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THE BATTLE OF OLUSTEE: ITS MEANING FOR THE BRITISH

by Lawrence E. Breeze

EARLY IN FEBRUARY 1864, Major General Quincy A. Gillmore, commanding the Federal Department of the South with headquarters at Hilton Head, South Carolina, ordered Brigadier General Truman Seymour, commander of the District of Hilton Head, to prepare his forces for a seaborne expedition.¹ Subsequent orders, issued after the embarkation of the troops, directed the expedition to the east coast of Florida.² On February 7, Seymour's forces reached the mouth of the St. Johns River. They ascended the river to Jacksonville and soon took possession of the town.³ Meeting only token resistance in the area, they began raiding operations outward from Jacksonville.⁴ As advance units of the Federal forces pushed toward the interior of the state, Brigadier General Joseph Finegan, the Confederate commander in East Florida, was gathering forces at Lake City approximately sixty miles west of Jacksonville. On February 13, the Confederates took up a position near Olustee, a village thirteen miles east of Lake City, and threw up field works. Finegan considered it the strongest position between Lake City and the Federal forces at Barber's plantation [Lawtey] on the St. Marys River.⁵ It was on firm ground in an area that otherwise was dotted with ponds and swamps and through it ran the roadway from Jacksonville to Lake City and the railroad from Jacksonville to Tallahassee. During the next few days, Finegan received reinforcements from General P. G. T. Beauregard, commander of the Confederate Department of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.⁶ These units came largely from Georgia and South Carolina and increased the Confederate

1. *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 69 vols. (Washington, 1880-1901), Series I, Vol. XXXV, pt. 1, 280. (Cited hereafter as *O.R.*)

2. *Ibid.*, 280-281.

3. William Watson Davis, *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (New York, 1913), 276-277; Mark F. Boyd, "The Federal Campaign of 1864 in East Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXIX (July 1950), 7.

4. Davis, 277-278; Boyd, 7.

5. *O.R.*, Series I, Vol. XXXV, pt. 1, 330-333.

6. *Ibid.*, 110-111, 331.

force to approximately 5,000 men. The cautious, even hesitant, nature of the Federal advance had facilitated the southern build-up in the area of Olustee.

On the morning of February 20, the main body of Union troops, amounting to 5,500 men, began an advance from Barber's plantation toward Lake City, intending to cut railroad communications between East and West Florida at the Suwannee River.⁷ Shortly after mid-day the Federal advance cavalry encountered the Confederate outposts, and by mid-afternoon the opposing forces were locked in deadly combat.⁸ The battle site was some three miles in advance of the Confederate defensive works at Olustee.

By nightfall the Federals had been beaten badly and Seymour ordered a withdrawal.⁹ The retreat continued until Union forces reached Jacksonville. On February 23, General Gillmore reported to General Halleck, General-in-Chief, United States Army, that the enemy had thrown such a large force into Florida that it was inexpedient to attempt to do more than hold the line at the St. Johns River.¹⁰

Olustee was a bloody battle. The Confederates reported a total of 946 casualties, and General Seymour reported nearly twice that number - 1,861.¹¹ Olustee brought the Federal invasion of Florida to an abrupt and disastrous conclusion. From the Confederate standpoint it was a timely victory, and it produced "general jubilation over the south."¹² The purpose of this paper is to examine the reaction of the Confederacy's British friends and

7. *Ibid.*, 288.

8. *Ibid.*, 288-290, 330-333, 338-341; Davis, 286-292; Boyd, 17-27.

9. *O.R.*, series I, Vol. XXXV, pt. 1, 289, 302, 305, 333.

10. *Ibid.*, 291. After the war, Gillmore reported (*Ibid.*, 290-291) that he learned later there had been no "disparity in numbers" at Olustee. The Confederates greatly overestimated the size of Union forces at Olustee. *Ibid.*, 339.

11. *Ibid.*, 298, 337. These figures included killed, wounded, and missing.

12. Boyd, 31; *O.R.*, Series I, Vol. XXXV, pt. 1, 338. The Confederate Congress prepared a resolution of thanks to Finegan and his men, and Beauregard congratulated Finegan on a "brilliant victory" and described it as a "timely success." In view of the dearth of Confederate victories at this point in the war, it was probably an apt description. Clement Eaton, *A History of the Southern Confederacy* (New York, 1954), 285, says that Olustee "gave the people of the Confederacy a gleam of hope in the dark gloom following the disaster of Missionary Ridge."

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supporters as expressed in some organs of the British press.¹³ In order best to understand their response to Olustee some background information will be helpful.

For nearly three years the British had followed the American struggle with lively interest, but, by 1864, this interest began to wane. Several reasons may be offered to account for this. For one thing, many Englishmen thought that the war would continue indefinitely, consuming men and resources, with no decision in sight.

More important were European developments that drew English attention away from America. The outbreak of a rebellion in Russian Poland in 1863, fanned the latent fire of Russophobia in Britain and crowded American news from the papers.¹⁴ Of even greater concern was the war between Denmark and the German states that appeared so threatening to the general peace and to Britain's position in European affairs, that alongside it American events paled into insignificance.¹⁵

Moreover, the elements that favored the political status quo in Britain had tried, from the very outset of the American war, to focus attention on the alleged breakdown of American democratic institutions as a warning against parliamentary reform and the extension of the franchise to the British working class.¹⁶ This attempt to make the American Civil War serve domestic political

13. Publications used in this paper include the *London Times*, the *Manchester Guardian*, and two weeklies published in London, the *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* and the *Index*. The *Index* was a Confederate-British journal established in the spring of 1862, with the announced purpose of advocating the "cause of the Southern Union," but it also served the anti-democratic cause in Britain.

14. Lawrence E. Breeze, "British Opinion of Russian Foreign Policy, 1841-1871" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Missouri, 1960), 280-307.

15. *Ibid.*, 308-311; *London Times*, March 22, 1864, referred to the Danish war and the prolongation of the American conflict as contributing factors to the decline of interest in the war in America.

16. See for example the *Saturday Review*, XII (April 27, 1861), 407, and July 20, 1861), 55; *Blackwood's Magazine*, XC (July 1861), 125-126, and (October 1861), 395-405; *Manchester Guardian*, August 10, September 10, 1861; *London Times*, August 5, 12, 26, September 2, 4, 1861; *Quarterly Review*, CX (July 1861), 247-288. For unsuccessful attempts to inject the "American example" into the debates of the House of Commons, see *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, third series, CLXII (1861), cols. 383-384, Stephen Cave's speech of April 10, 1861, and CLXIII (1861), col. 134, Sir John Ramsden's speech of May 27, 1861.

purposes had aligned much of the press on the side of the Confederacy. At the same time it had prompted a spirited counter-attack by anti-slavery forces and admirers of American democracy. Before the end of 1863, the success of this counterattack, evidenced by the growing community of interest between middle class reformers and the working classes and expressed in the resolutions emanating from numerous public meetings, raised doubts as to the further usefulness of the "American example" to the cause of British conservatism.¹⁷ Nor had military events in America, in the latter part of 1863, provoked much enthusiasm among the Confederacy's British supporters. The new year did not produce any military activity that attracted attention.

Such was the situation when information of a battle along the Jacksonville and Tallahassee railroad reached Britain. In 1864, it took several days for news from America to cross the Atlantic. It was February 25 before British readers learned that a Federal force of some size had arrived at Jacksonville.¹⁸ Subsequent mails brought scattered information about the Federal advance in Florida, such as the capture of Baldwin, the rail junction twenty miles west of Jacksonville.¹⁹ On March 12, the first news of the repulse at Olustee appeared in *The Times* of London and the *Manchester Guardian*.²⁰ The interest and spirits of Confederate sympathizers immediately rose.²¹ The victory not only had cost the Federals dearly in men and prestige, but it also forced them back to the

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17. For examples of the success of the counterattack see George M. Trevelyan, *The Life of John Bright* (Boston, 1913), 306 ff.; Frances Edna Gillespie, *Labor and Politics in England, 1850-1867* (Durham, 1927), 214-216; Martin B. Duberman, *Charles Francis Adams, 1807-1886* (Boston, 1961), 299-300; Worthington Chauncey Ford (ed.), *A Cycle of Adams Letters, 1861-1865*, 2 vols. (New York, 1920), I, 243-244; R. A. J. Walling (ed.), *The Diaries of John Bright* (London, 1930), 263; E. D. Adams, *Great Britain and the American Civil War*, 2 vols. (New York, 1924), II, 291-294. It is quite noticeable that beginning in mid-1863, many spokesmen for conservatism began to talk less and less of the political lessons to be drawn from the American conflict.
 18. *London Times*, February 25, 1864.
 19. *Ibid.*, March 1, 1864, considered the news from Florida unimportant; *ibid.*, March 5, 1864, reported the capture of Baldwin; *ibid.*, March 7, 1864; *Manchester Guardian*, March 7, 1864.
 20. *London Times*, March 12, 1864, the news had been sent by the paper's New York correspondent on February 27; *Manchester Guardian*, March 12, 1864.
 21. *London Times*, March 14, 1864; *Manchester Guardian*, March 14, 1864; *Index*, IV (March 17, 1864), 161, 168; *Saturday Review*, XVII (March 19, 1864), 337-338.

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coastal areas around Jacksonville, Fernandina, and St. Augustine. Never again would they threaten the interior of Florida.

When Union forces secured control of the Mississippi in 1863, they deprived the Confederacy of valuable food supplies from the West. As the supply situation became more serious, Florida's importance to the South increased. Reports from Confederate commissary officers, near the end of 1863, offered abundant testimony to the growing dependence of southern armies upon Florida for food resources, especially meat.²² In explaining his reasons for the invasion of Florida and his plan to occupy the richest portions of the area lying between the Suwannee and St. Johns rivers, General Gillmore, in a communication to General Halleck, dated January 31, had given as two of his objectives the acquisition of an outlet for cotton, lumber, timber, turpentine, and other Florida products, and the severance of one of the major Confederate sources of commissary supplies.²³ In elaborating upon the second of these objectives, General Gillmore explained that the Confederacy had come to rely largely upon Florida for beef and pork and that the enemy had plans to improve rail transportation into Georgia in order to expedite the movement of supplies to the Confederate armies. Consequently, Federal failure to cut this important supply line should have been a source of great satisfaction to Confederate sympathizers in Britain.

But while these English friends were delighted with the outcome of Olustee, and one enthusiastic writer even described the battle as the most crushing and humiliating defeat since Bull Run and Ball's Bluff,²⁴ they failed to see any real significance in it. In British eyes, Florida lay outside the area of significant military operations,²⁵ and there is no indication of British appreciation that this very isolation enabled Florida to play a vital role in supplying the Confederacy with badly needed supplies.

It is necessary to look elsewhere to find reasons for British interest in the Florida campaign. A look at their press treatment suggests that the military expedition had been undertaken solely for political purposes. Some English writers charged that President

22. Davis, 268-271.

23. *O.R.*, Series I, Vol. XXXV, pt. 1, 279. A third named objective was the recruitment of Negro troops.

24. *Index*, IV (March 31, 1864), 1931.

25. See for example the editorial in the *Manchester Guardian*, March 29, 1864; *Saturday Review*, XVII (March 19, 1864), 337.

Lincoln had personally ordered the invasion with the aim of "re-constructing" a loyal government in Florida, manufacturing three "sham" electoral votes, thereby assisting with his renomination and re-election to the presidency.²⁶ These publications were taking a cue from the segment of the American press that continually assailed Lincoln, accusing him of sacrificing men in an electioneering campaign in Florida. Certainly the British press was familiar with the position of the New York papers; the articles written by the London *Times'* New York correspondent echoed the line of Lincoln's detractors in America.

But it is more likely that some English conservatives arrived at this conclusion without resorting to transatlantic assistance. British conservatism neither understood Lincoln's conception of the Union nor appreciated his dedication to its restoration. On December 8, 1863, Lincoln had issued his ten per cent plan for the reconstruction of the United States.²⁷ Upon learning of the plan, the editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, without acknowledging the possibility that above all else Lincoln might desire the restoration of the secession states to their proper relationship with the Union, promptly labeled it a device to insure the Republicans enough electoral votes to win the next presidential election.²⁵ The editor went on to suggest that Louisiana and Tennessee were likely subjects for the application of the "constitutional fiction" designed to secure the re-election of Lincoln.

In the early part of 1864, Britishers were reading, especially in articles written by the London *Times'* New York correspondent, that much dissatisfaction with Lincoln existed within his own party, that other names were being mentioned as candidates, and that very likely the Democrats would nominate a strong candidate, probably General George McClellan.²⁹ In a portion of the press, an image began to take shape - that of a president determined to use any means to meet the challenge to his position. Attention was directed to Louisiana where General Nathaniel P. Banks had set in motion machinery for elections in late February 1864. According to the London *Times*, this was the first step in an attempt

26. Index, IV (March 17, 1864), 161; *Ibid.* (March 24, 1864), 178; London *Times*, March 17, 1864; *Saturday Review*, XVII (March 19, 1864), 337.

27. Bureau of National Literature (comp.), *Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, 11 vols., (New York, 1897-1917), 3414-3416.

28. *Manchester Guardian*, December 21, 1863.

29. London *Times*, January 25, February 2 and 22, 1864.

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to manufacture electoral votes in that state for Lincoln.³⁰ The same newspaper carried brief news items to the effect that enough Arkansas Unionists had been found to warrant preparations, directed by General Frederick Steele, for elections.³¹

Thus, through a word here and an article there, the way was prepared for a political interpretation of the Florida campaign. Certain factors surrounding the campaign itself lent credence to this view. There is little doubt that in addition to General Gillmore's plan to sever the Confederate supply lines from Florida, a further objective was the inauguration of measures to "reconstruct" Florida in accordance with instructions received from Lincoln through Major John Hay, his private secretary.³² Although the British did not have knowledge of this communication, they did know, as early as March 7, of General Gillmore's official invitation to the "Loyal people, and such as desire to become so under the provisions of the President's proclamation of December 8, 1863, who are now absent from their homes in East Florida, to return there and resume their usual avocations. It is the intention of the United States Government, and wholly within its power, to afford all needful protection."³³

In addition, the British knew that Major Hay had accompanied the Federal invading force. Soon after his arrival in Jacksonville, Hay began posting copies of Lincoln's proclamation of December 8. He spent several days in the area, hearing and recording oaths of allegiance and issuing certificates entitling the bearer to the benefits of the proclamation.³⁴

It appeared to some English writers that the scanty population of Florida had offered an easy and tempting target for the application of the president's scheme of reconstruction. If Gener-

30. *Ibid.*, February 4, March 7, 1864.

31. *Ibid.*, February 1, 6, 12, 1864. On February 16, the paper's New York correspondent reported that preparations were underway to reconstruct Tennessee.

32. *O.R.*, Series I, Vol. XXXV, pt. 1, 279; see 278 for Lincoln's message to Gillmore, January 13, 1864, which began as follows: "I understand an effort is being made by some worthy gentlemen to reconstruct a loyal State government in Florida." See Davis, 272-275, for a discussion of the Unionist movement in Florida and especially the activities of L. D. Stickney of St. Augustine who held a position as Federal Tax Commissioner.

33. *Manchester Guardian*, March 7, 1864, reprinted this notice as it appeared in the *New York Times*, February 20, 1864.

34. Tyler Dennett (ed.), *Lincoln and the Civil War in the Diaries and Letters of John Hay* (New York, 1939), 159-165.

al Seymour could maintain himself in middle Florida for even a short time, he might collect enough Unionists to equal one-tenth of the population. It would then be easy to hold a convention, dictate a constitution, and secure the nomination of electors pledged to Lincoln.³⁵ These writers saw no other Union advantage to be gained by the campaign. Some were ready to believe that Lincoln had ordered the expedition without consulting either the Secretary of War or his military advisors. They heaped abuse on a president who would sacrifice so many lives and so much money in such an indecent scheme.

The victory of the Confederates at Olustee brought jubilation to their British friends because to them it spoiled Lincoln's political game. Even if Union forces should retain their hold on some coastal towns, the British felt they would be unable to "reconstruct" the state. Olustee spelled disaster for Federal plans, or so it seemed to many Englishmen.

Since only a small congressional delegation and three electoral votes were involved, it might be asked why Federal failure should be such a source of satisfaction. In view of the progress of northern arms elsewhere in the South and the successful application of the reconstruction formula in some states, any reversal of fortune was welcome to Confederate sympathizers abroad. More important than depriving Lincoln of three electoral votes, which might not be essential to his re-election anyway, were the ramifications of the Florida campaign. Lincoln's northern enemies used the unsuccessful expedition with great force in attacking him. Anti-administration newspapers openly claimed that he had launched a costly military expedition to further his own selfish political ambitions.³⁶ Many believed it was because of this that the United States Senate, on March 2, adopted a resolution directing the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War to inquire into the origins, purposes, and results of the Florida military expedition.

35. *Saturday Review*, XVII (March 19, 1864), 337; *London Times*, March 17, 1864; *Index*, IV (March 17, 1864), 161, and (March 24, 1864), 178.

36. Dennett, 165. Hay made the following notation in his diary: "28th Feb. Sunday. The *Arago* came in this morning. The papers of the 23rd and 24th attack my coming here as a political trick. Q.A.G. [General Gillmore] is much troubled by it." Davis, 293-294.

37. *O.R.*, Series I, Vol. XXXV pt. 1, 292. This was reported by the *Manchester Guardian*, March 18, 1864.

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These repercussions in the North were taken as a hopeful sign by some British conservatives. In warning against electoral reform at home, they long had pointed to Lincoln as an example of the type of unqualified and ill-suited man likely to rise to power in a democracy. Since Lincoln's honesty had been an important point of popular belief, some of his British critics hopefully believed that confidence in him had been shaken by the charge that he had interfered in the management of the war for partisan political purposes.³⁸ The knowledge that the disaster at Olustee had provoked the Senate to take some action was encouraging to these foes of democracy.³⁹ This loss of popularity and confidence, coupled with a new call for 200,000 fresh troops by a leader who had just demonstrated a willingness to sacrifice lives for votes, might prepare the way for the reception of a peace party.⁴⁰

Many Britishers believed that if Lincoln remained in power, the war would last indefinitely. We would continue to ask for the sacrifice of more men until at long last the South lay prostrate before him. On the other hand, a Democratic candidate, or even another more flexible Republican, might bring the war to a close and do so on terms that recognized the permanent division of the United States. Some Englishmen wanted this out of genuine sympathy for the Confederacy; others thought primarily of the advantages to Britain if two republics replaced the single, dynamic, rapid-growing United States.

There was still another factor motivating some conservative organs of the British press. These foes of democracy had, at the very outset of the American crisis, interpreted disunion as the failure of democracy. It is true that the "American example" had lost some of its usefulness by 1864, and many British conservatives had laid the prestige of their political doctrine on the line with the fate of the Confederacy. Reunion in America would leave the position of the anti-reforming elements in Britain more vulnerable than ever to the demands of the working class for an extension of the franchise and other democratic measures.

It had become obvious by 1864, that foreign governments, including Britain, would not intervene to break the blockade, ex-

38. *London Times*, March 30, 1864.

39. *Saturday Review*, XVII (March 19, 1864), 337.

40. *London Times*, March 22, 30, 1864.

tend recognition, or take any other step that might assist the South in its struggle. And from the way the war had gone since Vicksburg, Gettysburg, and Missionary Ridge, the long range military picture did not look bright. The best chance of averting the reunion so dreaded by British conservatism lay in a change of attitude by the North. If Unionists should sicken of the blood-letting, tire of the repeated demands for more men for the slaughter, and become disenchanted with Abraham Lincoln's leadership, they might refuse further support of the war and let the South go its way without further hindrance. British supporters of the Confederacy did not expect that the disastrous and discredited Florida campaign would of itself produce this desired result, but it could be a start in that direction. Because it offered such a possibility, fleeting though it turned out to be, the battle of Olustee occupied an important, though brief, place in the treatment of the American war by the British press.