

# THE PADUCAH AFFAIR: BLOODLESS ACTION THAT ALTERED THE CIVIL WAR IN THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY

By E. B. LONG\*

OF A TOTAL of 10,455 military events during the American Civil War, Kentucky experienced 453. Only two of these, Perryville and Richmond, are listed as "battles." Six others, including Mill Springs or Logan's Cross Roads, are designated "engagements."<sup>1</sup> None of these Kentucky fights is credited with being "decisive" in influencing the outcome of the war, though Perryville, Richmond, and Mill Springs are admitted by most historians to have had their importance.

Over the years it has been a favorite parlor game to pick out Gettysburg, Vicksburg, and perhaps a score of others as "the decisive" operations in the Federal victory. This seems a somewhat useless, though enjoyable, exercise. No one military happening was "decisive," at least in the opinion of this author. Yet all candidates for this signal and questionable emphasis were vital in one way or in many ways to the outcome and the course of the war. They all, and many others, influenced the war as to length, casualties, military tactics and strategy, political results, and in social impact. There is no need to single one out as *the* factor that won or lost the war. Such treatment oftentimes results in unhistorical distortion. However, it can be said that some events were of more significance than others in the broad overview of the war, and that many occurrences did throw shadows that influenced the outcome.

These allegedly "decisive" battles are generally the great sieges, the spectacular blood baths, the cataclysms involving many thousands, and starring the more popular generals. They were and are the engagements on every tongue. No worth-

\* Associate Professor of American Studies at The University of Wyoming, compiler of the *Civil War Almanac*.

<sup>1</sup> Frederick H. Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion*, (Des Moines, Iowa: The Dyer Publishing Company, 1908), 583, 727-738.

while historian will degenerate, deride, or unduly debunk these earth-shattering tours de force.

At the same time, no careful scholar will resurrect some forgotten skirmish or "affair" and twist and turn it so that the obscure action is distorted out of proportion. This does those who served there a severe injustice. The historian is sadly out of line if he latches on to a military event and then constructs a house of cards utilizing his pet subject. Yet it does pay students of the Civil War from time to time to re-evaluate the too-often-repeated standard narrative to see if it might be incomplete, partly inaccurate, or insufficiently researched.

To my knowledge, no historian of the war ranks the Federal seizure of the Kentucky city of Paducah on the Ohio River at the mouth of the Tennessee as "decisive" in the overall result of the Civil War. Nor should such be done. One or two scholars have recognized it as a "major decision," locally important both in time and geography.<sup>2</sup> However, it has seldom been given a significant place in the context of the war as a whole. Yet its possible long term effect is in need of careful evaluation.

By late summer of 1861 the Civil War had as yet two primary military fronts. Virginia had seen First Manassas or Bull Run, a disrupting Federal defeat. There had been considerable fighting in the western counties of the state as well. Virginia seemed certain to be the main theatre. In Missouri the war was already something of an internal matter, more of a true "civil war." Wilson's Creek had been fought and pro-Missourians and pro-Confederates were battling Unionists for control of the state.

John Charles Frémont, commanding the Federal Western Department, was ensconced in his liberally criticized St. Louis headquarters. Garrisons and moving forces operated in Missouri to squelch the likes of Sterling Price and that already and always troublesome M. Jeff Thompson. Frémont was dreaming of a move down the Mississippi River, dreaming in

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth P. Williams, *Lincoln Finds A General*, 5 vols, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), V, *Grant's First Year in the West*, 56; Bruce Catton, *Grant Moves South*. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), 48-49.

the grandiose style that was so much a part of him, with little thought of how it was to be accomplished.

Soon after Fort Sumter, Illinois troops had seized Cairo at the confluence of the Ohio and the Mississippi Rivers. Cairo was a low-lying, unattractive community, situated in a geographic position the rankest military amateur could see held far-reaching strategic importance. Cairo, the southernmost point of Unionist Illinois, unobtrusively controlled what was probably the most vital river junction in the nation. On the map Cairo could be likened to the point of a sword piercing surprisingly deep toward the very heart of the South.

The Civil War along the Mississippi got off to a slow start for many reasons, not the least of which was the unrealistic and unfeasible neutrality of Kentucky. The state lay like a buffer between the warring nations, preventing the antagonists from grappling with each other from the Cumberland mountains on the East to the Mississippi River on the West. Geography had ordained for Kentucky a significant political and now a vital military role in the sectional struggle.

The neutrality of Kentucky has often been analyzed, as have the political implications of the Confederate move into the state and the violations or alleged violations of that neutrality by both sides. The actions and statements of Lincoln and his government and Jefferson Davis and his government have been well covered. Both sides were trying to make use politically of a situation that clearly could not remain unchanged for too long.

The Confederate occupation of Hickman and Columbus, Kentucky, on the Mississippi in the early days of September, 1861, which violated by fairly large scale action that shaky neutrality, is a familiar story. Bishop General Leonidas Polk at Memphis ordered Gideon Pillow to take his troops up the Mississippi and seize Hickman and Columbus. Both sides knew what every steamboat captain on the Mississippi knew, that Columbus, some twenty miles below Cairo, could serve as a sort of shield to that Illinois sword point lunging so far southward. Columbus with its high bluffs was a near perfect place to post batteries and troops effectively to halt or blockade any Federal move down the highway of the Mississippi.

And so, on September third and fourth, troops of the Confederate States of America moved northward from Tennessee into Kentucky and occupied Hickman and Columbus without opposition. The uproar over this advance was loud on both sides. The Yankees made the most of the Confederate "invasion." The Confederates immediately became engaged in bickering, with General Polk, Governors Beriah Magoffin of Kentucky and Isham Harris of Tennessee, Secretary of War Leroy Pope Walker, and President Davis as the main protagonists.<sup>3</sup>

There were those Confederates who thought Polk should pull all troops out of Kentucky, and who, probably naively, believed that if that were done the Yankees would likewise depart from the state. At the time and since, Polk's move has been highly criticized. All too often the quite logical reasons for his moves have been clouded due to the ensuing arguments and to superficial and short-form history.

From his headquarters at Memphis on September 1, Polk had telegraphed Kentucky Governor Magoffin, "I think it of the greatest consequence to the Southern cause in Kentucky or elsewhere that I should be ahead of the enemy in occupying Columbus and Paducah. . . ." <sup>4</sup> What caused Polk's apprehension? On the morning of August 22 the Federal gunboat *Lexington* had seized the little Southern steamer *W. B. Terry* at Paducah. Colonel Richard J. Oglesby, who was later to be governor of Illinois but who was now in command at Cairo, reported to Frémont in St. Louis that he had indisputable proof that the steamer was "running in the employment of the Confederate States." He said an examination of her papers confirmed this. The vessel itself, of no great value, was perhaps worth only \$3,000, but "To the Confederates three times that

<sup>3</sup> Many histories of the Civil War and of Kentucky cover the period of neutrality of the state. For some details see, among others, E. Merton Coulter, *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Kentucky*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926); Thomas Speed, *The Union Cause in Kentucky 1860-1865*, (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1907); Edward Conrad Smith, *The Borderland in the Civil War*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927).

<sup>4</sup> *War of the Rebellion, Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 books (Washington: various dates), Series I, Vol. IV, 179. (Hereafter cited as O.R. with Series I meant unless otherwise indicated.)

sum will not compensate the loss." Commander R. N. Stembel of the *Lexington* reported to Oglesby that he had little difficulty in capturing the *W. B. Terry*.<sup>5</sup>

To the people of Kentucky, no matter what the provocation, the capture was a violation of their neutrality. Therefore, as Oglesby reported, on that same day the crew and captain who had lost *Terry*, with the help of some citizens seized the Federal steamer *Samuel Orr* from Evansville, Indiana. Oglesby called it "a retaliation more vindictive than sensible, as they thus destroyed the last means of illicit trade with the border States north of the Ohio." The value of the Federal boat and cargo was estimated at \$25,000.<sup>6</sup> A little sputter of war had come to the people of Paducah and they had reacted.

Polk had further indications of what he regarded as Federal aggression upon Kentucky. He wired Davis September 4 that "the enemy having descended the Mississippi River some three or four days since, and seated himself with cannon and intrenched lines opposite the town of Columbus, Ky., making such demonstrations as left no doubt upon the minds of any of their intention to seize and forcibly possess said town, I thought proper, under the plenary power delegated to me, to direct a sufficient portion of my command, both by river way and by land, to concentrate at Columbus, as well to (afford) to its citizens that protection they unite to a man in acception, as also to prevent in time the occupation by the enemy of a point so necessary to the security of Western Tennessee. This demonstration has had the desired effect. The enemy had withdrawn his force even before I had fortified the position. It is my intention now to continue to occupy and keep this position. . . ."<sup>7</sup>

President Davis wired back September 4, "The necessity justifies the actions."<sup>8</sup> And quite probably the necessity did justify the action in Polk's eyes. However, there was a difference between seizing a vessel on the river boundary of Kentucky at Paducah or the apparent Federal threats from Mis-

<sup>5</sup> O.R., IV, 177-178.

<sup>6</sup> O.R., IV, 177.

<sup>7</sup> O.R., IV, 181.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

souri, and actually moving troops into supposedly neutral territory and occupying it. Polk sincerely believed he had stolen a march on the Federals. After all, he had received a wire from Columbus on September 3 that Union gunboats were on the Mississippi, Federal troops were camped in woods opposite Columbus, Federals from a steamboat had torn down a Confederate flag at Columbus, and the ferry boat between the Kentucky shore and Belmont, Missouri, had been sunk.<sup>9</sup>

Further, Polk wired Governor Magoffin September 8, "I had information on which I could rely that the Federal forces intended and were preparing to seize Columbus. I need not describe to you the danger resulting to Western Tennessee from such occupation. My responsibility could not permit me quietly to lose to the command intrusted to me so important a position. In evidence of the accuracy of the information I possessed, I will state that as the Confederate forces approached this place the Federal troops were found in formidable numbers in position upon the opposite bank, with their cannons turned upon Columbus. The citizens of the town had fled with terror, and not a word of assurance of safety or protection had been addressed to them. . . ."<sup>10</sup> Polk had also heard from one George C. Taylor, writing for a number of citizens of Columbus, as to the threat of the Federals.<sup>11</sup>

President Davis, while approving the move, appeared reluctant about it. However, he wired Governor Harris of Tennessee September 13, "Movement to Columbus was reported to me as a defensive measure rendered necessary by the descent of Federal troops. As a necessity it was sanctioned. . . ."<sup>12</sup> Years later Davis, in his *Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, characterized Kentucky as "the eldest daughter of Virginia." "Movements by the Federal forces in southwestern Kentucky," he wrote, "revealed such designs as made it absolutely necessary that General Polk, commanding the Confederate forces in that section, should immediately occupy the town of Columbus, Kentucky; a position of much strategic

<sup>9</sup> O.R., IV, 180, 183.

<sup>10</sup> O.R., IV, 185.

<sup>11</sup> O.R., IV, 181-185.

<sup>12</sup> O.R., IV, 190.

importance on the shore of the Mississippi River. That position was doubly important, because it commanded the opposite shore in Missouri, and was the gateway on the border of Tennessee. . . . Two states of the Confederacy were therefore threatened by the anticipated movement of the enemy to get possession of Columbus. . . ."<sup>13</sup> Davis further wrote, "The occupation of Columbus . . . was only just soon enough to anticipate the predetermined purpose of the Federal government. . . ."<sup>14</sup>

Thus, it appeared to Confederate leaders in the Mississippi Valley that the neutrality of Kentucky, which in their eyes had been covertly violated by the Federals for some time, was very soon to be overtly violated by direct Union invasion and occupation.

There was, therefore, only one thing to do; beat the Federals to the punch. That the Confederates were wise strategically to seize Columbus seems apparent. That they were unable to go farther and seize Paducah on September 4, or at the latest on the fifth, shows that in those first few hours of the invasion of Kentucky the Confederates in a real sense lost the ball game.

In St. Louis those late August days, John Charles Frémont was anxiously watching the Confederate activities in Missouri. Sterling Price's force appeared strong, there were various pro-Confederate or pro-Missouri groups scattered around the state, and M. Jeff Thompson was operating in southeast Missouri as only Thompson could operate. It was on August 30 that Frémont issued his famous unauthorized emancipation proclamation and order of confiscation of property of those who took up arms against the United States. Lincoln was forced to rescind the proclamation. The fact that Frémont's order came at about the same time as the Federal campaign in southeast Missouri, the Confederate invasion of Kentucky, Frémont's own plans to enter Kentucky, and Grant's capture of Paducah may or may not be a coincidence.

On August 28 General Frémont issued some rather com-

<sup>13</sup> Jefferson Davis, *Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, 2 vols., (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1881), I, 385, 391.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 402.

plicated orders. He named a commander to take over in southeast Missouri and far southern Illinois, including Cairo. This officer was a minor, unknown brigadier general by the name of Ulysses S. Grant, who had held several small commands in Missouri up to this time, but who had no real record of achievement in battle or occupation. Grant had so far carried out his duties well but unspectacularly.

Ordered to St. Louis from Jefferson City, Grant had an interview with Frémont. The story of this meeting is told in some detail in Frémont's Memoirs, which appear to be largely written by Mrs. Frémont. Earlier in August General Frémont had been in Cairo on inspection. He wanted an officer there "who would do exactly as he was ordered without question." At this time, he first saw General Grant, who had come to the headquarters in hope of obtaining the recognition that he had failed to get from the War Department and General McClellan. . . .<sup>15</sup>

The Frémont Memoirs go on to say that Grant was brought in by an old friend, Major Justus McKinstry. Grant "impressed General Frémont very strongly, by his soldierly qualities. His perfectly quiet unobtrusive attention, and his incisive decision, caused General Frémont to select him for the important position that he sent him to take charge of . . . To use General Frémont's own words about him, 'I believe him to be a man of great activity and of promptness in obeying orders without question or hesitation. . . .' Frémont was supposedly urged by some of his officers not to appoint Grant, but he did so anyway.<sup>16</sup> Before Grant left, Frémont did suggest that it would be best if Grant wore a uniform. The new general agreed to do so as soon as his brigadier's outfit arrived.<sup>17</sup>

Grant was to take personal command of an expedition involving several bodies of troops against M. Jeff Thompson. After Thompson was taken care of in southeastern Missouri,

<sup>15</sup> "Frémont Memoirs," typed ms., in John C. Frémont Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California.

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

<sup>17</sup> William Conant Church, *Ulysses S. Grant*, (Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing Company, 1928), 83.



Grant was to make Cairo his headquarters.<sup>18</sup> These orders of Frémont's are used in all Grant volumes and some other Civil War histories, as they should be. However, one phrase from these orders has not received the attention it may deserve, although a few authors have noted it. In the orders of August 28 Frémont wrote, "It is intended, in connection with all these movements, to occupy Columbus, Ky., as soon as possible. . . ."<sup>19</sup> In writing to Brigadier General B. M. Prentiss on August 28, Frémont said much the same thing, "it being the intention ultimately to take possession of Columbus and hold it. . . ."<sup>20</sup> In a later account, Frémont wrote that he had instructed Grant "Concerning the actual and intended movements on the Mississippi and the more immediate movements upon the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers. In his written instructions General Grant was directed to act in concert with Commander Rodgers and Colonel Waagner, and to take possession of points threatened by the Confederates on the Missouri and Kentucky shores. . . ."<sup>21</sup> It may be wondered what Frémont meant by "movements upon the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers" at this time. Thus, Frémont was clearly planning a military move into Kentucky, despite the state's neutrality and Lincoln's gingerly and skillful handling of affairs in the border state.

The Frémont memoirs do not include this idea directly, but do state, "Reports from Kentucky showed that it was now time, to either take control of the state or relinquish it into the hands of the rebels, who had made every preparation for invading."<sup>22</sup> Frémont's memoirs go on to say that on August 31, Captain J. A. Neustaedter was ordered by Frémont to go to Cairo and then "proceed along the Illinois side of the Ohio River, to a point opposite Paducah, and make necessary examination with a view of planting a battery, which would

<sup>18</sup> Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*, 2 vols., (New York: Charles L. Webster, 1885), I, 261, (hereafter cited as *Grant's Memoirs*); O.R., III, 141-142.

<sup>19</sup> O.R., III, 142.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> John C. Frémont, "In Command in Missouri," *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 4 vols., (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, Inc., 1956), I, 284.

<sup>22</sup> "Frémont Memoirs," *op. cit.*

command the Ohio River and the mouth of the Tennessee River. . . ." Grant was notified of Neustaedter's mission.<sup>23</sup>

In his August 28 orders to Grant, Frémont also said an expedition with troops and two gunboats under Commander John Rodgers had been ordered to go to Belmont, across from Columbus, "to destroy the fortifications erecting by the rebels, keep possession of that place, and move thence . . ." toward Charleston, Missouri, in the effort to stop Thompson.<sup>24</sup> This move looked to Polk like a direct threat to Columbus, which it may well have been in view of Frémont's statement that he intended to move on Columbus as soon as possible.

Colonel G. Waagner, in command of troops on the Belmont expedition, reported late on September 2 that he took 600 men to Belmont. He arrived there in early afternoon but found no real town. They captured the small ferry and another boat. Waagner reported, "At Columbus the rebels fly the secession flag from the top of a lofty pole in the center of the village in defiance of our gunboats. What shall I do with Columbus? What with Hickman? What with New Madrid?"<sup>25</sup> Waagner's questions were soon answered by the Confederates.

On September 4 Union naval commander John Rodgers reported that he had taken the gunboats *Tyler* and *Lexington* south from Belmont that morning to make a reconnaissance as far as Hickman. As they arrived in sight of Hickman, a rebel gunboat fired on them, and they exchanged shots with batteries on land. He then returned to near Cairo.<sup>26</sup>

Meanwhile, Grant had been trying to get his southeastern Missouri expedition underway and to bring together his various forces. He had established temporary headquarters at Cape Girardeau, and was expecting cooperation from Brigadier General Benjamin Prentiss from Ironton, Missouri. As Grant tells it, he was about to head for Jackson, Missouri, where a junction of the troops was expected, but to his surprise he found Prentiss and a large escort coming into Cape Girardeau, his troops having been ordered to follow. Grant reversed these

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *O.R.*, III, 142.

<sup>25</sup> *O.R.*, III, 151-152.

<sup>26</sup> *O.R.*, III, 152.

orders and sent Prentiss' command back to Jackson. Prentiss obeyed, but then left for St. Louis and reported himself to Frémont. A hassle had developed over rank, Prentiss believing himself to be senior to Grant. It was determined that Grant was senior, but this did not satisfy Prentiss. As Grant stated, this argument broke up the expedition. Actually, it probably had little chance to succeed anyway, as the sly Thompson moved light, had no fixed headquarters, and was a wizard at avoiding superior Federal forces.<sup>27</sup>

With the southeast Missouri expedition aborted, Grant left Cape Girardeau for Cairo, arriving September 4. Colonel Oglesby was in command there. In his citizen's dress, Grant was not immediately recognized when he arrived at headquarters. Grant proceeded to write out for himself an order assuming command, surprising Oglesby.

On this same September 4, Grant told Frémont that he could spare troops from Cairo "to take possession of Columbus heights. . . ."<sup>29</sup> This shows that Grant had in mind Frémont's idea of invading Columbus. Command responsibility thus was very soon thrust upon Grant. Having received reports of heavy firing to the south of Cairo, probably from Rodger's gunboats, Grant sent his third gunboat *Conestoga* south to render assistance if necessary.<sup>30</sup> He wired Frémont that he had ordered withdrawal of the Federal force from Belmont on the advice of Commander Rodgers. Frémont had advised this move.<sup>31</sup>

Then came a day of important decisions as far as the future of Kentucky in the Civil War was concerned: September 5. As Grant recalled it in his *Memoirs*, after he had assumed command at Cairo a man who said he was a scout for Frémont came in and reported that he had just come from Columbus. Confederate troops were there and "had started from there, or were about to start, to seize Paducah, at the mouth of the Tennessee." Thus it was that Grant heard of the invasion of

<sup>27</sup> Grant, *Memoirs*, I, 252-264.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> John Y. Simon, Editor, *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), II, 186. (Hereafter cited as Grant, *Papers*.)

<sup>30</sup> *O.R.*, II, 148.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

Kentucky by Pillow under Polk's orders. As Grant put it, "There was no time for delay; I reported by telegraph to the "department commander the information I had received, and added that I was taking steps to get off that night to be in advance of the enemy in securing that important point," meaning Paducah. Grant said he got no answer to his first dispatch, and then wired again that he would leave for Paducah that night.<sup>32</sup>

What is possibly the first telegram Grant sent to Frémont read, "On information telegraphed you, brought by Charles de Arnaud I am getting ready to go to Paducah. Will start at 6½ o'clock. . . ."<sup>33</sup>

Charles de Arnaud, a former Russian army officer, was apparently a spy for Frémont. He had come into Cairo with his information, had given it to Grant, and then telegraphed to Frémont, "The enemy is marching in large force to take Paducah, on the Ohio River, to invade Southern Illinois. Our occupation of Paducah will frustrate the enemy's plans and secure for us the Tennessee River. Have communicated this to General Grant. He will move at once. No time to lose."<sup>34</sup> Frémont wired President Lincoln that he thought the Confederates planned to throw their forces into West Kentucky, occupying Hickman, Columbus, ground opposite Cairo, and Paducah.<sup>35</sup>

Grant wired the Speaker of the Kentucky House of Representatives in Frankfort, "I regret to inform you that Confederate forces in considerable numbers have invaded the territory of Kentucky, and are occupying & fortifying strong positions at Hickman & Chalf Bluffs. . . ."<sup>36</sup> For this alleged meddling in politics, Grant on September 6 was sent a message from Frémont that he and other commanders were "not to correspond with State or other high authorities in matters pertaining to any branch of the public service. . . ."<sup>37</sup>

On the 5th, Grant issued special orders to his troops that

<sup>32</sup> Grant, *Memoirs*, I, 264-265.

<sup>33</sup> Grant, *Papers*, II, 193.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *O.R.*, III, 141.

<sup>36</sup> Grant, *Papers*, II, 189; *O.R.*, III, 166.

<sup>37</sup> *O.R.*, LII, Pt. I, 189.

"The people of Southwest Kentucky have permitted large bodies of armed men in rebellion to the Government to assemble upon her soil, to erect batteries, and fire upon the Federal flag, are guilty of an offense which must be resisted and punished. All commanders, therefore, on the Kentucky borders, within this military district, are directed to embarrass their communications with rebels in every way possible. . . ." Ferries and other boats were to be seized.<sup>38</sup>

Grant continued his decisive, quick action, based on the report of the Confederate invasion. He also wrote Frémont on September 5 that one of his tasks at Cairo had been to increase defenses. Grant mentioned this first and sent plans and estimates of works "opposite this place and Birds Point." He had sent a party to the Kentucky shore across from Cairo to make preliminary arrangements for defence.<sup>39</sup>

He told Frémont that all "information to day has been telegraphed fully. I am now nearly ready for Paducah (should not a telegraph arrive preventing the movement) on the strength of the information telegraphed. . . ." <sup>40</sup> There are possibly some missing telegrams from Grant to Frémont of September 5 and there is some confusion as to the sequence of the messages.

Grant continued to carry out his plans. Not receiving any reply from Frémont, according to his *Memoirs*, he got his expedition to Paducah underway.<sup>41</sup> While there can be some argument, perhaps, it seems from the evidence that Grant did not receive permission to move from Cairo to Paducah, or any message not to go, before he departed.

Later, Frémont and his wife, in an apparent effort to take credit for the Paducah move, wrote in the Frémont memoirs, "On September 5th, General Frémont ordered General Grant to push forward with the utmost speed, all work at the points selected on the Kentucky shore, ten miles from Paducah and which was named Fort Holt. In this same letter he directed him, to take possession of Paducah, if he felt strong enough to

<sup>38</sup> O.R., III, 150.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* There are possibly some missing telegrams from Grant to Frémont of September 5, and some confusion as to the sequence of messages. See Grant *Papers*, II, footnote, 192.

do so, but if not, to plant at once the battery opposite Paducah on the Illionis side (previously referred to) and which commanded the Ohio River and the mouth of the Tennessee. . . ."<sup>42</sup>

The Frémonts then relate that the evening of September 5 Captain de Arnaud reached Cairo. He had been delayed, they wrote, had been arrested as a spy but had escaped, and although suffering, as they claimed, from a fractured skull, "rode the whole night until he reached the Ohio River, where he was able to hire a boat and be conveyed to Cairo, where he at once went to General Grant . . . On reaching General Grant, he said, 'General, do you know that you are in danger of being surrounded by the enemy and that they are marching on Paducah?' Grant answered, 'No, I arrived here only yesterday.' Captain d'Arnaud, then disclosed the situation to him, and the service that he had been engaged upon, and having received a satisfactory answer, turned to him and said, 'You are right, I will move at once.' General Grant moved immediately. . . ."<sup>43</sup> The Frémont memoirs then conclude that "This promptitude on General Grant's part and his energy in carrying out the details of General Frémont's plan of campaign, communicated to him on the 28th August, determined General Frémont to give him chief command of the forces to be directed against the city of Memphis. . . ."<sup>44</sup> Frémont then wrote the President on September 8 of the Confederate action in Kentucky and the Federal counter actions. He told how he sent troops to Fort Holt, opposite Cairo, and to Paducah. But, interestingly enough, he does not mention Grant's role.<sup>45</sup> Thus can be seen a Frémont effort to get the glory for originating the move to Paducah, while giving Grant credit only for moving promptly.

Frémont did telegraph Grant and also wrote him September 5. In the telegram he ordered fortification of the Kentucky shore opposite Cairo and that "Paducah should be occupied if it is possible; if not, the mouth of the Tennessee River should be guarded safely from the opposite side. . . ." This telegram

<sup>42</sup> "Frémont Memoirs," *op. cit.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> O.R., III, 478.

was sent in Hungarian and, as Dr. John Y. Simon, editor of *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, says, "it is not clear, however, that the telegram had been sent to Cairo, received in intelligible form, and translated into English before USG left for Paducah, and USG's statement indicates that it probably was not available. Further, since this was the first telegram sent to USG in Hungarian, he may not have known what to do with it. . . ."<sup>46</sup>

It is quite possible, indeed likely, that Grant was not familiar with Hungarian, which was a somewhat quaint, even melodramatic way for Frémont to send his officers messages which he thought the enemy would not be able to read. Hungarian was undoubtedly used because of the officers on Frémont's staff of that nationality. In Frémont's letter of September 5 the Commanding General elaborated, "if you feel strong enough, you will take possession of Paducah; but if not, then opposite that place, on the Illinois side of the river, which you will do without delay, with the view of planting a battery which "shall command the Ohio and the mouth of the Tennessee River. . . ." He wanted Grant to prepare to build a bridge over the Ohio.<sup>47</sup>

It seems to me that Grant deserves full credit for acting independently on information regarding the Confederate invasion of Kentucky, and for taking the proper and, at that moment and for that area, the decisive move. It is not that moving to Paducah was such a remarkable idea; almost anyone looking at the map could have seen the situation. However, Grant knew the circumstances, and saw beyond the map to the strategic significance of Paducah and the mouths of the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers. He saw it was imperative to do something to counter the seizure of Columbus.

Grant rather laconically related what happened after he made his decision of September 5. He felt he had to get off that night to beat the enemy to Paducah: "There was no time for delay. . . ." A sufficient number of steamers were at Cairo with a "good many" boatmen in town. "It was the work of only a few hours to get the boats manned, with coal aboard and steam up. Troops were also designated to go aboard." It was

<sup>46</sup> Grant, *Papers*, II, 191-192.

<sup>47</sup> O.R., III, 149.

about forty-five miles from Cairo to Paducah, and Grant did not wish to get there before daylight of the 6th. He held the boats out in the Ohio until they started upstream, which was before midnight.<sup>48</sup>

Grant had two of the three available, makeshift gunboats, *Tyler* and *Conestoga* with him, and three steamboats. His troops were the Ninth Illinois under E. A. Paine, the Twelfth Illinois under Colonel J. McArthur, and a four-piece light artillery battery. It was hardly an overwhelming force, but sufficient considering the enemy's supposed strength. One of the steamers had an accident at Mound City near Cairo, which called for a transfer of troops.<sup>49</sup>

Andrew Hull Foote, that capable, experienced sea dog, who had been sent west to take over from John Rodgers, later wrote in a private letter that he got to Cairo in time on September 5 to find that the boats had just left with their estimated 2,000 troops. At midnight he got hold of a fast steamer and took out after the flotilla. Reaching the vessels, he told Rodgers of his arrival as the new commander, and joined Grant's expedition.<sup>50</sup>

Back in Cairo, Illinois politician-turned-Brigadier General John A. McClernand, left in command by Grant, reported by wire to Frémont at midnight of the 5th that vigorous measures had been taken to get the expedition ready. All river and road traffic was halted, and the telegraph restrained to prevent the enemy from knowing of the preparations. According to McClernand, the expedition sailed about 11:30 and consisted of about 1,800 men. Other estimates are 2,000. He added, "The officers and men chosen for this duty are among the most carefully chosen and drilled of the Illinois volunteers. . . ."<sup>51</sup>

A reporter from the *St. Louis Democrat*, who was along on the expedition, wrote, "The noble fleet pushed out into the stream amid the cheers of the assembled thousands and

<sup>48</sup> Grant, *Memoirs*, I, 265.

<sup>49</sup> O.R., IV, 197.

<sup>50</sup> *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, 28 vols., (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1908). Series I, Vol. 22, 321, 323.

<sup>51</sup> O.R., IV, 196.



steamed majestically up *La Belle Riviera*.”<sup>52</sup> It may be wondered how many thousands cheered at Cairo considering Grant’s measures to keep the move quiet.

Grant reported that they arrived at Paducah at 8:30 on the morning of the sixth, and in his *Memoirs* wrote that he had anticipated the enemy by probably not over six or eight hours.<sup>53</sup> In his report, Grant told of finding “numerous secession flags flying over the city, and the citizens in anticipation of the approach of the rebel army, which was reliably reported 3,800 strong 16 miles distant.” He even had evidence that allegedly Confederate Brigadier General Lloyd Tilghman and his staff, along with a recruiting officer and a Paducah company of Confederates, had left the city by rail with all the rolling stock.<sup>54</sup>

Grant said, “I landed the troops and took possession of the city without firing a gun.”<sup>55</sup> In his first message to Frémont he put it that he took “quiet possession of telegraph office, railroad depot, and Marine Hospital. Found a large quantity of complete rations and leather for the Southern Army. . .”<sup>56</sup> Grant ordered Yankee flags to replace the secession banners. He seized some letters and dispatches. He distributed troops around the city to be ready for the large force of the enemy reported to be coming down the Tennessee, even if he did not credit this rumor. He tried not to annoy the citizens.<sup>57</sup>

In his *Memoirs* Grant wrote he “never after saw such consternation depicted on the faces of the people. Men, women, and children came out of their doors looking pale and frightened at the presence of the invader. They were expecting rebel troops that day. . .” In the *Memoirs* Grant’s story differs from his report in that he says in his book that nearly 4,000 Confederates from Columbus were ten or fifteen miles from Paducah but turned around and went back to Co-

<sup>52</sup> *Rebellion Record*, 12 vols., (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1862), III, Doc. 31, 67-69.

<sup>53</sup> Grant, *Memoirs*, I, 265.

<sup>54</sup> O.R., IV, 197.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> O.R., IV, 196-197.

<sup>57</sup> O.R., IV, 197.

lumbus. In addition to the troops, he left the two gunboats to guard the river. By noon he himself was ready to leave.<sup>58</sup>

Grant did issue a proclamation to the citizens of Paducah in which he assured them he had come amongst them not as an enemy but as a friend and fellow citizen. He said his troops were not there to injure the citizenry "but to respect the rights, and to defend and enforce the rights of all loyal citizens. . . ." He pointed out that the rebels had planted their guns upon the soil of Kentucky and had occupied Hickman and Columbus, and were moving upon Paducah. Grant proclaimed he was in the city to defend the people against this enemy "and to assert and maintain the authority and sovereignty of your Government and mine." He would have nothing to do with politics, but would deal only with armed rebellion "and its aiders and abettors."<sup>59</sup>

Thereupon Grant left E. A. Paine in command and went back downstream to Cairo. When he reached that city he sent the Eighth Missouri up to Paducah and sought other reinforcements.<sup>60</sup> He had ordered Paine to "Take special care and precaution that no harm is done to inoffensive citizens; that the soldiers shall not enter any private dwelling nor make any searches unless by your orders, and then a detail shall be made for that purpose. Exercise the strictest discipline against any soldier who shall insult citizens or engage in plundering private property. . . ."<sup>61</sup> In his *Memoirs* Grant said he believed his proclamation and orders were "evidently a relief" to the citizens, "but the majority would have much preferred the presence of the other army. . . ."<sup>62</sup>

From the record, Grant seemed to take care of all the contingencies of occupation in a workmanlike way and also arranged for sufficient reinforcements.<sup>63</sup> By the seventh, Brigadier General Charles F. Smith, a canny old soldier, had succeeded the unpopular Paine in Paducah. In a short time troops were sent to occupy Smithland up the Ohio from Paducah at

<sup>58</sup> Grant, *Memoirs*, I, 266.

<sup>59</sup> Grant, *Papers*, II, 194-195.

<sup>60</sup> O.R., IV, 197.

<sup>61</sup> O.R., IV, 198.

<sup>62</sup> Grant, *Memoirs*, I, 266.

<sup>63</sup> O.R., IV, 198, 256, 257; Grant, *Memoirs*, I, 266.

the mouth of the Cumberland. In short, it had been a very well managed affair, especially by inexperienced troops and a relatively inexperienced commander.

While one must be somewhat cautious in using the report of the St. Louis newsman along on the expedition, he did write, "The stampede of the inhabitants from Paducah was astonishing and immense, and ere this scarcely a hundred families are left here. . . ." He described the main street as "perfectly chocked with carriages and vehicles, containing families and household furniture, leaving the city for points back in the country. Many went over to Illinois. A perfect panic seemed to possess them, which no assurance of our officers or troops could allay. They had got the idea into their heads that Pillow was advancing on us, that in case of an attack the town would be shelled and buried by our gunboats. . . ." <sup>64</sup> The same reporter does write that early in the occupation the gunboat *Tyler* was having gun practice and by some carelessness the boat inadvertently let fly a sixty-four pound shot. This struck an unoccupied house on the levee, knocking a hole in it. Of course, the accidental shot was soon magnified by the citizenry, and the reporter wrote that the terror of women and children increased. <sup>65</sup>

For the Confederates, it has been written that Polk's main aim was Columbus where he would establish his first line of defense on the Mississippi, with the second being Island No. 10, and the third Fort Pillow. Thus "Columbus was more important than Paducah. . . ." <sup>66</sup> However, Polk's son wrote that it was the general's "design to occupy Paducah as well as Columbus. This purpose, however, he felt himself obliged to forego, in view of the ease and rapidity with which the Federal troops could be concentrated for an attack on either place. . . ." The Confederates were hampered by an almost complete lack of gunboats and river transport of any signifi-

<sup>64</sup> *Rebellion Record, op. cit.*, III, Doc. 31, 67-69.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* Lloyd Miller of Kennilworth, Illinois, a native of Paducah, relates a family story that a shot went down the chimney of their home. Whether this is the one shell told of by the reporter is not clear.

<sup>66</sup> William M. Polk, *Leonidas Polk Bishop and General*, 2 vols., (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1915), II. 17.

cance.<sup>67</sup> Thus it appears fairly clear that reports of Confederates being near Paducah at the time of the Federal seizure were exaggerated.

On September 14, Polk indicated that Paducah was a worrisome matter. His son wrote that Paducah "occupied his thoughts." Polk told President Davis of reports of some 8,000 Yankee infantry and 1,550 cavalry at Paducah. He sent a brigade and a regiment out toward Mayfield to protect his right flank from any possible Federal drive on Columbus from Paducah.<sup>68</sup> Polk was clearly conscious of the strategic value of Columbus, but somewhat less intelligently evaluated the vital position of Paducah.

Simon Bolivar Buckner, who had been active in the Kentucky neutrality role but now joined the Confederacy, recognized the value of the seizure of Paducah. He wrote to C.S.A. Adjutant General Samuel Cooper from Nashville September 13, "Our possession of Columbus is already neutralized by that of Paducah. . . ." At the same time, Buckner was advising the removal of all Confederate forces from Kentucky. He felt that if a withdrawal was authorized he could rally thousands of "neutrality Union men to expel the Federals." He believed a withdrawal by Confederates would unite the state.<sup>69</sup> Other Confederate officials including Cooper expressed alarm over the seizure of Paducah and were concerned over what to do about it. Bowling Green, well south of Paducah, was threatened.<sup>70</sup>

The seizure of Paducah by the Federals in its surface aspects had been just another occupation, of which there would be many by both sides during the war. There had been no fighting, no one had been killed or even wounded, only a few feelings had been injured. But to look at it that way, or even to see it as a Kentucky incident seems far too narrow. Civil War historians, as perhaps all historians of war periods,

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 20; Joseph Parks, *General Leonidas Polk C.S.A., The Fighting Bishop*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1962), does not cover the Paducah aspects of the Confederate move into Kentucky, mentioning Paducah briefly on 181.

<sup>68</sup> Polk, *Polk, op. cit.*, 29.

<sup>69</sup> O.R., IV, 189-190.

<sup>70</sup> O.R., IV, 402-403.

have been prone to look at the old familiar patterns and not to re-examine some of the factors and events that may have been influential but which have been overlooked for various reasons.

Usually historians say, and this author has stated it as well, that the engagement at Belmont, Missouri, in November, 1861, was Grant's first important action in the Civil War. And even Belmont is considered a sort of practice in handling field command and fighting. Looking at it in the light of the overall strategy of the war, however, it can be said that Grant's decision of September 5, 1862, to head for Paducah rather than to attack the new Confederate position at Columbus, was his first important action. True, it was not a fighting action, although it might have been if the Confederates had gotten to Paducah as they probably should have and could have. It was a judgment decision, a strategic ploy, of the kind which sometimes can accrue more to a general's credit than command in battle. At the same time, it seems surprising that a man whose strategic experience was limited, who had not yet had time to grow, a man who on the surface did not seem the kind to be so acutely perceptive, would decide instantly, with no fuss, furor or apparent anxiety, on a proper course of action and unerringly carry it out within a matter of hours.

Certainly there is a sign here of something more substantial in Grant than just the qualities of a former army officer of no particular note who had rejoined the army under the exigencies of war. Aside from the example of what he did and his reports at the time, Grant wrote in his *Memoirs*, "It proved very fortunate that the expedition against Jeff. Thompson had been broken up. Had it not been, the enemy would have seized Paducah and fortified it, to our very great annoyance."<sup>71</sup> This is a typical Grant understatement. But the seizure of Paducah was of much greater value than just showing that one Federal commander could make decisions and take precipitate yet intelligent action.

Geography had ordained the importance of Paducah, commanding as it did a position of eminence on the Ohio River

<sup>71</sup> Grant, *Memoirs*, I, 265.

at the junction of the Tennessee and near the junction of the Ohio and the Cumberland. Industrially and otherwise, Paducah was not a major city. But it was here that two great rivers flowed out of the heart of the Confederacy. These rivers might be likened to great, stable highways north and south to and from Tennessee and the middle South, and even touching into the heart of the deep South itself. Everyone saw the value of the Mississippi to both North and South. Most people, if they looked at the map, could see something of the same regarding the Tennessee and Cumberland. There was no secret about it .

The Confederates had already recognized the strategic value of these two rivers by beginning construction of Fort Henry on the Tennessee and Fort Donelson on the Cumberland. These forts were, at least in the case of Henry, not built at the best locations for defense of the Tennessee. This was because of politics, the politics of the neutrality of Kentucky. The forts lay in Tennessee, as close to the Kentucky and Tennessee line as possible. This was the best the Confederates could do in the late summer of 1861. All that autumn, after the capture of Paducah, Federal gunboats ran up the Tennessee and Cumberland clear to the forts, right through the tenuous Confederate defense line, a position that was anything but firm. True, the anchors seemed strong, with the Columbus bluffs on the west frowning over the Mississippi and the eastern anchor of the line way east at Cumberland Gap in rugged Appalachia. In between, however, there was no line of bluffs, no river line, or anything but the farm land of central Kentucky. Bowling Green was largely a convenient urban and railroad center. Country roads in an irregular network connected the major points in a very desultory way. It would have taken far more men and materiel than the Confederacy could possibly have mustered to make the Kentucky line anything but an attenuated fiction. And it is doubtful that it could ever have been made a real bulwark against the Yankees, no matter how many men or supplies had been available.

There would have been no need for Forts Henry and Donelson except as a second line of defense if the Confeder-

ats could have done what strategically they should probably have done. Indeed, there would have been no need for the Columbus-Bowling Green-Cumberland Gap defense line which was in fact largely on paper. That is, no need if the Confederates of Polk could have seized Paducah and expanded upon its capture.

It does not seem beyond the realm of proper speculation, historical deduction and interpretation, to conjecture that if Paducah, and therefore a goodly portion of the Ohio River shore, had been in Confederate hands, the Civil War in the West might have taken a different turn. It is improbable that the Confederacy could have held or fortified the entire Ohio river between Kentucky and the north, even though such a defense line might in places have been easier to develop than the line between Columbus, Bowling Green, and Cumberland Gap. But it is probable that the Southern forces could have occupied key points along the river, points where garrisons could have been built up so as to hasten troops to unfortified positions nearby when they were threatened by Yankee amphibious invasion from across the river. The advantages and difficulties of defending a very wide and very major river are obvious.

Had the Confederates controlled the Ohio, the Federals could not have used the river as a vital shipping lane to supply the Mississippi Valley military frontier. They would have had to depend even more than they did on their railroads to the North. At least two thirds of Kentucky would have been in the Confederacy geographically, and many more of its people spiritually. Federal strategy would have had to be considerably different. Their gunboats could not as easily or as quickly have penetrated into Tennessee as they did in February of 1862 at Forts Henry and Donelson, bringing conquering troops with them. The Yankees would have had to launch water and land operations across the Ohio to invade the Kentucky shore in force. This would have required a new kind of war and far more protecting gunboats than were to be ready for some time. It might well have required more manpower, more casualties, and certainly more time.

Socially and politically an Ohio River line, no matter

how imperfect, would have been seen in southern Illinois, southern Indiana and southern Ohio as a display of Confederate power, as a threat. It might well have encouraged some of the political fence sitters in those states to turn more toward the Confederacy. On a national scope it would have delineated a more definite northern border for the new, existing Confederacy. If Kentucky had kept a Union government at all it might well have been one in exile, at least for a time, as was the Confederate Kentucky government for much of the war. Some industrial and transportation potential would have been preserved longer for Confederate use.

Even if the lengthy Ohio River line could not have been completely set up, some of the results beneficial to the Confederacy could have in part derived from control of the Ohio River in southern Illinois and Indiana from, say, Columbus through Paducah. Certainly Grant and Foote would not have carried out their invasion of Tennessee in February of 1862 as they did. Any Federal advance in the West would have been slowed down and we would have a considerably different military history of the Civil War in the Mississippi Valley.

No, the seizure of Paducah by the Federals was not a "decisive" action in the sense that it won the war for the North, or the failure to seize it lost the war for the South. But from a reappraisal of the facts and an attempt to look at things as they were at the time, it appears that Confederate troops in quantity well posted on even a portion of the Ohio River could have effected at least a longer Civil War. Perhaps it would have been an even more bloody one. Such a situation could have had political ramifications, could have altered the course of history in the Mississippi and Ohio River valleys, and in the state of Kentucky.