

## Into Tennessee and Failure: John Bell Hood

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## Review

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**Davis, Stephen.** *Into Tennessee and Failure: John Bell Hood*. Mercer University Press, 2020. HARDCOVER. \$35.00 ISBN 9780881467673 pp. 356.

Few Civil War campaigns resulted in as decisive a conclusion as the failed Confederate effort to invade and “liberate” the state of Tennessee in the fall of 1864. After the disastrous loss of Atlanta in the summer of that year, and with Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia bogged down in a stalemate in the east, much was at stake for the young and aggressive Lt. Gen. John Bell Hood and his hard-luck Army of Tennessee. Hood, the subject of Stephen Davis’s two-volume military biographical treatment (this is the second of these volumes), receives perhaps the most thorough and critical historical assessment in a generation. The result is an exhaustive, insightful, and often provocative work of military and historiographical analysis that should remain the foundation for future historians’ work for years to come.

Davis, who has written several books about the Atlanta Campaign, among others, has two main goals in the work: to analyze Hood’s generalship from the Battle of Jonesboro in September 1864 to his ultimate professional demise in December, and to assess the historiographical treatment of Hood and the campaign to date. Davis is less interested in exploring Hood’s role and relationship with the Lost Cause of the Confederacy, nor is he interested in delving deeply into the postbellum battles over Hood’s career and legacy. To his credit, Davis also does not allow venerable and persistent legends about Hood’s supposed abuse of laudanum, his alleged emotional imbalance, his physical infirmities and the like, to sidetrack his analysis either. And while the old popular image of a drug-addled or rage-driven Hood are sadly unlikely to die soon, thoughtful historians of the campaign have, for the most part, thankfully moved on from those discredited myths.

Davis is no Hood partisan, however, and the general’s flaws and misjudgments are on full display under his sharp analysis. Davis is unsparing in exposing Hood’s penchant for working

the levers of army politics, burnishing his own image, and shifting blame for failure to his subordinates. Neither of these characteristics are by any means unique to Hood, Davis finds, but they are nevertheless unflattering to see in the harsh light of analysis. Davis also unpacks several of Hood's biggest missteps, including delaying his invasion of Tennessee, his difficulties in coordinating the campaign with Beauregard, failing to execute his operational plans, and neglecting the detailed planning and logistical problems essential to an army's success. Davis's analysis of the Confederate failure at Spring Hill is just one bright spot among many in the work, and the author's evaluation of the evidence and historiography is an excellent example of his ability to marshal and deploy complex evidence in a persuasive and compelling way.

As Davis's narrative and analysis tracks Hood to Franklin, the Confederates' desperation becomes apparent even as their options narrow. Davis thoroughly examines what was perhaps Hood's most controversial decision, to launch a late afternoon assault on formidable Union defenses at Franklin. It was, as Davis concludes, a decision motivated by urgency and determination, not rage or impairment. And, in an interesting comparative approach, Davis analyzes both Hood's decision at Franklin and the resulting carnage alongside Robert E. Lee's decision to assault the Union line at Gettysburg in 1863. Davis finds that Hood acted no more recklessly than Lee and was in fact acting consistently with the Lee-Jackson culture of aggressiveness and risk-taking that had launched him into the stratosphere of high command in the first place.

Still reeling from the crushing experience at Franklin, Hood pressed on in an ill-conceived effort to coax the Union army out of Nashville and somehow reverse Confederate fortunes. The result was, of course, a resounding defeat and ignominious retreat from Tennessee. Davis explores what is known of Hood's thinking in this and other major decision points, a task made especially challenging given the highly partisan nature of postwar memoirs, letters, and public and private recriminations surrounding the Confederate failure.

Davis's portrait of Hood the man is, perhaps, incomplete; this work is, after all, more military narrative and analysis than biography. Yet the author's wide-ranging assessment of primary sources, secondary literature, and historiography represents the most detailed and rigorous portrait of Hood the general that we currently have. Not all will agree with Davis's every interpretation, but certainly any serious student of Hood and the 1864 Franklin-Nashville Campaign will need to reckon with Davis's outstanding work.

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