Introduction

By June 1863, the United States' effort to restore the Union had been stymied by inglorious battlefield defeats and political setbacks. Conversely, the Confederacy's star was ascending. In the East, General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia had once again repulsed the Union army's offensive toward Richmond in May. Lee seized the momentum and invaded the North into Pennsylvania. In the West, the Confederate Gibraltar of chattanooga was occupied, and offensives were launched. The Army of the Cumberland, numbered over 50,000 men, and was turned to field level officers and their small commands. (6)

Conciliation Has Failed

Invasion and Occupation

Invasion and extended occupation created a myriad of issues for US commanders and centered on: discerning the difference between hostile civilians, southern Unionists, and dissoloyal noncombatants, subjugating guerrillas, and other irregular forces. Contending with the large influx of enslaved African Americans and contraband of war, and conducting military campaigns. Response from commanders and their troops was varied. The US battle and attempts at reconciliation escalated the nature of the war. (5)

To Tullahoma and No Further

A Brilliant Maneuver

In June 1863, to the surprise of his senior commanders, General Rosecrans ordered the army to embark on its finest campaign. The destination: the Confederate Army of Tennessee positioned at Manchester and Tullahoma. Through audacious maneuver, deception, and wide-ranging flanking columns, Rosecrans forced the rebel withdrawal to Chattanooga at the cost of 600 casualties. Only the natural elements prevented the enemy's destruction. But, the army’s first step was to capture Tullahoma, the Union high command ordered in an effort to suppress offenses against civilians and private property. First, General George H. Thomas of the XIV Corps issued orders that inflicted fines as punishment for soldiers pillaging the countryside. (10)

To Tullahoma and No Other

The second, from army HQ, sought to stop stragglers and unenthusiastic foragers who fell out of the ranks as the army moved forward to pillage and deplete civilians. But, foraging was necessary to feed the men and their horses/mules as the army outpaced its supply lines. Commanders were instructed to subsist off the countryside, especially grazing for animals, but this provided a license for soldiers-many detached from their regiments to guard supplies, equipment, roads, and railroads-to pillage what was no man's land during occupation, and during occupation, the army's interaction with African-Africans increased. (11) General Benteley described the practical, on-ground response: "Calling the citizens together, I said to them the bushwhacking must stop. The Federal troops had tolerated it long enough. Hereafter, every time the telegraph wire was cut we would burn a house; ever time a train was fired upon we should hang a man; we would continue to do this until every house was burned and every man was hanged." "If they wanted to fight they should enter the army, meet us like honorable men..." (8) Far from support and the directives of headquarters, detached commanders struggled to garrison towns, guard bridges, railroads, transportation arteries, and combat the escalating scourge of guerrillas. Often supported by the local populace, irregular forces used terror, deception, and knowledge of the area to ambush and bushwhack Federal troops, supply trains, and southern loyalists. Union soldiers turned to the people harboring the guerrillas: civilians. (7)

Devolved Command

Occupational functions operated on the application of force to space. In Tennessee, the Union command structure devolved as units were detached from the main army (Murfreesboro) to garrison towns and area far away from support. Control fell to field level officers and their small commands. (6)

The Army of the Cumberland

Federal forces arrived in Middle Tennessee in February 1862, seized and occupied the capital of Nashville. In late December, the Army of the Cumberland initiated its first major offensive against the Confederate Army of Tennessee, positioned less than 50 miles southeast from the capital at Murfreesboro. The subsequent Union victory at the Battle of Stones River forced the rebel army to retreat southeast. Union forces used the next 6 months to regorganize, resupply, and operate in a department that stretched from the Kentucky border to the northern border of Alabama. (2) By the time of the Tullahoma Campaign, the Army of the Cumberland was organized into four corps, numbered over 50,000 men, and occupied ground from Franklin to Tullahoma, and Murfreesboro. Rosecrans' received unrelenting pressure from the War Department in Washington to direct an offensive against the Confederate Army. (3)

The Old Guard & The Citizen Soldier

The army personified the leadership and organization of Civil War armies. The majority of senior commanders had traditional military training. The enlisted men were civilian-turned-temporary-soldiers. The distinction between the two was demonstrated on campaign and during occupation. (4)

The Union Army

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The New Policy

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References

8. The Library of Congress. “Unconquerable Stronghold of Loyalty”.
10. The Library of Congress. Conclusion: To Georgia and Beyond.
11. The Library of Congress. The Tullahoma Campaign added luster to a victorious summer for the Union. The pressure focussed on Rosecrans’ army to deliver the decisive blow to end the war. When asked if he was going to neglect the opportunity, Rosecrans responded with justification: “I beg in behalf of this army that the War Department may not overlook so great an event because it is not written in letters of blood.” (14)