

**The Departmental System  
and  
Confederate Strategy in the West**

by

Ryan Peter Toews

A thesis  
presented to the University of Manitoba  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
in  
History

Winnipeg, Manitoba

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ISBN 0-315-71921-4

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STRATEGY IN THE WEST

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RYAN PETER TOEWS

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of  
the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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## ABSTRACT

The system of geographically defined military departments set the parameters for both the planning and the implementation of Confederate strategy during the American Civil War. This thesis shows how specific changes in the departmental organization interacted with the changes in Southern strategy in the West.

First, the growth of the departmental system is chronologically outlined and discussed in terms of the various factors which influenced its development. Second, the problems in the evolving departmental structure are examined; these primarily were rooted in the inherent tensions between regionally based departments and the need for greater unity of command. Within this context, Jefferson Davis is evaluated in his role as Commander-in-Chief of the Confederate army. Finally the departmental system is considered regarding its contribution towards the final Confederate defeat in the West.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Always in such an undertaking there exist a number of people without whose help and understanding such a project would not be possible. A special note of thanks is due to my wife, Iris, who did the typing, corrected my spelling, and gave me plenty of encouragement and moral support. I also wish to thank my father, Ernie Toews, my thesis advisor, George Schultz, and my friends and peers, Bradley Loewen, Dennis Wohlgemuth, and Douglas Bedford.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This thesis proposes to examine the development of the departmental system of military administration in the western Confederate States of America during the course of the Civil War. Whatever may have been the strategies implemented by the South in its struggle for secession, it can be argued that it was the departmental system through which these plans were or were not carried out. An evaluation of this system must be made to be able to understand the context of the Southern war effort. The departmental system in the West provides the focus for this assessment.<sup>1</sup> It was here that the Rebels suffered their worst defeats and the departmental system was put to its most severe test.

In 1861 the years of sectional antagonism between the North and the South came to a head with the creation of a separate Southern state. With the outbreak of war in April of this year, the newly formed Confederate States of America was faced with what would be its paramount problem

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<sup>1</sup>The West of the Civil War period was the region between the Appalachians and the Mississippi. The region on the far side of the Mississippi, which we today would call the West, was known as the Trans-Mississippi.

throughout its brief four years of existence, namely to maintain an effective military strategy for survival.

The answer to this problem appeared to be simple on the surface. The South did not seek to acquire control over new territories, nor did it need to win the war by conquest of the North. It only asked to be left alone and be allowed to pursue its own independent role as a separate nation-state. Towards this goal, all that was thought to be required was to impress upon the Northern government and people the futility of a forced reunion. Indeed, in the days before the outbreak of actual fighting many secessionists believed that there would be no war at all. The North was considered to have no desire to undertake the expenditure of the blood and gold necessary to bring the South back into the Union. After the beginning of the conflict the war was predicted to be of short duration. Once the South's determination to defend their home was realized by the North, the war would be won. Even when the realization that the war would be drawn out and the North indeed was prepared to engage in a long expensive struggle the basic underlying strategy of the Confederates did not change. The strategy adopted by the Rebels was defensive in orientation; Confederate armies would wait for Union forces to come to them and

then seek to concentrate and turn back the attackers.<sup>2</sup>

This strategy, termed the offensive-defensive, sought to bring about a battle of annihilation that would destroy the enemy army. The leading military theoretician of the period, Baron Henri de Jomini, emphasized that such a battle of annihilation was an ideal that strategic planners should strive towards. He cited Napoleon as the leading practitioner of such a strategy, the Napoleonic victories of Austerlitz and Marengo being two good examples of such an engagement. Jomini, however, also allowed that such a Napoleonic battle might not always be possible. Therefore, he also advocated a second, albeit less desirable, form of strategy, that of a war of exhaustion. By this he meant a war that sought to destroy the enemy's ability to wage war by the occupation of territory, thus depriving an opposing army of its means of existence.<sup>3</sup> Although the degree to which Jomini was actually read by Civil War leaders is a matter of some contention, he nevertheless provides an excellent model

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<sup>2</sup>Frank E. Vandiver, Rebel Brass: The Confederate Command System (Baton Rouge, 1956), pp. 16-17; Frank E. Vandiver, "Jefferson Davis and Confederate Strategy", Bernard Mayo (ed.), The American Tragedy: The Civil War in Retrospect (Hampton-Sydney, Va., 1959), pp. 20-21.

<sup>3</sup>Archer Jones, "Jomini and the Strategy of the American Civil War, A Reinterpretation", Military Affairs, Vol. XXXIV, No. 4 (1970), pp. 127-128; Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, How the North Won, A Military History of the Civil War (Urbana, Ill., 1983), pp. 21-24.

for understanding the strategic thinking of the period.<sup>4</sup> By effecting a dispersal of military strength the strategy of exhaustion by the North could be prevented as all territory vital to the Confederate war effort would be defended. Should the opportunity for a battle of annihilation arise the concentration of various armies could serve to provide the necessary troops to decisively strike down an invading Northern army.

This system of counteroffensives against Union invasionary moves could not, of course, exist in a vacuum. A method of exercising control over the various defensive forces, and the ability to use these forces to implement a specific strategic policy, was established from the start. Throughout 1861, as the war slowly grew in magnitude, the entire South was gradually divided up into various military departments. These departments were to be the

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<sup>4</sup>For a series of views on the importance of Jomini in Civil War strategy see David Donald, Lincoln Reconsidered (New York, 1956), pp. 82-102; Vandiver, "Jefferson Davis and Confederate Strategy", pp. 19-32; T. Harry Williams, "The Military Leadership North and South", David Donald (ed.), Why the North Won the Civil War (Baton Rouge, 1960), pp. 23-47; Jones, "Jomini and the Strategy of the American Civil War: A Reinterpretation", pp. 127-131; Thomas L. Connelly and Archer Jones, The Politics of Command: Factions and Ideas in Confederate Strategy (Baton Rouge, 1973), pp. 3-30; Joseph L. Harsh, "Battlesword and Rapier: Clausewitz, Jomini and the American Civil War", Military Affairs, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 4 (1974), pp. 133-138; Grady McWhiney, "Jefferson Davis and the Art of War", Civil War History, Vol. XXI, No. 2 (1975), pp. 101-112. For a historiographical outline of the above see T. Harry Williams, "The Return of Jomini--Some Thoughts on Recent Civil War Writing", Military Affairs, Vol. XXXIX, No. 4 (1975), pp. 204-206.

structural framework through which strategic designs would be carried out.<sup>5</sup>

Each departmental command covered a specific geographical area and was charged with the defense of this same area. Hopefully, each department would also be able to supply the troops within its jurisdiction with the sustenance necessary for their survival. To this end the department need not always be confined to an exact war zone, it could also include a large logistical hinterland. Within each department the departmental commander was to husband his troops to exploit any local opportunities for a counteroffensive. A departmental commander, in the view of Confederate President Jefferson Davis, would be able to act as he saw fit within his own department; he was to have autonomy within his jurisdiction. The departmental commander was also the final authority on any potential reinforcement of a neighbouring department or in any co-operative effort with the same.<sup>6</sup>

Co-ordination between departments, as opposed to co-operation, fell under the jurisdiction of the government in Richmond. This included President Davis, his various Secretaries of War and the War Department. As President, Davis was also the Commander-in-Chief of the Confederate army. Because of his refusal to appoint a General-in-

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<sup>5</sup>Connelly and Jones, The Politics of Command, p. 87.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 89.

Chief (until he was forced to do so in 1865), Davis was intimately involved in the shaping of Confederate strategy throughout the course of the war. His assertion of his command prerogative relegated his Secretaries of War and the War Department to essentially administrative duties.<sup>7</sup> Davis was, however, unwilling to fully utilize his authority over the various departmental commanders. Although he could order a departmental commander to undertake a certain movement, he felt that the discretion of the local commander should be given paramount consideration. The vast size of the Confederacy meant that in most situations Davis would find himself unable to accurately judge a situation from afar. Indeed, the danger that Richmond could err and misconstrue a distant situation served to limit the authorities in the capital to suggestions and requests to departmental commanders to work towards a particular end.

This balance between local autonomy and unity of command and purpose was thus an underlying source of tension within the departmental system, especially in the West. Throughout the course of the war the problems of command and strategic direction were interwoven with the desire to both preserve the independence of each

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<sup>7</sup>June I. Gow, "The Old Army and the Confederacy, 1861-1865", Kenneth J. Hagan and William R. Roberts (eds.), Against All Enemies: Interpretations of American Military History from Colonial Times to the Present (Westport, Conn., 1988), pp. 134, 142, 144-147.

department so as not to impair its strategic purpose and at the same time allow the system to work to provide the most efficient use of the comparatively weaker amount of Southern manpower. The departmental system, then, was a method intended to provide control of widely scattered Rebel forces at both the local and the strategic levels.

There were other important reasons for this widespread military structure. The Confederacy's vast area meant that sources of supply were also widely dispersed. The little industry that did exist was not concentrated, it was to be found throughout the South. The loss of any single area could very well mean the loss of a vital source of raw materials or manufactured goods. Likewise, any loss of territory could reduce the procurement of manpower. The loss of territory could also have a negative effect on existing army strengths by encouraging desertion by men desiring to return home to protect their families. A locally recruited and supplied army would also have the added incentive of a bureaucratic entity to preserve its own territorial basis for existence.<sup>8</sup>

Other reasons also existed for the adoption of such a system. Probably one of the simplest of these was the continuation of pre-war practices. In the old pre-

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<sup>8</sup>Archer Jones, Confederate Strategy from Shiloh to Vicksburg (Baton Rouge, 1961), p. 21; Vandiver, Rebel Brass, pp. 14-15, 19-20.

secession army the United States was divided into geographical commands. The Confederate States saw no real reason why this method of command, proven in the past, should not be continued.<sup>9</sup> More important was the way in which the departmental system served several political necessities. Localistic in outlook, each state within the Confederacy exerted pressure on Richmond to be given a military presence to protect itself from invasion. Each state provided the central government with a supply of soldiers. These soldiers were recruited by the state and at least some of them were also initially equipped by their own state government. It was therefore politically expedient for each region to be officially integrated into a precise military hierarchy.<sup>10</sup> The fear of a slave rebellion also called for a pervasive military presence. Ironically, the slave holding states had grown accustomed to a central government with military resources which were greater than that of any single state. These states were now unwilling to accept less from Richmond than they had formerly received from Washington.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Ulysses S. Grant III, "Military Strategy of the Civil War", Military Affairs, Vol. XXII, No. 1 (1958), p. 16.

<sup>10</sup>For an explicit examination of this problem see Frank L. Owsley, "Local Defense and the Overthrow of the Confederacy: A Study in State Rights", Mississippi Valley Historical Review, Vol. XI, No. 4 (1925), pp. 490-525.

<sup>11</sup>Russel F. Weigley, The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy (New York, 1973), p. 97.

The hope for European recognition of the Confederate States as an independent nation also argued for a widespread military establishment. The administration in Richmond knew that if it was to be able to demonstrate the viability of the Confederacy it would have to be seen to be able to have a military presence throughout its territorial claims.<sup>12</sup>

It was in the region west of the Appalachians and east of the Mississippi River that the war would be won or lost. Although Richmond was the head of the Confederate States, the West was the heart. Here lay the centre of Confederate rail and river lines which formed the vital Southern communications network. The main east-west rail lines in the South ran through this region, as did the waterborne highways of the Mississippi, Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers. Here too lay the heart of the Southern war industries. Already, by the summer of 1861, a number of fledgling manufacturing centres had sprung into being to supply the expanding Rebel armies. The Sycamore Powder Mill near Nashville provided the Tennessee State Forces with a vital source of gunpowder, although until September, 1861 its output was under five hundred pounds per day.<sup>13</sup> Northwest of Nashville the narrow strip of

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<sup>12</sup>Connelly and Jones, The Politics of Command, p. 20.

<sup>13</sup>Frank E. Vandiver, Ploughshares into Swords: Josiah Gorgas and Confederate Ordnance (Austin, Texas, 1952), p. 75.

land between the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers on the Tennessee-Kentucky border provided an important source of raw iron. Here in 1860 thirty-five ironmaking establishments had turned out 5144 tons of bar iron.<sup>14</sup> In Louisiana, manufacturers in New Orleans were busy answering a call from the Quartermaster Department for 1500 sets of clothing each week.<sup>15</sup> Former Federal arsenals in Nashville, Baton Rouge, Montgomery, Mount Vernon and Augusta produced accouterments, and if supplied with powder, cartridges.<sup>16</sup>

As the war continued, new and increasingly vital sources of military production would be developed. In central Alabama, Selma became a centre for the production of iron, artillery and ammunition. In 1864 half the artillery and two-thirds of the ammunition used by the South came from this region. Northern Alabama also developed as a centre for the production of iron. During the war the mines and furnaces of this region developed the capability of producing 30000 tons of pig iron and 10000 tons of bar iron per year.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Benjamin F. Cooling, Forts Henry and Donelson - The Key to the Confederate Heartland (Knoxville, 1987), p. 30.

<sup>15</sup>Richard D. Goff, Confederate Supply (Durham, N.C., 1969), p. 16.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Thomas L. Connelly, Army of the Heartland, The Army of Tennessee, 1861-1862 (Baton Rouge, 1967), p. 5.

It was as a source of foodstuffs, however, that the heartland region was of the greatest importance. The fertile Nashville Basin in Middle Tennessee and the Tennessee River Valley in East Tennessee produced a disproportionate amount of the West's corn, wheat and hogs. Further to the south the similarly fertile Mississippi Delta and the Alabama Black Belt were in 1861 still planted predominately in cotton but they held the potential to also be a valuable source of subsistence supplies.<sup>18</sup>

The West was also the region that would see the greatest strains in the departmental structure of command. Far removed from Tennessee and Mississippi, the government in Virginia was unable to effectively supervise the operations of the various armies in the western departments. Yet as these armies were always at a numerical disadvantage when compared to their Federal opponents close co-operation was necessary to maximize their effective defensive use.

Throughout most of 1861 and 1862 the departmental structure in the West was improvised. The system was gradually enlarged to encompass all the territory in the region but its evolution was often erratic. Nevertheless, by the winter of 1861-1862, a system was in place to

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<sup>18</sup>Sam B. Hilliard, Atlas of Antebellum Southern Agriculture (Baton Rouge, 1984), pp. 50, 61, 66, 71.

provide a framework for strategic operations. The first Union offensive, however, proved the system to be unsound. The numerous departments throughout the West produced a variety of conflicts between competing departmental commanders, and co-operation often proved difficult to achieve between the various commands.

An effort to change this took place in November of 1862. The creation of the Department of the West came about as an attempt to provide unity to the three main western commands. This department, which showed the potential of a supervisory command in the West, finally collapsed the following year due to the shortcomings of its commander and of the initial terms of its establishment. The system that then emerged from the ruins of the Department of the West was a return to the improvisational structure of 1862. Although the War Department showed more initiative in providing some directions for the development of western strategy the system still relied to a dangerous degree on ad hoc planning.

The year 1864 saw the departmental system's greatest success, but its worst drawbacks also became apparent. In the fall of that year Davis tried to again reform the system and bring back a supervisory command as had been tried before with the Department of the West. Again, however, problems of personalities and poorly defined

terms of command served to undercut the effectiveness of this effort.

Through the course of four years of war, attempts to provide the West with an effective command structure continued on unabated. During this time, the system had both its periods of success and of failure. In the end, however, Davis' inability to overcome the conflict between local autonomy and the need for unity of command reflected the larger issue of the failure of the Southern war effort as a whole.

## Chapter II

### A TIME OF IMPROVISATION

#### 2.1 THE SYSTEM EMERGES

The war in the West had hesitant beginnings. The first military concentrations which existed in the West were scattered and localistic in function, consisting for the most part of troops undergoing training in camps of instruction. The only command worthy of a departmental designation was that of Major General David Twiggs. His Department No. 1 was established on May 27, 1861 primarily for the defense of New Orleans. It encompassed all of Louisiana and the part of Mississippi south of the 31st parallel and west of the Pascagoula and the Chickasawha Rivers.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, Department No. 1 served mainly as a recruiting ground for other commands; by mid-1861 of 8000 men raised and armed by the department 5400 were serving outside of its boundaries.<sup>2</sup>

In Tennessee the forces raised by the state were not immediately taken into the Confederate army and were

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<sup>1</sup>William F. Amann (ed.), Personnel of the Civil War (New York, 1961), Vol. I, p. 188.

<sup>2</sup>John D. Winters, The Civil War in Louisiana (Baton Rouge, 1963), p. 28.

initially spread throughout Middle and West Tennessee. Because of delays in transferring the Tennessee State Army to Confederate control the majority of the recruits remained in their training camps. The few regiments which had been concentrated were situated to defend the Mississippi River.<sup>3</sup>

On the west side of the Mississippi political infighting between the Governor of Arkansas and Confederate authorities resulted in complete chaos. Determined to retain control over the troops raised in Arkansas, Governor Rector refused to allow any Arkansas recruits to enter the Confederate Army unless he was given a guarantee that the transfer was done only after the men in question had given their personal consent. As well, he demanded that any troops previously armed by Arkansas be used only for the specific defense of their home state. When the War Department authorities refused to agree to these stipulations Rector allowed the regiments already in existence to disband. The result was that by mid-July only five regiments of infantry, one battalion of cavalry, and four artillery batteries had been transferred to Confederate jurisdiction.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Connelly, Army of the Heartland, pp. 27-30.

<sup>4</sup>Michael B. Dougan, Confederate Arkansas: The People and Policies of a Frontier State in Wartime (University, Ala., 1976), pp. 75-79; Nathaniel C. Hughes, General William J. Hardee: Old Reliable (Baton Rouge, 1965), pp. 75-77.

Only in western Florida was there any established military body of a substantial size. Pensacola had been an armed camp ever since the Southern seizure on January 12, 1861, two days after Florida's secession, of the United States Navy Yard located on Pensacola Bay. Brigadier General Braxton Bragg, who arrived in March, had been continually reinforced and by April he commanded 1100 men with 5000 more on the way. Although in the following months a number of troops were dispatched to Virginia this small army was a mainstay of Confederate military power on the Gulf Coast.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, during the summer of 1861 measures were begun to provide the West with a proper military structure. On June 17 William Hardee was promoted to the rank of Brigadier General and given command of Arkansas north of the Arkansas River and west of the line of the White and the Black Rivers. At this time, though, the War Department could only promise him one regiment, any additional units he would have to try to salvage from the wreckage of the rapidly disbanding Arkansas State Army.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Grady McWhiney, Braxton Bragg and Confederate Defeat (New York, 1969), pp. 164, 177.

<sup>6</sup>The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (Washington, 1880-1901), Series I, Vol. III, pp. 589-590. Hereinafter cited as Official Records, with all references to Series I unless otherwise noted; Hughes, General William J. Hardee, p. 74; Dougan, Confederate Arkansas, pp. 76-77.

More importantly, one week later the War Department took steps to strengthen the situation along the Mississippi. In early June Leonidas Polk, Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of Louisiana, had travelled to Virginia to visit the Louisiana troops serving in that state. While in Richmond, he met with President Davis to convey the concerns of Westerners that something be done to properly protect the Tennessee frontier and specifically to urge that Albert Sidney Johnston be appointed to command in this region. Davis, a personal friend of both Polk and Johnston, readily agreed with both of these pleas. But, as Johnston was presently trying to reach the Confederacy from his previous Federal posting in California, Davis, on June 25, appointed Polk as temporary commander of the newly created Department No. 2.<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, as Polk's main concerns had arisen from a fear of a Northern invasion along the Mississippi River, the new department was structured to deal with exactly such a threat. It included Tennessee west of, and Alabama north of, the Tennessee River; as well as the river counties of Arkansas and Mississippi, the river parishes of Louisiana north of the Red River, and the northeast section of Arkansas north and east of the Black and the White Rivers.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Joseph H. Parks, General Leonidas Polk, C.S.A.: The Fighting Bishop (Baton Rouge, 1962), pp. 166-167; Amann (ed.), Personnel of the Civil War, Vol. I, p. 188.

<sup>8</sup>Official Records, Vol. IV, p. 362.

The creation of Department No. 2 brought a large part of the troops being raised in Tennessee under Confederate control. What it did not do was establish a coherent defense structure for the Confederate northern front in the West. After the Confederate victory at Wilson's Creek on August 10 gave the Southerners the strategic initiative in Missouri, the exploitation of this victory proved to be beyond Southern command capabilities. While personality clashes between Polk and his subordinate Pillow caused some of the problems the bulk of the difficulties arose from the tangled command structure. Hardee, along with virtually all of the troops raised in Arkansas, was not under Polk's control. Polk proved therefore to be reluctant to commit his troops to an offensive he could not control. Misinformed of Southern strength on the west side of the river he refused to order Pillow to aid Hardee, instead only telling him to co-operate if possible. The result was that Hardee, who had already pressed forward into southern Missouri, was forced to call off any further offensive action. Perhaps it was just as well. Left without proper direction from above, Pillow had shown himself to be unwilling to co-operate with anybody. While Hardee sat at Greenville, Missouri requesting Pillow's aid for an advance on Ironton, Pillow had resolutely maintained that the proper objective should be Cape Girardeau. The result was a stalemate that only

ended with Polk's decision to call off the attempted offensive. Further to the west the victors of Wilson's Creek also did not properly manage their troops. Price, in command of the Missouri State Guard, was not trusted by Ben McCulloch, commander of the Confederate forces; thus the former struck out on his own into his native State. Neither tried to act in concert with the other Rebel forces in Arkansas.<sup>9</sup>

The limited jurisdiction of Department No. 2 also led to problems in Middle and East Tennessee. This region remained under the military control of the Governor of Tennessee, Isham Harris. Harris accomplished little towards preparing the military defenses of his command. Like Polk, he saw the primary Union threat as coming down the Mississippi River; accordingly, he relied on Kentucky's neutrality to protect the rest of Tennessee's northern border. Kentucky had been badly split over the issue of secession and the Federal government's threat of forced reunification. Governor Magoffin, himself pro-secessionist, had tried to achieve a compromise between the two opposing factions and declared Kentucky to be neutral, forbidding either of the two belligerents from placing any troops in the Bluegrass State. As long as

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<sup>9</sup>John M. Harrel, "Arkansas", Clement A. Evans (ed.), Confederate Military History (1989, rpr. New York, 1962), Vol. X, pp. 57-58, 65-66; Hughes, General William J. Hardee, pp. 79-80; Connelly, Army of the Heartland.