

To Hell or Richmond

THE 1862 PENINSULA CAMPAIGN

by Doug Crenshaw
and Drew A. Gruber

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SB

Savas Beatie
California

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*This book is dedicated to Bert Dunkerly,
whose constant support and encouragement has pushed us as historians,
opened doors to new sources, and introduced us to great people and wonderful opportunities.
Everywhere we go, someone knows Bert Dunkerly.
Here's to Bert—an excellent historian and a great friend.*

Drew & Doug

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At Fair Oaks Station today, a convenience store is now located on the corner of Nine Mile and Hanover Roads, the “hinge” of the Federal position on May 31, 1862. (dc)

and as always, he was very encouraging and incredibly supportive. Norm Cooper led me on my first tour of the Peninsula and Williamsburg battlefields. Bert Dunkerly rode with me on several trips to the area, including some out-of-the-way sites; he

also introduced me to Drew Gruber. Drew is very knowledgeable about actions on the Peninsula and is probably the expert on the battle of Williamsburg. He also is the director of Civil War Trails and has accomplished some important preservation near Fort Magruder. Rob Orrison and Mark Wilcox are friends and talented writers, and I am proud that they agreed to contribute articles to this book. Thanks to Michael Moore for taking some of us around the Peninsula sites several times over the past years; he possesses a wealth of expertise, and is always willing to share. Vic Vignola has done some excellent research on Fair Oaks. He took me to the



Today, the building at 13181 Hanover Courthouse Rd., Hanover, Virginia, is home to a great museum, the Virginia Repertory Theatre, and a modern restaurant. It is also a great stop to learn about the 1862 battle of Hanover. (htf)

site and shared his very interesting findings. I am grateful to Chris Kolakowski for reviewing the text. As always, Bob Krick of the Richmond National Battlefield Park opened his amazing library to me. Thanks also to publisher Ted Savas for his support, and thanks to the constant patience and encouragement of my wife, Judy.

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Foreword

J. MICHAEL MOORE

The Peninsula Campaign of 1862 is one of the largest operations launched by the Union in the Civil War. On March 17, 1862, Union Maj. Gen. George Brinton McClellan's 121,500-man Army of the Potomac left Washington, D.C. for their much-anticipated strike against the heart of the Confederacy: Richmond, Virginia. In just three weeks, the Army of the Potomac disembarked at Fort Monroe and Newport News Point along with all of their artillery and equipage. McClellan planned for an offensive launched up the historic Virginia Peninsula, bounded by the James and York rivers, against the Confederate capital in Richmond.

Facing this Union juggernaut, Confederate Maj. Gen. John Bankhead Magruder commanded a 13,000-man Army of the Peninsula with three lines of fortifications across the Lower Peninsula. One of the most colorful generals of the Civil War, "Prince John" Magruder, known for his flair and style in dress and manner on and off the battlefield, had been charged with the Peninsula's defense in May 1861. He was matched against McClellan, who was a brilliant organizer and who had raised a first-class fighting force. However, Little Mac's reputation with President Abraham Lincoln's administration was already tarnished.

Established in June 1866, Seven Pines National Cemetery in Sandston, Virginia, is the final resting place for more than 1,300 Civil War soldiers. (dc)

The subsequent military operations should have been a foregone conclusion given the Union advantage in firepower and manpower.

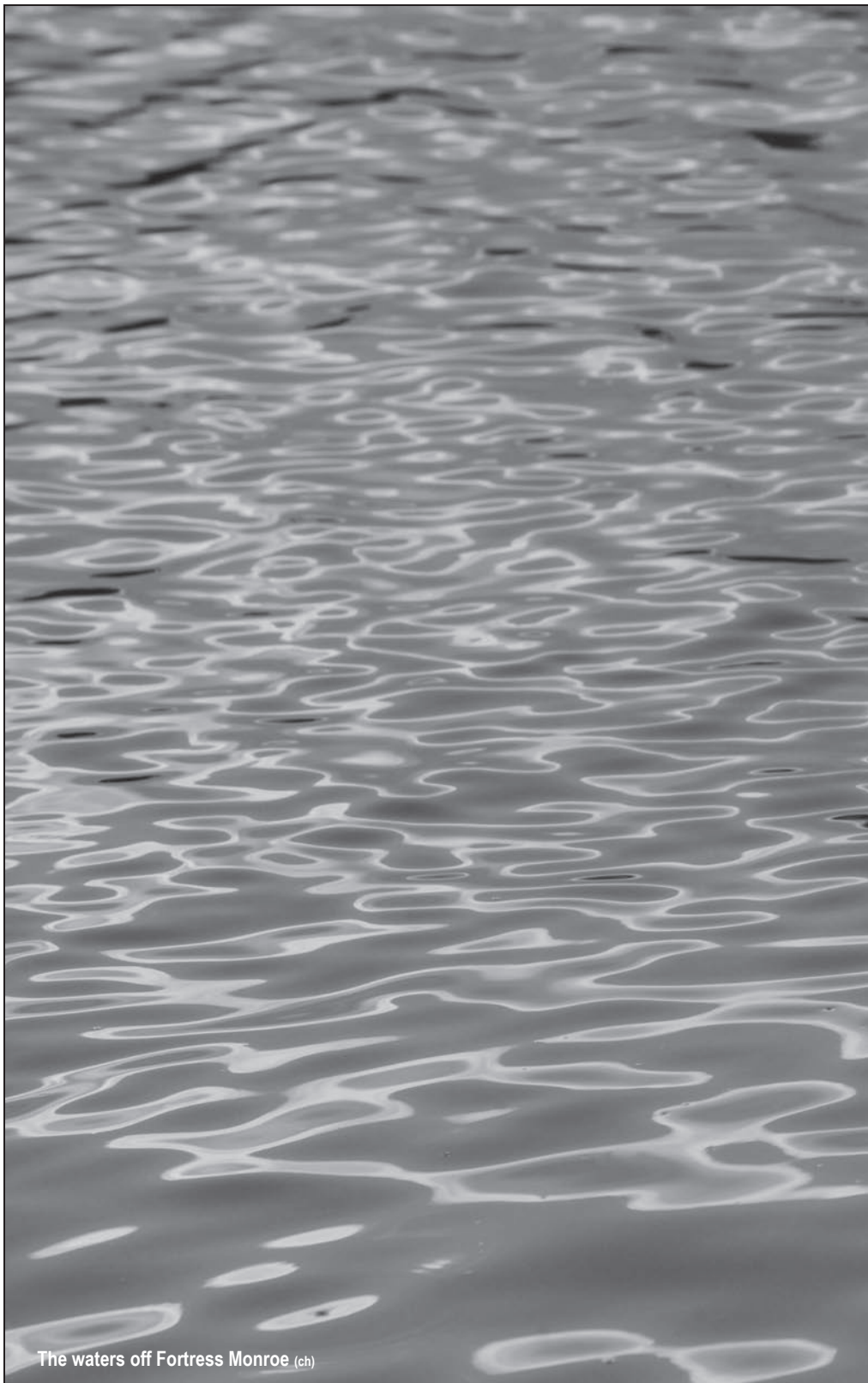
The subject of this book covers the ensuing Union advance from the Lower Peninsula, the Siege of the Warwick-Yorktown Line, the battle of Williamsburg, and the battle of Seven Pines. All of these are often overshadowed by the Seven Days Battles and later Union campaigns against Richmond.

McClellan was thwarted by faulty intelligence, formidable defensive works, and poor weather. Magruder brilliantly maneuvered his Confederate army along the Warwick-Yorktown Line, creating the illusion of double his numbers. His replacement, Gen. Joseph Eggleston Johnston, rightly concluded that the Union firepower, once unleashed, would obliterate the Confederate defenses and ordered the withdrawal to Richmond. The battle of Williamsburg was nonetheless the largest engagement since the first battle of Bull Run almost a year earlier.

Accurate local intelligence from Contrabands helped the Union retain control of the battlefield, but the Confederates retreated in good order to Richmond. Johnston's counterattack at Seven Pines was complicated by an acoustic shadow and poor coordination, which saved the Federals on the south banks of the Chickahominy River. McClellan, however, wrongly concluded that he faced a larger enemy force.

Doug Crenshaw and Drew A. Gruber cover all of these details in a very readable narrative. It is a fine addition to the Peninsula Campaign's historiography. The authors provide excellent details about the extant battlefields and historic sites in an area that is also rich in history from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. More importantly, the Peninsula Campaign is a story of freedom, logistics, personalities, and technology. The authors masterfully cover all of those stories, thereby providing further information about an often-overlooked part of the Civil War.

J. MICHAEL MOORE is an author, historian, and preservationist employed by the City of Newport News as the curator of Lee Hall Mansion and Historic Endview.



The waters off Fortress Monroe (ch)

RAILROAD
CROSSING



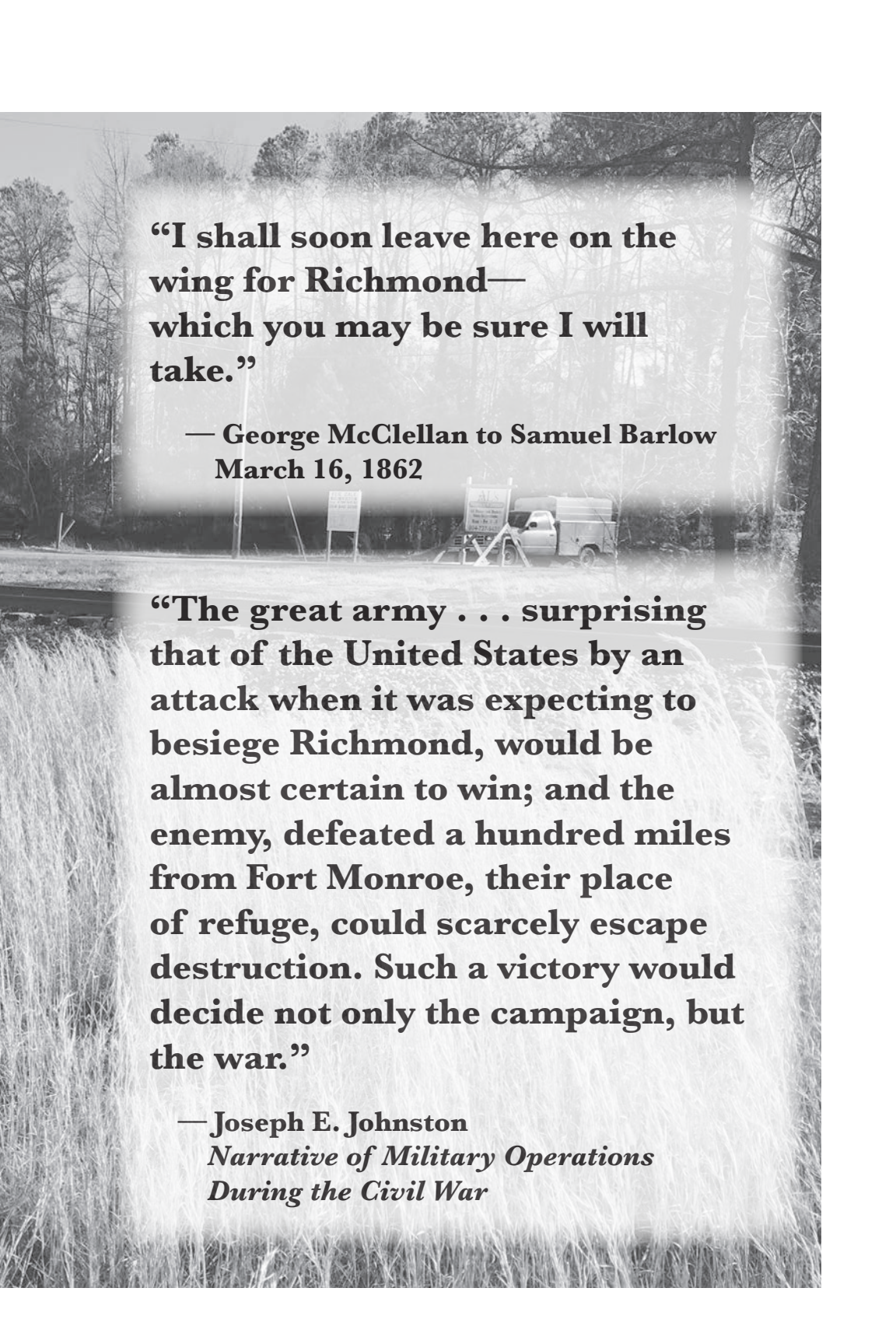
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SECOND DAY AT SEVEN PINES

Most of the fighting on the second day of the Battle of Seven Pines (Fair Oaks), occurred near here on 31 June 1862. Confederate Maj. Gen. Gustavus W. Smith, who had assumed command following the wounding of Gen. Joseph E. Johnston the evening before, returned the attack in the morning, when the Union defenses proved too strong. The Confederates disengaged and retired to their original line. Gen. Robert E. Lee, who already had been assigned to command the Confederate troops in front of Richmond early in the day, assumed that command when Smith collapsed from exhaustion during the afternoon.

Historical Marker Commission
1990



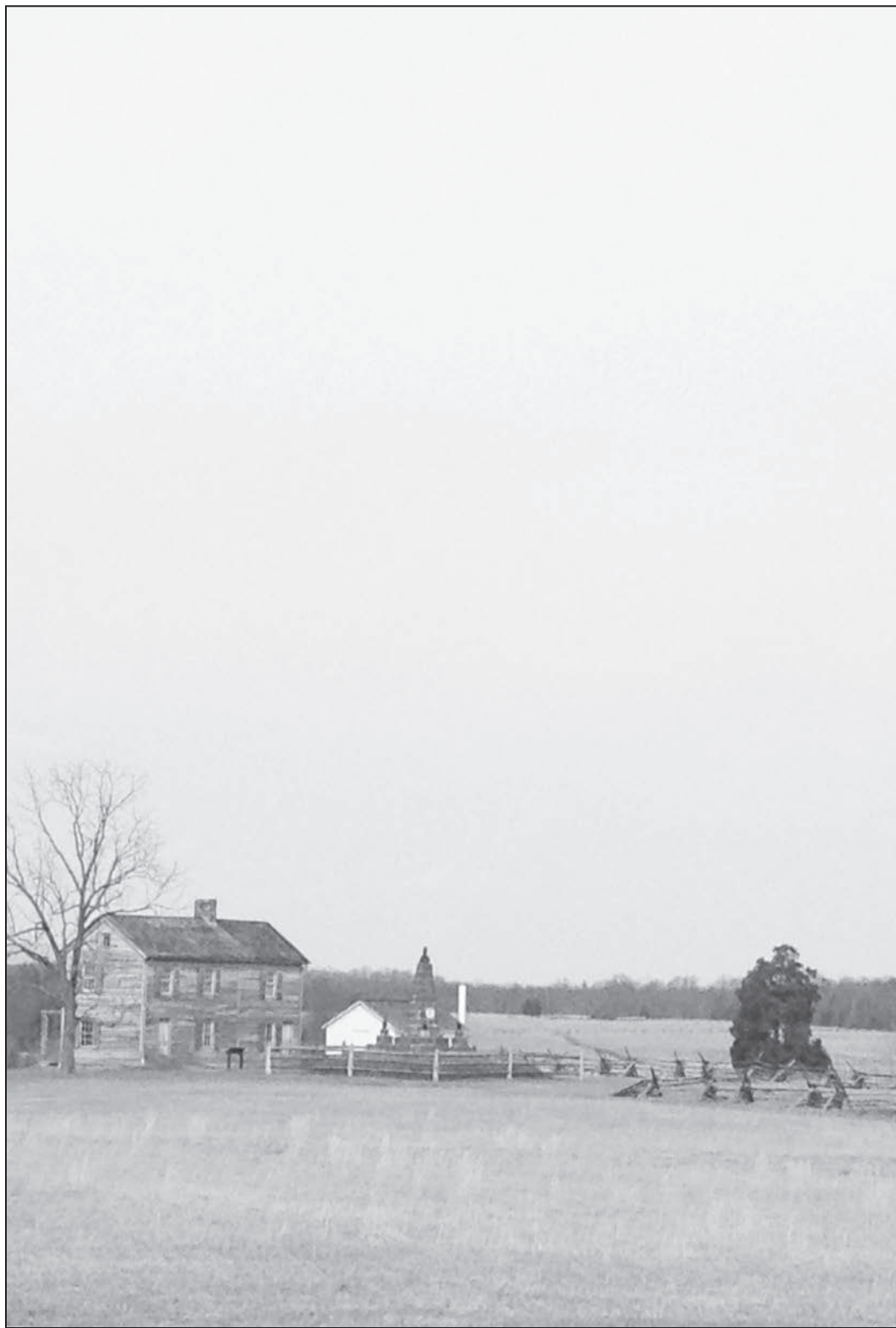
A black and white photograph of a waterfall. The waterfall is on the left side of the image, with water cascading down. In the background, there is a road with a white van parked on it. There are trees and a sign on the road. The text is overlaid on the image.

“I shall soon leave here on the wing for Richmond— which you may be sure I will take.”

**— George McClellan to Samuel Barlow
March 16, 1862**

“The great army . . . surprising that of the United States by an attack when it was expecting to besiege Richmond, would be almost certain to win; and the enemy, defeated a hundred miles from Fort Monroe, their place of refuge, could scarcely escape destruction. Such a victory would decide not only the campaign, but the war.”

— Joseph E. Johnston
*Narrative of Military Operations
During the Civil War*



Prologue

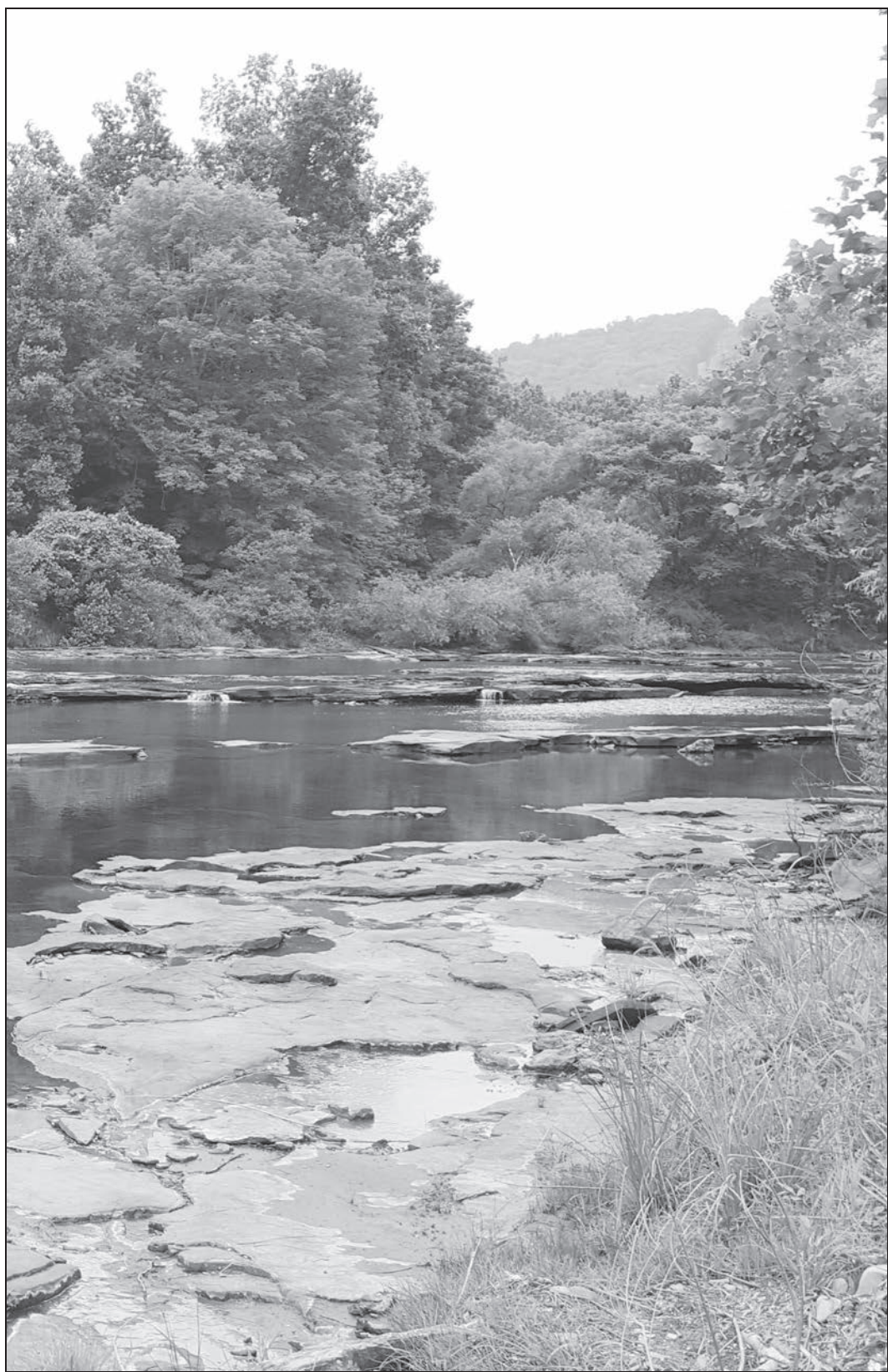
It was going to be a short war. One battle would decide the issue: the South would win its independence or the Union would be put back together again. Civilians flocked out from Washington to watch the spectacle—people had no idea of the horrors of war and brought their picnic lunches, expecting to witness an exciting and glorious event.

On July 21, 1861, Brig. Gen. Irvin McDowell advanced his army and attacked the Confederate force under Gen. Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard on the fields outside of Manassas. The battle started out well enough for McDowell, but the tide began to turn when Gen. Joseph E. Johnston arrived with Confederate reinforcements. By the end of the day, the Federal army was routed, and northern soldiers streamed back to the safety of Washington.

For President Abraham Lincoln, the battle was a disaster of the highest order, but to his credit, he did not panic. He looked about for a new commander, one who could pull the army back together and crush the rebellion. The Union had but one hero at the time, the brash young George B. McClellan. He oversaw several successful operations throughout present-day West Virginia, including the victory at Richmond Mountain. This positioned him as a rising star.

On July 22, McClellan received a telegram from Washington: “Circumstances make your presence here necessary. . . . [C]ome hither without delay.”

The Union disaster at First Manassas opened the door for the rise of George B. McClellan. (cm)



"Circumstances Make Your Presence Here Necessary"

CHAPTER ONE

Summer of 1861–Fall of 1862

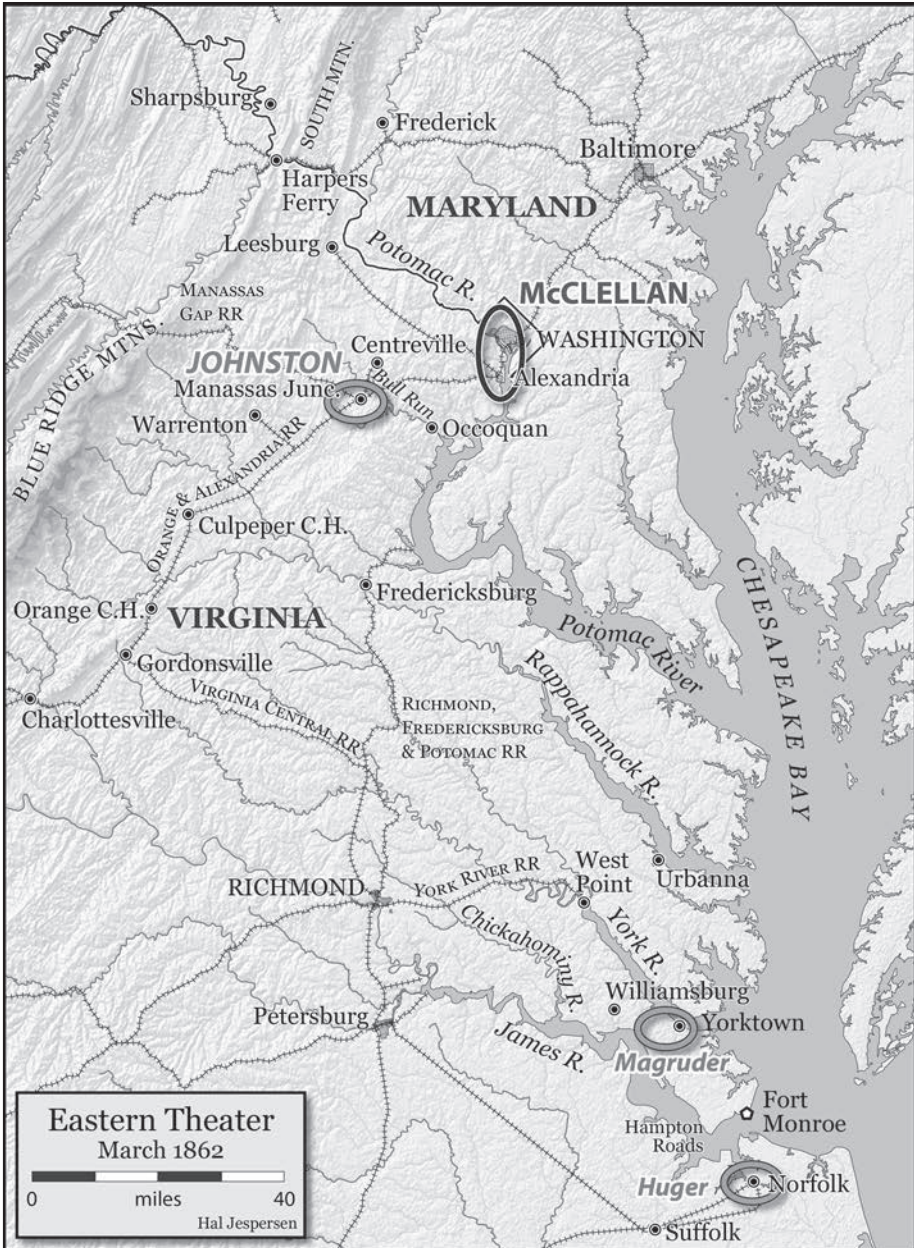
Major General George Brinton McClellan was thirty-four years old, a surprisingly young age for a commander. His experience leading an army was limited, but at the moment, he was all the Union had: he was its most promising general. That prior experience on the battlefield resulted in a commander that made McClellan brilliant, ambitious, and insecure.

After graduating second in his class at West Point in 1846, he was assigned to the Engineers, and was soon fighting in Mexico, where his bravery was noted. Later, he was sent as an observer to the Crimean War to study European tactics and modern warfare, an experience that left a deep and lasting impression on him. During the late 1850s, with limited opportunities in the tiny peacetime army, McClellan resigned his commission and became a successful railroad executive.

The Confederate shelling of Fort Sumter changed everything. The Union was in search of promising commanders, and McClellan was decidedly one of them. A West Point education, experience in Mexico, and a career as an executive in the railroad industry made him an attractive commodity. He returned to the army as a major general in command of Ohio's volunteers.

When he arrived in Washington on the afternoon of July 26, 1861, McClellan was treated

George McClellan had success in western Virginia, such as at the battle of Corrick's Ford, at a time when other Union efforts floundered, making him a promising prospect for higher command. Corrick's Ford is nearly forgotten today. (sb)



EASTERN THEATER—The situation in the winter of 1861–1862 had McClellan searching for a way to get past Johnston’s army. McClellan needed transportation infrastructure in order to properly provide for his army, so Johnston’s position along the Orange & Alexandria Railroad proved especially problematic. A move to Fort Monroe would put McClellan’s army in close proximity to other Confederate forces, but he would be able to easily supply his men by water while also calling on naval support for additional protection.

almost like a conquering hero. On the 27th, he met with the president and, later that day, wrote to his wife, "I find myself in a new & strange position here—Presdt, Cabinet, Genl [Winfield] Scott & all deferring to me—by some strange operation of magic I seem to have become *the* power of the land." Three days later he wrote that members of the Senate were "flocking around me" and he looked outside to see the "crowd gathering around to stare at me." McClellan's pride began to swell. "Who would have thought . . . that I should so soon be called upon to save my country?" He wrote to his wife, "[T]hey said in Richmond that there was only one man they feared & that was McClellan."

The new commander immediately set to work restoring discipline in the army, building up his infantry, cavalry and artillery, and regularly riding out to meet his men, creating a strong bond with them. He also devised his plan for the conduct of the war. Troops would be sent to Kentucky to ensure its loyalty, and then some of these would move into eastern Tennessee to cut the railroad that brought Confederate supplies east. Other troops would secure western Virginia, Baltimore, and Washington. The main army was to consist of 250 regiments, 600 pieces of artillery and 28 regiments of cavalry—a total of 273,000 men. This army would drive the rebels from Virginia, "occupy Richmond . . . Charleston, Savannah, Montgomery, Pensacola, Mobile and New Orleans . . . and crush this rebellion in its very heart." Additional troops would be available to replace losses.

McClellan noted the importance of a strong navy, which would close Southern ports, supply his army, and transport his troops. He also saw the logistical opportunities presented by railroads. With the massive military he envisioned, action should be "prompt and irresistible." It would be so decisive that the South would realize the futility of resistance and rejoin the Union. The Confederacy would fall "in one campaign."

The "Young Napoleon" also had definite ideas about how to treat Southerners. His aim



George B. McClellan, the brash young commander of the Army of the Potomac, excelled at building an army—but what would he do with it? (loc)

was to bring them back into the Union at the least possible cost. He had no interest in destroying their property. McClellan may have drawn inspiration from Prussian military thinker Carl von Clausewitz, who said, “the smaller the penalty you demand from your opponent, the less you can expect him to try and

deny it to you.” Private property would be respected—something that extended to slavery. Freeing the slaves was not one of McClellan’s war aims.

McClellan succeeded in building a massive army, one the like of which had never been seen on the North American continent. Constant training and drill was the norm. Officers were trained in schools established by their



McClellan turned the army that was defeated at Manassas into a formidable, well-drilled machine. (na)

generals. In his daily rides through the camps, McClellan fostered an image of paternalistic leadership, which caused many of the men to become devoted to him. The army soon became an impressive, disciplined tool, but it was one he refused to rush into the field until it was ready.

As successful as he was in building the force he termed the “Army of the Potomac,” McClellan’s skills did not extend to dealing with his superiors, including overall U.S. Army commander, Lt. Gen. Winfield Scott, as well as the president and the cabinet. Scott became his first target.

Born in 1876, Scott was a veteran of the War of 1812 and the Black Hawk War, and he was the hero of the Mexican War. Scott devised the “Anaconda Plan,” which would strangle the Confederacy by cutting of its trade with the outside world. By 1861, though, Scott was old and overweight; McClellan saw Scott as standing in his way.

On August 2, only a little more than a week after taking command, McClellan wrote to his wife about “the old man, who by the by, is fast becoming very slow & very old.” The young general felt “sure

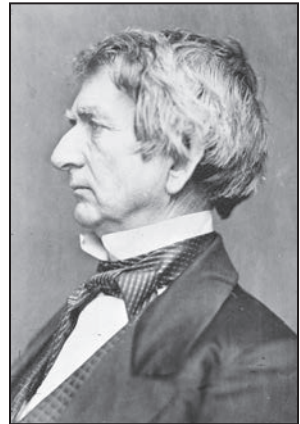
to succeed him, unless in the mean time I lose a battle—which I do not expect to do." He later called Scott "a perfect imbecile. He understands nothing, appreciates nothing & is ever in my way." His disdain spread quickly, and soon he would say, "the Presdt is an idiot, the old General in his dotage." In October, he wrote that Secretary of State William H. Seward was "a meddling, officious, incompetent little puppy" and the "Presdt is nothing more than a well meaning baboon" As brilliant an organizer as George McClellan might have been, his inability to work with senior officers and politicians was a serious flaw and would have grave consequences for him.

The general had other demons. His army was huge. It was well organized and supplied, and as politicians and the press saw this, they continually called for action. The Union Army had been humiliated at Manassas. Confederate troops were positioned near Washington, adding to the embarrassment. Each day the army did nothing but cost the treasury a fortune. None of this mattered to McClellan, who would not move until he was prepared. His goal was to overwhelm the enemy, not merely to drive them from northern Virginia. He was certain that the Confederate army facing him was massive—at least 100,000 troops. Not only that, he believed it was fortified and protected by significant amounts of artillery.

By August 19, McClellan's estimate, based mainly on rumors and his own imagination, had swelled the enemy's ranks to 150,000 men. There was no way he could move, saying "if this week passes without a battle & reinforcements come in I shall feel sure that a dangerous point is turned." Not only could he not attack, he needed more troops just to defend the capital. On October 4, he received a report from the detective Allan Pinkerton that the Confederate strength in the area was 98,400 men, and in all of Virginia there were 118,160. This was fewer than McClellan had imagined, but it was still in excess of reality. His tendency to overestimate the enemy's numbers



Winfield Scott was commander of all United States armies during the early part of McClellan's tenure. A hero of the Mexican War, Scott was past his prime in 1861. (na)



William Seward served as secretary of state in the Lincoln administration. (loc)



General Charles Stone was scapegoated after the disaster at Ball's Bluff. (loc)

would vex McClellan and affect his judgment throughout the upcoming campaign.

On October 17, division commander Brig. Gen. Charles Stone reported a body of Confederate infantry at Leesburg. McClellan ordered Brig. Gen. George McCall to head out and join Stone for a show of force that would likely drive the enemy from the area. Stone was ordered to make a small demonstration. On the 21st, McCall was recalled to his camp near Washington, but unaware of this, Stone threw his men across the river, where they were attacked and roundly defeated at Ball's Bluff. Colonel Edward Baker, a U.S. senator and one of the president's close friends, was killed in the debacle. The incident had a lasting effect on McClellan. It emphasized to him the importance of thorough training and preparation and, if reliable subordinates could not be found, personal leadership.

Around this time, McClellan's problems with Scott finally came to a head. He had written to his wife that the old general "is for inaction & the defensive, he endeavors to cripple me in every way." Scott, for his part complained that the young general did not keep him informed; McClellan wanted the old general out of the picture. On October 18, McClellan got his way when the cabinet accepted Scott's resignation. Lincoln accepted it on November 1, and McClellan was placed in command of all of the nation's armies.

Politicians and newspapers increased their clamoring for the "Young Napoleon" to take action. On October 31, McClellan wrote to Secretary of War Simon Cameron that he thought it necessary "to advance with a reasonable certainty of success" while still providing for the defense of the capital. "Two courses are left to the Government," he said: the army should "either go into winter quarters, or assume the offensive with forces greatly inferior in numbers to the army I regarded as desirable & necessary." In the same letter, McClellan went on to say that a successful movement would require 208,000 men and 488 guns.

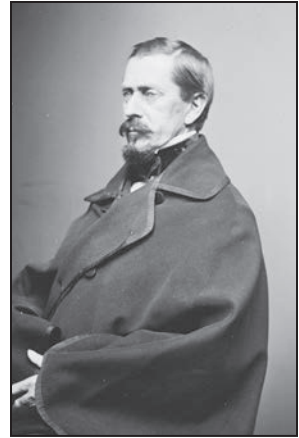
According to general, the strength of the Army of the Potomac was as follows: 168,318 men, which included troops in Baltimore, Annapolis, and along the Potomac. Of this, 134,285 were equipped. In consideration of leaving troops behind to defend Washington, McClellan stated that he could take forward only 76,285. There were 228 field guns, far short of the 488 he required for garrison and for battle. He estimated that the enemy had a force of at least 150,000 men equipped and ready.

Clearly the army would not be moving anytime soon.

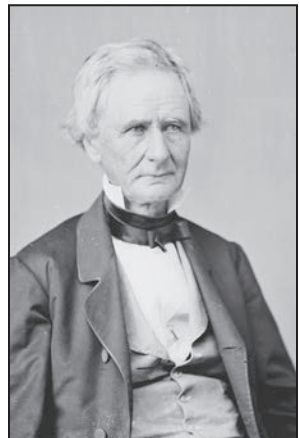
Pressure continued to mount. Lincoln's patience was being strained, and he tried to encourage McClellan to take action. He hoped the general would take his army and move against the Confederates at Manassas and also land a force to the east by crossing the Occoquan River and marching to cut the Confederate railroad. But how long would that take?

Possibly for fear of leaks, or criticism, McClellan would not keep Lincoln well-enough informed. After one meeting, the general wrote to his wife on November 17 that the president is "the original gorilla, about as intelligent as ever. What a specimen to be at the head of our affairs now!" The president continued to give the general his support, but time was running out.

Unknown to the president, McClellan was indeed coming up with a plan.



Brig. Gen. George McCall supported McClellan's Urbanna Plan and later played a prominent role in the Seven Days' battles. (loc)



Simon Cameron served as secretary of war during the early part of Lincoln's administration. (loc)

