ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

George Brinton McClellan

By **Mark Grimsley**, Ohio State University

For good or ill, no Union military commander except Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant had a greater impact on the Civil War than George Brinton McClellan. Born on December 3, 1826, into a prominent Philadelphia family, McClellan had an impressive pre-war career. Just 15 years old when he entered the United States Military Academy in 1842, he graduated in 1846, second in a class of 59, and was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Corps of Engineers, considered the most prestigious branch of the U.S. Army.

At almost the same time that McClellan ended his days as a West Point cadet, the Mexican-American War began on the border between Texas and Mexico. McClellan's service in that conflict was exemplary. Serving mainly as a staff officer under Major General Winfield Scott, he gained distinction in the battles of Contreras and Churubusco, which won him promotion to the brevet rank of first lieutenant (in the nineteenth-century Army, brevet rank served the function of present-day military decorations). His heroic service at Chapultepec, the war's climactic battle, won him the brevet rank of captain. Together with Robert E. Lee, who also served on his staff, Scott marked McClellan as the two most gifted officers in the Army.

Promoted to the permanent rank of captain in March 1855, McClellan's most important postwar assignment was with a military commission sent by Secretary of War Jefferson Davis to observe the Crimean War (1853-1856). The commission, led by Major Richard Delafield, witnessed the siege of Sevastopol. But more importantly, it had the opportunity to observe several European armies, particularly the French army, then considered the best in the world. Returning to the United States in 1856, McClellan wrote the section of the report that dealt with the organization of Europe's major armies. McClellan's section concluded with a proposed field manual for cavalry as well as a recommendation for a new saddle which the U.S. Army adopted. The Army would use the McClellan saddle for as long as it used horses. But further peacetime service did not suit McClellan and, as with many other gifted officers, he left the Army to pursue a more interesting and lucrative career in business. He resigned his commission in January 1857 and went to work as chief engineer and vice president of the Illinois Central Railroad, then as president of the Ohio and Mississippi Railroad. On the eve of the Civil War, he was earning a salary of $10,000 per year, the equivalent of $350,000 in 2025.

With the war's outbreak in April 1861, state governors North and South scrambled to recruit experienced military officers, especially West Pointers, to help organize the volunteer

regiments they were hastily creating. Governor William Dennison, Jr. of Ohio had the good fortune to secure McClellan. Commissioned as a major general of volunteers on April 23, McClellan soon found himself in command of the Department of the Ohio, and on May 14 was given the rank of major general in the regular army. He now held higher rank than anyone in the army except Winfield Scott, who at 75 years old was the army's general-in-chief. McClellan himself was just a few months past his 34th birthday.

McClellan showed great energy and skill in organizing the Ohio volunteers. On May 26, having received intelligence reports that the Confederates were burning bridges on the vital Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, he set in motion forces that entered western Virginia (future West Virginia) to remove the threat, and soon went to lead them in person. After seizing the important railroad junction of Grafton, where the railroad divided into a main line that ran toward Wheeling and a branch that ran to Parkersburg, McClellan's troops soon caught up to a Confederate rear guard at Philippi and swiftly put it to flight. Militarily inconsequential, the Philippi races nonetheless made national headlines because it was the first encounter between Union and Confederate land forces. On July 11, his army of 7,000 fought the far more important battle of Rich Mountain, driving the 1,300 Confederate defenders off the mountaintop and capturing almost half of them. McClellan's force then continued to Beverly, Virginia. There it halted; the Allegheny Mountains and its narrow roads made a further advance impractical. But more than any other military action, Rich Mountain secured pro-Unionist western Virginia and paved the way for the creation of West Virginia two years later.

In future years, it would be bruited about that McClellan deserved no credit for the victory and had, in fact, been frozen with indecision while his second-in-command, Brigadier General William Starke Rosecrans, fought and won the actual battle. These charges were heavily influenced by anti-McClellan partisanship, however, and were, at the very least, overblown. And they did not change the fact that McClellan had been responsible for the war's first Union victory of consequence. On July 16, he published an address to his troops congratulating them on having "annihilated two armies"—the other annihilation having been a minor skirmish at Laurel Mountain—"entrenched in mountain fastnesses fortified at their leisure." This was a ludicrous overstatement, although one must concede that the address was mainly aimed at bolstering the morale of his soldiers.[1] It was nonetheless accepted as straight reporting by the breathless Northern press. The *New York Herald* called McClellan "the Napoleon of the present war," and from then on he was regularly described as "the Young Napoleon."[2]

Barely a week after the victory at Rich Mountain, a Union army of 35,000 men under Major General Irvin McDowell suffered an ignominious defeat near Manassas Junction, about 25 miles from Washington. The retreat to the nation's capital quickly became a rout, and the Lincoln administration realized that the army at Washington required a new commander. On July 22, McClellan received a telegram: "Circumstances make your presence here necessary…. Come

[1] "To the Army of the West," July 16, 1861, in Stephen W. Sears, ed., *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan: Selected Correspondence, 1860-1865* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1989), 58-59.

[2] *New York Herald*, July 15, 1861.

hither without delay" and was appointed to command of the Military Division of the Potomac on July 26.[3]

The next several months were, in some important respects, the most consequential of McClellan's Civil War career. First, by all accounts, he did a superb job of organizing what he dubbed the Army of the Potomac, which by the early spring of 1862 reached a strength of 120,000. The troops were well-trained, well-disciplined, and, for the most part, well-officered. Second, he quickly became embroiled in the politics of the war. This was to some extent unavoidable, given that it was a civil war, but McClellan did nothing to remove himself from the political currents that swirled around him, and as the months progressed, it became increasingly apparent that his political sympathies, and his strongest support, came from the Democratic Party. This created suspicions among powerful members of the Republican Party, some of whom went so far as to whisper that he was sympathetic to the South.

Third, he and President Abraham Lincoln created what was not a strong working relationship to begin with and one that became steadily worse as the war progressed. In modern times, historians have almost uniformly blamed McClellan for this, arguing more or less explicitly that Lincoln did his generous best to forge a good relationship while McClellan did his toxic worst to undermine it. And yet, of the two actors, Lincoln was the more powerful. He could give McClellan direct orders, say no to any action by McClellan he disliked, and even remove him from command altogether. Instead, Lincoln dealt with McClellan in a fashion that was often meek, sometimes querulous, and occasionally underhanded. He also did McClellan's bidding by forcing Winfield Scott's retirement as general-in-chief and replacing him with McClellan on November 1, 1861. With this promotion McClellan also retained command of the Army of the Potomac.

McClellan, for his part, plainly considered Lincoln out of his depth. This was a common sentiment—Lincoln, after all, had never held an executive political office, had served at the federal government level for just two years (a single term in Congress), and had been a compromise choice for the Republican nomination when supposedly better qualified candidates, most notably William Henry Seward, could not muster enough support at the 1860 Republican convention. Seward was quite certain that Lincoln was out of his depth, and soon after becoming Lincoln's Secretary of State, made Lincoln an astonishing offer to, in essence, take over as a head of the government while Lincoln was relegated to head to state. Lincoln rejected the suggestion, but for a long time Seward treated the president with a condescension he did little to hide and that McClellan could not have failed to notice. Another member of Lincoln's Cabinet, Secretary of the Treasury Salmon Portland Chase, had also been a front runner for the Republican nomination, also thought himself superior to Lincoln, and for a time was among McClellan's strongest supporters in pressuring Lincoln to accept McClellan's plans.

[3] Lorenzo Thomas to McClellan, July 22, 1861, in United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies,* 70 vols. in 128 parts (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 2, p. 753 (hereafter cited as *O.R.,* I, 2, 753).

Contemporaries had doubts about Lincoln almost until the end of the war, but his assassination in April 1865 made him a martyr and within a few years, he was widely regarded not just as a president who deserved to rank with George Washington but also as a kind of American secular saint. Few of Lincoln's opponents have fared well in the history books, and this has sharply colored—one might even say distorted—assessments of the Lincoln-McClellan relationship. McClellan's disparaging comments about Lincoln, made in letters to his wife, Ellen Marcy McClellan, and in catty asides to members of his staff, have placed McClellan in an even worse light. It is well known that on several occasions he called the tall, gawky Lincoln a gorilla. (It is less well known that he adopted the epithet from Edwin McMasters Stanton, who also called Lincoln a gorilla prior to becoming Lincoln's Secretary of War in January 1862.)[4]

By early autumn 1861, political pressure began to mount on McClellan to undertake active operations against the Confederate army concentrated at Centreville, not far from the Manassas battlefield. This was unrealistic, partly because the Army of the Potomac's training and organization were incomplete and partly because—as would become clear as the war unfolded—the best time to begin operations was in mid-spring, the worst time in winter or late autumn. But in the innocent early months of the war, this was not apparent. Frustration mounted when McClellan steadfastly refused to move prematurely, a frustration shared by Lincoln, who on January 10, 1862, took the extraordinary step of meeting with McClellan's top generals behind his back—McClellan was then ill with typhoid fever—and pointedly asking them what they would do with the army if placed in command. McClellan got wind of the meeting and two days later appeared at the White House unannounced, where for the first time he disclosed that he already had a plan of campaign. The next day, Lincoln organized a war council consisting of himself, most of his Cabinet, McClellan, and the top generals with whom he had already spoken. This was as dysfunctional an arrangement as one can imagine, because it signaled both that Lincoln's confidence in McClellan was shaken and that, evidently, he believed that without the assistance of the Cabinet officials and generals, he could not impose his will on McClellan.

McClellan proposed to take advantage of Northern sea power to transfer the Army of the Potomac to the town of Urbanna on the Rappahannock River. A short march would carry it to West Point at the head of the York River, from which a railroad ran directly to the Confederate capital of Richmond. This would not only give the army a secure supply line by which to move against Richmond, it would also force the Confederate army at Centreville to abandon its position and fall back dozens of miles. Strategically this was ingenious (and Grant would make similar use of Virginia's tidal rivers in his Overland Campaign two years later), but politically it struck Lincoln as fraught with danger, because it potentially exposed Washington to attack. Lincoln also questioned why McClellan could not just advance directly against the Confederate position at Centreville.

McClellan responded that the Confederate army outnumbered his own and that, consequently, a direct advance was doomed to defeat. This became a chronic refrain and one of the best-known elements of the McClellan story: throughout his tenure in command, he would

[4] Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1988), 132-3.

always insist that he faced a numerically superior enemy. This elided into another well-known element of the story: that McClellan was overcautious to the point of timidity. Some have suspected that McClellan intentionally inflated enemy numbers to justify his caution, but Stephen W. Sears, McClellan's foremost modern biographer, has demonstrated that McClellan's claims about enemy numbers accurately reflected the analyses supplied by his chief of intelligence, Allan Pinkerton. Yet others who examined the evidence of enemy numbers reached conclusions more in line with the facts. It is not unreasonable to conclude that McClellan believed Pinkerton's figures because he wanted to believe them.

Despite his doubts, Lincoln did not veto McClellan's Urbanna plan, but he signaled his lack of confidence in McClellan by overruling McClellan's desire to divide his twelve divisions into corps only after having had the chance to evaluate his generals' performance in the field. Instead, Lincoln not only forced McClellan to create a corps structure immediately but also named their commanders: Major General Irvin McDowell, Major General Edwin Vose Sumner, Major General Samuel Peter Heintzelman, and Major General Erasmus Darwin Keyes, three of whom were on record as having opposed the Urbanna plan. Lincoln also removed McClellan as general-in-chief, another indication that he lacked confidence in the Young Napoleon. (In practical terms, this scarcely mattered: McClellan had never shown much interest in operations beyond Virginia.)

On March 10, word arrived that the Confederate army had abruptly withdrawn from Centreville. When the Army of the Potomac advanced to Centreville, merely as a kind of shake-down cruise, critics observed that the abandoned encampments could not possibly have held an army as numerous as McClellan claimed.

Lincoln nonetheless permitted McClellan to continue his plans for a seaborne offensive, although the Confederate retreat now made the Urbanna plan unworkable and McClellan focused instead on landing his army at Fort Monroe, at the tip of the Virginia Peninsula, formed by the York and James River estuaries.

The lead elements of the Army of the Potomac disembarked at Fort Monroe on April 4. Other elements were still in transit when Lincoln and Stanton discovered that McClellan did not appear to have done as Lincoln demanded and left behind enough troops to defend Washington. Generals charged with reviewing the strength reports agreed with this assessment. Lincoln, who had already withdrawn a 10,000-man division from the Army of the Potomac and, for political reasons, given it to Major General John C. Frémont in western Virginia, now halted the transfer to the Peninsula of the entire First Corps: 40,000 men under McDowell. One could easily multiply examples of Lincoln's interference in McClellan's operations. Was the interference justified? Perhaps. Perhaps not. What it makes clear, however, was that Lincoln's confidence in McClellan was so shaken that he should have forbidden McClellan to launch the Peninsula Campaign in the first place.

A discussion of the Peninsula Campaign is beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say that it failed, that McClellan blamed Lincoln for its failure—"you have done your best to sacrifice this army," McClellan bitterly accused Stanton, and by easy extension Lincoln, in one anguished telegram—and that a toxic level of mutual suspicion now characterized the command

relationship between the two men.[5] Moreover, political partisans on all sides, who were already subjecting the Lincoln-McClellan relationship to more intense scrutiny than any other command relationship in American history, now excoriated president or general in the halls of Congress, in the salons of Washington, and in newspapers throughout the country.

Worse, Lincoln and McClellan now disagreed on how to deal with what had plainly become a military stalemate. Lincoln, who had hitherto preferred to fight a limited war to restore the Union and with as little impact on slavery as possible, now believed that this conciliatory policy had failed. In mid-July, with McClellan's army still at Harrison's Landing on the James River after its drubbing by General Robert E. Lee in the Seven Days' battles, Lincoln announced to his Cabinet plans to issue an emancipation proclamation. At the same time, he signaled a willingness to inflict heavier blows on the Confederacy through the destruction or confiscation of civilian property. McClellan had already discerned that Lincoln's thoughts were moving in that direction and during a brief visit by Lincoln to Harrison's Landing earlier in the month, handed him a letter urging him not to do so. The war "should be conducted upon the highest principles known to Christian Civilization…. It should not be, at all, a War upon population; but against armed forces and political organizations…. Military power should noy be allowed to interfere with the relations of servitude, either by supporting or impairing the authority of the master…. A declaration of radical views, especially upon slavery, will rapidly disintegrate our present Armies."[6] This Harrison's Landing Letter, as it eventually became known, remained confidential until the eve of 1864. When it became public, it functioned as a major campaign document during that year's presidential contest.

McClellan hoped to use Harrison's Landing as a base from which to renew the offensive against Richmond. But this Lincoln refused to countenance, and on August 3, McClellan received orders to withdraw his army from the Peninsula and return it to Washington. As this transfer of troops progressed, most units were placed under the control of Major General John Pope, whose recently created Army of Virginia had become the target of an offensive by the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia under Lee. On August 30-31, Lee inflicted a defeat on Pope at the Second Battle of Manassas that was, if anything, worse than the defeat of McDowell's army the year before.

Despite the violent objections of much of his Cabinet, Lincoln placed McClellan in command of all troops in the vicinity of Washington—essentially the Army of the Potomac and the units that had constituted the now dissolved Army of Virginia. These included not just veteran troops but also thousands of new troops, recently organized into regiments after an August 1862 call for 300,000 additional volunteers. On September 4, Lee launched an offensive into Maryland, with the intent of moving on to Pennsylvania (much as he would do in the Gettysburg Campaign the following year). He did not believe that McClellan, beset with the problem of a major re-organization of the Army of the Potomac, would be able to launch a swift pursuit. Instead,

[5] McClellan to Stanton, June 27, 1862, in Sears, ed., *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan*, 323.
[6] McClellan to Lincoln, July 7, 1862, in Sears, ed., *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan*, 344-5.

McClellan did so in a matter of days, defeating Lee in the preliminary battle of South Mountain on September 14 and defeating Lee at the battle of Antietam on September 17.

During the Antietam Campaign, McClellan operated, as he always did, on the assumption that enemy forces outnumbered his own. In fact, at the battle of Antietam Lee had, at most, 40,000 men, while McClellan's field forces numbered 87,000. McClellan thus stood an excellent chance of doing as Lincoln wished—"destroy the rebel army"—but had no idea that this was possible and instead conducted a series of cautious assaults that resulted in the bloodiest day in American military history while giving Lee the chance to escape across the Potomac River with his army intact.[7] Ironically, given McClellan's opposition to emancipation, Lincoln used this marginal victory at Antietam to provide him with the opportunity to issue his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation on September 22—Seward had warned Lincoln against issuing the proclamation until Union forces gained a victory enough to make the proclamation seem a gesture of strength rather than desperation.

Because of McClellan's enmeshment in the politics of the war, Lincoln waited until the Northern midterm elections were over before removing McClellan from command of the Army of the Potomac on November 5, 1862. McClellan never again held a military assignment. Instead, he spent much of 1863 composing a book-length report on his operations as commander of the Army of the Potomac that effectively functioned as an attack on Lincoln's competence as commander-in-chief. Few doubted that McClellan would be the Democratic Party's presidential nominee in 1864, and since the election was fundamentally a referendum on Lincoln as a war president, the published report hit Lincoln where he was most vulnerable.

By mid-summer 1864, the military stalemate in Virginia and Georgia made Lincoln fear that he would lose the coming election. But no sooner did McClellan officially become the Democratic nominee than word came of Major General William Tecumseh Sherman's capture of Atlanta. Although McClellan himself insisted that as president he would continue the war against the Confederacy, he was saddled with a peace plank declaring the war a failure and a running mate, George Hunt Pendleton, a prominent Peace Democrat who favored a negotiated peace. Major General Philip Henry Sheridan's victories in the Shenandoah Valley in September and October underscored that the North was winning the war. On November 8, Lincoln easily won reelection, receiving 55 percent of the popular vote and a whopping 212 electoral votes against the 21 won by McClellan. That same day, McClellan resigned his commission as major general and re-entered civilian life.

After the war, McClellan enjoyed modest but still substantial success, most notably a three-year term as governor of New Jersey after winning election in 1877. But on October 29, 1885, he unexpectedly died of an apparent heart attack. He was just 58 years old.

McClellan spent much of his postwar years defending the decisions he made and actions he took while in command of the Army of the Potomac. He would have felt both pleased and

[7] Lincoln to McClellan, September 15, 1862, in Roy P. Basler (ed), *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* 8 vols. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), vol. 5, 426.

vindicated to learn that Lee, when asked to name the Union general he thought the greatest, responded, "McClellan, by all odds!"[8] He became the subject of several biographies, some of them sharply critical, others sympathetic. In 1952, however, T. Harry Williams published *Lincoln and His Generals*, a classic study of Lincoln's relationship with his top commanders, of which almost half was devoted to a remorseless demolition of McClellan through a combination of accuracy (McClellan assuredly had flaws), acid observations, rhetorical sleight of hand, and a heads-I-win-tails-you-lose narrative strategy whereby Lincoln emerged unscathed.

Williams' critique made McClellan the object of reflexive derision in the minds of many academics and most lay students of the Civil War. Despite several efforts by historians seeking to offer a more measured assessment of McClellan's strengths and weaknesses, nothing has so far shaken the popular image of McClellan as a combination of arrogance, timidity, and fatally flawed military judgment. Possibly nothing ever will.

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George Brinton McClellan

Born	December 3, 1826 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Died	October 29, 1885 West Orange, New Jersey
Buried	Riverview Cemetery, Trenton New Jersey
Father	George McClellan
Mother	Elizabeth Brinton
Career Milestones	Graduated U.S. Military Academy, 1847 (second in his class) | won three brevets in the Mexican-American War for gallantry and distinguished service |member of the Delafield Commission, 1855-1856 | resigned as Captain in 1857 to become a successful railroad executive | Began Civil War as a Major General of Ohio volunteers, soon promoted to Major General in U.S. Army | won battle of Rich Mountain, Virginia, July 11, 1861 | Created and commanded the Army of the Potomac, July 1861-November 1862 | General-in-Chief, Union Armies, November 1861-March 1862 | Commanded Army of the Potomac in Peninsula Campaign, April-July 1862 | defeated by Gen. Robert E. Lee in Seven Days' Battles, June 25-

[8] Cazenove Lee memorandum, undated, in Robert E. Lee [Jr.], *Recollections and Letters of General Robert E. Lee* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1904), 416.

	July 1, 1862 | Command Army of the Potomac in Antietam Campaign, September 1862 | defeated Lee in battles of South Mountain and Antietam, September 14, September 17, 1862 | Relieved of command of Army of the Potomac, November 7, 1862 | ran as Democratic Party nominee in 1864 presidential campaign | Governor of New Jersey, 1878-1881,

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