

McClellan's War

Russel H. Beatie

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Review

Beatie, Russel H. "Cap"

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The Controversial Commander

Little Mac, Lincoln, and the Army of the Potomac

Bashers beware! Your days of unbridled freedom have come to an end; you can no longer say anything, use the sources carelessly, or announce irrational conclusions. White knights are not "rescuing" the reputation of George B. McClellan, nor are they launching a universal defense against criticism. However, they are, and I include myself and Ethan Rafuse in this group, attempting to make balanced, fair judgments about McClellan's conduct, something sorely lacking in recent decades. In the final analysis all of us can probably agree that, like McClellan, no general officer put in command of the Army of the Potomac during the first two years of the war would have survived into 1863. With an unusual historical twist Ethan Rafuse has studied that uncertain and impossible period in his excellent new book McClellan's War.

Many reviews of civil war scholarship tout "new" material as a basis for praising the author and his product. The real test for any study of this period is the attention to detail and the thought devoted to the existing material. A fair and thoughtful analysis of the well-known, existing material is sufficient and will yield many new conclusions or inferences. Rafuse has given considerable thought and analysis to his task and his sources.

Rafuse's bibliography is extensive and thorough but did not have a vast quantity of "new stuff." Although the bibliography tells us little or nothing about the scope of the effort, the footnotes tell a great deal. The McClellan, Porter, and Heintzelman manuscripts (all vast in quantity and detail), and several smaller collections, along with a huge quantity of primary and secondary printed matter, make any study of McClellan a daunting undertaking and, given the deficient use

of these materials in the past, make the finding of "new" material unnecessary. The literature about McClellan, much of it created by the major general himself, is extensive, his manuscripts collection in the Library of Congress amounting to 91 reels of microfilm. This huge body of literature did nothing to make Rafuse's undertaking easy. Only two published works, one primary and one secondary, lightened his burden: Mark S. Grimsley, The Hard Hand of War, and Stephen W. Sears, The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan: Selected Correspondence, 1860-1865.

Most writers about the major general come to their task driven by a sense of duty. They must convict him of scurrilous misconduct compounded by a "bad attitude" toward the greatest president in American history, or they must defend a man whose sincere and devoted professional efforts suffered repeated interference from ignorant, incompetent, unfair, and unreasonable politicians. In both these camps, the proponents most often find one side to be right at all times and the other to be wrong at all times. Neither position is defensible. Neither is correct. Both Lincoln and McClellan committed many errors and did many things well.

Is a biography (Rafuse denies that he has written one) or a related study of McClellan complete if it does not evaluate both Lincoln and McClellan . . . complete if it does not at least compare them. This is one of the many traps for the unwary writer. Rafuse skillfully avoids the distractions and sticks to his subject: McClellan's war aims and McClellan's role as they progressed to their ultimate rejection.

But painstaking study of the material does not end the task. The writings left behind by McClellan, his manuscripts, his memoirs, his correspondence, and his various articles, tell a great deal about the day to day man but very little about his motives and his thought processes. After the war even those who wished to defend him against fallacious charges that had become common creed for his assistance and asked him to speak on the many issues about which his silence denied them authority for their assessments.

The best insight into McClellan's mind, its inner workings, and his emotional reactions to the many instances of unfair treatment he suffered are his letters to his confessor, his soulmate, and his wife Ellen. The bashers leap upon this gold mine as conclusive evidence of McClellan's hypocrisy, the commanding trait of a man who gave the president the public obeisance

necessary for his station but who, behind Lincoln's back, reviled him as a stupid politician. In fact, McClellan never recognized or accepted the extraordinary but necessary impact of political, social, and economic factors on the military efforts he directed. But they existed, they were real, they were critical to the preservation of the Union, and they provide the basis for evaluating McClellan's public behavior toward Lincoln. McClellan's personal letters to his wife, therefore, are no more than evidence of the terrible strain imposed on him by the broken promises, the lies, and the disappointments necessitated, as the administration and Lincoln saw them, by political, social, and economic factors. Events influencing the development of a military policy where none existed and the relations between McClellan and Lincoln may be somewhat broader than those described by Rafuse . . . although all find their way appropriately into his narrative.

In a recent review of another work Professor Peter S. Carmichl of the University of North Carolina reflected on "the troubling gap that continues to divide popular and academic Civil War writing. We need historians [with] . . . formidable writing abilities to use the narrative form as a way to challenge readers with complex ideas. Analysis is not the antithesis of well-written, accessible prose. Academics . . . could learn from popular writers . . ." This quotation applies favorably to Rafuse's work on McClellan and the development of the Union's war aims.

When McClellan first arrived in Washington, Lincoln requested a statement of overall policy for the war; and in a long letter dated August 2, the major general advocated a war on the southern planter aristocracy with preservation of the lives and property of those southerners not responsible for secession and the war because the victorious Union would necessarily reincorporate them as part of a "permanent peaceful Union." Although McClellan detested slavery and thought it should, under gradual, controlled circumstances, be abolished, he thought the Radical Republican program of immediate emancipation, abolition, equal rights, and integration should not be war aims. Nor should they be imposed on whites . . . or on blacks . . . in a short period of time.

The line between presidential authority and military judgment did not exist in 1861, nor had it played any significant role in American affairs before that. As the war progressed the line appeared, sharp and clear and stationary. Then it became fuzzy, mobile, and unpredictable. In 1862, Lincoln took an increasing hand in both strategy and tactics while he also played a large role in

administrative matters, demanding the creation of corps, appointing the corps commanders, and dabbling at the division and brigade levels. These unnecessary intrusions on McClellan's domain passed without complaint from the major general until the accumulated frustrations of deleterious if not crippling interference from two ignorant but well-intentioned civilians reached a level he could no longer tolerate. The president could cross the line--or redraw the line--whenever he wished . . . his only constraints being the electorate and the verdict of history. Not so for McClellan, but just like Douglas MacArthur almost one hundred years later, McClellan crossed the line when he, his army, and the president came together at Harrison's Landing after a truly brilliant change of position by McClellan in the Seven Days battles. Although the president had, in deference to the border states and the loyal slave owners, evaded the early Radical demands, by the time he reached Harrison's Landing in early July of 1862, he felt compelled to adopt many of the Radical war aims. At their meeting, McClellan had already planned an intrusion on this sacred civilian ground. He had not changed his assessment, except that he had become willing to enter a preserve he knew to be "out of bounds" for the military. He gave the president a letter that defined a war against "political organizations" and "armed rebellion;" and he fixed the impossible task that it not involve "population," "private property . . . unarmed persons . . . or forcible abolition of slavery." Lincoln received this second exegesis without comment. Second Bull Run, the nadir in American military history of the battle of maneuver, followed hard on this meeting.

Rafuse's brief assessment of McClellan's conduct toward Pope during the Second Bull Run campaign presents an interesting variation on the personal animus featured in most accounts.

This resentment of Pope was not based purely on McClellan's own particular command relationship with Pope, for the Illinoisan managed to alienate just about everyone he worked with during the Civil War. What truly antagonized McClellan in August 1862 was the challenge to his own professional military judgment, something that was at the core of his sense of self, and the change in the direction of the Union war effort that Pope represented.

This change was not something McClellan interpreted merely as a personal affront, however. He saw the evacuation from the Peninsula and the move away from conciliation as evidence that after only a year and a half, the window of opportunity for moderation, statesmanship, and reason was closing in the North.

Henceforth, he feared the Union war effort would be steered by party politics and ignorant politicians in a direction that served popular prejudices and parochial interests in the North but compromised military operations and would be fatal to hopes for the restoration of a truly harmonious Union. It was a development the general believed fatal to the hopes of enlightened statesmen and military professionals for a true reconciliation of the warring sections and one that had to be reversed at almost any cost.

McClellan revitalized and reorganized his army after the disaster at Second Bull Run and the vicious fighting at Antietam, then maneuvered his army to an advantageous position between the widely separated wings of Lee's army. But to Lincoln he had done no more than allow Longstreet to interpose his wing between the Army of the Potomac and Richmond, and he had done nothing to "hurt" the Army of Northern Virginia since September. Rafuse concludes:

It is clear that by November 1862 McClellan and Lincoln could not work together any longer. Both men recognized that McClellan and his vision of how the war should be conducted could not be vindicated without effectively discrediting the most important decisions Lincoln had made in his management of the war in 1862. And in November 1862, the administration's political power and standing with much of the army was too insecure for it to sustain such a blow to its prestige without serious consequences for the entire Union war effort. Despite his admirable performance in the weeks after Antietam, McClellan simply had to go.

Rafuse has attempted to demonstrate that McClellan's views on the nation's proper military policy rose from his political and social environment, his upbringing and family, and his early life experiences, something in the nature of a "life and times." The leap from a sociological and political narrative about a country to a rationale for personal, individual conduct follows no crystal-clear path, has no strong guidelines, and at this stage in our comprehension no certain accuracy. Nevertheless, Rafuse has produced a convincing argument that McClellan's devotion to orderly and gentlemanly conduct, instilled by his Whig-Democrat political and social background, required the impossible "conciliatory" war aims which he pursued and by which he believed a peaceful reunion and reconciliation must be accomplished, i.e., he should fight the war against the Confederate planter aristocracy, the slave owners, and their armies but avoid any impact on the civilian population that would rejoin the Union. But did his war aims cause the end of his career at the head of the Army of the

Potomac. Proving cause and effect in history? Difficult if not impossible, especially when the cause is a concept. Rafuse strongly implies, if he does not say, that McClellan's final removal from command arose from the conclusive rejection of his war aims, and he has assembled a powerful, interesting presentation to support that contention. But the tired old arguments mindlessly repeated without analysis or historical context by the bashers still have their residual power: the failure to advance against the Confederates from September to March, the choice of the Peninsula, the slow pace up the Peninsula, the failure to leap to Pope's assistance, the failure to crush Lee at Antietam, the failure to renew the attack at the end of the day of September 17 and many smaller, truly inconsequential points repeated by them. Any historical picture requires the inclusion and assessment of all aspects of the question to determine the "Cause." McClellan's War adds a new and important factor to that complex historical inquiry.

Russel H. Cap Beatie, a former army lieutenant, is a graduate of Princeton University and Columbia Law School. He has been a trial lawyer in New York City for almost four decades. Beatie's previous book is Road to Manassas (1961).