



ABRAHAM LINCOLN

But You Must Act (1862)

McClellan never comprehended the importance of public opinion in shaping military strategy in a democratic society. As an experienced politician, Lincoln, on the other hand, was extremely sensitive to the growing public impatience over McClellan's slow progress in Virginia. In the following letter, written in early April 1862, shortly after McClellan's peninsula campaign got under way, Lincoln defended his decision to detach part of McClellan's invasion force to protect Washington, repeated his reservations about McClellan's strategic plan, and stressed the importance of McClellan moving quickly and aggressively. This was a lesson that the cautious, obtuse general never absorbed.

Washington,
April 9, 1862

Major General McClellan.
My dear Sir.

Your despatches complaining that you are not properly sustained, while they do not offend me, do pain me very much. . . .

After you left, I ascertained that less than twenty thousand unorganized men, without a single field battery, were all you designed to be left for the defence of Washington, and Manassas Junction; and part of this even, was to go to Gen. Hooker's old position. . . . This presented, (or would present, when McDowell and Sumner should be gone) a great temptation to the enemy to turn back from the Rappahanock, and sack Washington. My explicit order that Washington should, by the judgment of *all* the commanders of Army corps, be left entirely secure, had been neglected. It was precisely this that drove me to detain McDowell.

I do not forget that I was satisfied with your arrangement to leave Banks at Mannassas Junc-

tion; but when that arrangement was broken up, and *nothing* was substituted for it, of course I was not satisfied. I was constrained to substitute something for it myself. And now allow me to ask "Do you really think I should permit the line from Richmond, *via* Mannassas Junction, to this city to be entirely open, except what resistance could be presented by less than twenty thousand unorganized troops?" This is a question which the country will not allow me to evade. . . .

I suppose the whole force which has gone forward for you, is with you by this time; and if so, I think it is the precise time for you to strike a blow. By delay the enemy will relatively gain upon you—that is, he will gain faster, by *fortifications* and *re-inforcements*, than you can by re-inforcements alone.

And, once more let me tell you, it is indispensable to *you* that you strike a blow. *I* am powerless to help this. You will do me the justice to remember I always insisted, that going down the Bay in search of a field, instead of fighting at or near Manassas, was only shifting, and not surmounting, a difficulty—that we would find the same enemy, and the same, or equal, intrenchments, at either place. The country will not fail to note—is now

FROM Roy P. Basler, et al., eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. 5 (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), pp. 184–85.

noting—that the present hesitation to move upon an intrenched enemy, is but the story of Manassas repeated.

I beg to assure you that I have never written you, or spoken to you, in greater kindness of feel-

ing than now, nor with a fuller purpose to sustain you, so far as in my most anxious judgment, I consistently can. *But you must act.*

Yours very truly

A. Lincoln



GEORGE McCLELLAN

You Have Done Your Best to Sacrifice This Army (1862)

In very heavy fighting that marked the beginning of Seven Days' battles, Robert E. Lee, the new Confederate commander, attacked part of McClellan's army at Gaines Mill in Virginia. McClellan effectively parried this blow (while leaving the bulk of his army inactive) but was forced to retreat from a position that would turn out to be the closest the Army of the Potomac would get to Richmond until its capture in April 1865. McClellan's defeatist psychology was readily apparent. Although he outnumbered Lee (his complaints to the contrary notwithstanding), McClellan characteristically sought to place the blame on others, and in this telegram he lashed out at Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, and by clear implication Lincoln, for failing to meet his every request. Edward S. Sanford, head of the War Department's telegraphic office, was shocked by the tone of McClellan's dispatch and deleted the final two sentences before delivering a copy to Stanton. The full text was not published until McClellan presented his report on the campaign. Sanford's action had unfortunate consequences. When Lincoln and Stanton failed to respond to his harsh accusation (which, of course, they had not seen), McClellan believed that they had meekly accepted his rebuke, and his conviction of his indispensability to the Union cause correspondingly increased.

Savage Station
June 28, 1862 12.20 a.m.

To Edwin M. Stanton

I now know the full history of the day [June 27]. On this side of the river (the right bank) we repulsed several very strong attacks. On the left bank our men did all that men could do, all that soldiers

could accomplish—but they were overwhelmed by vastly superior numbers, even after I brought my last reserves into action. The loss on both sides is terrible. I believe it will prove to be the most desperate battle of the war.

The sad remnants of my men behave as men. Those battalions who fought most bravely and suffered most are still in the best order. My regulars were superb, and I count upon what are left to turn another battle in company with their gallant com-

rades of the volunteers. Had I 20,000 or even 10,000 fresh troops to use to-morrow I could take Richmond, but I have not a man in reserve, and shall be glad to cover my retreat & save the material and *personnel* of the army.

If we have lost the day we have yet preserved our honor, & no one need blush for the Army of the Potomac. I have lost this battle because my force was too small.

I again repeat that I am not responsible for this, and I say it with the earnestness of a general who feels in his heart the loss of every brave man who has been needlessly sacrificed to-day. I still hope to retrieve our fortunes, but to do this the Govt must view the matter in the same earnest light that I do. You must send me very large re-inforcements, and send them at once. . . .

In addition to what I have already said, I only wish to say to the President that I think he is wrong

in regarding me as ungenerous when I said that my force was too weak. I merely intimated a truth which to-day has been too plainly proved. If, at this instant, I could dispose of 10,000 fresh men, I could gain the victory to-morrow. I know that a few thousand men more would have changed this battle from a defeat to a victory. As it is, the government must not and cannot hold me responsible for the result.

I feel too earnestly to-night. I have seen too many dead and wounded comrades to feel otherwise than that the Government has not sustained this Army. If you do not do so now the game is lost.

If I save this Army now, I tell you plainly that I owe no thanks to you or any other persons in Washington. You have done your best to sacrifice this army.

George B. McClellan

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GEORGE McCLELLAN

The War Should Be Conducted upon the Highest Principles of Christian Civilization

(1862)

In late June 1862, following the Army of the Potomac's repulse in Virginia, McClellan wrote a letter outlining the strategy of a limited war, which he handed to Lincoln in early July when the president visited the army along the James River. Lincoln accepted the letter without comment, but by now he had lost faith both in this strategy and in McClellan. In his letter, McClellan repeated the standard arguments in favor of a limited war, including a forceful statement of his opposition to emancipation.

Camp near Harrison's Landing, Va.
July 7, 1862

Mr President

You have been fully informed, that the rebel army is in our front, with the purpose of overwhelming us by attacking our positions or reducing us by blocking our river communications. I can not but regard our condition as critical, and I earnestly desire, in view of possible contingencies, to lay before your excellency, for your private consideration, my general views concerning the existing state of the rebellion, although they do not strictly relate to the situation of this army or strictly come within the scope of my official duties. These views amount to convictions and are deeply impressed upon my mind and heart. Our cause must never be abandoned; it is the cause of free institutions and self-government. The Constitution and the Union must be preserved, whatever may be the cost in time, treasure, and blood. If secession is successful other dissolutions are clearly to be seen in the future. Let neither military disaster, political faction, nor foreign war shake your settled purpose to enforce the equal operation of the laws of the United States upon the people of every state.

The time has come when the government must determine upon a civil and military policy, covering the whole ground of our national trouble.

The responsibility of determining, declaring and supporting such civil and military policy, and of directing the whole course of national affairs in regard to the rebellion, must now be assumed and exercised by you, or our cause will be lost. The Constitution gives you power sufficient even for the present terrible exigency.

This rebellion has assumed the character of a war; as such it should be regarded, and it should be conducted upon the highest principles known to Christian Civilization. It should not be a war looking to the subjugation of the people of any State in any event. It should not be at all a war upon popu-

lation; but against armed forces and political organizations. Neither confiscation of property, political executions of persons, territorial organization of States, or forcible abolition of slavery should be contemplated for a moment. In prosecuting the war all private property and unarmed persons should be strictly protected, subject only to the necessities of military operations. All private property taken for military use should be paid or receipted for; pillage and waste should be treated as high crimes; all unnecessary trespass sternly prohibited, and offensive demeanor by the military towards citizens promptly rebuked. Military arrests should not be tolerated, except in places where active hostilities exist, and oaths not required by enactments constitutionally made should be neither demanded nor received. Military government should be confined to the preservation of public order and the protection of political rights. Military power should not be allowed to interfere with the relations of servitude, either by supporting or impairing the authority of the master, except for repressing disorder, as in other cases. Slaves contraband under the act of Congress, seeking military protection, should receive it. The right of the government to appropriate permanently to its own service claims to slave labor should be asserted, and the right of the owner to compensation therefor should be recognized.

This principle might be extended upon grounds of military necessity and security, to all the slaves within a particular State, thus working manumission in such State; and in Missouri, perhaps in Western Virginia also, and possibly even in Maryland, the expediency of such a military measure is only a question of time.

A system of policy thus constitutional and conservative, and pervaded by the influences of Christianity and freedom, would receive the support of almost all truly loyal men, would deeply impress the rebel masses and all foreign nations, and it might be humbly hoped that it would commend itself to the favor of the Almighty.

Unless the principles governing the further conduct of our struggle shall be made known and approved, the effort to obtain requisite forces will

FROM George B. McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story* (New York: Charles L. Webster and Company, 1887), p. 487-89.

be almost hopeless. A declaration of radical views, especially upon slavery, will rapidly disintegrate our present armies. The policy of the government must be supported by concentrations of military power. The national forces should not be dispersed in expeditions, posts of occupation, and numerous armies, but should be mainly collected into masses and brought to bear upon the armies of the Confederate States. Those armies thoroughly defeated,

the political structure which they support would soon cease to exist. . . .

I may be on the brink of eternity; and as I hope forgiveness from my Maker, I have written this letter with sincerity towards you and from love for my country.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

Geo. B. McClellan,
Maj.-Gen. Commanding.

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John Pope Adopts Harsher Policies against Southern Civilians (1862)

Following the failure of McClellan's invasion of Virginia, Lincoln brought General John Pope from the West and put him in command of a newly organized army in that state. An advocate of waging a harder war against the Confederacy, Pope issued a series of controversial orders outlining harsher policies against southern civilians. Henry Halleck, the new general-in-chief, believed Pope's orders were counterproductive, but Lincoln, who had decided sterner measures were required, read and approved these orders before they were published. Terming Pope a "miscreant," Lee formally protested these orders and threatened retaliation by the Confederacy. Unpopular with the army and militarily inept, Pope did not remain in command for long, but his orders nevertheless were evidence of the escalation in Union war policy.

Headquarters Army of Virginia,
Washington, July 18, 1862.

General Orders, No. 5.

Hereafter, as far as practicable, the troops of this command will subsist upon the country in which their operations are carried on. In all cases supplies for this purpose will be taken by the officers to whose department they properly belong under the orders of the commanding officer of the troops for whose use they are intended. Vouchers will be given to the owners, stating on their face that they

will be payable at the conclusion of the war, upon sufficient testimony being furnished that such owners have been loyal citizens of the United States since the date of the vouchers. Whenever it is known that supplies can be furnished in any district of the country where the troops are to operate the use of trains for carrying subsistence will be dispensed with as far as possible.

By command of Major-General Pope.

Headquarters Army of Virginia,
Washington, July 10 [?], 1862.

General Orders, No. 7.

The people of the valley of the Shenandoah and throughout the region of operations of this army

FROM *Official Records*, ser. 1, vol. 12, pt. 2, pp. 50–52; pt. 3, p. 509.