

Episode 107: Lincoln Gets Frustrated with His Generals

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After the Battle of Perryville in early October, Confederate General Braxton Bragg began a slow retreat back to Tennessee. Although his outnumbered men had performed well at Perryville, Bragg realized that the dream of Kentuckians rushing to join the Confederate army was not going to materialize. He headed first toward Knoxville and then farther south to Chattanooga. Although some of his subordinate officers complained bitterly that Bragg did not stay and fight longer in Kentucky, Bragg felt there was little to be gained by remaining in the border state.

On the opposing side, Major General Don Carlos Buell did not send his Union troops in vigorous pursuit of the Confederates. This passive approach was too much for a frustrated Abraham Lincoln. Already annoyed with what he considered a lack of aggression by George McClellan after the Battle of Antietam, Lincoln was not satisfied with having another complacent general in command. On October 24, 1862, Buell was replaced as head of the Army of the Cumberland by William Starke Rosecrans.

Rosecrans was a 43-year-old West Point graduate, born in Ohio and the great-grandson of Stephen Hopkins, who had been Governor of Rhode Island and signer of the Declaration of Independence. At West Point, Rosecrans had been roommates with James Longstreet who would rise to fame as a Confederate general.

Early in the war, Rosecrans devised the plan that enabled McClellan to win the victory at Rich Mountain in western Virginia that would start McClellan on the path to leading the Union armies in the east. When McClellan's official report did not mention or credit Rosecrans, he

refused to follow McClellan to the eastern theatre. In the west, troops under Rosecrans's command had performed well at Iuka and at Corinth. After Corinth, Rosecrans also traded blame with his superior officer Ulysses S. Grant. In contrast to his problems with his commanding officers, Rosecrans was very popular with his troops, who called him "Old Rosy". After assuming command, Rosecrans began to get his troops moving southward to Tennessee, where they would meet Bragg again in December at Stones River.

Meanwhile, in Virginia, Union troops under McClellan would finally begin to move this week across the Potomac River and into Virginia. It had been over a month since the Battle at Antietam and the wait had been excruciating for Lincoln at the White House. Lincoln had been prodding McClellan on a daily basis to get moving and after the Confederates. On October 25, McClellan had complained that his horses had sore tongues and were fatigued. Lincoln shot back a telegram stating "Will you pardon me for asking what the horses have done since the Battle of Antietam to fatigue anything?" The next day the Army of the Potomac finally crossed the river and Lincoln sent McClellan a telegram exclaiming that he was "rejoicing" at the news.

McClellan's lethargy had given the Confederates a much needed respite. With no threat from Union forces, the Confederates were able to replenish their armaments and stores, get bathed and well fed and healed. Leaving Antietam, one observer had described them as "...sun burnt, gaunt, ragged, scarcely at all shod, specters and caricatures of their former selves." Over the next six weeks, as they regrouped around Winchester, another officer was able to declare that "the arduous and perilous duties of the Maryland campaign were forgotten and the army was itself again." As the weather began to turn cooler and McClellan crossed the river, another confrontation was sure to be on the horizon.