

Cowards in the Face of Immediate Death:

The Exceptional Leadership of General George H. Thomas at Chickamauga

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Americans often remember 1863 as the turning point of the Civil War; decisive victories at both Gettysburg and Vicksburg seemed to change the tide of the conflict. However, few remember the disastrous Union defeat at Chickamauga in September of the same year which nearly cost the North an entire field army. Instead of allowing a complete rout, the will, determination, and perseverance of one commanding officer and his corps preserved the Army of the Cumberland. While the Georgian forests burned around him and all seemed to collapse, the Rock of Chickamauga stood firm: George Thomas, true as steel, refused to yield. Only Clausewitz himself can explain the effects of Thomas's exceptional command:

So long as a unit fights cheerfully, with spirit and elan, great strength of will is rarely needed; but once conditions become difficult, as they must when much is at stake, things no longer run like a well-oiled machine...As each man's strength gives out, as it no longer responds to his will, the inertia of the whole gradually comes to rest on the commander's will alone...Such are the burdens in battle that the commander's courage and strength of will must overcome if he hopes to achieve outstanding success.¹

The situation by the third day of the Battle of Chickamauga was dire at best, catastrophic at worst, and most certainly disastrous. Both XX and XXI Corps under Major Generals McCook and Crittenden, respectively, had been routed from the battlefield. The overwhelming weight of the Army of Tennessee bore down on Thomas's defensive position as successive waves of rebels thrashed his lines.² Only Thomas and his corps stood between the

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. & trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 104-105.

² Peter Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound: The Battle of Chickamauga* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 440.

Army of the Cumberland, the Confederates, and certain destruction. The “inertia of the whole” truly had fallen on Thomas’ will alone, but he did not waver. George Thomas’s exceptional composure and heroic leadership on the third day of the Battle of Chickamauga allowed him to inspire his troops, maintain a stout defense, and save the Army of the Cumberland from destruction. George Thomas and his actions are proof that strong character cannot be disregarded in the study of military command.

George Thomas’s humility is the bane of any scholar wishing to study the elusive American general. Thomas notoriously refused to write a memoir and shunned the limelight, leaving his wife, Frances, to preserve much of his reputation.³ Countless authors have attempted to understand the enigmatic man by combing through his few correspondences. To supplement this lack of personal testimony, scholars often rely on testimonials from a number of people who surrounded Thomas during his life such as aides, friends, and subordinates.⁴ While Thomas was as flawed as any other human being—showing a propensity to marginalize some of his fellow commanders—Thomas’s general conduct on and off the battlefield was remarkable. Synthesizing accounts from witnesses, allies, and enemies, scholars can elucidate how George Thomas was a truly exceptional man and leader who succeeded at a critical moment in American history.

Moreso than a keen understanding of tactical or operational maneuvers, Thomas’s character and experience uniquely prepared him for his stand at Chickamauga. George Henry Thomas was born into an aristocratic, slave-owning, Virginian family. He grew up strong, smart, and fiercely independent. Most importantly, as noted by a neighbor, Thomas showed an immense deference to duty above all else.⁵ From the classrooms of West Point to the battlefields of Mexico, Thomas would hone these skills, standing out from his peers as a fearless and implacable soldier.⁶ Never,

³ Brian Steel Wills, *George Henry Thomas: As True as Steel* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 451.

⁴ Along with Frances Thomas, George Thomas’ former aide, Alfred Hough did much of the heavy lifting early on to solidify Thomas’ place in American history. He compiled Thomas’s official writings and gave them to biographer Thomas Van Horne who published the first official biography of Thomas in 1882. Wills, *George Henry Thomas*, 454-458.

⁵ Wills, *George Henry Thomas*, 11.

however, was this obligation to country tested more than when Virginia seceded from the Union. While Thomas deliberated for some time, he saw no other choice but to support the oath he made to the Constitution, abandoning Virginia, his home, and possible prestige in the Confederate Army.⁷ Thomas was never able to repair his relationship with his family who saw him as a traitor. Fellow Virginian J.E.B. Stuart wrote of his desire to hang Thomas as a traitor to Virginia upon hearing of Thomas's decision to remain in the Union Army.⁸ Disowned by his family and shunned by former friends, Thomas demonstrated, as he would time and time again, that duty was paramount.

Thomas's decision to maintain his position at Chickamauga was no mistake; it was the product of a repeated behavior, a tendency to place honor above self-preservation. Thomas showed flashes of this conduct during the Battle of Stones River. Serving under William Rosecrans—the man from whom he would take command of the Army of the Cumberland after Chickamauga—Thomas conducted himself with the utmost professionalism. While infuriated that he had been passed up by his junior (and an inferior officer), Thomas dutifully served under Rosecrans, never letting his opinions cloud the chain of command, and showing once more a proclivity to place duty above all else.⁹ Faced by overwhelming Confederate forces, General William Rosecrans considered retreating, but Thomas, “calm, stern, determined,” merely quipped, “Gentlemen, I know of no place better to die than right here,” before nonchalantly returning to his lines.¹⁰ Ever the stoic, Thomas was immutable in the face of danger. He

⁶ Wills, *George Henry Thomas*, 57. These years proved to be especially foundational to Thomas as he met some lifetime friends (and rivals) who would undeniably influence him. He roomed with William Tecumseh Sherman at West Point—whom he affectionately referred to as “Cump”—and developed a close relationship with Braxton Bragg—his future adversary at Chickamauga – during the Mexican American War.

⁷ Wills, *George Henry Thomas*, 101.

⁸ Francis MacDonnell, “The Confederate Spin on Winfield Scott and George Thomas,” *Civil War History* 44, no. 4 (December 1998): 255, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cwh.1998.0063>, 1.

⁹ Edwin C. Bearss, “Cavalry Operations in the Battle of Stones River: Part I,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (1960): 26.

¹⁰ Wills, *George Henry Thomas*, 168.

showed an even keener understanding of motivation in the face of death during a speech at a staff meeting. Thomas noted that success on the battlefield was often a question of nerves. He told his staff that “we are all cowards in the presence of immediate death,” but that courage amongst leadership and a disregard for one’s own wellbeing could motivate any soldier to fight.¹¹ Anecdotes such as these prove that Thomas held an uncanny understanding of Clausewitz’s definition of command and that he alone was suited to save the Army of the Cumberland just a few months later.

At Chickamauga, Thomas willingly endangered his own life and the lives of his soldiers to save the Army of the Cumberland, all the while maintaining his composure as those about him lost their heads. On September 18, 1863, the Confederate Army of Tennessee clashed with the Union Army of the Cumberland just a few miles south of the critical railway junction in Chattanooga at Chickamauga Creek.¹² Thomas, commanding XIV Corps, held the left flank of the Union forces opposite of Leonidas Polk, who—under the command of Braxton Bragg—violently probed Thomas’s lines.¹³ Fearful that Bragg would turn Thomas on the Union’s left flank, General William Rosecrans, commander of the Army of the Cumberland, ordered a division of Crittenden’s XXI Corps to reinforce Thomas. Fatefully, Rosecrans pulled a division from the Union’s center exposing a massive gap in their line which Confederate General James Longstreet quickly exploited.¹⁴ Longstreet’s soldiers crashed through this hole creating confusion and chaos amongst the Federals while making

¹¹ Wills, *George Henry Thomas*, 4.

¹² Benjamin F. Sawyer, “Chickamauga,” in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, Volume 5*, ed. Peter Cozzens (University of Illinois Press, 2002), 422–29, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt1hj9xdv.39>, 73.

¹³ Wills, *George Henry Thomas*, 200.

¹⁴ Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 362-365. The issuing of this order is a story in and of itself. Either erroneously or acting on poor intelligence, Rosecrans ordered General Thomas Wood’s division to vacate its position at Brotherton Field. Wood should have exercised better judgement (having been under Confederate attack all day) and remained in place, but, due to two prior instances in which Rosecrans publicly humiliated Wood for failing to follow orders, Wood stubbornly withdrew ostensibly dooming the Union center which Longstreet quickly overran. The events of this day would be debated for years to come, marring both Rosecrans’ and Wood’s careers.

considerable gains for the Confederates.¹⁵ What began as an attempt to protect Thomas and XIV Corps from a rout instead forced both XXI and XX Corps to flee their positions, stranding Thomas and his soldiers, and exposing the entire Army of the Cumberland. Seeing the rapid degradation in the Union's lines, Thomas sprung to action employing his forces for a stout defense along the high ground of Horseshoe Ridge and Snodgrass Hill. Thomas appeared unperturbed by the situation; each soldier who saw Thomas remarked on his "electrifying" presence and calm demeanor, sowing trust in his leadership.¹⁶ His presence, above his actual orders, helped restore faith throughout his corps with one lieutenant colonel noting, "it is strange what an effect the appearance Old Pap [Thomas]...had upon his men...It always restored confidence."¹⁷ It is truly telling of Thomas's exceptional leadership that his peers, McCook and Crittenden, and their soldiers fared so poorly and were so disorganized while Thomas was able to maintain order. The Army of the Cumberland would sorely need this leadership the next day as their situation worsened.

Seeing the severity of the situation, George Thomas disregarded his own fears and acted as a stalwart in the face of danger, invigorating both his own soldiers and his fellow commanders. Thomas was a human being; he feared death as much as his soldiers, but he knew showing such fear would only weaken their resolve.¹⁸ To demonstrate this fearlessness, he consistently exposed himself to enemy fire by choosing to reconnoiter positions on his own. On one occasion, he was nearly decapitated by two successive artillery shells. Instead of running in terror, he merely joked that he might not be so lucky if they fired a third shell and calmly returned to his

¹⁵ James Longstreet and Christian Keller, "BATTLE OF CHICKAMAUGA.," in *From Manassas to Appomattox: Memoirs of the Civil War in America*, ed. James I. Robertson, (Indiana University Press, 2020), 445–60, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvwh8dqq.50>, 450.

¹⁶ Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 422.

¹⁷ Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 423.

¹⁸ Wills, *George Henry Thomas*, 206. Despite fastidious attempts to hide his fear, Thomas had a few obvious tells that he was becoming nervous. One officer noted that Thomas would ruffle his mustache whiskers when agitated causing them to become unruly. When composed, he would smoothly stroke them.

headquarters.¹⁹ The more soldiers Bragg, Longstreet, and Polk threw at his line, the more resolute Thomas became. His strength of will had an undeniable effect, soothing all those who laid eyes upon him and setting a firm example. Impassioned by Thomas's stolid appearance and bravery, Brigadier General James Steedman grabbed a standard from his retreating soldiers, charged forward under intense fire, and inspired them to take up their defensive positions once more.²⁰ Another one of these soldiers was Rosecrans's aide de camp who, upon arriving disheveled and anxious with orders for Thomas to withdraw, was instantly calmed by Thomas's "steady example."²¹ Thomas seemed to be everywhere on the battlefield always appearing calm, always appearing unshaken, and always doing more to improve the army's chance of survival. Motivated by Thomas's stand, General Gordon Granger, commander of the reserve corps, activated his units without the direct orders of Rosecrans.²² Thomas utilized this additional strength to fortify his center, rebuffing the waves of Confederate attacks which continued to bloody themselves upon his straining lines. By 5:00 P.M. on September 20th after conversing with Rosecrans's aide de camp and assessing his ammunition, supplies, and position, Thomas finally decided to end his "heroic stand" and begin his withdrawal.²³ While it lasted, however, everyone from rifleman to corps commander could agree that Thomas's strength of will was undeniable and infectious.

Considering the terrible conditions and chaos at Chickamauga, that George Thomas could have orchestrated a successful withdrawal and preserved his forces should merit studying his command alone. After the vigorous fighting on September 20th in which Thomas barely held the Union position, he facilitated a timely and orderly withdrawal without Bragg even

¹⁹ Wills, *George Henry Thomas*, 203.

²⁰ Robert W. Ikard, "Lieutenant Thompson Reports on Chickamauga: A Comparison of Immediate and Historical Perspectives of the Battle," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1985): 434.

²¹ Wills, *George Henry Thomas*, 209. This aide happened to be future president James Garfield.

²² Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 440.

²³ Sawyer, "Chickamauga," 428.

realizing Thomas had left completely and prevented the maneuver from becoming a rout.²⁴ The 16,179 Union casualties could very well have increased immeasurably.²⁵ Beyond any of Thomas's tactical prowess or defensive genius, however, the remarkable power of his character stands out. From Rosecrans (who dubbed Thomas the "Rock of Chickamauga") to Granger to ordinary soldiers on both sides, almost every participant at Chickamauga reveled in Thomas's courage, bravery, and strength. His command at Chickamauga transcends his orders, movements, and decisions. It enters the realm of leadership intangibles all commanders wish to possess, but few ever will. His courage mattered. His will mattered. His sense of duty mattered. Truly, the "well-oiled machine" of the Army of the Cumberland broke down and each man's strength gave way during those three bloody September days. When the fate of the army fell on Thomas's shoulders, he not only rose to the challenge, but he willfully embraced it. When studying commanders, scholars can become overburdened by the minutiae of decision-making. They can focus too much on the technical details and disregard the humanity of these leaders. Especially at a tactical level, they should not discount the effect a commander's demeanor and presence has on his or her soldiers. Thomas is proof that the "commander's courage and strength of will" alone may be the difference between stunning success or crushing defeat. Thomas is proof that character matters.

²⁴ Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 513.

²⁵ Cozzens, *This Terrible Sound*, 534.