

Two Campaigns Conclude, and Two Congresses Meet

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During the first week in December 1863, fighting wound down in both the eastern and western theaters, as both Union and Confederate forces prepared for a winter respite while looking back over a long, bloody year of combat.

In late November, Union General George Meade and his Army of the Potomac had commenced an offensive by crossing the Rappahannock River and forcing Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia to retreat south of the Rapidan River. Lee established strong defensive positions along the Rapidan, but Meade devised a plan to flank the Confederate position with a move to the east across a small stream known as Mine Run. Unfortunately for Meade, a portion of his army under General William French started late on its march, and then took a wrong road. The delay in the Union advance allowed Lee time to move his troops into position to stop the Federals. After inconclusive fighting at Payne's Farm, Lee was able to further strengthen his position along Mine Run. Meade had planned a major assault on November 30, but after observing the strength of the Confederate lines, he called off the attack. On December 1-2 he withdrew his army back across the Rappahannock, thus avoiding a possible counterattack by Lee. While the Lincoln administration was disappointed with the failure of the campaign, Meade's men appreciated his unwillingness to sacrifice their lives needlessly. Following the end of the maneuvering, both sides settled into winter quarters.

In the western theater, Confederate President Jefferson Davis accepted General Braxton Bragg's resignation as commander of the Army of Tennessee. Lieutenant General William

Hardee temporarily took command of the troops then at Dalton, Georgia, though General Joseph E. Johnston would eventually be appointed to permanent command. The following spring, Johnston would defend north Georgia against three Union armies under William T. Sherman.

On December 3-4, James Longstreet abandoned his siege of Knoxville and moved his small army east towards Greenville, marking a Federal victory of major proportions. William Sherman arrived in Knoxville with 25,000 men to break the siege, and the Federals soon launched a pursuit of the retreating Confederates. Inconclusive movements took place for the next ten days, but both sides would soon enter into winter quarters, ending the east Tennessee campaign with most of the region in Federal hands.

Far from the battlefields, the first session of the Thirty-eighth United States Congress was held in Washington, while the fourth session of the First Confederate Congress convened in Richmond. Jefferson Davis took the opportunity to reflect on the past year of war. He noted the “grave reverses” of the past summer, but emphasized that Federal advances “had been checked.” He admitted the lack of progress in gaining a foreign ally for the Confederacy, while also explaining the situation surrounding the nation’s finances. Davis commented on the Union refusal to continue the exchange of prisoners-of-war, and the problems in the Trans-Mississippi now that that area was cut off from the rest of the Confederacy. The president concluded by noting that “The hope last year entertained of an early termination of the war has not been realized . . . [but] The patriotism of the people has proved equal to every sacrifice demanded by their country’s need.” The first week of December 1863 showed that despite defeats and heavy losses, both sides were more than willing to continue fighting. The third Christmas of the war was less than three weeks away.