

*A Civil War Feud:  
Jefferson Davis versus Joseph E. Johnston*

by

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Southern diarist Mary Chestnut wrote in October 1863 that President Jefferson Davis "detests Joe Johnston for all the trouble he has given him. And General Joe returns the compliment with compound interest. His hatred of Jeff Davis amounts to a religion."<sup>1</sup> How did these two dedicated Confederates get embroiled in such bitter strife? This essay examines that question, and discusses how and why the Jefferson Davis - Joseph E. Johnston feud evolved during the Civil War.

Events before the Civil War may have precipitated the future animosity. Many sources mention that Davis and Johnston fought over the daughter of nearby tavern owner, Benny Havens, while both attended West Point. This alleged incident is not well documented,<sup>2</sup> and even if it occurred, it did not appear to have influenced events over thirty years later. A more likely source of conflict concerned Joseph E. Johnston's appointment as Quartermaster General in the United States Army in 1860. It appears that then Senator Davis supported his friend Albert Sidney Johnston for the position. Possibly Davis may have held some resentment toward Joseph Johnston because of his receipt of the assignment.<sup>3</sup>

In assessing their feud it has not been sufficiently emphasized that, in their pre-Civil War days, Davis was unusually combative, while Johnston was not. While at West Point and in the Army Davis had many clashes with his superiors and was court-martialed several times. Furthermore, in the Army and during his political career, Davis got into numerous fights and feuds.<sup>4</sup> One historian aptly noted that while "dignified in his correspondence," Jefferson Davis nonetheless was "a very pugnacious man."<sup>5</sup>

These items were only precursors of events to come. During the Civil War after briefly serving as a general for the Virginia forces, Johnston accepted a commission in the Confederate Army as a brigadier general. On May 15, 1861, Johnston was ordered to take command of the troops at Harper's Ferry. A minor conflict developed between Johnston and President Davis and General Robert E. Lee, then the commander of the Virginia military forces. Davis and Lee wanted Harper's Ferry to be held, if at all possible. However, Johnston felt the arsenal would be difficult to hold and did not want to lose troops in a vain attempt to defend it.<sup>6</sup> Harper's Ferry changed hands many times during the Civil War, and General George B. McClellan lost 12,500 Union troops there when he was not allowed to withdraw them before the Battle of Antietam. These facts show that Harper's Ferry was very vulnerable and support Johnston's arguments.<sup>7</sup>

Compounding the strategic differences was the fact that Johnston received

somewhat contradictory orders from Davis and Lee in early June 1861. General Johnston was told he could leave and "destroy all the facilities" at Harper's Ferry, but Lee also noted that Davis was strongly against evacuation and placed "great value" on the area. Johnston then telegraphed Richmond for more precise orders. On June 13, 1861, Adjutant General Samuel P. Cooper informed Johnston that he had full discretion to withdraw from the arsenal and destroy everything there. Cooper also told Johnston that he felt Johnston already had this authority and had tried to avoid taking responsibility for his actions. Johnston angrily denied this charge in a wire to Cooper.<sup>8</sup> Shortly after this exchange Harper's Ferry was evacuated to the dismay of Davis who believed General Johnston's withdrawal was premature and hasty. Davis' confidence in his commander was thus probably somewhat undermined.<sup>9</sup>

About six weeks after Johnston left Harper's Ferry, his troops united with General P. G. T. Beauregard's to fight the Union forces at Manassas. The Confederates successfully counterattacked and won the Battle of Bull Run. President Davis rode to the battlefield and personally drew up a pursuit order since Beauregard and Johnston had not done so. However, they helped to convince Davis not to issue the order. Shortly afterwards Davis was unfairly criticized for supposedly halting the Confederate advance. Davis asked Johnston to publicly deny these rumors, which he did.<sup>10</sup>

In late July 1861 Johnston complained about General Robert E. Lee assigning him an adjutant general. General Johnston claimed that Lee as his inferior had no authority to make the appointment and that Davis or Cooper would have to issue the orders.<sup>11</sup> On several different occasions during the Civil War Johnston complained to Richmond over issues related to his rank.

On August 31, 1861, the Confederate Congress confirmed the five nominees for general and the dates the appointments were to take effect that President Jefferson Davis had submitted. The nominations were as follows: first, Samuel P. Cooper to rank from May 16, 1861; second, Albert Sidney Johnston to rank from May 30, 1861; third, Robert E. Lee to rank from June 14, 1861; fourth, Joseph E. Johnston to rank from July 4, 1861; and last P. G. T. Beauregard to rank from July 21, 1861.<sup>12</sup>

When Joseph Johnston saw the list of nominations he wrote President Davis an emotional letter of strong protest (dated September 12, 1862), expressing "surprise and mortification" at being ranked fourth instead of first. Johnston based his claim on having been the Quartermaster General in the United States Army, which made him the top ranking officer. According to the Confederate law of March 14, 1861, "the rank for the officers of each grade shall be determined by their commissions in the U.S. Army."<sup>13</sup>

After the war Davis argued that the Quartermaster General had staff and not field command, which counteracted Johnston's contention. Being appointed Quartermaster General made Johnston a brigadier general, while previously he was a lieutenant colonel and outranked by several officers.<sup>14</sup> But the Confederate law made no distinction between staff and line command--this was an interpretation of Davis'. The President also erred in issuing different dates for the commissions, because the Confederate statute stated that "the commissions issued shall bear one and the same date." Moreover, seniority in the United States Army should have determined the officers' ranking in the Confederate Army, and not President Davis's arbitrary dating of the commissions.



Historian William C. Davis concludes that Davis badly "misconstrued and misinterpreted statutes that were, in fact, quite explicit."<sup>15</sup>

Johnston argued that May 16, 1861, rather than July 4th of that year, was the effective date of his commission. On May 14, 1861, Jefferson Davis nominated Lee and Johnston to be brigadier generals; nominations which the Confederate Congress immediately approved.<sup>16</sup> Then a supplementary act of Congress two days later replaced the rank of brigadier general with general. Johnston wrote that therefore he claimed to hold his rank as general "under the act of May 16, 1861." Johnston noted that if the May 16th appointment were not operative, then Beauregard would have outranked him, when Davis promoted the latter to general shortly after the Battle of Manassas.<sup>17</sup> However, all of Davis's and the War Department's correspondence recognized Johnston as Beauregard's superior officer. Finally, as Johnston's letter to Davis stated, since the President had already nominated and Congress approved Cooper, J. E. Johnston, Lee and Beauregard as generals, Davis had no legitimate grounds for making the renominations.<sup>18</sup>

Because Johnston realized that he had strong feelings over the ranking issue, he put his letter aside for two days. Then he reread the letter, felt it contained nothing improper and mailed it to the President unchanged. It was not wrong for Johnston to write Davis about his views on the matter. However, General Johnston did question the President's motives and compared his ranking to action by a court martial. He also made emotional arguments stating, for example, that Davis's actions had tarnished his "fair fame as a soldier."<sup>19</sup> A diplomatic letter confined to Johnston's differing interpretation of Confederate law would have been more effective and might have avoided angering the president.

Davis curtly responded to Johnston's criticism:

I have just received and read your letter of the 12th instant. Its language, is as you say, unusual; its arguments utterly one-sided, and its insinuations as unfounded as they are unbecoming.<sup>20</sup>

Most historians have not recognized either the significance of Davis's unusually terse response to Johnston or his failure to address the points the general raised. In contrast in 1863 Davis sent Johnston a fifteen page letter that reproved his conduct in Mississippi. Normally, Davis revelled in writing lengthy letters to persons with whom he disagreed. When he was Secretary of War, Davis sent a hostile letter to General Winfield Scott that was twenty-seven pages long.<sup>21</sup> Jefferson Davis's failure to address Johnston's arguments possibly indicates that he was not able to refute them.

Davis had no serious disagreements with Johnston before the ranking incident, and therefore his making the general fourth in seniority was probably not because of personal antagonism. The possibility that President Davis may have done so to create lines of seniority and authority more to his liking must remain conjecture. Nonetheless, most likely he ranked Joseph Johnston fourth in order to favor three generals who were friends. Samuel Cooper and Albert Sidney Johnston were longtime favorites of Davis, and his

military advisor Robert E. Lee and he had recently formed a strong friendship.<sup>22</sup>

In his memoirs Davis lavishly praised Albert Sidney Johnston. He said his views came from "long and intimate acquaintance" and had grown through the years "without check or variation."<sup>23</sup> The safe return of A. S. Johnston from California to Texas in late August 1861 provides a possible reason for President Davis's actions. A. S. Johnston had been out of the Confederacy and therefore was not commissioned as an officer. Resubmitting the names of the four generals whose nominations had been previously confirmed and dated allowed Davis to make Sidney Johnston "the highest ranking general in the field."<sup>24</sup> Davis's questionable conduct in this situation is best explained by his desire to give Albert Sidney Johnston seniority over J. E. Johnston. This explanation also gives credence to the latter's charges that the President's renominations unjustifiably deprived Joseph Johnston of his top ranking in the Confederate Army.

Samuel Cooper had performed no outstanding achievements in the military, but he was given the highest rank in the Confederacy. Furthermore, the office of adjutant general did not require or need to have the Army's highest ranking. Cooper, however, had been a very cooperative adjutant general for Davis when Davis had served as the United States Secretary of War.<sup>25</sup> At the time of appointment, Albert Sidney Johnston and Lee had not distinguished themselves on the battlefield. Nonetheless, they were ranked ahead of Joseph E. Johnston, who had led the Confederates in their Bull Run victory. Thus one can see how the unfairness of his ranking upset Johnston, although he probably should have recognized that it did not actually affect his power as the commander of the South's most important army.<sup>26</sup>

The next major strain in relations between Johnston and Davis occurred over the Union General McClellan's invasion of the Peninsula. President Davis felt Johnston abandoned his position at Centreville, Virginia too quickly. Also during Johnston's retreat millions of pounds of supplies were lost. It was not Johnston's fault that a meat-curing facility had been built in an exposed area near his camp and that supplies had continued to be sent to him against his orders.<sup>27</sup> Davis showed bias in severely condemning Joseph Johnston for lost materiel, while ignoring the similar abandonment of a tremendous amount of supplies in Nashville by Albert Sidney Johnston, whom he greatly liked.<sup>28</sup>

When McClellan began his attack, Johnston wanted to abandon the Peninsula and concentrate his defense at Richmond. Davis and Lee disagreed and ordered him to take command at Yorktown. Johnston complied with Davis's instructions, but he soon retreated up the Peninsula anyway.<sup>29</sup> When Johnston announced he was evacuating Yorktown on April 30, Jefferson Davis asked him to delay the withdrawal. This telegram was ignored, as well as a May 2nd wire from Robert E. Lee on the same subject. In fact, from May 1st through May 7th Johnston failed to communicate with Richmond.<sup>30</sup>

Johnston later defended his failure to inform Davis of his plans by saying, "I could not consult with him without adopting the course he might advise."<sup>31</sup> Another factor in the communications breakdown was that after a February cabinet meeting, Johnston found that important information had been leaked to the public. This made him more reticent in future talks with Davis and his cabinet.<sup>32</sup>

As McClellan's army inched closer to Richmond, Johnston would give the President



no assurances about his plans. Both face-to-face discussions and sending Lee to consult with Johnston about his plans were unfruitful. As Shelby Foote wrote, Johnston "kept his intentions from the President as assiduously--as if the two had engaged as opponents in high-stakes poker."<sup>33</sup>

In late Spring 1862 President Davis and the citizens of Richmond were greatly concerned about the large Union army that was very near the Confederate capitol. When McClellan's troops were divided by the Chickahominy River, Johnston finally launched an attack at the Battle of Seven Pines. Although the assault was flawed in planning and execution, it temporarily halted the Union advance. While Johnston had logical reasons for delaying a stand (further down the Peninsula, Union troops could have bypassed his army by ship on the York River and moved to his rear), he seemed oblivious to the political pressure his retreats caused Davis. Johnston was severely wounded at Seven Pines, and Davis very cordially talked to him there and expressed great concern about his injury.<sup>34</sup>

After partially recovering from the wounds he received at Seven Pines, on November 12, 1862, Joseph Johnston informed Richmond officials that he could return to duty. Johnston was appointed Commander of the Western Armies, which included territory in western North Carolina, northern Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, and the part of Louisiana east of the Mississippi River. Three major armies were under Johnston--General John C. Pemberton's in Mississippi, General Braxton Bragg's in Tennessee and General Edmund Kirby Smith's in east Tennessee.<sup>35</sup>

Johnston told Secretary of War Randolph that he thought General Theophilus H. Holmes in Arkansas should unite with Pemberton at Mississippi, since Vicksburg was in danger. Randolph agreed and showed Johnston a note he had sent to Holmes, ordering him to do this.<sup>36</sup> President Davis, however, countermanded the order, as an infringement of his power, which was one reason Randolph resigned as Secretary of War. He was replaced by James A. Seddon.<sup>37</sup>

Johnston soon found he had a great amount of responsibility but little authority, because Kirby Smith, Bragg, and Pemberton actually received their orders through Richmond.<sup>38</sup> President Davis refused many of Johnston's requests, such as that 20,000 troops of General Holmes be sent to Mississippi. In December 1862 General Johnston argued against sending nearly one-fourth of General Bragg's men to aid Pemberton. He felt the troops would not be enough to help in Mississippi, while they would dangerously weaken the Army of Tennessee. Union General William Rosecrans's subsequent advance and ultimate victory over the Confederates at Murfreesboro confirms Johnston's views.<sup>39</sup> General Johnston believed that the Commander of the Western Armies was in an unworkable position, because the six hundred mile distance of railroads between Mississippi and Tennessee (the Northern army occupied part of Tennessee, which required Southern trains to detour through Mobile) made shifting troops impractical. Surprisingly, despite Johnston's known strong misgivings about his role, Davis kept him in command.<sup>40</sup>

When Vicksburg fell on July 4, 1863, Davis referred to Johnston in saying that the Confederate Army surrendered there because of, "want of provisions inside, and a general outside who wouldn't fight."<sup>41</sup> These comments were unfair first because

Johnston had repeatedly ordered Pemberton not to get trapped in Vicksburg and to leave the city. General Pemberton disobeyed these orders, and lost both Vicksburg and his army, as Johnston had feared. Second, General Johnston's very small force could not have feasibly attacked at Vicksburg. It was Davis's selection of Pemberton, a very poor field commander, and not Johnston's actions (or lack of such) that resulted in the fiasco in Mississippi.<sup>42</sup>

After Vicksburg's surrender Davis wrote Johnston an angry fifteen page letter that severely criticized him for not utilizing troops in Tennessee and his full authority. Johnston responded with a meticulous defense.<sup>43</sup> Events at Vicksburg showed, as they did earlier at Harper's Ferry and in the Peninsula Campaign, that Johnston's military judgment was usually correct.

With some misgivings President Davis appointed Joseph E. Johnston to head the Army of Tennessee, effective on December 16, 1863. Some reasons for the selection of Johnston included the fact that he was the highest ranking general available, and he had strong support from his fellow military officers, Congress (Texas Senator Louis T. Wigfall was Johnston's leading backer), and the Confederate cabinet.<sup>44</sup> However, Davis was not pressured into appointing Johnston against his will. The President recognized Johnston had ability as he wrote his wife in 1862 "he is a good soldier . . . and could at this time render most valuable service."<sup>45</sup>

A brief analysis of Davis's differences with Beauregard puts his disputes with Johnston into better perspective. General Beauregard, unlike Johnston, made several, mostly unjustified, public attacks against the Administration. Also, he had left his post as commander of the Army of Tennessee without getting permission for leave<sup>46</sup> (Beauregard took command of the army after Albert Sidney Johnston was killed at the Battle of Shiloh). Davis concluded in June 1862 that as head of an army Beauregard had "been placed too high for his mental strength." After P. G. T. Beauregard's evacuation of Corinth, Davis sent him a list of seven questions that sharply challenged his conduct since the Battle of Shiloh, and demanded explanations.<sup>47</sup> Davis never dealt so abruptly with Joseph Johnston, for whom the President had more respect and a higher opinion of his ability.

It is also not correct as many historians have argued that Davis was pressured into appointing J. E. Johnston to head of the Army of Tennessee. Davis demonstrated his obstinance when a group of congressman in 1862 asked that the President restore Beauregard to command of the Army of Tennessee, and he rebuffed them. The President said, "If the whole world were to ask me to restore General Beauregard to the command which I have already given to General [Braxton] Bragg, I would refuse it."<sup>48</sup> This episode shows the unlikelihood of pressure being effective in forcing Jefferson Davis to make an appointment against his wishes.

In November 1863 Southern troops under General Bragg were hungry, poorly clothed, and demoralized. Then at Missionary Ridge on the day before Thanksgiving, Bragg's Army of Tennessee was routed from the field.<sup>49</sup> Their retreat ended at Dalton, Georgia, where Johnston took control. The new commander was liked by his men as much as Bragg had been hated. Johnston brought discipline, supplies, and confidence to the soldiers. Private Sam Watkins wrote that he "was loved, respected, admired, yea, almost worshipped by his troops."<sup>50</sup>



During Johnston's retreat in North Georgia from May to July 1864 he parried General William T. Sherman's big blows, but continually fell back. Davis became very concerned that Johnston would not eventually make a stand, and in July 1864 sent him several telegrams asking the general for his plans. All of Johnston's replies were vague, and he gave no indication that he would defend Atlanta. Consequently President Davis sent his military advisor General Braxton Bragg to visit Johnston. Bragg, too, was unable to determine Johnston's plans. However, Bragg did not warn Johnston that President Davis needed assurances about his defending Atlanta, or he would be removed from duty.

On July 16, 1864, Davis asked Johnston again about his intentions. Johnston's reply indicated that he might abandon Atlanta: "We are trying to put Atlanta in condition to be held for a day or two by the Georgia militia, that the army movements may be freer and wider." Johnston felt he had to keep his options open against a much larger army. On the basis of this last response, Davis removed Johnston and replaced him with General John Bell Hood.<sup>51</sup> President Davis seems to have relieved Johnston because of real concern for Atlanta, and not personal antagonism.<sup>52</sup>

The appointment of Hood was clearly an error. Lee had serious reservations about Hood, and even Bragg conceded that he was "not a great general," but only the best available.<sup>53</sup> Both Northern Generals Sherman and Ulysses S. Grant believed the firing of Johnston was a mistake, and that his delaying tactics had been successful. General Sherman was especially glad to be able to fight the Confederates in open fields under the rash Hood.<sup>54</sup> Civil War historian Bruce Catton wrote that "the decision to replace Johnston with Hood was probably the single largest mistake that either government made during the war."<sup>55</sup>

In February 1865 Joseph Johnston returned to head the remnant of the Army of Tennessee, which had not been destroyed through Hood's reckless assaults at the battles of Atlanta, Franklin, and Nashville. Shortly after Robert E. Lee became General in Chief in early 1865 he appointed Johnston as the Army's new commander.<sup>56</sup> Lee, who remained very deferential of Davis's power, probably would not have made the appointment had the President opposed it. Davis considered resisting it, but ultimately did not.

One should not exaggerate the influence of the quarreling between Davis and Johnston. Jefferson Davis showed great patience during the Peninsula Campaign, and did not remove Johnston even after he failed to follow his orders. Furthermore, Davis entrusted Johnston with the Confederacy's two major armies, and appointed him to high positions, even after they had serious disagreements. For Johnston's part, he remained in the Confederate Army, even when he strongly disagreed with Davis's decisions. Both men were strong willed and egotistical, defensive of their authority and sensitive over threats to it. These attitudes, combined with the infant confederacy's new lines of power and command, produced inevitable conflict between Davis and Johnston. Their differences were further exacerbated by the strain of fighting in a losing military cause to which both were greatly devoted. Considering these difficult circumstances, the Davis-Johnston feud is more understandable, and it also shows that both men deserve some credit for partly putting aside their personal differences in order to serve the Confederacy.

## NOTES

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