The First Battle of Bull Run

By Heyan Chung
On July 21, 1861, American soldiers were fighting a desperate battle while civilians nearby were looking hungrily at their picnics (especially the watermelons). Wait, what? How did this happen? Well, to understand this, you have to go back in time to the presidential election of 1860, where a question hung in the air. Slavery. Should the immoral practice of forcing people to work all day for no pay and making them live in fear of being sold and separated from their families be legal?
While Northerners didn't need huge amounts of slaves to work at their factories, the South was made up of huge plantations that needed tons of labor. So the Northerners decided slavery was immoral, while the Southerners said that it was okay. A mistrust grew between North and South, but it wasn't too bad until new states started joining the union.
There was the question of whether the new states would be slave or free, and congress got very worked up about this. On one side, there were the Republicans, who were anti-slavery, and the Democrats, who were pro-slavery. When a Republican named Abraham Lincoln became president, that was the last straw. South Carolina left the country, then more slave states left and formed the "Confederate States of America". Lincoln was outraged and declared war.
So the Civil war stated, with the U.S. fighting against the Confederacy. The first major battle occurred near Bull Run creek. Encouraged by a couple of easy victories in the west, Lincoln told Major General Mcdowell to go and take Richmond, the capital of the confederacy. This would hopefully bring a short end to the war. The attack began at Bull Run river, where Mcdowell's 30,000 troops met Confederate General P.G.T. Beauregard's 22,000. United States citizens, sure that the battle would end with the United States soldiers destroying the Confederates, went down to Bull Run to watch the battle while having picnics.
The large Union force outnumbered the Confederate force and was winning the battle, pushing Beauregard's forces back. Mcdowell, however, was making mistake after mistake, even accidentally revealing his plans to the confederates. The Union also did not know that another Confederate force under the command of Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston was arriving by train, and remained disorganized while the U.S. citizens celebrated too early by taking out their watermelons. Meanwhile, Confederate Brigadier General Thomas Jackson and Confederate Colonel Wade Hampton approached.
Jackson stood still against the charging U.S. forces, and Brigadier General Bernard Bee shouted to his troops, "Look, men, there stands Jackson like a stone wall. Rally behind the Virginians!" This earned Jackson the nickname "Stonewall Jackson". Meanwhile, the disorganized union troops let Johnston's forces in, and with renewed force, the Confederates charged forward, shouting what would later be called the "Rebel Yell at Bull Run".
The U.S. army chaotically retreated as quickly as possible, running into the citizens who were looking sadly at their watermelons that had been crushed by Confederate cannons. The Confederates did not chase them, as they were also too disorganized. Two times as many U.S. soldiers had died compared to the Confederate deaths. This battle made it clear to everyone that the war was not going to be the quick and easy one they had expected. However, they never imagined in their wildest dreams that the Civil War was going to be the bloodiest war ever fought in the United States.