
Reviewed by Richard Forziati (Independent Scholar)

Published on H-CivWar (May, 2024)

Commissioned by G. David Schieffler (Crowder College)

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 throes 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.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at 
https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=60024

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.