

Union Disaster at Ball's Bluff **<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

Following the Confederate victory at Manassas in July 1861, the two sides would fight no major engagements in Virginia for the remainder of the year, focusing instead on strengthening their positions and building up the size of their forces. One smaller battle did occur that had important political and morale consequences. It was the October 21, 1861 engagement at Ball's Bluff, near Leesburg.

In the fall of 1861, Confederate forces at several locations held positions along or near the Potomac River, threatening Washington, D.C. As part of a number of minor demonstrations and probes, Union troops advanced towards the small Virginia town of Dranesville on October 19. Major General George McClellan, recently placed in command of Federal forces following the Bull Run debacle, ordered his subordinate General Charles P. Stone to watch for a possible Confederate withdrawal from nearby Leesburg and, if necessary, to conduct a "light demonstration" to ascertain rebel intentions.

Stone subsequently made preparations for such an operation, moving troops to the north bank of the Potomac near Leesburg, and sending a small force under Colonel Charles Devens across to the Virginia side of the river. Devens found no Confederates, and advanced on to Leesburg, which he also found deserted. He then asked Stone to send over additional troops to consolidate his position, but the lack of sufficient boats slowed the movement. Colonel Edward Baker, a senator from Oregon and close friend of President Lincoln, took command of the Federal forces and established an ill-advised position in an open field not far from the river, with a 100-foot high bluff to his rear and an elevated ridge to his front. By mid-afternoon

Confederate troops under Colonel Nathan Evans, made aware of the Union advance across the river, launched an attack against the inexperienced Baker. His men maintained their position for several hours, but Baker was eventually killed by enemy fire, and what began as an orderly retreat soon turned into a rout. Federal soldiers fell or attempted to climb down the bluff, and then frantically tried to cross the river under Confederate fire, with many drowning or being shot down in the attempt.

During the fighting, the Federals lost more than 400 men killed and wounded, and over 500 captured. The Confederates, meanwhile, suffered fewer than 150 casualties. News of Edward Baker's death devastated President Lincoln. Witnesses reported seeing him with tears in his eyes as he walked back to the White House after hearing of his friend's death. A state funeral was held for the fallen senator, with most of the major political figures in Washington attending.

The battle had proven to be an embarrassment to the Union high command and the Lincoln administration. Coupled with the defeat at Bull Run three months earlier, it seemed to reinforce the perception of Confederate superiority and Union incompetence in the Virginia Theater. In December, partly to investigate the circumstances of the Ball's Bluff fiasco, and more broadly to establish increased congressional oversight over the war effort, congress established the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, which had, in the words of historian Bruce Tap, "broad discretion to investigate any aspect of Northern military affairs, 'past, present, and future.'" While the Committee's activities had both positive and negative impacts on the war's conduct, Tap contends that in many cases it "was a waste of time, energy, and resources—something superfluous, something that detracted from the Union's ability to wage war." In the aftermath of the Ball's Bluff defeat, the committee harshly criticized the actions of General Stone, leading to his relief from command and his arrest, even though no charges were formally

brought. He was eventually released and returned to active duty, but the incident had severely damaged his reputation.