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In *Contrasts in Command: The Battle of Fair Oaks, May 31–June 1, 1862,* Victor Vignola provides a detailed account of the Confederate Army's first attempt to take the offensive to relieve the Federals’ mounting pressure on the capital at Richmond. The phrase “contrasts in command” aptly describes Vignola's central thesis, which focuses on the differences between the generalships of the Union and Confederacy's leading commanders. Despite the vulnerability of the Army of the Potomac, which was separated by the flooded Chickahominy River, the Confederate commands of Joseph E. Johnston, supplemented by those of James Longstreet, blundered due to miscommunication, disorganization, and even neglect. Meanwhile, Union generals Edwin Sumner, Darius Couch, and John Abercrombie prevailed through initiative, sensible decision-making, and determination. Although the tactical result of the Battle of Fair Oaks was inconclusive, strategically the Confederates failed in their initial attempt to break the impending Union stranglehold on Richmond.

Vignola uses twelve chapters to prove his case that faulty rebel leadership in the battle was defeated by superior Union generalship. The text covers the first day of fighting, which set the executional tone of the battle, and then continues through the following morning of the conflict. Three appendices are included at the conclusion of the narrative. The first, which is instrumental to Vignola's thesis, explains the supposed “misunderstanding” between Johnston and Longstreet on May 30. As Vignola explains, Johnston established this myth to explain the miscommunication between himself and Longstreet during the battle and to absolve the two generals of responsibility for Confederate failure. After the battle, Johnston and Longstreet blamed another division commander, Benjamin Huger, for being too slow. Vignola dispels the “misunderstanding” theory by pointing out clear decisions that Johnston and Longstreet made during the battle that contributed to the defeat. Johnston mistakenly issued verbal instead of written orders, and he remained away from the center of the action and thus was unable to ensure that his attacks were executed. Longstreet, for his part, only engaged 30 percent of his division in the fight. Vignola's other two appendices provide tactical movements of the Twentieth Massachusetts Regiment and topographical maps of the battle site.

The Battle of Fair Oaks has been largely ignored in the existing historiography. One reason for this is the higher profile, competing battles of 1862 that have captured much of the public's attention: the Seven Days’ Battles, Second Bull Run, Antietam, and Fredericksburg campaigns in the East, and the battles of Shiloh, Perryville, and
Stones  River  in  the  West.  As  a  result,  there  are  many  more  publications  on  these  battles  than  there  are  on  Fair  Oaks.  Further  shifting  public  attention  is  the  number  of  casualties,  a  metric  that  can  improperly  rank  a  battle’s  significance.  At  eleven  thousand  killed,  wounded,  captured,  or  missing,  the  Battle  of  Fair  Oaks  (or  Seven  Pines)  does  not  rank  in  the  top  ten  costliest  battles  of  the  Civil  War,  which  causes  some  to  overlook  it.  There  is  also  the  Robert  E.  Lee  factor  to  consider.  The  predominant  takeaway  from  Fair  Oaks  has  been  the  wounding  of  Johnston,  which  paved  the  way  for  Lee  to  take  command  and  organize  the  Army  of  Northern  Virginia.  But  Lee  did  not  command  in  this  battle,  and  his  later  influence  overshadowed  the  rest  of  the  war  in  the  East.  Finally,  as  R.  E.  L.  Krick  writes  in  this  book’s  foreword,  the  displacement  of  the  Fair  Oaks  battlefield  by  modern  development  has  removed  its  importance  from  public  consciousness  and,  by  doing  so,  obscured  our  understanding  of  it.  Vignola’s  book,  therefore,  fills  a  void  in  the  literature  by  analyzing  a  battle  that  had  major  consequences  in  the  high  stakes  struggle  for  Richmond.

Most  previous  books  on  the  battle  have  not  focused  on  the  northern  side  of  the  action  at  Fair  Oaks,  as  Vignola  does.  The  most  popular  related  source  is  Stephen  W.  Sears’s  *To  the  Gates  of  Richmond*  (1996),  a  text  that  covers  the  entire  Union  effort  along  the  Virginian  peninsula  in  1862.  Other  works  such  as  Joseph  P.  Cullen’s  *The  Peninsula  Campaign  1862:  McClellan  and  Lee  Struggle  for  Richmond*  (1956),  the  multivolume  essay  collection  *The  Peninsula  Campaign  of  1862*  (1997),  edited  by  William  J.  Miller,  and  Steven  H.  Newton’s  *The  Battle  of  Seven  Pines:  May  31-June  1,  1862*  (1993)  cover  the  battle  in  some  detail,  but  Vignola  goes  farther  in  explaining  Confederate  failures  and  Union  successes.

Vignola  also  focuses  on  battle  idiosyncrasies  such  as  independent  command  decisions,  important  topographical  features,  and  political  influences  at  Fair  Oaks.  As  expected  in  any  book  on  a  Civil  War  battle,  Vignola  emphasizes  tactical  leadership  and  execution,  especially  decisions  that  shaped  the  battle’s  outcome.  More  specifically,  he  stresses  Johnston’s  incapacity  to  coordinate  multifaceted  attacks,  arguing  that  the  commanding  general’s  “performance  suffered  from  apparent  paralysis  as  he  lacked  necessary  foresight  to  counteract  the  current  adversity”  (p.  38).  He  also  highlights  Longstreet’s  arrogance,  writing  that  “Longstreet  clearly  blundered  in  his  attempt  at  leading  a  general  engagement  and,  as  history  would  show,  it  would  not  be  the  last  time”  (p.  42).  Vignola  pulls  no  punches  in  his  criticisms  of  the  leading  Confederate  commanders.  Meanwhile,  he  mostly  praises  the  Union’s  leadership,  especially  Sumner,  who  supervised  the  construction  of  the  Grapevine  Bridge  before  the  battle.  When  the  fighting  began,  that  bridge  proved  crucial  to  the  battle’s  development  because  it  allowed  John  Sedgwick’s  division  to  arrive  in  time  to  support  Darius  Couch,  who  was  already  in  the  throngs  of  a  hard  fight.  As  Vignola  shows,  Sumner  built  upon  this  early  success  with  strong  leadership  in  his  placement  of  critical  artillery,  establishing  an  inverted  salient,  and  ordering  timely  counter-charges  that  crushed  the  Confederates’  disjointed  attacks.  Vignola  also  analyzes  the  performances  of  some  lesser-known  soldiers  who  nevertheless  played  important  roles  in  the  battle,  including  William  H.  C.  Whiting,  James  Pettigrew,  Micah  Jenkins,  D.  H.  Hill,  Benjamin  Huger,  Erasmus  Keyes,  and  Samuel  Heintzelman.

Unlike  other  authors  who  have  written  about  Fair  Oaks,  Vignola  shows  that  politics  proved  pivotal  on  both  sides.  For  example,  he  describes  George  B.  McClellan’s  unsuccessful  effort  to  convince  President  Lincoln  to  release  Irwin  McDowell’s  First  Corps  to  strengthen  the  Union  presence  on  the  Peninsula.  Without  McDowell,  the  Union  line  was  unbalanced,  and  McClellan’s  decision  not  to  send  more  forces  south  of  the  Chickahominy  to  circumvent  this  liability  was  a  mistake.  On  the  other  side,  Confederate  President  Jefferson  Davis’s  uncompromising  pressure  on  Johnston’s  replacement,  Gustavus  Smith,  resulted  in  a  second  day  of
poorly coordinated attacks that were no more successful than those on the first. Vignola also devotes significant attention to battlefield topography beyond just that related to the Chickahominy. For example, he introduces us to the swamps, fence lines, and wooded lots that previous authors have not considered but that nevertheless were important to the battle’s outcome. Vignola also reminds readers that battle is more than a series of chess movements between two opposing sides; it also causes irrevocable harm, both physical and psychological, to its combatants, which he reveals through vivid anecdotes.

Vignola’s bibliography includes a diverse selection of sources. Unpublished manuscripts and archival documents abound, while Vignola does not ignore the well-known sources, both primary and secondary. Soldiers’ personal accounts from letters and regimental histories give granularity to the experience of the battle. And the book’s maps, thirteen in total, are clear, concise, and strategically placed throughout the text.

Civil War aficionados and students of military history will find much to like in Vignola’s work, including his clear thesis that the primary reason the Union won the engagement is because of its superior generalship. Prior knowledge of the battle is helpful, but not necessary, to appreciate this book because Vignola’s concise writing gives even novices the ability to walk away with a firm understanding of the engagement’s importance. It is difficult to appease both well-informed readers and beginners, but Vignola successfully strikes this balance. The work is substantive in its evaluation of the military leadership while also providing an gripping narrative of the challenges of battle. In sum, Contrasts in Command is highly recommended for those who wish to understand a critical but often overlooked juncture in the Civil War.
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