The Generalship of General George B. McClellan Revisited

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2-23-2021

Historian Thomas Rowland's revisionist assessment of the generalship of George B. McClellan offers a quite convincing series of arguments and historic evidence that Lincoln's first commander-in-chief of all the Union Armies was nothing of the cowardly and completely incompetent failure (even traitor to some) that many previous historians have painted him to be. To be sure, Rowland's *George B. McClellan and Civil War History* is by no means a hagiographic paean to the historically disgraced general; far from it. But contrary to both the most caustic condemnations of McClellan's supposed military and personal failures as well the more balanced view of James McPherson, Rowland succeeds in demonstrating that when compared to all other Civil War generals, McClellan was "average at best, mediocre at worst."[1] And, if anything, the Union Army's first general-in-chief was more of a victim of circumstance and timing than the Southern sympathizing, abject failure that he has so often been portrayed as.

Although James McPherson's *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* does at least acknowledge McClellan's excellent organizational skills in forging a qualified Union Army throughout 1861-62, his constant portrayal of the general as the militarily incompetent political and personal enemy of Abraham Lincoln serves to ultimately perpetuate the same dismissive narrative of McClellan so often presented to students of Civil War history. Thus, although McPherson might choose not to indulge in some of the more egregious *ad hominem* attacks on McClellan and does present relatively accurate analysis of specific military engagements, still his narrative is so laden with deprecatory asides and innuendos regarding the general's competence that the reader is left with the same negative view of McClellan that so many other historians have presented. Indeed, this bias begins at the very first mention of McClellan in the book where

[1] Thomas J. Rowland, *George B. McClellan and Civil War History* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1998), 21.

the author feels compelled to insert a snide comment on how the general "proved adept at writing dispatches reflecting glory on himself" as somehow an outcome of his otherwise quite important military victory in West Virginia in 1861.[2] Soon afterwards, we are told by McPherson that McClellan simply "lacked that mental and moral courage of great generals," and, being unable or unwilling to act, scapegoated others "to cover his weaknesses."[3] Since McClellan's Peninsula Campaign did ultimately fail in its objective to take Richmond, readers of *Ordeal by Fire* have already been prepped by McPherson to accept his analysis that the failures were overwhelmingly of McClellan's making and that "whatever defects existed in the Southern command were exceeded by McClellan's deficiencies as a fighting general."[4] Thus, McPherson repeats the common criticism of the Peninsula Campaign that McClellan was too slow, too cautious, and reticent to attack entrenched Confederate positions around Richmond. Further, according to McPherson one of the main reasons for McClellan's refusal to attack was due to his "delusional" preoccupation with an overestimation of enemy troop strength.[5] Since McClellan's Peninsula strategy was the central focus of the Union Army's 1862 campaign in the East, this bears closer scrutiny.

Target Richmond

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of the Peninsula Campaign addressed extensively by Thomas Rowland in *George B. McClellan and Civil War History* was that McClellan had a *fundamental disagreement* with Lincoln and Secretary of War Stanton over what military strategy would most efficiently cripple (if not defeat) the Confederacy in 1862.

[2] James McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 174.
[3] McPherson, 234.
[4] McPherson, 270.
[5] McPherson, 206.

Like many Union Army generals of the day (including Grant after Shiloh), Lincoln considered the wholesale destruction of the Confederate Army to be the main focus of the war in the East. McClellan's view was different. Rather than destroying the Army of Northern Virginia *per se,* McClellan considered the capture of the Confederate capital to be the primary military objective of the Union Army in 1862. At the time, Richmond was the industrial center and transport hub of the Confederacy. Its successful capture would have thus severely crippled the Confederacy early on in the war and dealt a demoralizing and perhaps even fatal blow to the Confederate cause in general.[6] McClellan even argued that the Union could and should "crush the rebellion at one blow [and] terminate the war in one campaign."[7] Thus, McClellan had no desire (especially after the disastrous first Battle of Bull Run) to risk unnecessary casualties and enemy raids on supply lines by smashing into the Army of Northern Virginia over the ninety miles overland between Washington, D.C. and Richmond. Instead, although the anxious Lincoln and Stanton may have been itching for a more immediate engagement, McClellan adopted the more prudent strategy of advancing the Army of the Potomac south by water, and then moving up the peninsula bounded by the navigable York and James Rivers toward Richmond. Among other things, this approach would also secure the army's supply line courtesy of the Federal Navy.

It is important to note here that this was precisely the strategy of which Robert E. Lee was most fearful ("McClellan will make this a battle of posts")—a siege of the Confederate capital in which a superior Union Army and artillery would only be assailable by "storming his works" resulting in horrible Confederate casualties.[8] Perhaps this is the reason that, as Rowland points out, Lee considered McClellan to be the best Union commander that he had faced during

[6] Rowland, 200-01.
[7] Rowland, 85.
[8] Rowland, 203.

the entire war.[9] From this standpoint, McClellan's concern with having overwhelming troop strength for a successful siege of Richmond was certainly not unreasonable. Rowland also points out that McClellan's supposedly "delusional" over-estimation of enemy troop strength was not at all unique him, but rather a persistent problem throughout the war where such regular misestimations due to intelligence failures were a constant problem for commanders in the field. Although McClellan might be faulted with relying too much on such bad intelligence, he was certainly no more or less preoccupied with having overwhelming superiority than other Union generals.[10]

Of course, in the case of the Peninsula Campaign, the manpower issue became especially acute as the result of circumstances created by Stonewall Jackson's diversionary Valley Campaign throughout the spring of 1862. The supposed threat to Washington, D.C. by Jackson's thrust north so panicked Lincoln and some of his more squeamish cabinet members, that the pre-planned rendezvous of McDowell's First Corps with McClellan at Richmond was held back by Lincoln and Stanton *no less than three times* during the campaign. Importantly, both McClellan and McDowell correctly assessed Jackson's Valley Campaign to be exactly what it was—a *diversion* to siphon off the required forces to successfully take Richmond, and never a real threat to Washington, D.C. Ironically, contrary to McPherson's view of McClellan as the one never willing to take risks, it was here where McClellan *was* willing to take the risk of a full contingency attack on Richmond to possibly "crush the rebellion at one blow"—a risk that Lincoln and Stanton were unwilling to take by deploying McDowell's Corps away from Washington as had been originally planned.[11] Although Rowland is quick to criticize

[9] Rowland, 195-96.
[10] Rowland, 20-21.
[11] Rowland, 129.

McClellan's sometimes "rude and arrogant behavior directed at Lincoln,"[12] still he argues that a multitude of command errors by Lincoln and Stanton, not the least of which was their failure to support his vulnerable right flank, played an important role in the failed Peninsula Campaign that ultimately forced McClellan's withdrawal from the gates of Richmond and allowed Lee to launch his invasion of the North.[13]

The Conciliatory War

Another habitual criticism of McClellan was that his political sympathies with slavery and the Confederacy dampened his willingness to "close in on the enemy for the kill," especially following the Battle of Antietam. McPherson joins others in this criticism asserting early on in *Ordeal by Fire* that McClellan and his chosen staff "were soft on the South" and that their Democratic political leanings had "serious consequences" for the Union Army's future effectiveness.[14] McPherson also cites McClellan's famous July 1862 Harrison Landing letter to Lincoln explaining his views supporting the continuance of a conciliatory war against the Confederacy to bolster the argument that perhaps McClellan's "heart was not in the cause."[15] Rowland, however, correctly identifies the historic reality that such a "conservative" view of the war's objectives against the rebellion in 1862 was actually the predominant sentiment held by most military and political leaders throughout the North at that time. As evidence, Rowland cites Lincoln's rebuke of both his own Secretary of War as well as Union Army General David Hunter on two separate occasions for violating administration policy by attempting to emancipate and then arm slaves in captured Confederate territory.[16] Rowland includes the fact that both Grant

[12] Rowland, 147.
[13] Rowland, 129.
[14] McPherson, 236.
[15] McPherson, 275-76.
[16] Rowland, 86-89.

and Sherman endorsed and abided by similar conciliatory views of the war in this period.[17] In fact, it was not until the Emancipation Proclamation in late September (well after the Harrison Landing letter) that the idea of a conciliatory war was abandoned by the Lincoln Administration as the most efficient means of preserving the Union.

McPherson tells us that although Antietam was technically a Union victory and Lee's army had been badly mangled, "McClellan's failure was the greater."[18] Rowland, on the other hand, provides a convincing argument that the charge that McClelland failed miserably to pursue Lee after Antietam and "destroy" the Army of Northern Virginia has virtually no historic or military validity. Retreating armies are capable of launching devastating real-guard actions, as the slaughter of the Corn Exchange Regiment by A.P. Hill's counterattack after Antietam attests.[19] Further, the simple historic fact remains that at no point during the Civil War did *any* commander "destroy an enemy army," and, if any criticism might be lain at McClellan's doorstep, it is simply that he was one of the first to fail at such, with many more to follow.[20]

Finally, Rowland offers a convincing argument that, although the generalship of George B. McClellan may not be one to guild the annals of American military history, he suffered more from being deployed at the wrong time than anything else. The constant eclipsing of McClellan's military capabilities under the shadows of the much later successes of Grant and Sherman ultimately bears little relevance to what he was actually able to achieve militarily at the time that he did. Rowland also cites the historic fact that by the time of Grant and Sherman's achievements in 1864, the Confederacy had been reduced to a mere shadow of the strength and

[17] Roland, 99-100.
[18] McPherson, 311.
[19] Rowland, 220-21.
[20] Rowland, 234-35.

vibrancy that it had enjoyed in the first years of the war. McClellan's strategic disagreements with Lincoln and his sometimes haughty disposition toward the radical Republicans may certainly have alienated him from many in the administration in 1862, but that certainly does not justify condemning the entirety of his Civil War military career to historic damnation.