



2015-002

Chester G. Hearn, *Lincoln and McClellan at War*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2012. Pp. 257. ISBN 978-0-8071-4552-4.

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In *Lincoln and McClellan at War*, military veteran and prolific historian Chester G. Hearn¹ affirms Gen. George B. McClellan's reputation as a dithering, egotistical field commander whose mistakes likely protracted the Civil War. However, he also acknowledges the man's talent for preparation and organization, to which no less an authority than Shelby Foote once attributed the ultimate success of the Army of the Potomac. Hearn renders a similarly balanced judgment of Abraham Lincoln, whose capacity for intellectual growth is on full display here—the prairie lawyer and political organizer with two months of militia experience transformed himself into an astute military strategist and tactician. But Hearn yet recognizes that Lincoln remained a novice whose military decision-making sometimes hurt the Union cause. He also demonstrates that political and military strategy, like political and military history, are intimately related.

Hearn traces McClellan's deficiencies as a general to his military education, with its stress on waging defensive war. His education “was limited by his study of engineering and fortifications at West Point” at a time when “no officer at the academy anticipated a prolonged war from within the sprawling boundaries of the nation” (2). In spring 1862, Lincoln retained Gen. Irwin McDowell's corps for the purpose of defending Washington while McClellan led the rest of the Army of the Potomac down the Chesapeake Bay for a projected flanking assault on the Confederate capital Richmond. Defending Lincoln's decision, Hearn writes that “For those who believed McClellan could have captured Richmond with McDowell's help, one important factor requires careful study. Both generals lacked aggressiveness. They had been trained in defensive tactics and preferred to fight from behind well-built earthworks” (131).

More importantly for his relationship with Lincoln, McClellan's time at the Academy revealed him to be remarkably insecure about his own performance. Having graduated second in a class of fifty-nine, “He believed he should have graduated first and blamed the oversight on faculty injustice—a trait developed at an early age of always reproaching someone else for his own limitations” (19). McClellan attributed his slowness to take Yorktown during his Peninsular campaign to Lincoln's posting of McDowell's corps to defend Washington—“deflection of blame to justify his own lack of aggressiveness became standard practice for as long as McClellan remained in command” (116). By contrast, Lincoln's modesty and willingness to admit fault allowed him to learn from his mistakes. In a rare bit of psychological analysis, Hearn writes that “[McClellan's] charismatic image inspired adulation, but he lived with an inner horror of doubting his own capabilities, which he blamed on everyone else” (45).

In hindsight, McClellan, like Lincoln himself, was too optimistic at the outset of the Civil War: he “wanted to avoid bloodshed and, like [his predecessor, Gen. Winfield] Scott, believed strong Unionist sentiment still existed in the South and would bring the disaffected element back into the Union. Lincoln, however, wanted not to irritate the border states and preferred, like McClellan and most northerners, to end the war with one decisive battle in Virginia” (26).

Officers like William T. Sherman, who foresaw a long, bloody war of attrition, were considered insane, but Lincoln, unlike McClellan, outgrew his sanguine expectations of a quick and bloodless victory. In May 1862, McClellan took Williamsburg, a town Confederate Gen. Joe Johnston had no intention to hold. Hearn observes,

1. Among his other works on the Civil War are *The Capture of New Orleans, 1862* (Baton Rouge: LSU Pr, 1995), *Six Years of Hell: Harpers Ferry during the Civil War* (id., 1996), *When the Devil Came Down to Dixie: Ben Butler in New Orleans* (id., 1997), *Ellet's Brigade: The Strangest Outfit of All* (id., 2000), and *Lincoln, the Cabinet, and the Generals* (id., 2010).

If Lincoln had been able to read McClellan's letters home, he might have recognized differences between his objectives as president and Little Mac's objectives as general. On the day Johnston's forces retired from Williamsburg, McClellan wrote his wife, "Are you satisfied with my bloodless victories?" McClellan considered Johnston's withdrawal from Manassas, [Confederate Gen. John Bankhead] Magruder's withdrawal from Yorktown, and the current withdrawal from Williamsburg all bloodless victories. Yet the Confederates continued to grow stronger while waiting for McClellan to fight, and Little Mac blamed his stalling on "always some little absurd thing being done by those gentry in Washington." (125)

McClellan never overcame his aversion to bloodshed—"He loved his men too much to see them harmed" (134). It is, therefore, grimly ironic that, after having come within four miles of Richmond, McClellan justified his failure to take the rebel capital by declaring, "I have lost this battle because my force was too small. What McClellan lost," writes Hearn, "was the possibility of winning the war without the horrendous bloodshed that followed in the years ahead" (147).

Union defeat at First Manassas in July 1861 roughly coincided with McClellan's victory at Rich Mountain, which "secured western Virginia for the Union and brought Little Mac² instant fame" (30) that led many to overlook the traits that later kept him from striking the decisive blow Lincoln was yearning for when he appointed him general-in-chief that November. "McClellan's behavior [at Rich Mountain] foreshadowed an unfortunate trait that became prevalent as he later faced major battles. His tactics ... manifested a preference for maneuver when opposing a force of uncertain strength" (30). His decision to hold his main force in reserve at Rich Mountain allowed Confederate troops under Gen. Robert Garnett to escape, a lapse repeated at Antietam, where McClellan failed to capitalize on Gen. Robert E. Lee's decision to divide his forces; instead, he spent an entire day "meticulously getting troops into position. Lee's error of dividing his force should have been fatal. McClellan only had to advance in force..." (191).

Faced with the Union retreat from Manassas, however, Lincoln found himself in need of McClellan's expertise. The president possessed the raw materials of an effective army, but no leader to organize them into a cohesive force:

He found the troops badly disorganized but morally strong, and he now realized the army, to fight effectively, had to be better organized and properly trained. He needed a military administrator, a person who could pull the army together and perhaps replace Scott, who admitted lapses in his own performance and said, "I deserve removal because I did not stand up ... when my army was not in a condition for fighting, and resist it to the last." (34)

Initially, Lincoln "could not have chosen a better man to reorganize McDowell's disillusioned troops and yet attend to the daily arrival of new regiments. Little Mac skillfully accomplished in three months a task that might have killed a man of lesser ability" (39). As Lincoln himself once commented, "If he can't fight himself, he excels in making others ready to fight" (183). Perhaps in an effort to be evenhanded in assessing McClellan's lack of *élan* in pursuing Lee's smaller force during the Seven Days campaign, Hearn writes that "McClellan was not willing to take ... risks. In that respect, he was flawed and cannot be considered a great commander. It does not mean he was irretrievably a dismal one" (152).³ Thus, when he ultimately concludes that "no one was more responsible for the army's failure on the Peninsula than the general himself" (169), the reader does not feel McClellan has been denied a fair hearing.

Hearn also diverts blame for McClellan's habitual overestimation of enemy troop strength: "Nobody played on McClellan's apprehensions more than the general's chief of intelligence, Allan Pinkerton, who ran a successful detective agency but knew nothing about military espionage.... [His] calculations of enemy strength ... were gross exaggerations caused by double or triple counting the same information from different sources and making wild extrapolations" (49). McClellan justified his inertia in early 1862 by pegging Johnston's forces at Manassas at 180,000–200,000, when Johnston himself reported 44,131 soldiers under his

2. Hearn refers to McClellan alternately as "McClellan," "Little Mac," and "the Young Napoleon."

3. Quoting Thomas J. Rowland, *George B. McClellan and Civil War History: In the Shadow of Grant and Sherman* (Kent, OH: Kent State U Pr, 1998) 75.

command. But Hearn shows that the intelligence McClellan received confirmed his assumptions, asserting that “Pinkerton’s operation quickly became the most inept intelligence service ever employed by a general” (61).

Besides poor intelligence, McClellan had to grapple with the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, composed mostly of radical Republicans inherently suspicious of the Democrat McClellan. The influence of the Committee on Union army leadership should give pause to those who would separate military from political history: “Lincoln, the cabinet, and McClellan began to feel the committee’s impact. The president, who understood the nature of the public, knew he must deal dexterously with this new powerful legislative appendage, and though he consistently defended McClellan’s exhaustive preparations, he also regularly reminded the general that time should not be squandered preparing a forward movement” (63).

Union expectations of an easy victory and the clamor for battlefield success after First Manassas placed tremendous pressure on Lincoln to buttress support for the Union war effort by striking the rebels in Virginia, the sooner the better. In April 1862, he wrote to McClellan as the Army of the Potomac bogged down outside Yorktown, pointedly asking why he claimed to have 85,000 effective troops (the Secretary of War estimated 108,000) and stressing the urgency of the situation: “once more let me tell you, it is indispensable to you that you strike a blow.... I beg to assure you that I have never written you, or spoken to you, in greater kindness of feeling than now, nor with a fuller purpose to sustain you, so far as in my most anxious judgment, I consistently can. *But you must act*” (118). Here is the voice of determination that emerged after Fort Sumter’s fall; the day after Maj. Robert Anderson surrendered the garrison, Lincoln sent a two-word telegram to Ohio Governor William Dennison: “Thirteen regiments.”⁴

“Over time, Lincoln had expanded his knowledge of military matters. Accustomed to years of self-education and with an intellect already fine-tuned to analyzing issues from different perspectives, the president entered the second year of war with increasing expertise as commander-in-chief” (66). The texts Lincoln studied included *Elements of Military Art and Science* by Henry Halleck, commander of the Western Department and future chief of staff for the Union army under Ulysses S. Grant. Based upon his reading and conversations with commanders like McDowell, Lincoln developed a plan for a direct assault on Johnston’s force at Manassas in winter 1861–62. This shows his early awareness of the need to destroy the Confederate army in northern Virginia rather than capture Richmond.

Lincoln’s burgeoning knowledge of military strategy is evident in a letter to Halleck and Don Carlos Buell, the ranking generals in the Union army’s Western Department. A meeting between Lincoln, McClellan, Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs, and Treasury Secretary Salmon Chase to decide between the president’s plan for a direct strike on Johnston at Manassas or McClellan’s proposal to transport the Army of the Potomac by ship down the Chesapeake Bay to the peninsula between the James and York rivers and attack Richmond. Having advocated a simultaneous move by Halleck and Buell into Tennessee and down the Mississippi River, Lincoln explained his thinking:

I state my general idea of this war to be that we have greater numbers, and the enemy has greater facility of concentrating forces upon points of collision; that we must fail unless we can find some way of making our advantage an over-match for his; and that this can only be done by menacing him with superior forces at different points, at the same time; so that we can safely attack ... one, or both, if he makes no change; and if he weakens one to strengthen the other, forebear to attack the strengthened one, but seize and hold the weakened one, gaining so much. (68)

Lincoln entered office with little practical experience of military command, unlike his Confederate counterpart Jefferson Davis, a West Point graduate who had served in the Mexican War and as Secretary of War during the 1850s. But, with his formidable intellect and capacity to learn, Lincoln quickly made up this deficit. Furthermore, he could be flexible in his opinions when he felt circumstances required it. Thus, when Secretary Chase criticized him for reinstating McClellan as commander of the Army of the Potomac after John Pope’s defeat at Second Manassas, Lincoln stated that “McClellan knows this whole ground; his

4. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler, vol. 4 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers U Pr, 1953) 333.

specialty is to defend; he is a good engineer, there is no better organizer. [He] can be trusted to act on the defensive, but he is troubled with the 'slows'" (182).

The president similarly set aside his personal grievances with Edwin Stanton, who had been a fierce critic of the administration before his appointment as Secretary of War and had slighted Lincoln years before when the two worked together on the McCormick reaper trial in Cincinnati. Of Lincoln's declaration that "We must use the tools we have," Hearn writes that "Few better examples exist of Lincoln's uncanny genius of being able to put aside personal differences in order to produce a better military and political outcome over all the objections of his advisors" (183).

In fact, Lincoln, the former militia captain who had "bled, and came away" after 'charges upon wild onions' and 'a good many bloody struggles with the Musketoes'"⁵ during the Black Hawk War (1832), may have been too eager to assert his authority as commander in chief. On 27 January 1862, he issued General War Order No. 1, mandating a "general movement of land and naval forces against the enemy" before 22 February, George Washington's birthday. He reissued the order on 31 January "to make clear that he expected the Army of the Potomac" to seize Manassas (74). "Both orders," Hearn writes, "have been criticized by historians as blatant intrusions into military operations rather than serving to explain the purpose behind them. The January 27 order was political rather than military, intended to protect the administration from accusations of inaction and not to initiate a series of impulsive battles" (74-75).

The author notes that "Lincoln suffered a certain amount of deserved criticism" (111) for retaining McDowell's corps before Washington during the Peninsular campaign. Lincoln's direct involvement with war planning did not stop there. He reconnoitered a possible landing spot for the Army of the Potomac's assault on Norfolk in May 1862. Secretary Chase, far from his most supportive cabinet member, later wrote of the expedition, "I think [it] quite certain that if he had not come down[,] Norfolk would still have been in possession of the enemy" (122). Lincoln's interventions into Union army strategic and tactical planning distress some modern historians. Others, like Clausewitz before them, recognize that war is an inherently political act, meant to secure political goals and thus demanding the direction of political leaders. In this regard, Hearn is quite right to place Lincoln's general war orders in their proper political context.

Hearn shows that the propensity to blame politicians for wartime setbacks characterized McClellan's relationship to the Lincoln administration. Notwithstanding General War Order No. 1, Lincoln eventually allowed McClellan to forgo a direct assault on Manassas in favor of his Peninsular campaign. "In giving the general his way," Hearn writes, "Lincoln lost more of his own prestige. McClellan felt he had outmaneuvered the president." Quoting Joseph T. Glatthaar,⁶ Hearn emphasizes the divergent opinions of the two men: "McClellan believed that politicians should determine when and where the nation engaged in war, but then turn over details of war fighting to military professionals.' Lincoln, however, understood that the North 'held him accountable for the outcome of the war, and that he had a constitutional obligation to oversee all military activities'" (85). By highlighting this disagreement, Hearn makes clear that we must not consider Civil War strategy in isolation from Civil War politics.

Gen. John C. Frémont's deposition as military commander of Missouri is a case in point. In August 1861, Frémont had issued an order emancipating the slaves of rebellious Missourians. This elicited a swift rebuke from Lincoln, who at the time was urgently concerned to keep the border states in the Union. Congressional Republicans were angered by the removal of Frémont, who had been their presidential candidate in 1856. In order to placate his own party, Lincoln created the Mountain Department and placed Frémont at its head. Tasked with resisting Stonewall Jackson in the Shenandoah Valley, the general requested a division of German troops under Louis Blenker that had been attached to McClellan's Army of the Potomac during his Peninsular campaign. Convinced that "he could not risk losing the support of the radicals," Lincoln de-

5. James M. McPherson, "A. Lincoln, Commander in Chief," in *Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and His World*, ed. Eric Foner (NY: Norton, 2008) 19.

6. *Partners in Command: The Relationships between Leaders in the Civil War* (NY: Free Pr, 1993) 70.

tached the ten thousand-man division from McClellan, writing him, “I did so with great pain, understanding you wish it otherwise” (102–3).⁷

It is curious that McClellan, who so frequently failed to convert his vast advantages into battlefield success, yet retained the loyalty of his men. Hearn quotes Hugh McCullough, a Democrat supporter of the general: “There were hundreds in the ranks who were fitted to be captains; scores who were fitted to be colonels and generals. The manner in which McClellan was received by such men—the men whom he had trained, under whom he had fought in the desperate battles on the Peninsula—was not only a compliment to him as a man, but a strong testimony to his merit as a commander” (5).

Readers of *Lincoln and McClellan at War* will find Chester Hearn’s arguments most persuasive and his well-reasoned verdict on Little Mac and his performance during the Civil War hard to argue with: “McClellan remains an enigma, a talented organizer, a better-than-average strategist, but an ineffective implementer of his own strategy” (221).

7. Cf. McPherson (note 5 above) 24: “the main purpose of commissioning prominent political and ethnic leaders was to mobilize their constituencies for the war effort.”