In the Shadow of McClellan: The Army of the Potomac and the Struggle for High Command 1861-1863.

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Synopsis

This thesis examines how the Union struggled to achieve an effective high command during the first two years of the American Civil War. In particular, it looks at the Union high command through the lens of General McClellan and with a focus on the Union’s main army, the Army of the Potomac.

Much of the Union’s military attention in the first two years of the war was focused on the eastern theatre where General McClellan commanded the Army of the Potomac. McClellan intended to defeat the Confederacy by capturing Richmond. This failed and he was eventually sacked by President Lincoln. McClellan’s sacking provoked a revolt among senior officers in the Army of the Potomac which sought to return McClellan to command. This revolt is often overlooked by historians but it reveals much about the failure of the Union to establish a system of high command.

Although the literature on the Civil War is vast, the Union’s high command and Union strategy has been neglected in favour of the study of battles and generals. What literature there is on the Union’s high command has been examined from Lincoln’s perspective. This thesis takes the fresh approach of examining the Union’s high command through the perspective of McClellan. Adopting a chronological approach, the thesis explores whether the Union had the high command in place to provide the framework for victory. It draws on secondary sources but relies heavily on primary sources, in particular the Official Records and the Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War. By bringing a fresh approach and interpreting the sources with
fresh eyes I will be broadening and deepening our understanding of why the Union was not able to achieve victory in the first two years of the war and moving the debate over the Union’s leadership in the Civil War into new areas.
Introduction

This thesis is a military history that examines the upper echelons of the Union’s high command in the first two years of the war. It uses secondary sources but the major sources are the vast array of primary sources that deal with the United States’ deadliest conflict. The study of the Union’s high command and Union strategy has been relatively neglected by prior research. When looked at through the lens of General McClellan, and with a focus on the Union’s main army, the Army of the Potomac, it can be seen that the Union lacked the high command which could have designed and implemented the Union’s war aims, military strategy and operations in the first two years of the Civil War. This helps to explain why the war lasted longer than it might have and why the Union did not achieve victory a lot earlier than was eventually the case.

The American Civil War is fixed in American consciousness. The war began on 12 April 1861 with the Confederate bombardment of the Union’s Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina and it is generally accepted that it ended when General Lee surrendered to General Grant Appomattox Court House, Virginia on 9 April, 1865. The industrial and more populace North defeated the agrarian South. It was the deadliest war in America’s history. About 620,000 soldiers from both sides died. This is more than died in the rest of America’s wars. The battles fought and the generals who commanded the armies became embedded in American culture. The Civil War saw the mass mobilisation of manpower and resources for a modern war. It saw the creation of a capitalist, modern America. The balance of political power firmly shifted from the
south to the north. The political divide of the Civil War remained to some extent and was reflected in the Republican North and the Democrat South. Significantly the war saw the death of slavery as well as the assassination of American President, Abraham Lincoln.

The Civil War battles and the generals who commanded the armies naturally became the focus of a lot of attention. The Civil War was fought by large armies in the largest battles every fought on American soil. The Battle of Antietam which was fought in Maryland on 17 September, 1862 was the single bloodiest day in American history with about 23,000 casualties on both sides. Earlier in 1862, the Union and Confederate armies had collided near Shiloh. For two days 67,000 Union troops and 45,000 Confederates had fought it out for control of a small piece of land on the Tennessee River. About 23,000 casualties were suffered on both sides. From the 1 to 3 July, 1863 the Battle of Gettysburg was fought in Pennsylvania. The 94,000 troops of the Union’s Army of the Potomac defeated the 71,000 Confederate Army of Northern Virginia. The generals who commanded the Civil War armies became legends in their own time. The Confederate general Robert E. Lee is widely regarded as the greatest Civil War general. He seemed to represent the romantic view of the ‘old’ south. He is also represented as a romantic figure, the last of the Napoleonic generals who had fought honourably against a numerically superior enemy. His antithesis is the Union’s General Ulysses S. Grant. Grant is the untidy general who butchered Union troops as he attempted to wear down Lee’s army in Virginia. Grant was methodical, but he won. Somewhere in between is the Union’s General George Brinton McClellan. McClellan looked the dashing
Napoleonic figure. He created a formidable fighting force in the Army of the Potomac, but he failed to achieve the success that he promised.¹

The role of General George Brinton McClellan as commander of the Army of the Potomac is one of the American Civil War’s most intriguing subjects. It has been studied extensively. McClellan commanded the Army of the Potomac, the Union’s main army of operations, from 26 July 1861 to 5 November 1862. This army was designed to operate near Washington which put its commander under intense public and political scrutiny. McClellan was brilliant, charismatic, and arrogant and he built the Army of the Potomac into a formidable fighting force. Some have argued that he could have won the war for the Union in 1862 if not for the political interference from President Abraham Lincoln.² Most have argued that he was a skilled organiser who was unsuccessful as a commander of an army on the battlefield.³ Yet the attention that McClellan is given, with its focus on operations and battles, has distracted attention from another interesting subject, namely, the reasons for and the effects of McClellan’s sacking as commander of the Army of the Potomac and what this reveals about the ability of the Union’s high command to direct a large scale war.

The reason for this can be partly explained by the dominant Unionist interpretation which argued that it was not until Grant came east and Sherman was in command in the

west, that Lincoln had the military commanders he needed to win the war. The partnerships among these three men provided the Union with opportunity to enact the strategy needed to win the war from the middle of 1864 and onwards. Lincoln is viewed as a great Commander-in-Chief. Consequently, all the efforts by other generals, prior to this important date, are as seen as inconsequential and even futile. McClellan is therefore placed somewhere below Grant and Sherman in a hierarchy of Union Civil War generals. In one way this is unfair to McClellan because the context of the war differed from 1861-1862 to 1864-1865 regarding the relative fighting capabilities of both sides. McClellan’s sacking is therefore just one more painful step in the President’s attempt to find a successful general.

This thesis will examine McClellan as a vehicle to explore the Union high command in the first two years of the Civil War and therefore with a focus on the Civil War’s eastern theatre. McClellan was appointed commander of the Army of the Potomac in the early stages of the American Civil War when the Union was trying to establish a system of high command to fight a war unprecedented in American history in its nature and scale. The importance placed on the Army of the Potomac and its commander because of the army’s proximity to Washington, the army’s large size and the popular belief that it would be this army that would win the war for the Union meant that it was more tightly enmeshed in the workings of the Union’s high command than any other army. McClellan seemed to be the answer to part of the problems the high command had because he seemed to be able to fight and win. It is not the purpose of this thesis to study every one of McClellan’s battles and campaigns in detail because the focus will be on Union war aims, strategy and operations. However, some assessment of

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McClellan as a battlefield commander will naturally follow. It is not the purpose here to try to resurrect McClellan’s career or to vindicate those who regard him as a failure. McClellan’s lack of success as a field commander makes it hard to rank him above Grant and Sherman, but he was not the worst Union commander and he can certainly be viewed as competent. Yet, his appointment, his conduct as its commander and as General-in-Chief, exposed strains within the Union’s high command that would be further tested after he was sacked.

The starting point for this thesis is a chapter titled, ‘The Revolt of the Generals’ in Controversies and Commanders: Dispatches from the Army of the Potomac by Stephen W. Sears.5 ‘The Revolt of the Generals’ is a narrative about a conspiracy that involved senior officers of the Army of the Potomac that began with McClellan’s sacking. Sears’ thirty-one page chapter begins after the Peninsula Campaign, the Union defeat at the Second Bull Run and General McClellan’s sacking. General McClellan was sacked as commander of the Army of the Potomac on 7 November 1862. Lincoln had been disappointed by McClellan’s lack of a vigorous pursuit of General Lee’s army after the Battle of Antietam. Lincoln even considered that McClellan may have deliberately allowed Lee to escape rather than to trap and destroy his army. Nevertheless Lincoln used the Union victory at Antietam to announce the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. The Proclamation had indicated a change in the Union’s strategy away from the more conciliatory approach, which McClellan and many other Union officers had favoured, that sought to restore the Union and not to interfere with slavery. McClellan was replaced by General Ambrose Burnside. A group of discontent, senior officers who were still loyal to McClellan worked to undermine General Burnside after

the Union defeat at Fredericksburg on 13 December 1862. Their aim was to have Burnside replaced by McClellan. They achieved some success because they interfered with Burnside’s plan to attack the Confederate army again. Two senior officers, Generals Franklin and Smith, wrote a letter to Lincoln that was critical of Burnside’s plan. When Burnside attempted to move around his army in order to get in a position to cross the Rappahannock River and attack Lee, two generals, John Newton and John Cochrane, visited Lincoln to raise concerns that they had about Burnside’s ability to command the army. The result was that Lincoln ordered Burnside not to move his army. Burnside was eventually sacked after battlefield failure and the lack of confidence in him by senior officers. He was replaced by General Joseph Hooker, however, rather than McClellan. Hooker had actively undermined McClellan and then Burnside. His plan to defeat Lee resulted in the Union defeat at Chancellorsville. Hooker blamed the defeat on three of his corps commanders. A new general’s revolt began with the purpose of removing Hooker. Hooker suffered the same fate as Burnside, but Lincoln chose as his replacement, General George Meade, who had enough support of the pro-McClellan faction to end the revolt. Sears saw the significance of this ill-defined movement, which was comprised of an ever-changing group of senior officers, as being ‘instrumental in the dismissal of two commanding generals’ and as managing to ‘reshape one campaign.’[^1] Beyond the motivation of the group of disgruntled senior officers to re-appoint McClellan, Sears’ cursory examination offers little explanation of how this ‘revolt’ could have occurred at all.

This thesis will examine one of the most interesting issues about the ‘revolt’, what it reveals about the functioning of the Union’s high command. In particular, senior

[^1]: Sears, ‘Controversies and Commanders: Dispatches from the Army of the Potomac,’ 133.
officers in the Army of the Potomac had sought an audience with the President. The obvious question was why the chain of command was being ignored. Was this because it had not yet been fully established? Was this informed by U.S. military tradition? Senior officers in the Army of the Potomac had ignored their commanding general and had petitioned the President, the Commander-in-Chief, on a number of occasions. Why would the President allow this? Lincoln did interfere in military matters but was this just the Commander-in-Chief exercising his right to command? It certainly begs the question about how Lincoln defined the role of Commander-in-Chief during the Civil War.

The examination of McClellan and the Union’s high command will inevitably bring into focus President Lincoln’s role. But what this thesis will do that is new is to study the Union’s high command not from the perspective of Lincoln, but McClellan. The Unionist interpretation of the Civil War is that Abraham Lincoln was a great President and Commander-in-Chief. Historian, T. Harry Williams, has best summed up this view about Lincoln: "Lincoln stands out as a great war president, probably the greatest in our history, and a great natural strategist, a better one than any of his generals."⁷ According to this view, Lincoln was the self-taught military strategist who saw the path to victory more clearly than any of his generals, until General Ulysses S. Grant arrived in the east to take up the role of General-in-Chief in 1864. This view fitted the American amateur military tradition that any American could be a great soldier just by their own natural ability and not by any formal and professional military training. However, many of the West Point trained officers, such as McClellan, viewed the interest that civilians or amateurs had in military spheres as interference that was at the least a hindrance and at

worst detrimental to military strategy and operations. This thesis will examine this issue and how it affected the ability of the Union’s high command to function cohesively and effectively.

The civilian/military relationship was complicated by Lincoln’s determination to use his Presidential powers to preserve the Union. Lincoln tried to define the role of the President by attaching the concept of ‘war power’ to the Presidency. Lincoln believed it was his solemn oath to defend the Constitution. Since the Constitution was the nation, Lincoln believed he could use every means to defend it. In this emergency Lincoln believed he could call out the armed forces without consulting Congress. No formal declaration of war was needed. Lincoln saw the focal point of the President’s ‘war power’ in the role of Commander-in-Chief. But the evolution of this role would create tension between Lincoln and many senior military officers.

The Union’s high command comprised President Lincoln, who was also the Commander-in-Chief of the Army and the Navy, Lincoln’s cabinet, the General-in-Chief and senior military officers. Lincoln had a strong view about the role of the President as Commander-in-Chief in the context of the national crisis. The role of the President as the Commander-in-Chief was provided in the Constitution but never fully defined. This allowed Lincoln to define the functions of the Commander-in-Chief during the course of the conflict. The term, General-in-Chief, was used to refer to the Commanding General of the United States Army who was the single most senior officer in the United States Army. The roles and responsibilities of the General-in-Chief were not fully defined beyond providing military advice for the President. Eventually, the position was abolished in 1903 with the creation of the Chief of Staff of the United
States Army. This meant that there was little to guide the civil-military relationship that was essential for the high command to work. Unless policy was put in place, the Union high command had to rely on the ability of its individual members to work cooperatively and cohesively for it to function effectively. Two sets of personality conflicts, Scott-McClellan and Lincoln-McClellan, would interfere with the effective operation of the high command. This would impact on the Union’s war aims and strategies.

The formulation and implementation of strategy is an important part of the role of the Union’s high command. The meaning of strategy has changed over time. What Lincoln tended to view as strategy, today we would call military operations. For the purpose of this thesis I will use the following definitions. Strategy sits in the middle of an inverted pyramid below policy or war aims and above operations. War aims or policy informs strategy. Strategy is the deployment of military resources to achieve the desired war aim and it is put into action by military operations. Tactics is the domain of the battlefield and sits below operations. It involves directing and deploying troops. For example, Lincoln’s initial war aim was the return of the seceded states to the Union. One of the strategies employed was to use military force to secure the control of the Mississippi River and try and force the rebellious states to negotiate rather than face economic ruin. One of the operations used to implement this strategy was to capture New Orleans and therefore block the mouth of the Mississippi to Confederate trade. This war aim, the return to the Union of the seceded states, is commonly referred to as a limited or conciliatory war aim. However, as the war lengthened, the Union’s war aims evolved with the conflict. This created a strain within the Union’s high command between those who wanted to expand the war aims of the Union to include slavery and those, like
McClellan, who did not. However, there was an inherent contradiction in the Union’s war aim, early in the conflict, between getting the seceded states to return, a limited war aim, and the destruction of the Confederate government, which was an unlimited war aim.

It is common to see a connection made between the concepts of ‘unlimited war’ and ‘total war.’ James M. McPherson has argued that Lincoln ‘grasped the necessity of adopting a strategy of total war to overthrow the enemy’s social and political system.’

It is easy to see why so many have regarded the Civil War as the beginning of the twentieth century’s total wars. The war saw mass manufacturing, mass mobilization of manpower, trench warfare, railway transportation of troops, ironclad warships, telegraph communications and huge casualty lists as a result of large battles. Mark Neely has argued, however, that while the Civil War was a modern war; it did not break down the barriers between soldiers and non-combatants to the extent of the two world wars in the twentieth century.

It is more appropriate to describe the nature of the war the Union waged as evolving from a war of conciliation to, as Mark Grimsley has described it, a "hard war" rather than a “total war.” Union policy, Grimsley has argued, moved from a limited war of restraint, in which protection was given to Confederate property, to a “hard war” policy that subjected Confederate civilians to “directed severity” so that they had to endure the horrors of war. This thesis will be using the terms ‘conciliatory war’ and ‘hard war’ throughout. Certainly, McClellan and Lincoln supported limiting the impact of the war on Southern civilians but, by the second year

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of the war, a division of opinion had emerged in the Union high command over the treatment of Southern civilians and property.

It is not the purpose of this thesis to examine the comparative merits of the Union and Confederate high command structures. However, it is worth noting that the Union and Confederates shared similar command problems. Confederate President, Jefferson Davis had the added difficulty of creating a government and military forces from scratch. This provided Davis with the opportunity to put into practice his views of what being President meant in regard to his role as Commander-in-Chief. It was logical and pragmatic for the Confederacy to adopt the military/political model of the United States but Davis did not appoint a General-in-Chief. Perhaps this innovation was based on Davis’ own experience when he had been the Secretary of War and he had battled with General-in-Chief Winfield Scott over who was superior in the chain of command.

Davis believed that the President was, in war-time, the General-in-Chief. Davis and his secretaries of war were thus able to perform the role of Commander-in-Chief and have a strong influence on military strategy and operations.\(^{11}\) Davis was well suited to the role. He had been educated at the United States Military Academy at West Point and he had had experience commanding regulars and militia. In contrast, Lincoln had no military training and no military experience of any value.\(^{12}\) Yet, Davis underestimated the complexity and enormity of the task in managing a war on this scale while at the same time attempting to be the Napoleonic era leader of the nation. This type of leader was

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\(^{12}\) Steven E. Woodworth, *Jefferson Davis and His Generals: The Failure of Confederate Command in the West*, (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 305.
also the field commander of its military forces. A Confederate General-in-Chief was not appointed until 1865 when the decision was far too late.\(^{13}\)

The military task that confronted the Confederacy was as huge and as daunting as the Union’s military task. The Confederates had to defend an enormous land area including a large, exposed coastline. Davis decided that he had to follow a policy to defend as much territory as possible. There were logistical issues that drove this policy and there was also the major consideration of how fragile slavery would be in the face of an invading army.\(^{14}\) Davis could not trade space for time so he made the decision to spread a cordon of troops on the border of the Confederacy. This was a problem because it meant the Confederates were weak everywhere but it appeased states that believed they should be protected by Confederate troops. Like Lincoln, Davis had to contend with a popular push for an aggressive, offensive military strategy, Both Davis and Lincoln were under popular and political pressure to march on the enemy’s capital because of the near proximity of the two capitals, Richmond and Washington. Davis correctly decided against this because he did not have the military strength, but he did adopt an offensive-defensive strategy which aimed to take advantage of opportunities to bring the war to the north and threaten Union army supply lines\(^{15}\)

Both leaders had to contend with egotistical generals. Pierre G. T. Beauregard and Joseph E. Johnston were hard to handle.\(^{16}\) Davisisalso had to manage politically appointed generals such as Gideon Johnson Pillow and David Emanuel Twiggs who proved inadequate as military commanders. Another factor that inhibited the working of


\(^{14}\) Woodworth, *Jefferson Davis and His Generals: The Failure of Confederate Command in the West*, 18.


\(^{16}\) Woodworth, *Jefferson Davis and His Generals: The Failure of Confederate Command in the West*, 20.
an effective Confederate high command was Davis’ unwillingness to see weaknesses and faults in his friends. General Leonidas Polk committed one of the greatest mistakes of the war when he sent troops to occupy Columbus, Kentucky, in September 1861. This rash move cost the neutrality of Kentucky and drove it into the Union. Despite this and his poor record as a commander, Davis did not dismiss him and Polk remained as a commanding officer until his death in June, 1864. Lincoln may not have been as tolerant as Davis was with this general. But both Lincoln and Davis were challenged with both the need to find successful generals and to manage whose that they had in the period 1861 to 1863.

The thesis takes a chronological approach. The first chapter is a review of relevant literature. The second chapter examines the United States’ military tradition and how that affected the way the Union high command responded to the Civil War. The third chapter explores the first ninety days of the war and the struggle that the Union had to establish its war aims and strategy. It includes a focus on how Lincoln tried to define the role of the President in such a national emergency and his relationship with senior military officers. The fourth chapter then looks at the rise of General McClellan, the McClellan/Scott feud and the struggle to define the roles of Commander-in-Chief and General-in-Chief. Chapter five analyses McClellan as commander of the Army of the Potomac and as General-in-Chief, as well as the growth of the Lincoln/McClellan conflict. Chapter six studies the military and political tensions created by three military campaigns that eventually resulted in the sacking of McClellan. Chapter seven looks into the consequences of McClellan’s sacking on the Union high command and how an influential group of pro-McClellan senior officers undermined McClellan’s successor,

17 Woodworth, Jefferson Davis and His Generals: The Failure of Confederate Command in the West, 24, 34-45.
General Burnside. The last chapter, chapter eight, explores the ongoing problems that ensued in the Union high command in the east with the appointment of Hooker to replace Burnside and the subsequent plot to remove Hooker. This thesis will show that the Union lacked a system of high command that could have set and implemented the war aims and strategy necessary to win the war in the first two years of the conflict and that this was accentuated by personality conflicts among the members of the Union’s high command.