THE ROCK OF CHICKAMAUGA

(George Henry Thomas, Major General, United States Army)

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When this paper was read before the Sphex Club of Lynchburg, January 16, 1964, the following prefatory remarks were made extemporaneously:

I offer this paper with some hesitation. In the first place, it violates every rule of unity and coherence that I learned in classroom or that I afterwards tried to teach in classroom.

In the second place, it skirts, if it does not actually impinge upon, the field covered by Mr. (Richard P.) Gifford in his excellent paper two weeks ago tonight. When I heard Mr. Gifford's paper, I had already blocked out this paper and had written it in part, and, after some consideration, I decided to go ahead with my original plan for the paper.

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The armed conflict which raged in our country from 1861 to 1865 is often referred to as a fratricidal war. The appellation is a just one. Not only was our country divided against itself but the division reached down into family life until brother actually fought in battle against brother. General Jeb Stuart's 23-year old Assistant Adjutant General, Major Henry McClellan, was a first cousin of the Federal General George Brinton McClellan, and had four brothers who fought in the Federal Armies, one of them being Assistant Adjutant General to General George Gordon Meade. And George Gordon Meade's wife was a sister of the wife of Governor Wise of Virginia, and I have been told that General Meade had a brother, the rector of an Episcopal Church in Charlestown, W. Va., who was in sympathy with what has since come to be called the Lost Cause. Those must have been heart-rending times, and times of much soul searching on the part of men who, like Robert E. Lee, had to decide between loyalty to the Union and loyalty to their State.

At times, however, there were lighter aspects of this tragic division. General Jeb Stuart's father-in-law, General Philip St. George Cooke, remained with the Federal Army and in 1862 commanded some Union Cavalry near Richmond. His son, John R. Cooke, had, of course, grown up in the atmosphere of the old regular army but, refusing an army career for himself, he had been graduated from Harvard. In 1861 he came South to volunteer for service in the Confederate Army and soon reached the grade of brigadier general. In June 1862 he was on duty near Richmond. His men told a story on him that, when he learned that his father was in command of an outfit not far from him at Seven Pines, he said, "All right; let's go down and stir up papa."

lad's thanks rather curtly; he is reported to have said: "No cadet from my district has ever graduated at the Military Academy. If you do not, I never want to see your face again." He entered the Academy July 1, 1836, and four years later was graduated 12th in a class of forty-five. One of his classmates was a lad by the name of William Tecumseh Sherman. Another bore the name of Richard Stoddert Ewell. As a second lieutenant he saw service in Florida against the Indians, then in Charleston, S. C., and a little later at Fort McHenry. He was on recruiting duty in New York City when our Mexican troubles came to a head.

In the Mexican War, Thomas served as an artillery officer, - served with such effectiveness and distinction that at Buena Vista he received his third brevet of the conflict, thus becoming a brevet major. Shortly after the war he paid a visit to his home county and there, on July 19, 1847, at Jerusalem Court House, his fellow citizens presented him with a handsome sword, suitably engraved with the names of the victories in which he had recently participated.

After the Mexican War, Thomas received several minor assignments and then, from 1851 to 1854, he was an instuctor at West Point; while there he was promoted to the permanent grade of captain. Soon thereafter he was sent to California, where the 2nd Cavalry Regiment (afterwards the 5th) was being formed. This regiment boasted an officer roster that was destined to become famous: The commanding officer was Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston; the second in command was Lieutenant Colonel Rbert Edward Lee; the majors commanding the two squadrons were William J. Hardee and George H. Thomas. These four men were all born south of the Mason-Dixon Line and, since Jefferson Davis was then Secretary of War, some have speculated that Davis deliberately chose these men in the hope that they might swing the whole regiment to the South when the country should find itself involved in the strife which Davis felt was inevitable.

The regiment was on duty in Texas in 1860 when Thomas asked for and received a leave of absence from the Army for twelve months. He started for New York to join his wife. Shortly before reaching Lynchburg on the Virginia

later he was promoted lieutenant colonel and in May was made a full colonel. He was placed in command of a brigade in the Shenandoah Valley, being made a brigadier general in August. Since he was in the Valley, he escaped the debacle at First Bull Run. A little later he was sent to Kentucky to assist with the raising of new troops and in November '61 he was placed in command of the first division of the Army of the Ohio. All his subsequent service in the War was in the western theatre.

When Thomas found that three of the four senior officers of the regiment had resigned from the United States Army in order to offer their services to the newly formed Confederacy, He must have been faced with the most difficult decision of his life. Little is known of the thoughts which led him to remain with the Union Army. He was not a communicative man; it was not easy for him to share his intimate thoughts with others. Perhaps a letter written by his widow fourteen years after her husband's death (1884) shows best how completely the decision was Thomas' own: Writing to a friend on November 9, 1884, Mrs. Thomas said: "General Keyes' private opinion that I was the cause of General Thomas remaining in the service is decidedly a mistake. . . . There was never a word passed between General Thomas and myself, or any one of the family, upon the subject of his remaining loyal to the United States Government. We felt that, whatever his course, it would be from a conscientious sense of duty; that no one could persuade him to do what he felt was not right."

Nevertheless, his southern birth caused his loyalty to be questioned more than once in Washington and, though I can find nothing to document my musings, I myself have wondered whether his rather sudden transfer from the Valley of Virginia to the Ohio theatre may have prompted by the belief in Washington that he would be "safer" in the west - or perhaps some generous soul in the upper echelons of the War Department may have thought that it would be easier for the new general to fight at full strength if he did not have to fight on the soil of his native state. At any rate, west he went and west he stayed.

(Gen'l. W.T. Sherman vouched to Lincoln for his Loyalty to the Union)

Between November, 1861, when he assuned command of the first division of the Army of the Ohio, and January 19, 1862, when he fought and won the battle of Mill Springs, Thomas had done an enormous amount of work. Out of raw recruits he had gradually but quickly created a division of four brigades and his handling of these troops in this minor engagement marked him in the eyes of his immediate superiors. At Shiloh and Pittsburgh Landing early in April, 1862, Buell, commanding the Army of the Ohio, now known as the Army of the Cumberland, brought his forces up to the aid of the surprised Grant. Thomas' division was the one farthest from the scene of action and consequently reached the field too late to take any real part in that much-discussed battle. For a short time thereafter Thomas was under the command of Major General Halleck but within two months he was back with his old command under Buell. Later that year Rosecrans replaced Buell as commanding general of the Army of the Cumberland, and Thomas became commander of the XIV Army Corps. He had been made a major general of volunteers soon after the Battle of Shiloh. Then, in January and July, 1863, followed the battles of Stone's River and of Tullahoma, in which Rosecrans pushed the Confederate forces under Braxton Bragg completely out of southwestern Tennessee - for the time being. Both Federals and Confederates realized that Chattanooga was a vital spot and both were striving for it - and that striving was to cost many lives. Bragg's Confederates soon were again operating in Tennessee, somewhat east of the portion from which they had been driven. The Confederates still held Chattanooga.

Early in September, 1863, Rosecrans crossed the Tennessee River and without too much difficulty manouvered Bragg out of Chattanooga just as he had two months earlier manouvered him out of the Tullahoma lines. In this movement, however, Rosecrans' forces became very much extended and could present only a thin line to an advancing foe. Just at this time Bragg was reenforced by

the promise of the First Corps of ~~the~~ Lee's Army of Norhtern Virginia under General Longstreet - I say "by the promise of," because Longstreet and his men had to travel by a very circuitous route and the time of their arrival could not be accurately foretold. With these reenforcements, and in view of the ~~Union~~ severe extension of the Union lines, Bragg decided to try to cut Rosecrans off from Chattanooga, and thereby regain possession of the much-coveted city. He waited, however, one day too long to launch his attack and this one day of grace enabled Rosecrans to reconcentrate his forces along Chicamauga Creek (The River of Death), a few miles south of Chattanooga. General Thomas' XIV Army Corps formed the left, or northernmost, flank of the Union Army.

The Union Army of the Cumberland now, on September 18, stood with its back to Missionary Ridge; the huge mass of Lookout Mountain loomed in the background further to the west. Thomas' XIV Corps stood with its back to a foothill of Missionary Ridge, an elevation called Snodgrass' Hill. The whole line was nearly six miles long. There was some desultory fighting on the 18th but the real attack by the Confederates began at dawn on the 19th. Rosecrans had correctly sized up the situation: Bragg hoped to drive the Union Army back into the blind valleys behind them, from ~~these~~ which was no escape. During the night of the 18th, Rosecrans visited Thomas at the latter's headquarters and told him to hang on to his position at all costs. And Rosecrans sent Thomas reserves, so that on the morning of the 19th the latter had under his command a little more than half of the Army of the Cumberland. But the fighting became so bitter that Thomas called for more reserves, if they were to be had. Rosecrans had one division on the right of his line which did not seem to be very busy, and he accordingly sent this division to Thomas. In some way, never understood to this day, that division lost its sense of direction and went wandering off somewhere in the back area of the battle. Thomas ~~called for more help~~ accordingly renewed

his plea for help and the commanding general, now thoroughly nervous, detached more troops from his right and sent them to Thomas. When the ~~days~~ day's bitter fighting came to a close, the Federals were still holding their line.

The next day, about noon, Lonsgstreet with his First Corps from the Army of Northern Virginia came into action. Longstreet had reached the area the afternoon of the 18th and in a conference with Bragg that night, the latter gave Longstreet full command of the left or southern half of the Confederate Army. He massed his brigades and sent them in against Rosecrans left. Longstreet, aided a bit by a piece of luck which is too tedious to relate in detail here, routed the whole right half of the Army of the Cumberland and drove it in confusion back through the passes of Missionary Ridge toward Chattanooga. Rosecrans' headquarters were overrun and he himself, thinking that all was lost, fled with the rest. But he had not counted on one George Thomas. The latter, seeing or sensing what was taking place, drew his command slightly back until it formed a great horseshoe at the foot of Snodgrass Hill. And there he and his men stood and fought and still stood while Rosecrans and his formless column continued their frantic way toward Chattanooga, to prepare for a last desperate stand there. Thomas and his men stood their ground until sunset, thus saving the Army, and when he finally ordered a withdrawal and his exhausted units began to move back to the Gap and Chattanooga, the Confederates were too fought out to pursue. Commanders like Lonsgtreet and Bedford Forest wanted to pursue but Bragg had grown too listless. His losses had been appalling and the day had been too much for him, and he went to bed at last not quite certain whether he had won a great victory or had narrowly avoided a humiliating defeat. And for a while, the Union Army was not too sure just what had happened to it. But when the dust and smoke of the confusion had cleared, it was easily seen that the stubborn stand made by Thomas and his men had saved the Union army from disaster, and out of the day's fighting came two things for George Henry Thomas, his title "The Rock of Chicamauga"

and, a month after the battle, his commission as brigadier general in the regular army.

The situation of the Union forces in Chattanooga was now critical. ~~There~~ They were besieged by the Confederates and, unless some means could be devised for getting supplies to them, they were in actual danger of starvation. At just this time, Grant was placed in supreme command in the western theatre. To his old Army of the Tennessee he gave as its commanding general William Tecumseh Sherman. He also had the two army corps which had been sent to him from Washington under the command of Joe Hooker. One of Grant's first acts was to relieve Rosecrans and place Thomas in command of the Army of the Cumberland. This command Thomas held until the war was over.

A way was finally found to get supplies in to Chattanooga for Thomas' starving men and Grant was able to coördinate his forces. A little more than two months after the Battle of Chickamauga, in the Battles of Lookout Mountain (Nov. 24) and Missionary Ridge (Nov. 25), the Union Army forced Bragg back into Georgia, and Chattanooga remained in Union hands for the rest of the war, and the Union forces in Chattanooga spent the winter of '63-'64 refitting and strengthening themselves for the campaigns that were sure to come in 1864. Let us now turn to May fourth of that year.

Four weeks earlier, on March 9, 1964, Grant had been made general commanding officer of all Union armies and had elected to take his station with the Army of the Potomac, leaving Sherman in command in Tennessee. On that fateful May 4th, Grant crossed the Rapidan River to begin the campaign which was to know no let-up until it ended eleven months later at Appomattox, And on that same day, Sherman moved out of his fortified positions around Chattanooga to begin a campaign which would take him to Atlanta, Savannah, Columbia, Raleigh and Goldsboro, North Carolina and thus bring him, in those same eleven months, almost within shouting distance of Grant.

As Sherman emerged from Chattanooga, his force of something over 100,000 men was organized into three armies, one of which was the Army of the Cumberland under Thomas. The continual outflanking of the Confederate forces by superior numbers; the skillful and dogged retreat which Joe Johnston conducted; the impatience of Jefferson Davis in replacing Johnston by Hood, are all parts of the story which we have to pass over but we can note that much of the fighting during this long march to Atlanta fell to the lot of Thomas' Army and that it was against Thomas that Hood launched his illtimed attack at Peachtree Creek and again that it was Thomas' Army to which Atlanta actually surrendered.

When the question of the march to the sea arose - and that had been in Sherman's and Grant's minds all along, - it was suggested that Thomas and his Army make their way to Savannah and that Sherman return north to deal with Hood and his Army of Tennessee. Some say that Thomas himself made the suggestion. But Sherman decided that he would be the one to go and here again one may be permitted to wonder whether Thomas' birth in Southern Virginia had any part in Sherman's decision. If Thomas had led his men over the same route that Sherman pursued, he would have ended up a very short distance from his birthplace. But this was not in the cards. Thomas and his army were sent back to Tennessee to take care of Hood, who had marched north from Atlanta in the vain hope of decoying Sherman out of the city, while Sherman planned his march eastward. Militarily, it was a strange sight. Two great armies, which had faced each other all the way from Shiloh to Atlanta, now turned their backs on each other, one marching east, the other north. One marched to success; the other, dashing its slight forces against the immovable Thomas, failed, and with that failure the last flicker of hope for the Confederacy died. The Battle of Nashville, Dec. 15th and 16th, 1864, the first and only real routx of a major Confederate Army, was the final blow in the western theatre. Perhaps its significance is well expressed in a song composed by some of the men in Hood's

army in their post-Christmas retreat:

"And now I'm going southward
For my heart is full of woe,
I'm going back to Georgia
To find my 'Uncle Joe.' (Johnston)
You may sing about your dearest maid,
And sing of Rosalie,
But the gallant Hood of Texas
Played hell in Tennessee."

There was an interesting prelude to this Battle of Nashville. When Thomas got into position in Nashville and Hood surrounded him with a numerically inferior force, Grant, from his position in Virginia, wanted Thomas to sally forth and attck Hood at once. Thomas, with his characteristic thoroughness, refused on the ground that he was not ready to fight a major battle. After ten days had passed, Grant issued an order suspending Thomas and putting Schofield in his place, but the order was rescinded before it could be put into effect. Then snow and ice - weather of unusual severity - caused another delay and the impatient Grant sent General Logan to replace Thomas while he himself started from Virginia for Tennessee. But, before Logan could get to Nashville and when Grant was no further on his journey than Washington, ~~xxxxx~~ the weather moderated and Thmoas came out to drive the Confederate Army in a complete rout. Here again, as in the early days of the war, there seems to have been some lingering suspicion of Thomas' loyalty to the Union. But after the battle, he was made a major general in the regular army. After the war, in 1868, he was offered brevet ranks of lieutenant general and then of general. He declined both on the ground that he had done nothing since the war to warrant such promotions and, if they were offered for his services during the war, they came too late. And he steadfastly refused to accept a large sum of money raised by his admirers to purchase a home for him and his wife; he said that his army pay was sufficient

for his needs and that the money could best be given to the widows of men who had died in the service. Silver service - same reply. No one knows what became of it.

Soon after the close of the war, he was ordered to New Orleans. He requested that the orders be rescinded and that he be assigned to some position not in the Southern States; that he could not discharge his duties satisfactorily in an atmosphere that would be hostile to him because of what people regarded as his defection from his native state and the South. He was accordingly ordered to the Military Division of the Pacific with headquarters at San Francisco, and here he died of apoplexy March 28, 1870, not quite fifty-four years of age. Wihtin a few years his six-foot frame had increased in weight from 175 to 230 and high blood pressure took its toll. The best shorthand appraisal of his career that I have seen is found in Bruce Catton's This Hallowed Ground, page 369: "Thomas comes down in history as the Rock of Chicamauga, the great defensive fighter, the man who could never be driven away but who was not much on the offensive. That may be a correct appraisal. Yet it may also be worth making note that just twice in all the war was a major Confederate army driven away from a prepared position in complete rout - at Chattanooga and at Nashville. Each time the blow that routed it was launched by Thomas."

This is the fourth time that I have inflicted upon the members of the Sphex Club a paper on a Civil War general officer. In view of my southern birth and ancestry, my southern prejudices and biases, it may seem a bit surprising that three of these four papers have had as their subject a general who wore the blue uniform of the Union Army. First was George Gordon Meade. Then Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard of the Confederate Army. Next, at the challenge of Mr. Gilliam, William Tecumseh Sherman. Finally - and I mean finally - George Henry Thomas. I must confess that I have enjoyed and profited by these somewhat rambling excursions into the North. In fact, I find myself reminded of the remark of a southern lady after her first visit to the battlefield of Gettysburg, where she saw, of course, countless monuments erected in memory of regiments from Ohio and Pennsylvania and New York and Vermont and a host of other northern states. She said, in effect: "You know, I always thought that the Battle of Gettysburg was fought by Confederate soldiers but this visit has made me realize that there were some northern soldiers there too." These delvings into the Yankee side of things have helped me to bear in mind that there were perosnal courage and idealism and sacrifice and bickerings and jealousies north of the Mason and Dixon line, just as there were to the south. They fought bravely on both sides; they fought it to the end, and the final decision was that there should be an undivided Union, a United States of America. And we today, a century later, can well join in the ancient prayer, Requiescat in Pace, all of them, all there who wore the blue and the gray a century ago.

Now, partly, I suppose, as a result of these journeyings of mine into the past, I have found myself wondering what these men who fought each other in blue and gray, generals and buck privates alike, would think of our nation today, could they suddenly be brought back into this last half of the twentieth century. What would footsoldiers who plodded wearily from Fredericksburg to Gettysburg, from Chattanooga to Atlanta, think of the recent airlift which in some seventy-two hours carried an entire division of our army of today to Europe? What would those artillerymen, whose pieces had an effective range of only a few hundred yards, think of missiles which can strike at targets thousands of miles away, - missiles which, if equipped with nuclear warheads, could literally wipe all mankind fromthe face of this earth? Our, what would they think of a United States in which, according to our political scientists, the once sovereign states are daily becoming less and less sovereign and are sinking to the level of mere convenient administrative subdivisions, whose activities will more and more be directed from Washington? States' rights, ~~that~~ one of the ~~largest~~ hardest rocks upon which the Confederacy's ship of state foundered, have ~~withered~~ eroded much and have ~~faded~~ been sinking from sight in the past century. There is a constant clamor for uniformity from one end of our country to the other. In some fields this uniformity may be highly desirable. In some respects, our modern way of life has grown so complex, our business and industry have become so extensive, that it lies beyond the power of a single state to prescribe the atmosphere in which they shall operate. In a more personal field, one can make out, I think, a good argument for somewhat more uniformity in our laws governing marriage and divorce, and in the rules and regulations governing motor vehicular traffic upon our highways. Yet such uniformity can be obtained only at the expense of personal liberty, and each step towards it means an increase of power centralized in the nation's capital.

Again, I wonder what these men of a century ago could contribute toward the solution of what I consider one of the most serious problems facing us today. It is a problem which has been with us certainly since the days of King John and Magna Charta, but it has assumed great importance in recent years. Briefly, and perhaps oversimplified, it is this: How far is it proper ~~right~~ for the central Government, whether by legislation or by executive ~~decree~~ or by judicial fiat decree, to deny ~~the~~ rights & privileges to a majority in order to secure ~~the~~ a minority its rights? To a minority that is often vociferous and well organized? what the minority considers its rights and privileges Perhaps a part of the answer to this question lies in the fact that it is much easier to organize unhappiness and discontent than it to arouse to action a happy and contented group. And yet, as Mr. Gifford pointed out so clearly two weeks ago, by such a process our personal freedom of action and thought is being chipped away, and will be chipped away still further unless we can formulate some effective protest against the porcess. Perhaps we need a metaphorical Rock of Chickamauga to lead us in stemming the tide.

Many of us are deeply disturbed by the intrusion, as we see it, of the Federal courts into fields which we have always been taught are the province of our legislative bodies. Not only have the courts, especially the U.S. Supreme Court, completely abandoned the older legal doctrine of stare decisis, as Mr. Caskie so clearly showed in his discussion two weeks ago but, in their efforts to interpret the Constitution as a living and flexible document, they seem to overlook the fact that that document itself makes orderly provision for necessary changes, and in their haste to attain some desired end - and it may sometimes be a desirable end - they - the court arrogate to themselves powers which ~~legally~~ constitutionally belong only to the Congress. Yet Sometimes there is a voice crying in the wilderness. A paragraph in ~~quotation from~~ a decision recently handed down by the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia decries this tendency ~~to legislate~~ on the part of our Courts. The very fact that these two judges felt it proper to include such ~~to legislate~~ to encroach upon the prerogatives of the Congress by indulging in legislation by judicial decree

remarks opinion belief
~~statements~~ in their ~~decision~~ shows how far, in their ~~opinion~~, this tendency on the part of the courts to legislate has gone. Their remarks are so general in their application that, to grasp their meaning, one does not need to know anything of the instant case, and, as I draw near the end of this ramble of mine, I think it worthwhile ~~and I can think of no better ending for this ramble of mine than~~ to quote verbatim from the court's opinion:

"That appellants now resort to the courts on some vague and disoriented theory that judicial power can supply some quick and pervasive remedy is no reason why we as judges should regard ourselves as some kind of Guardian Elders ordained to review the political judgments of elected representatives of the people.

"In framing policies relating to the great issues of defense and security, the people are and must be, in a sense, at the mercy of their elected representatives. But the basic and important corollary is that the people may remove their elected representatives as they cannot dismiss United States judges. This elementary fact about the nature of our system, which seems to have escaped notice occasionally, must make manifest to judges that we are neither gods nor godlike, but judicial officers with narrow and limited authority.

"Our entire system of government would suffer incalculable mischief should judges attempt to interpose the judicial will above that of the Congress and President. . . ."

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I once heard a bishop of our Church say in a public address: "Democracy is the political expression of Christianity." The aphorism caught my attention and later, in a private conversation with him, I elicited from him the thought that democracy, as practiced by the English speaking people, is the best political expression of Christianity that man has up to this time been able to evolve. He did not intend to say that there is nothing better or higher possible beyond democracy; that man in his evolutionary process cannot at some time in the future evolve a political system which will come closer to the Christian ideal. He did, however, deplore the spreading belief that political socialism and its cousin-german, communism, are panaceas for ~~the~~ all human ills, pathways to an earthly Utopia along which we are urged by those who seem not to realize that their goal is a uniformity of thought and action under which we would become a nation of uniform mediocrity.

To opposition to such an end, and to the maintenance of the democratic process ~~may~~ our nation should devote its best efforts in the years ~~to come~~ that lie before us. the thoughtful people of their