

THE TURNING OF COLUMBUS

By JAY CARLTON MULLEN

EMERGING FROM beneath a promontory bluff at Cape Girardeau, Missouri, into a self-created alluvial Valley, the Mississippi River flows some eleven hundred miles to the sea. This basin, which was a prehistoric prolongation of the Gulf of Mexico, fans out to an average width of seventy-five miles and provides few natural barriers to impede the river's flow. As a consequence the river meanders along in broad loops and bends with countless swamps and horseshoe lakes on its flanks.¹

In 1860 this alluvial bottom was not easily traversed except by water. The bluffs that approach the river's east banks afforded the best sites for habitation. Twenty miles below the Ohio junction the river lapped for two miles against the Iron Banks. A few miles further downstream it also washed the foot of the Chalk Banks. These two bluffs were the sites of the Kentucky towns, Columbus and Hickman. In Tennessee, a series of four bluffs identified as the Chickasaw Bluffs approached the river at Fulton, Randolph, Island Number 36, and Memphis. In the Yazoo delta, some two hundred miles below Memphis, the Walnut Hills loomed over the River.²

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the Mississippi and forty-five of its tributaries formed a network of internal transportation that extended over 15,000 miles. While railroads were experiencing a painful adolescence, steamboats piled high with northern foodstuffs and southern cotton made New Orleans the nation's second and the South's largest seaport.

The river that was such a commercial blessing to the South

¹Harold Fisk, *Geological Investigations of the Alluvial Valley of the Lower Mississippi River* (War Department: Corps of Engineers, U. S. Army, 1944), p. 27.

²Fisk, *op. cit.*, p. 27; Uriah Pierson James, *James' River Guide* (Cincinnati, U. P. James, 1866), pp. 92-97.

during peacetime, however, was her military nemeses during wartime. Flowing directly into the South, it was an avenue of transportation that did not require thousands deployed along its length guarding bridges, track and vehicles from swift-striking cavalry units. Only formidable artillery installations could hope to contend with the withering fire-power of gunboats. Inclement weather conditions which practically precluded land travel posed only a minor inconvenience to armies transported by boats.

Both sides appreciated the strategic value of the river, but the Confederate government's concept of a purely defensive war prevented its exploiting the river's potential as a highway into the North.³ Federal leaders in northern Virginia had grimly realized that frontal attacks yielded little when the Confederates had the natural allies of Chesapeake Bay on the east and the Appalachian Mountains on the west to prevent a flanking movement. The east flowing rivers of this area provided natural barriers against Union armies descending into the Old Dominion. The most effective way for the Union forces to overcome this position was by a gigantic flanking movement covering some 1,000 miles from Nashville through eastern Tennessee and northern Georgia, another around the southern extremity of the Appalachians to the rear of Virginia. To succeed in such a maneuver the Union right flank had to be securely protected. Union control of the Mississippi would ensure this.⁴

Early in the war Winfield Scott advocated that the Federals capture the Mississippi. But there were vast problems of organization to be dealt with before either side could field functional armies. Had the Missouri militia, under secessionist Governor Claiborne Jackson, been able to seize that state, the Confederacy's river orientation would have been entirely different. However, the swift action of Generals Nathaniel Lyon

³Gordon B. Turner, *A History of Military Affairs in Western Society Since the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Harcourt-Brace, 1953), pp. 147, 153; Archer Jones, *Confederate Strategy from Shiloh to Vicksburg* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1961), pp. 16-25; G. F. R. Henderson, *The Civil War: A Soldier's View* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 198.

⁴Turner, *loc. cit.*; Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

and Francis P. Blair thwarted Southern plans with the capture of the militia at Camp Jackson in St. Louis and the driving of the remaining state forces into Missouri's southwest corner. Meanwhile, activity in Tennessee was directed toward preventing Northern forces from descending the river. Before Tennessee voters could express themselves in a secession referendum, the Tennessee Assembly ratified a military league with the Confederacy.⁵ Although the league was the first formal transaction conducted between the two governments, important informal negotiations had already taken place. When the Confederate Secretary of War received intelligence that Cairo, Illinois, was to be a base for operations on the Mississippi River, he immediately wrote Governor Isham G. Harris, requesting permission to fortify the Chickasaw Bluffs. Harris, who also held an appreciation of the river's value, had already ordered a reconnaissance to determine the river sites that could be most advantageously fortified. He welcomed Confederate cooperation and instructed his men to act in conjunction with any Confederate authorities assigned to the project. The second Chickasaw Bluff was reported to be the best defensive position, and work was begun to protect the lower Mississippi Valley from invasion.⁶

The Tennessee Legislature voted five million dollars to raise and equip an army of 55,000 men.⁷ Gideon J. Pillow was appointed brigadier-general by Governor Harris. From his Memphis headquarters he began organizing the Provisional Army of Tennessee. In early June, work was begun on Fort Pillow and Fort Randolph on the first and second Chickasaw Bluffs. Despite their natural advantages, these northernmost Confederate military installations were anything but formidable bastions. Work had proceeded slowly on the fortifications,

⁵James Walter Fertig, *The Secession and Reconstruction of Tennessee* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1898), p. 18.

⁶U. S. Congress, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894-1922), Ser. I, XXII, 786-87; U. S. Congress, *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Ser. I, IV, 251. (Hereinafter cited as OR.)

⁷Fertig, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

and it was not until November, five months after it was begun, that Fort Pillow was entirely defensible. The fort's cannons were cast from poor quality metal and were often improperly mounted. They lacked disparts, tangents, and elevating screws for sighting and setting. They were aimed by visual calculation and were raised or lowered by wooden chocks.

With volunteers of short duration garrisoning the forts, discipline and other rudiments of military science were almost nonexistent. Those men not confined to their tents by illness spent most of their time lounging, or else in affecting drill. Their greatest energies seemed to be directed toward avoiding the manual labor necessary for advancing the fortifications. The prospect of slaves replacing them on labor details elicited much more enthusiasm than the prospect of battle. The only semblance of uniform equipment among the men at Fort Randolph seemed to be the tin water flask that each man carried. The men at Fort Pillow, however, were gentlemen planters and farmers and were handsomely clad in uniforms that they had purchased themselves.

William H. Russell, the British correspondent of the *London Times*, witnessed artillery practice at both forts during June of 1861. At Fort Randolph the demonstration centered around a forty-two pound cannonade. It failed to fire on the first attempt, and its missile fell far short of its mark on the second. Another cannonade was fired, but its barrel burst by an overcharge of powder and its recoil was so violent that it jumped, carriage and all, completely off its platform and fell to the ground. At Fort Pillow, six minutes elapsed from the time the order was given before the gun was ready to fire. On the fourth attempt the gun was successfully discharged, but the shot again fell short. Russell summarized the demonstrations: "Nothing could be worse than the artillery practice which I saw here, and a fleet of vessels coming down the river might, in the present state of the garrison, escape unhurt.⁸ Perhaps Fort Pillow's greatest defensive asset in June of 1861 was the similar incompetency of the raw Union forces upriver at Cairo.

⁸William Howard Russell, *My Diary North and South* (Boston: T.O.H.P. Burnham, 1863), pp. 310-313; *OR*, Ser. I, IV, 408.

Cairo's location at the junction of the Ohio and Mississippi River made it the key Union position on the upper waters. Egypt, as southern Illinois was called, had been the site of many pro-southern rallies and enlistment drives. Indeed, a movement to withdraw the southern counties from the state had been gaining momentum since South Carolina's secession. Realizing the gravity of the situation, Illinois Governor Richard Yates commanded General Richard K. Swift to mobilize the Chicago district militia.

Four hundred militiamen and four brass cannons were secretly transported by train from Chicago to Cairo. Their destination had been kept secret in order to prevent southern sympathizers from seizing Cairo and burning the Illinois Central Railroad's trestle over the Big Muddy River. Because of the governor's swift action, the militiamen with their four cannons were able to occupy Cairo unimpeded just ten days after the surrender of Fort Sumter. After the militia's arrival, a local farmer commented that many people were "converted" by the "brass missionaries."⁹

Cairo's Camp Defiance, close by the levee, soon became a Union position of prime strategical importance. Bird's Point on the Mississippi bank opposite Cairo was also fortified, while its owner, Colonel John Bird, a southern sympathizer, was confined to arrest at Cairo's St. Charles Hotel.¹⁰ Cairo's levee served as Camp Defiance's rampart. When heavy cannons were finally in place behind the levee, a thirty-two pound shot was sent booming down the Mississippi as a symbolic warning to the seceded states.¹¹

But the volunteers at Cairo spent most of the early summer of 1861 fighting rats, mosquitoes, dysentery, malaria and boredom. One soldier thought that Wisconsin hogpens were palaces compared to camp quarters at Cairo; and he was

⁹Mabel McIlvaine, *Reminiscences of Chicago During the Civil War* (Chicago: R. R. Donnelley and Sons, 1914), pp. 53, 56, 69-70; Frank Moore, editor, *The Rebellion Record: A Diary of American Events* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1861-67), I, Sec. III, 112.

¹⁰George W. Driggs, *Opening the Mississippi: Or Two Years Campaigning in the Southwest* (Madison: William J. Park Company, 1864), p. 65.

¹¹Moore, *op. cit.*, I, Sec. I, 90.

amazed when he saw a man stuck in the mud and unable to extricate himself not two rods from headquarters.¹²

Between the rival forces at Fort Pillow and Cairo lay the neutral buffer, Kentucky. Because the Bluegrass State had not seceded, Federal authorities permitted traffic to pass below Cairo to Kentucky river towns provided no contraband was being carried. Steamers from Tennessee also moored at Kentucky landings. In addition to their cargoes, these steamers carried many rumors and messages between the two encampments. A unique message was exchanged by the bodyguards of the two opposing commanding generals, Gideon J. Pillow and Benjamin M. Prentiss. Pillow's guards challenged their Union counterparts to personal combat. But instead of designating a time, place, and weapons, the Federals replied that they would only hang "traitors," not make deals with them.¹³

The Confederate victory at Bull Run put Southern thought in an offensive tenor. After Tennessee joined the Confederacy, Pillow's West Tennessee command was placed under General Leonidas Polk. With designs on southern Missouri, Polk dispatched Pillow's force upriver to occupy the Missouri river town of New Madrid. On July 28, eight Confederate steamers splashed up to the New Madrid levee, and amid the cheers of the local citizenry, General Pillow's Army of Liberation tramped down the gang planks onto Missouri soil.

Meanwhile, William J. Hardee had a Confederate force of some 4,500 in Pochahontas, Arkansas. M. Jeff Thompson had a smaller contingent of fighters encamped near Bloomfield, Missouri, by the Great Mingo Swamp. Pillow, Thompson and Missouri's secessionist governor, Claiborne Jackson, met at New Madrid to formulate a scheme for capturing southern Missouri. General Sterling Price was expected to advance out of the state's southwest corner while Hardee and Thompson moved out of the southeast. This two-pronged attack was in-

¹²Driggs, *op. cit.*, p. 64. Note: Similar accounts of camp life at Cairo can be found in: Henry H. Eby, *Observations of an Illinois Boy in Battle, Camp, and Prisons—1861 to 1865* (Mendota, Ill.: Henry H. Eby, 1910); Edmund Newsome, *Experiences in the War of the Rebellion* (Carbondale: E. Newsome, 1879); and Charles W. Wills, *Army Life of an Illinois Soldier* (Washington: The Globe, 1906).

¹³Moore, *op. cit.*, II, Sec. III, 84.

tended to outflank the Federals in central Missouri, forcing them to retreat to defend St. Louis. Pillow, in the meantime, was to advance overland and capture the river town of Cape Girardeau. From Cape Girardeau's bluffs his army could block communications on the Mississippi between St. Louis and Cairo, cross the river, capture Cairo from above, and thus relieve the threat of a Federal river descent.¹⁴

Hardee moved out of Arkansas to Greenville, where he waited for Thompson to join him before attacking Ironton on the railroad running to St. Louis. Thompson, however, was ordered to join Pillow in the move on Cape Girardeau. But Pillow did not advance. He remained in New Madrid nursing a carbuncle on his buttock that made riding anything but pleasant. And his offensive fervor was displaced by thoughts of defense. He maintained that his threats on Cape Girardeau had prevented a concentration of Federals in western Missouri and the most urgent matter seemed to be the protection of the Mississippi Valley and the Tennessee interior by fortifying Columbus, Kentucky.¹⁵ Thompson was not strong enough to attack Cape Girardeau alone and Hardee felt he had obligations to Arkansas and withdrew to that state.¹⁶ As this campaign fizzled out, the Confederates lost a prime opportunity to take the offensive in the Mississippi Valley; from then on Confederate efforts were directed at stopping Union offensives.

During August both Polk and Pillow felt that their position at New Madrid was untenable. Polk was disposed toward falling back on the already substantial Tennessee works at Forts Pillow and Randolph and to use Union City, Tennessee, as a base of operations into Missouri. Pillow, however, implored Polk to let him ascend the river into neutral Kentucky and fortify the Iron Banks at Columbus, a point of "paramount military necessity," where he could "close the door effectually against invasion of Tennessee or descent of the Mississippi."¹⁷

The sympathies of the Columbus populace were undoubt-

¹⁴OR, Ser. I, III, 618-19.

¹⁵OR, Ser. I, III, 686; Jay Monaghan, *Swamp Fox of the Confederacy: The Life and Military Services of M. Jeff Thompson* (Tuscaloosa: Confederate Publishing Company, 1957), pp. 31-33.

¹⁶OR, Ser. I, III, 681, 693.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 686-87.

edly Southern. In early June of 1861, Union soldiers aboard a reconnaissance steamboat noticed a Confederate flag flying at Columbus. The vessel landed and a colonel stormed ashore ordering the flag down. When townspeople refused to comply he took it down and desecrated it. As the Federals resumed their way upriver, they looked back and beheld a new Confederate flag hoisted over Columbus.¹⁸ The citizens of Columbus were further incensed when Federal troops entered Kentucky in search of a group designated as the Columbus Rangers. This band was an organization of local youths formed "for the mere purpose of drill and to learn camp life and to amuse themselves in hunting."¹⁹ They had been on a campout when the Federals set out in search of them. Fortunately for the Rangers they had returned from their outing early.

Meanwhile, on the Missouri shore opposite Columbus, Union troops occupied Belmont, a landing with no inhabitants or buildings.²⁰ General Ulysses S. Grant ordered this position evacuated September 2, 1861, so the Federals had no knowledge of the violation of Kentucky neutrality by Confederates until commander John Rodger reported on September 4, that the gunboats *Tyler* and *Lexington* had been fired upon by Confederate batteries at Hickman and riflemen at Columbus.²¹

As military leaders are often wont to do, General Polk had disregarded political protocol to secure a military advantage. When Governor Beriah Magoffin of Kentucky received Polk's statement that it was of "the greatest consequence to the Southern cause" that he occupy Columbus and Paducah, two gunboats and over 1,500 men were already stationed at the Iron Bluffs.²² The move was justified by Polk on the basis that Kentucky's sanctity had already been violated by the Federals, whose Congress had levied a tax on the state to help finance Union war costs, as well as by Federal maintenance or armies in Garrard County under General Lovell

¹⁸OR, Ser. I, VI, 181-84; Moore, *op. cit.*, I, Sec. I, 101; Wills, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19.

¹⁹OR, Ser. I, IV, 182-83.

²⁰*Ibid.*, III, 151.

²¹*Ibid.*, III, 152.

²²*Ibid.*, IV, 179-80.

H. Rousseau and at Lexington under Colonel Thomas H. Bramlette.²³ Civil leaders in the Confederacy disagreed as to the occupation of Columbus; some endorsed Polk's action. Governor Harris of Tennessee requested Polk to withdraw, and Secretary of War Leroy P. Walker ordered him to do so. But, Jefferson Davis in a terse letter supported him, stating simply that "The necessity justified the action." The Kentucky Senate also demanded immediate withdrawal. Polk told the governor he could do so only with the assurance that Federal troops would not violate the state's neutrality. Polk was advised that the Confederacy had no rights in Kentucky but that if he would withdraw unconditionally, responsible parties would see that the Union would honor the neutrality. But Davis' advice that political elements should not control the actions of military necessity was all the justification Polk needed. The fortifying of Columbus continued.²⁴

During this time Grant was not idle. Two days after Polk seized Columbus, Grant quietly occupied Paducah.²⁵ Albert Sidney Johnston, the Confederate commander of Department Number Two, approved Polk's occupation of Columbus and announced that he intended to advance to Bowling Green on the rail line from Louisville to Nashville.²⁶ While Polk sent troops to Mayfield to protect his right flank, Grant fortified Fort Holt, a Kentucky position on the east bank of the Mississippi a few miles downstream from Cairo, opposite Birds Point.²⁷ As September ended, Federals faced a Confederate line that blocked the major western rivers. Anchored on the right at Bowling Green, the line dipped into Tennessee where Forts Henry and Donelson guarded the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers and extended upward again to Columbus on the left.

Surveys to establish Forts Henry and Donelson had begun as early as April, 1861, but Jeremy F. Gilmer, chief engineer for the department felt that they had not been located in the most advantageous positions. Due to equipment and labor

²³*Ibid.*, pp. 184-87.

²⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 185, 189-90, 192.

²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 196-97.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 190.

²⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 187-91.

shortages these positions were never rendered as formidable as they might have been.²⁸ Work at Columbus, however, progressed more favorably. Provisions and supplies capable of sustaining a force of 25,000 for four months were stocked within the fort. The Iron Banks permitted the establishment of tiers of batteries with fire angles extending from plunging to water line. A large chain extended the width of the river to obstruct the passage of any but friendly boats. One hundred and forty heavy guns stood in this "Gibraltar of the West" as sentinels of the Mississippi Valley.

But this very strength served ultimately as the fort's downfall. The outworks alone required a garrison of 13,000 men, while there were only 15,000 in the whole district. Employing so great a number to hold a single position left no forces to operate in the field. A modest garrison of 3,000 to 5,000 men in a well constructed fort could have defended the river. Such an arrangement would have availed reserves for emergencies. With rail connections extending from Columbus, Kentucky, to Humbolt, Tennessee, and thence to Bowling Green, Kentucky, swift transfers of reserves would have been possible to any major position along the Bowling Green-Columbus defensive line.

The Union leaders had the highest respect for Columbus, both as a defensive stronghold and a potential offensive sally port. No attempt was ever made to take it, although the Federals did clash with Confederates under the guns of Columbus at Belmont. Grant had dispatched forces from Bird's Point and Cape Girardeau to join an expedition from Ironton intent on driving Jeff Thompson's command out of southeast Missouri into Arkansas. Grant's St. Louis headquarters had also been advised that Price's force in Western Missouri was expecting reinforcements from Columbus, intelligence that later proved to be false. He called for demonstrations on Columbus from Paducah and Fort Holt. In the meantime, he would lead a demonstration down the river. When he received word that Confederate troops had been crossing to Belmont from Columbus he decided to attack; with this attack

²⁸James L. Nichols, *Confederate Engineers* (Tuscaloosa: Confederate Publishing Company, 1957), pp. 42-44; *OR*, Ser. I, IV, 506, 544-45.

he would prevent the troops that were pursuing Thompson from being cut off as well as preventing Price's reinforcement.²⁹

On the evening of November 6, 1861, 3,114 men boarded the steam transports at Cairo and dropped nine miles down the river. Pulling into the Kentucky shore, they spent the night giving the appearance of intending to disembark on that bank and attack Columbus. The next morning they chugged into the Missouri shore a few miles above Columbus. The troops disembarked and marched about a mile before forming into a battle line. Deploying skirmishers before them, they advanced upon the Confederate position, while the gunboats dropped down river opposite Columbus to occupy the batteries of the fort.

At Belmont the Confederates, who were low on ammunition, charged the advancing Union line but could not check it. Finally, the Yanks succeeded in expelling them from the camp and driving them into a position under the river bank. As the Federals entered the Confederate camp, they lost all form of order. Jubilant over their success, the men ransacked the camp in search of trophies, while officers made speeches proclaiming the justice of the Union cause. A group of men turned a captured field piece on some steamboats far out of range downriver and began firing, accompanying each discharge with whoops and cheers. They failed, however, to observe two boats laden with men crossing from Columbus. When the camp was set ablaze, the artillerymen at Columbus realized it was no longer held by their comrades and opened fire.

When the Confederates huddled beneath the riverbank realized they were not going to be captured, they proceeded upstream completely unnoticed and rallied with the troops just arriving from Columbus. The burning camp, the Confederate cannonade and the appearance of the enemy threatening to cut them off from their own transports brought a semblance of order into the jubilant but disorganized Union army. Some of the officers became panic-stricken and talked of surrender. But Grant dismissed such talk. He maintained that his army had fought its way in, so it could fight its way out. All after-

²⁹OR, Ser. I, III, 267-72.

noon the Federals slugged towards their transports. Just as the Confederates were fast approaching the transports, they managed to board and shove off. One Illinois regiment, however, proceeded up the wrong road and had to be evacuated further upstream. Grant scored the encounter a victory claiming that it had prevented forces from joining Price. It also prevented Confederates from cutting off his expedition against Thompson. Polk, on the other hand, maintained the day was his for having repelled the attack. Either way, the positions on the river remained unaltered.³⁰

Meanwhile, Price had kept Confederate hopes flickering in western Missouri. But Price's victory in Lexington, Missouri, proved ephemeral when General Ben McCulloch in Arkansas refused to come to his aid. Hope still existed for a movement from Columbus to "emancipate" St. Louis, and Polk assured Price that his efforts in southwest Missouri were relieving pressure on Columbus.³¹

After the Battle of Belmont the Confederate commanders on the river passed the remainder of the year trying to perfect their defenses, and mustering troops out of state service and remustering them into the Confederate army. One Confederate private later described that winter in Columbus as filled with "dreary nights and weary days with many marches throughout the Purchase but to no end except as training."³²

Through most of the winter the action on the Missouri-Kentucky front consisted of skirmishes and limited expeditions. In December, Confederate gunboats engaged the batteries at Fort Holt, accomplishing what one Illinois volunteer termed "a little fright."³³ A short time later, Jeff Thompson's command raided Commerce, Missouri, eight miles below Cape Girardeau, and managed to capture a Union steamboat at the wharf.³⁴ Meanwhile, Union troops were occupied with expe-

³⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 348-57; C. C. Buel and R. V. Johnson, *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* (New York: Century Company, 1887), I, 348-57. Hereinafter cited as *BL.*)

³¹OR, Ser. I, VIII, 728-29

³²John Milton Hubbard, *Notes of a Private* (Memphis: E. H. Clarke and Brother, 1909), pp. 11-13.

³³Daniel Lief Ambrose, *History of the Seventh Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry* (Springfield: Illinois Journal Company, 1868), p. 21.

³⁴OR, Ser. I, VIII, 45; Wills, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

ditions to halt trade that bypassed Cairo by passing overland through southeast Missouri to Confederate Armies.³⁵ A move that generated much alarm among the Confederates was a demonstration from Fort Holt against Columbus. The only profit by this move, however, was the discovery of two roads which were not marked on Union maps.³⁶

Important for its future bearing on Columbus and ultimate river control was the replacement of John C. Fremont as head of the Union Department of Missouri by Henry W. Halleck. Fremont had been described by Confederate Secretary of War Judah P. Benjamin as a general "whose incompetency, well known to us, was a guarantee against immediate peril." Halleck, however, was considered by the Confederates to be "an able and well instructed military commander."³⁷ But Halleck's attentions were first directed toward subduing partisan bands in Missouri, and he gave little consideration to a downriver offensive.

Orders from Washington soon altered this situation. Major-General George B. McClellan was proposing an offensive into northern Virginia that called for a supporting thrust in the West to capture Confederate rail communications through the Cumberland Gap. Lincoln's desire to aid the east Tennessee Unionists gave added impetus to such a move. Leadership of this project was assigned to Major General Don Carlos Buell. Halleck was to support him by keeping the Confederates on the Columbus-Bowling Green line occupied, thus preventing Confederate reinforcement of east Tennessee.³⁸ When 1862 began, neither Halleck nor Buell thought circumstances would allow such a cooperative action, and neither had communicated with the other regarding the mission. By the end of January, however, Halleck was provided with the necessary impetus to initiate a move. There were rumors circulating that Confederate General P. G. T. Beauregard was being transferred to the West with fifteen regiments. Also,

³⁵OR, Ser. I, VIII, 457; Wills, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

³⁶OR, Ser. I, VII, 68-72, 565; Moore, *op. cit.*, IV, Sec. 1, 15.

³⁷OR, Ser. I, VI, 788.

³⁸Roy P. Basler, editor, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1953), V, 84, 86-87, 94-95, 98-99; Bruce Catton, *Grant Moves South* (Boston: Little Brown Company, 1960), pp. 111-18.

letters from Grant at Cairo cited the weaknesses of Fort Henry on the Columbus-Bowling Green line. Grant stated that if Fort Henry was captured, it could serve as a base for further operations against Fort Donelson, Memphis, or Columbus. On January 30, 1862, Halleck issued the following order to Grant:

You will immediately prepare to send forward to Fort Henry, on the Tennessee River, all your available forces from Smithland, Paducah, Cairo, Fort Holt, Birds Point, &c. Sufficient garrisons must be left to hold these places against an attack from Columbus.³⁹

Two brigades under Brigadier General C. F. Smith reconnoitered Fort Henry a week earlier and advised Grant of its defenses.⁴⁰ Grant's plan of attack was relatively simple. One third of his attacking force was to advance on Fort Heiman, the supporting position on the river opposite Fort Henry while the remainder, with gunboat support, was to advance on Fort Henry.⁴¹ To meet this attack was a Confederate garrison of 2,675 men. The stronghold boasted sixteen guns, but poor judgment by the engineers, and the flooded condition of the river rendered the watery battery useless.⁴² According to Brigadier General Lloyd Tilghman, commander at Fort Henry, if the attack had come a few days later, the Federals would have faced a work with one third of its fortifications washed away. He said, "The history of military engineering records no parallel to this case."⁴³

Realizing Fort Henry's weakness as he did, Tilghman decided to merely stage a delaying action there. He believed that Fort Donelson, if properly reinforced, could be held even if Fort Henry fell. He also knew that Bowling Green and Columbus depended upon Donelson remaining a Confederate position. He therefore selected a token force of eighty men to execute a holding action while the rest of the garrison marched overland twelve miles to Fort Donelson.⁴⁴

On February 6, 1862, Flag Officer A. H. Foute's seven ironclad gunboats bombarded Fort Henry into submission even

³⁹OR, Ser. I, VII, 121.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 72-75.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, pp. 125-26.

⁴²*Ibid.*, pp. 137-38, 143.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 138-41.

before Grant's infantrymen could position themselves for attack. Grant then wrote Halleck, "I shall take and destroy Fort Donelson on the 8th and return to Fort Henry."⁴⁵

When the evacuees of Fort Henry tramped into Fort Donelson, General Gideon Pillow had 3,000 men garrisoning the position. The next day, however, 12,000 troops arrived from Bowling Green to reinforce the fort. Johnston had withdrawn his right wing from Bowling Green and divided it between Fort Donelson and Nashville.

Grant delayed his move against Fort Donelson until the gunboats could travel the Tennessee to the Ohio for repairs, and then up the Cumberland. Enroute these steamers picked up Lew Wallace's division to reinforce Grant. On February 10, the move toward Donelson began and by nightfall of the 12th Grant had deployed his command around the fort. That night a bitter snowstorm raged around the combatants who awaited dawn when the gunboats would commence the attack.

Foote's gunboats, however, did not duplicate their Fort Henry success and withdrew from the first day's fighting badly mauled. The contest was then shifted to the infantry. John B. Floyd, Donelson's newly appointed commander was apprehensive about the power that the Union could bring to bear on the fort if a full-scale siege was effected. He decided, with the concurrence of his officers, to withdraw to Nashville. However, the Union forces blocked the withdrawal route. The Confederates were unable to dislodge the stubborn Federals, so after two days of fierce fighting, the Confederates deemed further resistance imprudent. Except for Floyd and Pillow, who boarded a steamer and fled upriver to Nashville with a Virginia regiment, and Nathan Bedford Forrest, who managed to lead his cavalry command to safety, the entire Confederate command at Fort Donelson was surrendered unconditionally.⁴⁶

The action at Forts Henry and Donelson had temporarily eclipsed Columbus as the point of immediate concern. Their fall stimulated immediate action aimed at isolating the Kentucky stronghold. A Union naval expedition proceeded from

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁴⁶*BL.*, I, 410-22.

Fort Henry up the Tennessee River as far as Florence, Alabama. It managed to capture war materials, destroy Confederate steamers, and frighten the populace. But its significant achievement was the capture of the railroad bridge over the Tennessee River. With this structure in Union hands, Columbus was isolated from other Confederate positions on the defensive line.⁴⁷

Realizing that Union control of the Tennessee River cut communications with Columbus, Beauregard advised that only a small garrison be left to make "a desperate defense of the river." The remainder of the force was to fall back on Island Number Ten.⁴⁸ While the Federals were occupied at Fort Donelson, Polk was not pressed to evacuate Columbus immediately and the withdrawal did not begin until February 25. On the 27th, Brigadier General John McCowan departed with his command for Island Number Ten. On March 1, Stewart's brigade left aboard steamers for New Madrid, while B. F. Cheatam's men marched overland to Union City. Polk, his staff, and the cavalry remained to attend to the details of the evacuation. March 2, 1862, at 3:00 P.M. the torches of the Confederate cavalymen turned the evacuated buildings into a roaring conflagration. The next day Union cavalymen rode into the "Gibraltar of the West" without firing a shot.⁴⁹

Fort Henry, although situated on the Tennessee River, was the keystone of the Mississippi Valley's defense. Its capitulation permitted Columbus to be flanked. The evacuation of Columbus opened the door of the lower Mississippi Valley to the Union forces while Fort Donelson opened the door to Nashville and central Tennessee. This was the first step in the circa-Appalachian flanking movement.

These were calamitous events for the Confederacy, but their true import was not immediately felt. In the winter of 1862, Confederate hopes were still high. The defeats on the western rivers were far removed from Richmond and the eastern theatre, which was the real focus of attention. The "Gibraltar of the West" had fallen, but Europe was expected to intervene. While Richmond waited for Europe, unbounded

⁴⁷OR, Ser. I, VII, 153-56, 860-61.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 861.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 436-38, 683.

confidence was placed in a new shield of the Mississippi Valley, Island Number Ten.

Today if one walks around the well-groomed state park that marks the site of the Columbus fortress one begins to appreciate the strength that such a position afforded. But today only a museum that once served as a hospital, a few restored earthworks, some mounted cannons and an occasional historical plaque mark the position where thousands once camped. The very strength of Columbus destined it to become a little known location a century later. Because it was such a formidable position it was never directly assaulted and is therefore not identified with the death and carnage so readily associated with other locations. But the Iron Banks that loom over the Mississippi had, in 1861-62, a profound influence on the events in Kentucky, and indeed, upon the course of the war and our whole nation.