

Book Review: *Lincoln and McClellan: The Troubled Partnership Between A President and His General*, by John C. Waugh. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 252 pages.

<<http://us.macmillan.com/lincolnmcclellan>>

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By way of full disclosure, I approach this book as a strong admirer of John C. Waugh's work, considering *Reelecting Lincoln: The Battle for the 1864 Presidency* and *The Class of 1846: From West Point to Appomattox: Stonewall Jackson, George McClellan and their Brothers* to be among the very best Civil War books that I have read. They form a base of several years' worth of research and analysis that inform the author's reflections in this new book on the relationship between Lincoln and McClellan.

The first three chapters of the book juxtapose brief, but important, descriptions of the prewar careers of both men, describing their extremely different backgrounds while highlighting the capacities which brought them to their roles in 1861. Perhaps too easily overlooked by the modern reader, the more experienced and seasoned Lincoln was seventeen years older than McClellan, taking office at age 52 as McClellan's star rose in western Virginia that summer before he reached age 35. Also easily overlooked is the fact that the two men knew each other in Illinois in 1857-1860, as McClellan rose rapidly in the Illinois Central Railroad to become superintendent, while Lincoln periodically served the railroad as legal counsel. McClellan was an active supporter of Stephen Douglas during the 1858 state elections that would determine the next U.S. Senator from Illinois, providing his personal railcar for Douglas' travel to his debates with Lincoln. As Waugh points out, McClellan's conclusion from this early experience with Lincoln was that Lincoln was his social, intellectual, and moral inferior, an opinion that McClellan never seemed to overcome.

The author's portrait of the early McClellan emphasizes his significant talents and his personal charm. For those of us whose reading has led to a more negative impression of McClellan, it is important to be reminded that many contemporaries described him as "generous-hearted ... noble ... not a mean thought in him ... honorable ... pleasant ... charming ... modest." However, different characteristics emerged quickly during the war. MG Jacob Cox, one of McClellan's subordinates in western Virginia in the summer of 1861, wrote later that: "His personal intercourse with those about him was so kindly, and his bearing so modest, that his dispatches, proclamations, and correspondence are a psychological study, more puzzling to those who knew him well than to strangers. Their turgid rhetoric and exaggerated pretense did not seem natural to him. In them he seemed to be composing for stage effect." Shortly, McClellan's letters to his wife would indicate his being enthralled with the public's adulation, with being called the "Young General" and hearing the comments of "how young he is." Soon, as the author notes, "He was believing his press releases."

The failure of the relationship between Lincoln and McClellan leads to further comparison of the relationships of both men to Edwin Stanton. Lincoln's prewar problems with Stanton are well known, and the ultimate success of their relationship is a tribute both to Lincoln's judgment of capacity and to Stanton's willingness to buckle down and get the work done, coming in his own time to become an ardent admirer of Lincoln. Starting from a perhaps similarly deficient relationship, Lincoln was also willing to swallow his pride and display extraordinary patience with McClellan. How many Presidents would have suffered the snub of going to the home of their top military commander, waiting for an extended period to see him, and then being told that the general had gone to bed? In contrast to Stanton, Lincoln's patience with McClellan never produced results.

Stanton's case is also illuminating in that he was an early McClellan supporter and confidante, whose allegiance McClellan seemed to make no effort to keep. In McClellan's eyes, Stanton became just another enemy who did not know what he was doing. McClellan's overwhelming arrogance and blindness toward others' capability was not just personally directed at Lincoln, but he managed to lose the support of many who initially thought highly of him, while he failed to cultivate the support and understanding of those whose partnership he certainly needed, including Lincoln, Stanton, and Halleck.

The author provides a concise, but fresh and engaging, narrative of the strained and painful interactions throughout the first months of McClellan's command, the Peninsula Campaign, and the Maryland Campaign.

When Lincoln's seemingly endless patience is finally exhausted and McClellan is relieved of command, we are left with one of those puzzles of history: was there ever a major character in American history whose personal capabilities and whose political capital were so large as McClellan's in 1861, but who produced so little to show for it?

The story did not end in November 1862, of course. In an excellent chapter titled "Two Storks by a Frog Pond," the author draws upon his work in *Reelecting Lincoln* to relate the ironic events that led to the Democrats' choice of McClellan to oppose Lincoln in the 1864 election. The verdict of the Army, whose allegiance McClellan thought he owned, was clear: of the 150,000-plus votes cast by soldiers in the field, Lincoln received more than 80%.

The irony of 1864 should also cause us to consider whether McClellan's political beliefs in 1862 influenced or impaired his military judgment. Jacob Cox later described these characteristics as "overestimate of the enemy, tendency to interpret unfavorably the sights and sounds in front, hesitancy to throw in his whole force when he knew that his subordinate was engaged." Were these strictly indications of his military thinking and style, or was he allowing the political fires to be stoked, presumably in his favor? In any event, the author concludes that "McClellan's inability to see Lincoln's greatness, as Grant later could, in effect destroyed McClellan's career and made Grant's. Lincoln had held out his hand to McClellan, but McClellan refused to grasp it, refused to confide in the President, refused to make him his partner. Above everything else, that failure had been his Achilles' heel."

Thanks to John C. Waugh for another stimulating book, well worth reading.