

Episode 157: Jefferson Davis Pays Braxton Bragg a Visit

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While Braxton Bragg's main enemy sat in front of him at Chattanooga, he had some other serious opposition within his own ranks. His subordinate generals, displeased with his lack of pursuit of the Yankees after Chickamauga and with Bragg's command in general, were advocating for his removal.

Bragg was a career officer, having graduated in the West Point class of 1837. He was apparently a very argumentative and unpleasant person. During his first U.S. Army command in Florida, he wrote a series of complaint letters to his commanding officer regarding conditions at the outpost where he was stationed. Several years later he anonymously published a magazine article in which he referred to Winfield Scott, then the army's commander-in chief, as a "vain, petty and conniving man." The article was eventually traced back to Bragg and he was court-martialed, but the sentence was only an official reprimand and half pay for two months. There were rumors in the late 1840's that some of Bragg's own soldiers had tried unsuccessfully to assassinate him.

Bragg did have success on the battlefield. During the Mexican War Battle of Buena Vista, he brought his troops in to fill a gap in the U.S. lines and helped to repulse a superior Mexican force. This was partially in support of Mississippi troops under Jefferson Davis. The future Confederate president would long remember Bragg saving the day. Bragg's stern personality also made him a strong and respected disciplinarian and his troops were among the best drilled in the army.

When Bragg joined the Confederate effort he was made a brigadier general, but his good work at the Battle of Shiloh in April 1862 prompted Jefferson Davis to make him one of only six full generals in the Confederate army.

However, by October of 1863, Bragg's Army of the Tennessee was nearly in a state of mutiny as almost all of his subordinates had had enough of Bragg. Cavalry general Nathan Bedford Forrest refused to serve under Bragg any longer and essentially told Bragg that if he crossed his path he would kill him. Lieutenant General James Longstreet wrote to Secretary of War telling him that things in Tennessee were hopeless unless Bragg was replaced. Most of Bragg's division and corps commanders met in secret and wrote and signed a petition to Jefferson Davis asking that Bragg be removed.

Davis made the unusual step of leaving Richmond and traveling to meet Bragg to assess the situation. He arrived at Bragg's camp on October 10. Although Bragg offered to resign to defuse the crisis, Jefferson would not accept the offer. He believed Bragg was the best man for the job and denounced his subordinates. In particular, he authorized Bragg to relieve D.H. Hill of his command. Hill had been one of Bragg's most vocal opponents. Historical hindsight indicates that Davis probably did not make the right call in this situation. By late in the next month, events on the battlefield would deteriorate to the point where Davis would gladly accept Bragg's resignation.