



# John C. Ackerman

Tazewell County Board

*Continuing a Family Tradition of Community Service*

August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009

## **August ASO Magazine Column** **Roles of the Subordinate**

The year is July 12<sup>th</sup>, 1864. The site is Fort Stevens on the outskirts of Washington, DC. Confederate General Jubal Early has moved his army up the Shenandoah Valley in a move against the Capitol, while Union General Ulysses S. Grant is busy with Confederate General Robert E. Lee at Petersburg, Virginia. With most of the Union Army with General Grant, this was a great opportunity to attack the Capitol. In the mist of the battle, a young Union Lieutenant Colonel noticed a tall civilian had climbed to the top of the parapet during the fight in direct line of Confederate sharpshooters. Without hesitation and with little regard to whom it may be, he quickly yelled "Get down, you damn fool!" When the civilian obeyed and turned to him, that is when a young Lieutenant Colonel Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr realized that the tall civilian was the President of United States, Abraham Lincoln, who had come out with his staff to observe the battle. The action of yelling at the President didn't hurt the future career of Lieutenant Colonel Holmes; in 1902 President Theodore Roosevelt named Holmes to the United States Supreme Court.

Leading up to the battle, as it became clear to the President and his aids that General Early was heading towards the Capitol, the city was gripped by terror. Citizens started evacuating the city and fleeing north and the President and his aids started demanding General Grant come and save the city. Locked in what he believed was an important conflict with General Lee at Petersburg, Grant ignored a dispatch from the President that read "Now what I think is that you should...retain your hold where you are certainly, and bring the rest with you personally and make a vigorous effort to destroy the enemy's force..." Faced with this dispatch from the Commander in Chief, Grant decided that the more important conflict was the one in Petersburg, and dispatched a small force to go to the Capitol and provide reinforcements. He would not go to the Capitol, but would stay and continue to choke the life out of General Lee's Army and the Confederacy as a whole, forcing them to surrender.

While reviewing this battle one will find many historical points; A) the Battle of Fort Stevens marks the only occasion in American history when two former opponents in a presidential election faced one another across battle lines as Major General John C. Breckinridge (a former U.S. Vice President and one of Lincoln's opponents in the presidential election of 1860) was one of the Confederate commanders, B) the only time in American history a sitting president was under fire in combat, C) one of the few times the Capitol has been under attack. Rather than the historical points of the battle, I would like to focus on the leadership lessons that can be learned from this conflict, mainly the role of subordinates.

To many, the role of a subordinate in any organization is to take instructions and do as they are told. This subordinate role could be in politics, business, on the battlefield, or any number of other possible places. But upon closer review of this battle, one can see that strict obedience of the instructions you are given may not always give the desired or the best results. Maybe the best personal example I can offer comes from the pages of The Doctrine of Completed Staff Work, Army Navy Journal of January, 1942. I was presented with this last year by a manager after a meeting in which I presented him with a problem. He asked me what I thought need to be done to resolve the issue, to which I had no reply. He promptly went to his computer and printed out the following passage, which still today is posted at my desk and to which I try to follow. It reads:

*“The impulse which often comes to the inexperienced staff officer is to ask the chief what to do, recurs more often when the problem is difficult. It is accompanied by a feeling of mental frustration. It is so easy to ask the chief what to do, and it appears so easy for him to answer. Resist that impulse. You will succumb to it only if you do not know your job. It is your job to advise the chief what to do, not to ask him what you ought to do. He needs answers, not questions. Your job is to study, write, restudy, and rewrite until you have evolved a single proposed action – the best one of all you have considered. Your chief merely approves or dis-approves.”*

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