

Fort Donelson - Just who is running the show?

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INTRODUCTION

From the very outset of the Civil War, many people on both sides believed the War would be short. One or two battles and, depending on your particular allegiance, the “cowardly Yankees” or “slovenly Rebels” would give up and the War would be over. With such confidence in quick success, thought of long term strategy seemed superfluous.

The more discerning and responsible leaders from both sides did not hold this popular view of a short war but even these leaders did not foresee the “total war” that was to emerge. Most Northern leaders thought in terms of a limited war in which it was not intended to conquer the South but to suppress an insurrection and win back the loyalty of its misguided people. In this context, the War was seen as one of limited goals requiring a strategy of limited means. The Union’s General-in-Chief, Winfield Scott devised such a strategy when he proposed that instead of directly invading the South, they should:

“...envelope it with a blockade by sea together with a fleet of gunboats supported by soldiers down the Mississippi. Thus sealed off from the rest of the world the Rebels would suffocate along with their government and ...bring them to terms with less bloodshed than by any other means”¹

This strategy of envelopment was to be called the **Anaconda Plan**. Northern newspapers scorned Scott’s plan. Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune* trumpeted the headline:

FORWARD TO RICHMOND! FORWARD TO RICHMOND!

**The Rebel Congress must not be allowed to meet there on 20th
of July**

**BY THAT DATE THE PLACE MUST BE HELD BY THE
NATIONAL ARMY**

Other newspapers picked up this “On to Richmond” cry with some even suggesting that Scott’s Anaconda Plan showed a reluctance by him to invade his native state.

The politicians relented - a Virginia invasion seemed the easier option. As a consequence, the War moved to an unplanned and confused start and the North’s first venture into Virginia ended in disaster at the Battle of Manassas (Bull Run) on July 21, 1861.

The more discerning minds saw merit in Scott’s proposed strategy. So it was that by the first winter of the War, the naval blockade had commenced and Union troops were massing in Illinois, Missouri and Kentucky for a strike down the Mississippi. They were to converge on Fort Henry, a Confederate fort guarding the Tennessee River, and subsequently on Dover, a small Tennessee town on the Cumberland River and its nearby military gun emplacements, **Fort Donelson**.

¹ McPherson, J.M., *Battle Cry of Freedom – The Civil War Era*: New York, Oxford University Press, 1988. p 333.

THE SITUATION IN EARLY 1862

The Western Theatre in the Civil War stretched from the Appalachian Mountains in the east to the Mississippi River in the west and comprised Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi and parts of Missouri, Illinois, Ohio and Georgia. In February 1862, the situation was one where the Union forces greatly outnumbered the Confederates. The Federals comprised nearly 200,000 men although these forces were widely dispersed. Half of the Federals were under command of Brigadier General Don Carlos Buell and were located in central Kentucky whilst the remainder, commanded by Major General Henry Halleck, were in Missouri with the headquarters located in St. Louis. Against these armies, the Confederacy had a force of less than 75,000 men and was commanded by Albert Sidney Johnston, considered by many, including President Davis, as the finest soldier in North America at that time.

Johnston had deployed his troops along a concave front that began at Columbus, Kentucky on the Mississippi River, ran south-east to Fort Henry and Donelson in Tennessee and then north-east to Bowling Green in Kentucky. Whilst Johnston was able to use the railroad for movement of men and supplies, the system of rivers was not in his favour even if he had gunboats to support his defensive operations. The rivers did provide, however, a natural highway for the Union forces and the naval gunboats supporting them. To defend the rivers and prevent Union movement on them, the Confederates had constructed two forts – Fort Henry on the Tennessee River and Fort Donelson on the Cumberland River. Neither fort had good natural defences nor was Johnston able to have them strongly garrisoned.

Johnston's Confederate troops were "raw" recruits, untested in battle and led by untried line officers. Furthermore, they were poorly armed and inadequately supplied. Whilst the Federals were better armed, supplied and disciplined, their leadership at various levels was somewhat problematic. Importantly, there was no unity of command. Halleck and Buell each reported directly to the General-in-Chief, George B McClellan, who, in turn, usually ignored both of them! Worse still, neither trusted the other nor Halleck's subordinate who was to face the Confederates in battle for the forts – Brigadier General Ulysses S Grant.

Since the beginning of the year, Lincoln had been calling for action from his commanders in the Western Theatre and, as was to occur regularly throughout the War until Grant assumed overall command, his commanders were afflicted with a case of the "slows". In this case, although Grant was anxious to move against Fort Henry, Halleck hesitated. Some hesitation might well have been justified, as there was the potential for Johnston to surround and defeat Grant's forces if the Confederate commander threw caution to the wind and took the battle to Grant. With the benefit that hindsight gives us we know that Johnston failed this "test".

It was only when Halleck heard that Beauregard was coming west with fifteen regiments to reinforce the forts on January 29, a rumour that was to prove false, that he approved Grant's proposal to seize Fort Henry.

THE ATTACK ON FORT HENRY

Grant began his movement to Fort Henry from Cairo, Illinois in early February 1862 and by February 6 had reached the fort. The Confederate commander, Brigadier General Lloyd Tilghman, sent most of his men eastward to Fort Donelson before Grant could close for battle. Tilghman stayed at the fort with a handful of troops to delay the Federal fleet with the fort's artillery. In this they had some success being able to disable one of Flag Officer Andrew Foote's gunboats in the initial engagement. Foote's larger guns were to be too much for the poorly constructed fort and, by early afternoon, Tilghman lowered his flag in surrender. The Federals had achieved a naval victory.

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Johnston believed that this brief engagement at Fort Henry had changed the entire situation in the Western Theatre. His line was broken, the Tennessee River was open now to the Union gunboats and other craft and the morale of his army was shattered. All of this had been achieved without a major battle being fought.

The bulk of Foote's fleet had started down the Tennessee River and would certainly move east along the Ohio and then turn south on the Cumberland River with a view to attacking Fort Donelson. To meet this impending disaster, Johnston failed to adopt a plan that had any chance of achieving a significant Confederate victory. Instead of seizing the initiative and concentrating his forces against Grant or even falling back to establish a new defensive line that he could properly defend, he divided his force sending half into Fort Donelson and falling back with the other half towards Nashville. These actions set the scene for what Johnston himself was to call a blow:

"...most disastrous and almost without remedy"

It was a blow from which the Confederates would not recover. They had the opportunity to surround and destroy the most important Union army in the west and possibly change the course of the War. That they were not able to do this was a direct consequence of their Commander's lack of imagination and over-cautious approach to battle.

FORT DONELSON

Fort Donelson was built in the early winter of 1861 on a ridge just west of Dover, Tennessee. Its purpose was to deny the Federals use of the Cumberland River and the batteries of cannon sited in the fort were well suited to the task. The fort itself consisted of little more than a series of shallow earthen entrenchments that extended in a semi-circle around the batteries and just south of Dover. The entire area was hilly and heavily wooded with only a few roads running through it.

THE PERSONALITIES – FLOYD, PILLOW AND BUCKNER vs GRANT

Johnston had deployed too few men at Fort Donelson to hold Grant, but more than he could afford to lose. More importantly, he compounded this error by his allocation of commanders at the fort². All of the decisions made by Johnston during this campaign in the winter of 1861-62 can and have been defended but nothing a theatre commander does is more important than his selection of his subordinate commanders and here Johnston was an unmitigated failure! For Johnston to allocate three senior officers of equal rank, irrespective of appointment or position, was, at best, foolhardy but when two of them had little or no military experience, set the scene for disaster and begs the question:

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Commanding Fort Donelson at this time was Brigadier General John B. Floyd, a former United States Secretary of War in the Buchanan Administration from 1857 - 1861. Floyd no military experience or leadership ability, little sense of the responsibility of command and whose sole concern appeared to be his own personal safety. In this regard, Floyd had become embroiled in a controversy over the misuse of funds earmarked for the Indians and in May 1860 ordered the transfer of 115000 weapons to five of the rebellious states, an act that even today is regarded by many as treason.

² Johnston sent three commanders of the same rank to defend Fort Donelson, which is not a smart thing to do unless the chain of command is explicitly stated and has a rational basis. Essentially the chain of command at Fort Donelson was established in terms of each commander's arrival at the fort. Unfortunately for the Confederates, Buckner was the last to arrive!

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Floyd's second-in-command was Brigadier General Gideon J. Pillow whose only claim to fame seems to be that he was President James K. Polk's former law partner. Pillow, who was a veteran of the Mexican War, was the only Confederate officer toward whom Grant ever expressed outspoken contempt. His sense of responsibility was considered to be on a par with that of Floyd.

The only real soldier in the fort was Brigadier General Simon Oliver Buckner, but his seniority placed him only third in the chain of command. Buckner had been a year behind Grant at West Point and the two were close friends. Buckner was a professional soldier who knew his business, but Floyd and Pillow saw to it that he never had a chance to show his qualities.

Facing the Confederates at Fort Donelson was Brigadier General Ulysses S Grant, a man small in stature and a failure in all of his business ventures prior to the War, but someone who was to prove the nemesis for the South in battle. Grant's great genius as a soldier, the characteristic in which he outdid every opponent he ever faced, was that he did not worry what the enemy could do to him but concentrated on what he could do to the enemy. Grant showed this trait at Fort Donelson. Here he was, in midwinter in hostile territory with scarcely seventeen thousand men dependant on a single river for supplies and reinforcements, surrounded by Confederates and with most of Foote's transports having gone. From Halleck's point of view he was seen as a reckless subordinate in the heart of enemy territory with nothing to hold in case of disaster. In effect he was in a "bag", with the enemy to the northeast, northwest, and directly in front. If Johnston saw his opportunity and pulled the strings, Grant would be trapped and the course of the War in the west might well have changed. Johnston did not see this opportunity, but neither did Grant consider it as an insurmountable limitation to his plans. He reasoned that the Confederates were demoralised and panicky and one more concerted push would drive them out of middle and western Tennessee. He was determined to leave Fort Henry and march overland to Fort Donelson. Bad weather held him up for a few days but he started this forced march on February 11.

THE BATTLE

Grant's forces were close to the fort by February 13. As Grant had expected, the enemy made no attempt to contest his advance. He later wrote:

"I had known General Pillow in Mexico, and judged that with any force, no matter how small, I could march up to within gunshot of any entrenchments he was given to hold."

Grant's forces were formed into two Divisions: the first under command of Brigadier General John H. McClernand on the right, or the eastern end of the line, and the other, commanded by under Brigadier General Charles F Smith, on the left. McClernand was an Illinois politician said to be ambitious, lacking tact, of limited ability and someone who hated "West Pointers" with a passion. In contrast, Smith, a West Point graduate who had served with distinction in the Mexican War, was an outstanding soldier.

The infantry on both sides had a miserable day on February 14. There had been a blizzard the previous night, and as the troops could not have campfires they had been cold, wet and unhappy. A number of the wounded froze to death.

Grant had received reinforcements at this time with Brigadier General Lew Wallace's 3rd Division joining Grant's forces. Wallace, a previous newspaper reporter, lawyer, politician and veteran of the Mexican War, put his men into the Union line between McClernand on the right and Smith on the left.

Grant's plan was to keep the Confederate infantry pinned within their lines while the gunboats attacked the batteries at close range. Both he and Foote thought that the boats would reduce the opposition at Fort Donelson just as they had at Henry. When the batteries were destroyed and the

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fleet controlled the river, Grant's men would block the routes of escape, forcing the Confederates to surrender.

Foote was a little sceptical about this plan of attack. He knew that the Fort Donelson guns were bigger than those at Fort Henry but Grant urged speed and by mid-afternoon of February 14 he came upstream with his four ironclads, *Pittsburg*, *St.Louis*, *Carondelet* and *Louisville* followed by two unarmed gunboats, *Tyler* and *Conestoga*. The *St.Louis* was Foote's flagship. Foote opened fire at about a range of one-mile. His shots fell short and he moved in closer – he had won at Fort Henry by coming in close and was determined to do the same at Fort Donelson. Foote moved in until he was at a range of only four hundred yards. All the ironclads were hit by Confederate fire with the *St.Louis* alone taking forty-nine hits. His shots were still falling short and he moved in to 380 yards a solid shot tore through the pilot-house of the *St.Louis*. It carried away the wheel, mortally wounded the pilot and injured Foote. With his fleet damaged Foote was compelled to retreat. Any victory won at Fort Donelson would have to be won by the army.

Whilst Grant was disappointed with Foote's failure, he did not panic. He knew the Confederates could not get significant reinforcements into the fort nor bring supplies to the besieged men. He was certain that Johnston was not going to mount an attack on his rear. He was willing to wait for starvation to bring him victory.

The Confederates decided not to wait. They had no choice now but to try to cut their way out and reach Nashville. In the snowstorm the Confederates moved out of the fort and drove back the surrounding Union troops. Having achieved this breakout, General Pillow suddenly lost his nerve and prevailed on his fellow generals, Floyd and Buckner, to call off the escape bid and return to the fort. Floyd then decided to attack the Union right wing to force a break-out. At dawn the Confederates struck, Pillow on the left and Buckner in the center. The general direction was along Wynn's Ferry Road. After the first confused moments McClernand's brigade commanders got their units into line and began to return fire. The firefight lasted all morning, "spreading a lurid red over the snow." The Federals held.

The time had come to begin the retreat south. There can be no doubt that had the Confederates started out at noon they could have made it safely to Nashville. The Union forces would not have mounted an effective pursuit, since Grant was not on the scene to direct it. He had left before daybreak to consult with Foote and was in the middle of the Cumberland River on the *St.Louis*. Pillow, the hero of the morning's fighting, now proceeded to have a "brain explosion" and which made him appear ludicrous. He convinced himself that Grant's whole army had been routed and was fleeing back towards Fort Henry. Ignoring Floyd, he rode over to Buckner and accused him of cowardice. Napoleon, he exclaimed, followed up his victories and the Confederates would do no less. Pointing to a road that ran up a gorge in front of Buckner, he ordered an attack. He then sent an aide to the nearest telegraph station with a dispatch for Johnston, asserting on his honour as a soldier that the day was his. With his head swimming with his own glories, Pillow abandoned all thoughts of a Confederate retreat to Nashville.

Grant decided to launch an attack of his own. He was sure that Floyd must have stripped his entrenchments to make his attack. He ordered Smith to attack the Confederate right flank. The objective was difficult, uphill and "criss-crossed" with felled trees. Smith in what Grant described as "an incredibly short time," had his men in line and led the attack from the front to keep his men from firing while they worked their way through the obstacles of felled trees. The attack scattered the Rebels. Meanwhile, McClernand and Wallace launched their own attacks on the Rebels left flank thus driving Pillow's and Buckner's men back into their entrenchments. The Confederate attempt to break out had failed.

By nightfall on February 15, the Confederates were back in their weapon pits, exhausted and cold. Floyd and Pillow argued about ways of extricating the army from its embarrassing situation. Unable to reach an agreement, they called a meeting of all brigade and regimental commanders at 1am on February 16. Floyd advised that scouts had revealed that Grant was to be reinforced by five

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additional regiments. Discussion continued throughout the night. Cavalry commander Colonel Nathan B. Forrest stated that the Charlotte Road across Lick Creek was still passable. Being a man of action not words, Forrest left immediately to reconnoitre the route and found the water level "just up to touch the saddle skirts". Meanwhile, an infantry scouting party reported that "the overflow of Lick's Creek was not practical for infantry, that the soft mud was about leg high deep, the water was saddle skirt deep and there was a good deal of drift in the way. Furthermore, it was noted that a number of their troops were suffering from frostbite and this was to be given some weight in subsequent deliberations.

THE CONFEDERATE CONFERENCE – 0530 HRS, FEBRUARY 16

The following is an abridged record of the conversations that took place at General Floyd's Headquarters at 5.30am, February 16.

Floyd: *"Well, gentlemen, what is best now to be done?"*- Floyd repeated the question.

Pillow: *"It is difficult to determine what is best to be done, but I was in favour in cutting our way out."*

Floyd: *"Buckner, what do you think?"*

Buckner: *"I consider the position as desperate. The troops have been worn down by watching, with labour, with fighting. There has been no issue of rations for a number of days and scarcely any means of cooking. Their ammunition is nearly expended. We are completely invested by a force fully four times the strength of our own. In their exhausted condition they could not march. An attempt to make a sortie would be resisted by a superior force of fresh troops. The result would be a virtual massacre of our troops, who would thus be assailed on their front, rear, and flanks at the same instant. The result would be more disheartening in its effects than surrender. I do not think any general has the right to make such a sacrifice of human life."*

Forrest assured Buckner that his cavalry would be able to cover the army's retreat. General Floyd sided with Buckner.

Buckner: *"It would be wrong to subject the army to virtual massacre when no good could result from the sacrifice. General officers owed it to their men, when further resistance was unavailing, to obtain the best terms of capitulation possible."*

General Floyd agreed with Buckner on this point.

Pillow: *"Gentlemen, if we cannot cut our way out nor fight on there is no alternative left to us but capitulation, and I am determined that I will never surrender my command nor will I ever surrender myself a prisoner. I will die first."*

Floyd: *"Nor will I; I cannot and will not surrender, but I must confess personal reasons control me."*

Buckner: *"But such considerations should not control a General's actions."*

Floyd: *"But nevertheless such is my determination."*

Pillow: *"I think there are no two persons in the Confederacy whom the Yankees would prefer to capture than myself and General Floyd. - General Floyd would you accompany me?"*

Floyd: *"It is a question for every man to decide for himself."*

Forrest: *"Are you going to surrender the command?"*

Floyd nodded.

Forrest: *"I intend to go out - if but to save one man."*

Floyd: *"I will take my chances with Forrest."*

Floyd: *"General Buckner, would you make the surrender."*

Buckner replied in the affirmative.

Floyd: *"General Buckner, I place you in command, will you permit me to draw out my brigade?"*

Buckner: *"Yes, provided you do so before the enemy act upon my communications."*

Floyd: *"General Pillow, I turn over my command."*

Pillow: *"I pass it."*

Buckner: *"I assume it; bring on a bugler, pen, ink and paper."*

General Buckner then sat down and began to draft a message, addressed to General Grant.

Pillow: *"Gentlemen is there anything wrong with me leaving?"*

Floyd: *"Everyman must judge that for himself."*

Pillow: *"Then I shall leave this place."*

THE ESCAPE

As Buckner began his bitter duty, Floyd and Pillow rushed out down to the river, where they were expecting to board a steamboat, *The General Anderson*. Just before dawn the boat arrived. Troops rushed the vessel and, seeing this, the captain informed Floyd that the vessel would be swamped unless he left immediately. Floyd ordered this move. Meanwhile, Pillow's staff had located a flatboat and ferried Pillow across the Cumberland River.

Pillow reached Clarkesville during the late afternoon where he rejoined Floyd aboard the *General Anderson* and together they proceeded to Nashville, arriving around 7am on February 17.

UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER

Buckner, who held to a belief that a commander's responsibility extended to going into captivity with his men, composed his note to Grant asking for terms of capitulation.

Grant received the note just before daylight and his reply was terse and to the point:

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“No terms except unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted. I propose to move immediately on your works.”

Buckner's reaction was one of shock. He had not slept for over thirty hours and was disgusted with the actions of his superiors. Furthermore, he did not quite know what Grant meant by "...unconditional...surrender." The term was a new one, and he did not like to think of the implications of it. He had a role to play, and he was determined to play it out, with dignity, to the end.

With the capture of Fort Donelson, the South was forced to give up southern Kentucky and much of middle and western Tennessee. The Confederates had run the gamut from glittering opportunity through brilliant victory to a final bitter defeat. All three senior officers, Johnston, Floyd and Pillow, had blundered and their actions would have severe consequences for the Confederate cause. Only Buckner had emerged untarnished. At least he had managed to restore some dignity to the situation in the final act of surrender.

Later that morning, Grant rode up to Buckner's headquarters at the Dover Hotel. Despite the brusque tone of his written demand for "unconditional surrender," Grant, when he arrived, was, according to Buckner,

“very kind and civil and polite.”

In the course of the conversation, Buckner told Grant that if he had been in command during the campaign, the Federals would not have been allowed to make an unopposed approach on Donelson. Grant replied that, if Buckner had been in command, he would not have tried in the way he did. Grant added somewhat facetiously that Pillow need not have been so anxious to escape:

“ If I had captured him, I would have turned him loose, I would rather have him in command of you fellows than as a prisoner.”

When Buckner rose to leave, Grant followed outside. Grant stopped and remarked:

“Buckner, you are I know, separated from your people and, perhaps you need funds; my purse is at your disposal.”

After declining Grant's offer, Buckner thanked him. Nevertheless, it was a clear indication that the Union General had remembered Buckner's kindness to him in the summer of 1854, when Grant reached New York from the west coast in almost destitute condition. His financial affairs had reached a crisis; his hotel refused him further credit for room and lodging. In this emergency, Grant appealed to his friend, Captain Simon Buckner, whom he knew at West Point and in Mexico. Buckner restored Grant's line of credit at the hotel, had his baggage returned, and tided him over until he was able to collect some money from a creditor.

PRISONERS OF WAR

The number of Confederates captured at Fort Donelson has never been established with any precision although it is believed that up to 2000 escaped in groups or individually. What is known may be summarised in the following terms:

- Over 500 Confederates are buried in the Dover cemetery. There is no accurate count of those who subsequently died of wounds or who are buried elsewhere but it is likely to be in excess of 2000;
- On the day of the surrender, Grant reported the number of prisoners captured as "...from 12000 to 15000";

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- In his book “the Military History of U S Grant”, Colonel Adam Badeau states that the number of Rebels captured was 14623;
- In total, the Confederate forces charged with the defence of the Dover area was around 15500 effective troops;
- This figure does not take into account the men in hospital, those assigned to supernumerary duties and the 400 recruits who reached Dover on the morning of February 16;
- When these are added to the garrison numbers, it probably exceeded 18000 men.

Whatever the number of troops who were captured, the task of taking care of thousands of POWs proved to be extremely difficult as there were no procedures in place for the administration and control of POWs. Grant advised Halleck that he was “...truly glad” to be rid of them. He expressed the view that they were “...easier captured than taken care of” and feared that the prisoners would “...prove an elephant”.

THE AFTERMATH

Grant’s dispatch reporting the fall of Fort Donelson reached General Halleck’s headquarters in St Louis at about noon on February 17. The jubilant Halleck wired General-in-Chief McClellan in Washington:

“Make Buell, Grant and Pope major generals of volunteers and give me command in the west. I ask this in return for Forts Henry and Donelson.”

It appears that this “armchair general” was trying to capitalise on the achievements of his able subordinates. Furthermore, by bracketing Grant’s name with the others, he appeared to be attempting to make the Washington authorities believe that other the Union generals had shared equally in the victory. Except for a general order published on February 19, Halleck took no further notice of Grant’s role in the operation.

Following the receipt in Washington of the news of the fall of Fort Donelson, President Lincoln nominated Grant a major general of volunteers as of February 16 and the Senate immediately confirmed the appointment. Subsequently, Buell, McClernand, Pope, C.F.Smith and Lew Wallace were also promoted to the rank of major general to take effect from March 21.

By their capture of Fort Henry, the Federals had driven a wedge into the Confederate defence line guarding the heartland of the Confederacy. The left flank of this line had been anchored on Columbus, Kentucky, and the right on the Cumberland Gap. With the loss of Fort Donelson, this defensive line was shattered and to make matters worse, the Confederates had lost, also, a powerful field army and an immense amount of war materiel.

The fruits of victory were apparent very quickly. Two days after the fall of Fort Henry and in the face of the threat to Fort Donelson, General Albert Sydney Johnston had notified the Confederate Secretary of War, Judah Benjamin, that he was giving up his position at Bowling Green, Kentucky, and was retiring to Nashville. When Fort Donelson fell, Nashville was in danger of being overrun since Union gunboats were now able to move along the Cumberland River unopposed. The Confederates were compelled now to give up this vital industrial and transportation complex and on February 17, Johnston began to evacuate Nashville.

Thus, by the capture of Fort Donelson and the destruction of the defending army, the Union had forced in one operation the Confederates to give up southern Kentucky, and virtually all of middle and west Tennessee. With the fall of Fort Donelson, the entire picture of the “War in the West” had

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changed. Grant had seized the initiative and despite temporary setbacks, he was never to lose it. The deep wedge driven into the South by the fall of Fort Donelson would eventually split the Confederacy. Soon would come the battles at Shiloh, Corinth, Memphis and, 18 months later, at Vicksburg.

The South was to pay for this disaster at Dover with three more years of bitter warfare, but the ultimate price was total defeat.

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