

6: *The Road to East Tennessee*

promised a great deal to the Union cause. Here was the asset President Lincoln had looked for in vain elsewhere in the South—a solid nucleus of Unionists who would rally around a Federal army the moment such an army appeared. The highland people were loyalists, and the central highlands ran over into North Carolina and down into northern Georgia and Alabama as well; establish a Union army in the upper Tennessee Valley, and the Confederacy might well begin to disintegrate at the core. Mr. Lincoln had believed—often rather against the evidence—that the Confederacy was not the monolithic unit its leaders said it was. Here was one place where he could prove it.

Whatever had really driven the people of the South to secede, it was undeniable that loyalty to the old Union ran strong wherever the slave population was small. In the Southland, as a whole, there was one slave to every two white people; in east Tennessee there was one slave to twelve whites. Most people were small farmers, poor, cut off from the main currents of Southern life, feeling no kinship whatever with the wealthy slaveowning class. In his distrust of the plantation aristocracy, Andrew Johnson accurately reflected the viewpoint of his own people. Most of them, probably, were willing to submit passively to Confederate authority, but they would do nothing whatever against the Union and they would rejoice openly if Confederate authority were removed.⁴

There was another matter of great practical importance. The most significant railway line in the South was the one that threaded the length of Tennessee, giving Richmond its connection with the west. If a Union army could be planted permanently across that railroad line the Confederacy would be in a dire fix; as a Richmond editor pointed out, in such case "the empire of the South is cut in twain and we become a fragmentary organization, fighting in scattered and segregated localities, for a cause which can no longer boast the important attribute of geographical unity."⁵ Before Bull Run, President Lincoln had been aware of the strategic possibilities here, and late in September he wrote that he wanted an expedition "to seize and hold a point on the Railroad connecting Virginia and Tennessee, near the mountain pass called Cumberland Gap."⁶