

“MY ENEMIES ARE CRUSHED”: LINCOLN, MCCLELLAN, AND
THE POLITICIZATION OF THE ARMY OF THE POTOMAC
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On September 7, 1862, Major-General George B. McClellan wrote to his wife exultantly that “my enemies are crushed, silent, and disarmed.” What on earth did he mean? Had he won a great battle against the Army of Northern Virginia that has somehow escaped the attention of historians? This was far from the only time that McClellan referred to titanic struggles with his enemies. “I am in a battle & must fight it out,” he wrote on another occasion. My “bitter enemies . . . are making their last grand attack. I must & will defeat them.”¹ Abraham Lincoln would have been startled by such bellicose language from McClellan, whom he had compared to “an auger too dull to take hold.” McClellan, said the president, was a commander who “would not fight.”²

Lincoln was right. McClellan’s “bitter enemies” whom he had “crushed” in September 1862 were not the rebels but instead were other generals in the Union army and high officials in the United States government—Generals John Pope and Irvin McDowell, who had been relieved of command and whose troops had been absorbed into McClellan’s Army of the Potomac, and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, who had wanted to cashier McClellan. If McClellan had exerted as much energy and determination in his battles against the enemy army as he did against these supposed enemies in his own army and government, the North might have won the war in 1862.

The strongest language McClellan used against Confederates was “those rascals,” while he described his adversaries in the Union Congress, administration, and army as “heartless villains . . . wretches . . . incompetent knaves . . . a most

despicable set of men.”³ When Winfield Scott was still general in chief and McClellan’s commanding officer in 1861, the 34-year-old McClellan described Scott as “a dotard” and “a perfect imbecile.” He privately ridiculed Lincoln in the fall of 1861 as “nothing more than a well meaning baboon . . . ‘the original gorilla.’”⁴ As for members of Lincoln’s cabinet, Secretary of State William H. Seward was “a meddlesome, officious, incompetent little puppy” and Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles was “weaker than a garrulous old woman.”⁵ McClellan reserved his greatest animosity for Stanton, who had been the general’s confidant and supporter before he became secretary of war in January 1862 and lost faith in McClellan’s competence and determination. McClellan made Stanton the scapegoat for the failure of his Peninsula campaign in 1862. The secretary of war, he wrote his wife, was “the most depraved hypocrite & villain” he had ever known. If he “had lived in the time of the Saviour, Judas Iscariot would have remained a respected member of the fraternity of Apostles.”⁶

McClellan certainly had powerful paranoid tendencies, but he did not make up this vision of “bitter enemies” out of whole cloth. His sharpest critics were radical Republicans in Congress and the cabinet—especially the Congressional Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War and Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase as well as Stanton. All of them had once been McClellan backers but had become profoundly disillusioned. After the Army of the Potomac was driven from before Richmond in the Seven Days battles, Senator Zachariah Chandler of Michigan, a leading member of the Committee on the Conduct of the War, wrote privately that “McClellan is an imbecile if not a traitor. He has virtually lost the Army of the Potomac” and “deserves to be shot.”⁷

After McClellan resisted orders to reinforce General John Pope with the 6th and 2nd Corps at the battle of Second Bull Run on August 29-30, 1862, Stanton wanted McClellan court-martialed and Chase also said he should be shot.⁸

How had matters come to such a pass by August 1862? It would be easy to attribute this breakdown of relations between McClellan and leading Republicans entirely to politics. McClellan and several of his corps and division commanders in the Army of the Potomac were Democrats, while the congressional majority and the Lincoln administration were Republicans. McClellan himself ascribed political motives to his critics. But such an explanation is too facile. McClellan had enjoyed bipartisan and virtually unanimous support from political leaders when he first became commander of the Army of the Potomac and for several months thereafter. Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, who became McClellan's sharpest critic, was originally a Democrat and a confidant of McClellan. The principal reason for the general's fall from favor was military and psychological—McClellan's peculiar psychology—and not political. And much of the politicization of the Army of the Potomac referred to in the subtitle of this essay had more to do with army politics than with traditional electoral politics, though the latter also played a part. So, how had this happened?

To answer this question, we must go back to the last week of July 1861. Lincoln had called McClellan to Washington after the Union defeat at First Bull Run to become commander of the newly named Army of the Potomac. Fresh from commanding a small Union force whose victories in western Virginia helped put that Unionist region on the path to becoming the new state of West Virginia, McClellan received a hero's welcome in the capital. The press lionized him as a "young Napoleon"; the correspondent for the

Times of London described him as “the man on horseback” to save the country; the president of the United States Sanitary Commission said that “there is an indefinable air of success about him and something of the ‘man of destiny.’”⁹

This adulation surprised McClellan and then went to his head. The day after arriving in Washington, he wrote that “I find myself in a new & strange position here—Presdt, Cabinet, Genl Scott & all deferring to me—by some strange operation of magic I seem to have become the power of the land.” Three days later he went to Capitol Hill and was “quite overwhelmed by the congratulations I received & the respect with which I was treated.” Congress seemed willing to “give me my way in everything.” McClellan developed what can only be called a messiah complex during these first weeks in Washington. “God has placed a great work in my hands,” he wrote. “I was called to it; my previous life seems to have been unwittingly directed to this great end.”¹⁰

But God seemed to place obstacles in McClellan’s path. The first of them was General-in-Chief Winfield Scott. A hero of the War of 1812 and conqueror of Mexico in 1847, Scott was America’s greatest soldier since George Washington. Old and infirm by 1861, however, he could work only a few hours each day while the young Napoleon put in sixteen-hour days organizing and training his new army. Tension and then conflict between the old and new military titans soon erupted. McClellan attended a cabinet meeting on his second day in Washington, to which Scott was not invited. McClellan bypassed Scott frequently and communicated directly with Lincoln and other cabinet members—including Seward, even as the general was privately condemning the secretary of state as an incompetent and meddlesome puppy.

The action that most angered Scott was a memorandum from McClellan on August 8, 1861, sent to both Lincoln and Scott, that highlighted what turned out to be McClellan's main defect as a military commander—an alarmist tendency to inflate enemy strength and intentions. The Confederate army in his front only twenty miles from Washington, McClellan insisted, had 100,000 men (their real numbers were about 40,000), and reinforcements were passing through Knoxville to join them. Washington was in danger of attack by this huge force, McClellan told Scott (and Lincoln). “Our present army in this vicinity is entirely insufficient for the emergency,” McClellan warned, so he advised Scott to order forward all troops scattered in other places within reach of Washington to meet this “imminent danger.”¹¹

Scott regarded this communication as an insult to his own authority and his management of the army. He also scoffed at McClellan's estimate of enemy numbers and his fears of an imminent attack. He called McClellan to his headquarters and apparently dressed him down. At the same time Scott asked Secretary of War Simon Cameron to place him on the retired list—in effect submitting his resignation as general in chief.¹² Lincoln was upset by this contretemps between his two top commanders. He stepped into the quarrel between McClellan and the first of his many “enemies”—a task that the beleaguered president would have to repeat many times in the next fifteen months. He persuaded Scott to stay on and persuaded McClellan to withdraw his offending letter. In what passed for an apology, McClellan promised to “abstain from any word or act that could give offense to General Scott or embarrass the President.” He also offered his “most profound assurances of respect for General Scott and yourself.”¹³

At this very time, however, McClellan was writing privately that the Confederate army in his front now numbered 150,000 men. “I am here in a terrible place,” he fumed. “The enemy have 3 to 4 times my force. . . . Genl Scott is the most dangerous antagonist I have . . . a perfect imbecile. . . . He will not comprehend the danger & is either a traitor or an incompetent. . . . The President is an idiot, the old General in his dotage—they cannot or will not see the true state of affairs.”¹⁴

Although Lincoln had managed to defuse a blowup between his two top generals, tensions continued to simmer for the next two months. McClellan persisted in leaving Scott out of the loop of his communications with the president and cabinet. During these months several Republican leaders in Congress and broad segments of the Northern press grew restless as McClellan continued to train his expanding army and to hold impressive reviews but did nothing to advance against the main Confederate army or to prevent the enemy from establishing batteries on the Potomac below Washington to blockade the river. McClellan declined to cooperate with the navy in an expedition to capture these batteries and end what had become a national humiliation by October 1861. When Assistant Secretary of the Navy Gustavus Fox informed Lincoln of McClellan’s failure to provide troops for this purpose, the president, according to Fox, “manifested more feeling and disappointment than I have seen him before exhibit.”¹⁵

At about the same time Senator Benjamin Wade, soon to become chairman of the Committee on the Conduct of the War, wrote to his colleague Zachariah Chandler: “The present state of things must not be suffered to continue. . . . We have vast armies in the field maintained at prodigious and almost ruinous expense. Yet they are suffered to do nothing with the power in our hands to crush the rebellion. . . . We are in danger of

having our army set into winter quarters with the capitol in a state of siege for another year.”¹⁶ McClellan met with the senators and managed to convince them that he wanted to advance but Scott held him back. They went to Lincoln and pressed him to force Scott out. The president had Scott’s earlier request for retirement on his desk; Scott renewed the request, citing continued deterioration of his health.¹⁷

McClellan was pulling every string he could to get himself appointed as Scott’s successor. But the old general wanted that job to go to Henry W. Halleck, author and translator of books on military strategy and history, who like McClellan had resigned from the army in the 1850s to pursue a more rewarding civilian career. Halleck returned to the army in August 1861 with a commission as major general. Scott hoped Halleck could get to Washington from California in time for Lincoln to appoint him rather than McClellan as Scott’s successor. But it was not to be. On October 18 Lincoln persuaded the cabinet to accept Scott’s request to retire. McClellan learned of this decision from one of his sources in the cabinet—probably Montgomery Blair, but perhaps Chase, a McClellan ally at this time. McClellan wrote to his wife on October 19: “It seems to be pretty well settled that I will be Comdr in Chf within a week. Genl Scott proposes to retire in favor of Halleck. The Presdt and Cabinet have determined to accept his retirement, but not in favor of Halleck,” who was at sea and would not arrive for another two or three weeks.¹⁸

On November 1 McClellan achieved his goal: Scott retired and at the age of 34 McClellan became the youngest general in chief of United States armies in history—as well as field commander of the Army of the Potomac. Lincoln expressed some concern

that “this vast increase in responsibilities . . . will entail a vast labor upon you.” “I can do it all,” McClellan replied.¹⁹

Having convinced radical Republican senators—and perhaps Lincoln also—that it was only Scott’s timidity that had kept him on a leash, McClellan now faced expectations that he would advance. But in conversations with the president he immediately began backtracking. In his mind the Confederate forces in northern Virginia now numbered 170,000 (three times their actual size). He reminded Lincoln of what had happened at Bull Run in July when the Union army fought a battle before it was trained and disciplined. The disastrous outcome of a reconnaissance in force toward Leesburg on October 21, when several Union regiments were ambushed at Balls Bluff and Lincoln’s friend Colonel Edward Baker was killed, lent legitimacy to McClellan’s counsel of caution. “Dont let them hurry me,” McClellan urged Lincoln. “You shall have your own way in the matter,” the president assured him. But he also warned McClellan that the pressure for the army to do something instead of dress parades and reviews was “a reality and should be taken into account. At the same time General you must not fight till you are ready.”²⁰

McClellan proved to have a tin ear about that ever-present “reality,” which the president could not ignore. But the general heard loud and clear Lincoln’s counsel not to fight until he was ready. The problem was that he was perpetually *almost* but never *quite* ready to move. The enemy always outnumbered him and his own army was always lacking something. In response to Lincoln’s request, the new general in chief prepared a memorandum stating that “winter is approaching so rapidly” that unless the Army of the Potomac could be increased from its current strength of 134,000 men to 208,000, the only

alternative to taking the field “with forces greatly inferior” to the enemy was “to go into winter quarters.”²¹ Since Lincoln was well aware that the army could not be increased by that much before the end of the year if ever, his shoulders must have slumped when he read these words. They slumped more as week after week of unusually mild and dry weather slipped by in November and December with no advance in Virginia and no military success anywhere except the capture of Port Royal Bay in South Carolina and the adjacent sea islands by the navy.

Lincoln began dropping by McClellan’s headquarters or his home near the White House almost daily to consult with him. McClellan grew to resent these visits as a waste of time or an unwanted form of pressure. More than once he hid himself away “to dodge all enemies in shape of ‘browsing’ Presdt etc.”²² On the evening of November 13 Lincoln and Seward, along with the president’s secretary John Hay, called unannounced on McClellan at home but learned that he was at a wedding. When the general returned an hour later, the porter told him that Lincoln was waiting to see him. McClellan said nothing and went upstairs to bed. The president and secretary of state waited another half hour before a servant deigned to tell them that the general was asleep. Hay was furious at “this unparalleled insolence of epaulettes.” But as they walked back to the White House, Lincoln told him that it was “better at this time not to be making points of etiquette and personal dignity.” Significantly, however, from then on Lincoln almost always summoned McClellan to his office when he wanted to talk with the general. After one such occasion four days later, McClellan wrote to his wife that at the White House “I found ‘the

original gorilla,’ about as intelligent as ever. What a specimen to be at the head of our affairs!’²³

About December 1, despairing of any initiative by McClellan, Lincoln drafted a proposal for part of the army to make a feint toward Centreville to hold the enemy in place while two other columns moved south along the Potomac—one by road and the other by water—to turn the Confederate flank and move up the Occoquan valley to Brentsville southwest of Manassas. On paper, at least, this plan reflected what Lincoln had learned from his recent reading of works on military history and strategy—including one of Halleck’s books. Lincoln’s plan would avoid a frontal attack on Confederate defenses at Centreville and Manassas, which McClellan claimed were impregnable. The general rejected the plan, however, because he said the enemy’s greatly superior numbers would enable him to detach mobile reserves to counterattack and defeat the flanking force.²⁴

Meanwhile the confrontation with Britain over the seizure of James Mason and John Slidell from the British ship *Trent* caused a diplomatic crisis and dried up the sale of bonds to finance the war. Just before Christmas McClellan fell sick with typhoid fever. Northern morale and Lincoln’s own mood plunged to a low point in the first days of the new year. On January 10 the president dropped in at the office of Quartermaster-General Montgomery Meigs. “General, what shall I do?” asked Lincoln. “The people are impatient; Chase has no money . . .; the General of the Army has typhoid fever. The bottom is out of the tub. What shall I do?” Meigs advised him to assert his prerogative as commander in chief and set in motion a

campaign without regard to McClellan, who might not be able to resume duty for weeks.²⁵

This counsel echoed similar advice from Attorney-General Edward Bates. Except for Lincoln's insistence the previous June that Scott order the army forward toward Manassas—against Scott's judgment—Lincoln had deferred to Scott and then to McClellan on military strategy. The unhappy outcome of the Manassas campaign had sobered the president. With no military training or experience, Lincoln recognized the need to rely on professionals. But the professionals had disappointed him—and now the chief disappointment was ill. Having begun a cram course of reading in military strategy, Lincoln was open to Bates's urging that, “being ‘Commander in chief’ by law, he must command” rather than continue “this injurious deference to his subordinates.”²⁶

So Lincoln walked out of Meigs's office on January 10 and summoned to his own office two of the Army of the Potomac's division commanders, Brigadier Generals Irvin McDowell and William B. Franklin. The army's senior division commander, McDowell was also the choice of the Committee on the Conduct of the War to replace McClellan. Franklin was one of McClellan's personal friends and protégés. These two seemed an unpromising combination to carry out Lincoln's insistence on action. Nevertheless, the president figuratively knocked their heads together at the meeting on January 10. According to McDowell's notes, Lincoln said that “if General McClellan did not want to use the army, he would like to borrow it.”²⁷ Lincoln ordered the two generals to come up with a plan and to meet next day

with him and Meigs (who would be responsible for logistics) plus several cabinet members.

They came up with two plans. McDowell formulated a short-range flanking movement via the Occoquan River similar to Lincoln's earlier proposal. Franklin sketched out a deep flanking movement all the way down the Chesapeake Bay to Fortress Monroe to operate against Richmond via the peninsula between the York and James Rivers. McClellan had been mulling a similar operation for some time, and Franklin was privy to it—while McDowell and the president obviously were not. Most of those at the January 11 meeting favored McDowell's plan. McClellan got wind of this meeting, probably from Chase, and rose from his sickbed to meet with the same group on the 13th. He refused to reveal his plan to them, stating that he feared a leak. But when he assured Lincoln that he actually had a plan and a timetable to carry it out, the president once again deferred to him and adjourned the meeting.²⁸

Five days later Lincoln's confidant, Senator Orville Browning of Illinois, wrote in his diary that the president had "expressed great confidence" in McClellan. But when two more weeks went by and matters continued "All Quiet Along the Potomac," as a popular song had it, Lincoln's confidence waned. On January 31 he issued Special Order No. 1 specifying that the Army of the Potomac must move against the enemy at Centreville and Manassas by February 22.²⁹ As intended, this order forced McClellan for the first time to reveal his plans in detail. Instead of moving via the Occoquan against Manassas, he proposed to take the army 100 miles farther by water down the Potomac and the Chesapeake Bay and up the Rappahannock River to Urbana, Virginia. From there he would have a secure supply base to launch a fifty-mile campaign to Richmond. This

move would force the Confederates to evacuate Manassas and retreat south to defend Richmond, which McClellan predicted he might reach before the enemy could get there.³⁰

Lincoln was concerned that the rebels instead might attack Washington before McClellan got anywhere near Richmond. The president posed a set of hard questions to McClellan asking him why his distant-flanking strategy was better than Lincoln's short-flanking plan. Two sound premises underlay Lincoln's questions: first, the enemy army, not Richmond, should be the objective; and second, Lincoln's plan would enable the Army of the Potomac to operate close to its own base (Washington) while McClellan's plan, even if successful, would draw the enemy back to its base (Richmond) and greatly lengthen Union supply lines.³¹ Although McClellan's responses to these questions did not entirely satisfy Lincoln, he again deferred to the general's supposedly superior professional qualifications and reluctantly approved McClellan's plan.

Assembling the shipping and other logistical resources for McClellan's campaign would take several weeks. This was one of the reasons Lincoln had questioned it. "Does not your plan involve a greatly larger expenditure of time, and money than mine?" he had challenged McClellan. Largely ignoring this question, McClellan set to work with a will to organize the campaign. Meanwhile, other Union forces won a string of victories in Tennessee, North Carolina, Florida, and Arkansas that made the Army of the Potomac's continuing inactivity seemingly more humiliating by comparison.

Ugly rumors began to circulate in Republican circles that McClellan, a Democrat, did not really want to crush the rebellion. McClellan had made little secret of

his dislike of abolitionists and radical Republicans. His closest political associates—including his favorite division commanders in the Army of the Potomac, Fitz-John Porter and William B. Franklin—were Democrats who wanted to restore the Union on the basis of something like the Crittenden Compromise that would preserve slavery and the political power of Southern Democrats. Some of the generals serving in the Confederate army confronting him “were once my most intimate friends,” McClellan acknowledged (privately) in November 1861. He did not want to fight the kind of war the radicals were beginning to demand—a war to destroy slavery and the planter class and to give the restored Union a new birth of freedom. McClellan wrote in November 1861 to an influential Democratic friend: “Help me dodge the nigger. . . . I am fighting to preserve the integrity of the Union. . . . To gain that end we cannot afford to raise up the negro question.”³²

Radical Republican Senators Benjamin Wade and Zachariah Chandler had played a significant role in boosting McClellan to the position of general in chief the previous November. Four months had passed and, in their view, McClellan had betrayed them by doing nothing. They were suspicious of his politics and perhaps half believed rumors of his disloyalty, but the main reason for their conversion from supporters of McClellan to his most vocal critics was the general’s military inactivity. On March 3 Lincoln met with members of the Committee on the Conduct of the War. They gave the president an earful of complaints about McClellan. Committee chairman Ben Wade urged Lincoln to remove him from command. If he did so, Lincoln asked, who should replace him? “Why, anybody!” Wade reportedly responded. “Wade,” Lincoln supposedly said, “anybody will do for you, but not for me. I must have somebody.”³³

Despite Lincoln's deflection of Wade, the president was in fact considering the removal of McClellan. Four weeks had gone by since Lincoln had lukewarmly approved the general's Urbana plan. The army was still in winter quarters. The day after his meeting with the Committee, Lincoln told a Pennsylvania congressman that unless McClellan moved soon he would be replaced.³⁴ Three days later Lincoln summoned McClellan to the White House and told him with unprecedented bluntness that his tenure was short unless he got moving. The president also hinted—perhaps stated openly—that some influential men believed that the real purpose of his Urbana plan was to leave Washington uncovered so the rebels could capture it. McClellan was outraged, but Lincoln assured the general that he did not believe a word of the rumors. With his tin ear for the political realities of both his and the president's positions, McClellan said that he would resolve any doubts about his Urbana plan by submitting it to a vote of his eleven division commanders and the army's chief engineer officer. They voted eight to four in favor of the plan—not surprising, perhaps, since most of those eight owed their positions to McClellan's sponsorship. Three of the four division commanders with the greatest seniority voted against the plan.³⁵ Next day Lincoln issued an order organizing the Army of the Potomac into four corps and appointed the four senior generals—including the three who voted against the plan—as the corps commanders. If McClellan failed to get the message, Lincoln added more clarity three days later by relieving McClellan from duty as general in chief because, as commander of an army about to take the field, he could no longer “do it all.” For the time being, Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton would do the job of general in chief.³⁶

On the very day that a majority of generals had voted for the Urbana plan, Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston threw a monkey wrench into the operation by withdrawing from the Centreville-Manassas line to Culpeper south of the Rappahannock River, where he was in a position to block McClellan's intention to move toward Richmond from Urbana. The Union commander immediately led the Army of the Potomac on what he called a "practice march" to the abandoned Confederate works. Northern journalists who accompanied the army discovered that the Confederate defenses were by no means as formidable as McClellan had claimed and the camps had room for only about half as many men as McClellan had estimated. And several of the heavy-artillery redoubts mounted logs painted black rather than large-caliber cannons. These "Quaker guns" caused McClellan much embarrassment. Already doubtful of his estimates of enemy numbers and strength, Lincoln and Stanton never again gave credence to the general's perpetual complaints of inferior numbers.

Johnston's retreat compelled McClellan to shift his proposed flanking movement all the way to Fortress Monroe at the tip of the Virginia Peninsula. This time all four corps commanders voted for the plan, and Lincoln reluctantly approved—provided McClellan left behind a sufficient force to protect Washington. The general promised to do so, but failed to consult with Lincoln about what constituted a sufficient force. After he departed for the Peninsula, McClellan sent back a memorandum summarizing the units he had left to defend the capital. Lincoln and Stanton soon discovered that the number of these troops was considerably less than McClellan had stated, so the president held back McDowell's corps. Thus began a prolonged and increasingly bitter controversy in which McClellan blamed the

government for failing to support his campaign against an enemy whose numbers he consistently inflated by a factor of two or three.

The details of the Peninsula campaign are beyond the scope of this essay. But a little of the flavor of controversy is suggested by Lincoln's letter of April 9 to McClellan. At a time when 70,000 Union troops had already arrived and deployed before Confederate defenses behind the Warwick River south of Yorktown held by only 17,000 enemy soldiers, McClellan decided that these defenses were too strong to attack and began preparing a siege with heavy artillery. An exasperated Lincoln wrote to him that "you will do me the justice to remember I always insisted, that going down the Bay in search of a field, instead of fighting at or near Manassas, was only shifting, and not surmounting, a difficulty—that we would find the same enemy, and the same, or equal, intrenchments at either place. The country will not fail to note—is now noting—that the present hesitation to move upon an intrenched enemy, is but the story of Manassas repeated. . . . It is indispensable to you that you strike a blow. . . . I have never written you, or spoken to you, in greater kindness of feeling than now, nor with a fuller purpose to sustain you. . . . But you must act."³⁷

McClellan seemed constitutionally unable to act, only to *react*. His response to Lincoln's urging of an attack was to write his wife: "I was much tempted to reply that he had better come & do it himself."³⁸ McClellan yielded the initiative to the enemy, especially after Robert E. Lee became commander of the Army of Northern Virginia on June 1. McClellan's list of "enemies" in his own government and in the Northern press grew longer as he blamed others but never himself for the failure of the Peninsula campaign. In the middle of the Seven Days battles, on June 28, he sent a telegram to

Stanton that concluded with these words: “I have lost this battle because my force was too small. . . . [The] Government has not sustained this army. . . . If I save this army now, I tell you plainly that I owe no thanks to you or to any other persons in Washington. You have done your best to sacrifice this army.”³⁹ Shocked by the two concluding sentences, the head of the War Department telegraph office recopied the dispatch without them before sending it on to Stanton, so he and Lincoln never saw these sentences.

Nevertheless, they were well aware that Stanton had become McClellan’s chief whipping boy and that some of that hostility spilled over to the president himself. After Lincoln had given his consent to the Peninsula plan in March, McClellan had written to a prominent Democrat: “The President is all right—he is my strongest friend.” But now, three months later, he wrote to his wife that “Honest A[be] has again fallen into the hands of my enemies.”⁴⁰

After McClellan retreated to the James River in the Seven Days battles, Lincoln called Henry W. Halleck from the West to become general in chief. McClellan added Halleck to his list of enemies when he advised Lincoln to withdraw the Army of the Potomac from the Peninsula to reinforce General John Pope’s newly created Army of Virginia south of Washington. Pope had curried favor with McClellan’s Republican critics in Washington, and had issued orders for rigorous treatment of enemy civilians in areas occupied by Union forces, a policy that McClellan opposed. So Pope also joined the list of McClellan’s enemies. McClellan predicted that Pope would be “badly thrashed” by Lee, “very badly whipped he will be & ought to be—such a villain as he is ought to bring defeat upon any cause that employs him.”⁴¹

These startling sentiments help explain why McClellan resisted repeated orders from Halleck to rush the 6th and 2nd Corps of the Army of the Potomac to Pope's aid during the second battle of Bull Run. Lincoln was shocked by McClellan's actions. He "wanted Pope defeated," the president told his private secretary.⁴² But through thick and thin, soldiers in the Army of the Potomac remained fiercely loyal to McClellan. Even those in the Army of Virginia preferred him to Pope. When General Ambrose Burnside turned down Lincoln's offer of command of the Army of the Potomac, Lincoln felt he had no alternative but to retain McClellan in command of that army and to merge the Army of Virginia into it. The president was painfully aware that both armies were "utterly demoralized." McClellan was the only man who could "reorganize the army and bring it out of chaos," Lincoln said. He "has the army with him . . . [and] we must use the tools we have. There is no man . . . who can . . . lick these troops of ours into shape half as well as he. . . . If he can't fight himself, he excels in making others ready to fight."⁴³

Events of the next two months confirmed Lincoln's judgment. As the Army of Northern Virginia invaded Maryland, McClellan did reorganize the two armies into one and lick them into shape. He also prepared them to fight, which they did at South Mountain and Antietam. When McClellan telegraphed an exaggerated report of his victory at South Mountain, Lincoln wired back congratulations and added: "Destroy the rebel army, if possible."⁴⁴ But when the president learned that McClellan had held back his reserves at Antietam instead of exploiting potential breakthroughs because he feared a counterattack by an enemy whose numbers he inflated by a factor of three, and that he had not renewed the attack on September 18 but instead let the enemy escape across the

river, Lincoln again evinced disappointment. The president visited the army during the first four days of October to pump some energy and aggressiveness into McClellan. When Lincoln returned to Washington, he had Halleck send an order to McClellan that any other general would have considered peremptory: “Cross the Potomac and give battle to the enemy. . . . Your army must move now while the roads are good.” But McClellan stayed north of the Potomac for almost three more weeks. In a letter, whose sentiments surely echoed Lincoln’s, Halleck expressed enormous frustration: “I am sick, tired, and disgusted,” he wrote. “There is an immobility here that exceeds all that any man can conceive of. It requires the lever of Archimedes to move this inert mass.”⁴⁵

Lincoln finally gave up on “tardy George.” On November 7 he removed him from command and appointed a reluctant Ambrose Burnside to replace him. Lincoln explained his decision to John Hay: “I peremptorily ordered him to advance. . . . He kept delaying on little pretexts of wanting this and that. I began to fear he was playing false—that he did not want to hurt the enemy. I saw how he could intercept the enemy on the way to Richmond. I determined to make that the test. If he let them get away I would remove him. He did so & I relieved him.”⁴⁶

Seventeen months and three commanders of the Army of the Potomac later, General Ulysses S. Grant, who had also learned that it seemed to require the lever of Archimedes to move that army, asked cavalry commander James H. Wilson: “What’s wrong with this army?”⁴⁷ Wilson did not have any good answers. If Grant had asked Lincoln this question, the president might accurately have replied that McClellan had created the army in his own image, and even Grant would find it a hard job to overcome that legacy.

NOTES

¹ George B. McClellan to Mary Ellen Marcy McClellan, (hereinafter “Ellen”), Sept. 7, 1862, Feb. 26, 1863, McClellan Papers, Library of Congress. All citations of McClellan’s letters and reports will be to the original sources. These documents are also published in a superbly edited collection, *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan*, ed. Stephen W. Sears (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1989), and can be found there by the appropriate date.

² Francis Preston Blair to Montgomery Blair, Nov. 7, 1862, in William E. Smith, *The Francis Preston Blair Family in Politics*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1933), 2:144; *The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning*, ed. Theodore Calvin Pease and James G. Randall, 2 vols. (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1925), 1:563, entry of July 25, 1862.

³ McClellan to Samuel L.M. Barlow, July 25, 1862, Barlow Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California; McClellan to Ellen, July 31, 1862, Oct. 11, 1861, McClellan Papers.

⁴ McClellan to Ellen, Aug. 8, Oct. 11, Nov. 17, 1861, McClellan Papers.

⁵ McClellan to Ellen, Oct. 11, 1861, McClellan Papers.

⁶ McClellan to Ellen, July 13, 22, 1862, McClellan Papers.

⁷ Chandler to his wife, July 11, 6, 1862, quoted in Bruce Tap, *Over Lincoln’s Shoulder: The Committee on the Conduct of the War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), pp. 124, 122.

⁸ *Diary of Gideon Welles*, ed. Howard K. Beale, 3 vols. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1960), 1:93-102, entries of Aug. 31 and Sept. 1, 1862; *The Salmon P. Chase Papers*, Vol. I: *Journals, 1829-1872*, ed. John Niven (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1993), pp. 366-68, diary entries of Aug. 29, 30, 31, Sept. 1, 1862.

⁹ William Howard Russell, *My Diary North and South*, ed., Fletcher Pratt (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), p. 240, entry of July 27, 1861; Allan Nevins, *The War for the Union*, Vol. I: *The Improvised War 1861-1862* (New York: Scribner’s, 1959), p. 269.

¹⁰ McClellan to Ellen, July 27, 30, Aug. 9, Oct. 31, 1861, McClellan Papers.

¹¹ *War of the Rebellion . . . Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (hereinafter *O.R.*), 128 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, Vol. 11, part 3, pp. 3-4.

¹² McClellan to Ellen, Aug. 8, 1861, McClellan Papers; Scott to Cameron, Aug. 9, 1861, *O.R.*, Series I, Vol. 11, part 3, p. 4.

¹³ McClellan to Lincoln, Aug. 10, 1861, Abraham Lincoln Papers (Robert Todd Lincoln Collection), Library of Congress.

¹⁴ McClellan to Ellen, Aug. 8, 9, 14, 16, 19, McClellan Papers.

¹⁵ *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, Vol. 2, part 1: *The Army of the Potomac* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1863), p. 241.

¹⁶ Wade to Chandler, Oct. 8, 1861, in Russel H. Beatie, *Army of the Potomac: McClellan Takes Command, September 1861-February 1862* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2004), pp. 25-26.

¹⁷ McClellan to Ellen, Oct. 26, 1861, McClellan Papers; Scott to Simon Cameron, Oct. 31, *O.R.*, Series III, Vol. 1, pp. 611-12.

¹⁸ McClellan to Ellen, Oct. 19, 1861, McClellan Papers.

¹⁹ *Inside Lincoln’s White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay*, ed. Michael Burlingame and Jom R. Turner-Ettlinger (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1997), p. 30, entry dated “November 1861.”

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 25, 29, entries of Oct. 10 and 26, 1861.

²¹ McClellan to Simon Cameron, undated but probably Oct. 31, 1861, in *O.R.*, Series I, Vol. 5, pp. 9-11.

²² McClellan to Ellen, Oct. 31, 1861, McClellan Papers.

²³ *Inside Lincoln’s White House*, p. 32: entry of November 13, 1861; McClellan to Ellen, Nov. 17, 1861, McClellan Papers.

²⁴ “Memorandum to George B. McClellan on Potomac Campaign,” c. Dec. 1, 1861, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler, 9 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953-1955), 5:34-35.

²⁵ “General M. C. Meigs on the Conduct of the Civil War,” *American Historical Review*, 26 (1921), 292. See Meigs’s diary entry of Jan. 10 on p. 302.

²⁶ *The Diary of Edward Bates 1859-1866*, ed. Howard K. Beale (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1933), pp. 218, 220, entries of Dec. 31, 1861 and Jan. 3, 1862.

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- ²⁷ Minutes of the meeting written by McDowell, in William Swinton, *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac* (New York: Charles B. Richardson, 1866), p. 80.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 79-85.
- ²⁹ *Diary of Orville Hickman Browning*, p. 525, entry of Jan. 18, 1862; *Collected Works of Lincoln*, 5:115.
- ³⁰ McClellan to Edwin M. Stanton, Feb. 3, 1862, *O.R.*, Series I, Vol. V, pp. 42-45.
- ³¹ Lincoln to McClellan, Feb. 3, 1862, *Collected Works of Lincoln*, 5:118-19.
- ³² McClellan to Samuel L. M. Barlow, Nov. 8, 1861, Barlow Papers.
- ³³ Several versions of this anecdote exist; this one is from Helen Nicolay, *Lincoln's Secretary: A Biography of John G. Nicolay* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1949), p. 149, evidently based on recollections by her father, who may have been present at the meeting. See also Tap, *Over Lincoln's Shoulder*, p. 113.
- ³⁴ James H. Campbell to his wife, March 4, 1862, in *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher and Virginia Fehrenbacher (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 76.
- ³⁵ Stephen W. Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1992), pp. 3-9; *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, Vol. II, part I, pp. 270, 360, 387.
- ³⁶ *Collected Works of Lincoln*, 5:149-50, 155.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 185.
- ³⁸ McClellan to Ellen, April 8, 1862, McClellan Papers.
- ³⁹ *O.R.*, Series I, Vol. 11, part 1, p. 61.
- ⁴⁰ McClellan to Samuel L.M. Barlow, March 16, 1862, Barlow Papers; McClellan to Ellen, June 22, 1862, McClellan Papers.
- ⁴¹ McClellan to Ellen, Aug. 10, 1862, McClellan Papers.
- ⁴² *Inside Lincoln's White House*, p. 37, entry of Sept. 1, 1862.
- ⁴³ *Diary of Gideon Welles*, 1:113, entry of Sept. 7, 1962; *Inside Lincoln's White House*, pp. 38-39, entry of Sept. 5, 1862.
- ⁴⁴ Lincoln to McClellan, Sept. 15, 1862, *Collected Works of Lincoln*, 5:426.
- ⁴⁵ Halleck to McClellan, Oct. 6, 1862, *O.R.*, Series I, Vol. 19, part 1, p. 72; Halleck to Hamilton R. Gamble, Oct. 30, 1862, *O.R.*, Series 3, Vol. 2, pp. 703-04.
- ⁴⁶ *Inside Lincoln's White House*, p. 232, entry of Sept. 25, 1864.
- ⁴⁷ James H. Wilson, *Under the Old Flag*, 2 Vols. (New York: D. Appleton and Co.), 1:400.