ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Bull Run, July 21, 1861

By **David Detzer**

Someone once calculated there were about ten thousand battles during the Civil War. In truth, calling most of these events "battles" is stretching that word to include thousands of localized shoot-outs—important, of course, to those in them but not what most people consider real military clashes. The first genuinely great battle of the war took place one hundred days after the conflict began.

The Civil War started before dawn on April 12, 1861 when Confederate cannon began blasting Fort Sumter, a brick structure sitting atop a manmade island in Charleston Harbor. During the next ninety-nine days the Confederacy and the Union prepared for combat. Here and there, in places in Virginia, Texas, and Missouri, for example, groups of armed warriors did sometimes fire at each other. Men were killed, prisoners were taken. But compared to the awfulness that was approaching, these incidents were mere skirmishes. Almost no one during those first weeks conceived of the horror they were about to experience during the coming four years. Then, finally, on July 21, 1861 a great battle took place. The Confederates called it Manassas, after a nearby railway station with a telegraph office that relayed southward the first reports about that day's events. The rest of the country would always call the battle Bull Run because the initial stories going north to Washington spoke of a stream with that name, which separated watching newspaper reporters from the violent scenes. In either case, whatever the name, the slaughter there was awful. America would never again be quite the same. Exactly how and why two armies fought in that spot requires some explanation.

Sometimes battles occur by accident, without careful planning, with little consideration for terrain or supplies, when armies stumble into each other. Gettysburg is an example. Bull Run, however, was intentional. Both sides planned it. They had been plodding toward it for months.

Two days after the Confederacy opened fire on Fort Sumter, Abraham Lincoln and his cabinet had agreed on their first response. The next day they telegraphed most of the governors of non-Confederate states, asking them to call up their state militiamen. Given the fact that Lincoln had only a few hundred troops available to defend Washington, and the city might come under attack within days, the administration asked certain governors to forward volunteers to the capital as soon as possible. In less than a month armed but amateurish soldiers were encamped there.

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Meanwhile, the president of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, had been busy. He, too, had asked for state volunteers. But in one significant way his situation was different from Lincoln's. The Confederate capital at the time—Montgomery, Alabama—was far from the borders, from outside attack. So the first Confederate soldiers often stayed close to home where they trained. Then, after Virginia seceded, Davis began to send some of his regiments up the railway lines toward Richmond. And then past Richmond, northward. By late June the Confederacy had two major armies in Virginia. One, led by the able General Joseph Eggleston Johnston, sat about seventy miles west of Richmond in the Shenandoah River region that locals simply called the Valley. The other, far more unwieldy, force scattered throughout a region about sixty miles north of Richmond. Much of this army, which had arrived piecemeal from assorted Confederate states, had disembarked from railway cars at a small depot called Manassas Junction. Then they had jostled about, some moving a bit east or west, some northward, toward the Potomac. Jefferson Davis received some negative reports of these regiments' lack of cohesion and ordered General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard to take command. Soon, most of Beauregard's Confederate force was positioned in a half-moon shape just north of Manassas Junction.

General Scott, sitting in Washington, planning his next moves, worked from several assumptions. The Confederacy was brand new. It had only been in existence a few months. Any emotional ties holding it together were tenuous. (A cogent argument could be made that "the South" did not exist until the hardships of the long Civil War created it.)

In retrospect, critics of the Union army's failure to defeat the Confederates at Bull Run usually blamed one man more than anyone: General Robert Patterson, the officer in command of Lincoln's army in the Shenandoah Valley, who, critics insisted, did not assault Joe Johnston, his foe in the Valley, vigorously enough. Modern historians tend to agree with the Civil War criticisms, usually noting the same reason. Patterson was old, they say, and therefore overly cautious. But those early critics and modern historians merely state their argument; they do not prove it.

Here are some facts. General Patterson was, indeed, sixty-nine years old during that summer, making him about the same age as Stalin at the beginning of the Cold War, as Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh during the moments of their greatest successes. There are numerous other examples of rather elderly, extraordinarily tough fighters. Moreover, Patterson listened carefully to the advice of his young staff, including soldiers like Colonel George Henry ("Pap") Thomas, who would later prove their worth. (Thomas would later acquire the nickname "The Rock of Chickamauga" due to his determination.) And Patterson's staff members urged him to be cautious. Perhaps most importantly, he also was following a direct order he had received on June 6 from Winfield Scott who told him to take his army from Pennsylvania southward into the Valley to pin Joe Johnston's force there, but warned him to move very carefully because the Union must avoid any action that could lead to a setback, which might cause the Confederates to feel optimistic. "I have said," Scott emphasized in that order, "we must sustain no reverse; . . . a check or a drawn battle would be a victory to the enemy, filling his heart with joy. … Take your

measures, therefore, circumspectly." Scott added, "Attempt nothing without a clear prospect of success." Winfield Scott was recognized up to that moment as the country's greatest general and military thinker. Given his cautionary orders to Patterson, plus the fact that Patterson's army was not vastly bigger than Johnston's, it is hardly surprising that Patterson and his advisers were not anxious to fling their untrained volunteers at a rather entrenched foe, who was, after all, fighting on his own turf. (It might be added, not only was Joe Johnston an excellent strategist born in Virginia, but he had at his right hand a remarkably aggressive Virginian named Brigadier General Thomas Jonathan Jackson, who was about to become quite famous in his own right.) [1]

After receiving those orders from General Scott, Patterson had to await additional supplies and troops, so he did not actually head southward until July 2. Then, during the next two weeks his army moved slowly into the Valley. Skirmishes occurred along the edges of the two armies, but neither side felt confident enough to press hard against the foe. Joe Johnston just gradually retreated, using his zealous cavalry, led by Lieutenant Colonel J. E. B. Stuart, to probe for enemy weakness. Meanwhile, Johnston awaited orders. He was prepared to quietly disengage from Patterson, and slip away eastward, to join Beauregard's force if it was seriously threatened.

Scott had pieced together a logical long-range plan. He was well-aware that the volunteers who first arrived in Washington back in April had only signed up for three months. Their immediate value had been to protect the capital if the Confederacy had decided to throw an army northward. But they were really a ragtag bunch, and it was his intention to let their service time draw to an end in July without using them. Some of these men might simply depart and go home, but others could be expected to volunteer for Lincoln's new requirement of a three-year enlistment. In Scott's mind, this new army in time would have far better equipment and more training. By autumn they would be ready. Some could stay in the Washington area as a protective force, but the biggest number should move westward to the Mississippi River, where, using that waterway as an efficient method to transport heavy goods, they could press south. In Scott's mind a major advantage of this approach was that the population was far sparser in that region. The strategy involved blockading the Confederate ports and advancing down the Mississippi to cut the Confederacy in two. It was dubbed the Anaconda Plan by its detractors, who favored a more direct attack on the Confederacy, because it resembled a great snake slowly squeezing the Confederacy. As a result, there would be fewer casualties, and when the Confederacy was defeated it would feel less long-range bitterness. If the Union had followed Scott's advice in 1861, it is possible he would have been proven right. As it was, his plans were sidetracked by the president.

Scott correctly assumed that the coming war would likely be far more difficult than most Northerners believed. But in early July Congress began meeting, and its arriving politicians demanded immediate action. Some represented states that had already supplied Lincoln with the three-month volunteers, whose terms were about to come to an end. Lincoln's army, therefore, was about to lose a sizeable percentage of its

[1] David Detzer, *Donnybrook: The Battle of Bull Run, 1861* (New York: Harcourt, 2004), 56-7.

numbers. Unless this war ended quickly, some critics insisted, it would become overly costly. Without Southern imports and exports, how would the federal government pay for it? And there was the complicating factor of Europe, especially Britain. If too much time passed, might not governments across the Atlantic get involved? As a result of these matters, and others, Scott felt enormous pressure from the administration to take dramatic steps, to bring the war to an end, soon. But the general was acutely aware of a military truism: Once an enemy army becomes relatively entrenched, an attacking force should be decisively bigger, ideally at least two or three times as large. This seemed even more valid if the attackers were neither well-organized nor well-trained, which of course Scott knew to be true of his soldiers.

Lincoln had much to learn about war. He had respect for Winfield Scott, though he thought the old general was too political in his thinking and ought to stick to military matters. After Bull Run, Scott came to Lincoln, almost in tears, and apologized profusely for not pressing harder for the Anaconda Plan. In truth, however, the coming battle near Manassas Junction was the president's firm decision, and he was to his core a civilian and a politician. He had little respect for the notion held by professional soldiers that an army, especially an attacking force, must be well-trained. In Lincoln's mind, as he pooh-poohed their concerns to his generals: "You are green, it is true, but they are green also; you are all green alike." The president needed Congress to supply money and manpower, and most of the incoming politicians were demanding immediate action. In the midst of all this, the administration learned that an officer named Irvin McDowell had a more aggressive plan than General Scott.[2]

On May 23 Lincoln's army had crossed the Potomac from the capital, pushing their way into a new base in northern Virginia, camped around Alexandria and Arlington. As their numbers grew the army needed new ranking officers to command their greater complexity. Major Irvin McDowell, 43 and a West Point classmate of Beauregard (Class of 1838), seemed worthy of promotion and was made a brigadier general, and placed in command of the regiments entrenching in Virginia. Scott held some unstated reservations about McDowell, perhaps considering him a bit too aggressive. Scott intended to keep him on a short leash and neglected to supply him sufficient staff. As a result McDowell lacked a chief of artillery, for example, to say nothing of a chief of staff, and he could often be seen in his tent painfully scrawling notes and orders.

By early July, after Congress began meeting, Lincoln grew impatient and told Scott he wanted action. Scott ordered McDowell to suggest a plan of attack. McDowell was aware that Beauregard, by reputation an excellent military engineer, had reportedly been entrenching his position in the hilly, forested region of Manassas. McDowell considered the situation. He knew he had Beauregard outnumbered, so long as Patterson kept Joe Johnston pinned in the Valley, but manpower by itself would be insufficient for success. The distance between the Union encampments and Manassas was about twenty-five miles or so. Since McDowell's regiments would be carting their supplies and dragging their artillery, he assumed they would likely take three days to advance to a

[2] Detzer, *Donnybrook,* 67.

position where they could assault the Confederates. He drew up his plan accordingly. On July 16 he and his army began moving.

General Beauregard had carefully studied Napoleonic tactics. He knew that soldiers who held a defensive position had many advantages. One involved the matter of being a rather compact force. An attacking army had to spread itself out to get around the defender's position, creating growing difficulties involving communications, and maneuvering by relatively long "exterior lines," as military analysts say, from one position to another as the sway of battle changed. With this fact in mind, he had sent an order to his most advanced units, stationed halfway to Washington. As soon as they felt a serious Union attack force coming, they must retreat toward Manassas.

Beauregard had examined the terrain with care and came to an important conclusion. A stream called Bull Run meandered eastward a few miles north of the railway station. Beyond Bull Run lay a tiny hamlet called Centreville, where several roads converged. Beauregard concluded, correctly, that an attacking force would move to that village, then advance from there. The stream itself was unimpressive and could be easily forded by men on foot, but its banks were lined in most sections by fairly precipitous hills that would make moving heavy equipment like artillery difficult. This emphasized the importance of a few fording places, where local farmers had created paths. General Beauregard felt he lacked enough troops to guard all the fords, so he did what he thought was the best he could. On July 18 an advancing probe of the Union army bumped into one of these crossings, Blackburn's Ford, not far from Centreville. The two armies exchanged fire for several hours. A great battle might have evolved right here, but most of McDowell's troops had not yet arrived in the area, and by late afternoon the Union soldiers retreated a few miles to lick their wounds and await their comrades. A notable footnote of this incident was the presence, indeed the leadership, of the Confederate commander there: James Longstreet, who would prove to be one of the best generals on either side of the coming war.

On the night of July 20, 1861 the armies of Beauregard and McDowell settled into their positions. Both sides assumed a great battle would take place the following morning. The highest-ranking officers on both sides stayed up late reviewing the next day's plans, as well as their equipment. Most enlisted men wrapped themselves in blankets, lay down on the ground, and attempted to sleep.

Out in the Valley, meanwhile, the other two opposing armies had been nervously maneuvering. Patterson, still unsure what Scott wanted, telegrammed army headquarters, plaintively asking, "Shall I attack?"[3] Ironically, at almost that same moment Johnston had just received a wire from Richmond, urging him to rush to Manassas and assist Beauregard, if possible. But Richmond coyly said that General Johnston must himself decide if he could elude Patterson. In other words, Richmond flung the onus—the possible fate of the Confederacy—upon Joe Johnston's shoulders. As it turned out, Johnston did his best, and as he proved often in the coming war, his best was very good indeed. The general carefully disengaged from his position in the Valley,

[3] Detzer, *Donnybrook,* 103.

marched his troops to a nearby railway, and started most of his force toward Manassas. The only question was, would they arrive in time?

One central fact is important to understand. The term “battlefield” has become, mostly, a misnomer. The word seems to imply a central location, in fact, even a field: cleared and flat like a movie set or a football stadium. Reality tends to be far different, and far more confusing. A large, relatively “modern” army like McDowell’s is a complex mechanism with many different parts: for example, infantry, artillery, medical staff, and a lengthy supply line. Each element has different needs, moves at different speeds. Terrain is also critically important. In the case of the coming battle the left and right wings of McDowell’s force were moving in opposite directions. By the time firing first began they were separated by so many miles the two sides could not clearly hear each other’s rifle fire. Between the two wings were old colonial hamlets, numerous hills, clumps of forests, enumerable farms and roads, and of course the stream Bull Run. McDowell’s army had no method of connecting its two wings, providing them with helpful information or advice. Put another way, during the course of this day, the Union and Confederate armies did not fight a single battle, but in fact four or five. Confusion was inevitable. Under the circumstances, Beauregard with his interior lines was inevitably going to be better off.

Weather often plays a factor in battles. In this case the soldiers of both sides, already suffering from inevitable matters like poor hygiene, insufficient sleep, uncomfortable uniforms, and poor nutrition, had to march and sweat under a hot Virginia sun. Union infantrymen, especially, tended to guzzle their canteens of water early in the day, after marching many miles on dusty pathways, then felt woozy from dehydration.

As is true of almost all battles, most of the activity for the soldiers involved movement, not fighting. More than 40,000 men participated in Bull Run, but most only caught brief glimpses of their foes, often through cloudy road dust or the smoke from artillery fire, or through branches and leaves or waving corn. As is normally true, the battle remained more confusing than vivid to most participants. A military axiom reminds us the first casualty of battle is the plan. Both Beauregard and McDowell were, of course, aware of this, but each had spent countless hours refining what they assumed would be the best tactics to use. Both generals turned out to have been intelligent and prescient, and wrong.

In broad strokes, the main Union activities of that early morning look like this. While it was still quite dark a force of about 8,000, led by the capable Brigadier General Daniel Tyler, headed straight downhill from Centreville toward Bull Run, heading directly toward the only major bridge crossing the stream. They arrived in position on the Centreville side about six o’clock in the morning. McDowell had assumed Beauregard would have placed a sizeable group of defenders on the far side, so Tyler’s men waited. Their role was to stay here till late morning, at first merely threatening to cross the bridge, to persuade the Confederates on the other side to worry about their presence. A second part of McDowell’s battle plan involved a smaller force, with artillery, getting into position several miles off to the left (east) of Centreville and down toward the stream two miles or so. Their orders were, about midday to open fire on the

Confederates guarding Blackburn's Ford. (In the afternoon some actual fighting took place in this sector, but nothing that affected much the battle's outcome.) The distant artillery barrage near Blackburn's Ford, along with Tyler's troops at the bridge were to distract Beauregard from McDowell's main attack, 12,000 men, who had awakened just past midnight and had started marching by 2:30 a.m., downhill from Centreville toward Bull Run. But unlike Tyler's men, this sizeable force, in the darkness, took a right onto a dirt pathway a mile or so before they arrived at the bridge. These 12,000 men stumbled along, parallel to the stream, through thick forests, their officers endeavoring to keep them as quiet as possible. After several hours dawn slowly broke and they could see their way better. But, inevitably, most of them were now tired and thirsty. Finally, their scouts, riding ahead, found what they were searching for: another wagon-path that turned sharply left again, leading to Bull Run. Around 9:30 a.m. that morning, after marching for seven hours, with few breaks, the soldiers began splashing across the stream. Local inhabitants often crossed right here at these shallows. Not far past this crossing, beyond the stream's bank, lay a sprinkling of houses and a simple church. Folks hereabouts referred to this area as Sudley Church, after the rustic chapel. In a few hours that building would become a hospital, filled with blood-spattered surgeons and dying men, but now it just stood there, vacant and silent, as 12,000 soldiers passed by.

McDowell had devised a good plan, gambling on the possibility that the Confederates would be so distracted by the observable movement of Tyler's regiments threatening to cross the stone bridge, that they would misjudge the real threat of the 12,000 men who had swung wide, and presumably out of sight, would now be threatening to hammer Manassas, only a few miles away.

General Beauregard had not scouted the Sudley Church area carefully, and therefore did not recognize that possible weakness. Moreover, he had inexplicably only placed a small brigade of 1,100 men to guard the critical stone bridge. Luckily for the Confederate cause, the man in command of that brigade, a man named Colonel Nathan ("Shanks") Evans, known mostly for not being very bright and for imbibing too enthusiastically, was also a tough fighter. As soon as he learned that an attack might be coming from off to his left, he took 900 of his troops and set off (leaving a meager 200 to face Tyler's 8,000, though Tyler's men did not realize for hours the incredible vacuum in front of them beyond the bridge).

One might think that 900 Confederate soldiers would be quickly crushed by 12,000 attackers, but generalized military numbers seldom tell the story, at least in the short run. In this case Evans's troops—especially the 1st Louisiana Special Battalion, led by Major Chatham Roberdeau Wheat—held on against the oncoming Union soldiers, commanded by General Ambrose Burnside, who were the first to arrive. Wheat's "Tigers," as they liked to be called, remained fairly firm until Confederate reinforcements began to arrive: two brigades, led by Brigadier General Barnard Bee and Colonel Francis Stebbens Bartow. This stage of the battle lasted till after 11:30 a.m., when a Union colonel named William Tecumseh Sherman brought his brigade across Bull Run at a different fording and caught the Confederates in the side, thrusting them backward, away from Sudley Church, up a long slope toward what was locally called Henry House Hill,

named after a family farm owned by the Henry family who had long resided in a two-story house at the top.

These two critical hours of fighting gave the Confederates time to regroup. General Joe Johnston's audacious decision, made two days earlier, to abandon the Valley and take his little army toward Manassas began to pay off. Their trek, mostly by slow-moving trains, had begun bringing them to the station the previous day. In fact only about half Johnston's force got there in time to have any real impact on the battle, but those who did served a critical function. Two important contributors to the Confederate cause, for example, were the brigades of Bartow and Bee, which clogged the Union attack that morning. Around noon a third brigade of Johnston's moved into position near the Henry house, and waited. This brigade, led by General Thomas Jackson, would soon be famous. At this moment, high noon, with the hot July Virginia sun glaring down, the Confederate soldiers who had been fighting all morning had been defeated. They were straggling back up Henry House Hill and past it.

By this time General McDowell himself had arrived on the scene. If he had now ordered a full-out attack, his army might have carried the day right there. But instead he decided to "soften up" the enemy with artillery fire before advancing. This pause allowed Jackson to get his men settled in the farm fields near the house. As General Bee. A South Carolinian, led his disorganized force past the crest of the ridge he saw Jackson. "The enemy are driving us," Bee said, though the retreat must have been obvious to Jackson, who replied, "Then, sir, we will give them the bayonet." We will never know what Bee, who would receive a mortal wound that afternoon, actually thought of Jackson's remark, whether he was impressed with its flinty confidence or considered the Virginian a bit of a cautious dolt for not rushing to the rescue of Bee's men. We do know that Bee turned to his troops, hoping to give them a bit of confidence, and shouted, "There is Jackson, standing like a stone wall. Let us determine to die here and we will conquer. Rally behind the Virginians." (It is possible Bee was simply furious at Jackson's unwillingness to move to assist them, but his word "Stonewall" would enter the lingo during the next few days when Virginia newsmen preferred a positive twist on the term and picked Jackson to be their state's "colorful hero" in accounts of the battle.) [4]

Jackson placed his five regiments of infantrymen and thirteen cannon on the reverse side of the hill, away from the approaching Union force, and therefore slightly protected. Sightseers of the site nowadays can hardly imagine this critical battle zone of 1861. The area is now a pleasant rolling greensward, much like a golf fairway. But when Jackson was maneuvering his men, they were stumbling through a farm field, much of it filled with fairly high cornstalks and fencing, and all of it consisting of clumps of dry dirt that could easily cause a man to stumble and fall.

[4] Detzer, *Donnybrook,* 337.

During the next several hours waves of Union troops came toward this killing zone. Tyler's men had finally pushed across the bridge, and they, too, joined the action. McDowell ordered artillery to come on up, and eleven Union cannon got in position a few hundred yards from Jackson's guns. Then began a genuine artillery duel that lasted much of the afternoon. (One phenomenon of this day resulted from the fact that both armies contained units that wore whatever outfits they had donned back home during peacetime. As a result, for example, both armies had men wearing bright red shirts or pants. During the fighting that took place in the heat of this afternoon, on at least two occasions, soldiers on one side or the other became confused by some of these idiosyncratic uniforms, thinking, for instance, that men in blue must be Union soldiers when in fact they were from the other side.) In the smoke and confusion of that afternoon Jackson ordered some of his men to charge a few of the Union guns, which were ultimately captured. Although McDowell's force, in the abstract, outnumbered the Confederates near the Henry house by two to one, the Union attackers arrived fitfully, and were eventually pushed back. By four o'clock Union troops began leaving the fray in large numbers. The battle had been won by the Confederates.

Union soldiers started to retreat in groups, first back toward Centreville, then, often individually, in exhaustion, hunger, and despair, toward Washington. Around midnight it began to rain. During the course of this day and throughout the following night, many Union infantrymen would walk, or stagger, about forty miles, with little sleep or sustenance and insufficient water. Most passed through their lines around the capital before collapsing, though some simply found their way to the city where they fell to the ground to sleep, shocking civilian passersby with their ragged appearance.

Jefferson Davis had actually arrived at Manassas Junction during the afternoon. He pleaded with Generals Johnston and Beauregard to initiate a vigorous attack on the virtually defenseless Union men. Some efforts were made, but with little effect. The Confederate army, itself, had retained little of its own organization. A massive victory for the Confederacy would have been splendid, but it was not to be at this time, on this day. The Confederates would have to be satisfied by holding the field and declaring themselves the winner. They could take pride in these facts, especially since they thought they had been badly outnumbered. In fact, however, both sides each only had about 18,000 men who actually fought.

Compared to some of the truly grisly battlefields to come, the casualties at Bull Run must be considered awful, but not as bad as many. Pertinent records on both sides were dubious, but almost a thousand Americans probably died that day or shortly thereafter from wounds. Of this number, it would seem that Union deaths were somewhat, but not dramatically, higher: approximately 525 to 450 Confederate deaths. Stating such figures so casually overlooks the ugly realities of that battlefield, including the overpowering odors of visceral matter and feces and vomit and blood; the dead and dying horses becoming bloated; the harsh sounds of wounded men, the noise of shovels being wielded by tired soldiers or local slaves digging graves; the abominable sights.

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Many Union men were taken prisoner; the official numbers were 1,421. They were taken by train to Richmond, to remain for many months, mostly in abandoned tobacco warehouses, where they would be stared at by the city's curious civilians.

A footnote to the Battle of Bull Run involved some Northern civilians who came to observe events that day. Their presence there received comment by many newspapers, especially Southern ones, the story snidely repeated to make fun of them, a number of Washington politicians, who had arrived, often in carriages that morning from the capital, and settled down, more or less together, on the hill sloping downward between Centreville and Bull Run. Their arrival, with baskets of provisions, seemed shallow, risible, and absurd. They could easily be compared to drooling audiences at cockfights. Some news accounts even suggested that a few of these politicians had been accompanied by raucous and tarnished ladies of the night. But the reality was not so tawdry. Most of these civilians—men like Congressman Albert Ely of New York—came because they had constituents among the volunteers and wished to support their "boys," and they gave away much of their foodstuffs to hungry passing soldiers. It is true that these observers did not have any realistic notion of what was about to occur, and therefore took the situation too casually, but in general their hearts were in the right place. And there is zero hard evidence of any prostitutes with them.

In terms of this battle's results, the greatest change involved the fact that both sides had their cavalier attitudes about the coming war ripped away by reality. Henceforth, they settled down for a much longer, more serious war than they had expected, and both sides became determined not to return to major fighting until they had raised much larger, better trained armies.

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