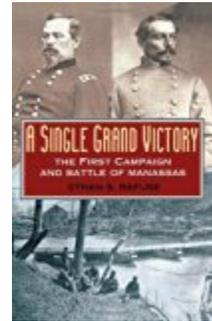


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ethan S. Rafuse. *A Single Grand Victory: The First Campaign and Battle of Manassas*. The American Crisis Series: Scholarly Resources, 2002. xv+ 226 pp. \$17.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8420-2876-9.

Reviewed by David S. Heidler (Colorado State University–Pueblo)  
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This seventh entry in Steve Woodworth's series on the Civil War era covers in remarkable detail the events leading up to the first Battle of Manassas, as well as the campaign and battle itself. Ethan Rafuse brings to the task special qualifications beyond his fine scholarship in Civil War Studies, specifically his time as a park ranger at Manassas, which have made him familiar with both the terrain and some relatively obscure sources that shed light on such well known incidents as how "Stonewall" Jackson came by his famous nickname.

Rafuse places Manassas in its political context by exploring in his opening three chapters the prevailing northern and southern perceptions of war. Both sides, he points out, had reasons to expect that the contest would be settled with one battle, grandly conceived and significantly final in its result. By the time he embarks upon the campaign itself, he has acquainted his readers with the political situations in Washington and Richmond, the personalities in the respective governments and military establishments, and the popular pressures that were driving the policy that resulted in the clash near the railroad junction at Manassas. His treatment of the campaign and battle uses excellent thumbnail sketches of the major figures and a judicious use of anecdote to convey the experiences of major players, minor officers, and common soldiers. The result is a vivid portrait of what happened that hot, July day in 1861.

This is not the kind of book that is fashioned to offer up startlingly innovative interpretations or surprising revelations. Instead, it is intended to synthesize a wealth of secondary authorities and bolster earlier studies with sound primary accounts. Rafuse tips his hat to William C. Davis and John J. Hennessy for their books on

the event, noting that both are strong in particular, but not all, areas of coverage.[1] He remarks, for example, that Hennessy's work is quite good as a military history while Davis is better at placing the battle in its larger political and strategic setting. *A Single Grand Victory* seeks to combine the best elements of these standard accounts, expressing opinions with certitude along the way. Rafuse's measure of William Tecumseh Sherman, for instance, mirrors recent scholarship that assesses Sherman as blessed with occasionally spectacular strategic vision but lamentably handicapped by a seriously flawed understanding of tactics. Moreover, Rafuse presents a balanced story that describes the foibles and heroism of both sides, doing so with empathy and admiration for those untried warriors whose education in combat was violent and unforgiving.

Scholars familiar with this event will quickly recognize the ground covered here: the entire campaign is put in relief against those disasters that plagued minor Union military ventures prior to it. Thus, he explains, for instance, the extreme caution of prudent commanders fearful of stumbling on dreaded masked batteries. The military immaturity of both sides, marked by faltering Confederate troop placements and the languid pace of McDowell's march south, is complemented by clear explanations of why these circumstances existed and why the battle was destined to take place where and when it did. Other writers have noticed the strange coincidence of Confederate and Union plans—Beauregard wanted to turn McDowell's left while McDowell intended to turn Beauregard's right—and have amusingly observed that had these plans worked they would have made for an odd pirouette of armies, but Rafuse resists as too simple such an explanation of the conflicting maneuvers. Instead, he

handles this large and complicated tactical issue adroitly by painstakingly describing the movements of individual units, a technique that could have become tedious had he not leavened it with pertinent quotations and telling anecdotes. And he skillfully shows how the outcome of the contest was by no means predestined to be a Union defeat. McDowell was competent and Beauregard capable, and the fight that broke out at Manassas was more evenly balanced than the outcome suggests. To cite only one of the alternative scenarios, had the hapless Daniel Patterson, whose crucial job was to freeze Confederate forces in the Shenandoah Valley to prevent their appearance at Manassas, been less timid and indecisive, things might have gone much differently. Even as it happened, Confederate reinforcements from the valley were almost too late anyway, and the Union defeat as well as the rout that blemished it was by no means inevitable.

Scholarly Resources has done a typically fine job with production values. The maps are ample and clear. Rafuse provides an artful introduction balanced by a bibli-

ographical essay that covers the scholarly literature on the war in general as well as this campaign specifically. A good index makes finding both people and items quick and easy. Minor problems barely merit mention, such as the absence of a map list in the table of contents for easy reference and the lack of any illustrations to accompany the text. These are small observations, though, rather than complaints.

Rafuse writes well. Occasionally he accomplishes lyricism with his prose, but he always manages clarity with a brisk, muscular style that is a delight to read. For those unfamiliar with the Manassas campaign, he has written a fine introduction to it, a work that knowledgeable scholars will find pleasantly engaging.

[1] William C. Davis, *Battle at Bull Run: A History of the First Major Campaign of the Civil War* 2nd ed. (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 1995) and John J. Hennessey, *Return to Bull Run: The Campaign and Battle of Second Manassas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).

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