‘Lessons in leadership from General John Bell Hood, CSA’
by Rev. David B. Smith

‘Lessons in leadership from John Bell Hood’: this might appear to some be a strange title for an address. Those unfamiliar with the history of the American Civil War might well ask ‘what on earth could a nineteenth century Confederate general possibly have to say to us today about leadership, especially about church leadership, which was originally the focus of this talk. On the other hand, those who are familiar with the history of the American Civil War might well ask more particularly ‘what on earth could anyone learn about leadership from General John Bell Hood?’ - a general whose best-known acts of leadership are associated with two of the worst disasters (‘Confederately’ speaking) of the entire American Civil War!

It was Hood who led the Texans against Little Round Top on day two of Gettysburg and who failed to take those rocks - so setting the stage for the tragic charge of day three that spelled the beginning of the end for the Confederacy. The other piece of leadership for which Hood is best remembered came after he took over the command of the Confederate army of the Tennessee from Joseph Johnston, and led that army into a series of bloody encounters that culminated in the terrible battle of Franklin, through which the Army of the West was all but completely destroyed.

For this latter reason especially, General John Bell Hood is regularly remembered as the man who, more than any other single Confederate, lost the war. I remember in my recent trip to America, one die-hard Confederate who still could only pronounce the name of John Bell Hood through clenched teeth – ‘Hood destroyed that army’ he said. For many Southerners it would seem, Hood ranks a close second to his one-time commander James Longstreet as the Confederate general remembered with the least affection by his people – not because of any supposed treachery on his part (as might be the case with Longstreet), but simply because of his supposed complete incompetence as a general, which raises the question again even more pointedly: ‘what on earth could we possibly learn about leadership from Confederate General John Bell Hood?’

Now I’m a bit of a Hood fan actually, in case you hadn’t guessed. Maybe it’s my natural leaning towards the underdog, such as that which already fuels my sympathy for the Confederate cause to begin with, but I do have a feeling that Sam, as he was known to his friends (for reasons not remotely obvious to me), has been much misunderstood. Even so, the points I want to make in this presentation are, surprisingly, not really dependent at all upon anybody’s estimate of John Bell Hood the man or of John Bell Hood the General! What they are dependent upon is upon my reading of the memoirs of the above-mentioned General – the memoirs that he wrote during his retirement in New Orleans after the war, entitled ‘Advance and Retreat’.

A little bit of trivia at this point: Sam Hood retired to New Orleans after the close of the war in 1865. There he married Anna Marie Hennen and, despite losing an arm at Gettysburg and a leg at Chickamauga, Sam proved that he had not lost anything else of vital importance by siring eleven children! Hood tried his hand at the insurance business but failed, and when yellow fever swept through New Orleans killing half the town in 1877, Hood and his family did not have the resources to move to a healthier environment. The following year, thankfully, only six people were killed by yellow fever, but unfortunately this included Hood, his wife, and their eldest daughter. The ten remaining children were farmed out to adopting families, not having any inheritance to sustain them. And yet one man, another New Orleans resident, took it upon himself to sell copies of a photograph that had been taken of Hood and his family to sympathetic veterans. By so doing he raised a substantial amount of money that was then distributed between the surviving children. His name: Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard.
I greatly enjoyed reading ‘Advance and Retreat’ – not least because I completed my reading of the book while relaxing in a bath in a hotel in the middle of Broadway, New York. Having put my little one to bed, and being alone in New York and on holidays, I took the first bath that I had taken in about five years (I normally shower because I tell myself there’s no time for a bath). This reflects the very relaxed state of mind I was in when I read the concluding chapters of Advance and Retreat – one that was entirely conducive to my building serious natural sympathies with the much-maligned General. Let me say now though, lest any of you should fear that the thoughts expressed in this paper owe more to a bath-salts induced delirium than they do to any solid logic, that the material I am quoting from tonight came entirely from that part of the book that I had already completed reading before taking that well-earned and well-remembered bath in Broadway.

The importance of Advance and Retreat for our purposes, at any rate, lies not in the way it portrays the leadership skills (or otherwise) of John Bell Hood, but rather in the way Hood portrays the leadership skills of his commanders in the book – Jackson, Longstreet, and of course the most celebrated general of them all – the immortal Robert E. Lee.

Bobby Lee of course penned almost nothing about himself through which we might gain insight into his method of leadership. This must in part reflect the extraordinary humility of the man, who seemed to make no attempt at all after the war to answer his many critics, by giving any written defense of his own decisions or actions during the war. It doubtless also reflects though that Lee in his later years was still working through unresolved issues with his own father. Indeed, during those last years in Lexington, when Lee should have been working on his own memoirs, he was busy reworking a history of his father, ‘Light Horse Harry’ Lee, in an attempt to rescue the man from the mire of ignominy into which his name had sunk, and that for the most understandable of reasons.

However we understand Lee’s silence, it did at any rate fall to others to extol the virtues of the marble man, and there have never been any shortage of persons ready to take up that challenge – extolling his remarkable piety, compassion, and fairness, as well as his military brilliance. I would be happy at this point to join that great long line of admirers and enter into yet another eulogy upon the greatness of ‘Uncle Robert’ (as he was often affectionately referred to) and I had sincerely considered giving an alternative paper tonight, simply entitled ‘My love affair with Robert E. Lee’. However that is not the title of this paper, and I will try to resist breaking into any soliloquy of praise and restrict myself solely to a discussion of his style of leadership, and even more narrowly to the leadership style of Lee as discussed in ‘Advance and Retreat’ – the memoirs of John Bell Hood.

I have cut out two chunks of the book that I intend to read to you in full tonight. One of these is a very long chunk, running over several pages. The other is a relatively short chunk, adding up to about half a page. I will start reading the first chunk, the longer one, in a moment. Keep in mind when I do please that Hood’s book, and this part of the book that extols the leadership style of Robert E. Lee, was not written for the purpose of extolling the leadership style of Robert E. Lee. It was written for the purpose of defending the leadership style of John Bell Hood against his many post-war detractors (chief among them being his former commander Joseph Johnston). It could be that Hood has twisted the facts about Lee to suit his own purpose. Having said that, I suspect that Hood is spot-on about Lee. Let me read the passage to you without further delay, and you can make up your own mind.

(reading of the first extract from Hood’s memoirs)

Without wanting to simply repeat too much what has just been read, let me summarise Hood’s position, as outlined in these pages.
Hood contrasts what he calls the Lee-Jackson school of leadership with what he understands to be the Joe Johnston School of leadership. The Lee style of leadership attempts to make maximum use of the strategic offensive. It is characterised by boldness and energy, and makes a minimum use of defensive entrenchments. It yields strong results both in terms of battles won and in terms of the level of morale experienced by the army. It is this style of leadership with which Hood associates himself.

The Johnston style of leadership, on the other hand, is characterised by caution and careful planning. It attempts to avoid any unnecessary risk, prefers to always fight on the defensive, and so attempts to minimise the loss of life through repeated use of entrenchments, though, in Hood's analysis, the low number of battlefield casualties is more than compensated for by the large number of desertions that are the inevitable counterpart to this style of leadership.

Whether Hood is right in his analysis of Johnston need not overly concern us here, but let me note in passing that it was no lesser historian than Richard McMurry who in my hearing referred to Johnston as the spiritual twin-brother of Federal General George B. McClellan. Both men constantly complained that they did not have enough troops to risk a full engagement. Both men repeatedly fought on the defensive, and both men were soundly beaten by their opposing generals in one battle after another.

McClellan, you will remember, was thrashed back by Lee again and again in the Peninsula Campaign of 1862. Ironically it was Johnston who had allowed McClellan to get within earshot of the church bells of Richmond until he was wounded in the battle of Seven Pines, after which Lee took command. Lee then proceeded to turn the tables on McClellan, leaving a thin line of defense between the Union forces and Richmond, and attacking the vulnerable flank of Union General Fitz John Porter in strength. McClellan, despite having vastly superior numbers, could not stomach, so it would seem, the violent slaughter that his troops were being subjected to, and so he retreated further and further until he was eventually forced to withdraw altogether. And so he left Confederate territory having suffered far fewer losses than the Southerners, but having lost the war (at least up to that point).

Johnston’s encounters with Sherman were nowhere near as colourful as were McClellan’s with Lee, but neither was Johnston facing an opponent as aggressive as Robert E. Lee. Johnston's battle strategy for the army of the Tennessee was pretty straightforward. He would fortify an entrenched position and then wait for Sherman to attack it. Sherman of course did not attack it, but marched around it, after which Johnston would retreat to another entrenched position further back and watch as Sherman marched around him again. Johnston’s steady retreat may have come at even less cost in human life than did McClellan’s, but his lack of success was equally dismal.

It is the leadership style of Lee though that must concern us for the rest of our time here, and my feeling is that Hood, as I've suggested, has got Lee dead right. Lee’s boldness and daring and his repeated use of the strategic offensive surely were the essential ingredients to his many successes, and it is at these points that his style is most easily distinguished from that of his many less successful military peers - both Federal and Confederate.

Lee took the initiative outside of Richmond, and aggressively stayed on the offensive until the Union forces left for home. He took the same approach in most of the battles that followed in 1862 and 1863, meeting with repeated success, most memorably at Chancellorsville, where Lee turned the tables on the arrogant General Hooker.

Hooker entered the Southern States with an army almost twice the size of Lee’s and swore that his plan of attack was so foolproof that God Himself would not be able to prevent the destruction of the Confederate army! And yet it was not long before Hooker was found scurrying back across the Rappahannock with his tail between his legs, having been completely confounded by Jackson’s flanking march and by the vigour of Lee's attack!
Now I suspect that any sense of mystery that I might initially have managed to instil in you over the strange title of my talk has by now completely dissipated. Indeed, I suspect that the initial question I raised - ‘What on earth could Confederate General John Bell Hood have to teach us about leadership?’ - has by this stage transported itself from the realm of the mysterious and confounding to the realm of the bleeding obvious, if indeed some of us had not placed it there to begin with.

Rather than risk boring you therefore by persisting any further with this frontal assault (as it were) on the relative merits of certain styles of leadership, let me break off for a moment to approach the question from a different angle (thereby performing a sort of rhetorical flanking manoeuvre of sorts) by sharing with you how these insights of Hood became relevant to me in my specific managerial responsibilities.

About mid way through 2001 I found it necessary to devote some concentrated thought to the question of why our church was not moving forward, and had indeed not been moving forward for the best part of a year.

Our Sunday attendances were down in number and we were not meeting budget. To some churches this might mean cutting back on the number of overseas missions supported. In our case such problems raise the possibility of imminent financial insolvency, as we have no reserves to fall back on if we fall behind in our bills. The situation therefore required some immediate analysis.

Now it is said that the strength of an army can be divided into three areas of equal importance:

1. Force of Arms (which includes the numbers and health of your troops)
2. Position
3. Morale

As a student of military history, I had known this equation for some time, but it wasn’t until I read Advance and Retreat that it occurred to me that the strength of a church could be assessed in similar terms.

What was our force of arms? How many troops did we have, and how capable were they? What was our position in the community? Were we well respected and well connected to community resources? And finally, what was the morale level of the troops? I suspect that any number of businesses can be fruitfully assessed using the same criteria, but perhaps most especially churches, schools and charitable organisations that depend largely upon the work of volunteers in order to function properly.

In our case, our total force of arms was indeed small, and yet we had always been small, and, like Lee, we had never overly concerned ourselves with numbers, as this had not inhibited us greatly in the past.

As to our position, we were in an enviable position - well known and well respected for our many years of service to the youth of our area in particular.

It was in the third area - in the area of morale that we were most obviously lacking. The signs of this became obvious enough once I started to look for them. The paucity of persons volunteering for front-line service, the small numbers staying for morning tea on a Sunday or initiating spontaneous get-togethers, and the distinct lack of missionary zeal on the part of the laity. The boys, we might say, were simply not ready for a brawl.

I have not been to many seminars on general business management, but I have been to plenty of talks and seminars on church management. As I reflected on these, it occurred to me that most of the focus these presentations has been on the first two areas. How do we grow our numbers and so increase our force of arms? How do we better position ourselves for effective work in the community? Not a lot of attention is given to the issue of morale, though in Hood’s analysis it is the single most important factor in determining the success or failure of an entire army.

This led me to an extensive analysis of why our morale had hit such a low point, and then to giving thought as to how we might regain it.
Here again, I took my lead from Hood. In a church or a school or an army, there can be any number of reasons why morale might rise and fall - a change in leadership, poor conditions, inedible rations, etc. Hood is surely right though in suggesting that the key factor determining the morale of an army revolves around how it is performing in its fundamental task as an army. Is it carrying lines, taking colours and winning battles? If these things are happening, then the army can probably endure all sorts of deprivation and change without losing its spirits. Conversely, if these things are not happening, it won't matter how well-shod and well-provisioned the army is, we can expect poor morale and desertions in large numbers.

To translate Hood's wisdom to my own context, I had to ask 'how well is our church functioning as a church?' Are we, in our own way, carrying lines, taking colours and winning battles? I found it hard at first to take seriously the thought that we might not be. After all, our little band was constantly being lauded by the community, the council and the media for our work amongst local young people. And yet, when I reflected more strenuously upon the matter, I realised that it was actually only a small number of the persons in our little company who were actually directly engaged in the much-lauded work. Their morale was high. Meanwhile though the rest of the troops were not only uninvolved, but were largely uninformed about what was going on!

I will not bore you with the details as to how we have gone about trying to reintegrate the outreach work of the parish back into the mainstream of congregational life. Suffice it to say that it is an ongoing work, but that the goal is clear. We must, in our own way, try to carry lines, take colours and win battles, and we must try to do so in a way that involves every member of our corps in the process. In our context, the war is against illicit drugs, racial prejudice and a grasping and individualistic middle-class culture, rather than against the blue-bellies, but the principles are the same. If we want to go on functioning as a powerful fighting force, then we must maintain morale, and if we are going to maintain morale, then we must remain on the offensive, and we must involve all of our troops in that offensive.

Now it may appear to some that the endpoint of my analysis is a simple statement of commonsense. Strip this wisdom of its Civil War jargon, and have I said anything more than that if you want to be a successful leader, then you have to get your team to work at their jobs in a way that is courageous and aggressive?

Let me say firstly, in response to this, that if it is that obvious, then such good sense is nonetheless not very widespread in organisations such as mine. On the contrary, the time-honoured approach for most church leaders, when faced with shrinking numbers and poor morale, is to hold an organ recital or a church BBQ. A little bit of Hood's wisdom will show that this is a disastrous response. If morale is low because the members of the church do not feel that they are being productive as a church, then holding a feel-good meeting is not likely to improve the situation. And worse still is the possibility that it will improve the situation, but at the expense of the community's proper sense of identity.

Let me explain. Unlike an army, the purpose of a church can be a little hard to define. Most of us know that it has something to do with worship, mission and community, but we are not always sure as to how we should balance up these different elements. If morale is going down because the church is not functioning properly in its mission, and we respond to this by trying to enhance the community feel, then what we are doing is attempting to develop a community that does not revolve around worship or mission. In other words, we are developing a community that exists for its own sake. This is the process I suspect through which many a good Christian mission has been gradually transformed into a sort of middle-class ecclesiastical golf club.

The John Bell Hood alternative of course would be to get that church victoriously engaged in pushing back the enemy - be that enemy drugs, street violence, poverty or simple spiritual emptiness. In so doing one would be building the community identity around the missionary activity. Thus the church would not loose touch with its raison d'etre.

Let me leave the discussion of the relevance of Hood to ecclesiastical leadership right there, and make one further point about the simple commonsense of Hood's approach.
Hood's analysis, I believe, cannot be reduced to the simple formula ‘that aggressive fighting wins battles’. The formula is a little more complex than that. It is rather ‘that aggressive and successful fighting tends to build high morale amongst the troops, and that troops with high morale tend to fight aggressive and successful battles’. Let me say too that if you notice a certain circularity in this formula you are correct, and this is an indication of the fact that what we are dealing with here is an ongoing pattern of leadership, rather than any short-term leadership strategy. Indeed, in Hood’s analysis, it is a pattern of leadership that arises directly out of the character of the leader. And this brings us to our second and final excerpt from Hood:

(reading of second extract from Hood’s memoirs)

If you notice a touch of fatalism in Hood’s final words here, then I think you are right. Joe Johnston was never going to be the leader Robert E. Lee was, and the army that had been schooled for so many years under the Joe Johnston School of cautionary fighting never really stood a chance when pitted against a more aggressively trained outfit. That was certainly Hood’s perspective, and that was Hood’s excuse for the terrible carnage of Franklin and the destruction of the Army of the Tennessee. He had inherited that army too late to be able to turn it around!

History, on the whole, has judged Hood more harshly than that, and I must leave you to arrive at your own conclusions about the merits and demerits of Hood the man and Hood the General. The character that I unreservedly commend to you tonight though is Hood the professor in the School of Leadership Theory. Surely he is right - that a strong army must be characterised by courage and aggression. And surely he is equally correct in believing that a courageous and aggressive army can only be produced by a courageous and aggressive leader.

Indeed, the ultimate lesson we may have to learn from Hood is that when it comes to the leadership of churches, schools and armies, we must choose our leaders very carefully – more carefully perhaps than did Jefferson Davis, when he chose Hood to take the reins of the Army of the Tennessee.

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