

Rehabilitating McClellan: Did Radical Republicans Conspire Against 'Young Napoleon'?

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Review

REHABILITATING MCCLELLAN

Did Radical Republicans conspire against 'Young Napoleon'?

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Ridgway Jr., James M. *Little Mac: Demise of an American Hero*. Xlibris, \$24.99 ISBN 738805793

He was a charismatic, natural born leader who graduated second in his class at West Point and achieved fame during this country's darkest moment. Why then is George B. McClellan so poorly regarded today?

McClellan certainly was an extremely well-educated, superbly trained, experienced officer, as author James M. Ridgway, Jr. stresses in **Little Mac: Demise of an American Hero**. Always adored by his troops, after the War he still remained popular enough to be decisively elected governor of New Jersey. Nonetheless, most historians have treated McClellan with sarcastic disdain; so much that, as Ridgway points out in his introduction, at the end of the 20th century McClellan is often defined by a few choice Lincoln phrases - "he has the slows" and "he will not fight."

What Ridgway offers in this revisionist study is a fresh landscape of facts from which the reader can draw his own interpretation of McClellan's worth as a military leader. Ridgway, a Civil War Round Table veteran, passionately challenges the Radical Republican view of the general popularized by such historians as Stephen W. Sears. **Little Mac** contends that McClellan's sterling reputation was crushed by a combination of circumstances. The conniving of Radical Republican enemies such as Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton and the post-assassination ascension of Lincoln as a political icon, coupled with McClellan's refusal to play the political game, conspired to discredit McClellan.

An undeniably clever strategist, McClellan believed that the easiest way to Richmond was from the east. However, this approach seemingly required taking his army out of a position to protect Washington, causing many senior Union

officials, including Stanton, to wonder if McClellan meant to give the Rebels the capital. In fact, as Ridgway correctly points out, McClellan was in no position to act boldly for many reasons. For instance, his primary Confederate nemesis, Robert E. Lee (Joseph E. Johnston before Seven Pines), benefited from access to northern newspapers in which McClellan's movements and intentions were assailed by the general's opponents. More generally, Ridgway convincingly argues that had McClellan received the necessary backing from the Republican radicals that Lee enjoyed with his government, he could have decisively defeated the Confederates and taken Richmond. But this did not occur.

Despite McClellan's popularity with his soldiers, a series of blunders (culminating in his failure to prevent the Confederate escape after Antietam) earned him a reputation for being timid and slow. He lost favor with the person whose support most mattered when Lincoln removed him permanently from command after Sharpsburg.

But Ridgway assigns principal responsibility to the Republican propaganda machine of the 1860s for the erosion of McClellan's reputation. Only a handful of books have bucked the massive anti-McClellan tide to tell the general's side of the story. McClellan wrote an account to clear his name, but it was fatefully lost in an 1881 fire, and then any further attempt was thwarted by his unexpected death in 1885. While General George McClellan's reputation stands the scrutiny of time, Ridgway's **Little Mac: Demise of an American Hero** provides a provocative glimpse of the general and his worth as a military leader.

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