not receive much help from Sherman, who already had his hands full with General John B. Hood's men tampering with his communication lines outside Atlanta.⁴⁵ Just as Chattanooga proved to be a strong supply base due to its railroad junction, Nashville was also a city of strategic importance, and gaining access to it was vital. Securing it would give Thomas a strong base of operations in which he could bring in new troops, reorganize the ones he already had, and plan for future action. If the Confederates retook the city, it could serve as a starting point for any subsequent invasion attempts on the North and also supply reinforcements to General Robert E. Lee's army in Richmond. The outcome of the Battle of Nashville would determine the course for the rest of the war itself, and whoever retained it would have the advantage.⁴⁶

Thomas's objective here was to not only defeat the Confederates, but to safeguard the North from invasion once and for all. However, there was one problem he had to remedy: his army was geared more for defense, not attack, and he needed to spend some time preparing them if they were to succeed. It would only take a few days to redirect his troops to a point where they

⁴⁴ Peter Cozzens, *The Shipwreck of their Hopes: The Battles for Chattanooga* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 143.

⁴⁵ Cleaves, 244.

⁴⁶ Coppee, 243-244.

could be ready for a march on Tennessee's capital, but according to General Grant, it was not time the Union could afford to take. There was a certain level of tension between Thomas's tendency toward caution and the requirements of Grant and Sherman's strategy of aggression. In many respects, the year 1864 was the conflict's crucial year, given that Abraham Lincoln was running for re-election against George McClellan and a Democrat platform which called for peace and acknowledgement of the Confederacy as its own separate country. In such circumstances, the Southern armies would put up desperate resistance in the hope that war weariness among the Northern electorate would bring about McClellan's election. Thus, Grant and Sherman sought to break that resistance through a strategy based on the aggressive pursuit of Confederate forces and attacking them wherever they stood their ground, in addition to extensive raids to destroy Southern infrastructure and logistical support. In this situation, the methodical tenacity and emphasis on careful preparation that marked Thomas's style of command, while of great success in the preparation of troops for combat and in crises such as Chickamauga, might not prove adequate to fulfill the requirements of Grant's strategy. As events would prove, however, Thomas had a crucial role to play in the upcoming campaign, one in which he would employ his strengths as a commander to decisively defeat the last significant Confederate threat in the Western theater.

Thomas knew his soldiers, and he was certain victory could not be attained unless he took the time to properly train his men. Thus, he decided to go against Grant's orders for an immediate attack to make sure his troops were primed for battle. Thomas knew that this would further solidify Grant's disliking of him and that it very well might cost him his career; however he refused to walk into battle with unprepared men. Annoyed by the delay, Grant considered giving an order for Thomas to be replaced by General John Schofield so that some progress

could be made. He was well aware that Thomas was the better commander, but was tired of his caution and wanted someone who was willing to take the initiative. However, General Halleck subdued Grant's rashness, telling him that he could very well order Thomas replaced, but the responsibility of doing so would be his alone.

The commander of the Army of the Cumberland had the support and devotion of his soldiers who would likely not stand idly by while a less competent officer took his place. Also, it would not be wise to change commanders so close to the battle at hand, for it would cause even more delays while the army adjusted to Schofield's new authority, not to mention the modifications he might make to the battle tactics before he was finally ready to make his move on Nashville. Rather, no matter how annoyed Grant was at Thomas's delay, it was clear that it was best to leave things as they were and trust Thomas's discernment.⁴⁷ Grant was worried the Confederate defenses might be strengthened while Thomas prepared his army and feared that General Hood might move on to take back control of the Chattanooga railroad line if Thomas did not make a move soon. He thought Thomas was taking a great risk in being so cautious, but he did not realize how bleak conditions actually were on the Confederate side. Grant was unaware of the debates among the Confederate authorities in Richmond about whether to send Hood to initiate an invasion of Kentucky or to leave him outside Nashville. However, his troops were in no shape to make such a bold move, and they could not afford the possible loss of Tennessee's capital city, so the best solution was to leave Hood where he was.

The harsh December weather also delayed Thomas's attack; there was no way he could make a march on Nashville in the midst of freezing rain. When Grant received word of the ice that covered the hills around the city, he reconsidered his plans to replace Thomas, knowing that

⁴⁷ Thomas B. Van Horne, *The Life of Major-General George H. Thomas* (New York, NY: C. Scribner's Sons, 1882), 299, 303.

no one could attack in those conditions. Finally, on December 14, 1864, the weather warmed up to a point where Thomas could commence his attack.⁴⁸ Despite the delay, the morale of Thomas's troops was substantially high, and they were confident it would be a victorious outcome. On the morning of December 15, Thomas commenced an attack upon the Confederate left and then transitioned into an advance upon its center. By doing this, he planned to cut off the left completely, thus opening the door for the right to be overcome even more easily. According to Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, on Thomas's part, this was an "almost perfectly coordinated maneuver, reminiscent of Frederick the Great." In fact, the only real complication that existed was the aftermath of the weather that had delayed the attack in the first place. Even though the ice may have melted, enabling Thomas and his troops to move forward, the ground had turned to mud, slowing the use of artillery. However, despite this particular barrier, the Union still won a resounding victory at the end of the battle.

In this battle, Thomas had the element of surprise in his favor, for although Hood might have known about the attack, he was not aware of where the Northern army would strike. He was able to hold his defense for a good portion of that December morning and was even able to pull more troops to the left to stand against the initial attack. However, he was still not able to hold his defenses, and the left flank of the Confederate army fell by dusk. Thomas and his troops halted to rest for the night, but Hood decided to use the evening to restore his positions in the hopes of catching the Northern army off guard the next day. Thomas opened his attack on the morning of December 16 with a two-hour assault on Hood's army. Although the Confederates were able to hold their defenses for most of the day, the constant barrage began to wear on them. By late afternoon, Thomas's troops had broken through Hood's defensive lines and the

⁴⁸ Earl J. Hess, *The Civil War in the West: Victory and Defeat from the Appalachians to the Mississippi* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 255-258.

Confederates were forced to pull back in disarray. Although this was the last major battle of the Western theater, the number of casualties was surprisingly low on both sides. In fact, Thomas ended up with more casualties than Hood: 3,061 to 1,500; however, the Union army was also able to capture 4,500 Confederate soldiers.⁴⁹

The battle for Nashville took two days with hard fighting on both sides in which there was much confusion due to the rawness of some of Thomas's new troops. However, they fought with just as much dedication as those who were experienced and were determined not to give up, even when it looked like Hood was winning for a time.⁵⁰ Nashville became Thomas's showpiece, a battle that he truly made his own, and he devoted as much time as possible to its planning, being certain that even the most remote detail was covered. His careful mind calculated every contingency as he analyzed every possible difficulty; he would not allow for a single margin of error. The outcome of the battle would not disappoint him: "It was the only field-fight of the war in which an army was destroyed. To the South it was the Waterloo of the four years' struggle. The victory at Nashville furnished a grave in which the last hope of the Confederacy was buried."⁵¹

According to Benson Bobrick, Thomas's victory at Nashville would be the great turning point for the Union in the Western Theater, preventing the Confederates from proceeding further into the North and shortening the war itself. He also states that it secured Sherman's March to the Sea and left the Southern army defending Richmond completely cut off to reinforcements. Although Grant was annoyed at Thomas for delaying his attack due to the inclement weather, none could deny that the commander of the Army of the Cumberland used that extra time wisely.

⁴⁹ Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, *How the North Won: A Military History of the Civil War* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 651-652.

⁵⁰ Woodworth, *Decision in the Heartland*, 133.

⁵¹ Torrance, 20.

The postponement did not take too much time, but it was enough to remount his cavalry and properly prepare them for battle, as well as try Grant's patience.⁵² Strangely, Bobrick dubs the battle of Nashville the most important in the war, ranking it even above Gettysburg or Antietam. He argues that while the Union had gained victory, nothing truly decisive had come out of those battles; however, Nashville was different in that with one battle, the entire Western Theater was secured. The same could not be said of the Eastern Theater, in which it took several battles before the Union could claim total victory and draw the war to a close.⁵³ After the conclusion of the Battle of Nashville, the war in the West was virtually over, and they had Thomas to thank for it, and from this particular confrontation he gained a new nickname: "At Nashville, he exhibited to the fullest his capacities for offensive action, scoring what many military historians feel to be one of the most complete victories of all time, second only to Napoleon's triumph at Austerlitz, earning him the title of 'The Sledge of Nashville.'"⁵⁴

⁵² Bobrick, *Master of War*, 303-304.

⁵³ Bobrick, *Battle of Nashville*, 74.

⁵⁴ Broadwater, 1.

Thomas's Relations with Commanding Officers

Before becoming the commander of the Army of the Cumberland, George Thomas was subordinate to General Don Carlos Buell and later to General William S. Rosecrans. Buell and Rosecrans recognized Thomas for his capability and expertise, valuing his advice and being grateful to have someone of such skill in their army. At various points during the war, both Buell and Rosecrans were seen as incompetent due to poor decisions on the battlefield, and Thomas was given the opportunity to be promoted over them. In the both cases, he refused the post, not wishing to be party to either of them losing command. However, Buell was demoted anyway and Rosecrans was put in his place. He later pressed Thomas to take the promotion over him, being willing to submit himself under Thomas's command. Thomas's southern heritage and upbringing did not affect how these men viewed him; rather they saw him for what he was: an experienced soldier whose country would benefit from his service.

However, after being given his commission, he still had to work in compliance with General William T. Sherman and General Ulysses S. Grant. Thomas enjoyed respectable relations of understood integrity with Buell and Rosecrans, but his association with Sherman and Grant was not so cordial, but rather hostile in fact. Both viewed Thomas as slow and hesitant to act and were annoyed at his careful and cautious planning, especially when it interfered with their own plans for offensive action. This hesitation could be due to a number of things, and in Grant and Sherman's eyes, they were all negative. Perhaps he was wary of the prospect of going up against his own statesmen, many of whom had been his friends and family members. Maybe he was unsure of his plan and decided instead to proceed with caution rather than make mistakes. Perhaps this slowness was merely part of Thomas's command technique and they simply needed a new commander who could show some initiative. Neither of them considered the possibility of

Thomas's real reason for careful movement: preparation. He wanted to be sure his soldiers were well-equipped and ready for battle; he refused to send them into an encounter otherwise. As is evidenced by his association with these four officers, Thomas's relations with his fellow officers during the Civil War were not the same across the board, but were marked by stark differences that merit further examination.

When Don Carlos Buell was in command of the Army of the Cumberland, it was first designated the Army of the Ohio, and Thomas was assigned to command the First Infantry Division, which also consisted of some cavalry and artillery units, making up four brigades in all.¹ Interestingly, Thomas was the more experienced commander, as he had graduated from West Point a year before Buell and was in active service for two wars before the Civil War began, not to mention his years of instruction at West Point. Curiously, Buell was promoted to the rank of major general before Thomas, as well as given the command of the Army of the Ohio. Even so, the two men managed to retain a good rapport with one another, working together in harmony and unity.² Buell and Thomas seemed to have similar views when it came to the army being prepared for battle. However, the former desired that the men be ready to engage at all times while the latter was more careful and meticulous, making sure the soldiers were adequately prepared before moving out. In Buell's mind, the army needed to be able to move out and act at a moment's notice; no camp could be permanently established, nor could it even remain stationary for very long. He prided himself on knowing the enemy's position and numbers, as well as the best way in which to implement his approach. His mind was constantly evaluating all the different avenues of attack, as well as the obstacles that could cause failure.

¹ Benson Bobrick, *Master of War: The Life of General George H. Thomas* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 2009), 93.

² Wilbur D. Thomas, *General George H. Thomas: The Indomitable Warrior* (New York: Exposition Press, 1964), 182-183.

Buell was careful not to leave out any contingency, and Thomas very much appreciated this thorough planning. In his mind, there was no one more capable to lead the campaign into Tennessee, but unfortunately, some disagreed.³

Because of their displeasure concerning the performance of General George B. McClellan, the Union War Department in the fall of 1862 sought to discredit those officers closely associated with him. One of those men was Don Carlos Buell.⁴ Thomas was appalled by this purge where multiple people were condemned for one man's mistakes, and spoke out against these efforts. To Vice President Andrew Johnson he wrote, "I can confidently assure you and the Government that General Buell's dispositions will eventually free all Tennessee and go very far to crush the rebellion entirely." It is clear that Thomas had confidence in Buell's ability to see the Union to victory in their campaign in Tennessee, and he had no intention of interfering with his authority.⁵

Later that year, the War Department became dissatisfied with how Buell conducted his campaigns, holding him responsible for the Confederate invasion of Kentucky in June of 1862. This took place after the Union victory at the battle of Shiloh when Buell decided to , move on with his campaign into Tennessee, taking his army east along the Memphis and Charleston rail line in an effort to seize Chattanooga. However, the Confederate General Braxton Bragg was ready with a countermove, managing to force his way into Kentucky, trying to claim this state for the Southern control. Even though he failed, Bragg was successful in driving Buell back to Louisville, which resulted in the battle of Perryville. Although the Union was able to achieve

³ George H. Thomas, *Report of Major General George H. Thomas to the United States Congress Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War* (Milwood, NY: Kraus Reprint Co., 1977), 14.

⁴ Bobrick, *Master of War*, 137.

⁵ Francis F. McKinney, *Education in Violence: The Life of George H. Thomas and the History of the Army of the Cumberland* (Chicago, IL: Americana House, 1997), 154-155.

victory in this encounter, the War Department was not pleased with Buell's performance.⁶ Without waiting for him to make a defense, nor giving him a chance to remedy the situation, they decided to replace him.

Thomas was the first choice for his replacement, but he was against Buell's being demoted, declaring a great injustice was being done, and he refused to take part in the proceedings. He also did not think it wise to have such a change in command mid-campaign, believing it would cause disorder within the army. It would take time for the men to adjust to a new commander, even if he formerly had been second in command, and time was a precious rarity they could not afford to waste.⁷ Thomas also did not feel prepared to take command, as he had not been given the information needed to proceed in the campaign. As Thomas stood uncomfortably in his commanding officer's tent, Buell, seeing the certainty of his demotion, tried to convince him to accept the promotion. However, Thomas persevered in his position, writing later to General Henry Halleck: "General Buell's preparations have been completed to move against the enemy, and I therefore respectfully ask that he may be retained in command. My position is very embarrassing, not being as well informed as I should be as the commander of this army and on the assumption of such a responsibility."⁸

In the opinion of historian Robert Broadwater, this assertion brings to light a pertinent question: For what did Thomas feel unprepared? As second-in-command, he no doubt knew the strengths and weaknesses of the army, as well as its purpose in the Tennessee campaign. He also certainly knew the importance of establishing Union control over the state, not to mention the dire situation that could result from successful enemy resistance. As second in command,

⁶ Robert Eno Hunt, *The Good Men who Won the War: Army of the Cumberland, Veterans and Emancipation Memory* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama, 2010), 14.

⁷ Henry Coppee, *General Thomas* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1898), 79-80.

⁸ Christopher J. Einolf, *George Thomas: Virginia for the Union* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 132.

Thomas also enjoyed the privilege of conducting numerous conferences with Buell and gave his commanding officer advice on many occasions. Due to these strategy meetings, he was no doubt well informed on the army's position, as well as its role in the upcoming campaign. In many instances, he appeared to be the more competent commander, and he never seemed unsure of his ability to command before. Thus, Broadwater is rather puzzled by Thomas's claim that he was not prepared to serve as Buell's replacement.

A distinct possibility is that the answer lies in the character and integrity of George Thomas. He was a loyal officer who submitted himself to his superiors and had no intention to supersede them in any way. Even if he disagreed with Buell's decisions in battle, those were issues he would have brought up in the privacy of their strategy meetings. He would not go behind his commanding officer's back and supersede his authority solely because he disagreed with him. Thomas viewed these kinds of acts as mixing political and military affairs; two things he did not believe should have anything to do with each other. Regardless, he felt that Buell was being true to his duty and that he had no right to participate in discrediting his superior officer; in fact, he found the entire matter downright insulting. He believed this to be a testing of his honor rather than his ability to command, and according to Broadwater, "in Thomas's mind, his advancement could only come as a result of his own accomplishments, and not by climbing over the heads of his superiors."⁹

However, Thomas Van Horne, George Thomas's first biographer, did not believe the man's decision to refuse the offer to replace Buell to be a result of his modest character; in fact, he saw that conjecture as a disappointing misconception. Van Horne asserts that Thomas was acting solely out of duty to his superior by requesting that Buell be retained in command. He

⁹ Robert P. Broadwater, *General George H. Thomas: A Biography of the Union's "Rock of Chickamauga"* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2009), 81-82.

notes that in his statement, Thomas specified that if the appeal was rejected, he would reluctantly accept the position. By no means did he ever conspire to remove Buell from office, but he would take his place if obligated. However, the War Department saw the account as an outright refusal of the promotion and thus went on to put Rosecrans into that position. According to Van Horne, “he considered it unjust to General Buell to remove him at the culmination of his operations. His request was based primarily on the fact that Buell had completed his preparations to move against the enemy, and secondly on his own embarrassments in taking the responsibility of commanding an army on the eve of battle.”¹⁰ When the War Department went around Thomas and replaced Buell with Rosecrans, he was even more insulted. For a time, he entertained the idea of filing a protest to Washington, but Halleck persuaded him that such an action would not work to his benefit, therefore he withdrew the complaint.¹¹

Van Horne is not the only historian to assert this position. Thomas’s good friend and fellow instructor at West Point, Henry Coppee, also made it a point to set the record straight. Both of these men were rather close to Thomas and thus their primary accounts are more credible, and other authors should realize the consistency between their statements. However, it seems that most historians spend too much time praising Thomas for his humble refusal to supersede his commanding officer and gloss over the fact that he was willing to take the office should his appeal on Buell’s behalf be refused. They also do not acknowledge the extreme humiliation Thomas felt when the War Department went behind his back to promote Rosecrans to the position. However, much of it was due to their misconception of his appeal, a factor of which Coppee made a pointed note: “the Government thought, or affected to think, that when

¹⁰ Thomas B. Van Horne, *The Life of Major-General George H. Thomas* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1882), 75-76.

¹¹ Winston Groom, *Shrouds of Glory: From Atlanta to Nashville – the Last Great Campaign of the Civil War* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 118.

before the battle of Perryville he had declined to supersede Buell, he meant to express a permanent disinclination to assume command, a diffidence of his own powers, and a desire to evade responsibility. Nothing could be more absurd or further from the truth.”¹²

As Buell’s most trusted confidant, Thomas’s conscience would not allow him to dishonor his commanding officer by accepting this promotion. Whether or not he agreed with Buell’s management of the campaign was not the point; rather it was his honor that was at stake. He believed the charges brought against his commanding officer to be unfounded, and he would have no part in their implementation. The public was rather confused by Thomas’s refusal of the office, as most soldiers would jump at the chance of promotion. Even Buell was confounded by the refusal and in the end accredited it to their friendship, believing himself to be a man Thomas respected and admired, and he would not willingly participate in any action that would soil his commanding officer’s reputation.

The accuracy of this belief aside, Thomas’s utmost reason for his refusal of promotion lay in something much deeper and had to do with his own personal honor. If he was going to accept such a position, he wanted to have earned it instead of being pushed into it simply because the War Department was trying to displace his superior. He reacted within the boundaries of his own integrity, which obligated him to refuse the promotion, but also to deliver an impartial account when called to the witness stand in Buell’s court martial. There, he truthfully “gave the errors of his general when he permitted Bragg to march abreast of him from Murfreesboro to the Ohio.” Although he did not believe Buell should be replaced, he also felt duty bound to give a truthful account before the judge, a difficult line to tread.¹³

¹² Coppee, 86-87.

¹³ Donn Piatt, *General George H. Thomas, a critical biography* (Cincinnati, OH: R. Clarke & Company, 1893), 170-171.

When he was asked to replace Buell, Thomas felt he was being used to hurt his commanding officer, and that was something he could not allow. In this promotion he saw the politics of war at work rather than a reward for his exceptional service, and because the corruption that existed in politics disgusted him so much, he refused to rise through the military ranks in this way. In fact, he was rather embarrassed by the entire affair: “I was once offered the command of the Army of the Cumberland when I thought it should not be taken from a general who had claims for it. I therefore declined it. I would not permit myself to be made use of to do him injury.” Even so, there were still rumors that Thomas was seeking to supersede Buell’s authority, despite his refusal of the promotion when initially offered to him. Interestingly, Thomas was not the only one who tried to stop Buell’s demotion: President Abraham Lincoln himself tried to prevent the issuing of the order and the Congressional delegation of Kentucky vowed to support him. However, Vice President Andrew Johnson continued his attack and was able to convene an investigation by a military commission. Although the trial was riddled with corruption, as at least one judge showed signs of being biased and vindictive, the conclusions of the inquiry appeared valid and Lincoln felt obligated to pass on the order for Buell’s suspension.¹⁴

Thomas next served under William S. Rosecrans, as President Lincoln now felt forced to replace Buell. Even though Thomas had seemingly rejected the position, there were still members of Lincoln’s cabinet endorsing his promotion, one of them being Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. However, another cabinet member, Secretary of Treasury Salmon P. Chase lobbied vigorously for Rosecrans, one of his fellow Ohioans, to be given the position. In the end, Lincoln ultimately decided to “let the Virginian wait” and promoted Rosecrans instead. This is just one example of Thomas’s Southern heritage working to his disadvantage, as the

¹⁴ McKinney, 154-155.

Union seemed more willing to promote Northerners, even if they were not as skilled or experienced. With his own state being a member of the Confederacy, there were not many in Washington who would stand up for him.

Rosecrans was three years younger than Thomas and not nearly as experienced; however, Thomas made an effort not to show any indignation toward him. In fact, their relationship became much like the one that Thomas and Buell had enjoyed, and before long, Thomas became Rosecrans's top subordinate. Thomas may not have been happy with the situation, but he had no personal animosity toward Rosecrans, and therefore he committed to serve this new commanding officer with full devotion. Cherishing Thomas's loyalty as well as his experience and ingenuity, Rosecrans often sought him out for advice, just as Buell once did. He had not pursued the command, but it had been thrust upon him, and he accepted because he knew Thomas would be his senior subordinate. When he arrived at the army's encampment to take command, Rosecrans confided in Thomas saying, "You and I have been friends for many years and I shall especially need your support and advice."¹⁵ The history between these two men went back to their days as students at West Point, as Rosecrans had been two years behind Thomas. They had been close friends there and had remained so in the many years afterward, and Rosecrans was rather pleased when he heard Thomas was remaining true to the Union, being one of the few that trusted him despite his Southern upbringing. Throughout his life, Thomas earned a number of nicknames, and Rosecrans was responsible for one, that of "George Washington." Apparently, Thomas reminded him of the first president in relation to his "sterling character and deportment."¹⁶

Thomas acknowledged Rosecrans's plea for his help and willingly served under him for the next year. He was not one to waste time sulking over a lost promotion, for it would do him

¹⁵ Bobrick, *Master of War*, 132, 136.

¹⁶ Broadwater, 87.

no good. He also recognized that Rosecrans was a competent commander, and given his newfound rank, he deserved Thomas's respect and obedience. He would not take out on Rosecrans any resentment he may have felt towards the War Department for not promoting him. He had no personal objection to Rosecrans, and was determined to accept this new situation whether he liked it or not. Receiving unwanted assignments or not receiving desired assignments are contingencies for which every soldier has to allow. Whatever the situation, they are expected to adapt immediately, responding with respect and dignity to the government's decision. Rosecrans also recognized the absurdity of the conditions under which he had been promoted and therefore worked with Thomas as a partner rather than a superior. As a show of his good faith, Rosecrans let Thomas have any choice of command he wished within the Army of the Cumberland and thus honored his request to be assigned to the center.¹⁷

As with Buell, Rosecrans got along well with Thomas, and as time wore on they proved to work together in rather remarkable harmony and efficiency. Rosecrans valued Thomas's experience and expertise, and thus often sought him out for his input in planning army movements. The reverse was also true, inasmuch as Thomas respected Rosecrans's authority and adhered to his final decisions, whether he agreed with them or not. However, they also shared an accountability of sorts, for when Thomas did disagree with his commanding officer's decisions; he was obligated to share his opinion. He could freely protest Rosecrans's plans without worrying about seeming disrespectful or causing his superior to be angry about his objection. However, Thomas ultimately understood that Rosecrans's decisions were final, and although he may have offered his input, his commanding officer was under no obligation to implement his suggestions. Whether or not Rosecrans ended up making wise choices was not

¹⁷ Freeman Cleaves, *Rock of Chickamauga, the Life of General George H. Thomas* (Greenwood Press, 1974), 119.

the point; as his subordinate, Thomas was required to adhere to his decisions. This understanding made their relationship reflect the one he previously had under Buell even more when Rosecrans began to have clashes with the authorities in Washington.

The War Department had promoted Rosecrans expecting him to be a better commander than Buell, hoping he would be able to transition the Army of the Cumberland into a force for the offensive, not just holding the line in Tennessee. They believed Buell had been too passive, and hoped that Rosecrans would prove to be a more aggressive commander; however he was not. In their eyes, Buell had lost a lot of ground in Tennessee, and it was Rosecrans's job to get it back and, with any luck, obtain more. However, the new commander of the Army of the Cumberland delayed his offensive plans, wanting to be sure his forces would be ready and well-supplied. The railroad line between the North and Nashville had to be repaired, and because that was his main artery for receiving weapons, equipment, and other supplies, Rosecrans insisted on waiting until it was completed. Although he may have had good reasons for delaying, the War Department was still frustrated by his deliberation, for they saw it as incompetency on his part. However, through all this, Thomas remained loyal to Rosecrans, dutifully following his orders even when all others seemed to have lost faith in him. War correspondent William Bickham took special note of this unusual relationship, describing Thomas in his report as Rosecrans's "true chief of staff." Rosecrans had designated him as his "chief counselor," and Bickham was impressed by the accountability the two men apparently shared.¹⁸

With confidence this dynamic duo marched the Army of the Cumberland into the battle of Chickamauga, crossing the mountains in an effort to cut Bragg's railroad access. After the North occupied Chattanooga, they sought to drive Confederate General Braxton Bragg and his forces out of Tennessee and penetrate into Georgia. At Chickamauga, Rosecrans concentrated

¹⁸ Einolf, 143.

the army and managed to construct a strong defense while Bragg unsuccessfully attempted to overlap his northern flank. However, due to a mistake in orders, a gap was created in Rosecrans's line, and General James Longstreet was able to burst his way through. In the confusion that followed, Rosecrans made the decision to retreat to his stronghold in Chattanooga. This disorganized retreat caused many casualties within the Union Army that day, but fortunately Thomas's firm stand as the "Rock of Chickamauga" on Snodgrass Hill gave the army a chance to salvage the situation. Thomas did not resent Rosecrans for retreating and later did not blame him for the loss as others did; he simply assessed the situation and set up his defense. The battle of Chickamauga may have been a tactical defeat for the Union, but thanks to Thomas's cool handling of the situation, it became acknowledged as a moral victory.¹⁹

Rosecrans was not one to try and steal glory from Thomas in the great stand he made during the battle of Chickamauga. In fact, in his final report of the engagement, Rosecrans wrote a tribute to his valiant subordinate, saying, "to Major-General Thomas, the true soldier, the prudent and undaunted commander, the most and incorruptible patriot, the thanks and the gratitude of the country are due for his conduct at the battle of Chickamauga." He realized that without Thomas's fearlessly stoic firmness in the midst of the chaos and the calmness he displayed in forming a defensive line, they would have lost not only Chickamauga, but Chattanooga as well. However, despite Thomas's admirable courage on the battlefield, this had turned out to be a most damaging defeat for the Union. Although he was not to blame, the War Department held Rosecrans personally responsible for this loss. They believed that by running to Chattanooga and leaving Thomas to defend Chickamauga, Rosecrans had lost his competency for command.

¹⁹ Archer Jones, *Civil War Command and Strategy: The Process of Victory and Defeat* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 175-176.

Eventually, Thomas was promoted over Rosecrans; however, it was not a decision made lightly, as they were still quite wary of the Virginian, despite his unwavering loyalty. General Ulysses S. Grant made the choice between Rosecrans and Thomas seem like a matter of deciding between the lesser of two evils rather than a matter over who was more competent. Ultimately, he concluded that he had no choice because although Thomas's defensive line had been successful; the battle had been lost overall. The Army of the Cumberland under Rosecrans had been defeated, thus diminishing his ability to lead in the eyes of the authority in Washington. He may have had good reasons for retreating to Chattanooga, but they saw a cowardly commander running away, leaving his second in command to defend the hill. Once again, Thomas was asked to replace his commanding officer, and although he contemplated refusing, Rosecrans begged him to accept. Rosecrans urged him to look past the politics and corruption in conceding to supersede his superior and not miss the opportunity for a promotion that he should have been awarded many months ago based on his own merits and actions. Thus, Thomas reluctantly accepted the position as overall commander of the Army of the Cumberland.²⁰

Long before the switch of command was made official, rumors began swarming through the camp, as people suspected Thomas of being involved in the politicking to remove Rosecrans from command. Even though Thomas sought to refute the gossip by declining the position, Rosecrans urged him to take the command, believing the army could not be in better hands than those of George Thomas.²¹ Rosecrans held no bitterness towards him in this situation; in fact, he encouraged him to take the position. Even though his demotion grieved him, Rosecrans knew the Army of the Cumberland was in good hands with Thomas. He realized that the Army of the Cumberland was already in a precarious situation in Chattanooga without adding animosity

²⁰ L.P. Brockett, *Our Great Captains: Grant, Sherman, Thomas, Sheridan, and Farragut* (New York: C.B. Richardson, 1865), 177.

²¹ Van Horne, *The Life of Major-General George H. Thomas*, 151.

towards Thomas. Rosecrans later showed his high respect for Thomas in his final order to the army before adhering to Washington's orders in stepping down:

Major General George H. Thomas, in compliance with orders will assume the command of this army and department. The chiefs of all the staff departments will report to him for orders. . . . General Thomas has been identified with this army from its first organization. He had led you often in battle. To his known prudence, dauntless courage, and true patriotism, you may look with confidence that under God he will lead you to victory. The general commanding doubts not you will be as true to yourselves and your country in the future as you have been in the past.²²

Thomas now had the responsibility of holding the city of Chattanooga, and although it served as a fortress of sorts, the fact that they were short on supplies made the objective a difficult one to put into practice. The Confederates had blocked off many of the railroad lines through which the army obtained food, clothing, and ammunition. Any attempts implementing other methods to gain supplies failed, as most other avenues proved to be rather inefficient. Thomas certainly had his work cut out for him, and everyone realized it, most believing there was no way the Union would be able to hold the city. However, despite the seeming hopelessness of the situation, Thomas remained calm and showed no resentment toward Rosecrans for the conditions under which he had been forced to assume command.²³

In Thomas's own report of his promotion over Rosecrans, he made no attempt to bask in the position he had been given, or to gloat in any way. That was simply not his nature; plus he also understood that he had not been given the command of the Army of the Cumberland solely because he deserved it, but primarily because the War Department was seeking to replace Rosecrans. He saw the striking similarities between this situation and the one involving Buell merely a year earlier, and he was greatly disturbed by the repetition of events. However, in his report he merely acknowledged the change in command, also noting that the order that promoted

²² Thomas, *Indomitable Warrior*, 411.

²³ Piatt, 453.

him also assigned Grant to be in command of the military division of the Mississippi River. After that brief mention he then went on in detail about the status of the Union army, particularly his corps in the Army of the Cumberland. He made note of the perilous situation they faced as they holed up in the city of Chattanooga with the shortage of food, clothing, and other essential supplies. Despite the bleak conditions, Thomas firmly resolves to adhere to Grant's orders regarding the city, "Hold Chattanooga at all hazards," by replying, "I will hold the town till we starve."²⁴

The contentious relations that Thomas had with Grant and Sherman were quite different from the benevolent ones he shared with Buell and Rosecrans. The first sign of their animosity towards him came in the form of the conditions under which Thomas became the commander of the Army of the Cumberland. Although Grant did not particularly care for Thomas, he cared even less for Rosecrans, and so he, as overall commander of the Western Theater, appointed the former as a way of choosing the lesser of two evils. However, he did not intend to let Thomas have a fully independent command and from then on sought to keep a tight leash on him. Neither trusted the other's military judgment and skill, Grant believing Thomas to be too slow, as well as untrustworthy because of his Southern heritage. In turn, Thomas thought Grant to be too rash, and in several instances where he was ordered to attack before he felt his troops were adequately prepared, he delayed action. Grant was outraged by what he considered acts of disobedience and accused Thomas of being disobedient and insubordinate in these occasions.²⁵

On the other hand, Thomas worried that Grant's aggressive orders and actions were rather hasty and contained unnecessary risk. These inclinations showed signs of a commander

²⁴ Thomas, *Report*, 117.

²⁵ Bobrick, *Master of War*, 199.

who was impulsive, whereas he valued being careful and thorough in his preparation.²⁶ Sherman too was apprehensive regarding Thomas's inclination toward caution, expressing his concern often in conversation with Grant. The days of Sherman and Thomas being roommates at West Point had been decades ago, and any friendship the two men might have had was now gone. Early on in their military careers, Sherman had expressed a certain admiration for Thomas, but that respect was no longer evident. Even though he acknowledged that Thomas was dependable, Sherman exaggerated the man's caution when reporting on his actions before Grant. Because of this, Thomas's nickname "Old Slow Trot," which had been a designation of respect when he was teaching at West Point, became a form of criticism during the Civil War.²⁷

My chief source of trouble is with the Army of the Cumberland, which is dreadfully slow. A fresh furrow in a ploughed field will stop the whole column, and all begin to entrench. I have again and again tried to impress on Thomas that we must assail and not defend; we are the offensive, and yet it seems the whole Army of the Cumberland is so habituated to be on the defensive that, from its commander down to the lowest private, I cannot get it out of their heads.²⁸

Although his strategies of caution had proved successful in many battles, Grant was angered by Thomas's delayed attacks, acts which he considered as outright defiance. He expected Thomas to comply with the plans already put into motion by himself and Sherman. In fact, Grant considered the Army of the Cumberland as more of an accessory to Sherman's Army of the Tennessee than a separate unit carrying out independent operations. "Thomas, however, continued to shape his plans as the commander of an army which conceivably might be permitted to do something on its own account."²⁹ Grant often found himself comparing Thomas to Sherman, whom he saw as an ideal commander and subordinate. Sherman and Grant were

²⁶ Thomas B. Buell, *The Warrior Generals: Combat Leadership in the Civil War* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1997), 354.

²⁷ Grooms, 112.

²⁸ Thomas, *Indomitable Warrior*, 29. [Sherman in conversation with Grant]

²⁹ Cleaves, 207.

very much alike, both being inclined to take the offensive in a battle and more willing to take risks. However, Thomas had proved to be very much the opposite, and Grant very quickly became annoyed at his caution and careful attention to preparation and detail.³⁰

Grant was not used to his orders being disobeyed, as even the administration in Washington D.C. seemed to defer to his wishes. Once he became head of the Union Army, the War Department hardly ever questioned his decisions, and any partial failures on his part were overshadowed by his many victories. Grant and Thomas did have several similarities in appearance and temperament. They had similar facial features and both had an air of solid reserve about them that made each man stand strong even in the thick of battle.³¹ However, Grant was quite different from Thomas in regard to battle tactics, being known as an aggressive and obstinate man who was willing to sacrifice the lives of his men for the sake of a triumph on the battlefield. Thomas on the other hand had a calm and quiet demeanor, and his strategies were a result of careful planning with his soldiers' best interests at heart, as well as keeping in mind the military objective at hand. His caution annoyed Grant to no end, and as a result, their relations were extremely antagonistic towards one another.³² Historian James McDonough attempts to put forth possible reasons why Grant might have pushed Thomas so hard, but ultimately attributed each one as a poor excuse for his animosity towards the Virginian. He speculated that perhaps Grant was simply being irritable as a result of the pain he sustained after a bad fall from his horse. Perhaps he felt pressured by the administration in Washington D.C. to act more quickly and put an end to the war. However, it was clear that Grant possessed a deep contempt for Thomas, and no amount of explanations could excuse his animosity. Obviously

³⁰ Einolf, 220.

³¹ Clarence Edward Macartney, *Grant and his Generals* (New York: McBride Company, Inc., 1953), 2.

³² Coppee, 262-263.

these men had two very different approaches to war, and a compromise would not be easy to implement, that is, if agreement between the two men was even possible.³³

Thomas was fully aware of the stark differences between himself and Grant, and knew he would have to change his tactics in some ways to accommodate his superior. He felt more confident operating on the defensive and had been successful in doing so on numerous occasions. Switching to an aggressive approach would mean a significant change in mindset, and although he favored a strong defense, he was aware that at times, taking the offensive was necessary. However, because his army was not geared to the offensive, he would need time to redirect them, time which Grant was not willing to give him. According to Steven Woodworth, Thomas seemed unable to comprehend the idea of taking the offensive, but the fact that he was able to make the transition proved he understood its value. He simply had found a defensive strategy to be successful in the past and was wary of changing to Grant's aggressive approach, as he considered it rather risky. However, there was something to be said for a carefully planned attack, and Thomas resolved to only move once he felt his men had been properly redirected and prepared.³⁴ Numerous times, Thomas tried to meet Grant halfway without completely compromising the strategies to which he had so long adhered. However, Grant insisted that his orders be followed without question or alteration, and he refused to consider any of Thomas's suggestions in battle tactics.³⁵

One prime example of this can be seen in the battle of Nashville, in which Grant ordered Thomas to immediately attack General Hood's army. However, Thomas refused, arguing that he

³³ James Lee McDonough, *Chattanooga: A Death Grip on the Confederacy* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 108.

³⁴ Steven E. Woodworth, *Six Armies in Tennessee: The Chickamauga and Chattanooga Campaigns* (University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 194.

³⁵ Peter Cozzens, *The Shipwreck of their Hopes: The Battles for Chattanooga* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 124.

might have had enough infantry to do so, but he did not have enough cavalry yet mounted; therefore, he must wait until he was more prepared. The main reason Thomas was lacking in troops in this instance was due to Sherman taking a significant amount of them in his march to the sea. Sherman believed that he had left Thomas with plenty of men to confront Hood; however, he had greatly underestimated the number of soldiers Hood had under his command.³⁶ Thomas promised to conduct the attack within the next few days, but Grant found this unacceptable and began consideration of replacing Thomas with General John Schofield.³⁷ Grant knew Thomas was the more qualified general, but his patience with the man's delays was wearing thin. There was no one more capable to command the Army of the Cumberland, but he was afraid that Thomas might never attack, or when he finally did, the opportunity would be lost. "There is no better man to repel an attack than Thomas, but I fear he is too cautious to ever take the initiative."³⁸ Grant was afraid that the longer Thomas took to prepare, the more time he would also be giving to Hood to ready his men, so that by the time Thomas attacked, Hood's forces would be impregnable. Grant sent out several dispatches ordering Thomas to put his men into action against Hood, warning him that there was great danger in these constant delays. However, Thomas was concerned that there was more risk in attacking before he was ready and continued to prepare his troops to the point where Grant nearly removed him from command out of exasperation. When Thomas heard of Grant's plan to replace him with Schofield, although he was offended, he replied with an air of calm and reserved poise, saying, "I regret that General Grant should feel dissatisfaction at my delay in attacking the enemy. I feel conscious that I have

³⁶ William T. Sherman, *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman* (Indiana University Press, 1957), 161.

³⁷ Benson Bobrick, *The Battle of Nashville: General George H. Thomas and the most Decisive battle of the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2010), 94-95.

³⁸ Steven E. Woodworth, *Decision in the Heartland: The Civil War in the West* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008), 132.

done everything in my power to prepare and that the troops could not have been gotten ready before this, and that if he should order me to be relieved I shall submit without a murmur.”³⁹

Grant believed that with Schofield in charge, the action he wanted would finally be taken, and hopefully they would still be able to salvage a victory. However, he did not find the support he thought he would when he wired his appeal to General Henry Halleck in Washington.

Although Halleck did acknowledge that Grant would probably receive no objection from the administration in ordering Thomas’s dismissal, he also stated that the decision would be on Grant’s shoulders alone, for no one at the capital really wanted Thomas removed. Halleck’s ominous statement showed how much power Grant’s influence wielded in Washington, in that none would object to his decision to demote Thomas, even if that was not what they wished.

However, as the choice was Grant’s, so was the responsibility; therefore if he went through with it and Schofield failed, Grant would be the one Washington would blame.⁴⁰

In addition to Thomas’s own deliberation, the Army of the Cumberland was delayed by the harsh weather conditions produced by ice storms. Finally, when the skies cleared and Thomas knew his men were ready, he met with victory at the battle of Nashville, and Grant was forced to withdraw his protests, as well as his contemplation of given the command to Schofield. However, that did not stop him from criticizing Thomas’s methods, classifying him as “a picky commander who imperiled the Union cause while he perfected inconsequential details for his attack.”⁴¹ According to historian Peter Andrews, especially in regards to the Battle of Nashville,

The problem between Grant and Thomas was that each had a different idea of what was important. Grant was thinking about his final campaign to defeat the Confederacy, and Thomas, with his eternal fussing about details, was putting the

³⁹ Louis A. Coolidge, *Ulysses S. Grant* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), 182-185.

⁴⁰ Thomas B. Van Horne, *History of the Army of the Cumberland: its Organization, Campaigns, and battles, Written at the request of Major-General George H. Thomas chiefly from his private Military Journal and Official and other Documents Furnished by him* (Cincinnati, OH: R. Clarke, 1875), History, iv-v.

⁴¹ McKinney, viii-ix.

campaign at risk. Grant was willing to accept a partial victory as long as it kept Hood from upsetting his plans. Thomas, who had a more limited area of responsibility, was thinking about an individual action. Why go into battle if he couldn't give Hood a thorough whipping? After all, that had been Grant's original order to the Western army.⁴²

⁴² Peter Andrews, "The Rock of Chickamauga." *American Heritage* 41, Issue 2: 90.

Conclusion: Reconstruction and Death

Following the Civil War, a military government was established in an effort to smoothly assimilate the former Confederate states back into the Union. Due to this, many Northern generals were assigned to command a military division; however, George Thomas was only given a department of one of those divisions. In fact, it was under the Military Division of the Mississippi, commanded by William T. Sherman himself. As Thomas gazed upon the map depicting the various divisions, he was very displeased with how command had been distributed. Thus, he entreated upon his friend General John F. Miller, who had been placed in command of the Nashville division, to travel to Washington and make an appeal to President Andrew Johnson on his behalf. Surprisingly, the president agreed and established an extra division for Thomas to command, which included the states of Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia. Sherman, however, was not pleased with this new development, arguing that Thomas had been given too much and that his own command was now left in the lurch. He demanded that his division be expanded to the Rocky Mountains to make up for what Johnson had given to Thomas. However, the president seemed satisfied with the new command arrangements and thus “more Southern states were assigned to Thomas than to any other man.”¹

Thomas’s new position included a number of different responsibilities, but one of his main duties was testifying before the congressional Joint Committee on Reconstruction. There his testimonies were considered consistent and trustworthy; however, initially they possessed an air of blind optimism in regards to the readmission of the Southern states to the Union and the rate of Reconstruction itself. Even so, Thomas was not completely oblivious, keeping his positivity in check and remaining wary of any subterfuge or sabotage within his division. In fact,

¹ Benson Bobrick, *Master of War: The Life of General George H. Thomas* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 2009), 317-318.

he was the first to warn Washington about secret organizations being formed which sought to revive Confederate institutions, the most prominent of course being the Klu Klux Klan.

Although the organization claimed that their mission was in adherence to the Constitution and its laws, Thomas was not convinced and vowed to keep a close watch on the Klan. In accordance with this scrutiny, he also kept a careful eye on the polls to make sure no signs of bigotry would take hold of the states under his command. “In the interests of orderly government, he understood that it was important for the South to reestablish its legal system, but insisted on the elimination of all laws that in any shape or form treated blacks as inferior to whites.” He knew that discrimination could not be instantly eliminated, but that it would be a considerably long process, taking even longer than the physical Reconstruction of the South. It would take a while for former slaves to come to terms with the fact that they were actually free and for that freedom to be accepted by their former owners. Therefore, he did his best to help the process along, acquiring lands on which the blacks could settle and begin to make a living for themselves. “Few abolitionists did as much practical good as Thomas in this respect. For he set his sights not on revenge against the Southern whites, but on giving blacks the true dignity in practice they deserved.”²

Although he intended to be fair in commanding the division of states assigned to him, Thomas made no effort to keep quiet his views regarding their secession and the establishment of the Confederacy years earlier. He believed such acts to be a violation of the Constitution and thus illegal; therefore, in breaking away from the Union, the Southerners were traitors revolting against their own country. However, he did not wish to punish the rebels, trying his best to bring them back into the Union smoothly. He knew the transition would not be easy, and he was surprised by how many Confederates were not taken to court and sentenced as war criminals.

² Ibid, 319-321.

Unfortunately, just because the North was willing to accept the Southern states back into the Union did not mean that the former Confederates were willing to accept blacks as equal citizens. On many occasions Thomas was forced to deal with their blatant acts of hostility, having to institute order and discipline against their violence. Tensions ran especially high when Thomas deployed regiments of colored soldiers. Disturbances leading to confrontations, both provoked and unprovoked, broke out through the South, and Thomas was caught in the middle, doing all he could to keep the peace and maintain order. To his disappointment, resentment such as this gave birth to organizations such as the Klu Klux Klan, the former Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest coming to the forefront as its most prominent leader. He was referred to as their “Grand Wizard,” and with his intimidating band he rode throughout the Southern states, terrorizing blacks and Unionist whites.

Any efforts to arrest Klansmen proved futile, as many local lawmen throughout the South were members themselves. Thomas certainly had his work cut out for him, as Washington did not seem to be exerting much effort to disband the Klan, believing he was exaggerating their exploits. He ultimately had to call in his troops to protect local polls and prevent violence.³ When the Klan had first been established in Pulaski, Tennessee, the members argued that their undertaking was simply to protect white rights. However, as time went on, it became apparent that their task actually entailed tampering with the rights being established for blacks.⁴

Before long, Thomas himself also became a target in Tennessee in the year of 1869. Three years before, the state legislature had commissioned a portrait of Thomas to be hung in the state library. However, he received word that a legislature with southern sympathies was

³ Robert P. Broadwater, *General George H. Thomas: A Biography of the Union's "Rock of Chickamauga"* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2009), 223-224.

⁴ Wilbur D. Thomas, *General George H. Thomas: The Indomitable Warrior* (New York: Exposition Press, 1964), 607.

attempting to call a vote to have the portrait taken down. Not wishing for the painting to cause any kind of disturbance, he offered to buy it from the library, but the issue was suddenly dropped, and the portrait still hangs in the library to this day.⁵

During his time in command of this division, Thomas became a man of considerable influence, and in 1868, several people suggested that he run for the presidency. There was actually a strong pull from each of the respective political parties, both vying for his candidacy, but he declined both of their appeals. Organizations to draft him onto the ballot were formed in the states of Tennessee and Ohio, but he was adamant on his position, telling them that his place was in the military, not the political arena. “I am a soldier, and I know my duty; as a politician I would be lost.” Even President Andrew Johnson implored Thomas to step into the political arena and run interference against Ulysses S. Grant. Johnson had been put off by Grant’s political ambitions and presumed that since he and Thomas had disagreed numerous times during the Civil War that Thomas would gladly run against him. However, Thomas had an even stronger disliking for political corruption, and did not wish to be caught in the middle of their clash, no matter what his views regarding Grant’s competency might have been. He refused to get involved, and when Grant became president, he of course named his trusted friend Sherman to succeed him as the commanding general of the army.⁶

Johnson entreated upon Thomas not out of any personal respect for the distinguished general, but simply because he wished to submit his own name in the running and serve a second term as president. However, in light of his impeachment after his first term, Johnson’s chances for being nominated were slim. Johnson also knew that Grant’s popularity as the general who had won the Civil War and his having accepted General Robert E. Lee’s surrender at

⁵ Winston Groom, *Shrouds of Glory: From Atlanta to Nashville – the Last Great Campaign of the Civil War* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 279-280.

⁶ Bobrick, *Master of War*, 323-326.

Appomattox could clinch his campaign for the presidency. However, if he could convince Thomas to run interference, perhaps he could stand a chance, but Thomas would have nothing to do with this kind of subterfuge. Interestingly enough, Johnson initially approached Sherman with his appeal, but Sherman refused to undermine such a trusted friend, not to mention his own superior officer. As it turned out, the president only sought out Thomas as his last resort, or final ditch effort in his attempt to block Grant's political aspirations. Although Thomas was well aware of the corruption and felt personally insulted as well as utterly disgusted by the entire situation, he declined Johnson's requests in a respectful manner. He even went so far as to thank him for the consideration, but wished to be taken off the ballot and out of consideration. Even if it could be regarded as a reward for his services during the war, it was one he did not wish to receive, for it came too late to be considered an honor, and the means by which it would come were not of the dignified sort in his opinion.⁷

Although he declined all appeals, many kept badgering Thomas throughout Grant's presidency to submit his candidacy in 1872. Three weeks before he passed away in 1870, he wrote a letter to John Tyler, Jr., who had been one of his supporters and was also the son of the United States' tenth president. In it he stated, "My services are now, as they have always been, subject to the call of the Government in whatever military capacity I may be considered competent and worthy to fill, and will be cordially undertaken whenever called upon to render them. All civil honors and duties I shall continue to decline." Thomas was also puzzled by the fact that people were pushing for his candidacy so early, as Grant had been inaugurated barely a year before. Although he had not found himself in agreement with Grant on the battlefield years before, he had no objection to the man's presidency thus far. As of yet, Grant had not made any

⁷ Christopher J. Einolf, *George Thomas: Virginia for the Union* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 326-327.

grievous mistakes as president, and Thomas believed that if he remained true to the promises set forth in his inaugural address, he could very well win a second term in office.⁸

Replying to Tyler, Thomas pointed out that he had received both of the man's letters entreating him to put forth his candidacy for the presidency. He went on to explain his lack of response to the first one, as it had taken a considerable amount of time in arriving to him. He assured Tyler that he had no aspirations for the presidency whatsoever and did not intend to lobby for the candidacy of any political office then or anytime in the future. His entire life had been committed to service in the military, and that was where he was content to stay. He felt his responsibility was to the military, and he possessed an extreme distaste for the political arena, regardless of his commitment to his current profession. He also did not think his beliefs and convictions would be well-received and did not wish to subject himself to the criticism that would no doubt accompany his candidacy. He already received a suspicious eye from numerous people regarding his loyalties throughout the war and did not wish to give those minds a chance to tarnish his reputation further by putting his life under such a microscope. He simply did not want to deal with the intrigue and corruption that he saw in politics; he had already seen enough of it throughout the war, and he wanted no part of it afterwards. Although he might have proved to be a good leader, he knew the rumors surrounding his name would sabotage his administration and would not serve to benefit the country in the least. Thus, he felt it was his duty to remain in service in the present position the United States had given him, as he thought that was the best way in which he could serve his country.⁹

A number of critical pieces about Thomas appeared in several newspapers in the years following the Civil War. One that was particularly disturbing appeared in in the *New York*

⁸ William H. Lambert, *George Henry Thomas: Oration Before the Society of the Army of the Cumberland, at Rochester N.Y., September 17, 1884* (Cincinnati, OH: Robert Clarke, 1885), 27.

⁹ "George H. Thomas. One of the General's Last Letters." *The New York Times*, March 14, 1872, p. 2.

Tribune on March 12, 1870, entitled “One Who Fought at Nashville.” In the article, credit for the battle plan was attributed to General Schofield rather than Thomas, grieving the Virginian as he felt deliberately stabbed in the back.¹⁰ Although rebuttals were also submitted, Thomas wished to give his own response, and that is what he was doing in late March of 1870. He was seen leaving his headquarters and heading for home by his staff aide, Alfred Hough, at 10:30 in the morning, and he seemed perfectly fine. However, when Hough arrived at the Thomas household around 1:45 that same afternoon, he discovered otherwise.¹¹ On March 28, 1870 around 1:30 in the afternoon, George Thomas fell unconscious on his home office floor, having suffered a massive stroke. Although three doctors were called to his aid and were able revive him, the damage was too severe and proved fatal.¹² Initially, the doctors presumed he had simply fainted, perhaps having suffered from indigestion or some other superficial cause. He seemed to be responding well at first, as he carried on a short conversation with his wife Frances and was also able to walk around a little. However, later in the evening he began to experience convulsions and had trouble breathing, eventually slipping once again into unconsciousness and by 7:25, the esteemed general had passed away. Although there was no autopsy performed upon the body and the doctors attributed Thomas’s death to a stroke, fatty deposits were found causing arterial blockage when the body was later embalmed.¹³

The funeral was held a week and a half later on April 8, 1870 in Troy, New York, where a special train carried the body to the funeral and then later to the grave site. Flags were also flown at half-mast that day to commemorate his service and devotion to the country. However, at the request of his wife, the service was a brief one, and there was no eulogy offered over his

¹⁰ Hans Juergensen, *Major General George Henry Thomas: A Summary in Perspective* (Tampa, FL: American Studies Press, 1980), 1.

¹¹ Einolf, 335.

¹² Bobrick, *Master of War*, 331.

¹³ Einolf, 335.

grave. His death came as a surprise and a shock to many, as he was barely in his mid-fifties, and many had possessed high hopes for him in the political arena.¹⁴ Frances outlived her husband by almost twenty years, but she never remarried, living out the rest of her life instead with her sister in Troy, New York. However, she did make many trips to Washington D.C. and corresponded with Thomas's first biographer, Thomas Van Horne. She wanted to make sure her husband was remembered well for his admirable service to the country, and therefore gave Van Horne as much information as possible so he could provide an accurate account. However, acting in accordance to Thomas's wishes, she had his personal papers kept private and saw to it that they were destroyed after her death.¹⁵ "With the death of Thomas, Van Horne was deprived of his greatest single source of oral recollections. To fill the gaps in his research, Van Horne turned to former corps, division, and brigade commanders of the Army of the Cumberland, as well as other officers who had been connected with its operations."¹⁶

Admittedly, Thomas was not in the best of health, as he suffered from a recurring pain that the doctors attributed to a disease in the liver, or neuralgia, as they called it. However, evidence suggests that it was more likely he suffered from high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease rather than liver failure. He had also gained a considerable amount of weight following the war, presumably because he was no longer on active duty, but it could also have been due to the stress of his command.¹⁷ Thomas may have only been fifty-three years old when he died, and he may have been active during his many years of service in the military, but those days had passed five years before. Following the Civil War, his duties caused him to be

¹⁴ Benson Bobrick, *The Battle of Nashville: General George H. Thomas and the most Decisive battle of the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2010), 106.

¹⁵ Einolf, 337.

¹⁶ Thomas B. Van Horne, *History of the Army of the Cumberland: its Organization, Campaigns, and battles, Written at the request of Major-General George H. Thomas chiefly from his private Military Journal and Official and other Documents Furnished by him* (Cincinnati, OH: R. Clarke, 1875), xii.

¹⁷ Einolf, 319.

deskbound for long periods of time, as he spent many hours in his office composing letters, reports, and orders. He had always been heavy eater, but the intense exercise required of a soldier had evened it out for most of his life. However, his new line of work following the war caused him to exercise less, and thus he began to gain more weight.¹⁸

When Thomas died in 1870, there were several famous Civil War veterans who attended his funeral, including Ulysses S. Grant, William T. Sherman, Joseph Hooker, Philip Sheridan, and George G. Meade.¹⁹ Whether they had agreed with him and his tactics during the war or not, he was the first well-known Union general to pass away following the war, and they were required to show him the respect he was due. Many of the country's citizens came out to pay their respects to the deceased general, giving his body a triumphal escort to the funeral complete with military honors. A crowd of thousands turned out for this somber occasion, but sadly, Thomas's family felt no such obligation.²⁰ Not one of his family members could be found among the crowd, save his wife Frances. It had been almost ten years since Thomas's decision to join the Union, and five years since the war's end, but his siblings, especially his sisters, never forgave him. Over the years he had sent them money and gifts, but they remained unopened, and they had refused to return to him the saber he had won after the Mexican American War, which they had once displayed so proudly. According to Thomas's sisters, "Our brother George died to us in '61."

Thomas's grave can now be visited at the Oakwood Cemetery in Washington D.C. and can be easily spotted due to the stone eagle perched on top of the granite tomb. There is also a monument dedicated to the general at an intersection known as Thomas Circle where he is

¹⁸ Ibid, 335.

¹⁹ Bobrick, *Master of War*, 1.

²⁰ Einolf, 336.

depicted atop a horse facing the Potomac River.²¹ Thomas's sisters were not the only ones to show no grief for the deceased general, as many Southerners also still branded him as a traitor and an opportunist. While the North was mourning the death of a Union hero, the members of the former Confederacy were reminiscing on how he had abandoned his state because of his wife's Northern influence and his aspirations for a high rank in the Union Army. Several papers featured starkly different obituaries for Thomas, one of the most negative being in the *New Orleans Picayune*, while the *Richmond Dispatch* gave a positive and much more accurate tribute. "The *Dispatch* asserted that Thomas had been uncertain of his loyalties at the beginning of the war but stated that this was commendable, since only a person with a 'heart of stone' would be able to oppose his native state without hesitation."²²

Historians of the war would begin to forget it at the time of his death. No office did more to advance the cause of the Union, and few did as much, but Thomas was to become relegated to a position of unenviable obscurity as the war's great events were chronicled for posterity. He was not part of the Grant-Sherman-Sheridan circle that dominated the press. His political affiliations had been forever severed when he chose to fight for the Union. His family, neighbors, and friends had all favored the Confederacy, and thought of him as a traitor. Only the men who served under him protected his reputation and honored his accomplishments, but then there is no greater tribute a leader can receive than to be honored by those who served under him, even though it was not sufficient to ensure the everlasting glory due this hero of the nation.²³

²¹ Freeman Cleaves, *Rock of Chickamauga, the Life of General George H. Thomas* (Greenwood Press, 1974), 306-307.

²² Einolf, 337.

²³ Broadwater, 232.

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