

Lincoln and McClellan: The Troubled Partnership Between a President and His General

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Review

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Waugh, John C. *Lincoln and McClellan: The Troubled Partnership Between a President and His General.* Palgrave MacMillan, \$27.00 ISBN 978-0-230-61349-2

Re-examining a Tested Relationship

John Waugh's *Lincoln and McClellan* is a study in a troubled relationship with the future of the United States at stake. Despite his strong dislike of his commander-in-chief Abraham Lincoln, Union General George B. McClellan plotted military strategy in an atmosphere of utter disdain. Yet, this is a story of a general who organized a great army, in fact, the greatest on the planet earth, as no other man could have done at that time in America's civil war. Award-winning author, John C. Waugh, develops the McClellan-Lincoln problems with a lively narrative, illuminated by his earlier research found in his 1994 book, *The Class of 1846*, McClellan's class, and in his 1997 work, *Re-electing Lincoln*, a study of the 1864 presidential campaign of Lincoln and McClellan.

With gusto, at the beginning of his command of the Army of the Potomac, McClellan took charge of a "green and awkward" army with intelligence and skill and breathed new life and vigor into it (215). He "rehorsed," equipped, and drilled disorganized batteries; overhauled forts and lines of defenses; and created the largest army in the world (215). Eventually, Lincoln elevated him to the rank of general-in-chief of all Union forces. He had told the president that he could do it all.

McClellan stirred his men with his genuine affection—his great charisma. He was well versed in military matters, a general with great "experience and opportunities," as his commander in chief admitted. But, as Waugh points out, the tragedy of McClellan was that he "could not convert this great charisma and hold over them into victory on the battlefield" (216). As Lincoln put it so well,

“he never embraces his opportunities. That’s where the trouble is. He always puts off the hour for embracing his opportunities” (216). But McClellan’s soldiers loved him deeply, especially “Democratic soldiers!” After McClellan had been relieved, one bright moonlight night, a regiment of Pennsylvanians marched down Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House, paused before the presidential mansion and “kept bawling and hurraing for McClellan.” Lincoln had witnessed the performance and found it very perplexing.

But Lincoln patiently tried to bring uppermost the best in “Little Mac,” urging, cajoling, personally liking him as a man. He protected him from attack and stood by him as long as he could. McClellan’s great flaw had been his genteel, upper-class upbringing, which became his fatal liability. He believed Lincoln to be his lower-class, culturally inferior, intellectually inferior, and socially inferior commander in chief. As McClellan once wrote about his inferior boss, he “was nothing more than a well-meaning baboon” (50). And Lincoln simply could not redeem himself. Waugh says McClellan was nearsighted and could not see greatness. And thus “McClellan’s inability to see Lincoln’s greatness...in effect destroyed McClellan’s career....” (218). McClellan’s paranoia, misjudgments and over caution denied him his place in the pantheon of great generals.

All of this is a rather familiar story of a commander in chief and one of his generals. However, journalist and historian Waugh delves into this complicated relationship and traces the lives of both men back to their childhood, taking the reader through their early careers. In three quick chapters, Waugh moves McClellan through his West Point years, Mexican War years, and his first encounter with Lincoln. They had met years before the Civil War, when both were in the private sector. Then Lincoln was an attorney and former congressman, providing legal counsel to the Illinois Central Railroad, over which McClellan served as an executive and, technically, Lincoln’s boss. At that time, McClellan disliked Lincoln, long before commander in chief Lincoln turned to him to lead the Union forces in 1861. And it all went quickly to McClellan’s head. He wrote his wife that “Presdt, Cabinet, Genl Scott and all deferring to me—by some strange operation of magic I seem to have become the power of the land” (42).

Waugh draws heavily upon McClellan’s correspondence with his wife, Nelly, and some already published sources and some citations from the Library of Congress collection of McClellan Papers. His letters to his wife clearly reveal

McClellan's character and faithfully develop his heartfelt thoughts and reactions to Lincoln, his tendency to blame others for his failures, and his outsized ego. Because his correspondence is so forthright to her, it helps Waugh develop his in-depth look at the turn for the worse in his relationship with the president already taking place by late summer and fall of 1861. He moves rapidly through President Lincoln's growing unhappiness with the general in the following winter of 1861-1862, the "failures" of the Peninsula campaign, and of Antietam.

After Lincoln dismissed McClellan, Waugh presents McClellan's challenge to his former commander in chief as a presidential candidate in the following year of 1864. The author declares that "The day he was fired, McClellan became, in the mind of many Democrats, their front-running candidate to unseat the man in the White House who had fired him" (187). But, immediately after McClellan's nomination, he began to lose support from his "beloved soldiers" (209). McClellan's platform declared the war a failure and called for negotiations with the enemy. But his soldiers had turned on him "nearly en masse," by seven votes of every ten in his own Army of the Potomac (210). On election, McClellan resigned his commission and Lincoln accepted it. Their troubled relationship was at an end!

Although this is a short irresistible story of a very important relationship, Waugh develops his fair and impartial story of the tragic failure of McClellan's unwillingness to accept Lincoln's offered friendship and help. A general who was one of the finest perceptive strategic thinkers of his day and time, but whose failure to accept the role of his commander in chief, led to his dismissal. Believing himself unappreciated, McClellan believed that he had twice saved the nation, first after the chaos of First Manassas, and then again at Antietam. McClellan's legacy remained, however, the well-trained Army of the Potomac, the army which General U. S. Grant used to defeat the strong forces of General Robert E. Lee's Army of Virginia, thereby helping preserve the Union.

With the finesse of an excellent story-teller, John C. Waugh has written a work of strong scholarship, as he developed the relationship of the most dissimilar pair in American Civil War History, Abraham Lincoln and George Brinton McClellan.

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