

LINCOLN AND MCCLELLAN: A MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE TURNED SOUR

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ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION

When observing the relationship between President Abraham Lincoln and General George B. McClellan, it is tempting to approach the story as a common one of hero versus villain. As Joseph Harsh explains in his essay on McClellan, the General's "role in the Unionist scenario is all but predetermined. He is the first and sorriest of the candidates to try the patience of Lincoln."¹ While these anti-McClellan histories were not without basis, they failed to realize that Lincoln was not without fault in this relationship. The relationship between Lincoln and McClellan was indeed a marriage, but it was a marriage of convenience, and sadly for both men they married too young and inexperienced. McClellan was certainly a thorn in Lincoln's side, but Lincoln did not yet know how properly to handle a general, so rather than walk around the sticker bush, Lincoln dove in headfirst. McClellan and Lincoln were both ill equipped to handle their new positions and both did things to one another that, had they encountered each other later in the war, they may not have done. Sadly for them, their relationship became a casualty of their inexperience.

I. AS BACHELORS

Abraham Lincoln's story before meeting McClellan is well documented; briefly, he was born on February 12, 1809, in Kentucky. Lincoln came from poverty, received only one year of formal education, and worked hard for everything he accomplished. Before becoming President, Lincoln began his professional career as a lawyer in Illinois. McClellan's pre-Lincoln story has received far less study. McClellan was born on December 3, 1826, in Philadelphia. McClellan's father, also named George, practiced medicine and "moved among the upper rank of Philadelphia society."² Young George McClellan received an exceptional education, starting from when he was five and culminating in his attending the University of Pennsylvania in 1840. McClellan originally "resigned himself without enthusiasm to a career in the law," but "after two years there he changed his goal to the military."³ Upon deciding on his new career McClellan resolved to attend West Point. After a letter written by McClellan's father to the Secretary of War, William L. Marcy, asking for McClellan's acceptance to the school, and a possible recommendation from President John Tyler, McClellan's "nomination and acceptance proceeded without a hitch."⁴ McClellan's time at West Point was astonishing; he excelled in every manner possible, and was the ideal soldier. Even though McClellan hoped to graduate first in his class, "he fell short one file. He would have to settle for second."⁵ Even if McClellan was not officially the head of the class, "there was no doubt in this class's mind who their real star had been...It had been the born and bred little gentleman from Philadelphia."⁶ Gardner, a classmate, believed McClellan to be "the ablest man in the class.... We expected him to make a great record in the army, and if opportunity presented, we predicted real military fame for him."⁷ After McClellan's time at West Point he went on to serve valiantly in the Mexican-

¹ Joseph L. Harsh, "On the McClellan-Go-Round," *Civil War History* 19 (1973): 106.

² Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1988), 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ John C. Waugh, *The Class of 1846* (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1994), 66.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

American War, and “won two brevets (and declined one for Molino del Ray)”⁸ for his service. During peacetime, McClellan became the vice-president of the Illinois Central Railroad. McClellan’s time here would give him his first glimpse of Abraham Lincoln.

II. THE FIRST DATE

Between 1857 and 1860, Lincoln and McClellan both worked for the Illinois Central Railroad, with McClellan as vice-president, and Lincoln as an attorney who represented the railroad “in a number of legal cases during McClellan’s tenure.”⁹ McClellan wrote in his memoirs about his initial encounters with Lincoln, and while the two men’s first meeting was not “an unfriendly one,”¹⁰ McClellan was unimpressed by Lincoln. “Long before the war, when vice-president of the Illinois Central Railroad Company, I knew Mr. Lincoln, for he was one of the counsel of the company... His stories were seldom refined, but were always to the point.”¹¹ During this early period, McClellan assessed Lincoln as simple, and his inferior. Upon hearing that Lincoln was the president-elect a friend wrote to McClellan saying, “O Mc you and I know L and we know that he can not face the opposition which would rise if he were to take the right stand.... I tell you it is impossible for him to lead.”¹² McClellan did not disagree. These brief meetings between Lincoln and McClellan would end up being the only contact the two men had before Lincoln wed himself to McClellan in July 1861.

III. THE MARRIAGE

Fast forward to 1861; Lincoln had become President of the United States, and the country had dissolved into Civil War. The first battle, Bull Run, was an embarrassing defeat for the Union Army, and Lincoln was looking for a new general to replace his current one, McDowell. Lincoln needed someone who could lead this army to victory, and McDowell had proven that he was not that man.

After the war broke out, McClellan found that his military background made him a commodity, and “as it happened, the three Northern states with the largest military contingents all sought McClellan’s services.”¹³ Although McClellan was born in Pennsylvania, he was living in Ohio in 1861. McClellan had received offers from both states, but rather than go to Pennsylvania, away from where the war was happening, “McClellan accepted Ohio Governor William Dennison’s offer to command the volunteer troops of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, with the rank of major general.”¹⁴ McClellan “found himself holding one of the key jobs in the whole army. Ohio was on the frontier. The western part of Virginia was just across the river and Confederates had sent troops deep into the mountains.”¹⁵ McClellan took advantage of the opportunity; he marched into the mountains where the Confederate forces were encamped, “found two Confederate detachments drawn up in the passes, attacked one and caved it in, causing the other to retreat post haste, and moved on the town of Beverly, taking prisoners, securing everything west of the Alleghenies for the Union, and making possible the eventual formation of the state of West Virginia.”¹⁶

McClellan’s victory was the first for the Union side, and although in reality it was not all that impressive, McClellan spun it into a monumental success. McClellan claimed that his men had “annihilated two armies, commanded by educated and experienced soldiers, entrenched in mountain

⁸ Warren W. Hassler, Jr., *Commanders of the Army of the Potomac* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1962), 27.

⁹ Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1988), 58.

¹⁰ Warren W. Hassler, Jr., *General George B. McClellan: Shield of the Union* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), 22.

¹¹ George B. McClellan, *McClellan’s Own Story: The War For The Union* (New York: Charles L. Webster & Company, 1887), 162.

¹² Gabor S. Boritt, *Lincoln’s Generals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5.

¹³ Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1988), 68.

¹⁴ Warren W. Hassler, Jr., *Commanders of the Army of the Potomac* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1962), 27.

¹⁵ Bruce Catton, *Mr. Lincoln’s Army* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1951), 58.

¹⁶ Bruce Catton, *Mr. Lincoln’s Army* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1951), 58.

fastnesses fortified at their leisure."¹⁷ While none of these things were false, they were large exaggerations of what actually happened. McClellan's victory "went over big; and just then, before anybody had forgotten about it, the news came in of the humiliating disaster at Bull Run, with untrained regiments legging it all the way back to Washington, and carriage loads of distinguished sight-seers contributing to the rout."¹⁸ On July 22, the day after the debacle at Bull Run, "McClellan was urgently called to Washington."¹⁹ The date for the wedding between Lincoln and McClellan had been set. For better or for worse, on July 27 McClellan assumed command of the division of the Potomac. Lincoln and McClellan were now wedded together as Commander in Chief and General of the Army of the Potomac.

Looking back on this moment it becomes easy to question Lincoln's decision to promote McClellan so quickly over so little. While we now know that McClellan never became what he was expected to be, Lincoln's reason for promoting McClellan was simple; there was no better option. McDowell's failure at Bull Run demanded action from Lincoln, and McClellan was the only Union general who had won a battle. It is not as though McClellan had no other experience, either, he was a standout at West Point, and McClellan's pre-Civil War service in the Mexican-American War was, as Hassler said, "spectacular."²⁰ While McClellan's credentials may not have been worthy for the position of the head general of the Union forces, they were head and shoulders above anyone else who was available for the job. McClellan may have been a dud, but he was the only choice Lincoln had.

IV. THE HONEYMOON

When McClellan arrived in Washington he was quite happy with the new situation. McClellan was living out a fantasy he had been dreaming of since his days at West Point; the whole nation now realized how brilliant he was. McClellan was a star in Washington, and he had the undying admiration of the country. Earlier, Congress had sent a "unanimous joint resolution of thanks to him"²¹ for his victories in western Virginia. The *New York Times* had praised McClellan as "our wise and brave young Major-General," and predicted that "there is a future before him, if his life be spared, which he will make illustrious."²² McClellan received one of his more amusing accolades when "The *Journal* coined a new word for what had just happened to the enemy in the mountains: they had been 'McClellanized.'"²³ McClellan himself was ecstatic about his new position, writing home to his wife Nelly, "Who would have thought when we were married, that I should so soon be called upon to save my country?"²⁴ McClellan was finally receiving the recognition he felt he deserved.

Lincoln was also enjoying his decision, although not quite as much as McClellan. With McClellan fever spreading throughout the nation, few were focusing on what had just happened at Bull Run. Also, because McClellan was the "man of the hour," the morale of the country had been boosted by the appointment. Let us not forget also that Lincoln believed he had a competent general in charge of the army. McClellan began to live up to his reputation not long after he got his hands on the department of the Potomac, a force that he would quickly rename the Army of the Potomac, a name that would stick for the rest of the war. When McClellan arrived in Washington in July he stated, "I found no army to command, a mere collection of regiments cowering on the banks of the Potomac, some perfectly raw, others dispirited by the recent defeat. It was rather a mob than an army."²⁵ But McClellan was far and away the greatest organizer of the two armies, North and South, and he would soon show why. McClellan quickly went to work, and by the beginning of August he had started to mold the panicked soldiers who had limped back to Washington into a well-organized fighting force. The Army of the

¹⁷ Ibid, 59.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Warren W. Hassler, Jr., *Commanders of the Army of the Potomac* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1962), 28.

²⁰ Ibid, 27.

²¹ Ibid, 264.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid, 265.

²⁴ Warren W. Hassler, Jr., *Commanders of the Army of the Potomac* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1962), 265.

²⁵ Ibid, 31.

Potomac had “learned to respect their new commander as a strict and brilliant organizer and drillmaster.”²⁶ Up to this point, Lincoln could not have been more pleased with his new general.

When Lincoln and McClellan met in Washington, “a friendly relationship was immediately established...between the President – whom McClellan often addressed as ‘Your Excellency’ – and the young general, usually called ‘George’ by Lincoln.”²⁷ Lincoln made sure that McClellan was treated like a hero in Washington: in the words of Lincoln’s private secretaries, McClellan “was courted and caressed as few men in our history have been.”²⁸ When describing the current scene to his wife Nelly, McClellan wrote, “I find myself in a new & strange position here – Presdt, Cabinet, Genl Scott & all deferring to me – by some strange operation of magic I seem to have become *the* power of the land. I almost think that were I to win some small success now I could become Dictator or anything else that might please me.”²⁹ In the infancy of the marriage between Lincoln and McClellan, each man enjoyed the best that the other had to offer. But, as much as both men were enjoying it, the honeymoon would come to an end.

While both men enjoyed this early period in their relationship, and during it their relationship was stronger than ever, the novelty of this period masked problems between Lincoln and McClellan. Both rushed into this “marriage” without understanding one another. Lincoln had recently had his heart broken by McDowell, and perhaps rushed too quickly into a long-term relationship with McClellan in order to fill the void. Aside from sharing a few stories with him, Lincoln did not know McClellan very well. By choosing McClellan to head the department of the Potomac, Lincoln proposed to the first general to look his way. Lincoln’s inexperience with McClellan would soon come back to haunt him, since he did not know how best to handle his new general. For starters, Lincoln “made the mistake of being humble with a super-egoist. The egoist mistook humility for weakness.”³⁰ Lincoln’s initial humility allowed McClellan to believe that he was running the show. McClellan’s inexperience also played a part in the difficulty in the marriage, for even though Lincoln made the mistake of giving McClellan the false impression that he was in charge, McClellan made the mistake of believing it. Had McClellan truly understood his role as head general and Lincoln’s role as Commander in Chief, McClellan might have approached Lincoln differently.

V. MOVING IN TOGETHER

McClellan was not in Washington long before he and Lincoln began annoying one another. McClellan did many things that annoyed the President. Though McClellan was usually cordial when writing or speaking with the President, he often mocked him behind his back, referring to him often as a “gorilla.” McClellan would at times slight Lincoln at meetings, often showing up late, if at all. McClellan also had a superiority complex that kept him from taking advice from anyone, and Lincoln was certainly not the exception. Lincoln was not the perfect husband either; he constantly mocked McClellan behind his back, once writing to his wife, Mary Todd, “Gen. McClellan and myself are to be photographed...if we can be still long enough. I feel Gen. M should have no problem.”³¹ Lincoln had his habits that bothered McClellan as well, such as the way Lincoln would drop in on McClellan randomly, or the way he constantly inserted himself into military affairs in which McClellan felt he had no place. While the two men once enjoyed their relationship, their new familiarity created friction between the two men.

The strain that was put on the relationship cannot be solely attributed to McClellan’s flaws, but I believe he bears more of the blame. From McClellan’s arrival in Washington, he considered himself Lincoln’s superior. T. Harry Williams characterized McClellan’s feelings toward Lincoln quite well: “McClellan always saw Lincoln as a person of inferior antecedents and abilities, who unfortunately was his superior officer.... McClellan felt superior to most people; he was a natural patronizer.”³² McClellan

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Warren W. Hassler, Jr., *General George B. McClellan: Shield of the Union* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), 23.

²⁸ Ibid, 24.

²⁹ Stephen W. Sears, *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1989), 70.

³⁰ T. Harry Williams, *Lincoln And His Generals* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, Inc., 1952), 46.

³¹ Gabor S. Boritt, *Lincoln’s Generals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 2.

³² T. Harry Williams, *Lincoln And His Generals* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, Inc., 1952), 25.

viewed anything he could do as superior to anything Lincoln could do, and this feeling was compounded when it came to military matters. Whenever Lincoln questioned McClellan's plans, or suggested his own plans, McClellan not only felt that Lincoln was in no position to talk military strategy with the likes of him, but he also felt that Lincoln was questioning his abilities. For this reason McClellan was wholly unwilling to listen to any of Lincoln's suggestions, as this would be McClellan acknowledging that Lincoln had a better plan than his own. This can also help explain McClellan's insistence on his Urbanna plan, even after it seemed to become obsolete after General Johnston withdrew his Confederate troops from Manassas. Rather than admitting that his plan was no longer advantageous and contriving a new one, McClellan simply retooled Urbanna, which became the Peninsula Campaign. Lincoln always opposed this plan in either form, but because it was either McClellan's way or nothing, Lincoln deferred to his general. When McClellan's plan failed, and he was unable to capture Richmond, and Lincoln's concerns about the Peninsula Campaign were proven to be legitimate, Lincoln was understandably frustrated.

McClellan's feelings toward Lincoln, that he refused to accept him as a commanding officer, also stemmed from the rushed marriage. McClellan, like Lincoln, was learning on the job. When McClellan first arrived in Washington Lincoln was constantly deferring to McClellan's judgment, so when Lincoln began to question him, McClellan felt that Lincoln was out of line, and therefore dismissed Lincoln's prudent suggestions. McClellan's refusal to work with Lincoln ended up being one of his biggest mistakes. Of all the people in Washington, no one defended McClellan more than Lincoln. After McClellan's death, Alexander McClure wrote to McClellan's wife Ellen saying "The General's single mistake, that was the source of all his misfortunes, was his distrust of Lincoln."³³ Had McClellan fought alongside Lincoln, rather than constantly fighting against him, there is no telling how much more successful they might have been.

But Lincoln had his flaws as well. Lincoln's inability to read McClellan greatly interfered with his relationship with the general. While McClellan was encamped outside of Washington, Lincoln made a habit of visiting McClellan regularly: "the record shows Lincoln was with the general on at least fifty-seven occasions."³⁴ What McClellan "particularly resented was the president's habit of visiting him unannounced."³⁵ In fact, most of the occasions on which McClellan behaved badly resulted from his annoyance with these visits. McClellan "snubbed the president on numerous occasions. To his wife, McClellan described Lincoln as 'an idiot,' 'the original gorilla,' a 'baboon,'"³⁶ and many other offensive names. While McClellan's behavior towards the President was inexcusable, it was usually brought on by Lincoln rubbing McClellan the wrong way. For example, after Lincoln tried to advise McClellan that Vicksburg was the key to the Confederacy, "McClellan resented Lincoln's taking a hand in strategic planning. Right after Lincoln lectured McClellan about the Mississippi, the General administered to the President the famous snub described by the presidential secretary, John Hay."³⁷ (McClellan refused to see Lincoln after returning home late from a wedding.) Other snubs, when McClellan showed up late, or not at all, to a meeting, were designed to persuade Lincoln to discontinue his visits. Rarely did McClellan act out against Lincoln without reason. Perhaps if Lincoln had picked up on McClellan's less than subtle hints, their relationship would never have become so strained. "Perhaps," Stephen Sears wrote, "less familiarity might have bred less contempt on McClellan's part."³⁸

If McClellan's vice was his refusal to listen to Lincoln, Lincoln's was never realizing that the more he prodded McClellan, the less he did. This was obviously a dilemma for Lincoln, as he was unhappy with McClellan's pace, but had Lincoln left McClellan to his own plan, McClellan might have been faster. Every time that Lincoln suggested McClellan move, McClellan interpreted it as Lincoln pretending to know military strategy better than he, and if McClellan was to listen, then he would be accepting that

³³ Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1988), 132.

³⁴ Gabor S. Boritt, *Lincoln's Generals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 11.

³⁵ Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1988), 132.

³⁶ Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: the Observations of John G. Nicolay and John Hay* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), 96.

³⁷ T. Harry Williams, *Lincoln And His Generals* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, Inc., 1952), 45.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 134.

Lincoln was right. There is no more prudent example of this than McClellan's reaction to Lincoln's prodding of McClellan outside of Yorktown. McClellan's Peninsula Campaign had stalled at Yorktown when McClellan was confronted with a force he believed to be larger than his own. Lincoln, sensing the frustration of the nation increasing, and growing frustrated himself, warned McClellan that he must act. When McClellan read this he was furious. McClellan wrote to his wife Nelly, "The Presdt very coolly telegraphed me yesterday that he thought I had better break the enemy's lines at once! I was much tempted to reply that he had better come and do it himself."³⁹ No other example better signifies the misunderstanding between the two men. Lincoln was attempting to push McClellan into a situation McClellan was uncomfortable with, and McClellan felt as though Lincoln had no right to be telling him what to do.

What Lincoln failed to realize was that McClellan usually had a reason for his slowness, and that it was strategy, rather than unwillingness, that made McClellan avoid battles. McClellan had the strangest habit of overestimating by a magnitude or two or three the number of troops facing him, constantly thinking he was severely outnumbered. We know that McClellan's main intelligence officer, Allan Pinkerton, consistently gave McClellan inflated enemy troop counts, but "often enough, McClellan reported... even larger figures than those supplied by Pinkerton."⁴⁰ McClellan was constantly under the impression that he was up against a force at least twice his size, and therefore avoided battle out of the belief that his troops would be massacred if he were to engage the enemy. Whenever McClellan did engage, he tried to take numbers out of the equation by using "dexterous maneuvering rather than by a frontal attack."⁴¹ At the time McClellan was unaware at how harmful his misconceived strategy was, as "from the first day of his command to the last, it was his own army that was the larger one, by a substantial margin,"⁴² and he was eliminating his greatest advantage, not the enemy's. But every time McClellan overestimated and decided not to engage the enemy, his hesitation frustrated the nation and Lincoln.

It is important to remember that the relationship between Lincoln and McClellan was not so cut and dry as it may seem, however, and to realize that the relationship was constantly fluctuating. When McClellan complained about Lincoln, "often enough the issue was nothing more weighty than some offense to McClellan's patrician outlook."⁴³ At times McClellan referred to the President with disgust as "'the *original gorilla*,' about as intelligent as ever. What a specimen to be at the head of our affairs now!"⁴⁴ At other times McClellan spoke fondly of him: "*The President is all right* - he is my strongest friend."⁴⁵ Regardless of how brutal McClellan may seem when he criticizes Lincoln, his true feelings never seem to match up with his razor tongue. The jabs that Lincoln wrote about McClellan, and that McClellan returned, were little more than the bickering that is common of a married couple.

Fast forward to March 1862: McClellan and his army were still in Washington, and had just suffered a defeat at Harper's Ferry. Tensions between Lincoln and McClellan were at an all-time high. McClellan showed no interest in advancing into Virginia, and both Lincoln and the rest of the nation were at their limit with McClellan's inactivity. But, as Lincoln grew frustrated with McClellan, so did the general with Lincoln. The more McClellan delayed, the more pressure the President put on him to move, and the more resentful McClellan became of Lincoln for his unwanted military advice. The relationship between the two men had become a powder keg, waiting to be set off by the smallest spark. Such a spark never came, but a bombshell of an accusation did.

VI. INFIDELITY?

³⁹ Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1988), 234.

⁴⁰ Gabor S. Boritt, *Lincoln's Generals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 15.

⁴¹ Warren W. Hassler, Jr., *Commanders of the Army of the Potomac* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1962), 29.

⁴² Gabor S. Boritt, *Lincoln's Generals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 15.

⁴³ Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1988), 133.

⁴⁴ Stephen W. Sears, *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1989), 135.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 213.

On March 8, 1862 the relationship between Lincoln and McClellan crossed the point of no return. After what seemed to be an unwillingness to hurt the enemy, rumors began to flow about what exactly was holding McClellan back from attacking. People began to talk into the President's ear, claiming that McClellan was a traitor, and that is why he refused to fight the Confederates. The argument had teeth; it could help to explain the one thing about McClellan that Lincoln never could understand – his cautiousness. There was more to the theory. The rumor was that "the real motive behind McClellan's plan for taking the army down the Chesapeake was his 'traitorous' intention to leave Washington open to capture by the enemy."⁴⁶ At that time there was "no evidence that Lincoln ... believed the general was a traitor,"⁴⁷ but Lincoln needed to bring this rumor to McClellan's attention.

During a meeting with his generals on March 8, McClellan was "summoned to the White House for what he described in his memoirs as 'a very peculiar' private interview."⁴⁸ When McClellan arrived "he found the President sober, somewhat distraught. There was, said Lincoln, an ugly matter to talk about. It seemed to be so ugly that Lincoln hardly knew how to begin; McClellan finally had to prompt him by suggesting that, the uglier the matter was, the better it would be to speak about it frankly and openly. So Lincoln got to it."⁴⁹ After hearing Lincoln's claim McClellan "jumped to his feet and insisted hotly that the President retract his remark and apologize at once for such a base charge. The Chief Executive complied immediately, asserting that he had meant to say that such statements were abroad but that he personally did not believe them."⁵⁰ Lincoln had just accused his General-in-Chief of infidelity, and McClellan was devastated. Three days later, on March 11, McClellan would be relieved of his duties as General-in-Chief of all Union forces, but still retained command of the Army of the Potomac, proof that Lincoln's confidence in McClellan was low.

Neither man truly recovered from this; McClellan never felt that Lincoln fully trusted him, and with every act of slowness by McClellan the lingering suspicion of treason crept into Lincoln's mind, never to be completely extinguished. Lincoln did not act on any suspicions he had, however, and allowed McClellan to continue his Peninsula Campaign, but he appointed General Halleck to fill McClellan's old position as General-in-Chief, and did so without consulting McClellan. After this move, McClellan decided that Lincoln was no longer his dear friend, and that perhaps Lincoln was no longer loyal to him. On August 3, things got worse for the general, for after McClellan failed to reach Richmond, probably because of his "slowness," McClellan and his army were called back to Washington, a defeated bunch.

VII. TRIAL SEPARATION

After the failure of the Peninsula Campaign, Lincoln went to visit McClellan and the army at Harrison's Landing. During this meeting, McClellan decided to give Lincoln political advice in the "Harrison's Landing Letter." The letter, which told Lincoln how he should do his job, made Lincoln question "who was running the country."⁵¹ McClellan was pushing the boundaries of what Lincoln could accept, and this was after a defeat no less. After this odd gesture by McClellan, Lincoln decided that McClellan was expendable. McClellan had shown Lincoln all that he could do, and it was not enough.

On August 3, after just over a year's time serving as General of the Army of the Potomac, McClellan was called back to Washington, his time as general at an end. McClellan "arrived at Alexandria on August 27. With his troops sent down towards Manassas to join Pope's army in the field, he was left at Alexandria to cool his heels – a general without an army to command."⁵² Lincoln's message was clear: he needed some time apart and he wanted to see other people. Lincoln was not completely finished with McClellan, however, as he retained him in the army after stripping him of his command.

⁴⁶ Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1988), 159.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 158.

⁴⁹ Bruce Catton, *Mr. Lincoln's Army* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1951), 102.

⁵⁰ Warren W. Hassler, Jr., *Commanders of the Army of the Potomac* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1962), 38.

⁵¹ Bruce Catton, *Mr. Lincoln's Army* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1951), 157.

⁵² Warren W. Hassler, Jr., *Commanders of the Army of the Potomac* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1962), 55.

Lincoln was hanging on to McClellan's number. Perhaps Lincoln had the foresight to realize that while McClellan was not great, he was better than nothing.

McClellan was miserable after the breakup, and "on the evening of August 30, while many of his soldiers under Pope were in battle at Manassas, McClellan, with the distant rumbling of the guns reaching his ears, wrote to his wife, 'I feel too blue and disgusted to write anymore now, so I will smoke a cigar and try to get into a better humor. They have taken all my troops from me... I have been listening to the sound of a great battle in the distance. My men engaged in it and I away. I never felt worse in my life.'"⁵³ The two men sat alone that night, and in their own ways, looked back on their relationship wondering where it all went wrong. They probably did not reach the same conclusion.

VIII. LET'S GET BACK TOGETHER

McClellan's worst moment did not last long. Pope's Army of Virginia, combined with the forces in McClellan's Army of the Potomac, was soundly defeated at the Second Battle of Bull Run. On September 2, General Pope sent word to Halleck in what was an "almost unprecedented confession of failure by an army commander: 'Unless something can be done to restore tone to this army it will melt away before you know it... These forces under my command are not able to [stop the Confederates] in the open field, and if again checked I fear the force will be useless afterwards.'"⁵⁴ Pope's forces were in disarray, and without them nothing stood between Lee's Army of Northern Virginia and Washington. President Lincoln had no choice but to make "what was surely for him the most difficult military-command decision he made during the war."⁵⁵ Again after a battle at Bull Run, a defeated Union army limped back towards Washington; again the army was disorganized; again McClellan was called to put the army back together; again McClellan succeeded. Lincoln thought that perhaps McClellan was not as bad as he thought, and nothing McClellan had done could match the terrible date he had just been on with Pope. Lincoln wanted McClellan back, and McClellan wanted to return. McClellan resumed command of the Army of the Potomac on September 2, and set out to reorganize what remained of the army into a fighting force. "All this reorganization and restoration of morale was accomplished, or well started, in the space of just five days, and George McClellan's skill as a military administrator never shone more brightly."⁵⁶ McClellan had achieved exactly what Lincoln had expected out of him, as Lincoln commented to his secretary John Hay, "if the general could not fight himself, 'he excels in making others ready to fight.'"⁵⁷

McClellan's work, however, was not done. Lee was advancing into Maryland. While allowing McClellan to pursue was more than Lincoln originally intended, Pope's failure at Bull Run proved that Lincoln had no better option. Against enormous pressure from many in Washington, Lincoln permitted McClellan permission to advance. McClellan's luck had turned, and the only thing that could go better for McClellan was if Lee had delivered McClellan a personal copy of his battle plan. On September 13, such an act almost occurred. Early in the day, Corporal Mitchell came across an envelope containing three cigars wrapped in a piece of paper lying in the grass of a recently abandoned Confederate base. The paper ended up being what today has become known as "the Lost Order." McClellan now possessed Lee's plan for his northern invasion. After examining the order, McClellan realized that Lee, assuming McClellan would be very slow in pursuing him, had split his army, and was in a very vulnerable position. McClellan advanced with a pace that surprised Lee, who would soon realize the reason for McClellan's haste. While McClellan's pace did increase, it did not increase enough. Lee was able to stall McClellan at South Mountain and reassemble his army into decent fighting shape at Antietam Creek. The Battle of Antietam became the bloodiest day of the entire Civil War, which is ironic considering that McClellan was known as the general who did not have the heart to fight, and it was a Union victory.

As Lee's Confederates limped back into Virginia, McClellan alerted the President of the victory on September 17. Lincoln was pleased. At this moment he must have thought that his trial separation

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 74-75.

⁵⁵ Gabor S. Boritt, *Lincoln's Generals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 40.

⁵⁶ Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1988), 267.

⁵⁷ Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1988), 267.

with McClellan was what it took to get to the general. Lincoln responded to McClellan "God bless you, and all with you. Destroy the rebel army, if possible."⁵⁸ It was possible, but it did not happen. While the Battle of Antietam was technically a Union victory and McClellan forced Lee out of Maryland, it was a huge opportunity lost. McClellan had the opportunity to trap Lee on Northern soil, but allowed Lee to slip through his fingers. McClellan could have pursued Lee and destroyed his army as it tried to cross the Potomac River, but he did not. Instead McClellan made camp in Antietam, resting his tired men and allowing his army to lick its wounds rather than press onward for more action. McClellan always was good to his men, and they loved him for it, more so than any other general before or after, but Lincoln did not. Memories of why he originally ended things with McClellan rushed into the President's head: McClellan had not changed, and McClellan would not change. McClellan was again too slow and cautious to end the war. If he could not soundly beat Lee on Northern soil, with Lee's plan in his hands, he could never beat him, and Lincoln recognized this.

Lincoln allowed McClellan one last shot. After McClellan wasted a month in Antietam, Lincoln finally convinced him to march on Richmond. McClellan was unhappy about being forced into the decision – "this unsolicited tactical advice from the president depressed McClellan"⁵⁹ – and he moved more slowly than usual – not until October 26. The river which Lee's wounded and tired forces crossed in one day took McClellan and his well-rested men six days. Lincoln quickly became aware of McClellan's sluggishness and "resolved that if McClellan permitted Lee to cross the Blue Ridge and place himself between Richmond and the Army of the Potomac, he would remove him from command. Lincoln's frustration with McClellan's slowness grew, and McClellan was no longer slowed by strategy, but his anger with the President. McClellan had grown tired of Lincoln, and during his sluggish march towards Richmond wrote to his wife of Lincoln, "There never was a truer epithet applied to a certain individual than that of the 'Gorilla.'"⁶⁰ Regardless of their feelings about one another, the two men had duties to perform, and for McClellan the race was on.

IX. DIVORCE

McClellan's slowness had been constant throughout the war, and that did not change in November 1862. Lincoln finally decided to release McClellan "when Lee got his army – or part of it, at any rate – to Culpeper Courthouse ahead of McClellan."⁶¹ Lincoln's orders would arrive at McClellan's headquarters on November 7:

November 7, near midnight; a snowy night.... McClellan in his headquarters tent, writing a letter to his wife.... Finally there came a knock on his tent pole, and on his invitation two men came in - Burnside, looking very troubled and embarrassed, and the War Department's General Buckingham.... McClellan was cordial and seemed unworried; sat them down and chatted pleasantly about this and that... Buckingham at last remarked that maybe the general had better know what they were there for, and handed over the papers. Letter to McClellan from Halleck - "you will immediately turn over your command to Maj.-Gen. Burnside and repair to Trenton, N.J., for further orders."⁶²

It was over. Lincoln had officially divorced McClellan. Neither side seemed too upset over the matter; they had both reached their limits with one another, and were happy to part ways. McClellan read his orders and "seeming quite unruffled, ...looked up at Burnside with a little smile. 'Well, Burnside, I turn the command over to you.'"⁶³ McClellan handed over his command gracefully, allowing Burnside a few days to get himself acquainted with the army, and prepared to set off for New Jersey on November 10. McClellan made one last ride through the ranks, saying a final good-bye to his troops amid the thundering cheers they gave to their beloved general. As McClellan's train was ready to set off, his men uncoupled McClellan's car, and suggested they march on Washington to right the wrong that had been

⁵⁸ Michael P. Johnson, *Abraham Lincoln, Slavery, and the Civil War* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), 169.

⁵⁹ John C. Waugh, *The Class of 1846* (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1994), 396.

⁶⁰ Stephen W. Sears, *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1989), 515.

⁶¹ Bruce Catton, *Mr. Lincoln's Army* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1951), 333.

⁶² *Ibid*, 334.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 334.

committed; the kids wanted to stay with McClellan. Lincoln, along with the rest of Washington, feared this moment; this was the final test to see if McClellan was truly loyal or not. McClellan was. He told the men that his time was over, and that they must follow Burnside as they had followed him. McClellan knew it was better for everyone if the children stayed with their father, as McClellan could no longer provide for them. McClellan rode off quietly, his time in the army complete.

X. WHO GETS TO KEEP THE HOUSE?

In the 1864 presidential election, Lincoln confronted a familiar face, George McClellan. It would appear as though McClellan was not yet finished with Lincoln; they may have divorced, but McClellan was going after the house they once shared. During the campaign, Lincoln and McClellan never came in contact. "On August 29... the Democratic National Convention gathered in Chicago. The nomination of General George B. McClellan was already assured."⁶⁴ McClellan ran on the platform of abandoning emancipation and focusing only on restoring the Union. Even though the Democratic Party was split at the convention over the "peace plank," Lincoln's chances did not look good. The war was not showing any signs of ending, and the nation seemed to favor going in a new direction. On August 31, Lincoln declared, "I am a beaten man, unless we can have some great victory."⁶⁵ Luckily for Lincoln, his prayers were answered, as two days after Lincoln's declaration "William T. Sherman's army finally occupied Atlanta... Sherman's triumph made him a Union hero and dispelled the northern public's sense of futility. The combination of the Democratic convention and Sherman's victory reinvigorated Republican optimism."⁶⁶ The tables had turned, and McClellan was now chasing Lincoln. McClellan's supporters "continued to harp on the claim that Lincoln's 'abolition policy' was needlessly prolonging the war,"⁶⁷ and "as late as mid-October, Lincoln expected to lose half a dozen or more states and to be reelected by only three electoral votes. But early in November, he swept to a resounding victory, carrying every state except New Jersey, Delaware, and Kentucky."⁶⁸ Not only did Lincoln win a large majority of the popular votes, but he also won seventy percent of the soldier vote as well. McClellan was finished; he had been soundly beaten, and he even lost the vote of the men who had once held him so dear. Lincoln would be keeping the house.

XI. WHY DID I GET MARRIED?

When looking back on the marriage of Lincoln and McClellan, was it doomed from the start? Yes and no. While Lincoln and McClellan's personalities became a volatile combination during parts of the war, they only mixed so poorly because both men were inexperienced. Lincoln's approach to McClellan was all wrong; he allowed McClellan to gain a sense of control over their relationship, and he annoyed McClellan by visiting him too often and unexpectedly. McClellan's approach to Lincoln was also affected by his inexperience, as he was forced into the role of lead general too early, and his lack of experience showed in his relationship with Lincoln. Rather than accepting Lincoln as his superior whom he reported to, or at least his partner whose input he respected, he treated Lincoln as an adversary. Anything Lincoln put forward was taken as an insult, and was never even considered. Had McClellan become the lead general later in the war, Lincoln might have learned by then how to approach him, to be more firm with him, and to allow him to be more autonomous. McClellan, too, might have benefited from more experience, and perhaps would have learned to use Lincoln as a resource, rather than a foe.

Given that McClellan never achieved success, was the marriage in vain? Was it all a waste? Absolutely not; while McClellan had the misfortune of being a guinea pig for Lincoln's approach with his generals, and though he gained little from the relationship, Lincoln used the relationship as a learning experience: "at a time when the president had to go through a forced education in military science,

⁶⁴ Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2011), 308.

⁶⁵ Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2011), 308.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 309.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 310.

McClellan served – for good and for ill – as his most influential teacher.”⁶⁹ After McClellan, Lincoln never again got so involved with one of his generals. In terms of actual fighting, McClellan served his purpose as a soldier. In a time when the Confederacy was at its peak, McClellan kept the army from being destroyed. McClellan managed to save the Union army from completely dissolving on two occasions using his amazing capacity for organizing an army. Indeed, on the second occasion he may have saved Washington from a fatal invasion. Days after regaining command and resurrecting the army, McClellan drove Lee out of Maryland in what was one of the most critical moments of the war. For Lincoln, McClellan was the great buffer that allowed him to develop into the best war president our nation has ever seen. While McClellan’s refusal to fight kept the Union from winning, it also kept them from losing, and when McClellan outgrew his usefulness, the general left the army amicably and without incident. After McClellan, Lincoln was experienced and ready to handle whatever was thrown at him. McClellan may be remembered as a dud, but let us not forget how rare it is for a boy’s first love to also be his true love.

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⁶⁹ Gabor S. Boritt, *Lincoln's Generals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), III.