

# Cracking the Stonewall

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Cracking the Stonewall

By Norman Simms '06



The Lost Cause Mythology contains great “*What if ...*” questions; of these, one of the greatest is what would have happened if General Thomas (Stonewall) J. Jackson had not been killed so early on in the Civil War. Jackson was a disciplined and aggressive commander but as with all mythology, the facts have been exaggerated. Three discrepancies exist that portray Jackson as a good general but not the iconic figure found in most historical accounts. Jackson’s tendency towards secrecy prevented him from sharing his plans and intentions with subordinates, fellow commanders, and superiors. His stubborn nature was problematic, and resulted in a constant stream of courts-martial, which he was almost too willing to use against other officers, as well as in general discord, even amongst his most senior officers. He has been deemed a military genius, but he was only a genius as compared to the Union commanders that he faced in battle.

General Jackson’s secrecy was well known and resulted in many problems throughout his military campaigning in the Civil War. It affected the morale of his troops, hampered relations and caused confusion with both his own generals and other commanding generals, and resulted in the confusion that led to his death. Many commanders throughout military history have been secretive without negatively affecting their troops. Jackson believed in strict discipline and always providing optimal performance; consequently, he pushed his men like he pushed himself, no matter the conditions or how tired he was. At a time when only the officers and cavalry did not walk, the strain of his pushing took a horrible toll on the morale of his troops. This constant strain, combined with his decision to continue the Valley Campaign during the winter months, resulted in a severe drop in the spirits of his men. They spent most of their time struggling to go to an unknown destination and even the officers began to complain. Jackson’s brigade commander, General Charles Winder, after being ordered to complete another forced march said “he might as well lose his men in battle as on such a march.”<sup>1</sup> The actions of one of Jackson’s generals, Loring, provide strong evidence of the reaction of the men and officers to the secrecy.

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<sup>1</sup> James I. Robertson, *The Stonewall Brigade* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1977), 102.

The affair began when Jackson left Loring and his men to defend the city of Romney during the winter months of the Valley Campaign. The men and their general felt they had been left in an indefensible position with few supplies while Jackson retired to the comfortable lodgings of Winchester. Loring, with the full support of both his officers and enlisted men wrote to the War Department (in Richmond) in complaint. As a result of Loring's political connections and strong convictions shown in the request, he was "ordered...to evacuate Romney and return with his command to the vicinity of Winchester."<sup>2</sup> This order was sent "without consultation with General Jackson" and "in direct opposition" to his known plans.<sup>3</sup> The bypassing of Jackson and the resulting break in the chain-of-command was a considerable insult and it was only with a threat of resignation that he reasserted his authority and regained the respect that he had lost.

The men always forgave their commander after these affairs because of his record of success. Even so, during moments of crisis Jackson could face passive resistance (ex. orders ignored) and occasionally the real possibility of mutiny. This concept is summarized well by one of Jackson's commanders, A. P. Hill, who wrote of Jackson, "The Almighty will get tired, helping Jackson after awhile, and then he'll get the damdest thrashing—and the shoe pinches, for I should get my share and probably all the blame, for the people will never blame Stonewall for any disaster."<sup>4</sup>

Jackson's secrecy often caused problems with both his own commanders and other commanders. The problem arose from two factors. The first was that the lack of knowledge caused frustration and confusion while the second was the aristocratic background and nature of the commanders. Jackson was not an aristocrat and was prone to be stubborn and speak bluntly. He was unable to understand the need for tact and diplomacy in dealing with men who had been raised to believe that they were superior to the common man and were used to getting what they wanted. This inability manifested itself during the Battle of McDowell in 1862 and involved Jackson's commander, Major Harman. Harman was charged with strategically moving supplies and after having to work with Jackson's secrecy, he complained that "Jackson's mysterious ways are unbearable."<sup>5</sup> His constant request for information resulted in an insulting rebuff by Jackson and Harman then "thanked him for his candor and told him [he] would resign."<sup>6</sup>

When working with other commanders, Jackson had a tendency to operate independently. He always accepted the authority and orders of the Confederate War Department but he was prone to interpret them loosely. An example of this can be found in the early days of the war when he was instructed to patrol along the Virginia-Maryland border near the point where the Potomac River, Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, and the Shenandoah Rivers intersect. He took it upon himself to cross the border and take the Maryland Heights and only after doing so informed Lee.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to causing problems amongst his men and other commanders, Jackson's secrecy ultimately cost him his life when he was shot by friendly fire (by the

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<sup>2</sup> Henry K. Douglas, *I Rode With Stonewall* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1940), 25.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Byron Farwell, *Stonewall: A Biography of General Thomas J. Jackson* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1992), 457.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 265

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

18<sup>th</sup> North Carolina Infantry Regiment) at night during the battle of Chancellorsville. After situating his men, he had left the Confederate line to get reconnaissance on the terrain with several of his staff (about twenty men). He did not inform any of his lower level commanders about his mission and when returning he approached the lines recklessly. A captain of the regiment, Alfred Tolar, fired, later stating that “the tramp of thirty horsemen advancing through a heavy forest at a rapid gait seemed to the average infantryman like a brigade of cavalry.” The failure to recognize Jackson was further hampered by the constant harassment of the picket lines by Union cavalry; thus not only did the entourage sound like the enemy, but the lines were expecting to encounter the enemy. Jackson’s secrecy killed him and it was his men who would pay the price. General Franklin Paxton was unexpectedly thrust into command in the final engagements of the Battle of Chancellorsville and the Stonewall Brigade suffered its highest number of casualties in any one engagement during the Civil War (“493 men, including the principal officers”<sup>8</sup>). Despite the valiant efforts of the brigade, it was the poor performance of Union forces (under the command of General Hooker) and the shortness of the battle that saved the day. Afterwards, the Brigade could not even muster a full regiment.<sup>9</sup>

While secrecy was one important factor, Jackson’s stubborn personality and use of courts-martial proved to be another. The use of courts-martial was not unexpected due to his past but it did greatly reduce the effectiveness of his army. He attempted his first court-martial while at West Point and tried again against his commanding officer when he was stationed in Florida. While teaching at the Virginia Military Institute (VMI), he tried to court-martial students on several occasions. When Jackson believed that someone had violated the rules and lost discipline, he strongly advocated that justice be rendered. As a military man, the tool Jackson most often used to enforce both discipline and justice was the court-martial.

It is a little known fact that within the six months spanning the Shenandoah Valley Campaign Jackson had attempted to court-martial two of his brigadier generals (Loring and Garnett) and two of his senior colonels (Conner and Gilham). Of his six divisional commanders, the only one not facing court-martial charges was General Alexander Lawton. Four of his senior officers had been provoked to the point of threatening to resign. While presenting these facts, the author Byron Farwell states that, “no other general, North or South, had shone himself so abrasive and so clumsy in his personal relations with subordinates, and he never improved.”<sup>10</sup> The cases involving Brigadier General Garnett and General A. P. Hill (divisional commander) were representative of the circumstances surrounding many of these cases.

At the battle of Kernstown, General Garnett (commanding the Stonewall Brigade) ordered his men to retire at sundown, upsetting Jackson. According to Henry Douglas, a member of Jackson’s staff, “he maintained that he could not have held his position much longer...and that by falling back he saved some of his soldiers from unprofitable death and many from capture.”<sup>11</sup> The Confederate War Department agreed with Garnett and unsuccessfully attempted to convince Jackson to drop the charges. Garnett was even admonished for not breaking contact with the enemy sooner. Jackson’s own convictions

<sup>8</sup> Robertson, 189.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Farwell, 332.

<sup>11</sup> Douglas, 37.

and unmovable position can be seen in his statement: "I regard Gen. Garnett as so incompetent as a brigade commander that, instead of building up a Brigade, a good one, if turned over to him, would actually deteriorate under his command."<sup>12</sup> The charges were eventually dropped after Jackson died, and Garnett spent the rest of his army career (he died during Pickett's charge at Gettysburg) attempting to purge his loss of honor.

General A. P. Hill was first assigned to Jackson prior to the Cedar Mountain Campaign. He was considered one of the most skilled divisional commanders in the Confederate Army and as a result commanded the largest division. Lee sent along a recommendation stating that "you will, I think find [him] a good officer, with whom you can consult."<sup>13</sup> The addition of this skilled general proved problematic, however; the two men had been adversaries since West Point. Hill's decision to delay beginning the march towards Maryland and then refusing the order to halt his column for a scheduled rest caused an argument that ended with Jackson placing Hill under arrest. The arrest was temporary because Jackson needed Hill, who later proved his worth as a commander at the battles of Sharpsburg and Boteler's Ford. Throughout the campaign, however, a vicious battle of words ensued. Even the intervention of General Robert E. Lee could not end the feud and the threats of court-martial continued by both sides until Jackson's death. Jackson had allowed an old rivalry and a small confrontation to arise into a large and time-consuming debate. It might not have had such an impact had it not occurred at the beginning and then during one of the Confederacy's most critical military campaigns, the invasion of Maryland (what would be later called the First Invasion of Maryland).

Jackson's inability to maintain a working relationship with subordinates and the harsh and strict way he treated his men led to much dissatisfaction. The only reason the majority who stayed did not transfer or resign was because they knew that Jackson won battles.

In order to see why Jackson was dubbed a military genius, his successes must be analyzed. Jackson entered the war and served through several campaigns beginning with the Shenandoah Valley Campaign and ending with the Battle of Chancellorsville. It is acknowledged by most historians that during the Seven Day Battle he showed poor leadership and was unable to plan and execute successful military tactics.<sup>14</sup> But the successful military campaigns that resulted in him being dubbed a military genius were the Shenandoah campaign, the Battle of Fredericksburg, and his performance during the first part of the Battle of Chancellorsville. The Union commanders faced during each of these successes were moderately talented commanders at best and inexperienced and untalented commanders at worst. The survival of Jackson's reputation rests not on his success in battle but on his luck of not facing a capable commander (ex. Ulysees Grant, Tecumseh Sherman). During the Shenandoah Valley Campaign, Jackson faced off against the Union Major Generals Nathaniel P. Banks and John C. Fremont. Both men were bested by Jackson during the campaign, yet neither was a capable military commander.

Nathaniel Banks was appointed the major general of volunteers in May of 1861 and by July of the same year had been appointed the commander of the Department of the Shenandoah. He had no military experience and received his commission as a result of

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<sup>12</sup> Farwell, 240.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 376.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 333-71.

political connections. His unsuccessful performance led to the capture of large quantities of Union supplies and the Confederate forces dubbing him "Commissary Banks."<sup>15</sup> After the Valley campaign, he continued to suffer defeats as part of the Union forces at Cedar Mountain, 2<sup>nd</sup> Manassas, and finally during the Red River Campaign of 1864. After these defeats, he was left without a command, and was eventually mustered out in August of 1865. His only notable contributions lay in his political contributions to the war effort. The notable fact about the battles between the two men was not that Jackson was usually the victor, but rather the frequency in which the victory was in doubt.<sup>16</sup>

John C. Fremont was a national hero as a result of his contribution to extracting California from Mexico during the Mexican War, but his performance during the Civil War proved to be less than adequate. As the first commander of the Department of the West, he suffered several significant losses and his involvement in the Battle of Wilson Creek in August of 1861 proved particularly disastrous. His subsequent decision to place Missouri under martial law resulted in Lincoln reassigning him to commander of the Mountain Department (Shenandoah Department). His failures continued and he eventually resigned after again being reassigned (he was placed under the command of Pope—a previous subordinate of his). Despite previous military experience and fame, Fremont was an inept commander. He saw his appointments strictly from a political standpoint, and it was his political connections that kept getting him prominent military appointments—not his skill.<sup>17</sup>

During the Battle of Fredericksburg, Jackson faced the Union general Ambrose Burnside. A reluctant commander who had twice refused the post of commander of the Army of the Potomac, Burnside was inexperienced and knew it. Despite being a graduate of West Point (1847) and a veteran of both the Mexican War and fighting with Apaches in the New Mexico Territory, he was unprepared for the Civil War. Before Fredericksburg he had had limited success in expeditions that attacked the coast of North Carolina, but those were the last times he would perform well. His stubbornness and lack of experience cost the lives of many of the soldiers in his two corps at Antietam.<sup>18</sup> After the debacle at Fredericksburg, he experienced continued failure with his "Mud March" (which failed before it was even fully underway) and participation in the Siege of Knoxville, the Battle of the Wilderness, the Battle of Spotsylvania, and the Siege of Petersburg. Burnside's poor military record and incompetence allows Jackson's moderate performance to appear amazing in comparison.<sup>19</sup>

General Stonewall Jackson was a good general. He exhibited aggressiveness, personal courage, and sufficient detachment from his men to allow him to commit them to battle when necessary and without hesitation (unlike McClellan); however, he was not the extraordinary champion that history often says he is. The strong, secretive tendencies he had, the stubbornness that prompted him to constantly press court-martial charges on

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<sup>15</sup> Stewart Sifakis, "Nathaniel Prentiss Banks," *Who Was Who in the Civil War*, (New York: Fact on File, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Dick Weeks, "John Charles Fremont: 1813-1890," *Civil War Biographies*, 7 Jan. 1997, <<http://www.civilwarhome.com/biograph.htm>>.

<sup>18</sup> Clarence E. Macartney, *Grant and His Generals* (New York: McBride Company, 1953), 246.

<sup>19</sup> Stewart Sifakis, "Ambrose E Burnside," *Who Was Who in the Civil War* (New York: Fact on File, 1988).

his subordinates, and the poor quality (militarily) of the commanders he faced in battle all serve to break down the stone wall surrounding Jackson's reputation. Author Byron Farwell, in examining Jackson's long-lasting reputation, states, "It was by dying...at the height of his career, that [Jackson] achieved...lasting fame."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Farwell, 532.

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