

3 

GEORGE McCLELLAN

I Have Become the Power in the Land (1861)

When thirty-four-year-old George McClellan was brought to Washington in the summer of 1861 to take charge of the Union's main army, political leaders and journalists heaped praise on the young commander. In this letter to his wife, written shortly after he assumed his new post, McClellan describes this public flattery and its impact on his vanity. Almost immediately, McClellan, his head swirling with dreams of military grandeur, completely lost grasp of reality and concluded that he was irreplaceable. When Lincoln expressed concern that he had given McClellan too many responsibilities, the general confidently replied, "I can do it all."

July 27/61 Washington D.C. Saturday

To Mary Ellen McClellan

. . . I find myself in a new & strange position here—Presdt, Cabinet, Genl Scott & all deferring to me—by some strange operation of magic I seem to have become the power of the land. I almost think that were I to win some small success now I could become Dictator or anything else that might please me—but nothing of that kind would please me—*therefore I won't be Dictator*. Admirable self denial! I see already the main causes of our recent failure—I am *sure* that I can remedy these & am confident that I can lead these armies of men to

victory once more. I start tomorrow very early on a tour through the lines on the other side of the river—it will occupy me all day long & a rather fatiguing ride it will be—but I will be able to make up my mind as to the state of things. Refused invitations to dine today from Genl Scott & four Sectys—had too many things to attend to. . . .

I will endeavor to enclose with this the "Thanks of Congress" which please preserve. I feel very proud of it. Genl Scott objected to it on the ground that it ought to be accompanied by a gold medal. I cheerfully acquiesce in the Thanks by themselves, hoping to win the medal by some other action, & the sword by some other *fait d'éclat*.



GEORGE McCLELLAN

The President Is Nothing More Than a Well Meaning Baboon (1861)

McClellan's good relations with Union political leaders soon soured when, content with drilling his massive army, he failed to make any important military movement in the fall of 1861. The Union general did not understand that, in a democracy, military commanders can never exercise a completely free hand in their operations. Instead, he resented politicians' inquiries, which he considered to be meddling. In the following letter, McClellan expresses his contempt for Lincoln and the members of the Cabinet. These attitudes did not bode well for McClellan's ability to deal with the political as well as military realities he confronted as the Union commander.

[Washington] Friday [c. October 11, 1861]

To Mary Ellen McClellan

. . . I can't tell you how disgusted I am becoming with these wretched politicians—they are a most dispicable set of men & I think Seward is the meanest of them all—a meddling, officious, incompetent little puppy—he has done more than any other one man to bring all this misery upon the country & is one of the least competent to get

us out of the scrape. The Presdt is nothing more than a well meaning baboon. Welles is weaker than the most garrulous old woman you were ever annoyed by. Bates is a good inoffensive old man¹—so it goes—only keep these complimentary opinions to yourself, or you may get me into premature trouble. I believe I have choked off Seward already—& have strong hopes that he will keep himself to his own business hereafter. . . .

¹The references are to Secretary of State William Henry Seward, Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, and Attorney General Edward Bates.