

Battle between McClellan, Lincoln

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On March 17, 1862, Gen. George B. McClellan, commander of the Army of the Potomac, began to move his 70,000 soldiers from Washington down the Chesapeake Bay to Fortress Monroe on the James River Peninsula to launch a surprise attack on the Confederate capital at Richmond.

It was expected to be the deciding battle of the American Civil War. Instead, the Peninsula Campaign ended in failure, creating an irreparable rift between President Abraham Lincoln and the general he once believed would lead the Union to victory.

McClellan, a native Philadelphian, was considered the most promising general in the Union ranks at the beginning of the Civil War. The 34-year-old McClellan appeared by training and experience to be the ideal officer to lead the North to victory over the Confederate army.

Born on Dec. 3, 1826, George McClellan was the son of a prominent surgeon who founded Jefferson Medical College. Graduating second in his class at the U.S. Military Academy, McClellan was brevetted a second lieutenant in the Army Corps of Engineers.

During the Mexican War, he served under Gen. Winfield Scott, who, impressed by McClellan's brilliance as a military engineer and bravery in combat, promoted him to captain. Afterward, McClellan returned to West Point as an instructor of military engineering. He also traveled abroad to study European armies.

When the Civil War began in April 1861, McClellan was promoted to major general and made commander of the Department of the Ohio. In June, McClellan, commanding three times as many troops as the Confederate forces in western Virginia, easily routed the enemy.

Impressed by the victory, Lincoln, reeling after the disastrous Union defeat at the First Battle of Bull Run in early July, made McClellan the commander of the Army of the Potomac, the main federal army in the East. The appointment made him second only to Winfield Scott, the general-in-chief. McClellan's immediate duties were to ensure the safety of Washington and to reorganize the army.

Only two-thirds of the Union's 51,000 soldiers were properly trained and fit for duty. During the next eight months, McClellan drilled, disciplined, and reorganized the troops, preparing them to march on Richmond. In the process, he gained the admiration and affection of his troops.

The transformation was so remarkable that the press hailed McClellan as "the man to save the country" and dubbed him, "Young Napoleon," after the French emperor widely considered the greatest military genius of the 19th century.

Surrounded by a grateful public, devoted troops, and an adoring press, the opportunistic general undermined Scott's authority, forcing his resignation on Nov. 1. When Lincoln appointed McClellan general-in-chief of all the Union armies, he also expressed his concern about the "vast labor" involved in the dual role. McClellan responded haughtily, "I can do it all."

Instead, he often snubbed the president. McClellan once made Lincoln wait for 30 minutes in the front parlor of his house, only to be told that the general had gone to bed and could not see him. Privately, McClellan referred to Lincoln as a "baboon" or "gorilla" who was "ever unworthy of his high position."

Lincoln tolerated the insubordination, believing that McClellan was the best general to lead the Union to victory. But the president soon lost patience with the general's repeated delays of a major offensive against Richmond and his refusal to provide Lincoln or his Cabinet with his war plans.

With Confederate forces encamped at Manassas, Va., and threatening to invade Washington, Lincoln pushed McClellan to begin the attack. He refused, insisting that he didn't have sufficient forces.

On March 9, 1862, the rebel forces withdrew from Manassas and headed back toward Richmond. Infuriated by the missed opportunity, Lincoln removed McClellan as general-in-chief, leaving him in command of only the Army of the Potomac, ostensibly so that he would devote all his attention to capturing the Confederate capital.

Having run out of excuses, McClellan, on March 17, finally took to the field. Cautiously advancing his troops up the Virginia Peninsula en route to Richmond, he still refused to attack, chronically overestimating the strength of enemy

units and demanding that Lincoln send reinforcements. The delay allowed Confederate Gen. Joseph E. Johnston's forces to slip away unnoticed, having fooled McClellan's logs painted black to appear as cannons.

The Peninsula Campaign ended in failure. McClellan was forced into retreat from attacks by Gen. Robert E. Lee's smaller Army of Northern Virginia and prevented from capturing Richmond.

McClellan's later performance at the bloody Battle of Antietam on Sept. 17 blunted Lee's invasion of Maryland and allowed the Confederate commander to eke out a precarious tactical draw and avoid destruction, despite being outnumbered.

Lincoln's patience finally gave way. It was clear that McClellan lacked both the courage and resolve necessary to lead an army. On Nov. 5, the president relieved him of command of the Army of the Potomac.

McClellan, seeking vindication, opposed Lincoln in the 1864 presidential election. But his campaign was irreparably damaged when he repudiated the Democratic Party's "peace" war platform, which promised to end the war and negotiate with the Confederacy.

Lincoln won the election easily, with 212 electoral votes to McClellan's 21. The president also captured 55 percent of the popular vote. Even the Union troops abandoned their former commander, voting for Lincoln over him 3-1.

It was the ultimate rejection of a talented but arrogant general who might have otherwise been a hero of the Civil War.

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