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Cause and Effect: How Chickamauga Created the Spectacle at Missionary Ridge

Angelica N. Fikes

Abstract

Contemplating cause and effect usually leads the thought process to the science studies. However, this occurrence actually covers all academic subjects. Amidst the study of by gone eras, there are numerous cases of cause and effect that are continuously ignored. Pertaining to the aforementioned point, this historical research will analyze a particular instance of cause and effect within the Southeastern theater of the American Civil War. Therefore, on the topic of this paper, the Union defeat at Chickamauga is the cause, and the incredible spectacle known as the Battle of Missionary ridge is the effect. Therefore, this historical research will analyze the effect that the Confederate victory at Chickamauga had on their defeat at Chattanooga. How the ill feelings felt by the Army of the Cumberland had about Chickamauga led to their improvised victory at Missionary Ridge. Explaining about how their humiliating defeat at Chickamauga caused the Army of the Cumberland to charge up Missionary Ridge on an unordered whim. Further, this research will take a glance at the sudden lack of common sense to follow the impossible victory that the Union gained at Chattanooga as well. Chattanooga itself sat in the perfect position to control the railroads within the South, and while the actual victory of the territory was basically on the whim of the Army of the Cumberland's enlisted forces, it still turned the Civil War in favor for the Union. Thus, is the historical context of "Cause and Effect: How Chickamauga Created the Spectacle at Missionary Ridge.

Keywords: Whim, Missionary Ridge, Grant, Bragg, Chickamauga

Tactical strategies and decisions made prior to and within the fight itself have always had an enormous impact on the outcome of the battles and entire wars as a whole. Sometimes it is simply the decisions of kings and presidents as to whom they place in charge for a particular battle or over a region. Whereas, it could simply be how far said leader would go to defend their appointed officer that had the most impact on that particular era's military happenstance.

One editorial called him a "a disgraceful figure of a general," and demanded his removal. But Lincoln was firm in his faith in Grant as a "can-do" general who could and would accomplish any mission given him. "I can't spare this man," Lincoln would reply to Grant's critics. "He fights." To a temperance committee protesting Grant's drinking, Lincoln replied dryly, "I'd like to know where General Grant gets his whisky so that I can send a barrel to some of our other generals!"¹ (Archer, 68-69)

Would the Civil War have had a different outcome had President Abraham Lincoln not defended General Ulysses S. Grant, but replaced him instead? There really is not a question for this, the answer is definitely yes! Similarly, the outcome of numerous historical battles that Grant presided over would have been completely different if the general had made a tactical choice similar to that of Confederate General Robert E. Lee, instead of his own move on the chessboard.² (Archer, 65-66) Consequently, there are some historic battles whose outcome has less to do with the decisions of the participating commanders, and more to do with the choices of the present enlisted. Whereabout, the victory in battle coincides with the whim of a lower ranked soldier who had disobeyed their officer's direct orders. Furthermore, the whim of an entire regiment would not only impact the outcome of that precise battle but influence the fate of the entire war.

Moreover, ill feelings toward previous defeats and temperance due to injured pride can also be implemented on the battlefield, sometimes with more influence than the set strategical battle plan. Therefore, the purpose of this historical study is to analyze the effect that the Battle of Chickamauga and subsequent decisions had on the improvised outcome at Missionary Ridge.

Conscientiously the campaigns for the focused military conflict of cause and effect began with the Union defeat at Chickamauga, Georgia.³ (Turner, 103) Whereas following campaigns would lead to the fall of the Confederacy, being victorious at Chickamauga raised the spirit of the South to the point that they felt certain of the North's defeat within the Civil War. Whereabouts within the Confederacy, the Federal army of the United States of America had only two major strongholds amongst the Southeast region. Vicinity of aforementioned strongholds were the two railroad towns of Chickamauga, Georgia, and Chattanooga right over the borderline into Tennessee. Therefore, in order to drive the Union out of the Southeast, Confederate General Braxton Bragg, set his sights on Chickamauga, Georgia and began to push Union General William Rosecrans and the Federal army toward Chattanooga, Tennessee.⁴ (Korn, 2)

Horribly, the Battle of Chickamauga engaged on September nineteenth and twentieth, in the year of our Lord 1863, holds the record for the highest mortality rate within the Western theater of the American Civil War.⁵ (Korn, 62) In fact, the Battle of Chickamauga holds the second highest casualty count for the entire Civil War, behind only the numbers from Gettysburg.⁶ (Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum) Contributed to this historical disaster was a computed known Union and Confederate casualty count; of dead, wounded, and unaccounted for both sides, of thirty-

five thousand grand total.⁷ (Korn, 62) Even though the actual outcome was catastrophic for the North, the commanding Union General William Rosecrans entered the Battle of Chickamauga certain of a Confederate trounce.⁸ (Korn, 50) However, what he discovered was that his failure to pursue Bragg after the Union victory at Tullahoma gave the Confederacy a chance to resupply, strengthen, and prepare for the upcoming conflict at Chickamauga, Georgia.⁹ (Sheehan-Dean, 413)

Another aspect that probably contributed to the Union disaster at Chickamauga would be that the North was experiencing problems with their communications.¹⁰ (Sheehan-Dean, 417) Miswritten orders that General Rosecrans dictated to Major Frank Bond caused a great confusion for Brigadier General Thomas J. Wood.¹¹ (Sheehan-Dean, 416)

This order, written by Rosecrans's staff officer Major Frank Bond, contradicted itself. ... Wood could not "close upon" (a lateral maneuver) and "support" (move behind) an adjacent division at the same time. Rosecrans did not read the order before it was sent. When Wood received the confusing order he quickly began pulling his division out of line to fill an imaginary gap, in the process creating an actual gap.¹² (Sheehan-Dean, 416-17)

However, ill worded orders were not the only problems within the Federal communication at the Battle of Chickamauga, as aforementioned by the quote above there was no gap in the line to fill; in doing so created one and did the Confederates job for them.¹³ (Bowers, 117) Basically, Mother Nature and the vegetation around Chickamauga created an illusion that one division actually present was missing from

formation and the resulting panic led to orders and actions that opened up a hole in the Federal defense line that was never there to begin with.¹⁴ (Bowers, 115)

As Kellogg kept his horse at a steady pace, he saw, in the broad daylight of morning, something he took to be unusual. He saw a gap in the Federal line. *A hole!* He passed on Thomas's troop request to Rosecrans and then quite alarmingly noted the gap he had discovered. Rosecrans's nerves nearly gave way. What, oh what was going on? A Federal line of defense with a gaping hole in its center? Perhaps he should go out and check it himself, to make sure Kellogg was seeing straight, but now two other couriers rode up with the same sighting and message: There were no troops between those of Brigadier Generals Thomas J. Wood and Joseph J. Reynolds. There was a gap in the center of the Federal line. They had seen it...John M. Brannan's Third Division was there all the time. Like a magician's slight of hand, it was hidden in some woods down from the Glenn-Kelly Road. A whole division was down there engulfed in the forest, two steps into a jungle that hadn't been trampled by man in eons and now shrouded a whole division. Brannan's division lay deep in the woods. There was no gap...It was not a sea of calm, and Rosecrans was not a calm deliberator at the calmest of times. Believing there was a gap, he fired off an order: General Wood was to take *his* division and close up on General Reynolds "as fast as possible, and support him." Rosecrans had the ill luck then to turn to Major Frank S. Bond, his aide-de-camp, to relay this order-not stolid, surefooted James A. Garfield. Garfield *knew* where Brannan was. He knew where nearly every man in blue stood; it was his job, a job of knowing who to count on, a feel for where the strength lay, an ability that would later bring him to the White House. Garfield

studied and wrote out every order for Rosecrans that day, every single one save this fatal one.¹⁵ (Bowers, 115-16)

Thus, communication and consistency, separate or combined, can both help or doom a victory, as they worked hand in hand with the Union catastrophe at Chickamauga.¹⁶ (Bowers, 116) Furthermore, another aspect that led to the Federal defeat at Chickamauga was the unordered change in strategy; though a similar occurrence will contribute to the victory at Chattanooga a couple of months later.¹⁷ (Turner, 106) However, for Chickamauga the change led to complete and utter disaster.

Thomas was delighted, of course, to find more men in blue coming his way, but he was somewhat nonplussed that Wood was heading to support Reynolds. Reynolds? No, sir, Reynolds wouldn't be needing any support. Absolutely not. But he, Thomas, could certainly use some more flesh. Wood should keep right on going and give Absalom Baird some help there. Wood allowed his horse to paw the ground a moment and then said that if General Thomas would personally take full responsibility for this change in his orders, he would do so. By the book. Thomas was more than happy to take that responsibility, and so Wood moved his division far to the left. It couldn't have helped the Confederate cause more if Bragg had ordered it, and thus the Union defense line was set up for one of the greatest Federal debacles in the war. Hardly ten minutes after Wood moved out, all hell broke loose.¹⁸ (Bowers, 117)

Wood only agreed to changing the orders if Thomas took responsibility for a good reason, Rosecrans had already basically bit his head off, in front of his division, just that morning.¹⁹ (Bowers, 116) Thus, General Wood gained yet another reason to never stray

away from his follow every rule, by the book, perfect for the army personality.²⁰

(Bowers, 116)

Therefore, communication and strategy go hand and hand in effecting the happenstance of military conflict. Giving that miscommunication leads, in part, to the disaster and failed strategy. Thus, the aforementioned happenstance was definitely an enormous part of the outcome at the Battle of Chickamauga.²¹ (Sheehan-Dean, 416-17) Discouraging for the Union defeat was bluntly clear before Rosecrans could join General Thomas as he had planned in order to combine forces against the South.²² (Korn, 61-62) Instead of joining an army in the heat of battle, Rosecrans had to inquire as to the happenstance of the troops running past him; “the entire army was defeated and in retreat to Chattanooga.”²³ (Korn, 62) Furthermore, this problematic outcome to the Battle of Chickamauga caused Rosecrans such distress that the commanding General of the Army of the Cumberland was unable to walk unassisted when he reached Federal territory at Chattanooga.²⁴ (Korn, 62) Moreover, when the Assistance Secretary of War for the United States of America joined the Union forces at Chattanooga shortly thereafter, he wired the Secretary of War in Washington, comparing Chickamauga to the Union debacle at the beginning of the American Civil War.²⁵ (Bowers, 134) “Charles Dana arrived in Chattanooga soon afterwards and sent a grim telegram to Washington. “My report...of deplorable importance,”...”Chickamauga is as fatal a day in our history of Bull Run.”²⁶ (Korn, 62) Thus showing how disastrous the Battle of Chattanooga was when it was compared with the first Confederate victory that exceedingly shocked the Union.²⁷ (Faragher, 425) After all the citizens of the capital were so sure that they had

made a picnic of observing the Confederate defeat, yet the North gained a loss of astounding proportions.²⁸ (Faragher, 425)

Following the news received from Dana, President Abraham Lincoln appointed General Ulysses S. Grant over the Military Division of Mississippi and sent him to Chattanooga.²⁹ (Garrison, 142) While on his way to Tennessee, Grant decided to change which general was in command of the Army of the Cumberland and wired his orders on ahead.³⁰ (Garrison, 142) This decision was probably made based on the reports of Chickamauga, in order to save Tennessee Grant wanted the Army of the Cumberland not under the command of slow slacker William Rosecrans; but under the command of stoic General George Henry Thomas, the Rock of Chickamauga.³¹ (Turner, 103) As Thomas was the only general willing to stay and fight the charging Rebels, even though the Union lost Chickamauga, Thomas's division did not retreat prematurely like the other Federal divisions.³² (Bowers, 134-135) Grant granted a command that General George Henry Thomas was terrified of and only accepted it out of duty to the United States of America.³³ (Castel, 235)

After the defeat at Chickamauga, the Union forces, newly under the command of Generals Ulysses S. Grant and George Henry Thomas, gained two simultaneous victories all to US Grant's grand plan of conquest. Consequently, the gains of Orchard Knob and Lookout Mountain went down without a hitch. Completely unlike the unordered spectacle of Missionary Ridge, a victory which drove the Confederate States Army out of Tennessee and turned the tide of war for the Union.

Consequently, the Battle Above the Clouds, as the Battle of Lookout Mountain has been occasionally dubbed due to the immense fog, was actually part of Grants grand

plan to gain the Southwest for the Federal Union. This part did go according to plan, though General Joseph “Fighting Joe” Hooker thought that the fog was problematic for him, it actually made his job easier.³⁴ (White, 307) Considering that Lookout Mountain was the least active of all the battles to win Chattanooga. The fog actually covered the movement of the Federal troops climbing the aforementioned mountain, and thus, caused the actual outcome of the battle to be unknown until the sun rose the next morning to shine on the American flag flying over the “Nose” of Lookout Mountain showing that Hooker had won.³⁵ (White, 308) However, this perfect execution was the only portion of Grant’s plan to go off without a hitch, and was nothing like the impossible engagement at Missionary Ridge that was to follow.³⁶ (Gallagher, 15)

Subsequently, the original origin of the problems that the Union Army experienced during the Battle of Missionary Ridge can be contributed to optical illusions, as the whole reason that General Thomas’s troops were sent towards Missionary Ridge was because Sherman captured the wrong hill.³⁷ (White, 307) Tunnel Hill was the great General Sherman’s target, however, what he had actually captured was Billy Goat Hill, which was separated from Tunnel Hill by a large ravine.³⁸ (White, 307) The fact that the ravine in between the two hills could not be seen from Orchard Knob, the vantage point from where the attack plan was concocted, and made both hills look like one, could also be a factor pertaining to the very interesting outcome at Missionary Ridge.³⁹ (White, 307) With Sherman pinned down on the wrong side of the ravine, and Hooker stuck on Lookout Mountain, it is not a wonder that Grant had to change his original plans for the Confederate position at the top of Missionary Ridge. Leading to the military decision

that gave way to one of the most incredible outcomes in America militant history.⁴⁰
(White, 309)

Contemplating the effect of ill feeling gained by the horrific Union defeat at Chickamauga, brings to point how it led to one of the greatest improvisations in known history.⁴¹ (White, 309) Once it became obvious that neither Hooker nor Sherman were going to make it to Missionary Ridge from the side, Grant decided to send a distraction straight in front of the Confederate line.⁴² (White, 309) Thus, General George Henry Thomas the Army of the Cumberland troops that had survived Chickamauga were sent to capture the guns at the base of Missionary Ridge.⁴³ (White, 309) And to stay there!⁴⁴ (Gallagher, 14) Originally, the troops sent to the base of the ridge did follow their orders to stay there, however, with a chant of “Chickamauga, Chickamauga” the Army of the Cumberland began to charge, unordered up Missionary Ridge.⁴⁵ (White, 310)

And then, as Grant and Thomas looked on in amazement, the Federals began to move up the face of Missionary Ridge. They didn't have orders to do that. They went up in big inverted V's, straight up into the teeth of Braxton Bragg's position on Missionary Ridge. Incredibly, the attack swept all the way to the top of the ridge and drove Bragg's entire army off this extremely strong position. There's absolutely nothing else like this in the history of the Civil War. It went against everything that any trained soldier would say was possible.⁴⁶ (Gallagher, 14-15)

Professor Gary Gallagher from the University of Virginia gave a, abet brief, excellent description of the Battle of Missionary Ridge, as based of what was written about this historical event. Geoffrey Ward gives a better description of the charge up the

ridge in a little more detail by quoting the eyewitness of one of General Grant's aides present.⁴⁷ (Ward, 212-213)

At time their movements were in shape like the flight of migratory birds--- sometimes in line, sometimes in mass, mostly in V-shaped groups, with the points toward the enemy. At these point regimental flags were flying, sometimes dropping as the bearers were shot, but never reaching the ground, for other brave hands were there to seize them. Sixty flags were advancing up the hill.⁴⁸ (Ward, 212-213)

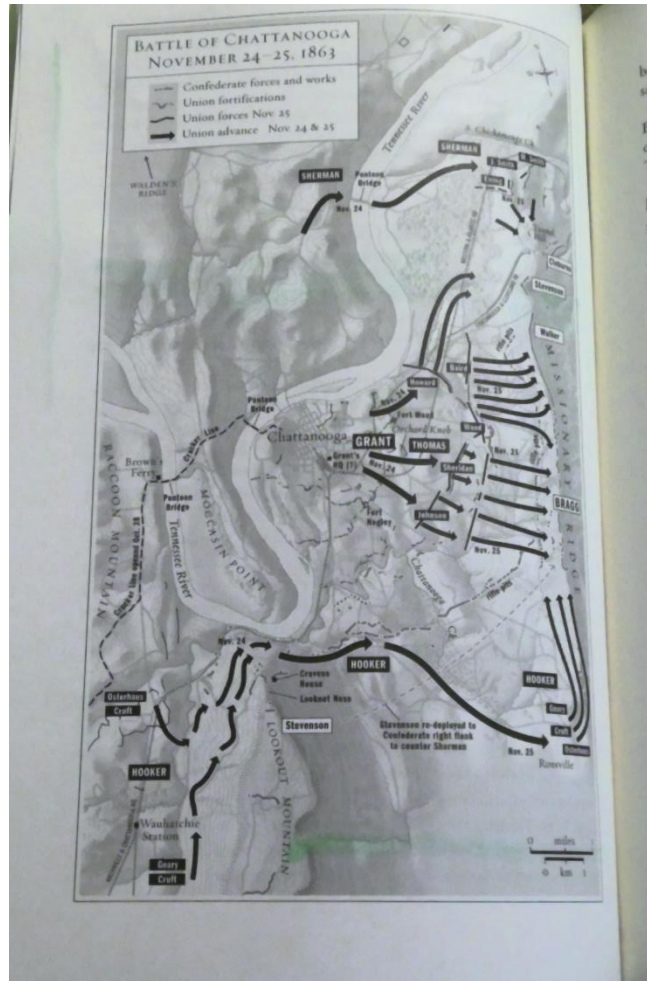
This charge was completely improvised by the troops of the Army of the Cumberland, and their chants lead to the notion that they wished to get back at the Confederate forces for the blow that Chickamauga had dealt their pride. So unexpected was this charge, that Grant out right threatened that someone would pay if the unordered charge ended in a horrific lost for the Union.⁴⁹ (Bowers, 228) Grant even stated that poetry was a good description for the storming of Lookout Mountain, but the only word he could think of for the charge of Missionary Ridge was improvisation.⁵⁰ (Bowers 228) Further, Charles Dana, there in the interest of a high governmental position, wrote an eyewitness account of the incredible event known as the Battle of Missionary Ridge.⁵¹ (White, 311) "The storming of the Ridge by our troops was one of the greatest miracles in Military history."⁵² (White, 311) Describing an event that actually served as the inspiration for infamous second world war General Douglas MacArthur, more than seventy years after his father, Arthur MacArthur Jr., won the Medal of Honor for bringing the same American flag to the top of Missionary Ridge that three other color bearers had been killed while carrying it up.⁵³ (Ward, 213)

While the charge up Missionary Ridge was an amazing victory, it also led to some ridiculous circumstances, due to both adrenaline and regained pride. In a bizarre act of joy at victory, Phil Sheridan mounted a cannon and mimicked a cowboy breaking a horse.⁵⁴ (Bowers, 232) Fortunately for him, either the cannon he mounted had cooled down since the original bombardment from the Confederate line, or his pants were extremely thick, one of the two.⁵⁵ (Bowers, 232) Because while Sheridan walked away just fine, Colonel Charles G. Harker, whom had copied his commander in celebration, gave a shriek of pain instead of exultation.⁵⁶ (Bowers, 232) Said colonel could not ride a horse for at least two weeks following the charge up Missionary Ridge, becoming a casualty of war due to nearly burning the hide off his behind!⁵⁷ (Bowers, 232) Brings to mind the effects that adrenaline can have on a person's common sense, as if he had been thinking clearly, he probably would have made sure that the cannon was cool first, before jumping on it.

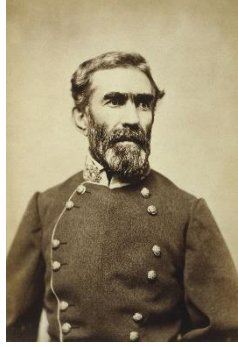
Thus, considering all the aspects noted amidst this historical analysis on cause and effect pertaining to the aforementioned event during the American Civil War. Firstly, the decisions of the head of state as to whom would command the army, in the case of this topic, it would be President Abraham Lincoln and his support of General Ulysses S. Grant.⁵⁸ (Archer, 68-69) Secondly, would be the conditions upon the battlefield, as well as all the elements relating to the chosen strategy. Thirdly, and finally, would be the most important aspect of this analysis, the thoughts, and feelings of the troops, in this case the Army of the Cumberland. While all of these attributes certainly play a part in the incredible spectacle known as the Battle of Missionary Ridge, the latter had the most effect, as pride can overrule thought. Therefore, the ill feelings

and dented pride due to the horrendous Union defeat at Chickamauga was the cause, and the improvised charge up the Confederate held Missionary Ridge was the effect.

Index



1. Battle of Chattanooga map



2

2. Confederate General Braxton Bragg

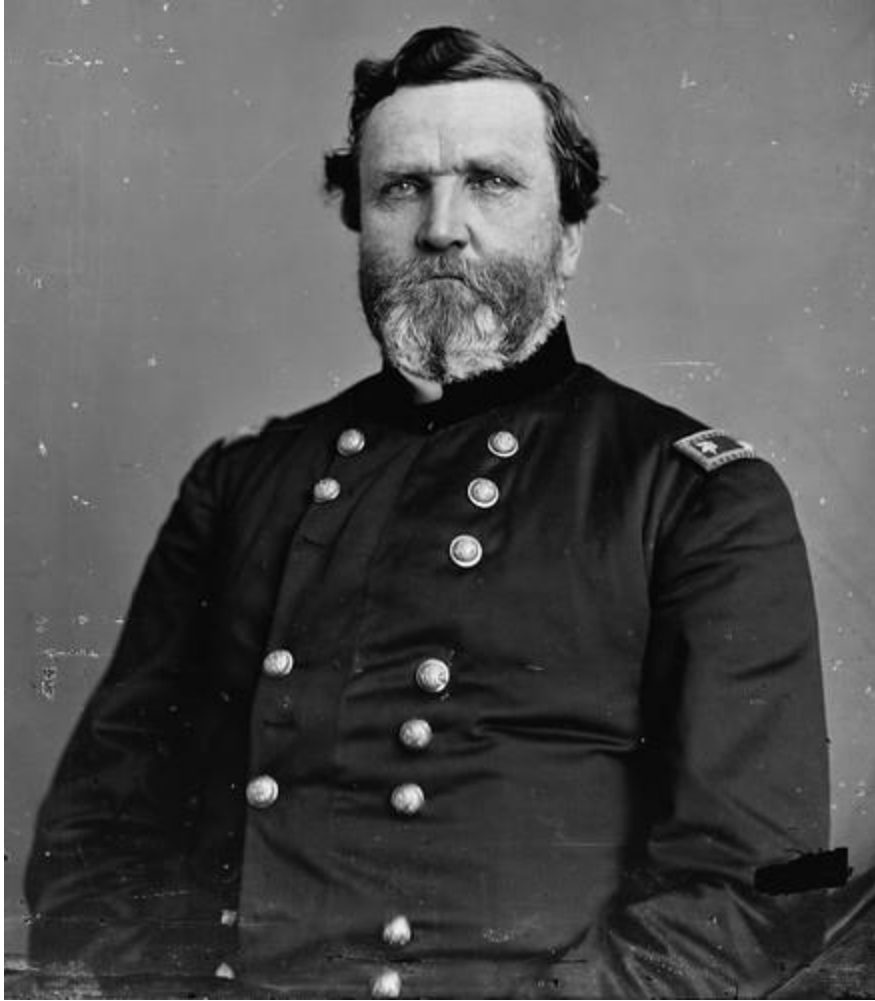


3

3. Union General William Rosecrans



4. Union General Ulysses S. Grant



5. Union General George Thomas

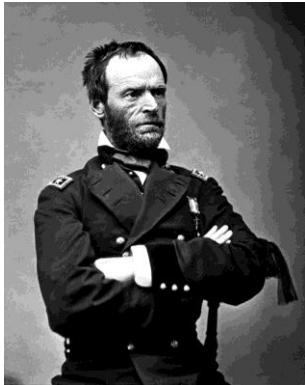


6

6. Union General Phil Sheridan



7. Union General Joseph "Fighting Joe" Hooker



8. Union General William T. Sherman



9. The Battle of Missionary Ridge

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² Archer, 65-66

³ Thomas Turner, *101 Things You Didn't Know About the Civil War*, (Avon: Adams Media, 2007),103

⁴ Jerry Korn, *The Fight for Chattanooga: Chickamauga to Missionary Ridge*, (Alexandria: Time-Life Books, 1992), 2

⁵ Korn, 62

⁶ Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, *The Civil War Battle Series: Chickamauga and Chattanooga*, (September 24, 2015: [The Civil War Battle Series: Chickamauga and Chattanooga - YouTube](#)), October 30, 2019

⁷ Korn, 62

⁸ Korn, 50

⁹ Aaron Sheehan-Dean, *A Companion to the Civil War: Volume I*, (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 413

¹⁰ Sheehan-Dean, 417

¹¹ Sheehan-Dean, 416

¹² Sheehan-Dean, 416-17

¹³ John Bowers, *Chickamauga and Chattanooga: The Battles That Doomed the Confederacy*, (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 1994), 117

¹⁴ Bowers, 115

¹⁵ Bowers, 115-16

¹⁶ Bowers, 116

¹⁷ Turner, 106

¹⁸ Bowers, 117

¹⁹ Bowers, 116

²⁰ Bowers, 116

²¹ Sheehan-Dean, 416-17

²² Korn, 61-62

²³ Korn, 62

²⁴ Korn, 62

²⁵ Bowers, 134

²⁶ Korn, 62

²⁷ John Mack Faragher, Mari Jo Buhle, Daniel Czitrom, Susan H. Armitage, *Out if Many: A History of the American People Volume I 6ed.*, (Upper Saddle River: Pearson, 2009), 425

²⁸ Faragher, 425

²⁹ Webb Garrison Jr., *Strange Battles of the Civil War*, (Nashville: Cumberland House, 2001), 142

³⁰ Garrison, 142

³¹ Turner, 103

³² Bowers, 134-135

³³ Albert Castel, *Victors in Blue: How the Union Generals Fought the Confederates, Battled Each Other, and Won the Civil War*, (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2011), 235

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- ³⁴ Ronald C. White, *American Ulysses: A Life of Ulysses S. Grant*, (New York: Random House, 2016), 307
- ³⁵ White, 308
- ³⁶ Gary W. Gallagher, *The American Civil War: Lectures 25-48*, (Chantilly: The Great Courses, 2000), 15
- ³⁷ White, 307
- ³⁸ White, 307
- ³⁹ White, 307
- ⁴⁰ White, 309
- ⁴¹ White, 309
- ⁴² White, 309
- ⁴³ White, 309
- ⁴⁴ Gallagher, 14
- ⁴⁵ White, 310
- ⁴⁶ Gallagher, 14-15
- ⁴⁷ Geoffrey Ward, *The Civil War*, (New York: Vintage Civil War Library, 1990), 212-213
- ⁴⁸ Ward, 212-213
- ⁴⁹ Bowers, 228
- ⁵⁰ Bowers, 228
- ⁵¹ White, 311
- ⁵² White, 311
- ⁵³ Ward, 213
- ⁵⁴ Bowers, 232
- ⁵⁵ Bowers, 232
- ⁵⁶ Bowers, 232
- ⁵⁷ Bowers, 232
- ⁵⁸ Archer, 68-69