

The Early Morning of War: Bull Run, 1861

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Review

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Complexity and Confusion at the Opening of the Civil War

The battle of Manassas (Bull Run) in July 1861, served as an early pivot point in the American Civil War, indicating that the conflict would be longer and more costly than many in the North or South would have imagined previously. In *The Early Morning of War* Edward G. Longacre turns his attentions to this campaign and its participants, noting many of the well-known stories and details, while casting a critical eye that considers alternative interpretations of some of these standard and time-honored elements. To be sure, First Manassas or First Bull Run, as the engagement came to be known, let the careers of some of those involved emerge or develop, while those of others languished into obscurity or at least fell into some form of abeyance. If the battle and its surrounding campaign failed to prove decisive in ending the fledgling war, it also demonstrated a level of sacrifice and determination on both sides that suggested that this struggle would dwarf others in the American experience in terms of the expenditure of blood, treasure and resources.

The author is certainly well-established in assessing the roles of individuals in the war. Edward Longacre has produced a lengthy list of studies of persons ranging from Ulysses Grant, Joshua Chamberlain and James Harrison Wilson for the Union to Wade Hampton, George E. Pickett and William Dorsey Pender for the Confederacy. He has also contributed work on various cavalry operations and an earlier volume on mounted raids that provides an excellent look at those undertakings. This background gives him a strong foundation on which to draw conclusions and render assessments. What emerges in this study is a probing examination of the efforts taken on the part of the combatants. *The Early Morning of War* highlights the degree to which political imperatives and personal foibles played roles in dictating military action in Virginia in the

summer of 1861 and the ways in which these factors helped to shape the subsequent decision-making and operations that surrounded that action.

Longacre begins his study with the circumstances out of which military activity was expected to occur in Virginia as the Civil War entered its first summer. He demonstrates that Washington City was a sieve of sensitive information that had a bearing on such Union troop movements, often passed to the opposition through the compliant hands of widowed socialite Rose Greenhow and others that complicated matters for the Federal military planners, although it is interesting that the author allows this intelligence greater significance in the text than an end note questioning its value suggests (pp. 529-530).

To be sure, Union commander Irvin McDowell felt tremendous pressure to move toward the Confederate capital of Richmond. Factors ranging from weather and logistical demands to unexpected encounters with the opposing forces shaped subsequent actions rather than overt dalliance on McDowell's part. In Longacre's description, the Federal approach to Manassas seems a bit less haphazard. Nevertheless, if the Union field commander "arrived at Centreville without a tactical plan," as Longacre also contends in a bid to explain how McDowell was more competent in orchestrating the campaign than is usually credited, that failure, and the need to develop one on the fly, still must rest with him (p. 278).

The author has moments of a storyteller's flair. The saga of Sullivan Ballou, made popular through the Ken Burns Civil War series, and the pre-war hunting adventure in which Joseph Johnston refused to take a shot at the fowl he and his companions had been stalking lest his reputation as an excellent marksman be called into question are among the well-known depictions of character and personality retold here. The work also includes a restive James E.B. Stuart, held in check through the "misuse of their mounted arm" by the Confederate commanders and the inability of those troops to have as much impact upon the routed Federals as "Stuart and some of his troopers would later claim (p. 394)." Longacre appears to take special delight in describing the plight of Northern political figures who had come to witness the action and became participants as the Union forces unraveled around them in retreat, including a hapless New York congressman Alfred Ely, who avoided summary execution at the hands of an angry Southern officer, but remained a high-profile Confederate captive for months after the battle.

Throughout, the author works at being fair-minded in his evaluations. Robert Patterson lacks a sufficient "degree of perceptivity," for which Winfield Scott allowed the subordinate "too much leeway." Nor had the former "demonstrated an aptitude for independent command, even in Mexico," despite the latter's initial confidence in his capabilities in that capacity. Muddled communications hampered and deteriorated their once-close relationship and the effectiveness of Patterson's leadership suffered. Further impacted by low morale in his own ranks, particularly regarding concerns over the defection of three-month volunteers from the command at this critical juncture, the Irish-born, Pennsylvania general with Mexican War credentials, seemed out of his element. Taking the most conservative, or safest path, left matters beyond his ability to control events in his sector in any meaningful sense. Eventually, when he failed to contribute to the larger campaign by thwarting Joseph Johnston's movement from the Valley to Manassas, Patterson would be relieved of command and discharged from the service, albeit honorably.

Despite such portrayals, one of the most significant difficulties for the author arises in assessing motivations. The narrative framework allows the action to unfold, but when specific choices have to be made or actions taken, the ground for evaluation seems less certain. Thus, when Johnston and P. G. T. "Gustave" Beauregard both appear on the scene at Manassas, the author accepts the latter's postwar recollections as the guiding component before speculating what Beauregard "probably meant" regarding the chances of being "second-guessed or countermanded by his superior within earshot of his subordinates, an understandable attitude but one he could hardly admit in print (p. 369)."

Of the most famous battle feature, the application of the name "Stonewall" to Thomas J. Jackson, Longacre accepts the variety of explanations that have existed, but signals his embrace of the less flattering notion that Barnard Bee was unhappy that Jackson would not move his men forward to assist. Likewise, he critiques the supposition that Northern civilians enhanced the panic among Union troops at the close of the engagement, as well as other factors, including the role of the Manassas Gap Railroad in shifting Southern reinforcements from the Shenandoah, as colored more by romantic retelling than by reality.

The author deserves high marks for allowing so much of the attention to move from the "Stonewall" moment on Henry House Hill to the other important

parts of the battlefield. His emphasis on the tactical movements along the Confederate right (and Union left) add substance to the nature of the engagement that occurred away from the point at which Jackson took his famous stand, creating a fuller picture of the fighting.

Despite the stunning defeat on the Plains of Manassas, the Union defensive efforts, also ably depicted here, helped to ensure that even those Confederates who had hoped to do so could not follow-up their victory effectively. This volume's greatest strength rests with the ability of the author to convey the confusing and complex environment that, in this instance, allowed the Confederates to do little "more than savoring their triumph (p. 477)," while the Federals moved from a state of shock and panic, sprinkled with signs of resolution, to a determination to regroup and rebound, amidst calls for assessment and accountability.

The Early Morning of War will still have to compete with William C. "Jack" Davis's 1977 volume, *The Battle at Bull Run* as the "standard history" of the campaigns associated with First Manassas, but the Longacre study offers the addition of the scholarship that has emerged in the intervening period. Numerous maps assist the reader less familiar with the terrain, but a map on the opening maneuvers at Bull Run (p. 288) is not nearly as readable as are those on the route of Irvin McDowell's army from Washington into Virginia (p. 193) or that of the retreat of the Union forces from Manassas (p. 450). In any case, readers will emerge from their perusal of the volume with a sense of the complexities of the situation that prevailed at this early stage of the conflict and the degree to which circumstances were never as clear-cut as they might appear on the surface. The atmospherics of Manassas would have ample time and opportunity for other factors to emerge that would influence and reshape them, but *The Early Morning of War* allows for an analysis of this crucial campaign and its ramifications for a war destined to continue beyond that immediate horizon.

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