

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

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## George Brinton McClellan

By Mark Grimsley, Ohio State University

### Resources

#### If you can read only one book

Author	<i>Title</i> . City: Publisher, Year.
Sears, Stephen W.	<i>George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon</i> . New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1988.

### Books and Articles

Author	<i>Title</i> . City: Publisher, Year.   “Title,” in <i>Journal</i> ##, no. # (Date): #.
Hassler, Jr., Warren W.	<i>General George B. McClellan: Shield of the Union</i> . Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957.
Hearn, Chester G.	<i>Lincoln and McClellan at War</i> . Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2012.
McClellan, George Brinton	<i>McClellan’s Own Story</i> . New York: Charles L. Webster, 1887.
Rable, George C.	<i>Conflict of Command: George McClellan, Abraham Lincoln, and the Politics of War</i> . Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2023.
Rafuse, Ethan S.	<i>McClellan’s War: The Failure of Moderation in the Struggle For the Union</i> . Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005.
Rowland, Thomas J.	<i>George B. McClellan and Civil War History: In the Shadow of Grant and Sherman</i> . Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1998.

Sears, ed., Stephen W.	<i>The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan: Selected Correspondence, 1860-1865.</i> New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1989.
Waugh, John C.	<i>Lincoln and McClellan: The Troubled Partnership Between a President and His General.</i> New York: MacMillan Palgrave, 2010.
Williams, T. Harry	<i>Lincoln and His Generals.</i> New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952, chap. 2-7.

### Other Sources

Name	Description, Contact information including address, email
George Brinton McClellan Papers at the Library of Congress	<p>The papers of U.S. Army officer and governor of New Jersey George Brinton McClellan (1826-1885) consist of 33,000 items (59,477 images), most of which were digitized from 82 reels of previously produced microfilm. Spanning the years 1783-1898, with the bulk dating from 1850 to 1885, the collection contains correspondence, telegrams, memoranda, diaries, writings, notes, military papers, McClellan family papers, scrapbooks, printed copies of speeches, articles and books, and other papers relating primarily to General George B. McClellan's Civil War service, particularly in the 1862 Peninsular Campaign in Virginia and battle of Antietam in Maryland.</p> <p>The collection can be viewed at:</p> <p><a href="https://www.loc.gov/collections/george-brinton-mcclellan-papers/about-this-collection/">https://www.loc.gov/collections/george-brinton-mcclellan-papers/about-this-collection/</a></p>

## Scholars

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## Topic Précis

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. For his performance in the Mexican American War immediately after his graduation he was promoted to brevet rank of Captain and marked as one of the two most gifted soldiers, together with Robert E. Lee. He served as an observer of the Crimean War in the early 1850s and resigned from the army in 1857 to become a railroad president. At the start of the war McClellan was commissioned a major general in the regular army and charged with command of the Department of the Ohio. He led Union forces to victory at Rich Mountain in July, effectively securing what was to become West Virginia for the Union. Following the defeat at the Battle of First Manassas of the Union army under Major General Irvin McDowell, McClellan was summoned by Lincoln to Washington and given command of the forces there, later the Army of the Potomac, on July 26. In that role he did a superb job of organizing the army but became embroiled in the politics of the war. Both he and Lincoln started a poor working relationship which deteriorated. On November 1 Lincoln appointed McClellan general-in-chief of all the Union armies, while also leaving him in command of the Army of the Potomac. Pressure mounted on McClellan to undertake active operations against the Confederate army. A series of meetings, councils of war and negotiations finally culminated in the movement of the Army of the Potomac by sea to the tip of the Virginia Peninsula on April 4, 1862, for an advance from there on Richmond. During these protracted processes McClellan's reputation for consistently insisting he faced a numerically superior enemy and that he was overcautious to the point of timidity was established. Lincoln also chose to remove McClellan from his role as general-in-chief at this time. While the army was landing in Virginia Lincoln ordered the withdrawal of the 40,000 men of the First Corps to defend Washington. The Peninsular Campaign failed and McClellan blamed Lincoln, further damaging their relations. Lincoln and McClellan also disagreed on the strategy for fighting the war with Lincoln preferring to inflict heavier blows on the Confederacy through the destruction or confiscation of civilian property while McClellan believed the war should be limited to fighting between armies. At the Battle of Second Manassas on August 30-31 the Union army under Major General John Pope was defeated. Lincoln then appointed McClellan to command all troops in the vicinity of Washington, which included Pope's army, the Army of the Potomac and

some 300,000 newly recruited volunteers. On September 4, Robert E. Lee invaded Maryland and McClellan led his forces first to defeat Lee at the Battle of South Mountain on September 14. At the Battle of Antietam on September 17, though McClellan outnumbered Lee by two to one, he persistent in believing he was outnumbered, and he 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. It was, however, a marginal victory and Lincoln used it to provide him with the opportunity to issue his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation on September 22. 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. McClellan devoted himself to writing 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. In the 1864 Presidential election McClellan was the Democratic Party nominee. 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. 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 has become 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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