

A Single Grand Victory: The first campaign and Battle of Manassas

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Review

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Rafuse, Ethan S. *A Single Grand Victory: The First Campaign and Battle of Manassas*. Scholarly Resources, \$60.00 ISBN 842028757

First blood

Comprehensive study investigates climactic battle

By July 1861, Americans impatiently awaited the first momentous battle of a civil war that was only three months old. In the opening passages of **A Single Grand Victory**, Ethan S. Rafuse, professor of history at the United States Military Academy at West Point, notes that although divided on numerous issues, most Americans, whether living in the North or the newly established Confederacy, agreed that a single climactic battle would produce a decisive victory that would persuade the opposition to abandon its war objectives and settle the conflict.

Although a few minor military clashes had already transpired since Confederate forces won the surrender of Fort Sumter, this greatly anticipated climactic battle ultimately occurred in Virginia in mid-summer 1861. Staged within a small geographical area that separated Washington, D.C., from Richmond, a grand campaign unfolded in the third week of July. By nightfall, July 21, the armed forces of the Confederate States of America claimed victory on the banks of Bull Run near Manassas Junction. In a day of chaotic and bitter combat, the butcher's bill listed more than 800 soldiers killed in action and another 2,700 wounded. To the surprise of citizens on both sides, the anticipated result--a rapid withdrawal of hostilities by a defeated enemy--did not occur. Instead, the United States' forces would recover from the brief setback, and a brutal war would continue to consume manpower and resources for four more years, resulting in a cost of over 625,000 American lives.

In this highly readable, judicious, and comprehensive battle narrative, Rafuse provides a sophisticated study of First Manassas. The book incorporates

the author's familiarity with battle literature and the battlefield and offers insights supported by recent military, political, and cultural scholarship. Rafuse capably analyzes important factors that influenced the decision of President Lincoln, against the advice of his military counsel, to issue orders that advanced United States military forces on a questionable offensive towards Manassas. He examines competing Union and Confederate war policies and provides insight into the political context behind the unfolding battlefield drama. Supported by a solid foundation of socio-political history, the author ably narrates the critical events and associated operational and tactical decisions that molded the Bull Run/Manassas campaign, the shockingly brutal face of battle, and the resulting outcome, which saw the victorious Confederate army unable to mount effective pursuit because it was, as Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston concluded several years later, more disorganized by victory than that of the United States by defeat. Rafuse observes that in the initial aftermath of First Manassas, Southern confidence and morale soared. One Confederate newspaper reported Yankee armies would never again advance beyond cannon shot of Washington. Another heralded the breakdown of the Yankee race, and their unfitness for empire and asserted the South could now take the scepter of power and adapt to its new destiny. The author soundly argues, however, that these emotional Southern pronouncements proved short-lived, and collapsed entirely under a grudging awareness that in spite of having inflicted a humiliating defeat, it was clear the determination of Lincoln and the North to preserve the Union remained remarkably strong. In the weeks that followed, the resolve of the North manifested itself in the presence of thousands of new soldiers--enlisted for three years of war service--that swelled the ranks of United States armies east and west.

Ethan Rafuse has produced a sound overview of the first major battle of the Civil War, providing an exciting narrative of significant events that foretold a fiery trial to come. The unresolved legacy of First Manassas left the combatants grappling with the political, social, and military complexities of total war; and as National and Confederate armies contested increasingly bloodier killing fields--none of which would become **A Single Grand Victory**--an entire generation of Americans experienced a level of applied violence far uglier than they could have ever foreseen.

Stacy D. Allen, an 18-year veteran of the National Park Service, currently serves as chief park ranger at Shiloh National Military Park in Tennessee and Mississippi. His essay on the early war experiences of General Lewis Wallace,

appears in Grant's Lieutenants: From Cairo to Vicksburg(2001), edited by Steven E. Woodworth.