# Stable Morale After the First Battle of Bull Run

**Alexander Menting**

The first major battle of the American Civil War was fought on July 21, 1861, only preceded by the short siege of Fort Sumter and small skirmishes. It was fought near the Manassas Junction, by the creek of Bull Run in Northern Virginia. The battle marks the beginning of the bloodiest war fought on North American soil. With the capitals of the two halves of the split country so close to one another, the territory between was vitally important to both sides. The battle was the first field test of both the Union and Confederate armies, soldiers, generals, tactics, and the overall fighting strength of both nations. With little strategic value placed on the battle because of the lack of territorial or strategic gain for both the North and South, the significance can be placed on the effect it had on the morale of both sides. In the aftermath of the battle, the South celebrated the victory, and the Northerner's hopes were diminished because of their defeat, but the overall morale of both sides did not waver or change significantly, with both sides merely becoming more resolute in their drive to win the overall conflict.

## Context

In the larger context of the Civil War, the battle did not move borders or have much effect on the current situation War, but it maintained the Confederates' position and ensured their temporary survival. The First Battle of Bull Run, or the First Battle of Manassas as the Confederates called it, was the first large battle in the War, and the two nations were anxious to see which side would prevail. Fought in Northern Virginia, both capitals were near and under threat. The Confederates were under the command of General P.G.T. Beauregard, while the Union army was commanded by General Irvin McDowell, with the numbers initially heavily in the North's favor. The Confederate Army was split between two strategic footholds; the main force placed itself at the Manassas Train Junction, and the other

was positioned further west to defend the flank. The Northern army poised themselves across the larger force at the Manassas Junction, advancing at the request of the Northern constituency to end the conflict quickly. The two forces engaged when General McDowell ordered his troops to cross Bull Run Creek and attack. At the beginning of the battle, the Union had the upper hand, attacking the flanks and forcing a slow retreat until reinforcements from General Johnston of the Confederate army arrived by rail and turned the tide of the battle. What started as a slow advance for the Union turned into a hasty retreat and then degenerated to a full-on rout as the Union troops retreated back into northern territory. The South did not give chase or push their advantage, so the Confederate victory was an indecisive one. Northern bystanders who had come to see the battle and Union soldiers alike were in total disarray, and they retreated in a disorganized rout. Both sides learned that their armies were not prepared for what was to come, and their hopes of a short, unbloody war were dashed.[1] The battle helped to keep the Confederacy alive, and the lack of counterattack kept both capital cities safe from any threat as well. The first battle did not spell disaster for either side yet but did have a small, and short-lasting effect on the morale of the citizens, soldiers, and media of both the Union and the Confederacy.

## Newspaper and Media Reaction

The accounts from the Confederate and Union newspapers during and shortly after the battle show that, while the morale of the two nations was briefly affected, it did not have a significant negative effect on the Union. Firstly, it is important to note that the battle was affecting morale as it was being fought. A newspaper article from the *New York Times* published

1 William J. Cooper Jr. and James J. Cooke, "First Battle of Bull Run." (*Salem Press Encyclopedia*, April 2023.) https://research-ebsco-com.proxysb.uits.iu.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=be9c5a96-03a1-3029-8cc3-25e5c87d6d21.

the day after the battle claimed a Union victory and stated that the Battle of Fort Sumpter had been avenged.[2] This shows the attitudes of the Northern populace as reflected by the media. They were desperate for news of the conflict as the *Times* reported inaccurate information in an effort to release news as quickly as possible. It also displays a sense of vengefulness resulting from the Union defeat at Fort Sumpter, which was probably why Northerners were itching for good news. The article the next day, July 23, clarifies the result of the battle and also talks about the reaction to the news in Brooklyn. The article says that the people were joyous at the news of a victory, then dealt a quick and fatal blow to their morale at the news of the Union Army's defeat. However, it later states, "but one feeling was prominent everywhere, and that was that enough men should be sent into Virginia at once to crush out the rebel force there."[3] While the quick change from good news to bad news was undoubtedly shocking to the Brooklyn populace, the article does not reflect a sense of defeat or surrender. Instead, the people became even more determined to end the rebellion, and a call for more volunteers rose. Other places in the North did not see the battle as a mark of doom for the Union either. The July 27 article from the Wyandotte Commercial Gazette in Kansas City was titled "Not so Bad After All," and stated that the battle was "of comparatively small importance."[4] It later states that the defeat has not shaken the resolve of the Union and that the celebration of the Confederates for their victory will be short-lived.[5] Such steeled resolve and affirmed purpose the Union Newspapers displayed reflect the lack of strategic value of the battle itself and the lack of any morale shock that might be

2 "Victory at Bull's Run--Sumter Avenged." (*New York Times* (1857-1922), Jul 22, 1861.) https://login.proxysb.uits.iu.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/victory-at-bulls-run-sumter-avenged/docview/91643262/se-2.

3 "HOW THE NEWS WAS RECEIVED IN BROOKLYN." (*New York Times (1857-1922),* Jul 23, 1861.) https://login.proxysb.uits.iu.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/how-news-was-received-brooklyn/docview/91622241/se-2.

4 "Not so Bad after All," *Wyandotte Commercial Gazette*, July 27, 1861, https://www.newspapers.com/article/wyandotte-commercial-gazette-editorial-s/28415289/.

5 "Not so Bad after All."

expected in losing the first battle of a conflict. The newspaper articles shown described the people as more determined and not swayed by the results of the battle, supporting the idea that the Union did not suffer a substantial morale dip because of the First Battle of Bull Run.

Southern newspapers also do not describe a significant change in morale because of the battle. The victory did nothing to affirm the misconception that many people had, which was that the war was going to be won in a relatively fast manner. Some editors of newspapers were reported to be telling people that the "war was not yet over" and to prepare themselves for bloodier battles on their path to freedom from the Union.[6] The idea that the War was won already was not circulating throughout the Southern towns. If it was, the newspapers warned against such delusions. These warnings are evidence that the Southerners' morale did not explode out of proportion just because they won the first major battle.

Another factor that reigned in the spirits of the Confederate press and people was the substantial casualties that were being reported along with the news of the victory. One article in the Richmond Dispatch stated, "while we rejoice over the public success, we have to mourn the loss of some of the most gallant spirits and most valuable men of whom the South could boast."[7] The somberness of the results of the first major battle of the War clearly was not only felt on the Northern side. The death toll was unlike any war that the United States had fought before. The fact that newspapers were not only the source of only the positive news of the victory but also the source of the somber news of the casualties is conceivably a reason why their depiction of

6 Cutler J. Andrews. "The Confederate Press and Public Morale." *The Journal of Southern History* 32, no. 4 (1966): 445–65. https://doi.org/10.2307/2204925.

7 "Richmond Dispatch 22 Jul 1861." Historical Newspapers from 1700s-2000s - Newspapers.com. Accessed November 14, 2023. https://www.newspapers.com/image/80618794/?clipping_id=28418719&fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVlLXZpZXctaWQiOjgwNjE4Nzk0LCJpYXQiOjE2OTk5NTg3MjgsImV4cCI6MTcwMDA0NTEyOH0.QxrW4OWOCXysZ0UNcqRsS7uP9UcjKjFFZT1u4GUG8ew.

events is not overconfident or celebratory. If people were getting the news of their victories alongside huge lists of the soldiers who died for those victories, it is understandable why they were not giddy with excitement and triumph. The realization that the Civil War was going to be such a bloody and brutal affair definitely had a major impact on what could have been a huge increase in the morale of the Confederacy.

**Soldier's Thoughts in the Aftermath of the Battle**

The soldiers' testimonies, both of those present at the battle and those not, show that their morale was temporarily swayed, but not swayed in any long-lasting manner. Soldiers who did not fight in the battle expressed feelings of regret that they had not been present but were not filled with great worry or dread at the news of losing the first major battle of the war. One soldier, Thomas Leanord Livermore, said, "My own feeling was that of deep chagrin at not having been present, although now I can say that if it would still have been defeat of the same kind, then I am glad I was not one of the runaways."[8] This mixed feeling of both regret and acceptance is one that could be shared by many who did not fight in the battle. It might have dampened their spirits for the time being, but Livermore mentioned nothing of feeling worried the North any fear of the future in any manner. He mentioned hearing the news, feeling some initial anguish, and then moved on because it did not affect him in a permanent or impactful way. A book covering the battle written by Civil War historian William C. Davis said that the soldiers wrote fairly mixed accounts that told tales of their own bravery up to the point of the retreat and tales of horror at having experienced war for the first time.[9] One soldier wrote,

8 Thomas Leonard Livermore. *Days and Events, 1860-1866: Memoir of Thomas Leonard Livermore*. (Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin and Company), 16. https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cdocument%7C4283412.

9 William C. Davis. *Battle at Bull Run: A History of the first major campaign of the Civil War*. (Norwalk, CT: Easton Press, 1996), 253-256.

"I have seen the horrors of war,"[10] however, Davis wrote, "most of the details of the battle they covered with pride,"[11] speaking about how Union soldiers wrote home about the battle. He also stated that a Union soldier said, "I shall see this thing played out… or die in the attempt."[12] This shows that the Union soldiers, while shaken by the experience of war, were not worried about losing the War, nor did they waver in their determination. With resolute statements and letters of their brave deeds written home, many seemed even more determined to continue the war as long as it would take to win. The Union soldiers' morale was not crippled because of the result of the battle.

Southern soldiers' morale was not greatly affected by the battle because they misunderstood how defeated their enemy was in the lackluster aftermath. Many thought their victory should have been followed by aggressiveness. Directly after the battle, some soldiers did not realize the totality of their victory as not many of them witnessed the rout of the Union army. This is shown in McHenry Howard's, a soldier from Maryland, account when he said in his memoir, "and after crossing Bull Run, by a wide and shallow ford, listlessness and lassitude passed away in the excitement of noticing the abundant evidences of the enemy's hasty flight," and, "the men were now drooping as the excitement wore off… by midday."[13] While the soldiers were noticeably more excited at the prospect that they had totally routed the enemy, their excitement had passed by midday. Evidently, their victory's morale boost was not very significant. The soldiers mentioned in Howard's account did not even know that they beat the Union into such a disorganized retreat. Therefore, the battle did not significantly raise their

10 Davis, *Battle at Bull Run,* 254.
11 Davis, *Battle at Bull Run,* 254.
12 Davis, *Battle at Bull Run,* 255.
13 McHenry Howard. *Recollections of a Maryland Confederate Soldier and Staff Officer Under Johnston, Jackson and Lee: Memoir of McHenry Howard*, (edited by McHenry Howard. Baltimore, MD: Williams and Wilkins Company), 40. https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cdocument%7C4351467.

spirits. The Confederate troops' morale was also brought low by the army's inactiveness, hampering any good that Bull Run did for their spirits. In the days and weeks following the battle, criticisms against the generals making such decisions arose. One soldier, named George Wilson Booth, in the Confederate army, stated, "the policy which determined this prolonged inaction was canvassed and criticized most freely."[14] He then says that the battle had done one thing above all else, and that was that it taught both sides that the war was not going to be decided any time soon.[15] This soldier's opinion was that the results of the battle could have been much more advantageous, and he stated that his sentiment was shared and expressed by others. If the victory at Bull Run had any major effect on the Southerner's morale, it was quickly quenched, at least in part, by their inactivity shortly after. This account shows the separation of ideas between soldiers and their generals, and that separation caused the Battle of Bull Run to have minimal positive effect on morale. This can be attributed to the soldiers' feelings that their leaders squandered an opportunity to attack and, therefore, wasted their victory.

However, a small increase in positive morale was clear. Booth, who had commented on the widespread criticism of the leaders, pointed out, "Manassas [Bull Run] was our 'baptism of fire,'" and still praised the battle as a victory, not only for the South as a whole but for the Southern soldier specifically.[16] This positive effect on morale, however, was mixed with other feelings of missed opportunities and the general experience of warfare that many of the soldiers who fought at the Battle of Bull Run were living through for the first time. The critical sentiments and the commentary on the struggles of a soldier's life are evidence of relatively

14 George Wilson Booth. *A Maryland Boy in Lee›s Army: Personal Reminiscences of a Maryland Soldier in the War between the States, 1861-1865: Memoir of George Wilson Booth*. (Baltimore, MD: Privately Published), 14. https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cdocument%7C4381804.

15 Booth, *A Maryland Boy in Lee's Army*, 14.

16 Booth, *A Maryland Boy in Lee's Army,* 15.

stable morale as a result of Bull Run, as the Southerners were back in the same position they were before the battle.

**Reaction at Home to the Battle's Result**

The letters and diaries of citizens on both sides of the conflict describe how the news of the battle affected them. Northern citizens were filled with sadness, anger, and fear. Most channeled these emotions into determination towards their cause. One perspective came from a nurse, Georgeanna Muirson Bacon, who was working in Washington, D.C. At this point, the Capital was within striking distance of the Confederate Army. Bacon describes a fairly dismal outlook within the capital after the battle. With the wounded pouring in with the remnants of the retreating army, she wrote to her cousin that the days directly following the battle were "hard to bear." However, she went on to say that assurances from General Scott, the Commanding General of the whole Union, were able to reassure her and the general populace that they were safe.[17] A nurse who worked with injured soldiers while participating in civilian life would have a unique perspective as they would have seen things from multiple viewpoints. Because General Scott was able to reassure her, it reflects that it reassured worries she could have been holding from both the perspectives of the soldiers she was treating and the perspective of a citizen of the Union The initial outset of panic and loss of morale described in this account may seem like the Union was dealt a huge blow to their spirit, but it was short-lived, as General Scott mildly improved morale within a few days. The fact that the people were rallied from their sorrows shows that the battle did not have a huge impact on the spirits of the citizens in Washington, D.C.

17 Georgeanna Muirson Woolsey Bacon. *Letters of a Family during the War for the Union 1861-1865, Vol. 1: Letter from Georgeanna Muirson Bacon to Margaret Hodge, July 22, 1861*, (edited by Georgeanna Muirson Woolsey Bacon, Eliza Newton Woolsey Howland Privately Published.) https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cdocument%7C4319554.

If the people at the frontline could be revitalized within days, the effect the battle had elsewhere was probably even less.

Some others in the North had positive outlooks on the battle. Historian Edward Longacre wrote that an abolitionist from New England named Wendell Phillips called the defeat a "godsend"[18] as it would force the North to fight harder and commit to ending slavery in the process. In the same book, Longacre says Reverend W. Bellows, the editor of a religious newspaper, spoke about the "moral necessity of the late defeat."[19] The abolitionists and religious citizens saw the loss as a catalyst for their cause to end slavery, as it would ensure the war would not end in a return to the political status quo. If the North devoted more time, resources, and lives to the war, it was more likely it would be a complete victory, thus increasing the chances that abolition would be achieved. The Union citizenry might have been rattled by the shock of losing the battle, but hopeful outlooks and measures from officials stemmed the defeat from causing lasting damage to the Northern citizens' morale.

Southern civilians celebrated the victory but were not overzealous in their celebrations. The initial joy and celebration that the citizens might have expected was curbed by several factors, including the death toll of the battle and the knowledge that there was more to come. A Richmond citizen named Sallie Brock Putnam described the aftermath of the battle as calm by saying, "the news of the great victory was received by the Southern people with no violent manifestations of joy. To a partial observer the Confederate capital might have been considered unmoved by the stirring news."[20] She later goes on to say that the people were excited but

18 Edward G. Longacre. *The Early Morning of War: Bull Run, 1861*. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2020), 501.

19 Longacre, *The Early Morning of War,* 501.

20 Sallie Brock Putnam, *Richmond during the War: Four Years of Personal Observation: Memoir of Sallie Brock Putnam.* (New York, NY: G.W. Carleton & Co.), 53, https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cdocument%7C4382530.

reserved because of the many people mourning and the "conservative" mindset of the Virginians.[21] The lack of overt celebration is evidence that the people did not see this as a massive victory for the South. While morale definitely rose, as it would with any victory, let alone winning the first major battle, the change was not very dramatic. Another Southern citizen named Lee C. Harby recounted her memories as a child of the aftermath of the battle and said, "it was after this battle that we saw our first sadly glorious spectacle of a military funeral," and, "'sweet and proper it is to die for one's country' was borne into the onlooker's mind by pomp and carnival of war, joined to the sobs, the tears, the anguish of the mourners."[22] Harby describes both triumph and sadness at the funeral, showing the two sides of emotion that the Southerners had to deal with in the wake of the battle. She also compared the "carnival of war" to the sadness felt by those who lost someone to the battle, displaying the emptiness of those triumphant feelings. This observation might have been made in hindsight of losing the war, but the tears and sorrow of the funeral she spoke of shed light on what the Southern citizen was dealing with after the First Battle of Bull Run. It also shows why they were not overly excited by their recent victory. The number of deaths the victory cost and the impending battles to come dampened what would have been a time of celebration in Richmond. While winning the first battle of the war was a step in the right direction, few of the civilians thought it was over with just this one victory. Therefore, overall, the news of the Battle of Bull Run did not have a significant or long-term impact on the morale of the Southern citizenry.

21 Putnam, *Memoir of Sallie Brock Putnam,* 53.

22 Lee C. Harby. *South Carolina Women in the Confederacy, Vol. 1: Memoir of Lee C. Harby*, (edited by Thomas Taylor, Sallie Enders Conner. Columbia, SC: State Company), 67. https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cdocument%7C4368113.

## Effect on Union Strategy and Discipline

While the loss at Bull Run did not destroy the Union's sense of morale, it gave them a necessary wake-up call that would turn their defeat into a lesson learned. Because of the loss, Union leaders changed the overall military strategy and logistics. The North had to change the structure of their military. Their soldiers were not able to perform at the level they had expected, so they enacted a "serious training and supply program for their troops," which ultimately meant "the Union gained a slight advantage from the battle."[23] With the lack of discipline displayed by the totally routed Northern troops and the lack of leadership displayed by their officers, they knew something had to change. The battle put them in a bad position, but they needed to be in that position to see the flaws in their system. Because of this, they rebuilt the army that had been so badly beaten and were able to refine their troops into a viable fighting force. The Union Army would grow "tenfold" and, put under new leadership and new training regimens, they would bounce back from the battle stronger than before.[24] Because of the Union's newfound strength, they positively responded to the defeat and eliminated the shortcomings that the battle had exposed. This also shows that the battle had no long-lasting negative effect on morale because it motivated the Union to improve and strengthened the North's prowess.

## Conclusion

The First Battle of Bull Run was not the bloodiest battle, nor was it the most important. However, it was the first major field battle and that itself places some significance on the outcome. If the Northern people, leaders, or soldiers overreacted, they could have failed at the first blow to their cause. Conversely, if the Southerners blew their victory out of proportion, it could have led to a sense that the war was already won and made them vulnerable to

23 Cooper and Cooke, "First Battle of Bull Run."

24 Timothy Reese. "Squared Away: The Regular Infantry Battalion a First Bull Run." (*On Point* 10, no. 1 (2004): 9–14), 14. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44610473.

overconfidence. However, the Union did not panic for long. They strengthened their resolve and fighting power because of their loss and proved there was no long-term damage to their morale. The Union soldiers and generals who were routed on the field were not discouraged indefinitely. The Confederates also did not over-celebrate the victory, as they recognized the loss of many men in the battle and the reality of the struggle they would endure. Many soldiers had seen combat for the first time, and celebration was not on many soldiers' minds amid the horrors of war they had encountered. Because of these factors, the First Battle of Bull Run had no long-term, significant effect on the morale of the people, soldiers, or media of either the Union or Confederacy.

**Bibliography**

Andrews, J. Cutler. "The Confederate Press and Public Morale." *The Journal of Southern History* 32, no. 4 (1966): 445–65. https://doi.org/10.2307/2204925.

Bacon, Georgeanna Muirson Woolsey. *Letters of a Family during the War for the Union 1861-1865, Vol. 1: Letter from Georgeanna Muirson Bacon to Margaret Hodge, July 22, 1861*, edited by Georgeanna Muirson Woolsey Bacon, Eliza Newton Woolsey Howland Privately Published. https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cdocument%7C4319554.

Booth, George Wilson. *A Maryland Boy in Lee›s Army: Personal Reminiscences of a Maryland Soldier in the War between the States, 1861-1865: Memoir of George Wilson Booth*. Baltimore, MD: Privately Published. https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cdocum ent%7C4381804.

Cooper, William J., Jr., and James J. Cooke. 2023. "First Battle of Bull Run." *Salem Press Encyclopedia*, April. https://research-ebsco-com.proxysb.uits.iu.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=be9c5a96-03a1-3029-8cc3-25e5c87d6d21.

Davis, William C. *Battle at Bull Run: A History of the first major campaign of the Civil War*. Norwalk, CT: Easton Press, 1996.

Harby, Lee C. *South Carolina Women in the Confederacy, Vol. 1: Memoir of Lee C. Harby*, edited by Thomas Taylor, Sallie Enders Conner. Columbia, SC: State Company. https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cdocument%7C4368113.

"HOW THE NEWS WAS RECEIVED IN BROOKLYN." *New York Times (1857-1922),* Jul 23, 1861.https://www.proquest.com/docview/91622241?parentSessionId=neY%2BUI1UUE7%2BwVADx7BjWPCfGPTBysLYqUhlD0kBIV0%3D&accountid=11653&sourcetype=Historical%20Newspapers.

Howard, McHenry. *Recollections of a Maryland Confederate Soldier and Staff Officer Under Johnston, Jackson and Lee: Memoir of McHenry Howard*, edited by McHenry Howard. Baltimore, MD: Williams and Wilkins Company. https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographicentity%7Cdocument%7C4351467.

Livermore, Thomas Leonard. *Days and Events, 1860-1866: Memoir of Thomas Leonard Livermore*. Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin and Company.

Longacre, Edward G. *The Early Morning of War: Bull Run, 1861*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2020.

"Not so Bad after All." *Wyandotte Commercial Gazette*. July 27, 1861. https://www.newspapers.com/article/wyandotte-commercial-gazette-editorial-s/28415289/.

Putnam, Sallie Brock. *Richmond during the War: Four Years of Personal Observation: Memoir of Sallie Brock Putnam.* New York, NY: G.W. Carleton & Co. https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cdocument%7C4382530.

"Richmond Dispatch 22 Jul 1861." Historical Newspapers from 1700s-2000s - Newspapers.com. Accessed November 14, 2023. https://www.newspapers.com/image/80618794/?clipping_id=28418719&fcfToken=eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiIsInR5cCI6IkpXVCJ9.eyJmcmVlLXZpZXctaWQiOjgwNjE4Nzk0LCJpYXQiOjE2OTk5NTg3MjgsImV4cCI6MTcwMDA0NTEyOH0.QxrW4OWOCXysZ0UNcqRsS7uP9UcjKjFFZT1u4GUG8ew.

Reese, Timothy. "Squared Away: The Regular Infantry Battalion a First Bull Run." *On Point* 10, no. 1 (2004): 9–14. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44610473.

"Victory at Bull's Run--Sumter Avenged." *New York Times* (1857-1922), Jul 22, 1861. https://login.proxysb.uits.iu.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/victory-at-bulls-run-sumter-avenged/docview/91643262/se-2.