



*Radical Sacrifice: The Rise and Ruin of Fitz John Porter* by William Marvel.

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Union Maj. Gen. Fitz John Porter, the “forgotten man” of the American Civil War, was wrongly accused of disobeying orders and losing the Second Battle of Manassas (28–30 Aug. 1862). He was court-martialed and dismissed from the Army, a victim of jealous senior officers and radical Republican politicians who despised his loyalty to Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan, commander of the Army of the Potomac. President Abraham Lincoln stood aloof from this “kangaroo court,” but approved of its verdict—not his finest hour. Indeed, *Radical Sacrifice* is a studied indictment of the president. Sixteen years later, Porter was exonerated when a board of officers chaired by the Superintendent of West Point reexamined the documentary record and concluded that “he had been entirely innocent and had not contributed to the defeat at Second Bull Run at all, deliberately or otherwise” (xii).

Author William Marvel is an independent scholar and prolific writer of books on the Civil War. His latest volume is firmly grounded in official records, personal correspondence, and memoirs of the soldiers and politicians involved in the controversy. The book proceeds chronologically through Porter’s life. A last chapter concerns his daughter’s efforts to restore his reputation after Congress reversed the judgment of the court-martial.

Fitz John Porter was the son of an undistinguished naval officer. His widowed mother gave him a good education and engineered his admission to West Point. Commissioned into the artillery branch in 1845, he proved to be a fine soldier. He distinguished himself in the Mexican War and later received brevet promotions to captain and major—a signal honor for a young officer. Porter was a creditable staff officer in momentous events before the Civil War, for instance, the pursuit of John Brown in “Bleeding Kansas” and the “Utah War” that brought the truculent Mormon government to heel—an arduous expedition spanning a thousand miles.

When the Civil War broke out, Porter was dispatched to Texas by the Army’s commanding general, Winfield Scott. He gathered hundreds of Federal troops from garrisons in the Rio Grande Valley and evacuated them by sea before the state’s commanding general, who had defected to the Confederacy, could imprison them. In fall 1861, Porter’s longtime friend McClellan, now a Major General, received command of the Army of the Potomac and soon succeeded Scott as the Army’s General in Chief. “Little Mac” promoted Porter to Brigadier General and gave him command of a division and then a corps. As McClellan’s “point man,” he distinguished himself in some of the hardest fighting of the Peninsular campaign (Spr. 1862). He also “took a keen interest in a novel means of detecting threatening enemy movements” (86–87). He made several balloon ascents with Prof. Thaddeus Lowe and became his most influential supporter.

The Peninsular campaign was the most original strategic approach undertaken in the Eastern theater, but McClellan’s constant overestimates of Rebel troop strength caused operational paralysis. When the Army of the Potomac reached the outskirts of Richmond, it was met by a mismanaged Confederate assault at Seven Pines, after which Gen. Robert E. Lee replaced the wounded Joseph E. Johnston in command of the newly renamed Army of Northern Virginia. The Union ar-

my straddled the Chickahominy River, flooded by spring rains. Only Porter's V Corps was left on the north bank to guard McClellan's right flank. Lee, with the largest army he ever commanded, moved north of the Chickahominy and unleashed the Seven Days Battles by attacking the isolated V Corps. Porter conducted a splendid defense against increasingly heavy odds until forced to retreat at the close of the second day. While this battle was raging, the rest of the Army of the Potomac sat idle before the Richmond fortifications, deceived by the much weaker Rebel forces. Had McClellan dared to attack while most of Lee's army was north of the Chickahominy, he might well have captured Richmond. Instead he retreated to stand on the defensive along the James River. At Malvern Hill, the culmination of the Seven Days Battles, McClellan again put Porter in charge with the V Corps, defending the high ground. Lee, showing the blind combativeness he later displayed at Gettysburg, launched a costly frontal assault that took heavy casualties.

McClellan's failure before Richmond badly hurt his reputation, and the administration replaced him as the Army's General in Chief with Maj. Gen. Henry Halleck, summoned from the Western Theater. Halleck brought with him a favored subordinate, Maj. Gen. John Pope, who was given command of the newly formed Army of Virginia, which would include troops from McClellan's Army withdrawing from the peninsula. Porter's V Corps was among the units transferred to Pope.

Porter, always a "team player," was inflexibly loyal to his superiors. Nevertheless, he was sowing the seeds of his own downfall. Circumspect within the chain of command, "to his ultimate regret, he maintained communication with civilians whose influence he valued and whose discretion he overestimated" (182). He was also indiscreet with trusted army friends; as a result, too many of Porter's unfiltered opinions circulated among his enemies within the Lincoln administration. Writing to a friend who was an influential journalist, Porter "advised putting no faith in Pope or anything he said, noting his reputation for prevarication in the old army," where "he was never known to tell the truth when he could gain his object by a falsehood" (186). Still, he lost no time when ordered to join the Army of Virginia: "For all his mutinous invective about Pope deserving defeat, Porter moved quickly to go to his aid" (188).

Pope's reputation for dishonesty and overweening ego alienated most of the senior officers in the Army of Virginia, whose attitude to him was summarized by Brig. Gen. Alpheus Williams: "more insolence, superciliousness, ignorance, and pretentiousness were never combined in one man" (189). Pope was clearly unequal to the challenge posed by Robert E. Lee. Despite his heavy losses in the Seven Days Battles, Lee had evicted the Army of the Potomac from the vicinity of Richmond. The Union high command, meanwhile, was in disarray: two Federal armies were a considerable distance apart and unable to cooperate. Stonewall Jackson, on the heels of an unimpressive performance during the Seven Days battles, now reverted to the aggressive soldier who had confounded Union armies in the Shenandoah Valley. With Pope's army secure behind the flooded Rappahannock, Jackson assayed a bold flanking maneuver—marching his corps over fifty miles in two days, reaching the major Union supply depot at Bristoe Station, deep in Pope's rear. After pillaging the depot, Jackson took a strong defensive position along the Warrenton Pike. He would be the "anvil" while Lee and the other half of the Army of Northern Virginia, under Gen. James Longstreet, would follow as the "hammer" against the left flank of Pope's army.

When Pope finally located Jackson, he redeployed his troops to confront him, with Porter's corps on the left flank. Porter suspected, correctly, that more Confederate troops were massing on the Union left and he warned Pope that Longstreet had probably arrived to join Jackson's troops. Pope disregarded Porter's warning, and Longstreet's attack on the afternoon of 30 August crushed

the Union forces, driving the survivors eastward. General Pope lost no time finding someone to blame for this disaster.

Porter's court-martial hinged on three issues: two allegations of disobedience of orders, and his indiscreet communications with friends and fellow officers expressing distrust of Pope. Most damning in the latter category was a dispatch to Maj. Gen. Ambrose Burnside widely circulated within the administration and regarded as proof of his disloyalty to Pope. Disobedience of orders was a more serious matter, however. On 27 Aug. 1862 Porter received an order from Pope for V Corps to leave its bivouac at 1 a.m. and march to Bristoe Station. Porter's troops, however, were exhausted from a long march, and the narrow road to Bristoe Station was known to be jammed with supply wagons. Porter decided that it was within his discretion as a corps commander to delay his march and give the men two extra hours of rest. Pope obviously did not agree.

The other charge should have been easier to refute, but the circumstances became murky in the recollections of the principals. At 4:30 on 29 Aug. 1862, General Pope wrote out an order for Porter to attack the flank and rear of Stonewall Jackson's corps. However, neither Jackson nor V Corps were where Pope imagined them to be. Instead, as Porter had already discovered, there were masses of Confederate troops to his front—Longstreet's corps arriving from the west, which heavily outnumbered the V Corps. Furthermore, Maj. Gen. Irvin McDowell was the senior Union officer on Pope's left, and Porter was under his orders. McDowell appropriated one of Porter's divisions and departed after advising Porter's chief of staff, Col. Frederick T. Locke, that Porter should remain where he was, and retreat if necessary. With darkness approaching and strong enemy forces ahead of him, Porter—covered by McDowell's verbal instructions to his chief of staff—sensibly refrained from attacking. At the trial, McDowell failed to recall what he said, or to whom. Porter's lawyers did what could, but their objections were overruled.

William Marvel's book rescues Fitz John Porter from obscurity, but it is difficult reading, particularly in its final chapters. The author leaves no stone unturned in recounting Porter's long road to redemption. Another problem, all too common in military history books, is the lack of adequate maps. Narrative alone cannot adequately capture the ebb and flow of battle.