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Did General George B. McClellan Do It Right? Insights into Operational Art

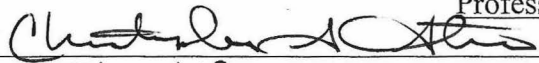
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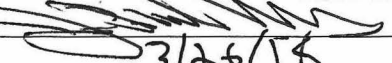
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title: Did General George B. McClellan Get It Right? Insights into Operational Art

Author: Major Matthew A. Dowden, USMC

Thesis: Major General George Brinton McClellan's successes and failures provide tangible insight into the struggles of an intelligent officer confronted with the burden of command as he sought to employ operational art to further the nation's policy goals. Indeed, an assessment of the complex problems afforded to McClellan reveals lessons in the development and generation of national strategy; civil-military relations; and the integration of ends, ways, and means to achieve operational goals in support of national policy.

Discussion: McClellan's actions in three areas provide meaningful lessons in the practice of operational art. McClellan's effort to develop and execute the Union's conciliation policy toward southern civilians in 1861 is an example of his effort to translate national policy into military grand strategy. During the same time period, McClellan was introduced to a cauldron of political machinery with his new assignment to Washington, D.C. The general's interaction with the President and Congress, the relationships that developed from those interactions, and the fruit that those relationships bore provide tangible lessons for senior military leaders in the contemporary environment as they integrate with civilian policy-makers. Lastly, McClellan's assignment of operational guidance and tactical tasks as byproducts of national grand strategy provide examples of how operational-level commanders can integrate ends, ways, and means to pursue an end state.

Conclusion: Historical judgments that imply a degree of finality, especially those as politically charged as the performance of a nation in battle, should not deter the practicing military professional from examining military history with a critical eye. There is something to be learned from observations of a dynamic, intelligent, and dedicated commander doing his best to adapt his upbringing and education to an unforeseen type of warfare on a scale previously unimagined in American history. Through his success and his failure, there is more to draw from George B. McClellan than how to move too slowly and take too little risk.

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PREFACE

In the spring of 2011 a group of young military officers stood atop the observation tower adjacent to the sunken road on the Antietam National Battlefield. Captains from two armed services and one officer from Turkey, the group was confronted with a question designed to induce critical thinking and reflection: Why did General McClellan not attempt to pursue General Lee south of the Potomac after the Battle of Antietam? A heated argument immediately ensued. I could not understand why the other military professionals in the group, all intelligent, independent thinkers in their own right, could disregard the events and conditions at the conclusion of the battle in 1862, the general context within which the battle took place, and the viewpoint of McClellan as he experienced the fight that September. The practice of “armchair quarterbacking” was alive and well even in the twenty-first century.

One year later I sat in Afghanistan and watched the second- and third-order effects of a national policy that limited the use of force against the enemy to a point that put my fellow Marines at, what they thought at the time, was unnecessary risk. The perception from the junior ranks was that senior officers were not having the right discussions with their civilian masters to portray the realities on the ground. I knew that civil-military relations was a bumpy road throughout American history; Vietnam was still fresh in the heads of my teachers as I grew up, and I recalled something I had studied years before about McClellan and his relationship with Lincoln.

This effort has given me the opportunity to discover the linkages between the popular opinion that McClellan was an inadequate senior commander and the academic writings that portray him in this light. It has also enabled me to dive deeper into an enduring challenge in our democratic system – civil military relations. Both seemed appropriate given the rich insight

General McClellan's situation could provide and the intent of the Command and Staff College to develop officers capable of thriving at the operational level of war. Though I have admittedly always preferred the underdog, I hope that I have retained my objectivity in this regard as I believe it is the only way military professionals can distill the lessons necessary to improve upon their performance in the future.

My humble thanks belong to Dr. Tom Clemens and Dr. Ethan Rafuse for their assistance and expert insights. The former a world-renowned expert on the Battle of Antietam and the latter a similarly qualified expert on McClellan himself, each took his time away from demanding schedules to entertain the questions of a curious Marine major. Dr. Clemens was surely entertained as he watched yet another military professional fumble around the Antietam battlefield in search for invaluable insight that he was gracious enough to provide. Dr. Christopher Stowe, my mentor in this endeavor, ever-insistent that thorough research be done with an objective eye, has been invaluable in providing energy and inspiration. Errors in my evaluations and conclusions are certainly my own and are in no way due to the magnificent support I have received from these world-class historians. My most heartfelt thanks, however, must go to my wife for her patience and love; she took care of four children and bore a fifth during the course of my research. Her sacrifices, and those of my five daughters, will never be lost on me.

INTRODUCTION

Major General George Brinton McClellan was heralded as the savior of the Union when he took command of the Army of the Potomac in 1861. He left the army shunned by members of the government as a self-absorbed military tortoise. McClellan was relieved of his duties in the midst of an intense domestic conflict with deep personal associations on both sides. The man that fired McClellan, Abraham Lincoln, was assassinated and became one of the most beloved presidents of all time; one of McClellan's successors, Ulysses S. Grant, succeeded in bringing the Confederacy to its knees. Countries generally prefer to recall their heroes in a positive light and associate these individuals in an elite group, and this group has not included George B. McClellan for the last one hundred fifty years. The country's citizens seem to forget that at the onset of such a terrible conflict, with no established war footing or instruction manual, McClellan was appointed as the highest-ranking officer in the armed forces at the age of 35 and entrusted with the fate of the Union. Smart leaders must have then had a sense that this young man had the ability and expertise to excel.

McClellan was a thorough professional and practitioner of the art of war at the operational level. He was a product of the antebellum officer corps that was trained after the War of 1812 to treat warfare with a methodical, scientific approach that lent itself to the professional employment of an organization like the United States Army. Nevertheless, the Army had not quite worked out the subtleties of civil-military relations in a democratic republic, or the intricacies of counterinsurgency operations, or the challenges of commanding and controlling mass armies in an operational environment that was quickly changing with the advent of technological advances from the Industrial Revolution. McClellan's struggles, both his successes and failures, provide tangible insight into the struggles of an intelligent officer

confronted with the burden of command as he sought to employ operational art to further the nation's policy goals. Indeed, an assessment of the complex problems afforded to McClellan reveals lessons in the development and generation of national strategy; civil-military relations; and the integration of ends, ways, and means to achieve operational goals in support of national policy.

If an inspired reader is in search of a work critical of McClellan's performance, many are readily available. The same can be said of works that present an approving assessment of his tenure as the head of the Army of the Potomac. A survey across the breadth of titles available will indicate one sure thing – a judgment of McClellan's performance at the operational level of war is far from a *fait accompli*. Furthermore, the concept of operational art itself has matured since late nineteenth century Prussia; different viewpoints endure to contemporary time regarding its meaning and how it is best employed.

McClellan's actions in three areas provide meaningful lessons in the practice of operational art. His development and execution of the Union's conciliation policy toward southern civilians in 1861 is an example of his effort to translate national policy into military grand strategy. During the same time period, McClellan was introduced to a cauldron of political machinery with his new assignment to Washington, D.C. The general's interaction with the President and Congress, the relationships that developed from those interactions, and the fruit that those relationships bore provide tangible lessons for senior military leaders in the contemporary environment as they interface with civilian policy-makers. Lastly, McClellan's assignment of operational guidance and tactical tasks as byproducts of national grand strategy provide examples of how operational level commanders can integrate ends, ways, and means to pursue an end state.

GEORGE B. MCCLELLAN: LITERATURE AND CANON

The journey toward an understanding of McClellan's lessons starts with a survey of one hundred fifty years of historical analysis. Two principal authors have devoted relatively recent biographies to General McClellan; each portrays the former head of the Army of the Potomac in a different light. Each author represents predominant "schools of thought" in how McClellan should be judged. One school lays blame upon the general as if he should have been omnipotent; he should have seen the battlefield as clearly as the historian that had years to sift through each detail of the battle. These opinions also commonly fail to take into account commonly accepted practices within officer and antebellum culture at the time. The second school of thought seeks to understand the mind of McClellan when presented with decisions at the time; the assumption is that he only knew what was evident to him, that he approached problems with the slate that had been written in his mind since he was a child, and this slate shaped his decision making, his social outlook, and his approach to problems.

The first school of thought is exemplified by the works of Stephen W. Sears. His in-depth assessment of McClellan's performance is established in the book, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon*. Sears is critical of McClellan's performance, including his relationship with President Abraham Lincoln, McClellan's withdrawal from his campaign east of Richmond in 1862, the timing of McClellan's move north to intercept Robert E. Lee at Sharpsburg, and finally McClellan's failure to destroy Robert E. Lee's Confederate Army of Northern Virginia at the battle of Antietam. Sears approaches each of McClellan's assumed failures with a level of disdain in his works that begs the reader to question if his approach is one of an unbiased observer. Sears described McClellan as being inflicted with "messianic vision."¹ The "thin

skinned messiah” ignored obvious intelligence reports in an attempt to feed his “self-fulfilling prophecies and assuaged his self-doubts.”² He later assessed that McClellan made no attempt to pursue General Robert E. Lee at the conclusion of the Battle of Antietam.³ Another more recent author that is as equally critical of McClellan is James M. McPherson in his book *Crossroads of Freedom*. McPherson, having written his acclaimed work *Battle Cry of Freedom* which established him as a standard bearer of Civil War historians, also published numerous pieces on the plight of slaves before and after the Civil War. He is also highly critical of a General accused of being a Democrat in support of slavery during his time at the head of the Union army.⁴ McPherson claims that McClellan was “a perfectionist in a profession where nothing could ever be perfect.... afraid to risk failure, so he risked nothing.”⁵ The foregoing authors provide in their writing that which might lead a reader to assume that there is nothing to learn from McClellan’s exploits. Indeed, both of these authors serve as popular torchbearers of a campaign that started decades before, with Kenneth P. Williams providing memorable quotes such as: “Surely the verdict must be: McClellan was not a real general. McClellan was not even a disciplined, truthful soldier. McClellan was merely an attractive but vain and unstable man, with considerable military knowledge, who sat a horse well and wanted to be president.”⁶ In 1962, T. Harry Williams provided a more tempered but still damning assessment of McClellan’s performance, saying that “he loved his men so much he could not sacrifice them in battle,” and that McClellan did not have the temperament for war.⁷

The second school of thought is perhaps best represented by Ethan S. Rafuse in his multiple works on the performance of General McClellan. Rafuse’s main work, *McClellan’s War*, is an exhaustive review of McClellan’s upbringing and education followed by assessments of what McClellan was likely to know and see at the time he made his decisions during 1861 and

1862. Rafuse's work tends to align with the methodology suggested by Carl von Clausewitz in his book *On War*. Clausewitz suggests that the way to truly learn the lessons of commanders from the past is to dig into the details of battles, not only to understand the mechanisms that forced the actual results, but to understand the thought processes of the individual leaders. The only way to assess these thoughts is to determine what each actually knew at the time of their decisions.⁸ With this methodology in mind, Rafuse remains critical of McClellan regarding some actions, but he also details specific facts that McClellan likely knew at the time (or thought he knew during his campaigns). Rafuse also outlines the political and military environment that surrounded the general and how he would have processed decisions given his upbringing and mindset. Rafuse compels the practitioner of modern-day warfare to dig deeper into the motivations that pushed McClellan into making the decisions that he did, including those that got him fired in the end.

Along with Rafuse, "McClellan's Defenders" include Thomas J. Rowland in his book *George B. McClellan and Civil War History: In the Shadow of Grant and Sherman*, and Joseph Harsh, a noted scholar that influenced Rafuse early in his profession and who challenged the prejudiced tendencies of earlier historians regarding McClellan's performance. Though noted for his works on Confederate military strategy, including *Confederate Tide Rising* and *Taken at the Flood*, Harsh also inspired one of the most respected experts on the Battle of Antietam, Thomas Clemens, whose work *The Maryland Campaign of 1862* took the observations of a Union commander, Ezra A. Carmen, and turned them into a thorough representation of what life was like for the mid-level leadership of the Union during the Maryland Campaign of 1862. Clemens, along with others in the "McClellan's Defenders" school, continue to challenge the generally accepted premise that McClellan failed miserably in the early days of the American

Civil War.⁹ Specifically, McClellan's detractors perceived an arrogant approach to his relationship with politicians, operational timidity while in command, and inability to assume risk. These, they claim, were massive flaws that prevented him from conquering Richmond in early 1862 on the Virginia Peninsula or destroying Robert E. Lee at the Battle of Antietam in September of the same year.

A range of readings that assess McClellan's condition and performance do not, however provide enough context through which to assess his actions. One under-emphasized facet of Union high-command performance is that of intelligence. A major contribution into understanding the informational challenges that confronted senior military leadership in the Civil War was not published until 1996 with Edwin C. Fishel's book, *The Secret War for the Union*; this work provided fresh insight into the intelligence-collection efforts of the Union during the Civil War. Written thirteen years after Sears' book on the Battle of Antietam, *Landscape Turned Red*, which is critical of McClellan's efforts, Fishel's book becomes important during the course of researching McClellan's performance as it outlines the distinct challenges of collecting intelligence at this early stage of modern war. General McClellan is consistently judged as having overinflated the size of the enemy forces that he faced, and this book informs readers as to why this may have been an institutional problem and not simply one man's read on the situation. Fishel is, however, also a member of the school of thought that is ultimately critical of McClellan's conduct of war, one that often ignores considerations of the specific conditions under which McClellan operated at the time. It is perhaps not ironic that the foreword of the book is written by Sears himself.¹⁰

Another research area that begs analysis of McClellan's performance is the national policy established by President Lincoln at the start of the Civil War. While Rafuse clearly

proposes that all of McClellan's actions were directly in support of the policy that Lincoln set forth, it would be folly to cite a single source in this regard. Mark Grimsley's book, *The Hard Hand of War*, assesses the Union policy toward southern civilians during the Civil War. The in-depth analysis used by Grimsley on civil-military operations during the early part of the Civil War is a major influence upon Rafuse's claims. Grimsley himself provides additional substantive analysis of McClellan's legacy in a shorter work "The Lincoln-McClellan Relationship in Myth and Memory." In this recent piece, Grimsley challenges the reader to question the presupposition that McClellan was an incompetent soldier and to stay away from a rigid portrayal of the General in history. Grimsley writes, "The tendency to think in terms of blame is by the way, the single strongest feature of the conventional telling of the relationship – and in my opinion fundamentally misguided, because a relationship is, by definition, reciprocal, so that logically the success or failure of any given relationship is the result of the interaction between the principals. In other words, by any rational analysis, Lincoln and McClellan *jointly* bore responsibility for the failure of their command partnership."¹¹

In spite of the voluminous literature discussing McClellan's role in the Civil War, no published works specifically address General McClellan's exercise of operational art as it is defined in contemporary times. This work is specifically tailored to seek lessons from McClellan's performance that could inform the modern practitioner of operational art; it seems logical then to establish the lens through which the input from each of these historical resources will be inspected.

WHAT IS OPERATIONAL ART?

Foundational to an analysis of any person and their qualifications as an operational-level commander would be a comparison to a commander who nearly universally receives credit for being a pioneer in the practice of operational art-- a leader such as this provides valuable insight into how to define an operational commander. Enter Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, an officer of Mecklenburg-Schwerin variety who served in the Prussian army from 1826 to 1888.¹² A hard-working man of solid character who had an uncanny understanding of modern railroads and technological advances, Moltke was a successful pioneer in the distinction between strategy and tactics; he used the term “operational conduct” to describe his management technique of forces in battle.¹³ Moltke provided informative remarks on the actions of an operational commander in war:

- Mass at the right time and right place when you want to give battle
- The operational objective is to break the will of the enemy
- Seek quick decisions; society bears a burden in sustaining a strong army
- Politics uses war for its purpose; politics is linked with strategy
- The task of strategy is to provide military means, then you have to figure out how to deploy it
- The first battle will render the entire campaign plan inapplicable
- Employ strategy to provide units with a short march to attack the flank of the enemy
- At times it is appropriate to tightly control tactical level forces, other times require much less control; do not give operational level orders once battle has commenced

- The operational commander should enjoy the full confidence of his political masters; their advice should contain the political goal, not the military goal¹⁴

Although Moltke was one of the first soldier/scholars to document and teach his theories on execution of the operational art, he did not have the opportunity to employ his craft until 1864, when he first took the field as the chief of staff of the combined Prussian-Austrian forces against the Danes.¹⁵ His writings and true influence over generations of soldiers and scholars would not be seen until much later, yet Moltke's early work in exploring what would later be termed operational art is indicative of the conceptual leaps that were only just germinating at the time of the American Civil War. George B. McClellan did not have the benefit of Moltke's insights when he was called back to duty in service of the Union in 1861 as the commander of the Department of the Ohio. Over one hundred years later, and with the benefit of trial and error by fire, today's definition of the operational art has further matured.

Contemporary doctrine on the use of operational art is less prescriptive than some of the axioms offered by Moltke, but it is perhaps indicative of the undefined bounds that contain the operational level of war. Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States, Joint Publication (JP) 1 provides a baseline definition of the operational "level" of war.

The operational level links strategy and tactics by establishing operational objectives needed to achieve the military end states and strategic objectives. It sequences tactical action to achieve objectives.¹⁶

In essence, current doctrine establishes the operational level of war as the primary place where campaigning occurs. JP-1 stipulates that "A campaign is a series of related major operations aimed at achieving strategic and operational objectives within a given time and space." The publication states further that the levels of war "help commanders design and synchronize

operations, allocate resources, and assign tasks to the appropriate command,” and that the operational level specifically “link[s] tactical actions to achievement of national objectives.” Lastly, the publication offers that there are no finite boundaries between the three levels of war.¹⁷

Joint doctrine provides further insight into how a commander executes his role at the operational level of war; it is here where the realm of operational art lies. JP-1 again provides an outline of this concept:

[Operational art is] the cognitive approach by commanders and staffs—supported by their skill, knowledge, experience, creativity, and judgment—to develop strategies, campaigns, and operations to organize and employ military forces by integrating ends, ways, and means. JFCs and component commanders use operational art to determine when, where, and for what purpose major forces will be employed and to influence the adversary’s disposition before combat. Operational art governs the deployment of those forces and the arrangement of battles and major operations to achieve operational and strategic objectives.¹⁸

The integration of ends, ways, and means is established then as a primary responsibility of the commander at the operational level of war.

Marine Corps service doctrine, moreover, presents a theoretical construct for the levels of war that exists within the bounds of joint doctrine, but serves here to frame an approach to analyzing McClellan’s actions in 1861 and 1862. This key realization presented in the single most important capstone document generated by these Soldiers of the Sea is that the levels of war can be driven together due to circumstance. A single commander can operate at the strategic level, planning national policy, but still be the sole executor of the tactical-level action that serves that policy (as in nuclear war). In contrast, a small-unit leader can execute tactical actions

in a combat zone that induce far-reaching, strategic consequences.¹⁹ These concepts are depicted in figures drawn directly from Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 1, seen here as Figure 1.1 and Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.1: Traditional Interrelated Levels of War.



Figure 1.2: Compressed Levels of War.



It is within the operational environment denoted by Figure 1.2 that General McClellan found himself during the early days of the Civil War, responsible for strategic planning, campaign planning, and tactical action.

Current-day leaders provide additional, relevant insight that allows for an even more developed understanding of the operational commander. The United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College concentrates its curriculum on the development of staff officers and commanders that can serve at the operational level of war. During one of many engagements

sessions with students at the Command and Staff Course, the College Director, Colonel William McCollough offered that operational commanders also serve as buffers that insulate noise at the strategic level from what the tactical-level needs to accomplish a mission. Given this requirement, the operational level commander's relationship with his civilian masters becomes important.²⁰ The implication here is that an informed approach to civil-military relations can be an essential element to the application of operational art for the operational-level commander. This realization provides a final layer to the understanding of what it means to operate at this level of war.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

It is essential that a deliberate approach be established in order to lend weight to judgments associated with an analysis of General McClellan. This not only invites repeatability but also exposes the method itself to critical evaluation, as it may in itself be folly and produce outcomes that favor one direction or another. As this work is not an effort to render judgment on a man or the quality of his career, but to distill lessons from his performance in one of the bloodiest times in American history, one should be open to critical advice in order to better the quality of lessons learned. These lessons, after all, serve to educate and develop the minds of those charged with the defense of the nation and should not be skewed due to personal bias or a scholarly axe to grind.

The current practitioner does not have the luxury of piles of reports and an unlimited amount of time to peruse them, deconstructing and resynthesizing the action that was really taking place vice what it appeared to be at the time. Therefore, it is from the perspective of the

commander that one must also approach an analysis of the past -- the same approach taken by Rafuse in *McClellan's War*.²¹ A comparison between what the commander knew and what actually happened further illustrates to a member of the profession of arms the permeation of friction and uncertainty in warfare. This approach is reinforced by the writings of Clausewitz in his chapter on critical analysis.²² A comparison to current doctrine further assesses McClellan's operational approach through the lens of 150 years of mental rigor and development. In the end, the intent is to paint a richer picture of McClellan's performance to a fidelity that informs the modern practitioner of the art of war.

Subsequent sections present an analysis of General McClellan's actions in three major areas, including development of national strategy; civil-military relations; and the integration of ends, ways, and means to achieve operational goals in support of national policy. These three areas encompass major areas of McClellan's operational approach, though admittedly not all of them.

MCCLELLAN AND THE PURSUIT OF NATIONAL POLICY

The Lincoln administration directed a policy of conciliation during the early days of the Civil War; McClellan, appointed as a Major General in the Union army from his civilian job as a railroad executive, immediately went to work in developing and executing an operational design that could be nested within the national-level framework presented by his civilian masters. McClellan was presented with a policy of conciliation by the Lincoln administration during the early days of the Civil War. His approach to operations (limit friendly casualties, treat southern civilians with fairness, control deliberate operations, and seek a short war) was nested within this

national policy. It proved to be effective while he commanded the Department of the Ohio in 1861 and was a natural byproduct of his upbringing. He was the ideal commander to press the policy; his grand strategy for executing the war and his translation of policy into an actual planned approach toward southern civilians can be directly attributed to his pursuit of the national command authority's guidance.

The Union conciliation policy from April 1861 to June 1862 was a direct result of a desire to reconstitute the original states in a manner that would align with the interests of both sides.²³ To do this, war was to be conducted in a manner that gave the highest moral impression to southern civilians in order to bifurcate them from the Confederate Government that had, in the view of the national command authority, illegally seceded from the Union. In essence, as Mark Grimsley described it, "respect and magnanimity" was a tactic to win southern civilians over and gain popular support from beneath the feet of the Confederacy. Grimsley went on to explain, "Their constitutional rights were to be respected; their property was not to be touched. The Lincoln administration specifically renounced any intention of attacking slavery. ...[M]ost white Southerners were lukewarm about secession, and if handled with forbearance would withdraw their allegiance from the Confederacy once Union armies entered their midst."²⁴ This policy was grounded in the northern assumption, and the assumption of President Lincoln, that there was a small group of southerners that had taken over the political mechanism of the south, had imposed their will on the majority, and that there were pockets of loyal Unionists spread throughout the south along with a majority of citizens that were indifferent to the Confederate cause.²⁵ The Union war effort would not require the coercion of the entire population, but would only have to defeat an insurrectionist conspiracy to restore the union.²⁶ In his *Proclamation Calling Forth Militia and Convening Congress* on April 15, 1861, Lincoln set out the primary focus of military

efforts as the reoccupation of government installations that were taken by the Confederacy, and that “the utmost care will be observed, consistently with the objects aforesaid, to avoid any devastation, any destruction of or interference with, property, or any disturbance of peaceful citizens in any part of the country.”²⁷ Each operational effort undertaken by McClellan was nested directly beneath this policy that would come to be known as conciliation.

McClellan instituted a strategy in support of national policy that sought overwhelming, controlled, deliberate operations that would limit friendly casualties but destroy Confederate forces while simultaneously treating civilians and private property with respect and deference. McClellan’s intent behind this strategy was to foster Union sentiment and avoid pushing those on the fence to the Confederate side; however, he also understood that time was not on his side and he needed a quick, overwhelming military victory in order to prevent the war from becoming a protracted conflict. He also surmised that though the war might have started with a smaller group of instigators, it was now with an entire people and would require military success to separate the people from the aristocracy of slave owners that had, it was charged, started it in the first place. McClellan set out his grand strategy in a memorandum to the President and his cabinet on August 2, 1861.²⁸ Even before McClellan took command of the Army of the Potomac in July 1861, he had tested his strategy in his operational approach as the commander of the Department of the Ohio earlier that year where his actions met with success in Kentucky²⁹ and Western Virginia.³⁰

Grimsley, in *The Hard Hand of War*, gleans from McClellan’s correspondence that, in order to operationalize this national-level strategy, McClellan would apply simultaneous pressure around the periphery of Confederate territory, including along the Mississippi River, Missouri, eastern Tennessee, West Texas, and western Virginia. Vital objectives along the Confederate

coastline would be seized using amphibious forces. These shaping efforts supported his initial primary objective of a successful thrust at the Confederate capital of Richmond with the cities of Charleston, Savannah, Montgomery, Pensacola, Mobile, and lastly New Orleans to follow.³¹ Simultaneous pressure around the Confederacy served to prevent the massing of Confederate forces at any one location.³² The president of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, was keenly aware that he needed to defend each of his member states to a degree, lest he lose political support and the benefit of recruiting pools with the loss of any appreciable territory.³³ The concept of simultaneous pressure was likely to work.

Another central component to McClellan's operational vision was the Union approach to civilians in the South. McClellan believed, as did President Lincoln in the first years of the Civil War, that secession had been initiated by a small group of extremists (anti-slavery fanatics in the North and secessionist fire-eaters in the south) that instigated the passions of the populace, misinforming them that the Northern majority would snuff out Southern domestic institutions.³⁴ McClellan's Whig Party upbringing, where "men of reason, moderate temperament, and refinement who could forge compromises that preserved social order and stability by conciliating competing interests and who could give paternalistic direction to national development and social progress" provided the antidote to such behavior.³⁵ He believed that Southerners would have to be persuaded that laying down their arms would not result in "surrendering their interests to a hostile government."³⁶ Through respect for their persons and their property, Southerners would be psychologically, mentally, and emotionally separated from the necessity of a separate government. Pressing the issue of slavery was seen as counterproductive; it would only push the slave owners back toward their insurrectionist government. Interestingly, Rafuse makes a sound assessment in this regard: "Because McClellan so forcefully espoused this policy and personified

the direction of Union war policy during the first two years of the war, his fate and that of the conciliation policy would be inextricably linked.”³⁷

Even when measured with the standards of contemporary doctrine, there is little doubt that McClellan made deliberate and effective efforts as a strategist and practitioner of operational art in his quest to bring reality to the national vision established by President Lincoln. Joint Publication 3-0 establishes an operational approach as “a description of the broad actions the force must take to transform current conditions into those desired at end state.”³⁸ McClellan’s generation of operational tasks over time and his establishment of clear intermediate objectives to arrive at an end state was an unmistakable effort toward this end. His reasoning to pursue an overwhelming victory to demonstrate the futility of military resistance and to delegitimize the Confederate States of America to the Southern people was well grounded. Furthermore, his clear, consistent direction regarding the treatment of southern civilians is reinforced by current doctrine. Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-33.5 (Counterinsurgency) establishes two notable concepts in this regard. The first is that the host-nation “should reduce the credibility of the insurgency while strengthening its own legitimacy.”³⁹ This appears to support McClellan’s assertion that an overwhelming military defeat would serve to delegitimize a Confederate national institution while strengthening that of the Union. Secondly, the Counterinsurgency manual specifically addresses how the ethical conduct of operations provides the basis for successful operations. Lethal force tempered by restraint only serves to enhance legitimacy and credibility.⁴⁰

MCCLELLAN ON CIVIL MILITARY RELATIONS

“My policy is to have no policy.”⁴¹

-Abraham Lincoln

“I can’t tell you how disgusted I am becoming with these wretched politicians.”⁴²

-General George B. McClellan

“I will pay no attention to popular clamor.”⁴³

-General George B. McClellan

General McClellan’s operationalization of national policy, as effective as it may have been, cannot be addressed separately from his relationship with the very individuals that were responsible for making that policy; the civil-military relationship between McClellan, President Lincoln, the Cabinet, and the Congressional oversight mechanism was strained as a result of incompatible approaches among all parties involved. McClellan possessed a unique upbringing that ingrained in him a distrust of politicians; this distrust, combined with legitimate concerns of intelligence leaks, induced McClellan to keep his plans as close-hold as possible for as long as possible.⁴⁴ McClellan’s personal views were reinforced by the prevalent opinion of the time that military matters should be addressed solely in the arena of the military professional without interference from political injects.⁴⁵ Concurrent to McClellan’s efforts to develop the situation as he arrived in Washington, President Lincoln, and his pragmatic and flexible nature, was subject to strong political currents that induced him to continuously reassess and modify his

approach to national policy. Lincoln's leadership technique of allowing subordinates to bring matters directly to him vice through the established chain of command also served to sow seeds of insubordination in the Union ranks.⁴⁶ The personal traits and approaches to civil military relations destined the relationship to be a rocky one that would inevitably affect the course of the war.

General McClellan arrived in Washington in the summer of 1861 with a pre-conceived view of what civil-military relations should look like at the highest levels of service. His upbringing stressed a Whig approach to statesmanship and valued the maintenance of personal standards and the concept of reason over passion in problem solving and personal relations.⁴⁷ To him, politicians in general displayed the opposite of this set of personal behavioral standards and, with very few exceptions, failed to grasp the intricacies of modern warfare.⁴⁸ His view on politicians was even echoed by several politicians at the time who held a similar view on civil-military relations. Senator Orville Browning, unlike McClellan a Republican from Illinois, stated in regard to the making of war strategy, "These necessities can be determined only by the military commander, and to him the Constitution has entrusted the prerogative of judging of them."⁴⁹ Then too, McClellan's upbringing in a Whig household was thus only further reinforced by the same set of personal values espoused during his education at West Point.⁵⁰ Combined with a personality type that included what Rafuse calls a "streak of petulance and self-righteousness" -- which was likely exacerbated by the hero's welcome he received upon his transition to Washington -- McClellan thought those who questioned his military knowledge outside of the profession of arms to be ignorant, narrow minded, partisan, and selfish.⁵¹

Abraham Lincoln, in contrast to McClellan, was a country-raised Republican politician with a penchant for story-telling. He possessed a pragmatic approach to politics and was quick

to react to public opinion.⁵² His appointment of McClellan (by 1861 a known Democrat) to head the Army of the Potomac was not a surprise given Lincoln's need to garner broad national support in 1861 if he expected to win an election in 1864 that included a re-united country with voters south of the Mason-Dixon line, especially around the border states.⁵³ The results of the First Battle of Bull Run induced feelings in voters across the Union that were amenable to providing the resources, but most importantly the time, needed to compile and train a fighting force that could defeat Confederate advances so close to the North. His approach to the issue of slavery in 1861 and early 1862 was that the institution should not be touched, also a nod to the need to garner broad support among both northern conservatives and border-state whites. At the beginning of their relationship in 1861, General McClellan and President Lincoln agreed almost completely on the fundamentals of fighting the war.⁵⁴ As public opinion changed, however, in the winter of 1861-62, northern Radicals applied more political pressure. The prospect of a re-election bid with less southern influence became a possibility, and as border-state politicians still did not acquiesce to less-stringent measures, President Lincoln started to change his approach.⁵⁵

General McClellan received his introduction to the political forcing function on senior-level military command almost immediately after accepting the post of General in Chief in November 1861. With the removal of Winfield Scott as his immediate senior, McClellan's impression that he would have unfettered ability to shape his operations as he liked were dashed when western governors complained to President Lincoln that the eastern effort was receiving more than the lion's share of Union manpower. McClellan wanted to reinforce the Army of the Potomac at the time due to his belief that he faced close to a 100,000-man army in Northern Virginia (more on this assumption later), but his plans were put on hold for a time.⁵⁶ Shortly after this, the well-publicized shunning of Lincoln occurred when the President dropped by for

an evening visit on 13 November 1861. McClellan had just returned home from an event, did not recognize his visitors, and went straight to bed. While this is often vaunted as an enormous slap in the face to Lincoln by McClellan and a watershed event in their relationship, no indications exist that Lincoln changed his opinion of McClellan or his abilities to carry out the war effort at the time.⁵⁷ It was, however, indicative of possible strains in the personal relationship between the two. It was in December 1861 when pressure started to mount on President Lincoln to hurry along the war effort or modify his policies.

By the end of 1861, a compilation of events transpired in short succession that affected Lincoln's outlook on the war and his relationship with McClellan. The "Trent Affair" served to display the very real possibility that Great Britain would become involved in the war if it was not brought to a speedy end. Lack of funding in the treasury presented a particular crisis that induced the need for hasty maneuvering within the cabinet. Newspapers, especially the *New York Tribune* and the *New York Times*, presented critical reviews on the pace of the war effort while the United States Congress pressed for more radical confiscation laws regarding Southern property (in direct conflict with Lincoln's policies). Following news that McClellan's friend, Samuel L. M. Barlow, had pushed McClellan to get involved politically, and even more so after the Union's humiliating defeat at Ball's Bluff, Virginia, in October, Radicals in the north on December 10, 1861, were able to maneuver into existence the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War (JCCW) designed to oversee the war effort.⁵⁸ Members of the committee were largely Jacksonian antimilitarists that were suspicious of professional military officers. They wanted war to be conducted more in line with the romanticized view of military operations where grand battles and assaults by virtuous patriots would lead to success.⁵⁹ This could not have been a group more contrasting with McClellan's views on how to conduct the war. If this

was not enough, during December, McClellan was struck with typhoid fever and was bedridden for weeks.⁶⁰ By 31 December, Lincoln called a meeting of his advisors and division-level general officers to discuss the war that would touch off a series of events ending in a contentious 13 January meeting with an ailing McClellan, the firing of Secretary of War Simon Cameron, the appointing of Edwin Stanton as the new Secretary of War, and McClellan refusing to present his operational plans for review by the President and his cabinet due to security-leak concerns.⁶¹ Though McClellan was justified in his desire to limit distribution of his plans, this was unacceptable in both the antebellum era and in contemporary time: The commander in chief had a right to know. McClellan was beginning to receive his education in the expedients of politics over military concerns; Lincoln was starting to get impatient with the progress of the war effort.⁶² While political exigencies in the winter of 1861 were certainly positioning themselves to affect what would become an untenable level of political support for McClellan in September 1862, President Lincoln was also germinating a technique with military leadership that would pit senior leaders against one another and generate a poisonous command environment.

President Lincoln, while a gifted politician, arrived in Washington, D.C., with no military, executive, or managerial experience; the only recent example for him to refer to regarding civil-military relations was President James K. Polk's treatment of Winfield Scott during the Mexican American War. Lincoln, like Polk, proceeded to utilize management techniques that subsequently undermined the efforts of commanders beneath him in the chain of command. In 1846, as the United States executed the Mexican War, President Polk continuously undermined the Army's commanding general, Winfield Scott, by attempting first to appoint a political loyalist instead of a professional military man above him to prosecute the war, and then later by appointing loyal Democrats as Scott's subordinates during the war.⁶³ This was not

without precedent as the same techniques were used by Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson during the late 1700s and early 1800s as the nation had endeavored to seek the appropriate balance between practiced military professionals and those loyal to the party they served.⁶⁴ Lincoln's assignment of advantageous political personalities to key military positions is well recorded throughout the course of the war. His assignment of Republican-approved, yet professionally incompetent, corps commanders to positions in McClellan's Army of the Potomac and later his assignment of General John Pope (a competent soldier at that point but a Republican firebrand) to head the Army of Virginia were indicative of this practice. Indeed, Mark Grimsley suggests in *The Hard Hand of War* that Pope's assignment was one of the catalysts that harried away the conciliation policy championed by McClellan.⁶⁵

Lincoln, moreover, established a precedent for junior leadership to usurp the efforts of those senior to them when the winds of chance allowed. Lincoln allowed McClellan to bypass General Scott when Scott was clearly the senior. Though the General in Chief was traditionally an advisory position and generals in charge of the army communicated with the Secretary of War and the President, Lincoln did no favors to this situation when he showed Scott a copy of a letter that McClellan had written contradicting Scott's stance on issues. Scott suggested that McClellan be court martialed; Scott was instead removed from his duties. Later Lincoln sought the opinions of division-level commanders directly while McClellan was sick with typhoid, bypassing several levels of the chain. Finally, when McClellan presented his plan for the Peninsula campaign to Lincoln, the President would only approve it after the newly appointed corps commanders had voted on its merit. Few things served to ingrain a feeling that it would be completely acceptable to bypass the chain of command as these events. This finally led to the instance of General Joe Hooker lobbying to members of the Cabinet and the media for the

position of Commander of the Army of the Potomac while he was himself still subordinate to McClellan (and McClellan was still in command). McClellan and Hooker's actions would seem questionable in the contemporary environment, but they simply operated within the command-environment parameters established by President Lincoln and certain of his predecessors.⁶⁶

In subsequent operations, McClellan would find more reason to distrust Lincoln while the President further inserted himself at the operational level. Lincoln would approve McClellan's plan to conduct the Peninsula campaign, but before he could execute it he would remove an entire corps from McClellan's ranks for the defense of Washington.⁶⁷ Lincoln subsequently published an order to direct that the capital would be left secure. McClellan surely thought this was unnecessary given that this imperative was already discussed, yet Lincoln saw it necessary to publish it anyway. Did Lincoln not trust McClellan to carry it out? Even one of McClellan's most ardent critics, T. Harry Williams, concluded "the General had left the capital secure. The forces he had left were adequate to meet any thrust the enemy could prepare."⁶⁸ Perhaps because of his mistrust of Lincoln by this point, McClellan did not see it necessary to discuss the final preparations of Washington before he embarked on his journey to the Virginia Peninsula.⁶⁹

For whatever reasons, the lack of communication and trust between Lincoln and McClellan likely resulted in the inability of McDowell's corps to play an integrated role in McClellan's Peninsula Campaign, which contributed to its stalling -- and the withering of political support for it -- until a withdrawal was ordered. It is in the area of civil-military relations where contemporary practitioners of warfare benefit most in contrast to the period surrounding the Civil War. Some ninety years later, Samuel Huntington and Morris Janowitz would produce in-depth analyses of the roles and responsibilities of the nation's senior civilian and military leaders in regard to their relationships to one another. Huntington could have

provided the insight to Lincoln that his senior field commander, McClellan, viewed himself as a true professional, and in that vein McClellan's actions were most likely not politically motivated; McClellan's primary focus was matching military means with political goals, and military security would come first before moral aims and ideological goals.⁷⁰ McClellan could have taken a line from Janowitz in the realization that every military task ultimately impinges on politics, and some officers will have jobs that require direct political planning and negotiation.⁷¹ A generation after Huntington and Janowitz, in 1985, Eliot A. Cohen would continue a more frequent trend of analysis and learning on this topic. In perhaps McClellan's most glaring shortfall as the commanding general of the Army of the Potomac, McClellan was never indoctrinated in a concept set forth by Cohen: "in practice the 'high' politics of war is suffused...with 'low' or domestic politics."⁷² McClellan was entreated on several occasions by his friends and national officials to pay more heed to the political currents at the national level. President Lincoln, Francis P. Blair, Sr., and George Gibbs all beckoned the general to consider the politics of the situation as an inject to his planning. McClellan refused.⁷³ Was McClellan purposefully isolating himself from political winds to maintain his own military-pure kingdom out of self-indulgence, or was he simply pressing an approach to civil-military relations that compelled him to concentrate solely on his profession, speaking what he saw as truth to power, but simply to a fault?

McClellan's approach to civil military relations at the most senior levels of military leadership provides tangible lessons for the operational commander and those that support their efforts. The first is that general and flag officers at this level disregard the political currents at their own peril. Civil military theorists years after McClellan's time established, partly because of his ill-informed approach, that military leaders need not take part in partisan political fights in

order to still be a vital component of the political process, a process that requires military participation in the American political system of government. The second lesson to extract at the expense of McClellan is to not enter a professional relationship with a pre-conceived view of one's motivations, experience, or capacity for professional development. McClellan missed opportunities, justified or unjustified, to build a level of trust with President Lincoln that could have staved off trouble later in his tenure. Blame cannot be squarely leveled on McClellan in this regard, however, and this realization provides substantive contribution to the third lesson: be cognizant of non-committal leadership in the political arena. Lincoln was known to quickly change his military approach based upon the domestic political situation and his chances for re-election. Over one hundred years later, Lyndon Baines Johnson ushered the United States into an unpopular war in Vietnam partially due to the elevation of his domestic agenda and re-election chances over a well-thought-out approach to the pending conflict in east Asia.⁷⁴ The trials and tribulations of General McClellan serve to season an approach to civil-military relations as practitioners of the operational art are forced to include this dynamic between military officers and national-level politicians in their professional kit bag.

MCCLELLAN ON CHOOSING WHEN AND WHERE TO GIVE BATTLE

General McClellan was presented with three major dilemmas during his command of the Army of the Potomac that resided distinctly within the operational level of war. These included the operational premise behind the Peninsula Campaign from March to July 1862, the initiation and execution of his movement to intercept Lee's forces in Maryland in September 1862, and

McClellan's decision to not engage in a full-fledged pursuit of the Army of Northern Virginia at the conclusion of the Battle of Antietam.

As previously discussed, McClellan was presented a clear national policy when he arrived in Washington, D.C. in 1861, and his pursuit of that policy meant that he would have to operate in a very deliberate manner in order to prevent the degeneration of the conflict into an extended and even bloodier conflict. McClellan was presented with a regional situation in mid-1861 that drove him to pursue an, at that time, unconventional solution to a "wicked" problem. On August 2, 1861, he delivered a plan to the President that outlined a military strategy for the conduct of the war. As indicated earlier, this included the application of pressure at multiple points from Texas, the Mississippi River, Missouri, Kentucky, and on the Confederate periphery along the coast. While at first glance this might seem like a convenient distribution of combat power, with the bonus of preventing Confederate massing in any one area, it also served to attack a critical vulnerability of the Confederacy: Richmond, Virginia.⁷⁵

Over a year later, McClellan was again given a clear national objective as General Robert E. Lee threatened to severely disrupt northern safe havens of supplies, recruiting, and political will. McClellan's operational approach of tightly controlled and deliberate operations using overwhelming mass would have to undergo a shift. Lincoln needed McClellan to deliver in September 1862, and neither the President nor McClellan could wait for the ideal conditions.

By the completion of the Maryland campaign, McClellan reinvigorated an operational environment for Lincoln that could feasibly support the achievement of the conciliation policy. At each major junction of operational decision-making, McClellan clearly pursued what he thought to be the best action to realize the end state provided to him by his political masters.

PLANNING THE PENINSULA CAMPAIGN

Richmond was a blessing and a curse for the Confederacy. Between 1800 and 1865 at least 300,000 slaves were brought in to the United States through the Shockoe Bottom slave auction in Richmond. Tredegar Iron Works was the third largest foundry in the United States, the largest foundry in the South, and produced over 2,200 cannon, and 700 tons of iron to armor Confederate warships.⁷⁶ The Iron Works was also the only foundry capable of fabricating the steam engines used to power the latest naval vessels.⁷⁷ Richmond, as a vital railroad hub, could forward trains west to Lynchburg, Virginia, and on to Knoxville, Tennessee, and beyond; southwest to Charlotte, North Carolina, or south via Petersburg, Virginia, to any of the coastal states. The city was cleverly placed to provide access to inland routes east of the Appalachian Mountains, but also deep-water access to the Chesapeake Bay and Atlantic Ocean via the James River. It and Petersburg just to the south (one could not survive militarily without the other) were the effective nerve centers for both communications and travel with telegraph lines and roads running through both. The seizure of Richmond would be a massive blow to the Confederate war machine, and a massive blow to the morale of the Confederate government as its seat located therein, and it was located less than 100 miles from Washington, D.C. An argument can be made that Richmond was not as essential as it was made out to be, that indeed if it was under imminent seizure that the government could have been moved south to Atlanta, Georgia, New Orleans, Louisiana, or Charlotte. However, it is unlikely that the Southern army or the political support for the Confederacy could have sustained such a blow, as can be seen by the acceptance of the same premise and subsequent actions by Grant to concentrate on Richmond later on in the war.⁷⁸ Even if modern-day doubt is cast on the certainty of such reasoning, McClellan certainly believed it at the time. A message from his friend, fellow general officer,

Democrat, and Illinois congressman James Shields on January 28, 1862, sums up Union thought on the issue at the time: “The Southern Government is a military oligarchy. The head of the oligarchy is in Richmond, and when the head falls a Union sentiment will be bound to burst forth in the South, which will soon entomb the body of this foul conspiracy.”⁷⁹ The city and everything it represented was an exposed node that could be exploited, if only the Union Army could get at it.

McClellan’s regional plan for the eastern United States while he acted as the General in Chief of Union forces included two essential tasks for general officers that he trusted. The first was the prosecution of operations in eastern Tennessee. Major General Don Carlos Buell was assigned to replace Major General William T. Sherman in the region and given command of what McClellan considered the most important command of the country outside the Army of the Potomac. Buell was pressed immediately by McClellan (and later Lincoln) to operate on Knoxville, Tennessee.⁸⁰ Upon inspection of Map 1 depicting lines of communication at the time, Knoxville was located in the only major southwest-to-northeast corridor connecting the main body of Virginia to the heart of the south (Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi) and was a stop along the major railroad running through this major avenue of approach into Virginia.⁸¹

in Fayetteville, North Carolina, was producing 4,000 small arms a day that were arriving in the Virginia area of operations).⁸² Further efforts by Major General Thomas W. Sherman in the littoral regions of South Carolina further served to fix Confederate forces south of McClellan's intended target of Richmond. As McClellan managed the effective isolation of Richmond using deep operations, he simultaneously protected, trained, and equipped his army for prosecution of his initial objective in the close fight. Through his efforts to shape the operational fight in adjacent theaters while simultaneously defending the nation's capital and preparing for a major deliberate strike, it is evident that McClellan understood the concept of deep, close, and rear operations espoused over one hundred years later in joint and service publications and mental frameworks like the Single Battle Concept.⁸³

The shaping and subsequent isolation of Virginia left McClellan with the lower-level operational task of closing with Richmond. In late 1861 President Lincoln was an advocate for an axis of advance in the Old Dominion that would take the Army of the Potomac from Washington D.C., to Richmond via Centreville, Manassas, and Fredericksburg, using the road network and established railroads to supply his war effort directly from Washington. From McClellan's perspective, this presented operational challenges.⁸⁴ The first was the likely enemy situation south of the Potomac River.

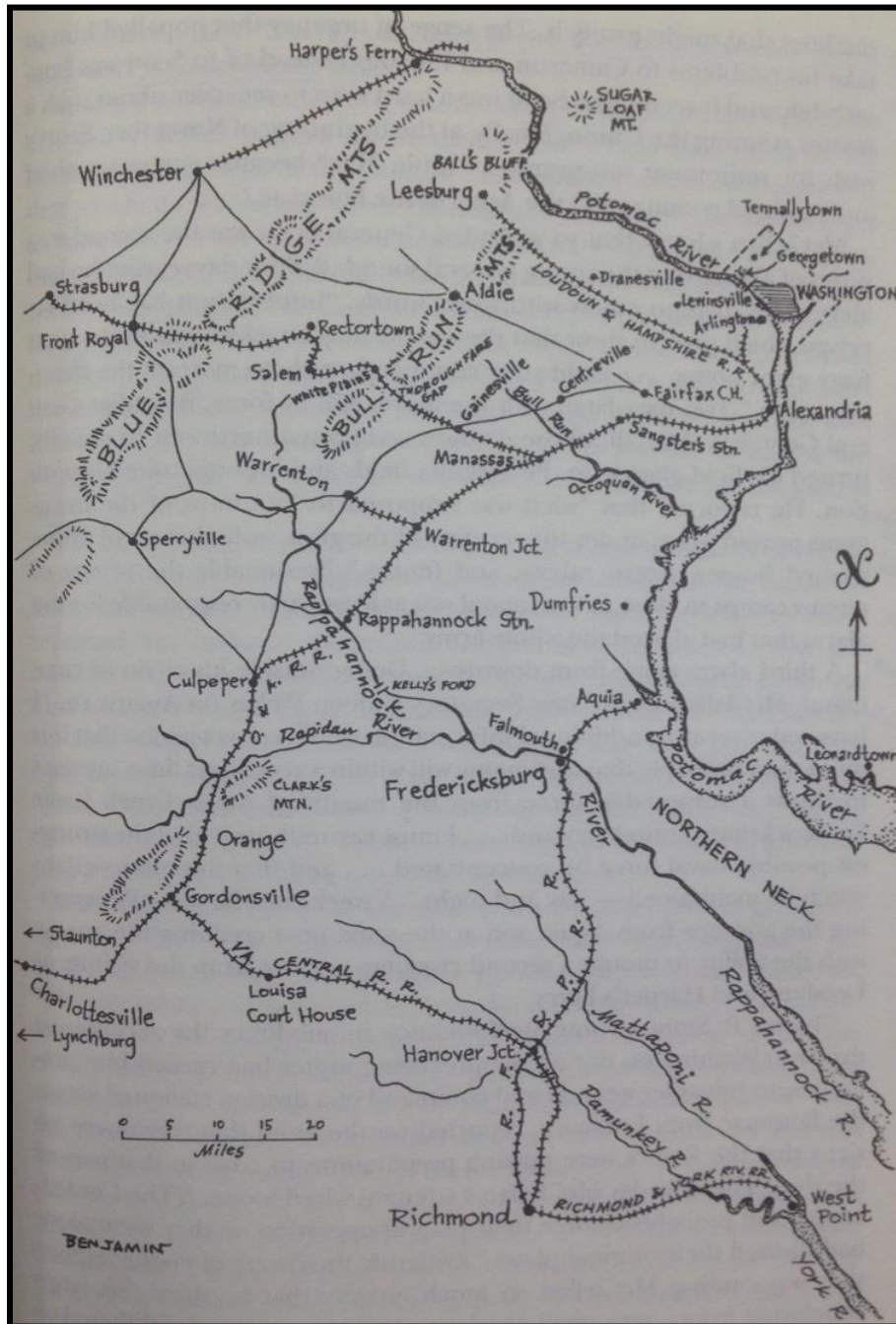
As indicated in *The Secret War for the Union*, Union intelligence collection capacity was limited at best in 1861 and 1862. In addition to the complete lack of an established intelligence apparatus, all reports were initially compiled and analyzed by McClellan himself, an enormous undertaking for even a dedicated intelligence professional in contemporary times.⁸⁵ Reports from human intelligence sources indicated that Confederate forces under General Joseph Johnston's command numbered anywhere from 40,000 to 160,000. While the initialization of a

professional intelligence service was a captivating story, it is outside the scope of this work.

Needless to say, McClellan had to operate upon something, and the freshly minted chief of the fledgling intelligence service, Allen Pinkerton, informed McClellan that his sources were reliable.⁸⁶

Secondly, and in addition to the sheer numbers of Johnston's command, McClellan understood there to be formidable defenses in the Centreville area.⁸⁷ A closer investigation of the area (see Map 2) indicates that Johnston's troops were tied in well with the macro-terrain of the area.⁸⁸ Defenses in Centreville were bordered by the Occoquan River and Bull Run to the east and the Bull Run Mountains to the west, leaving very little but a frontal assault as an option for an attacker from the north. During this time period the movement of an army over broken and wooded terrain such as the Bull Run Mountains presented a major obstacle; what little Civil War doctrine was available for the Army at the time indicated that fording of rivers should not be done by military units except at established crossing sites.⁸⁹ In contemporary times a combat power assessment should indicate that a force ratio of 3:1 is preferable when attacking prepared defensive positions.⁹⁰ It is not then unthinkable that McClellan would ask for 200K+ troops in order to execute this plan, a number that he was never close to obtaining from the government.

Map 2: The Northern Virginia Theater



Source: Edwin C. Fishel's *The Secret War for the Union*

As a third point, the problem of culmination was likely to rear its head. In essence, even if a successful attack could be conducted, and the Southern defenses could be penetrated at Manassas (see Map 2), then the Confederates had multiple, large-scale cross compartments that

offered highly defensible terrain to ward off an attacker (as can be seen by subsequent operations in and around Fredericksburg). It was highly unlikely that McClellan could prosecute the kind of war he wanted, one that minimized casualties and pursued a quick and decisive end, by going straight at the enemy surface.⁹¹

Alternatively, as early as November 1861, McClellan saw undeniable benefits in an amphibious operation to turn Johnston's forces by landing at Urbanna on the Rappahannock River, and striking immediately southwest to the gates of Richmond (only 47 miles away). The plan would take advantage of naval superiority down to the mouth of the Rappahannock River on the Chesapeake, avoiding the now tangible threat of the CSS Virginia reported at Norfolk, and enabling the supply of the Army of the Potomac with a base of operations [logistics resupply point (LRP) or combat service support area (CSSA) in current doctrine]. He would use what would later become a major tenet of maneuver warfare by bypassing the Confederate strengths to attack a gap in their defense.⁹² Over one hundred years later, the United States Marine Corps would further develop this tactic through the development of the service concept of Operational Maneuver from the Sea (OMFS).⁹³ Interestingly, McClellan went so far as to devise a branch plan where, if Confederate forces were too close in proximity to his landing site, he would divert to Fort Monroe where Union forces already had an effective foothold and firepower superiority on a Beach Landing Site (BLS) between the James and York Rivers. He even envisioned an operational-level infiltration and linkup outside Richmond between the Army of the Potomac and Burnside's forces from the south.⁹⁴

In summary, McClellan embodied a number of essential characteristics of the operational art as he devised the Peninsula Campaign in 1862. At the lower operational-level, he made every effort, much as Von Moltke would later tout, to provide his army with a short march to attack the

operational flank of the enemy. He deliberately targeted the will of the enemy and its center of gravity in Richmond, and he generated as much mass as possible and deployed it deliberately in synchronization with operations in separate theaters to drive a quick decision relative to the prospect of a long, drawn-out war. He clearly delineated operational objectives, sequenced over time, to reach a military end state that would specifically satisfy national strategic objectives. McClellan influenced the enemy's disposition prior to combat. At the ripe age of thirty six, he leveraged his in-depth study of railroads and logistics, his judgment of the enemy strengths and weaknesses in an uncertain environment, and his personal creativity to integrate ends, ways, and means at a magnitude that had never before been attempted in the United States military.

SEEKING OUT ROBERT E. LEE IN MARYLAND

Following a series of events that served to disintegrate General McClellan's assault on Richmond and attrite his army piecemeal to other commanders, McClellan again found himself in receipt of new instructions from his civilian masters: save Washington and Baltimore from Robert E. Lee's advance into central Maryland and eject him from Union territory. McClellan was presented with a monumental task. The Union Army under General Pope was just beaten soundly at the Battle of Second Manassas. Some of the men now in his command (as of September 2nd) were trained by him and were veterans of the Peninsula Campaign, others were trained under General Pope and had seen little but defeat and poor leadership in their prior actions, while still other thousands of men had only just arrived in the Union Army and had no training, let alone combat experience. Robert E. Lee began moving north into Maryland on the night of 4 September 1862, but not before McClellan deduced that he would do so on 3 September. If there was any doubt that McClellan could not be decisive and resolute in the face

of the enemy, he would prove between 3 and 15 September that he could press his men as hard as anyone.

On September 2, 1862, with General in Chief of Union forces, Henry W. Halleck, present, President Abraham Lincoln ordered McClellan to “take command of the forces in the field.”⁹⁵ Three days later Lincoln and Halleck personally ordered McClellan to take the forces arrayed around Washington to the field against Lee’s forces that had crossed the Potomac into Maryland.⁹⁶ Halleck would later testify that the order was given verbally by the President. Lincoln would claim that it was Halleck’s decision to select McClellan for the job. McClellan asserted that in addition to this command, he was told that his objectives were to deny an attack on Washington and Baltimore, and to eject the Army of Northern Virginia from Union territory.⁹⁷ At any rate, these were the strategic goals that were set before McClellan as he understood them at the time.

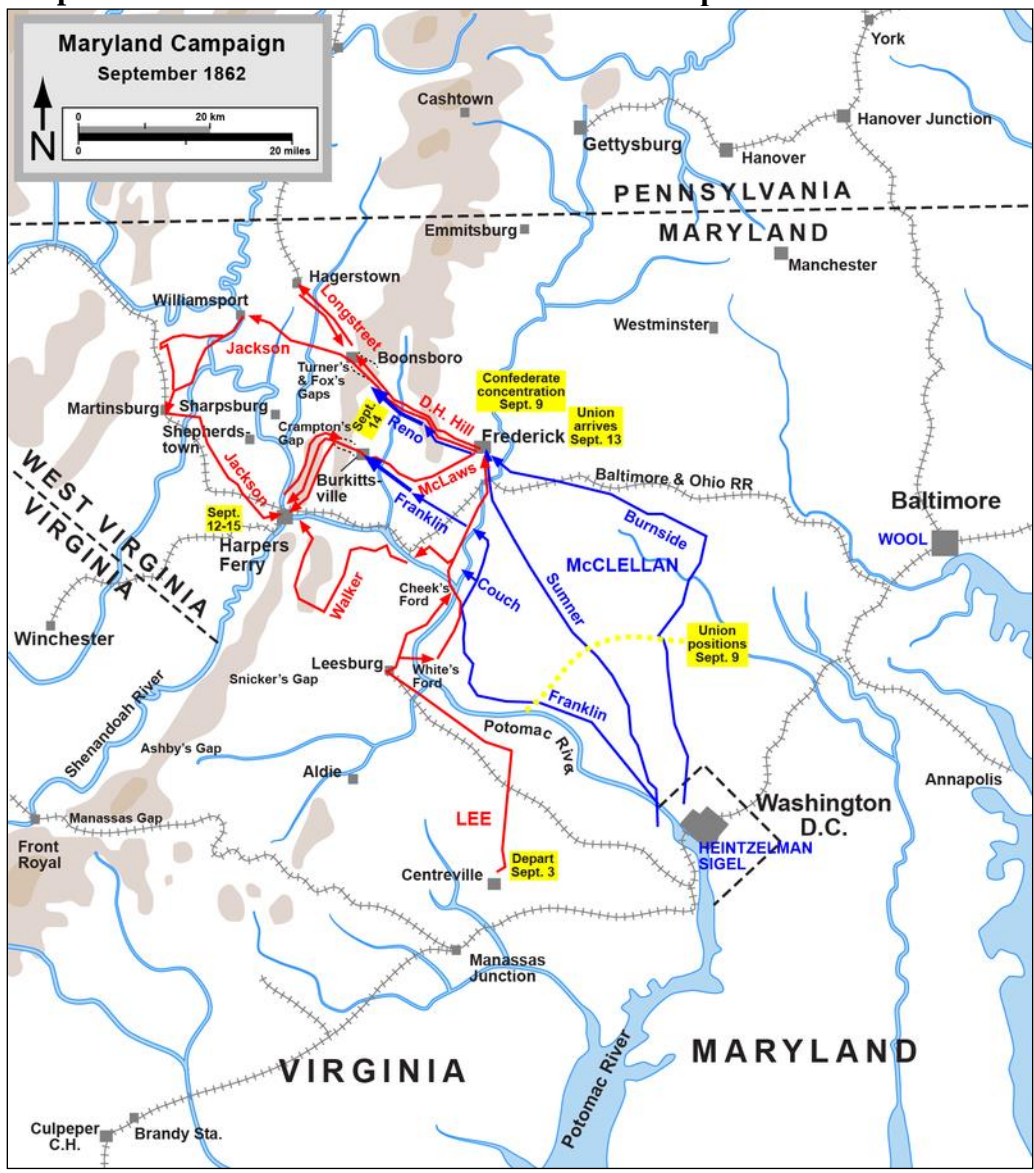
A vital duty of an operational commander must be to match the means necessary to execute the ways required to arrive at a required end; McClellan had a definite problem with the means available. In order to move as quickly as possible to check Lee’s excursion in the North, McClellan had to reorganize and reinforce his army. Entire corps of soldiers were put under new leadership. McClellan would have preferred to have mixed new recruits with seasoned soldiers, but political requirements did not allow for the disbanding of units put together within specific states. Therefore, regiments advanced that had no experience or training whatsoever.⁹⁸ Some units did not even fire their weapons; unfortunately for some, this would have given them the opportunity to see that their rifles even functioned.⁹⁹ In total 20,000 new troops were mustered into the Army of the Potomac.¹⁰⁰ That said, the reality of the situation dictated the expediency of such an act. Leadership from Washington to Pennsylvania considered the threat of destruction

by the Confederate army to be existential, therefore such means were not only necessary, but essential.

In addition to the monumental task of reforming an entire army, McClellan sought to match leadership with the tactical-level tasks that each unit would need to address, an important component of command at the operational level of war. Given the limited road and railroad network available to him and the need to both cover Washington and move as quickly as possible to cut off Lee's forces before they could strike east toward Baltimore or Philadelphia, he formed his army into three wings. As seen on Map 3, his southern-most and left wing would travel just north of the Potomac River toward Barnesville and would effectively deny Lee a quick avenue of approach to Washington from White's Ford where he was seen crossing on September 4th from Union observers on Sugar Loaf Mountain.¹⁰¹ He trusted both Generals William B. Franklin and Darius N. Couch to execute their duties with less oversight, as they had both been with McClellan at the Peninsula and had performed well; therefore, these two commanders composed the elements of the left wing. His right wing would be essential to rapidly close with the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. This line of communication running from west to east from Harpers Ferry, Virginia, to Baltimore, Maryland, was a prime axis of advance for Lee's army if his intended target was Baltimore (or even Philadelphia further to the northeast). For this essential mission he selected Burnside as the overall commander of the wing with Hooker and Jesse Reno as subordinate corps commanders. McClellan too had trust and confidence in all of these leaders. For the center of his movement, however, he would keep those in which he had less confidence or those that simply needed more supervision. One of these corps was only temporarily commanded by Alpheus Williams following the ouster of Banks and reassignment to the defenses of Washington. This corps would later be commanded by Joseph K. F. Mansfield

as he caught up on the march north. The other corps in the center wing was commanded by Edwin V. Sumner, an officer of some merit, but whose judgment had become suspect in previous actions.¹⁰² This deliberate arrangement of such a large force in what became a massive movement to contact was essential from a command-and-control perspective.

Map 3: Map of McClellan's Pursuit of Robert E. Lee in September 1862



Source: Map courtesy of Hal Jespersen

The pressing nature of the situation that first week of September 1862 also meant that McClellan would need to press his army to move quickly while still staying under control, lest he find himself in the same situation as Pope had just weeks before in the Second Battle of Manassas. There Pope was unable to coordinate and control the movements of his subordinates in the fluid environment of battle.¹⁰³ Communications at the time did not provide real-time battle tracking of units; hours or days could pass before messages were pushed through where telegraph lines did not exist, and these messages were often stale by the time they arrived. Confidence in the independent thought and actions of subordinate commanders were essential to maintain the initiative. Additionally, if McClellan waited too long or moved too slowly, Lee would have time to press deep into the Union rear area (Pennsylvania or possibly even New York), establish an effective delay in highly defensible terrain northeast of Washington, or even attack Washington or Baltimore.¹⁰⁴

Modifying from his preferred offensive technique of slow and deliberate moves, McClellan pressed his three wings to move quickly but in a controlled manner to deny options to Lee. Even before Union soldiers had discovered the famed Order 191 detailing Lee's intentions in the Harpers Ferry and Hagerstown, Maryland, area, McClellan had cut off a possible avenue of approach to Baltimore and denied Lee the use of the Catoctin Mountains as an initial defensive line along McClellan's march to the northeast.¹⁰⁵ Following the discovery of Order 191, regardless of whether it took McClellan six hours or a full day to re-orient the Army of the Potomac, his move was fast enough to out-cycle Lee before in-depth defenses could be established along the passes through South Mountain on September 14th.¹⁰⁶ McClellan's advice to one of his corps commanders as they exploited success at South Mountain was, "Attack whenever you see a fair chance of success."¹⁰⁷ To complete this case of operational

showmanship, upon McClellan's arrival outside of Sharpsburg on 15 September, perhaps in realization that he needed to complete the isolation and fixing of Lee there, McClellan accompanied Hooker's forces to the north side of the town on the next day and participated directly in often-overlooked fighting that denied Lee's cavalry commander, Brigadier General James Ewell Brown "Jeb" Stuart, a turning movement north to Hagerstown along a small road between the Hagerstown Pike and the Potomac River. McClellan had cut Lee off not only from access to Philadelphia and Baltimore, he had bottled him up in a small town on the north bank of the Potomac River.¹⁰⁸

Fighting administrative and logistics issues as well as a lack of personal initiative on the part of some of his corps commanders, McClellan's movement of over 80,000 personnel over 60 miles from Washington to the eastern side of Antietam Creek outside Sharpsburg, Maryland, in one week through enemy resistance with constantly changing (and inaccurate) intelligence was an admirable feat.¹⁰⁹ McClellan had balanced the ends, ways, and means up to September 15, 1862, that allowed him to pull Lee into a decisive battle that was not desired by the Confederate government or military leadership. McClellan had moved the Army of the Potomac quickly enough to get within the decision cycle of Robert E. Lee while still using tightly controlled movements when he could, and while spurring his units forward on their own initiative when needed. The battle of Antietam shifted into large-scale tactical action after September 16th; the operational situation at the conclusion of the battle provided more insight into the operational mind of McClellan as he struggled with the decision to pursue a renewed campaign into Northern Virginia.

ON PURSUING ROBERT E. LEE BACK INTO VIRGINIA FOLLOWING ANTIETAM

General George McClellan stood before a precarious situation on September 18, 1862. The Army of the Potomac was bloodied after the most intense fighting of the entire American Civil War. Over 12,000 casualties of his 87,000-man army littered the field. General Lee displaced from his fighting positions starting at 2 o'clock on the morning of September 19 and was making his way across fording sites on the Potomac River.¹¹⁰ Against numerous odds to the contrary, McClellan had denied Lee the ability to disrupt the Union rear and sent him badly bloodied back to northern Virginia. He had successfully accomplished the mission he was given by President Lincoln and General Halleck. Though McClellan was given instructions during the course of his movement to Sharpsburg to destroy the Army of Northern Virginia if possible, he was also still under the overall guidance of a policy of conciliation and had received no official instruction of a national policy change to the contrary.¹¹¹ McClellan's actions at the conclusion of the Battle of Antietam were directly in pursuit of both current -- as he saw it -- national policy guidance provided to him by the national command authority while prosecuting his objective.

The Army of the Potomac was in no condition to continue a large-scale offensive south into Virginia at the conclusion of the battle. The army was to receive both reinforcements and resupply at the conclusion of the fight, but neither were quick in coming. Reinforcements from Andrew Humphreys that did arrive after a forced march were exhausted and unable to continue without rest. Reinforcements from the Pennsylvania militia that had been promised to McClellan remained under the control of the state's governor and were ordered not to go into Maryland once an immediate threat to the state was suppressed. Aside from typical ammunition shortages at the conclusion of a battle of this magnitude, all 20 pound parrots, the largest guns at the disposal of the Army of the Potomac and attractive for pursuing an overwhelming offensive

strategy like the kind that McClellan preferred, were completely out of ammunition. McClellan himself had become sick with dysentery, yet none of this prevented him from making an effort to deny Lee the ability to return to Maryland – a very real and palatable possibility at this time.¹¹²

General Lee was still entertaining designs on Maryland as he moved across the Potomac on 19 September. He attempted to scout a possible return via Williamsport, Maryland, upriver from Sharpsburg, but was countered by McClellan's movement of Couch's division to deny the route. Meantime, McClellan ordered the Fifth Corps commander Fitz John Porter to conduct what amounted to a reconnaissance in force south of the Potomac at Boteler's Ford on 20 September. Two brigades from Porter's corps came into contact with A. P. Hill's Confederate division in Shepherdstown, Virginia, while acting as the rear guard for the Army of Northern Virginia.¹¹³ The battle might not have been so lopsided, but while withdrawing across the river, a Union regimental commander refused to displace back because the order he received was passed to him by a subordinate in rank. This tactical blunder resulted in the unit's mauling with several hundred dead and captured. From McClellan's perspective, the Confederate Army was deployed in strong positions, was in force, and had plenty of fight left in them. To engage at the time would have been difficult for an ill-equipped, understrength, and tired army.¹¹⁴ This last fight marked the end of the Maryland Campaign as Robert E. Lee pressed south to re-think his position and McClellan paused to approach his next step with the deliberateness that embodied his approach to attaining the country's national policy goals.

General McClellan had done his due diligence to deny a Confederate return to Maryland, he had labored to pursue the retreating Confederate army, and he had returned the war to conditions that were favorable for the prosecution of deliberate, yet overwhelming offensive operations, undertaken with high regard for civilian property and life. From his perspective,

when he received adequate reinforcement and resupply, he would be able to commence offensive operations yet again.¹¹⁵

McClellan's challenge at the conclusion of the Battle of Antietam was not unique to his command or to the American Civil War -- the Army of the Potomac culminated. With the benefit of hindsight and more advanced logistics, the armies of World War I could still not solve this problem adequately. It was only through the efforts of the German Army in World War I and then later through the efforts of Alexander Andreyevich Svechin during the interwar period that methods were devised to execute a penetration in depth to combat this chronic problem of how to achieve and sustain an operational breakthrough.¹¹⁶ This informs another challenge for McClellan in September 1862. McClellan was constantly forced to shift among three roles. The first role provided sound analysis and advice for the Commander in Chief regarding the employment of his army in support of national policy. The second arranged the employment of his army so as to proceed as rapidly as possible from one objective to the next and from one campaign to the next in an effort to approach the end state of national strategy. The third role amalgamated inputs regarding logistics, intelligence, manpower, force composition, terrain, civilian populace, etc., to generate tactical directives to corps- and division-level units to defeat a thinking enemy. The compression of the three levels of war as depicted earlier in Figure 1 was complete. This serves to inform the contemporary commander regarding the challenges evident at the operational level of war.

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately for George B. McClellan, the Battle of Antietam fanned political winds that had already changed direction and his operational approach toward conciliation was cemented to his name. The approach was discarded in favor of a more punitive approach to southern civilians and property. McClellan was no longer the right individual to prosecute the rest of the war as the head of the Army of the Potomac given the political situation, change in war policy, and the depths to which his relationship had fallen with President Lincoln.¹¹⁷ The general has endured criticism even after his death for events that were both rightfully blamed on him and for those that were no fault of his own. McClellan's tenuous relationship with Lincoln and Congress was a major contributor to his eventual demise, though he had little in the way of precedent to help guide him in this regard, and the prevalent civil-military approaches considered acceptable by a majority of professional military officers at the time was not in conflict with his approach. McClellan's use of operational art in the operationalization of the Union conciliatory policy and planning and shaping for the Peninsula Campaign was advanced for his time. Lastly, his utilization of the operational art in the command and control of an army of unprecedented size without a modern staff structure to support him, was deliberate, effective, and offers salient lessons in the generation of tactical tasks from established national strategy.

Past political judgments should not be enough to deter the practicing military professional from assessing military history with a critical eye. There is something to be learned from observations of a dynamic, intelligent, and dedicated commander doing his best to adapt his upbringing and education to an unforeseen type of warfare on a scale previously unimagined.

Through his success and his failure, there is more to draw from George B. McClellan than how to go too slowly and take too little risk.

NOTES

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- ²³ Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 4.
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- ⁴⁴ Ethan S. Rafuse, *McClellan's War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 162.
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⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 278.

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vote, when the majority moved to approve it, Lincoln indicated privately to Halleck, "We can do nothing else than accept their plan. We can't reject it and adopt another without assuming all responsibility in the case of the failure of the one we adopt." Ethan S. Rafuse, *McClellan's War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 191.

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¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 294-295.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 303.

¹⁰⁸ Tom Clemens (history professor emeritus at Hagerstown Community College), discussion with author, November 30, 2017.

¹⁰⁹ Ethan S. Rafuse, *McClellan's War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 282-307

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 329

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 307. Also Tom Clemens (history professor emeritus at Hagerstown Community College), discussion with author, November 30, 2017.

¹¹² Tom Clemens (history professor emeritus at Hagerstown Community College), discussion with author, November 30, 2017.

¹¹³ Ethan S. Rafuse, *McClellan's War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 330-331.

¹¹⁴ Tom Clemens (history professor emeritus at Hagerstown Community College), discussion with author, November 30, 2017.

¹¹⁵ Ethan S. Rafuse, *McClellan's War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 334-335

¹¹⁶ Timothy T. Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine: The Changes in German Tactical Doctrine in the First World War* (Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command & General Staff College, 1981), 37. Also Anne Louise Antonoff, "Command and Staff Course 3111: Beyond Tanks," (lecture, Quantico, VA, October 27, 2017).

¹¹⁷ Ethan S. Rafuse (Professor of History at U.S. Army Command and General Staff College), e-mail to author, November 20, 2017.

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