

### Failure in the Saddle: Nathan Bedford Forrest, Joseph Wheeler, and the Confederate Cavalry in the Chickamauga Campaign.

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## Review

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**Powell, David A.** *Failure in the Saddle: Nathan Bedford Forrest, Joseph Wheeler, and the Confederate Cavalry in the Chickamauga Campaign..* \$34.95  
ISBN 978-1-932714-87-6

### A Study of Confederate Cavalry

Historian David A. Powell argues that cavalry operations in the Western Theater of the Civil War have not been studied as well as they deserve, and he sets out to prove his point by writing a thorough examination of the Confederate cavalry in the Chickamauga campaign. General Braxton Bragg's Army of Tennessee had a larger mounted contingent for this campaign, which played out among the imposing mountains around Chattanooga during August and September, 1863, than for any other time period in the history of that army. And yet, as amply demonstrated by Powell, the gray-coated horsemen failed in many ways to serve the needs of the major Rebel army in the West, contributing greatly to Bragg's failure to save Chattanooga despite a smashing defeat of Major General William S. Rosecrans' Army of the Cumberland on the field of Chickamauga.

It is an interesting thesis. Powell argues that "miscues, mistakes, and outright refusals to follow orders hamstrung the Rebels," contributed to Rosecrans' ability to flank Bragg out of Chattanooga, and hampered Bragg's ability to take the offensive against his foe in the days preceding the bloody engagement at Chickamauga (xiii). These failures rested on the shoulders of Bragg's two cavalry commanders, Brigadier General Nathan Bedford Forrest and Major General Joseph Wheeler. These two men commanded a combined mounted force of some 16,000 troopers, outnumbering Rosecrans' available cavalry force. Powell also assesses the accomplishments and errors of subordinate Confederate cavalymen, but this is primarily a command and control study from the top down. He focuses most of his attention on Bragg, Forrest, and Wheeler. Powell's conclusion is that Bragg, who has received loads

of criticism from historians for the loss of Chattanooga and for failing to reap any real benefits from the costly victory at Chickamauga, does not deserve all of that blame. He further argues, and amply proves his point by reference to the *Official Records* and other primary sources, that both Forrest and Wheeler deserve a great deal more blame for these failures than they have ever received.

As Powell rightfully acknowledges, blaming Forrest for failure is a risky move within the context of the historiography. The subject of about a dozen major studies over the decades, Forrest is worshipped by many southern partisans as something slightly less than a martial god. In this area, more than in any other, Powell's book takes a much-needed departure from the prevailing literature and offers us a balanced, reasonable, and accurate assessment of Forrest as a military commander. Powell sees Forrest as primarily a raider who excelled at independent operations behind enemy lines, a man unsuited and ill-experienced to take on the role of a corps commander whose primary responsibility was to orient his operations around the needs of a large infantry force. As a result, Forrest's role in the Chickamauga campaign was mixed. He did some things well, but failed at many others through lack of experience at those roles and through his impatience with his assignment. While Bragg began the campaign with a high opinion of Forrest, by the end of it he was more than ready to authorize his assignment elsewhere.

Powell is even more critical of Joseph Wheeler, in part because it is difficult to figure out why the general was so reluctant to obey Bragg's orders during the campaign. Wheeler consistently ignored or only partially responded to Bragg's instructions about vigorous reconnaissance, arguing that his true role lay in protecting vital supply lines. When he did send in intelligence reports, they often were inaccurate or unhelpful. Yet, when it came time to re-organize his cavalry arm after the campaign, Bragg kept Wheeler and enlarged his responsibilities. While Powell is somewhat at a loss to explain this, ascribing it to Bragg's loyalty to Wheeler, a better explanation lies in Wheeler's performance during the Stones River campaign where the cavalry leader performed magnificently in supporting Bragg's defensive strategy near Murfreesboro. It is even possible that Wheeler's petulance during the Chickamauga campaign may have stemmed from suppressed anger over Bragg's favoring of Forrest. At any rate, Wheeler had already proven his ability to conduct mounted operations in support of a larger infantry force, and would later continue to do so during the Atlanta campaign, which is exactly what Bragg needed.

Wheeler has been a controversial figure in Civil War historiography, and whipping him once again will create only limited notice. But Powell may well be the first historian to offer a thorough and accurate critique of Forrest as a general. While he does not exonerate Bragg, Powell also offers a much-needed, balanced view of his generalship.

In short, there is everything to praise in this book. In addition to the sound research and welcome analysis, the fifteen maps are excellent. Powell includes mini-biographies of all the major players in Bragg's cavalry command and offers astute analysis of the nature of his mounted force before the campaign began, highlighting the problems of organization and the limitations among division and brigade commanders. His driving tour of cavalry sites associated with the Chickamauga campaign is superb, and his epilogue discussing how other historians have evaluated Bragg, Forrest, and Wheeler in the campaign is also very interesting.

My criticisms of the book are minor and few. Powell often mixes present tense with past tense, writing his mini-biographies and map captions in the former while the major text of the book is mostly in past tense. I say mostly because he sometimes slips from one tense to the other within the same paragraph. There also are more grammatical and typographical errors than there ought to be, all of which indicates that copyediting may have been slack on this project. But these small quibbles are more than balanced out by the consistently high standards imparted their books by the team of Savas and Beatie. This is a handsome product with strong binding and good paper.

Powell's book deserves wide consideration as a new look at topics encrusted with old ideas. I hope it will spark interest in similar studies of other western campaigns so that this somewhat neglected theater of operations will catch up with the Virginia theater, where historians such as Eric J. Wittenberg have been producing important studies of cavalry operations for some time now. Students of the Western Theater need a fresh look at the role played by both the Union and Confederate mounted arm in this sprawling, geographically diverse region of the Civil War.

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