Army of the Potomac Vol. II: McClellan Takes Command, September 1861-February 1862

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Review

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Producing power

Army was built for a campaign, not a battle

This is the second volume of Russel Beatie's extended history of the Army of the Potomac, and it covers the period from the aftermath of tactical defeat at Bull Run (First Manassas) to preparation for strategic defeat in the Seven Days Battle. The theme of this volume is building an effective army to defend Washington and move toward Richmond, something that Union Secretary of War Simon Cameron, commanding general Winfield Scott, and army commander Irvin McDowell, had failed to do before giving battle at Bull Run on July 21, 1861. The central figure in this immense administrative, logistical, training, and organizational task was George B. McClellan, appointed to command the Army of the Potomac after Bull Run and made general in chief in November, 1861.

When he assumed command of the Army of the Potomac at the end of July, 1861, McClellan saw first hand the wretched condition of the alleged army that McDowell had led south to defeat. There were virtually no defense works for Washington, the troop units were disorganized, untrained, and ill-equipped, and both officers and men appeared drunk on the streets of Washington. In his first volume, *The Army of the Potomac: Birth of Command, November 1860-September 1861*, (2002), Beatie described the command McClellan had inherited in the aftermath of Bull Run: Everything was in chaos. He did not see troops in military position. No avenue of approach was guarded. No regiment was properly encamped. The number of troops was insufficient. Their quality was low. The period of service of many regiments had expired or was about to expire. Men and officers left their camps at will (417-418).
It would have been hard to argue with any of that in July, 1861.

While there was plenty of experience in dealing with each of these problems on a small scale, there was none on doing them all in a big way and all at once. McClellan had to create an effective army from the rubble of chaos, defeat, and demoralization. He had to supply, train, and equip that army, and then lead it to victory over the rebels (the designation Confederate has become politically incorrect). These tasks were, in their nature, quite different; perhaps, by the Civil War, so different that it would be hard to find one man who could do them all well enough to win the war. Nevertheless, the young Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan was still expected to do them all, and he did the first two well and quickly. He was reluctant to lead his army south until he felt it was ready. Visible progress in organization, supply, equipment, and fortification of Washington contrasted with an absence of offensive activity. The great expectations that had accompanied McClellan to Washington gradually turned to criticism.

The army that McClellan set about building suffered from three primary difficulties, the first being supply, equipment, and training, the second involving command in the field and strategic direction in general, and the third concerning different political views of the general war aims. These difficulties were not insurmountable, but they were susceptible to essentially different modes of success and moments of proof. The new army demonstrated by its presence in defense of Washington that the mob of May-June, 1861, had been replaced by organization and discipline. Command would appear only in the test of battle, where the good and lucky officers would emerge. War aims would emerge from military circumstance and political discussion, though Congressional and local support for favored generals and campaigns continued always. The major part of Beatie's superb book describes McClellan's efforts to deal with the growing political demands to move south, engage the rebels and end slavery, all increasing as the larger and better supplied and equipped army seemed, simultaneously, both stronger than the southern forces and unwilling to fight.

Archimedes noted that large numbers were different from small numbers, a profound truth in administration as well as mathematics. This truth was applied to the emerging Army of the Potomac by Lincoln's Attorney General, Edward Bates, who confided to his diary on December 31, 1861, that none of the Union generals had any personal knowledge of the complicated movements of a great
army. He might well have added that organizing, equipping, and supplying a great army were also tasks of unknown, but clearly immense, proportions. Fortunately for the United States, Edwin Stanton, who replaced Simon Cameron at the War Department on January 13, 1862, had as clear a grasp as his cabinet colleague Bates on the nature of numbers. He wrote Charles A. Dana on February 1, 1862, that to manage an army of 500,000 with the machinery adapted to a peace establishment of 12,000 is no easy task. It was, however, a task that Stanton and Quartermaster general Montgomery Meigs could and did accomplish.

Letting contracts, buying and storing ordinance, transport and supply, keeping the books; these may have required miracles of administration work, but they turned out to be easy tasks. Finding the right officers to command the unprecedented large numbers of troops proved to be a much harder job, as personnel management always is. Beatie's book is particularly strong when examining the command problems facing Lincoln, Cameron and Stanton, and McClellan. Absent a major battle, when trial by fire would indicate who could exercise combat command, McClellan had to guess who ought to hold major line commands. Since McClellan wished to avoid even small battles until the army was ready, there were bound to be disappointments when the time finally came. Beatie describes the various manpower pools from which the officers came, including politics, the regular army, and the veterans of Bull Run. The most important, however, would be the Illinois shopkeeper pool, though, of course, McClellan could not have known of that.

A continuing and serious problem, intractable over the short hand and insolvable over the long, was the interplay of politics and military affairs. Beatie places the military/political interface in both the smaller context of states and politicians supporting favorite sons and the larger context of the issue of slavery. This dual focus gives the book a great deal of its exceptional value, making Army of the Potomac not a military history but a history of the military and its place in a democratic government and society in political and moral crisis. Beatie insists that the issue of abolition affected military personnel and tactical decisions from before the start of the war, (in Volume I), and during the creating of the army in 1861, (in Volume I and II), and in the preparation for the advance into Virginia (one hopes there will be a Volume III, and beyond).

George McClellan's creation of the Army of the Potomac in the months between Bull Run and the Seven Days Battle may be understood as the
beginning of the modern American way of war. In 1861-1862, just as in 1917-1918 and 1942-1943, American organizational skills, honed in church and government, in industry and transportation, produced a huge and victorious army more or less out of nothing, and kept it supplied with an efficiency that overwhelmed opponents and would later astound allies. Union mechanical skills, developed in commerce and industry, made McClellan's army technologically superior to its foe, and the gap between the two sides widened as the war went on. At Bull Run in 1861, the Union forces may have been variously and inadequately equipped, but those deficiencies disappeared quickly. No one in the Union civilian or military command structure doubted for a moment the need for a huge and modern army, including its logistical tail and organizational superstructure. This may have been unprecedented in the national memory and experience, but it was constructed anyway, and became the model for future American military organization.

At the time, generals and politicians thought they were creating an army for an immense and decisive battle, an enlarged and successful vision of Bull Run, which would decide the war. Certainly McClellan shared this vision of the future as he looked toward a major Union victory that would lead to the capture of Richmond and the end of the war. But he built an army designed for a campaign, not a battle, for closing with the other side for an extended period, not a day. Grant would take advantage of that army, inherited from generals who lost to Robert E. Lee more often than they won, while the army had campaigned on, surviving inadequate tactical command. That army was McClellan's creation.

Whatever the generals and politicians were doing, they could not do it behind close doors. Constant and often critical publicity is a further hallmark of the American way of war. Beatie covers it superbly. The Army of the Potomac was so close to Washington, the Willard Hotel, the telegraph office, and the railroad that reporters could visit units, return in a single day, gather in the Willard to pick up political gossip, get a story on the wire or the night train, and then return to the army the next day and repeat the process. Every bit of news, true or not, made it to the papers, often before the officers and men heard it. There were no secrets, military or otherwise, and though it bothered McClellan greatly, there was little he could do. It offended his sense of decorum, but it was war in the American way. As they used to say in World War II, the war was in all the papers.
In these several volumes, Russel Beatie is functioning as the biographer of the Army of the Potomac, but neither as a soldier's story of individuals nor as a study of generals and problems of command. The Army of the Potomac as an organization evolving over time is less well-known than are its leaders, who, until Grant and Meade, came and went usually in defeat. But the Army of the Potomac fought on through the horrors of combat, the boredom of cantonment, and the discomforts of military life, gradually getting better in the arts and mysteries of the soldierly craft, so that from defeat the army survived and ultimately prevailed. The picture Beatie has drawn of the Army of the Potomac is the reverse image of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia, where great commanders compensated for a lack of modern artillery, engineering, and logistics, while the more modern and efficient Army of the Potomac overcame failure of command until Lincoln could find Grant. Beatie has presented a sweeping vision, presenting the eastern campaigns, commanders, battles, and army both in detail and as a whole. The two extant volumes are a major achievement of historical scholarship, and we await the rest of what will be the standard study of the Army of the Potomac.

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