

## **The Union Army Advances in the West**

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During the week of February 26-March 4, 1862, the Union army began to push down the Tennessee, Cumberland, and Mississippi Rivers, Confederate forces evacuated Kentucky, and a change in command was instituted in the western theater. Major General Henry Halleck, commanding Union forces in the west, ordered Brigadier General Ulysses S. Grant to proceed southward along the Tennessee River. The capture of Forts Henry and Donelson had broken the Confederate defense lines along the Tennessee-Kentucky border, leading to the capture of Nashville and opening up much of Tennessee to Union invasion. Grant's troops would progress down the river and arrive ultimately at Pittsburg Landing, Tennessee, near the Alabama and Mississippi border, later that month. His army remained there, awaiting a junction with another Union force under General Don Carlos Buell, until early April, when a surprise attack by Confederates under General Albert Sidney Johnston, led to the bloody battle of Shiloh.

The same week, northern forces under General John Pope began to move south along the western shore of the Mississippi River. Pope had been given command of 25,000 troops a few days earlier, and had been tasked to clear "Confederate obstacles" along the Mississippi River. Pope's army was headed towards Island No. 10, a Confederate position held since the early days of the war. Island No. 10, at that time the tenth island in the Mississippi south of its junction with the Ohio River, and near the borders of Missouri, Kentucky, and Tennessee. The defenses on the mile long sandbar, located on a bend in the river, prevented Union vessels from safely using the waterway until the artillery batteries that protected it were subdued.

The main Confederate defensive position on the Mississippi River protecting locations to the south had been at Columbus, Kentucky. Columbus was a strategic point because it served as the terminus of the Mobile and Ohio Railroad and also represented an major steamboat and ferry center. Confederate forces under Major General Leonidas Polk had occupied the position since September 1861, mounting hundreds of cannon along the high bluffs on the river bank and turning it into what was sometimes called the “Gibraltar of the West.” Unfortunately for the Confederates, their defeats at Henry and Donelson made the remainder of their defensive lines in southern Kentucky and northern Tennessee untenable. Consequently, in late February and early March, Polk evacuated the Columbus defenses, abandoning virtually all of the cannon and heavy equipment. Union troops occupied the position the next day, while Polk eventually rendezvoused with Albert Sydney Johnston’s army at Corinth, Mississippi prior to the battle of Shiloh. Some of Columbus’ defenders were also sent south along the Mississippi and split amongst the two most important Confederate positions at Island No. 10 and Fort Pillow.

Polk’s choice to evacuate Columbus and reinforce Island No. 10 was controversial, as on the following day Federal troops under John Pope lay siege to the town of New Madrid, just north of Island No. 10. Control of the upper Mississippi River was quickly slipping from the Confederates’ grasp. Dissension in the Union high command, however, threatened to negate the advantages that the north had won in the west. President Lincoln authorized General Halleck to place Brigadier General Charles F. Smith in control of Grant’s army. Halleck claimed that Grant had displayed several instances of misconduct that made him unfit to command, and chose Smith to replace him due to the latter’s success in leading volunteer troops at Fort Donelson. Smith’s control over the army would be short lived however, as Grant would be restored to his position,

and Smith forced to leave active duty due to an injury. Grant's leadership would soon be tested at the battle of Shiloh.