

## THE AMERICAN CAVALRY TRADITION

Leslie J. Rodman

In 1860, the great military nations of the world were in Europe. The United States had only a minimal force under arms and only a limited military tradition, having fought one war against an indifferent colonial enemy in 1812, and another against an inferior Mexican army in 1846. In both cases the Americans had gained little in terms of experience or tradition in the art of waging war.

On December 31, the Regular Army of the United States had paper strength of approximately 18,093 officers and men, but in reality, the strength was probably closer to 16,367. As it existed, the army was organized into 198 companies, 183 of which were stationed at 79 posts on the frontier, and an additional 15 manned 23 arsenals and guarded the Atlantic Coastline and the Canadian border.

The commander of this force was Lt. General Winfield Scott, a 74-year-old hero of the Mexican War, who was in declining health and at the outbreak of the Civil War was so fat he was unable to mount a horse. Although he got the “*Anaconda Plan*” right, Scott was anything but a contemporary thinker, completely impervious to change in any form.<sup>1</sup>

In 1860 Scott’s command consisted of five regiments of mounted troops. These regiments were the First and Second Dragoons which had been organized in 1833 and 1837 respectively; the Regiment of Mounted Riflemen which had

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<sup>1</sup> Starr, Stephen A. The Union Cavalry in the Civil War, Volume 1 From Fort Sumter to Gettysburg, (Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge LA, 1979, pg. 48)

been organized in 1846 and the First and Second United States Cavalry, organized by Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, in 1855.

Much of this situation could be attributed to American attitudes of ambivalence about military matters in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In fact, the Republic had been set up that way. At its founding there existed an attitude that the American Revolution had successfully thrown off the yoke of one tyrant, and every effort was being made to ensure that another was not created. In the minds of the founding fathers, a concentration of power posed the greatest opportunity for abuse.

By separating and diffusing the powers of government, the founders were making a statement about concentrated power, especially in the executive branch of the government, believing it posed the greatest threat to the sovereignty of a free people. To at least some extent, the critical attitudes towards a standing army in terms of it posing a danger to the institutions of democracy was only part of the problem. Many believed such a policy was wasteful; a belief which dated back to a strong "*minuteman tradition*" of the revolutionary years, and the stated belief of George Washington that a standing militia was a "*destructive, expensive, and disorderly mob.*"

In 1860, the American military establishment had been reduced not only in size, but also in influence by civilian disinterest and a lack of congressional appropriation. Furthermore, within this institution of diminutive stature the mounted branch of the service was treated as a stepchild. Not only did a number of prominent Americans question the need for a strong military presence the

cavalry service was likewise being taken to task due to its cost. It had taken an appropriation of \$300,000 in 1833 to recruit, equip, and maintain the First and Second Dragoons, and few, if any members of Congress wanted to replicate such an appropriation for a service for which many believed there was no obvious need. After all, an engineering regiment made perfect sense because one could point to something it had constructed as part of any number of pork barrel projects near and dear to the hearts of congressmen. The need for artillery was obvious as one could easily see the batteries protecting the coastlines and borders. A limited number of infantry regiments could be tolerated in peacetime because they were relatively inexpensive to maintain. It would not be until the Indians on the frontier began to interfere in the economic expansion into the west, as well as the pet projects of several influential congressmen that the need of a mounted force became obvious enough to merit attention.<sup>2</sup>

When the time came to get serious about the military in general and the cavalry specifically, the United States looked to Europe for the solution. The modern tradition of European cavalry initially came of age during the Thirty Years' War, but made substantial advancements during the age of Napoleon. Napoleon had created a nearly invincible reputation using regiments known as chasseurs, which were smaller men on fast horses capable of rapid movement to protect the flanks of his main army, as well as provide intelligence on enemy troop movements. As a compliment to his chasseurs Napoleon used other mounted regiments of larger men on larger more powerful horses known as cuirassiers who literally could sweep away anything in the path of his advancing

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<sup>2</sup> Starr, Union Cavalry in the Civil War (pg. 49)

army. Napoleon was a firm believer of the advantage of interior lines and concentration of forces, and in keeping with these principles, had organized his regiments of cuirassiers into brigades and divisions, and eventually into corps.

These forces were extremely effective when used to attack an enemy infantry column weakened by an artillery barrage. To execute such a movement, Napoleon would often mass as many as 12,000 horsemen, including his chasseurs and cuirassiers, supplemented by as many as twenty-one regiments of dragoons, containing light as well as heavy cavalry capable of delivering the shock tactics of cuirassiers when needed. These men were not mounted infantry who merely rode horses to the scene of battle then fought on foot; however, when the situation demanded, this force was completely capable of repelling an infantry ground attack dismounted.<sup>3</sup>

Although cavalry (dragoon) regiments had existed in the United States Army since 1833, they possessed little formal organization, as each company commander was free to adopt his own methods of tactics and training, based upon his own desires and his level of competence. Finally, in 1839, Philip Kearny, and two of his colleagues were sent to France to enroll at the Royal School of Cavalry at Saumur. Upon their return in the fall of 1840 they authored a "*System of Cavalry Tactics*" or the "*Tactics of 1841*" which for the most part was a translation of the French Cavalry Manual, and became the bible for all United States Mounted Troops for the next twenty years.

After the Mexican War Jefferson Davis sent an American delegation to Europe to observe the application of cavalry techniques of the Russians and

Austrians during the war in the Crimea, considered in that day to be the world's most advanced and professional of all mounted forces. The youngest member of this delegation was George McClellan, at that time, a rising star in the American army. To be such a young officer serving on such a prestigious delegation was testimony to McClellan's standing in the military hierarchy. Returning from his European visit McClellan introduced several new innovations into the American army, e.g., the lightweight cavalry saddle, the pup tent, and the shorter and lighter cavalry saber. In addition, McClellan was credited with the experimental use during the Civil War of the tactics of the Russian Cossacks, utilizing groups of Commanche Indians under the command of the First Texas Cavalry.<sup>4</sup>

When the First and Second United States Cavalry were created in 1855, some of the best officers in the army eagerly sought assignment to the two regiments. Among these names was a young second lieutenant named J.E.B. Stuart. Of those seeking assignment to the cavalry, five would later become full generals in the Confederate army and two would become prominent Union commanders.<sup>5</sup> Competition for this assignment was intense, and when the list of selected officers was released, Stuart's name was included.

Upon being assigned to the First United States Cavalry, Stuart's rank was upgraded from brevet to permanent second lieutenant, and he was sent to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas where he would serve under Colonel Edwin Sumner who commanded the Second United States Cavalry. Upon his arrival at Fort Leavenworth Sumner immediately assigned Stuart to quartermaster duties.

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<sup>3</sup> Starr, Union Cavalry in the Civil War (pg. 52)

<sup>4</sup> Starr, Union Cavalry in the Civil War (pg. 51)

During his post at Fort Leavenworth Stuart met and married Flora Cooke, the daughter of Colonel St. George Cooke, commander of the Second United States Dragoons. It was during his time at Fort Leavenworth that that Stuart began the maturation process into that of a cavalry officer, possibly by the time of the Civil War, the best cavalry officer in either army. It was during this time that Stuart would get his first glimpse of John Brown in Kansas, be shot by a Cheyenne warrior in northwest Kansas, and given his first command, Company G, First United States Cavalry.<sup>6</sup>



While a bias against a standing army had existed in the North since colonial days, the culture of the South was much more accommodating. The agricultural economy supported by the presence of slave labor had long been the backdrop for slave rebellions and threats of slave rebellions, which had created an environment of paranoia among white southerners making a standing militia more acceptable and even necessary in many areas.

By the mid 1850s the old Slave Patrols of the colonial days had given way to the State Militias. Each time a slave rebellion or a threat of a rebellion came up militia enlistments increased, sometimes dramatically. For example, in Mississippi alone, the John Brown raid on Harpers Ferry in October 1859 was the direct cause of the raising of sixty-five new volunteer companies of militia between January 1860 and January 1861.<sup>7</sup> But to explain the militia tradition in the South as simply as an outgrowth of the slave labor system, would be

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<sup>5</sup> Starr, Union Cavalry in the Civil War (pg. 54)

<sup>6</sup> Thomas, Emory M., Bold Dragoon, (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, OK 1999 pgs. 45-47)

inaccurate. Membership in a militia company, especially a cavalry company, where one had the opportunity to wear bright gaudy uniforms and assume a “swashbuckling” cavalieristic persona was considered glamorous, and conferred a position of social status to the sons of many wealthy southern families.<sup>8</sup> Thus the militia tradition, and especially the cavalry tradition was always strong in the South carrying with it a purpose, while at the same time a high degree of social standing.

As a result, during any given time period prior to the war, southern militias most always outnumbered militias in the North on a proportional basis, and those in the South most always held a distinct advantage. They were generally manned by better horsemen, on better horses, and were simply more efficient. This is important in understanding why, with the exception of the artillery, the South had a head start in 1861, and was able to so effectively convert its militia system into an army. This was especially so in the case of the cavalry. While the North used its superior manpower and resource base to eventually catch up, the first two years of the war belonged to the South, which excelled militarily at the expense of poorly modestly trained armies and second rate commanders the Union was forced to place in the field.

Until 1860, the North and the South shared the same political and military institutions. Many of the leaders of both sides had attended the U.S. Military Academy and had learned from the same textbooks and knew each other well. In terms of deploying infantry, there were really no secrets in terms of military

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<sup>7</sup> Starr, Union Cavalry in the Civil War (pg. 210)

<sup>8</sup> Starr, Union Cavalry in the Civil War (pg. 57)

tactics or strategies. But the cavalry was different. From the very beginning, every southern boy had been raised to embrace the ideals of riding, shooting and telling the truth. It has been said “the best blood of the South rode in the cavalry.”<sup>9</sup> Not only did this most favorable opinion of southern cavalymen exist in the minds of southerners; it appears to have been shared by at least one important Union commander.

In September 1863, President Lincoln’s military adviser Gen. Henry W. Halleck wrote to Gen. William T. Sherman while in Mississippi asking his opinion as to what type government should be established to administer the territory which was at that time under Union occupation in lower Mississippi and Louisiana. Since he had spent much of his early life in the South, Sherman was familiar with, and understood the southern mind and culture, and his opinion was valued by the Lincoln administration.

Prior to giving his recommendations on administration of the occupied territory Sherman advised Halleck that it was essential to understand four basic classes into which southern society could be divided. The first of these classes was comprised of the large planters, who held a virtual monopoly on economic and political power in the South, and, in Sherman’s opinion, possibly could be allowed to retain that power once they clearly understood they had been defeated.

The second of these classes were those southerners that remained pro-Union for whom Sherman held little regard, while the third of these classes were the “small farmers,” mechanics, merchants, and laborers who comprised about

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<sup>9</sup> Starr, Union Cavalry in the Civil War, (pg. 211)

three-fourths of the white population in the South, and looked to the planter class for leadership. Finally, there was the class that Sherman termed the “young bloods.”

According to Sherman, these young bloods were the flaming youth of the Confederacy. They were the hard-riding, quick shooting young men, most of who were the sons of the planter class, and were followers of dynamic leaders like J.E.B. Stuart, and Nathan Bedford Forrest. This class of young Turks comprised a southern cavalry that Sherman much admired, as well as the heart of the rebellion he fought so ferociously to destroy. While other Union generals admired the horsemanship of these young men, Sherman was the first, and really only one to see them as a separate class of the southern social structure. He regarded them as “*dangerous subjects in every sense,*” believing that in order for the Union to be successful in its war effort, it would be absolutely necessary to eliminate this disruptive class.

In short, Sherman believed that if the Union expected to prevail in the war, this entire class of young southern cavalymen had to be killed. Sherman believed that this single class of young southern cavalymen had to be completely eliminated in order to break up forevermore the most effective military leadership the South could muster. Accordingly, if this class of southerners were not destroyed the rebellion would continue to re-ignite for generations to come. Quite a powerful insight and testimony as to how one of the more effective Union commanders viewed the Confederate cavalry’s ability to make war.



From an organizational standpoint, George McClellan was considered brilliant, but when it came to integrating cavalry regiments into his army, he had no clue. By contrast, Thomas Jackson recognized the advantage of a centralized cavalry command and almost immediately consolidated all of his cavalry forces in the Shenandoah Valley in 1861 under Stuart. This was a move later ratified by Joseph Johnston, which interestingly was a concept that was likewise embraced by John Pope who likewise did an excellent job integrating his cavalry effectively into his army.

Both Jackson and Johnston recognized Stuart's prior cavalry experience on the frontier, as well as the desirability of such a command structure notwithstanding that Stuart possessed an infantry commission.<sup>10</sup> This was a substantial difference in the basic organizational philosophy between the two armies. McClellan's system, or lack thereof, caused the cavalry regiments assigned to his army to be divided and attached to infantry divisions, only to be placed at the disposal of inexperienced commanders who further fragmented the units brigade level, or even lower.

Consequently, most of the cavalry in the Army of the Potomac prior to 1863 ended up serving as escorts and aides to infantry brigade and division commanders. McClellan's lack of vision in terms of how to use his cavalry set the Union cavalry service back and adversely effected the Army of the Potomac as a whole for the first three years of the war. <sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas, Bold Dragoon, (pg. 69)

<sup>11</sup> Starr, The Union Cavalry in the Civil War, (pgs. 236-37)



The prevailing culture in the South in the years between the colonial period and the outbreak of the Civil War nurtured a cavalry tradition, which easily adapted to the realities of the early years of the Civil War. By 1862 the understanding by the Confederacy of the kind of war it needed to fight brought on the organization of Partisan Rangers as an even more aggressive form of cavalry regiment. Unfortunate for the North, the cavalry tradition had to be learned. The recruitment of soldiers for the cavalry regiments who could not ride a horse, problems with supply, and commanders unskilled in what it took to be a cavalry officer placed the Union at a significant disadvantage for the first two years of the war. It took the superior manpower and resources of the capitalism of the North to ultimately prevail.

It was very true that while both the North and South shared the same basic culture and political system, they were at the same time two very different peoples sharing the same continent. Observing the evolution of the cavalry tradition is but only one way to compare the differences as they existed in 1860.

Starr, Stephen Z., *The Union Cavalry in the Civil War, Volume 1, From Fort Sumter to Gettysburg*, (Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA 1979)

Thomas, Emory M., *Bold Dragoon; The Life of J.E.B. Stuart*, (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, OK 1999)

