



BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

Ben Wade at Bull Run

By Fergus M. Bordewich, April 24, 2020. Adapted from his new book, *Congress at War: How Republican Reformers Fought the Civil War, Defied Lincoln, Ended Slavery, and Remade America*.

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Ben Wade | Library of Congress

After the fall of Fort Sumter, many of the North's political men dithered between resistance and conciliation toward the breakaway South. Sen. Ben Wade of Ohio's Western Reserve was not one of them. A tall, angular man with sharp bright eyes, bristling iron-gray hair, booming voice, bulldog stubbornness, and an unyielding hatred of slavery, the 60-year-old Wade declared to a roaring audience in Cleveland, "The time for argument has passed and the time for action has come. They wish to meet you hand to hand, and foot to foot. Old as I am, I'll go with a musket on my shoulder."

In the weeks that followed, the northern public and its political leadership gradually caught up to Wade. Demand for a decisive battle to crush the rebels steadily swelled. Reflecting later on the mood of the time, Rep. Albert Riddle, Wade's fellow Ohio Radical, wrote, "The average man then supposed war meant to march upon the enemy by the shortest route, assail, hang to him, and lick him in the shortest possible time." The *New York Tribune*, the most influential Republican newspaper in the country, hammered the administration daily with a taunt beneath its masthead: "The Nation's War Cry: Forward to Richmond! Forward to Richmond!"



BATTLE OF BULL RUN.

Battle of Bull Run | Library of Congress

The army faced another unforgiving source of pressure. Nearly all the troops under arms had been called up for just 90 days—the maximum allowable under the Militia Act of 1793—and their term of service was about to expire. The army's newly appointed field commander, Irvin McDowell, knew they weren't ready for battle. But he also knew that if he didn't use the men he had, he'd soon lose them. By mid-July, some regiments were already starting for home.

On July 16, the first regiments began marching out of their bivouacs on the Potomac toward the rebel encampment at Manassas Junction, 30 miles southwest of the capital. Five days later they collided with an army commanded by Pierre G.T. Beauregard, the Confederate hero of Fort Sumter, at a meandering stream called Bull Run. An army of civilian tourists, including many members of Congress, followed the army in carriages freighted with picnic baskets and bottles of wine, and in at least some cases armed with guns with which they hoped to take pot shots at the rebels. Among them were Ben Wade and his friend Sen. Zachariah Chandler, a giant of a man who, like Wade, was partial to explosive profanity that could stop men in their tracks. They were accompanied in a second carriage by the Senate's Sergeant-at-Arms and several others, all of them armed and confident that the rebels would be captured to a man.

Wade's party drove past deserted farms and ripening cornfields, past the expectant eyes of enslaved people, and their sullen masters. Carriages by the hundreds pulled up on the hills overlooking the rolling countryside where the battle was underway. A well-dressed lady watching the fight through opera glasses was heard to say, "Oh, my! Is not that first-rate! I guess we will be in Richmond this time tomorrow." The first messengers dispatched back to Washington reported a great victory.



Zachariah Chandler | Library of Congress



P. G. T. Beauregard | National Archives

Then it all began to come apart. The Confederates overran the Federal batteries on Henry House hill. Civilian wagon drivers panicked. First in twos and threes, then by the score, then in the hundreds, demoralized Federal troops began drifting back up the Centerville Road. Soon they were no longer walking but running, throwing away their rifles, canteens, cartridge boxes, haversacks, bed rolls, hats, and coats. Artillerymen abandoned their cannon and caissons. Officers disappeared. Drivers lashed maddened horses. Fleeing men's faces gaped like gargoyles, blackened from the powder from the cartridges they'd bitten off in battle, their eyes bulging with fear. There was Gen. David Hunter in the back of a wagon, blood pouring from his head. And there, Col. Ambrose Burnside, whose Rhode Islanders had seemed on the brink of victory a few hours before, now hatless, galloping past on a horse. And there, Sen. Henry Wilson heading away from the battle on a mule. The army that had marched off so proudly the night before was no longer an army but a mob, commandeering ambulances, carts, caissons, any kind of conveyance that rolled. With the explosion of every Confederate shell, the vast straining mass of men, animals, and wagons was seized as if by an electric convulsion.



Henry House ruins | Medford Museum & Society

Wade and his friends were swept along against their will in the rout. Shame at what he saw metamorphosed into a towering rage as the mob drove them on pell-mell over a road that was literally paved with discarded guns and gear. Just short of Fairfax Court House, 10 miles north of Bull Run, Wade convinced his friends to pull their carriages sideways across the road where it passed between a fenced-in farm and a dense wood. "Boys, we'll stop this damned runaway!" he shouted. He pushed his hat back on his head, levered a cartridge into the chamber of his new Maynard carbine, and cocked it. Chandler drew a heavy navy revolver. Their friends did likewise. They pointed their weapons at the boiling mass of men who jostled against their carriages. Wade boomed that if they attempted to run any farther he'd blow their brains out. Wade's stand lasted only about 20 minutes, but it was enough to stem the tide until the arrival of the still-intact Second New York Volunteers, which brought some semblance of order to the fleeing multitude. Wade's fame spread because of his sensational bravery.

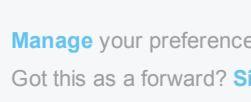
"Whatever credit there was in stopping that rout is due wholly to senators Wade and Chandler," wrote the *National Intelligencer*, with some exaggeration.

But the statesmen had shown extraordinary courage at a time when many had not.



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