

# BATTLE DIGEST™



Lessons for Today's Leaders

Volume 4 ★ Issue 3

American Civil War:

## First Bull Run

**DATE:**

July 21, 1861

**LOCATION:**

Manassas, Virginia

### OPPOSING FORCES

**Union Army:** 35,000 soldiers in the Army of Northeastern Virginia, commanded by Brig. Gen. Irvin McDowell. His division commanders were Brig. Gen. Daniel Tyler (1st Div.), Brig. Gen. David Hunter (2nd Div.), Col. Samuel Heintzelman (3rd Div.), Theodore Runyon (4th Div.), and Col. Dixon Miles (5th Div.).

**Confederate Army:** 32,000 soldiers in the combined Armies of the Potomac, commanded by Brig. Gen. Pierre G.T. Beauregard, and the Shenandoah, commanded by Gen. Joseph E. Johnston. Johnston brought around 8,500 men from the Shenandoah Valley and was in overall command as their senior officer. His five brigades—Brig. Gen. Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson (1st Bde.), Col. Francis Bartow (2nd Bde.), Brig. Gen. Barnard Bee Jr. (3rd Bde.), Brig. Gen. E. Kirby Smith (4th Bde.), and Col. J.E.B. Stuart (Cavalry)—played significant roles in the battle.

### HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

In April of 1861, after Confederate guns forced the surrender of Fort Sumter, the American Civil War began. Both sides rushed to build armies and prepare for what most thought would be a short war. But the first pitched battle, along a creek in northern Virginia known as Bull Run, would shatter those expectations when inexperienced generals - with untrained staff - led their mostly amateur soldiers to war. As the battle began, a clever Union flanking maneuver initially had the surprised Confederates on their heels. But the Union offensive stalled against determined resistance and reinforcements. And by late afternoon, the humiliated Union army was streaming back to Washington in defeat. The wake-up call had sounded: This war would not be quick or easy. It would require the serious business of building professional armies for the years ahead.

### STRATEGY & MANEUVER

**Actions by the Union** – The storm clouds of Southern secession had been building for years before bursting under the April 1861 bombardment of Fort Sumter. Newly elected President Abraham Lincoln faced the grim reality of war with an unprepared army that was small (around 17,000 men stationed mostly out West) and ill equipped for the kind of war that would



surrendered, Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to serve 90 days. He also ordered a naval blockade of Southern ports. During this chaotic time, state regiments converged on Washington amid the battle cry, “On to Richmond!”

By early July, Lincoln’s fledgling army was taking shape. Gen. George McClellan led 20,000 troops in western Virginia, while Maj. Gen. Robert Patterson led 18,000 troops in the upper Shenandoah Valley. Meanwhile, Brig. Gen. Irvin McDowell commanded the amalgamation of roughly 35,000 men around Washington. (*Map 1*)

Amid growing public pressure and the reality of soon-expiring enlistments, Lincoln needed to act. He looked to McDowell to begin a campaign toward Richmond, with an initial objective to seize the critical railroad junction at Manassas - where the north/south Orange & Alexandria and the east/west Manassas Gap Railroad converged. In this new era of railroads, it was the essence of key terrain.

McDowell planned to pin down the Confederates along Bull Run’s main crossing sites while turning the Confederate right flank to defeat them or force their retreat to Richmond. The entire operation rested on the assumption that Patterson could keep Gen. Joseph E. Johnston’s Confederate Army of 12,000 occupied in the Shenandoah Valley to prevent him from reinforcing Brig. Gen. Pierre G.T. Beauregard at Manassas. Scott telegraphed Patterson to ensure this would be accomplished, then reassured McDowell it would be done. On 16 June, McDowell’s army broke camp and moved toward Centerville.

Leading the column was Brig. Gen. Daniel Tyler’s division, which arrived in Centerville on the 18th. The same day, he took elements of his lead brigade south to reconnoiter Blackburn’s Ford, where he planned his feint. When he saw Confederates across the creek, he opened fire to gauge their strength. After the Confederates returned fire, the back and forth lasted nearly four hours before Tyler called a halt. It seemed he had found the main Rebel position. Meanwhile, McDowell and his engineers were doing their own reconnaissance when they realized that the terrain in the east would make the original plan impossible. Later that day, McDowell flipped his plan: Instead of enveloping the Confederate right flank, he would envelop the left. He spent the next day determining the best routes for movement.

With experienced troops, it would have been a good plan. The enemy was concentrated at the lower fords, and without Johnston’s army, they would be significantly outnumbered. But McDowell’s army was moving