

“Did Sherman Undermine the Reputation of George Thomas?”

By David Frey

Despite being the only Union general to compel two routs of Confederates, these being at Mill Springs, Kentucky , January 19 & 20, 1862, not far from the border with eastern Tennessee, and more significantly at Nashville, Tennessee, December 13 & 14, 1864, the enduring single-word impression of George Henry Thomas was that he was “slow.” Often this characterization is qualified by conceding that Thomas was excellent on the defensive but qualified by the faint praise of “slowness” that supposedly impaired his effectiveness on the offensive, where the great captains of war are ultimately judged.

Much of this judgment or impression comes directly from Ulysses S. (“Sam”) Grant and his memoirs written after Grant’s presidency. Grant and Thomas had an antagonistic relationship throughout the Civil War but the reports of Grant’s protégé, William T (“Cump”), during and after the Atlanta campaign must have reinforced, and validated, Grant’s opinion, at least for Grant’s purposes.

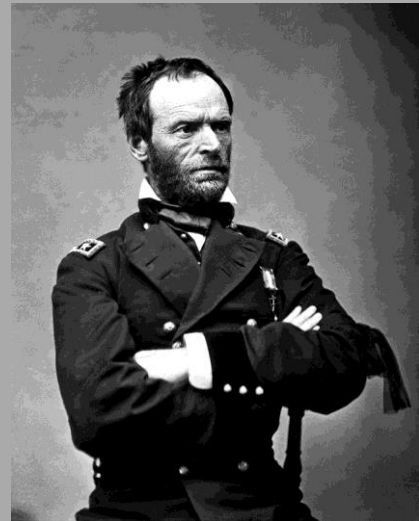


George Thomas

George Thomas was born 1816 in Virginia. He entered West Point as a member of the class of 1840, finishing twelfth in its class of forty-two. Thomas remained in the Regular Army seeing action in the Seminole War before earning two brevets in the Mexican War. Thomas returned to West Point to teach artillery and cavalry before being assigned as a Major in the Second Cavalry under Albert Sydney Johnston and Robert E. Lee in Texas along the Mexican border. In the fall of 1860 he was given a twelve month leave of absence after being shot in the face by an arrow. Despite his Virginia birth he

remained loyal to the Union to be named Colonel on May 3, 1861, in the 2d US Cavalry. Thomas was promoted to Brigadier General on August 3, 1861, before gaining his second star on April 25, 1862.

William Sherman was born 1820 in Lancaster, Ohio, southeast of Columbus. He gained admission to West Point in Thomas' class of 1840, graduating sixth in the class of forty two. His deployment to California caused Sherman to miss the Mexican War. Six years later in 1853 Sherman resigned his commission to pursue various business pursuits. Sherman was not a political general in the strictest sense but he still was not without his political connections, his foster father/father-in law (Cump married his



William Sherman

foster sister) had been a U.S. Senator, a position also held by Sherman's brother, John Sherman. At the outbreak of the Civil War Sherman used those connections to be re-commissioned as Colonel on May 14, 1861, serving as a brigade commander at First Bull Run. He was transferred west where he assumed command of the Kentucky area. However he became critical of the Federal administration while feuding with the press, some of whom accused him of being insane. Suffering from nervous exhaustion he was forced to take a leave of absence for rest and recovery.

Among Thomas, Grant, and himself, Sherman was the most complex personality, sometimes showing traits of narcissism, or egotistical preoccupation, which might have contributed to his nervous exhaustion. Sherman also had a mercurial temperament and often appeared to have a short attention span.

Sam Grant was another native of southern Ohio, being born in 1822, making him the youngest of these three generals. Grant was admitted to West Point as member of the class of 1843 where he finished an indifferent twenty

first in a class of thirty nine. Although he did not have a command he was nevertheless brevetted three times in Mexican War. Grant resigned his commission in 1854, purportedly to avoid court martial but probably also because of dismal chances for promotion in a stagnant Regular Army. Although Grant has frequently been portrayed as an unskilled commander who won battles only because of a willingness to sacrifice the blood of his soldiers, Grant had carefully studied the tactics and logistics of his superiors in the Mexican War. And although Grant had difficulty regaining a commission at the start of the war, he eventually enjoyed the patronage of Elihu B. Washburn, a powerful Congressman from Illinois where Grant's family had relocated.



Ulysses Grant

Thomas and Grant began their Civil War careers in the Western Theater where two major armies eventually emerged. One would come to be known as the Army of the Tennessee while the other would become known as the Army of the Cumberland. Grant and Sherman would become part of, and each would eventually command, the Army of the Tennessee while Thomas commanded various levels, including its topmost level, of the Army of the Cumberland.

Sherman and Grant were sufficiently acquainted to converse when Sherman encountered Grant selling firewood along the road near St. Louis after they both had resigned from active service. But they soon began to form a special relationship, starting as early as Shiloh. Grant was overall field commander – under Henry Halleck's administration – while Sherman commanded a division that was enjoying a leisurely Sunday morning breakfast when the Confederates surprisingly swept through and scattered their campsite. Although the first day's fighting at Shiloh was nearly calamitous for Grant's Federals, by the second day Grant and Sherman collaborated, with the inestimable help of the arrival of an army led by Don Carlos Buell – Thomas being second in command – to push the Confederates

back off the battlefield and in retreat toward Corinth, Mississippi, 26 miles to the south. Despite suspicions that he was not properly prepared at the start of the battle of Shiloh Sherman was promoted to Major General on May 1, 1862, making him six days junior to Thomas.

The relationship between Grant and Thomas got off to an awkward start in the aftermath of Shiloh when Halleck, apparently to spite Grant, relieved him of command to be replaced by the newly promoted Thomas. Although Thomas had not sought the assignment, Grant was embarrassed by the situation, even threatening to resign if not restored to his former post but Sherman encouraged Grant to remain in the army. Later Sherman would famously make his observation that he had stuck by that Grant when Grant was drunk and Grant had stuck by him when he was crazy. Furthermore, Grant was unhappy with Buell's sharp criticism of those Union soldiers whom Buell observed seeking shelter along the riverbanks after fleeing from the Rebel's initial onslaught. In his later writings Grant gave little credit to Buell's army, including Thomas, for its help in the second day's counteroffensive at Shiloh.

Their next significant connection came at Chattanooga late October, 1863, following the Battle of Chickamauga. Despite Thomas' new found fame as the Rock of Chickamauga, Lincoln appointed Grant as overall commander of the effort to break the Confederate siege and to initiate a counteroffensive against the Confederate army. Grant quickly appointed Thomas as Commanding General of the Army of the Cumberland – which was starving and withering under the siege – and telegraphed Thomas: “Hold Chattanooga at all hazards.” Thomas testily responded “I will hold the town until we starve.” Upon his arrival a few days later a crippled, soaked Grant had to remain sitting among several officers, including Thomas, until a staff officer suggested that someone ought to bring food and dry clothing for Grant.

Whatever their history may have been, it was probably unlikely that Grant and Thomas would ever develop a warm, trusting relationship. James Wilson, who would serve under both generals, and who was at that first

meeting in Chattanooga, would later write “they were both strong men with different points of view, habits of mind, and idiosyncrasies, and it is by no means strange that their prejudices and their preferences should have pushed them in different directions.” And throughout his adulthood Grant tended to rely heavily upon a clique of friends and seemed reluctant to change his attitude toward those not in his inner circle. On the other hand Thomas was a proud officer apparently given to some passive-aggressiveness, and it seems reasonable that it grated on his pride that he was being outranked and superseded by someone three years younger who had resigned under somewhat of a cloud before remaining out-of-service for seven years.

Even before the arrival of Sherman’s army Grant planned, with ample assistance from Washington, for a breakout of the siege against Chattanooga. As soon as Sherman arrived at Chattanooga Grant openly started to use and rely upon Sherman as his leading subordinate. When Grant – two years younger than Sherman – talked with Sherman he was “free, affectionate, and good humored.” Grant’s plan envisioned an attack by Sherman from the north of Missionary Ridge, the ridgeline occupied by the Confederates while another force, led by Joe Hooker, would advance from the south. Rationalizing that Thomas’ army was dispirited by the calamity of Chickamauga two months earlier, Grant assigned it to a secondary role of holding his middle away from base of Missionary Ridge.

However these plans faltered when Sherman did not reconnoiter his front, thus failing to realize a deep ravine lay between his army and the single Confederate division that was able to thwart Sherman’s advance for almost two days. In order to relieve the pressure upon Sherman Grant ordered Thomas to advance his army to the rifle pits at the base of Missionary Ridge. But when the Cumberlanders reached the base they were subjected to deadly fire from above. Rather than remain in such a vulnerable position, and unable to return to their initial position, on their own initiative they – including Phil Sheridan and his division – started to climb the 600 foot steep slope to miraculously overcome the Confederate defenders.

Grant was visibly irate as he observed the soldiers' ascent and threatened reprisals if their initiative failed. Afterwards Sherman and Grant fudged their several writings to suggest that Thomas's army had always been intended to lead the attack, a suggestion that was at obvious variance to anyone at Grant's command post. Incidentally until several years later Grant also failed to give Hooker – another general excluded from Grant and Sherman's inner circle – credit for his significant contribution as his army marched across Lookout Mountain.

Civil War generals were almost always aware of rank and seniority. For the first three years of the war the Union army had only two general ranks: major general and brigadier general. Accordingly the date of appointment was important, if not determinative, when considering seniority among generals of the same rank. Typically generals of the same rank were aware of the respective dates of appointment, and the resultant seniority, of their fellow generals, especially since command assignments were routinely made on the basis of seniority.

The issue of Thomas' seniority was contentious having erupted earlier when William S. Rosecrans was appointed to replace Don Carlos Buell to command the Army of the Cumberland. Under normal circumstances Thomas would have had seniority over Rosecrans, and thus should have been given priority consideration to replace Buell; but Rosecrans' commission as major general was belatedly and conveniently backdated to give Old Rosy seniority over Thomas. Upon learning of the circumstances of Rosecrans' appointment Thomas wrote to Henry Halleck, "You may hereafter put a stick over me if you choose to do so. I will take care, however, to so manage my command, whatever it may be, as not to be involved in the mistakes of the stick."

However Thomas would once again be forced to serve under a more junior general when Grant appointed his old comrade from the Army of the Tennessee as commander of the Military Division of the Mississippi that included Thomas's Army of the Cumberland. The record does not reflect any specific reaction by Thomas to this snub but one of his biographers, Freeman Cleves, says that "It was hardly likely that [Thomas] relished being placed under a volatile [and junior]

officer whom he had seen fail from a lack of confidence in Kentucky and from overconfidence in Missionary Ridge.”

After being appointed General-in-Chief of all Union armies, in April 1864 Grant devised and planned for a five prong thrust against the Confederacy. For one of these thrusts Grant would accompany George Meade’s Army of the Potomac as it proceeded south toward Richmond in an attempt to flush Lee’s army out into the open for a general encounter that presumably would defeat Lee.

For the second thrust Grant ordered Sherman to “move against Johnston’s army to break it up, and get into the interior of the enemy’s country as far as possible.” To accomplish that mission Sherman assembled a massive force, which he called his Grand Army, comprised of Thomas’s Army of the Cumberland that absorbed Hooker’s corps, Grant and Sherman’s former Army of the Tennessee, then commanded by James McPherson – another Grant protégé --, and the newly named Army of the Ohio, essentially an enlarged corps, commanded by John Schofield.

The general line of march of the so-called Atlanta campaign would follow the rail line south by southeast toward Atlanta. Johnston’s army would be afforded a series of excellent defensive terrain features, including high ridges, rivers, and mountains. On the other hand, Sherman’s much larger grand army could often use flanking maneuvers to circumvent Johnston’s well-fortified defensive positions. Thus while Sherman should be able to use his superior numbers to compel relatively short forward movements, conversely Johnston could frequently use his available resources, including terrain, to delay and frustrate those advances.

Throughout the Atlanta campaign Sherman opted to deploy Thomas in frontal attacks to hold Johnston in place while McPherson (and sometimes Schofield) was supposed to flank Johnston to get into his rear and/or cut off his retreat. With some justification Thomas and others believed Sherman often tried to assign the more glamorous tasks to his old army, the Army of the Tennessee. However McPherson, in his first army-sized command, proved to be timid and typically unable to take positions to give Sherman the

satisfaction of quick, decisive results. This was especially demonstrated at Dalton, Georgia, -- the first battle of the Atlanta campaign -- where Thomas had suggested that his army should get to Johnston's rear by way of a lightly defended gap that Thomas's cavalry had discovered earlier. However Sherman preferred to designate his old army to try to flank Johnston. McPherson, operating without sufficient cavalry to scout, misjudged the strength of Confederates in the area and backed away from his assigned position. While there is no guarantee that Thomas would have succeeded -- but among other things he certainly would have taken ample cavalry to better scout and ascertain the situation -- victory at Dalton would have quickly won the Atlanta campaign for Sherman.



John Bell Hood

Later Sherman wisely decided to deviate southwest from the railroad in order to avoid outstanding defenses at Altoona Pass. But Johnston also moved southwest of the railroad, John Bell Hood taking a position with his corps at New Hope Church. Thomas' cavalry had sighted these Rebel movements; furthermore a Rebel courier had been captured that should have alerted Sherman that Johnston knew the Federals' plans but Cump did not adjust. Instead of heeding this intelligence Sherman blundered by misjudging the size of the Rebel defenders,

impatiently complaining, "There haven't been twenty rebels there today." Pursuant to Sherman's orders the Thomas' vanguard charged three times across muddy ground and over a rain-filled ditch as Hood's infantry reinforced with 16 massed guns inflicted massive slaughter upon the Federals at "Hell Hole," the soldiers' name for the ensuing carnage. Typical of casualty rates when attacking fortified positions, Union losses were four times those of the Rebel defenders. And even though he had grossly misjudged the extent of Hood's defenders, Sherman will later blame the "slowness" of Thomas' Army

of the Cumberland for the failure of the attack, inexplicably characterizing New Hope Church as a “splendid opportunity.”ⁱ

During the next two days of difficult fighting the Army of the Cumberland suffered 3,000 casualties, crippling three divisions. Sherman’s tactical blunders led to inter-army bickering and a widening breach between Sherman and the Cumberlander’s high command. Sherman was evasive when reporting these battles to Halleck, incredibly describing them merely as “many sharp encounters, but nothing decisive.”

Returning to the rail line Sherman’s three armies continued their advance so that by June 16 they closed in near Marietta, Georgia, seventeen straight-line miles from Atlanta. Prior to his Atlanta campaign Sherman’s forte had been rapid movement, especially against light or minimal resistance. Accordingly he often became impatient or frustrated by Thomas’ deliberate, methodical style of advancing, even if Thomas was opposed by fortified positions. In his private letters to Grant, Sherman also took some pains to explain why the pace to Atlanta was not going as rapidly as they had anticipated. (Conversely Confederate authorities were becoming critical of Johnston’s propensity to keep giving ground.) Typical of several Civil War commanders Sherman assured his superiors that any shortcomings were the fault of his subordinates, while naturally holding himself blameless. Cump’s impatience persisted, criticizing the Army of the Cumberland in a letter dated June 18: “A fresh furrow in a plowed field will stop the whole column and all will begin to entrench.” Cleaves notes Sherman sent this letter as a private letter but with the anticipation that Grant would publish it for the world to see, which Grant did. Sherman also falsely blamed Thomas’ slowness for the failure to take Dallas at New Hope Church on May 25 and the First Kennesaw Line at Gilgel Church on June 9, overlooking the efficiency and effectiveness of the variety of fortifications constructed by Confederate engineers.

Eventually Sherman’s march toward Atlanta proceeded to a series of ridges and promontories collectively known as Kennesaw Mountains. After a series of preliminary encounters Sherman issued orders for a general assault upon Kennesaw Mountain proper to begin in three days on June 27, 1864.

Essentially each army would charge forward with Thomas' Cumberlanders ordered to make another assault in the middle. One regimental officer said, "...The stupidity of this order is enough to paralyze me." Thomas made a personal reconnaissance to look for a point of weakness in the Confederates' defenses but could not find "... the slightest prospect of success." John Logan, a highly credible source, while visiting Sherman's headquarters, heard Sherman express his envy of the press attention being given to Grant' head-on assaults.

After several hours of hard but futile fighting Thomas advised Sherman, "One or two more such assaults would use up this army." Overall the Grand Army suffered casualties at the rate of 5 to 1. Sherman refused to accept any blame for his decision for the disastrous attack, claiming later that he "had to do it" to show Johnston that he could not count on the Federals to sidestep forever. At this stage of the Civil War almost all commanders understood that a ratio of at least 3 to 1 was necessary to have any reasonable chance to prevail against fortified defenses; remarkably Sherman committed only 16,225 Federals against 17,733 strongly fortified Confederates. Sherman then blithely blamed "lack of vigor" for the failure of the assaults!

Fortunately Schofield found an undefended pass on the flank forcing Johnston to retreat once again. After the three Union armies crossed Peachtree Creek, the last natural barrier in front of Atlanta, Sherman ordered McPherson and Schofield to rotate clockwise around the north and east of Atlanta while Thomas followed. Hood, now commanding the Confederate army after replacing Johnston when the Richmond authorities lost their patience with Johnston's constant retreats, found a three mile gap between Thomas and Schofield. Accordingly Hood thought he saw an opportunity to attack Thomas's isolated position. But both force commanders were mistaken about their enemy's position: Sherman had not anticipated that Hood would attack Thomas' position, instead believing Hood would attack to the east leaving Thomas "to walk into Atlanta, capturing guns and everything," while Hood's subordinate commanders had to make a series of position adjustments before they could attack Thomas's new locations.

The delays caused by these adjustments allowed Thomas' Cumberlanders to dig in and to construct some rudimentary fieldworks while bringing up some artillery for support. Uncharacteristically for most army commanders, Thomas was in the thick of the battle, personally positioning some of the battery sites. The ensuing battle of Peachtree Creek lasted at least two hours -- during which Thomas personally directed artillery in a "calm and resolute manner" -- before the Confederates retired after taking severe losses. Although Thomas' performance might have been comparable to his earlier exploits during Chickamauga, Sherman -- who was not even aware of the Rebel attack until later that evening -- criticized Thomas for not advancing fast enough!

During the month of August, 1864, Hood launched two other unsuccessful attacks, or sorties, while Sherman was besieging Atlanta. Eventually Sherman determined he had to move faster, especially since the Confederates still had two rail lines serving as lifelines. Thus Sherman planned to form a giant spoke to wheel around the south of Atlanta in an attempt to sever the remaining rail lines. If Sherman's maneuver was successful Hood would be forced to either give battle or abandon what was left of Atlanta.

For almost two days Sherman's maneuvering made Hood believe the Federals were retreating back to Chattanooga. In the meanwhile Sherman's soldiers were destroying miles of rail lines vital to the Confederates' survival in Atlanta. Once Hood realized his peril he dispatched two of his three corps to Jonesboro, twenty-five miles south of Atlanta, where Hood hoped they could stymie, if not defeat, the Federals. By that time most of Sherman's Grand Army was aligned near or along the rail line with the Army of the Tennessee on the right, or closest to Jonesboro, with Thomas positioned on its left.

After a couple of Thomas' division commanders spotted large clouds of dust that told them large groups of Rebels were marching south toward Jonesboro, Thomas pled with Sherman to attack the passing Rebel right flank. But Cump refused, possibly because such a move would remove Thomas from supporting lead elements of Sherman's old army already approaching

Jonesboro. Cump's rejection of Thomas' tactical suggestion was at least the fourth rejection of suggestions for decisive action made by Thomas during the course of the campaign. In any event, the second, and vulnerable, Rebel corps passed uncontested in front of the constrained Thomas.

Sherman's enthusiasm for destroying rail track blinded him to a chance to destroy a major portion of Hood's army. Seeing another opportunity for a decisive victory, Thomas suggested that two of his Cumberland corps, including the one commanded by S. D. Stanley coming south, meet with Schofield as his army was also destroying track. These three corps would swing toward Lovejoy's Station, six or seven miles south of Jonesboro, thus cutting off any Rebel retreat to Macon. But as he had responded to four previous suggestions by Thomas, Sherman rejected this suggestion, ostensibly on the assumption that Rebels would retreat back to Atlanta, an unlikely possibility given that extensive destruction of the railroad had already made it impassible. Regardless Stanley and Schofield spent much of the morning continuing to redundantly destroy more track. Given that Hood's supply lines were destroyed beyond any reasonable possibility of repair while his army's position inside Atlanta had become precarious, Hood had little choice except to complete the evacuation of the remainder of his army from Atlanta. As Hood's rear guard began to blow up munitions and other stores, the remaining Rebels started to abandon Atlanta to head southeast along a road that ran roughly parallel approximately six to nine miles east of the rail line being destroyed. In the afternoon Sherman ordered Stanley's corps forward -- while continuing to cut railroad tracks -- with Schofield following to close the noose on Hood's biggest corps.

During the late afternoon of September 1 Sherman belatedly decided to try to cut off the Confederate retreat to Lovejoy's Station. Accordingly Stanley's orders were changed from rail line destruction to marching rapidly south to try to flank the retreating Confederates. However darkness fell and prevented any effective pursuit -- in Sherman's view Stanley had "dilly-dallied" notwithstanding all the hours spend earlier that afternoon by Stanley's corps in destroying additional rail track.

During the night of September 1-2 Confederate rear guard in Atlanta, continued to blow up ammunition and other munitions, the sounds of which could be heard for many miles, as well setting fires to warehouses. During the evening of September 1 when Sherman, then with Thomas at Jonesboro, could hear the explosions he ordered a reconnaissance of the situation. Sherman further ordered that if Hood was abandoning Atlanta, "it is unnecessary for us to go further at this stage." Except of course more railroad tracks were to be destroyed.

As the bulk of Sherman's Grand Army moved south the morning of September 2, continuing to destroy more railway track, Atlanta's mayor surrendered what was left of the town. Shortly after that surrender, Sherman learned that the last of Hood's men had evacuated Atlanta during the night. Sherman then wired Washington with the dramatic, electrifying message, "Atlanta is ours, and fairly won." But Sherman's message also included the ominous coda: "I shall not push farther on this raid, but in a day or two will move to Atlanta and give my men some rest. Since May 5 we have been in one constant battle or skirmish." Sherman, becoming curious about the extent of Atlanta's devastation, left Jonesboro to return to Atlanta. Before leaving Sherman cancelled his attack order for the Army of the Tennessee but inexplicably not for Stanley's corps whose flanking movement proceeded to advance into murderous artillery fire.

Sherman wrote a self-serving dispatch to Halleck on September 4 trying to explain why Hood had escaped. In essence he again blamed many of his subordinates, implying most of the blame fell upon Stanley, one of Thomas' corps commanders, and Schofield. But in the same dispatch Sherman characterized Thomas as being "slow, but true as steel."

Larry Daniel, chronicler of the Army of the Cumberland, identifies five occasions during the Atlanta campaign when Sherman rejected suggestions by Thomas to outflank the Confederates. At the same time Sherman had his own favorable ideas, except of course at the Kennesaw Mountains, about using maneuver as opposed to relying solely upon frontal attacks. But Sherman and Thomas differed in their reasons and objectives for using flanking maneuvers.

Essentially Sherman liked to deploy smallish, and presumably more mobile, infantry units to flank in order to coerce or threaten his adversary into retreating unaccompanied by any meaningful or effective pursuit. Thomas Buell claims that Sherman – “a raider accustomed to swift action, to movement” -- neither understood, nor had he mastered, the complex warfare characterized by the stop-and-go pursuit of Johnston. On the other hand Thomas advocated flanking maneuvers by larger forces, including cavalry, deployed to trap or capture the enemy thereby compelling the enemy to either surrender or attack. Sherman typically was anxious to commence his flanking maneuvers as soon as possible. In contrast Thomas preferred to take the time and effort, for instance some rudimentary reconnoitering, to prepare prior to deploying. At the risk of oversimplification, Sherman’s objective was usually to gain ground and to gain possession of places while Thomas’ objective was to conquer the enemy’s army. And even Sherman admitted he, “had not accomplished all, for Hood’s army, the chief objective, had escaped.” The argument here is not necessarily which approach, Sherman’s or Thomas’, was better; instead the point is that Sherman’s constant complaint about Thomas was misleading, and attempted to unfairly scapegoat Thomas, even though the progress of the Atlanta campaign from its start to Jonesboro was about as rapid as should have reasonably been expected.

Having escaped from Atlanta, Hood took some time to rest, refit and replenish his army before beginning a campaign to harass Sherman and his supply lines. Sherman gave half-hearted chase before deciding he would rather make his march to the sea regardless of Hood’s actions. Such a campaign would allow Hood virtually unimpeded access back through Georgia and then through Tennessee and Kentucky. Accordingly Grant gave Sherman permission for Sherman’s march only on the condition that Thomas be sent to Nashville where he could cobble together enough troops, reinforced by Schofield’s corps, to stop any movement by Hood to the north. After Grant became extraordinarily impatient with Thomas’s preparations, during a two-day battle in mid-December 1864 Thomas was not only able to defeat Hood but the second day’s battle routed the remnants of Hood’s army causing it to scatter southward toward Tupelo, Mississippi.

As Thomas had planned, his army, with Wilson's cavalry in the vanguard, immediately gave vigorous, sustained chase for ten days under terrible weather conditions. Thousands of Confederate stragglers were captured but excellent screening by Nathan Forrest's cavalry, swollen rivers, and other obstacles prevented the Federals from getting ahead, and blocking, of what was left of Hood's bedraggled army.

On January 8, 1865, Sherman announced Thomas' victory at Nashville but implausibly claimed that Thomas had "decoyed" Hood to Nashville. Although the pursuit after Nashville was by almost any standard the most successful of any until then in the Civil War, Grant continued his unrelenting personal criticism of Thomas. For instance, on January 21, 1865, Grant sent a dispatch to Sherman stating: "[Thomas'] pursuit of Hood indicated a sluggishness that satisfied me that he would never do to conduct one of your campaigns." It is also worth noting that Sherman seldom seriously pursued at any time during the Civil War, particularly after Jonesboro. Furthermore after Sherman arrived in Savannah on December 21, 1864, Grant graciously permitted Sherman to postpone the start of his Carolina campaign for six weeks, waiting among other things on more reinforcements from Thomas! At one later point Sherman would write to his wife, "Grant is almost childlike in his love for me."

Grant's criticism of Thomas continued unabated almost until his own death. Chapter 21 of Grant's best-selling *Memoirs*, citing distorted facts, criticized several aspects of the post-Nashville pursuit. Although this pursuit was led by Grant's protégé, James Wilson who was still living when Grant's memoirs were published in 1885, Grant does not mention Wilson by name.

At the beginning of the war Thomas was as competent, albeit with limitations, as any other higher ranking officer. But by the end of the war Thomas was a genuine master of the art of war. Not only had he learned to integrate and coordinate the major combat arms of infantry, artillery, and cavalry but he also used intelligence and logistics to his best advantage. He was also innovative, having developed a mobile pontoon bridge as well as a

mobile field command post. He was able to envision and actually deploy a wide range of battlefield tactics on the offensive as well as on the defensive. And most important he developed his killer's instinct aimed at totally vanquishing his enemy, a trait not shared by Sherman.

Thomas was the first of the pantheon of great Union generals – Grant, Sherman, Thomas, and Sheridan -- to die, having died in 1870 while in the process of gathering materials for his memoir. His relatively early demise meant he had little chance to extol his own virtues. As a native of Virginia he was without the benefit of home state boosterism or political patronage. Even his blood relatives disowned him! After Thomas' victory at Mill Springs, the first Union victory after First Manassas, Secretary of War Stanton's report neglected to mention Thomas by name. Thomas, while well liked by his subordinates and soldiers, was not as loquacious, charismatic, flamboyant, or colorful that sometimes attracted popular attention while obscuring command deficiencies. Nevertheless among the circle of Civil War historians his reputation is held in high regard.

Ranking military commanders, including the great and not-so-great, is at best inexact and subjective, and the importance of such rankings can be overrated. On the other hand the study of combat history, including its commanders, should be useful, if not essential, to understand the elements of leadership in both military and nonmilitary fields. For someone whose command never lost a battle, who often fought and won against long odds, and who left a legacy of unmatched professionalism and prescience, Thomas's reputation continues to suffer as being a defensive-oriented general. Although this characterization was frequently reiterated by Grant much of its origin is easy to identify.

It seems clear that Sherman did not intend to harm Thomas, with whom he had a cordial relationship. Despite Sherman's persistent complaints during the Civil War that Thomas was slow and/or sluggish, Sherman's memoirs, published in 1875, surprisingly ranked Thomas as the second best general in the Civil War, behind Grant but ahead of Lee. Nevertheless Sherman's personality traits would not allow the possibility of any criticism, especially

from Grant, his friend and superior officer. Thus it was expedient for Sherman to deflect dispersions away from himself and his former army but instead to cast blame upon the Army of the Cumberland, and its Commanding General and corps commanders, such as Hooker and Stanley. Unfortunately Grant was too willing to accept Sherman's critical remarks to authenticate his, Grant's, own biases against Thomas. Perhaps we will never know the precise answer but it is certainly a fair and reasonable question to wonder whether if but for Sherman's self-serving complaints during and after the Atlanta campaign about Thomas seriously diminished his reputation to this day.

Sources: Buell, Thomas B. *The Warrior Generals – Combat Leadership in the Civil War* (1997) New York: Three Rivers Press; Cleaves, Freeman. *Rock of Chickamauga – The Life of General George H. Thomas* (1948) Norman: University of Oklahoma Press; Daniel, Larry J. *Days of Glory: The Army of the Cumberland, 1861-1865* (2004) Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press; Davis, Stephen. *Atlanta will Fall – Sherman, Joe Johnston and the Yankee Heavy Battalions* (2001) Wilmington: Scholarly Resources; Einolf, Christopher J. *George Thomas – Virginian for the Union* (2007) Norman: University of Oklahoma Press; Flood, Charles Bracelen. *Grant and Sherman: The Friendship that Won the War* (2005) New York: Harper Perennial; Kennett, Lee. *Sherman – A Soldier's Life* (2001) Perennial.

ⁱ The full text of Sherman's "personal" letter to Grant is found at Bobrick pp 235-37.