



# The Life and Wars of Gideon J. Pillow (Civil War America)

*Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes Jr., Roy P. Stonesifer Jr.*

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Commonly portrayed in Civil War literature as a bungling general who disgraced himself at Fort Donelson, Gideon Johnson Pillow (1806-78) is one of the most controversial military figures of nineteenth-century America. In this first full-length biography, Nat Hughes and Roy Stonesifer take a fresh look at Pillow, calling attention to his prominent role in many of the major conflicts of his day. Pillow was one of Tennessee's wealthiest planters and lawyers as well as an influential broker in national politics. His friendship with fellow Tennessean James K. Polk brought Pillow a generalship in the Mexican War, where he served under Winfield Scott and Zachary Taylor and antagonized the military establishment with his recklessness and self-promotion. Following the war, Pillow attempted to capitalize on his notoriety as the "hero of Chapultepec" by reentering Democratic party politics. Despite his efforts on behalf of Franklin Pierce, he was unsuccessful in his bid for the vice presidency and the Senate. With the outbreak of the Civil War, Pillow again sought the public stage. His organization of what would become the Army of Tennessee placed him at the forefront of the Confederate war effort. But he was bested by Ulysses S. Grant at Belmont and then suffered disaster at Fort Donelson. Following these defeats, he spent the remainder of the war directing Confederate conscription in the West and leading Confederate cavalry forces. As a result of his role at Fort Donelson, Pillow has been dismissed as a political general with destructive military ambitions. Hughes and Stonesifer argue that such a judgment fails to consider the many contributions made by the dynamic planter-lawyer. They point out Pillow's organizational abilities (evidenced before and after Donelson), his standing with distinguished peers such as Joseph Johnston and Braxton Bragg, and his continuing service as an infantry and cavalry leader.

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