



# The Notorious "Bull" Nelson: Murdered Civil War General

*Donald A. Clark*

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A dynamic figure in the pages of history, Major General William "Bull" Nelson played a formative role in the Union's success in Kentucky and the Western theater of the Civil War. Now, Donald A. Clark presents a long-overdue examination of this irascible officer, his numerous accomplishments, and his grim fate. More popularly known for his temper than his intrepid endeavors on behalf of the North, Nelson nevertheless dedicated much of his life to his nation and the preservation of the Union.

The child of a privileged family, Nelson was one of the first officers to graduate from the newly formed U.S. Naval Academy. His years in the Navy imbued in him the qualities of bravery, loyalty, and fortitude; however, his term of service also seemed to breed an intolerance of others for which he became infamous, and that ultimately led to his violent downfall. Clark sheds new light upon Nelson's pre-Civil War years as a naval officer, when he became a hardened veteran of battle, fighting at the siege of Veracruz and the capture of Tabasco during the Mexican War in the 1840s. On the basis of Nelson's military experience, in 1861 President Lincoln sent him to Kentucky—which was considering secession—and Nelson rallied loyalists and helped the Union prepare to maintain control of the state during the next several years of war.

Nelson went on to prove instrumental in blocking Confederate attempts to subdue Kentucky and the West, serving important roles in the battle of Shiloh, General Henry W. Halleck's advance against Corinth, and Brigadier General Don Carlos Buell's movement toward Chattanooga. But while some viewed his bold maneuvers as the saving of the state, many others, including such notables as Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman, argued that Nelson's actions merited no praise. Unfortunately for the general, the question of his value to the Union abruptly became moot, as his achievements were shortly overshadowed by ignominious rumors of scandal and abuse.

His involvement in the defense of Louisville gave Nelson a chance to redeem himself and restore his military reputation, but the general's famous temper soon robbed him of any potential glory. During September of 1862, in a crime that was never prosecuted, fellow Union general Jefferson C. Davis shot and killed Nelson after an argument. Clark explores this remarkable exception in military law, arguing that while the fact of the murder was indisputable, many considered Davis a hero for having dispatched the so-called tyrant. Although Nelson eventually received many posthumous honors for his indispensable role in the war, justice was never sought for his murder.

A comprehensive study of this well-known, yet misunderstood American figure, *The Notorious "Bull" Nelson: Murdered Civil War General* is an illuminating addition to the history of the Civil War. Through Clark's impeccable research and richly layered narrative, William "Bull" Nelson springs from the pages as large and volatile as he was in life.

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