

# Lincoln and McClellan at War

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## Review

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**Hearn, Chester** *Lincoln and McClellan at War*. Louisiana State University Press, \$45.00 ISBN 978-0-8071-4552-4

### The Story Behind a Troubled Relationship

The command relationship between Abraham Lincoln and George B. McClellan must rank as one of the most troubled civil-military partnerships in the Civil War, if not in all U.S. military history. The signs of their schism are among the best remembered bits of Civil War lore: McClellan repeatedly snubbing his commander-in-chief and privately referring to him with such slurs as “the original gorilla,” Lincoln chiding the ever-cautious general for his chronic case of “the slows,” wondering if he might “borrow” the army if McClellan was not going to use it. What began with Lincoln appointing the nation’s seeming star general to command its largest, best-equipped army to date witnessed months of delay, a failed campaign on the Virginia peninsula, and a lost opportunity at Antietam, ended with Lincoln cashiering McClellan in late 1862 and McClellan unsuccessfully challenging the president’s re-election in 1864. This is the tempestuous command arrangement Chester G. Hearn examines in *Lincoln and McClellan at War*. Hearn has authored more than a score of titles in Civil War and American military history, including *Six Years of Hell: Harpers Ferry during the Civil War* and *When the Devil Came Down to Dixie: Ben Butler in New Orleans*. In this latest work, Hearn offers a workmanlike account of the strained professional relations between Lincoln and McClellan which defined much of the Union’s early war effort.

After summarizing the antebellum military careers of Lincoln and McClellan, Hearn takes readers into the early months of the Civil War. After scoring minor victories in present-day West Virginia, McClellan was called to Washington in the wake of the Union disaster at Bull Run. Already being styled “the Young Napoleon” by the press, “Little Mac” set his organizational and engineering talents to work building up both the newly constituted Army of the

Potomac and the ever-growing fortifications around the capital. This period, however, also witnessed the "All Quiet along the Potomac" phase of the Union war effort, with McClellan's army sitting idle while the Confederates held their Manassas defenses unmolested. Here Lincoln's frustration with McClellan's innate cautiousness would begin to mount. Still more of the Young Napoleon's personal foibles emerged at this time, including his penchants for imagining that he was outnumbered by ridiculously vast Confederate forces and that he himself was beset everywhere by scheming political enemies in Washington. While McClellan dithered, he and Lincoln found themselves increasingly at odds over military strategy, Lincoln favoring using the Chesapeake to turn the Rebel position at Manassas while McClellan favored taking his army further down the Chesapeake to launch a westward drive on Richmond. As Hearn correctly observes, McClellan never let go of his contempt for the president's military abilities, ignoring Lincoln's self-taught crash course in military science and his innate strategic common sense.

McClellan got his way, steaming his Army of the Potomac south for an approach to Richmond between the James and York Rivers. After allowing himself to be stalled besieging a much smaller Confederate force at Yorktown, McClellan marched up the peninsula, tantalizingly close to the Confederate capital. However, a series of bold counterattacks by Robert E. Lee intimidated McClellan into retreating back down the peninsula, even though his larger army managed to repulse most of Lee's assaults. McClellan dashed off increasingly dire dispatches seeking more and more reinforcements, particularly those Lincoln kept on the overland approach to Richmond in order to safeguard Washington. McClellan and his army returned north to deal with Lee's invasion of Maryland, culminating in the war's bloodiest one-day battle at Antietam. There McClellan's piecemeal attacks failed to destroy Lee's army, although Lee's retreat provided Lincoln enough of a Union triumph to announce his Emancipation Proclamation. Possibly motivated by his intense opposition to Lincoln's new policy, McClellan dragged his feet in pursuit of Lee, ultimately requiring Lincoln to relieve him of command in November 1862.

Hearn is notably even-handed in his assessment of the president and his slow-footed eastern general. He praises Lincoln for his remarkable patience and professionalism in dealing with McClellan's delays and personal snubs, taking an intellectual, statesmanlike approach to matters which McClellan met with emotion and pettiness. On the other hand, Lincoln may have been too deferential, Hearn suggests, specifically criticizing the commander-in-chief for

green-lighting McClellan's peninsula strategy over his own misgivings. While a strong case could be made that Lincoln should have taken a firmer hand with McClellan, this case seems an odd example to cite, considering Hearn's own testimony suggests that a general more confident and aggressive than McClellan could have made a success of the Peninsula Campaign. Curiously, Hearn also seems to pull his punches in assessing McClellan. To critics' charges that he was "hesitant and indecisive," he allows that "Little Mac was a certainly a little of each, but one must not forget the president's interference," concluding, "Both were novices, and novices make mistakes" (205). This may be a case of Hearn simply soft-pedaling his critique of Little Mac. Without explicitly harping on McClellan's faults, Hearn's narrative presents a general not only hesitant, indecisive, haughty, and petty, but also given to fantastically overestimating the size of enemy forces and deliberately misleading the administration with erroneously low counts of his own troop strength.

Much of the subject matter in *Lincoln and McClellan at War* is well known to students of the Civil War, but to Hearn's credit he uncovers some lesser known details and episodes. For instance, detective Allan Pinkerton's role in providing overestimates of Confederate numbers is well known, but Hearn demonstrates that McClellan was already doing his own overestimating even before acquiring Pinkerton's services and furthermore that he generously rounded up Pinkerton's own intelligence estimates in his reports to Washington. Hearn also recounts Lincoln's 1862 visit to McClellan's base on the peninsula, which notably featured the frustrated president taking military matters into his own hands and masterminding a small expedition that successfully captured Norfolk.

Excellent prose and solid research make Hearn's *Lincoln and McClellan at War* a readable and useful addition to Civil War libraries. Furthering developing the analysis would have made this volume even better. Hearn offers some fascinating speculation regarding whether McClellan's intense opposition to emancipation sapped his will to aggressively pursue Lee after the Battle of Antietam but does not fully develop this suggestion. Similarly, Hearn touches on the contrasting strategic visions of Lincoln and McClellan—Lincoln favoring the destruction of Rebel armies and McClellan pursuing a limited war of maneuver—but does not elaborate as much as he might have. An epilogue would have been an excellent place to pursue these themes further, but unfortunately Hearn ends the narrative with the 1864 election without providing much retrospective commentary. The book itself is adequately illustrated with maps of

Yorktown, the Peninsula Campaign, South Mountain, and Antietam, although a general map of early war Virginia would have proved a useful addition, considering the significance of the strategic debates between Lincoln and McClellan. That said, Chester Hearn in *Lincoln and McClellan at War* offers a useful and enjoyable exploration of one of the most strained command relationships of the Civil War.

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