



THOMAS C. HINDMAN

By Jean-Claude Janssens

(Adapted into English by Gerald Hawkins)

If one had to compile a list of the most controversial Confederate generals, General Thomas Carmichael Hindman Junior would no doubt be in the top ten. Like many of his colleagues, he was assigned a territory to defend, but unlike Lee, Johnston, Bragg or Beauregard, he had no army. The task given to Hindman appeared overwhelming: he had to create, or rather re-create from scratch an army to protect one of the many Southern areas threatened by the Federals.

If he succeeded, it was glory ; if he failed, history would treat him unkindly, and his military if not political career would be ruined. The challenge was formidable, and the chances of success were thin. And yet, Thomas Hindman was determined to undertake this titanic mission against all odds.

In Confederate Arkansas of 1862, the second year of the war started under particularly unfavorable auspices. Together with Price's militias of Missouri, the forces of Arkansas had contributed, in 1861, to the victory of Wilson's Creek in Missouri. Some of the troops were then sent to the east (Confederate Army of the Potomac, later renamed of Northern Virginia), to Vicksburg, Kentucky and elsewhere. For the first time, the soldiers of Arkansas had experienced the bitter taste of defeat in Tennessee with the Army of Mississippi of Albert S. Johnston, first at Forts Henry and Donelson in February, then at Shiloh in April. This was only the beginning.

Even before the re-conquest of Missouri, their comrades of the Army of the West under Earl Van Dorn had also suffered defeat in their own State, at Pea Ridge. On March 27, Van Dorn received the order to withdraw the remainder of his army to Memphis, Tennessee. He took along with him all the men, supplies and military equipment available. On May 1st, 1862, the transfer was complete. Van Dorn had left Arkansas in a precarious military position, as there was no Confederate army to defend the State.

On April 11, during the transfer of his forces to Tennessee, Van Dorn, commander of the Trans-Mississippi District (part of the huge Confederate Department nr 21) since January 10, 1862, had put General John Roane in charge of the defense of Arkansas. He could not have made a worse choice. Roane lacked the nerve and proper state of mind to accomplish this mission. He was moreover reluctant to enforce the drastic Conscript Act recently voted and had informed his superior about his disapproving views on the matter.

The only available forces in the area were those of General Albert Pike in the Indian Territory (future Oklahoma) and, despite Van Dorn's firm order that he relocates his white troops (essentially Texan) to Arkansas, Pike had bluntly refused. In addition, the local politicians were barely helping the unfortunate Roane. Infuriated by the withdrawal of Van Dorn, governor Rector had gone as far as issuing on May 5, a proclamation encouraging the secession of Arkansas ... from the Confederacy ! His

militias were there to defend the State and not to be used for any other purposes. Less radical than their governor, the Arkansas deputies to the Confederate Convention asked for, as a minimum, the creation of an autonomous military department west of the Mississippi. To simplify matters, two military commanders shared power in Arkansas: Rector, the governor of the State and General Roane, head of the Confederate forces.

At the end of May, Roane had under his orders 1,500 partially armed cavalrymen, a few hundred unarmed infantrymen and an artillery battery of 6 field pieces served by 40 men. Facing him, the Federal army of the Southwest comprised 15,000 veterans commanded by General Curtis, the victor of Pea Ridge. In Curtis' mind, Arkansas was about to fall like a ripe fruit. His advance had begun in April and in no time the north of the State had been occupied by Union troops without a shot being fired.

Finally grasping the seriousness of the military situation, the Confederate government immediately ordered that General Van Dorn return to Arkansas as soon as practical, but ironically, the State representatives made it clear that they no longer wanted Van Dorn. To appease the local politicians and satisfy one of their long-awaited demands, the Davis administration created on May 26, 1862, the Trans-Mississippi Department (grouping an hypothetical Missouri, Arkansas void of troops, Texas, an undefined Arizona, and what remained of Louisiana west of the Big River). Under the recommendations of General Beauregard, this new department was to be headed by General Thomas Carmichael Hindman Jr, native of the area. Thus, if Richmond could not dispatch an army to Arkansas, it would at least send out a general.

But who was Hindman ?

He was born in 1828 in Knoxville, Tennessee, from a family of politicians. At first glance, his looks seemed incompatible with the job description. He was 5 feet one inch tall; his left leg was shorter than his right one, forcing him to wear a high-heeled boot. He however took care of his appearance and dressed smartly. He attended school in New Jersey and then studied law in Mississippi before becoming actively involved in State politics. After having supported Jeff Davis' campaign for Governor of Mississippi, he was elected to the State Legislature. Moving to Arkansas, he soon became the leader of the Democratic Party and was elected State deputy to Congress in 1858 and 1860. He was a leading voice in favor of secession and, not surprisingly, took an active part in the adherence of Arkansas to the Southern Confederation. He was no West Pointer, but this was unimportant since they were a rare breed in the West anyway. He was nevertheless familiar with the basics of the military profession. He had performed bravely during the war against Mexico (1846-1848) as second lieutenant of the 2nd Mississippi Regiment. The conflict to come would soon witness his remarkable promotions. At the beginning of the Civil War, he was colonel of the 2nd Arkansas Infantry Regiment. On September 28, 1861, he was commissioned Brigadier General in the Confederate army. On April 6 and 7, 1862, he commanded a division at Shiloh and a week later, he was promoted Major General.

On May 30, 1862, General Thomas Hindman joined his new post at Little Rock, capital of Arkansas, where he arrived, to everyone's amazement, ... wearing pink gloves. He would soon astonish much more ! His welcome was, to say the least, dismal. There was no army and that he knew better than anybody else. But he couldn't find any administration, justice department, government, archives, or any form of structure that made Arkansas resemble an organized State. There were no supplies for civilians or soldiers and the Confederate currency was only reluctantly accepted. To make matters worse, the populations of the mountainous regions of the northwest of the State owned

few or no slaves, so they were not particularly sympathetic to the Confederate cause. Finally, the Federal menace was not far away, a mere 35 miles from the capital city.

Taking advantage of the chaotic situation, the recruiting agents of the Union operated openly and successfully in Arkansas, without any opposition whatsoever. Only the numerous deserters, stragglers and other marauders of the defunct local Confederate army were well organized, armed to the teeth and benefited from total impunity. Times were going to change.

Immediately upon his arrival, Hindman announced that he had come to Arkansas to "*hunt the enemy or die.*" Quite a program ! His words were soon to be transformed into deeds. A determined man, Hindman lost no time in dealing with the various problems that he faced.

One of the firsts he tackled, by far the most important, was the dual military command system. Unlike the hesitant Roane, Hindman unscrupulously made use of the Conscription Act to put the Arkansas militias and military equipment at the service of the Confederacy. Even Governor Rector was forced to abide the law. Having pushed his two rivals aside, General Thomas Hindman became, as expected, the new undisputed military commander.

Sole master on board, Hindman reorganized the armed forces of his district in two entities: the regular army destined to fight orderly battles (in spite of praiseworthy efforts, his efficiency in this field would always leave to be desired !) and the Partisan Rangers who could now be recruited legally since March 1862. These were irregulars armed and equipped at their own expenses, whose mission consisted in harassing the enemy and disrupting its supply system and lines of communications. Their immediate availability at little expense led to early successes that allowed more time to be committed to the training of the main army.

Hindman was blamed for having encouraged the recruitment of these hordes of men, most of who were scoundrels and lawless bushwhackers ruthlessly fighting a private war exclusively for profit. Their leaders received an officer's commission signed by or in the name of General Hindman. Among the most famous were William Clarke Quantrill and the James brothers, Frank and Jesse, who would pursue notorious careers after the war. But the end justifies the means, says the maxim, and Hindman understood this perfectly.

To recruit his army, he had received from Beauregard the order to proceed strictly in compliance with the Conscription Act. This law had however its drawbacks and limitations : it didn't foresee the creation of new regiments, only the beefing up of existing units to their full strength. Besides, numerous exemptions reduced its real impact. The use of substitutes was allowed and became widespread practice. Refusing to waste time with details of legislative order or wait for a waiver from Richmond, which would have been detrimental to the defense of the State, Hindman took it upon himself to go beyond the orders and the law, all the more since there were no existing regiments in Arkansas; they had to be created from scratch.

Particularly zealous, Hindman innovated from top to bottom. He began by restricting the too numerous exemptions and then declared the provision of substitutes illegal. It was with an evil eye that the State officials and influential politicians in Richmond watched their sons enrolled in the army. In Arkansas as elsewhere, one preferred to use the poor to fight the rich man's war. Professionals living from substitution suddenly saw their source of revenue nibbled. When the local and Confederate authorities were suddenly subject to martial law without the government's approval, the wealthy citizens started conspiring against Hindman. Few generals had

dared go so far. General Kirby Smith, future commander of the Department, was probably the only one unaffected by the Richmond bureaucrats. But that was in July 1863. By then Vicksburg had fallen and the Department was completely isolated from the rest of the country.

Now Hindman hit harder than ever. The population was deeply shocked, but law or no law, Hindman was invested of a mission that he would successfully fulfill to the bitter end, and the end would justify the means. As a first-class administrator, he divided the territory in recruiting districts that were headed by his trusted officers. In the past, volunteers had eagerly stepped forward, but as much in Arkansas as in the rest of the Confederacy, enthusiasm for the war had seriously dwindled by the summer of 1862. Volunteers no longer rushed to the recruitment bureaus. Those who did not willingly enlist were hunted down by the provost marshals and jailed. Firing squads were equally busy executing numerous deserters. The male population resented so much harshness. Many in the conscription age bracket ran away to neighboring Missouri, out of reach of Hindman's henchmen. Others preferred to join the ranks of the Union Army rather than to serve under the orders of this brutal and hated tyrant. Oddly enough, the cavalry found an excellent recruiting source among the Confederate sympathizers in Missouri. The presence in their ranks of the popular and competent General Joseph Shelby definitely constituted a first-class asset.

Thanks to the tough methods, the forces increased. Finally, thousands of draftees were gathered and sent under good escort to the instruction centers of Little Rock and Pine Bluff. To train and motivate this herd of recruits, Hindman was in need of a core of organized troops that could only be found outside the State. He had them come from everywhere, but mainly from Texas. Beauregard also needed Texan troops in the area of Tupelo, Mississippi, but Hindman didn't care. He diverted for his exclusive use five regiments intended for the army of Mississippi. The Indian Territory was also put to contribution. Regrettably, General Pike refused to obey Hindman just as Van Dorn had done before. In response, Hindman accused Pike of insubordination. Under such pressure, the latter finally resigned. Once the Pike problem out of the way, the troops and artillery previously under his orders made headway toward Arkansas.

One of the important achievements of Hindman was the reorganization of the cavalry. This department, as most others, was all but properly structured. The many regiments, battalions and other companies were attached to infantry brigades or functioned as independent units in the most uncoordinated way. The cavalry was insufficiently manned to effectively support the infantry when needed and lacked essential striking force. Once remodeled by Hindman, now commander of the District of Arkansas (July to December 1862), things were different. The cavalry would comprise large units. The most important one was a division of two brigades, one recruited in Texas (later replaced by a brigade from Arkansas) and the other in Missouri, commanded by the very competent Jo Shelby. The division was put under the orders of another eminent officer from Missouri, and moreover a West-Pointer, General John S. Marmaduke. To this were added five other brigades commanded by experienced leaders: three from Texas, one from Missouri and one from Arkansas.

After having completed the "tour de force" of recruiting the necessary manpower, the dogged Hindman tackled the problem of logistics. Proceeding in the same way as his system of conscription, he also divided the territory in logistical districts. Appointed officials were to report on the inventory of the agricultural, mineral and industrial resources of their sector. They had the power to acquire - or more frequently to requisition - all commodities and equipment useful to the army. General

Hindman also established factories in Arkadelphia, Arkansas, where military goods, mainly ammunition and light weapons were manufactured. The blacksmiths of the State were moreover requisitioned to repair the artillery pieces that had been abandoned earlier in the war. In addition, in accordance with the decisions of the Convention of March 17, 1862, Hindman ordered the destruction of the stocks of military or naval equipment, tobacco, cotton and miscellaneous goods susceptible to fall in enemy hands, as well as the blockading of all State rivers to prevent an attack from Union gunboats. Those who didn't respect these orders were considered traitors, with the consequences that one can imagine. This considerable destruction combined with the continuous guerrilla warfare waged on the border was most efficient because it literally starved Curtis' Federal army and forced him to postpone his project of invasion.

By mid-1862, the numbers were impressive. Arkansas had grudgingly provided 15 infantry regiments, 4 batteries of artillery and 5.000 irregulars. From Texas came 25 regiments and 3 additional batteries. On paper, Hindman could boast quantity, but quality was another matter: 18.000 men were fully equipped while 7.000 others were armed with pikes and a variety of obsolete weapons. Hindman had filled the crucial part of his mission, the building of an army from scratch. To lead this army to victory was something else. This proved virtually impossible, and a brief overview of his troop's performance reveals that Hindman failed on the battlefields.

On July 7, 1862, a detachment of 5.000 raw recruits was cut to pieces by the retreating veterans of Curtis at Hill's Plantation (Clarendon). This debacle can somewhat be mitigated by the fact that the Confederates were armed with pikes or squirrel rifles, and poorly commanded by Albert Rust, a politician promoted general. The Rust detachment completely disintegrated. On September 30, in Newtonia, Missouri, the cavalry (mainly the Indians of Cooper's and Shelby's brigade), for once properly grouped, had to finally abandon the ground after an undecided fight. Marmaduke's cavalry met the same fate at Duck Hill, Arkansas, on November 28, when it was pushed back to Van Buren by General Blunt and his Kansas forces. Hindman himself attempted to re-conquer Missouri. He was severely defeated by Generals J. Blunt and F. Herren at Prairie Grove, Arkansas, on December 7, 1862.

In the meantime, the civil authorities of Arkansas - or what was left of them - were receiving complaint after complaint and governor Rector was passing them along to Richmond. Even so Hindman had duly fulfilled his mission - he created an army and prevented the invasion of the State - he nevertheless committed a critical mistake : he had contravened the law and abused of its powers. This, the politicians could not openly accept nor forgive, and Hindman had to pay the price. What they omitted to mention is that if Hindman had been forced to go beyond the law, it was because they had done very little or nothing to enforce it. Failing to grasp the complexity and the very special nature of the situation in Arkansas, the Confederate administration ousted what was probably their best hope.

After 60 days of exhausting work, General Hindman was replaced at the head of the Department by the senile General Theophilus Holmes who was only too happy to rely on his predecessor's advice. Maintaining his rank, Hindman was appointed commander of the Arkansas District and then of the First Corps of the Army of the Trans-Mississippi Department. After the disaster of Prairie Grove, Hindman requested a transfer to the Army of Tennessee where he led a division of Polk's corps. He soon became a scapegoat for General Bragg's failings and once more fell out of favor of Richmond's political clique. A severe eye wound received during the fighting around

Atlanta, Georgia (August-September 1864) put a definite end to his military career. Hindman then moved with his family to Texas. Refusing to accept Lee's surrender at Appomatox, he crossed the border into Mexico where he worked as a coffee grower until mid-1866. Returning to Texas, he applied for a pardon from President Johnson, which was refused. Instead, he was indicted for treason and arrested.

Hindman finally returned to Arkansas in 1867 and settled in Helena where he dove back into politics, working for Reconstruction and promoting the Democratic Party among blacks and whites. On 28 September 1868, he was mortally wounded by a shot in the face, while sitting on the porch of his home. Some speculated that he was assassinated by one of his former soldiers in revenge for some act of harsh discipline during the war, but the murderer was never found, nor the crime solved.

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Some of the generals who exiled to Mexico rather than surrender. Standing, Major General John B. Magruder and Brigadier General William P. Hardeman. Sitting from left to right, Major Generals Cadmus Wilcox, Sterling Price and Thomas C. Hindman. (National Archives)