The Lincoln-McClellan Relationship in Myth and Memory

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Like many Civil War historians, I have for many years accepted invitations to address the general public. I have nearly always tried to offer fresh perspectives, and these have generally been well received. But almost invariably the Q and A or personal exchanges reveal an affection for familiar stories or questions. (Prominent among them is the query “What if Stonewall Jackson had been present at Gettysburg?”)

For a long time I harbored a private condescension about this affection, coupled with complete incuriosity about what its significance might be. But eventually I came to believe that I was missing something important: that these familiar stories, endlessly retold in nearly the same ways, were expressions of a mythic view of the Civil War, what the amateur historian Otto Eisenschiml memorably labeled “the American Iliad.”

For Eisenschiml “the American Iliad” was merely a clever title for a compendium of eyewitness accounts of the conflict, but I take the term seriously. In Homer’s Iliad the anger of Achilles, the perfidy of Agamemnon, the doomed gallantry of Hector—and the relationships between them—have enormous, uncontested, unchanging, and almost primal symbolic meaning. So too do certain figures in the American Iliad. Prominent among these are the butcher Grant, the Christ-like Lee, and the rage-filled Sherman. I believe that the traditional Civil War narrative functions as a national myth of central importance to our understanding of ourselves as Americans. And like the classic mythologies of old, it contains timeless wisdom about what it means to be a human being. Homer’s Iliad tells us much about war but also much about life. The American Iliad does the same thing.

For me the most compelling clue to this mythic American Iliad was my puzzlement over the unusually rigid portrayal of the vexed


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command partnership between Abraham Lincoln and George B. McClellan. It’s one of the Civil War’s most familiar episodes, perhaps far too familiar. Indeed, for at least seven decades, the basic outline of the story has remained unchanged. That’s unusual for an important historical subject, especially since we historians are often accused of ceaseless revisionism.

The two principals are men with starkly contrasting reputations. In popular imagination, Lincoln is the man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, who through patience and perseverance leads the country through the four bloodiest years of its existence. He breaks the chains of four million enslaved Americans. He nobly saves the Union, the last, best hope of earth. And in the hour of final victory he perishes a martyr, his memory forever enshrined in the heart of every patriotic American.

McClellan’s image is almost the polar opposite. If Lincoln is a secular saint, McClellan is the arrogant narcissist, the hubristic “Young Napoleon.” He dreams of saving the republic, yet proves so timid in battle, so self-pitying in defeat, and above all so disdainful of Lincoln that he is widely despised—and held completely to blame for the ultimate failure of the relationship between Lincoln and himself. When historian Thomas J. Rowland told friends that he had embarked on a new study of McClellan, even those only casually acquainted with the Civil War knew enough to loathe “Little Mac.” “At the very mention of McClellan’s name,” he wrote, “a visage of contempt generally crept over their other otherwise benevolent gazes, or worse, they mimed sticking their fingers down their throats.”

The rigid portrayal has seeped into popular culture as well. Journalists routinely invoke it when appraising the relationships between modern commanders in chief and key subordinates, invariably extolling the former and excoriating the latter. During the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, analogies to Lincoln and McClellan appeared in the media at least ninety times. Retired lieutenant general Ricardo Sanchez, who had led U.S. forces in Iraq in 2003–4, was labeled “Bush’s McClellan” for his criticisms of the George W. Bush administration’s handling of the war in 2007. Invoking a common comparison, the timidity of McClellan contrasted with the killer instinct of Ulysses S. Grant, one op-ed writer queried acidly, “Is this the sour grapes

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of a failed McClellan shown up by a U. S. Grant?” “McClellan,” the
writer continued, “was famously fired by President Lincoln after being
repeatedly outwitted by Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee in the Civil
War. Once Gen. Ulysses S. Grant was placed in charge, things soon
turned around—kind of like Iraq today under Gen. David Petraeus.”

When General Stanley McChrystal replaced General David McKiernan
as commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan in June 2009, Investor’s Business Daily compared McKiernan’s relief favorably to Grant’s
replacement of McClellan. “Changing commanders in the middle of a
war is sometimes a necessary prelude to victory,” noted the editorial.

“Union fortunes were bleak in the summer of 1864 until President
Abraham Lincoln sacked the pedestrian Gen. George McClellan and
chose Gen. Ulysses S. Grant to command Union forces and pointed
Gen. William T. Sherman toward Atlanta.” To be sure, this was gar-
bled history. McClellan was relieved of command in November 1862;
Grant did not become general-in-chief until March 1864 (and the gen-
eral had “pointed Sherman toward Atlanta” months before the sum-
mer of that year). It is also more likely that Lincoln sacked McClellan
for political rather than military reasons. But the key charge against
McClellan—that he was unforgivably overcautious—is the salient
feature of the usual portrayal of the Lincoln-McClellan relationship. If
Lincoln comes in for editorial criticism (which happens infrequently),
it is for too long sticking with McClellan “after there was abundant
evidence that his general lacked the aggressive spirit needed to win
the war.”

Ironically, a year later McChrystal abruptly went from being a con-
temporary Grant to being a contemporary McClellan. When Presi-
dent Barack Obama forced McChrystal into retirement after the latter
accused senior administration officials of hobbling his ability to win
the conflict, some commentators compared the president’s action to
Lincoln’s relief of McClellan. It was “not the first time in our nation’s
history that presidents and generals have clashed,” the Oakland Tribune
reminded readers. “In 1862, it was Abraham Lincoln who fired Gen.
George McClellan for what Lincoln felt was McClellan’s timid pursuit
of the Confederate army, especially following the battle of Antietam.”

6. USA Today, September 18, 2003, 21A.
7. Oakland Tribune editorial, reprinted in Contra Costa Times, June 25, 2010. See also
He might have added that McChrystal’s comments resembled McClellan’s famous *j’accuse* of the Lincoln administration after losing a critical battle in June 1862: “You have done your best to sacrifice this army.” To his battlefield timidity is added his insubordinate attitude toward the president. Nearly a century later, faced with General Douglas MacArthur’s repeated public criticisms of President Harry S Truman’s decision to keep the Korean War carefully limited—MacArthur famously having declared, “There is no substitute for victory,” and hinting broadly that the United States should employ nuclear weapons to resolve the conflict—Truman relieved MacArthur in April 1951. In his memoirs, Truman likened his decision to Lincoln’s sacking of McClellan after the general’s chronic refusal to assume the offensive. Truman claimed he sent a staff member to the Library of Congress to study Lincoln’s troubles with McClellan and write a report. “Lincoln was patient,” Truman wrote, “for that was his nature, but at long last he was compelled to relieve the Union Army’s principal commander. And though I gave this difficulty with McClellan much wearisome thought, I realized that I would have no other choice myself than to relieve the nation’s top field commander.”

Even Hollywood invoked Lincoln’s problems with McClellan. In the 1964 movie *In Harm’s Way*, one Admiral Broderick (Dana Andrews) fails to drive the Japanese from a key island in the South Pacific, complaining that he has an inadequate number of troops and aircraft. “CINCPAC II,” a thinly veiled version of Admiral Chester W. Nimitz played by Henry Fonda, summons Rear Admiral Rockwell Torrey (John Wayne) to his headquarters. After reviewing Broderick’s overcaution, CINCPAC II lectures Torrey: “Lincoln once found himself in the same predicament with General George B. McClellan. McClellan was a great little organizer but he couldn’t make up his mind when to fight. And indecision is a virus that can run through an army and destroy its will to win or even to survive. Lincoln called in a hard-headed Yankee named Grant. And Grant didn’t give a damn about organization but neither was he afflicted with the virus. He just pointed his battalions in the right direction and shoved off.”

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he concludes, “you’re going to be my Grant.” Sure enough, Torrey gets the job done in short order.¹⁰

In short, the vexed Lincoln-McClellan relationship is not just a matter of historical record; it has entered the realm of what historians commonly term “public memory.” The key distinction between history and memory is that you can argue about history. Indeed, arguing about history is one of the main duties of the professional historian and one of the main pleasures for the lay student of history (I reject the condescending term “history buff”). But you cannot argue with public memory, which is too charged with meaning.

Attempts to defend or reshape the memory of key events are usually seen as essentially driven by politics, but the rigid portrayal of the Lincoln-McClellan association is obviously disconnected from current politics. However, the question of blame for the failed relationship was so prominent an issue in the 1864 presidential election that it became the foundation of how we see the Lincoln-McClellan relationship today and is thus worth a look. McClellan kicked off his presidential bid with an unusual but potent political document: his official report of his sixteen-month tenure in command of the Army of the Potomac. Submitted to the War Department in August 1863, the report’s text alone ran to 447 pages, excluding appendixes and index. The Democratic Party published the entire report as a book, supplemented by General McClellan and the Conduct of the War, written by a journalist who worked for the Democratic New York World.¹¹

The report had two main themes. First, it painted a picture of McClellan’s flawless generalship. Not only had McClellan created

¹⁰. In Harm’s Way, directed by Otto Preminger, Hollywood, Calif.: Paramount, 1965, chapter 12, “Skyhook.” The film is based on the novel Harm’s Way, by James Bassett (Cleveland: World, 1962). Interestingly, the version of the scene in the novel (pp. 219–22) assumes that the reader already knows what the invocation of McClellan’s name connotes. The Admiral (as CINCPAC II is called) is discussing the problem of the stalled offensive with his G-2 and Torrey. He decides that he can’t remove Broderick outright, “But—we can remove Broderick from immediate tactical control of Skyhook, and make somebody else responsible for mounting Skyhook. Which is exactly what we’re going to do!” The admiral smiles in satisfaction. “McClellan needs a Grant to do the dirty work while he administers his ‘area.’ . . . Did I say McClellan? I meant Broderick” (221).

¹¹. McClellan, Report of the Organization and Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac; William Henry Hurlbert, General McClellan and the Conduct of the War (New York: Sheldon, 1864). Democratic Representative John Pruyn evidently tried to spare his party the expense of publishing the report by audaciously offering a resolution that “fifty thousand additional copies of General McClellan’s report be printed,” ostensibly “for the use of this House.” Congressional Globe, 38th Congress, January 25, 1864, 333.
and organized a superb army, but also his military strategy had been sound and he had twice saved the Union, initially by assuming command after the debacle of First Bull Run and then by repairing the damage done by Major General John Pope’s disastrous handling of Second Bull Run. His military skill had repelled Lee’s September 1862 invasion of Maryland, and he was well embarked on a strategically sound autumn offensive when Lincoln relieved him of command in November 1862.

Second, the report unmistakably implied that McClellan would have captured Richmond in June 1862 had he not been sabotaged by the Lincoln administration. McClellan was too smooth an operator to make the charge outright, but the narrative he crafted, and the evidence he deployed, were contrived to portray Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton as marplots who had withheld thousands of troops from McClellan and constantly interfered with his operations. This he did through a lavish but selective reprinting of dispatches, the most eye-popping of which was his telegram to Stanton after Lee had hurled him from the gates of Richmond in the crucial battle of Gaines’s Mill on June 27. The defeat had come by so narrow a margin, McClellan bitterly informed the secretary of war, that he bore no responsibility for defeat, because “the Government has not sustained this army,” and, with a j’accuse almost unique in American military history, concluded, “If I save this army now, I tell you plainly that I owe no thanks to you or to any other persons in Washington. You have done your best to sacrifice this army.”

No one with any political acumen could miss the fact that McClellan’s report was a political document “designed,” sniffed the hostile New York Times, “to raise a political wind that shall waft the author to the White House.” To help calm that wind, the newspaper ran an eleven-part demolition of McClellan’s report, subsequently abridged and published as McClellan’s Military Career Reviewed and Exposed: The Military Policy of the Administration Set Forth and Vindicated.

McClellan’s defeat at the polls, Union victory in the spring of 1865, and Lincoln’s martyrdom soon robbed the Lincoln-McClellan relationship of political significance, although, for the rest of his life McClellan defended his reputation while Lincoln partisans mercilessly attacked it. As the decades passed and historians appraised the relationship

in several biographies of McClellan, their interpretations divided between reaffirmations, in effect, of the Republican indictment of McClellan and accounts that were sympathetic to McClellan’s viewpoint, with the latter predominating. Then in 1941, H. J. Eckenrode and Bryan Conrad published *George B. McClellan: The Man Who Saved the Union*. The biography garnered positive reviews, including one by political historian T. Harry Williams. The review merits extensive quotation, for reasons that will shortly become apparent:

The reviewer . . . agrees with the authors that McClellan was a master of the art of war and the ablest of the Union generals. He also thinks that politics, as practiced by the Radical Republican “bosses,” prevented McClellan from capturing Richmond, and that politics, as practiced by Republican propagandists and accepted by historians, has deprived the General of the high niche in military history that is rightfully his. It was McClellan’s misfortune to command the eastern army too soon. In 1862 Lincoln, Congress, and the people were possessed by the delusion that one smashing victory would end the war, that McClellan had only to parade his army through Virginia, scatter the Confederate hosts, and march triumphantly into Richmond. The country demanded the impossible. Later Grant, with an army vastly superior to Lee’s, had to spend nine weary months of siege before he could take the city. McClellan was expected to accomplish the task in one short campaign with an army little if any larger than the one he faced. Had he been given the command in 1864 when the administration at last realized that war was a costly, grim business, there is every reason to believe that he would have achieved victory and would have emerged as the laureled hero of the great struggle.

Williams’s laudatory assessment is nothing short of astonishing, given that eleven years later he would completely reverse his opinion of McClellan and in the process create the portrayal of the Lincoln-McClellan relationship that we now accept as gospel. True, numerous

other historians have since piled on, with Kenneth P. Williams offering perhaps the most acid dismissal of McClellan as “a vain and unstable man, with considerable military knowledge, who sat a horse well and wanted to be President,” and the gifted writer Stephen W. Sears devoting the better part of three decades to a systematic demolition of McClellan’s reputation. But none of these portrayals depart very far from the six chapters in Williams’s 1952 best seller Lincoln and His Generals—nearly half the book—in which this brilliant historian with his bluff, plain-spoken authorial voice, portrayed the Lincoln-McClellan relationship in a way that was so lucidly written and authoritative in tone that its interpretation seemed unimpeachable.

In Williams’s opinion, Lincoln stood out as “a great war president, probably the greatest in our history”—which is certainly unexceptionable—but then affirmed that Lincoln was also “a great natural strategist, a better one than any of his generals,” and in effect a military genius. He adhered to this thesis unflinchingly, in part by employing a “heads I win, tails you lose” rhetorical strategy. Thus in his preface he announced his intention to consider Lincoln as “war director” “from the perspective of modern war.” But then a few pages later he denied Lincoln’s critics the right to apply that very perspective: “Judged by modern standards, Lincoln did some things that a civilian director of war should not do. Modern critics say that he ‘interfered’ too much with military operations. He and his contemporaries did not think that he interfered improperly. In the American command system it was traditional for the civilian authority to direct strategy and tactics” (emphasis added).

Much the same strategy is discernible in his treatment of the Lincoln-McClellan relationship, which is relentless in its attempt to assign to McClellan the blame for the relationship’s failure. The tendency to think in terms of blame is, by the way, the single strongest feature of the conventional telling of the relationship—and in my opinion

fundamentally misguided, because a relationship is, by definition, reciprocal, so that logically the success or failure of any given relationship is the result of the interaction between the principals. In other words, by any rational analysis, Lincoln and McClellan *jointly* bore responsibility for the failure of their command partnership. But Williams didn’t see it that way, and neither have any of his successors.

It isn’t difficult to see Lincoln’s contribution to the relationship’s failure. Williams continually harped on McClellan’s inability to place his trust in the president, but Lincoln plainly did not trust McClellan, either. Episodes of mistrust are screamingly obvious, most notably Lincoln’s ambivalence concerning McClellan’s proposal to use the North’s sea-power advantage to bypass the well-fortified Confederate position at Manassas and get as close to Richmond without a fight as possible. Williams addressed this ambivalence at length—he could hardly do otherwise—but always couched his comments in a way that got Lincoln off the hook. Imagine, for example, a chief executive permitting a subordinate to pursue a certain course of action and then hobbling his ability to do it. If it were any chief executive but Lincoln we would not hesitate to condemn such a policy. But Williams adroitly avoided this conclusion at every turn.

Consider this example: Lincoln much preferred a straightforward offensive against the Confederates at Manassas and, per Williams, “undoubtedly made a mistake in grudgingly approving a plan which he distrusted. If he did not like the Urbana scheme, he should have said so and either asked McClellan for another one or relieved the General.”20 Fair enough, but in the same paragraph Williams declared that McClellan should have understood the political pressures on Lincoln and attacked the Confederates at Manassas anyway. In other words, he should have voluntarily abandoned the plan in which he so strongly believed and that Lincoln had in fact approved. This is just plain crazy.

It gets worse. Lincoln refused to give final approval to McClellan’s plan until it had been accepted by a majority vote of McClellan’s twelve division commanders. Williams conceded that there was “something bizarre” in this spectacle. McClellan got his majority vote, but later that same day, “Lincoln issued two orders that showed he distrusted the General and disliked the Urbana move.” Instead of permitting McClellan to do what every other army commander got to do almost as a matter of course—choose his own senior subordinates—Lincoln

20. Ibid, 66. Williams consistently misspelled *Urbanna*, using only a single *n*. 
himself selected the four corps commanders on whom McClellan would have to rely to carry out his plan of campaign. Three of the four had voted against the Urbanna campaign, and the fourth had approved it but with reservations. Surely this was astounding, but Williams gave Lincoln a full pass: “It was as if he had said to the General: I will let you do what you want but I don’t like it, and I am going to get some older heads to watch you.”21 That was an accurate analysis, except Williams presented it to his readers as a sage decision, which it decidedly was not.

Lincoln’s second order supposedly indicating a lack of confidence in the plan was just common sense: he instructed McClellan to leave behind a force sufficient to protect Washington against a potential Confederate attack. This order led to a famous controversy over whether McClellan fully complied with it, but after giving extended attention to the question, Williams concluded that indeed “the General had left the capital secure. The forces he had left were adequate to meet any thrust the enemy could prepare.”22 But in the same paragraph Williams criticized McClellan at length for not explaining to Lincoln in person how he had—according to Williams—fulfilled Lincoln’s directive. McClellan, said Williams, “should have opened his heart to Lincoln. Lincoln wanted him to”—the same Lincoln who had, per Williams, repeatedly signaled his lack of trust in McClellan.23 Lincoln’s mistrust was apparently fine, but for McClellan to have a similar lack of trust in Lincoln was out of bounds.

One could multiply almost indefinitely examples of this sort of thing, as well as any number of tendentious word choices. McClellan did not display unwavering confidence in his Urbanna plan; he was “obsessed” with it. Solely on the basis of the wording of McClellan’s dispatches to Lincoln, not on any investigation of the observations of those close to McClellan, Williams discerned “the nervous oppression that always gripped McClellan in a critical moment” and his “customary nervous depression.”24 And when a dispatch from McClellan was upbeat, it was evidence of “a strange mood of confidence” (emphasis added).25

Equivalent rhetorical strategies are evident in two recent studies of the Lincoln-McClellan relationship, both in full accord with Williams’s

22. Ibid, 81.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid, 95, 103.
interpretation. The most striking aspect is the way both books alert the reader from the start that McClellan is arrogant, overcautious, messianic, and so on. Thus the basic setup is along these lines: “McClellan is an incompetent jerk. How long will it take Lincoln to figure this out? What will he do when he does figure it out?”

Any dissent from this rigid portrayal in the standard Lincoln-McClellan relationship invariably produces the declaration that one must be a McClellan apologist. I am not. The last bona fide McClellan advocate, Warren W. Hassler Jr., published his gallant but foredoomed defense, General George B. McClellan: Shield of the Union, sixty years ago. The intellectual bankruptcy of the standard depictions of the Lincoln-McClellan relationship struck me forcefully only after Stephen D. Engle invited me to contribute an essay to a volume ultimately published as The War Worth Fighting For: Abraham Lincoln’s Presidency and Civil War America.

Steve asked me to write on Lincoln as commander in chief. I agreed, only to realize with dismay that if I simply wrote a survey of Lincoln as war president, I’d have very little original to say. Would it be okay, I wrote Steve, if I focused on a single aspect of Lincoln’s performance? He generously said that I could. I decided that among the most interesting features of Lincoln as war president was his unusually active involvement in military operations—nothing on the scale of Jefferson Davis, his Confederate counterpart, but far more than most American commanders in chief.

Although I could have focused on any one of several operations—for example, Lincoln’s forceful insistence on the capture of Norfolk, Virginia, on May 7–9, 1862—I selected a much more significant intervention that took place a fortnight later. In the Shenandoah Valley on May 23, Major General Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson outmaneuvered a small army under the hapless Major General Nathaniel P. Banks and swiftly forced Banks down the Shenandoah Valley and across the Potomac River. Although Jackson’s audacity stunned many in the North, Lincoln did not panic; quite the contrary. He thought Jackson had figuratively placed his neck in the lunette of a guillotine and if

26. The two books in question are John C. Waugh, Lincoln and McClellan: The Troubled Partnership between a President and His General (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010); and Chester G. Hearn, Lincoln and McClellan at War (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2012).


available Federal forces could move with equal speed, they could neatly behead Jackson and annihilate his army.

I won’t rehearse the details here. Suffice it to say that Lincoln used the new-fangled telegraph to give detailed orders to two department commanders: Major General John C. Frémont, just west of the Allegheny Mountains that formed one wall of the Shenandoah Valley; and Major General Irvin McDowell, just east of the Blue Ridge Mountains that formed the other. Frémont, Lincoln commanded, would march into the valley from one direction, McDowell from the other, uniting near Harrisonburg, squarely athwart the macadamized Valley Turnpike on which Jackson’s successful escape depended. Although the gambit failed, most military historians have praised Lincoln’s initiative and blamed the failure on Frémont and McDowell. I made the opposite case: Lincoln’s initiative was misguided, and responsibility for the failure was his.29

Because of the links between the Valley Campaign and McClellan’s Peninsula Campaign then in progress, I had to address Lincoln’s relationship with McClellan—mostly the way in which Lincoln consistently failed to consult with McClellan and simply informed him of various interventions after the fact. Here too I differed with most military historians. I contended that Lincoln’s failure in the valley needlessly complicated McClellan’s far more critical operation against Richmond.

Historians will probably always criticize McClellan for his failure to defeat Lee during the Seven Days, and of the two generals, Lee was undoubtedly the superior in a battle of maneuver. Yet Lee understood that this was not the sort of battle McClellan ever intended to fight. “McClellan,” he informed President Davis on June 5, “will make this a battle of Posts. He will take position from position, under cover of his heavy guns & we cannot get at him without storming his works, which with our new troops is extremely hazardous.” Lee therefore began “preparing a line that I can hold with part of our forces in front, while with the rest I will endeavour to make a diversion to bring McClellan out”—in other words, to force McClellan to fight a battle of maneuver.30 This is ultimately what occurred, and Lee was greatly

assisted by two developments: first, the arrival of Jackson’s force from the valley on the eve of the counteroffensive; and second, the failure of McDowell’s corps ever to arrive at all.

This last statement needs a slight qualification, because a single division from McDowell’s corps—the only division not involved in the Valley operation—did reach McClellan by mid-June, but the remaining three divisions, some thirty thousand men, did not. According to Lincoln’s instructions to McClellan just prior to the president’s valley intervention, by the beginning of June McDowell’s entire corps should have arrived from northern Virginia and taken up position on McClellan’s right flank, where the Fifth Corps was posted under Major General Fitz John Porter. This was the flank at which Lee ultimately struck, because it was north of the Chickahominy River and “in the air,” that is, anchored to no strong natural obstacle. Two days of battle were necessary to pry Porter from that position. If the thirty thousand additional troops had participated, it is highly unlikely the Confederate win could have been accomplished. McDowell’s presence would have denied Lee the chance to transform the campaign into a battle of maneuver. It would have ensured that McClellan could successfully achieve what Lee feared most: make the campaign a “battle of posts,” in which by incremental, inexorable steps the Union general pushed his way into Richmond.

This alternative outcome is about as obvious as anything can be. Yet to a large extent, historians have praised Lincoln for his diversion of McDowell from the decisive theater of operations and overlooked or minimized the impact of his absence from the Army of the Potomac in June. Their assessment is based on sheer disdain for McClellan. It is well expressed in a recent treatment of the Peninsula Campaign: “The notion that McDowell’s Corps was essential to victory on the peninsula is nonsense. McClellan always greatly overestimated his opponents, and McDowell would not have made a difference. . . . There is absolutely no reason to think that if [McClellan] had been . . .

31. At least one historian has tried to have it both ways. In The Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1862 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), Gary W. Gallagher writes that Lincoln reacted “admirably” to Jackson’s campaign (3). And yet in the volume’s introduction he writes, “[Jackson . . . had accomplished Lee’s strategic goals. Not only did Banks remain far from Richmond, but McDowell’s troops at Fredericksburg also were withheld from McClellan. . . . When the military moment of truth came at Richmond at the end of June, the Confederates benefited immeasurably from the absence of McDowell’s divisions” (xv). Even so, in the conclusion of his essay on Lincoln’s intervention in the Valley Campaign, Gallagher writes, “Lincoln had been right in his handling of Union military forces in response to Jackson’s movements” (20).
given everything he wanted in the Peninsula Campaign it would have made any difference.” This is not analysis but the abdication of analysis, based on the premise that McClellan was incapable of achieving victory no matter how many resources he had at his disposal.

What makes this contention even more bizarre, by the way, is that for most of the Peninsula Campaign McClellan confronted not Lee, one of the truly great captains in American military history, but Joseph E. Johnston, whose reputation is in some circles every bit as dreadful as McClellan’s. Perhaps the most forceful indictment of Johnston is that by Stephen Davis, who contends that the general’s overcaution and other defects in commanding the Army of Tennessee during the Atlanta Campaign absolutely assured the fall of Atlanta. Without the fateful accident of the serious wound Johnston sustained during the battle of Seven Pines, forcing his replacement by Lee, McClellan would have faced an opponent who never conceived, much less executed, the dazzling battle of maneuver by which Lee saved Richmond and which the failure of Lincoln’s military intervention in the Shenandoah Valley had largely made possible.

To me, this seemingly invincible contempt for McClellan, coupled with an overly generous view of Lincoln’s ability to plan and execute a competent military operation, cried out for explanation, and in the conclusion of my essay I attempted to supply one.

For starters, there was the simple fact that McClellan had a stormy relationship with the most beloved president in American history. (Few who disliked Lincoln have come off well in the history books.) Everyone knows that in letters to his wife McClellan mocked Lincoln as “the original Gorilla,” that on one occasion he snubbed Lincoln by proceeding to bed after being told that the president was making an unannounced visit to his quarters, and that, in a fit of rage after being forced into retreat by Lee’s counteroffensive, he telegraphed Lincoln, “You have done your best to sacrifice this Army.” But I suspected that


the principal reason the standard interpretation has been so durable is that it perfectly fit certain mythic archetypes that Jungian psychologist Robert Moore and mythologist Douglas Gillette describe in their book on the archetypes of the mature masculine.

More on the specifics of those archetypes is forthcoming. But from earlier explorations of the way in which mythical archetypes appear, consciously or unconsciously, in effective storytelling, I asserted that because these models were universal and quite powerful they were therefore, to anyone crafting a historical narrative, quite seductive. They were like ruts in a well-traveled road. The wheels of one’s narrative wagon were bound to fall into them. I was not sure that avoiding them was possible, any more than it is possible to avoid the narrative emplotments, tropes, and modes famously laid out in *Metahistory*, by historian and literary critic Hayden White. But I did think that one could at least become aware of these mythical archetypes and employ them consciously—to put them in the service of one’s narrative rather than let the archetypes hijack it.

Having dealt at length with the Lincoln-McClellan relationship in memory, I am at last ready to address the relationship as myth, and to offer some informed speculations about why this myth is so important.

Myths matter because of the lessons they teach, and at the most basic level the standard retelling of the Lincoln-McClellan relationship, which I suggest is in large part a mythic retelling, functions as a powerful object lesson, frequently invoked for two main purposes. The first is the need for boldness in war. Pundits often cite McClellan’s timidity as the reason Lincoln sacked him in November 1862, and they sometimes mangle history to underscore the need for aggressiveness. They forget that Lincoln replaced McClellan with the bungling Major General Ambrose E. Burnside, as that hardly makes the desired point. Thus the *Investor’s Business Daily* 2009 editorial on President Barack Obama’s replacement of General Stanley McChrystal with General David Petraeus simply skipped two years of intervening history and declared Grant replaced McClellan in 1864.”

The second purpose is to underscore the need for military subordination. In using Lincoln’s relief of McClellan to justify his own removal of General Douglas MacArthur, Truman averred that McClellan


“made political statements on matters outside the military field” and chronically balked at Lincoln’s demand that he take the offensive. “The President would issue direct orders to McClellan and the general would ignore them.” Thus Truman saw himself as equaling Lincoln’s patience but also ultimately unable to contend further with such a troublesome subordinate.”

This rather workaday utility, however, cannot account for our negative passions about McClellan. We’re critical of many Civil War generals. The vitriol leveled at McClellan, however, is so outsized that it goes beyond mere criticism. It’s one thing to find fault with McClellan. It’s another to loathe him. Yet loathe him most of us do. More than that, we insist on loathing him. Why might this be? Here the lens of mythology comes into play.

That mythologies contain certain recurring archetypes has long been noted by scholars, especially psychologist Carl Jung, whose ideas about mythical archetypes have had enormous influence. George Lucas, who created *Star Wars*, consciously drew on the ideas of one of Jung’s most famous students, Joseph Campbell. And whether the teller is aware of it or not, effective storytelling always involves mythic archetypes.

McClellan’s ceaseless calls for reinforcements are among the best-known aspects of his generalship. Most students of the Civil War are familiar with this jibe by Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton: “If [McClellan] had a million men, he would swear the enemy had two millions, and then he would sit down in the mud and yell for three.”

The quote irresistibly conjures the image of a demanding brat. It corresponds to an archetype psychologist Robert Moore and mythologist Douglas Gillette, both disciples of Jung, term “the High Chair Tyrant.” This archetype, they explain, “is epitomized by the image of Little Lord Fauntleroy sitting in his high chair, banging his food on a tray, and screaming for his mother to feed him, kiss him, and attend him . . .

But when the food comes, it often does not meet his specifications; it is not good enough. . . . If he becomes sufficiently self-righteous, no food, no matter how hungry he is, will be adequate."

Arrogance, childishness, and irresponsibility, they continue, are hallmarks of the High Chair Tyrant—traits that are invariably assigned to McClellan. They are vividly on display in his reaction to the defeat at Gaines’s Mill at the outset of the Seven Days’ battles around Richmond. Forced to abandon his bid to capture the Confederate capital, McClellan blames not himself but the Lincoln administration. “You have done your best to sacrifice this army.”

Students of the war well know the sequel: the craven retreat McClellan calls a “change of base,” which he continues notwithstanding that Lee’s pursuing army botches every attempt to bring him to bay. On this as on so many occasions, McClellan’s hallmark is timidity. Basking in the image of the “Young Napoleon,” he is in fact a moral coward who persistently lets his Confederate adversaries dominate him. He overestimates their numbers, falls for their deceptions, and exaggerates their prowess. This image of McClellan corresponds to a second archetype closely related to the first: the “Weakling King.” The Weakling King is the opposite of the “King in His Fullness,” that is, the king confident in his own strength. While clinging to an image of himself as powerful, write Moore and Gillette, the Weakling King projects that power onto another, “allowing any forceful personality that comes along to bully and control him.”

One such forceful personality was Robert E. Lee, who famously regretted McClellan’s removal from command of the Army of the Potomac in November 1862. “We always understood each other so well. I fear they may continue to make these changes till they find some one whom I don’t understand.”

A letter from Lincoln to McClellan, written three weeks before the president sacked the general, is redolent of someone trying to cajole a Weakling King. “Are you not over-cautious when you assume that you cannot do what the enemy is constantly doing?” the president

asks. “Should you not claim to be at least his equal in prowess, and act upon the claim?” Lincoln points out that McClellan is at that moment closer to Richmond than Lee is. “Why can you not reach there before him, unless you admit that he is more than your equal on a march. . . . It is all easy if our troops march as well as the enemy, and it is unmanly to say they cannot do it.”

To say that these archetypes apply to the actual McClellan is simplistic. But they so thoroughly dominate the popular view of McClellan that I doubt they can ever be dislodged. It is likely they will always characterize his image in the American Iliad.

The mythic significance of the Lincoln-McClellan relationship, one that not only is important to me but also finds expression in other literary accounts, is that it shows the imperative of personal growth, a common trope in the Lincoln literature. Nowhere is this imperative more eloquently expressed than in a dazzling soliloquy in the middle of the epic poem *John Brown’s Body*, by Stephen Vincent Benét.

The soliloquy begins as Lincoln awaits word of the outcome of the battle of Antietam. Balanced between hope and melancholy, Lincoln muses over his own life and the mysteries of life in general. He thinks of a friend who seemed to hunger for too much in life, who, like Lincoln himself, “dreamed dreams of Elysium, far exceeding all / That any earthly thing can realize.” Ultimately Lincoln ponders his ambitions in life:

My old ambition was an iron ring
Loose-hooped around the live trunk of a tree.
If the tree grows till bark and iron touch
And then stops growing, ring and tree are matched
And the fulfillment fits.

But, if by some
Unlikely chance, the growing still keeps on,
The tree must burst the binding-ring or die.

I have not once controlled the circumstances.
They have controlled me. But with that control
They made me grow or die. And I have grown.
The iron ring is burst.

Three elements,
Earth, water and fire. I have passed through them all,
Still to find no Elysium for my hands,
Still to find no Elysium but growth,
And the slow will to grow to match my task.45

It is a passage that contains staggering power and requires little reflection for a reader to realize the life lesson bestowed on us by McClellan. In McClellan we see a man of much promise and many gifts but also the fatal belief that he already possessed every faculty to achieve success. If the lesson of Lincoln is that we must grow or die, the lesson of McClellan is the bitter fate that awaits us if we do not continue to mature.