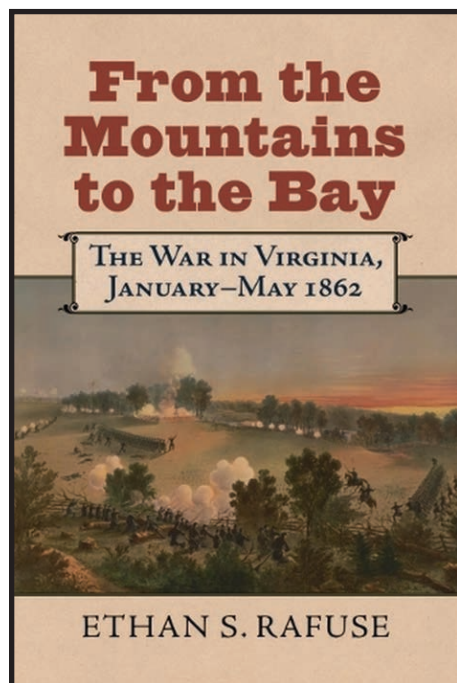


BOOKREVIEWS



FROM THE MOUNTAINS TO THE BAY: THE WAR IN VIRGINIA, JANUARY–MAY 1862

BY ETHAN S. RAFUSE

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REVIEW BY SHANE D. MAKOWICKI

Over the past 150 years, historians have spilled a tremendous amount of ink detailing military operations in the Civil War's Eastern Theater, particularly Virginia. For this reason, Ethan S. Rafuse acknowledges that his study, *From the Mountains to the Bay: The War in Virginia, January–May 1862*, is "to a great extent a work of synthesis" (xvii). Nevertheless, Rafuse's holistic approach to this period of the war allows him to cast an oft-covered subject in a new light. By treating the varied operations as "part of a single grand effort" by the U.S. and Confederate high commands, Rafuse demonstrates how small-scale campaigns and battles of seemingly minor importance had

"major ramifications for every other part of the system" (xviii).

In his preface, which functions as the book's introduction, Rafuse makes a compelling case for Virginia's importance in the war writ large. Although it was the location of the Confederate capital, Virginia held more than just symbolic value. In addition to the Confederacy's largest population (1,596,318 inhabitants, of whom 31 percent were slaves), the state boasted the rich agricultural lands of the Shenandoah Valley, the commercial centers of Alexandria, Fredericksburg, and Petersburg, and the growing industrial hub of Richmond. As Rafuse points out, Jefferson Davis, Abraham Lincoln, and their military commanders realized that "without the Old Dominion's agricultural, human, and industrial resources . . . the Confederacy's ability to wage warfare in the industrial age would be severely, if not fatally, compromised" (xiv).

These critical factors combined to make Virginia the scene of a "remarkably diverse range of operations," conducted by U.S. and Confederate military forces on a grander scale than had ever been attempted in North America (xiii, xvii). The bulk of Rafuse's work, divided into ten chapters, is devoted to describing these campaigns, which stretched from Bath and McDowell in western Virginia to the Tidewater region and the Virginia Peninsula. The book progresses chronologically from Maj. Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson's Romney Campaign in January 1862, through the arrival of Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan's Army of the Potomac outside the gates of Richmond in late May.

The first three chapters discuss McClellan's appointment as general-in-chief of the Federal armies, his subsequent (and often contentious) debates with Lincoln regarding U.S. strategy, the Confederate retreat from Manassas Junction in the early spring of 1862, and the clash of the CSS *Virginia* and the USS *Monitor*—the first fight between ironclad warships—at the Battle of Hampton Roads on 8–9 March. Chapters 4–5 describe fighting in the Shenandoah Valley, including

Jackson's defeat by Brig. Gen. James Shields at Kernstown on 23 March, and the opening of McClellan's campaign on the Virginia Peninsula (between the York and James Rivers). The greater portion of Chapters 6–8 focuses on McClellan's subsequent siege of Yorktown, which lasted from 5 April to 4 May. The final two chapters cover Jackson's victory at the Battle of McDowell (Sitlington's Hill) in the mountains west of Staunton on 8 May, the repulse of Cdr. John Rodgers's Navy squadron at the Battle of Drewry's Bluff below Richmond a week later, and the Army of the Potomac's advance up the peninsula to the Chickahominy River.

Throughout the book, Rafuse demonstrates his mastery of writing operational narrative. He possesses a keen sense of when to zoom out to discuss larger strategic or political questions and how much detail to apply when describing tactical engagements. Moreover, he never loses sight of what sets his work apart from the scores of other studies on the spring 1862 campaigns in Virginia. Repeatedly, he draws clear connections between the fighting in disparate regions of the state and illustrates how one military action or decision fed into another. For instance, Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston's withdrawal from Manassas Junction in early March, which was partly a result of U.S. advances in the Shenandoah Valley, forced McClellan to adjust his "vision of operations" and abandon his initial plan to shift the Army of the Potomac to Urbanna on the Rappahannock River (57). Another example is Rafuse's analysis of Kernstown. Although the battle was a tactical U.S. victory, Jackson's aggressiveness convinced Lincoln to detach Brig. Gen. Louis Blenker's division from McClellan's control and send it to Maj. Gen. John C. Fremont in western Virginia. This weakened McClellan's field force and placed additional pressure on the already strained relationship between the general and the president.

Apart from his deft handling of military operations, numerous other factors strengthen Rafuse's work. He consistently notes how terrain, weather, and logistics imposed

limitations on campaigns and affected their outcomes. Jackson's movements during the Romney Campaign were hampered by winter snows and a shortage of rations. At the same time, the "unusually wet" weather on the Virginia Peninsula throughout the spring flooded roads and bogged down horses, wagons, and artillery trains (136). Rafuse also pays due attention to related developments such as the "professionalization" of the U.S. Army's officer corps in the decades preceding the Civil War (11) and the creation of Thaddeus Lowe's "corps of aeronauts," which provided reconnaissance for McClellan (159). Yet while Rafuse's analysis of these subjects helps to contextualize the operations he describes, he avoids getting mired in tangential material.

Another refreshing aspect of Rafuse's book is his willingness to challenge common perceptions of major military figures. The most notable example here is General Joseph E. Johnston, who is often treated as a purely defensive general with no inclination for offensive operations. Conversely, Rafuse notes that Johnston advocated drawing Confederate forces closer to Richmond not because he was obsessed with retreating but because he sought to husband strength for an attack that would assist the Confederate cause far more than a futile attempt to hold Yorktown ever could. "We must change our course, take the offensive," Johnston told General Robert E. Lee in late April 1862. "Our troops have always wished for the offensive and so does the country" (187).

Nevertheless, Rafuse's study would benefit from connecting the campaigns in Virginia to those that occurred simultaneously in other theaters. The book is about the Old Dominion, and there its focus must lay, but just as operations in the state could not be isolated from each other, nor could they be isolated from the larger war effort. This is particularly true because, until mid-March 1862, McClellan was general-in-chief of all U.S. armies. McClellan acknowledged this in the strategic vision he outlined for Lincoln in February, in which he stated that Brig. Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside's command in eastern North Carolina and Brig. Gen. Don Carlos Buell's army in Kentucky were critical parts of his "general plan."¹

This is, however, a relatively minor quibble that does not seriously detract from the book's significant contributions. Rafuse's engaging and informative operational narrative, his ability to link each campaign to the larger whole, his impressive archival research, and the extremely useful orders of battle that he provides (Appendixes A and B) make *From*

the Mountains to the Bay a worthy addition to the shelf of any military historian who seeks to understand the interconnected nature of strategy, operations, and tactics.

Note

1. U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880–1901), ser. 1, vol. 5, 44.

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