McClellan Redux?
The Often-Reported, Imminent Return of Little Mac

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Only days after the disastrous Union defeat at the Battle of Fredericksburg, General George B. McClellan was returned to command of the Army of the Potomac. There was cheering in the camps around Falmouth, Virginia, and soldiers eagerly reported sighting a familiar figure on horseback. Of course, they were mistaken and the reports of McClellan’s restoration to command proved false, but in this case surely the wish was father to the rumor.1

Ironically, ever since President Abraham Lincoln removed McClellan in early November 1862, the general’s political and military critics had worried about reports of his imminent return. Although the Chicago Tribune had once trumpeted McClellan as the savior of the Union, that sentiment became, as the soldiers would have said, “all played out.” Or at least the editor hoped so, for the fear remained that the general’s still loyal and sizable following might be hell-bent on overturning the president’s decision, giving aid and comfort to the Confederates, or even sparking an army mutiny. Republican losses in the fall elections had only compounded these worries, as did reports of New York Democrats assiduously courting McClellan. For sure, with General Ambrose Burnside commanding the Army of the Potomac, by

early December such fears had subsided. Senator Zachariah Chandler of Michigan crowed that a recent report from General-in-Chief Henry W. Halleck “has put the last clod of earth upon McClellan’s coffin.” Flattered by being styled the “McClellan killer,” Chandler sarcastically remarked, “Now I am only sorry the game is so small.”2

Yet even as Chandler was exulting in his supposed triumph, the Fredericksburg debacle rekindled talk of McClellan’s return. “I think I can see through the policy of some of the press who . . . are constantly speaking in such unqualified praise of McClellan,” one of Burnside’s staff officers had presciently remarked just as the Fredericksburg campaign was being launched. “Should any mishap take place in the Army of the Potomac, Burnside will get it right & left, let the reasons be what they may.” Indeed many soldiers, not to mention people back home, had not yet reconciled themselves to McClellan’s departure. Even before the Army of the Potomac had been withdrawn from Fredericksburg, newspapers railed against Lincoln’s great “blunder” in removing Little Mac. “Jeff Davis still laughs at the follies of our military directors,” the New York Herald insisted. A volunteer in the Army of the Potomac shifted the blame to the politicians: “I do wish our statesmen . . . would stop this infernal meddling with the war and leave everything to our beloved McClellan.” Little Mac got closer to Richmond than any of the other generals, a New York private commented sharply, adding, “Our greatest disasters occur when we try somebody else.”3

Deriding civilian authorities for hamstringing generals was hardly unusual; in both the North and the South, and regardless of party, ordinary citizens, newspaper editors, and of course politicians regularly complained about the president or the War Department interfering with or not properly supporting the supposedly brilliant operations of their favorite commanders. “The politicians have ruined the country,” a New York cavalryman wrote home, but “if Gen. McClellan could

2. Louisville Daily Journal, November 15, 1862; Chicago Tribune, November 19, 20, December 16, 1862; Boston Herald, December 18, 1862; Willet Raynor to Zachariah Chandler, December 4, 1862, Chandler to his wife, December 15, 1862, Chandler Papers, LC. One skeptic, however, doubted that reports, published correspondence, or any other kind of evidence could change the mind of McClellan’s most ardent admirers. John Chipman Gray and John Codman Ropes, War Letters, 1862–1865 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1927), 42–43.

appear here today, with unrestricted authority—the air would be rent with shouting, the army doubled in strength." Whether they were scheming politicians or ignorant civilians, the general’s enemies were clearly ruining the country. The word “blunder,” it seemed to many, best summed up Lincoln’s decision to shelve McClellan. Soldiers still talked of McClellan’s genius and his ability to match wits with Robert E. Lee, and even before news of the Fredericksburg defeat, speculation grew that just as in the aftermath of Second Bull Run, Lincoln would be forced once again to call on Little Mac to save the country.4

Put simply, there remained a deep well of affection for McClellan. As one Hoosier volunteer who had seen some of the worst of the fighting put it only days after the battle, the camp now rang with the cry, “McClellan is the man,” and soon the troops were reportedly singing, “McClellan is our leader, so march along.” Had he been in command, the army would have been on its way to Richmond or already seized the Rebel capital, other soldiers claimed. Some speculated that McClellan could have taken Mayre’s Heights without launching disastrous frontal assaults. Perhaps the Army of the Potomac was really just “Mac’s old army” in the words of a Massachusetts soldier. Critics who had scoffed at McClellan’s slow movements would now have to reckon with the Fredericksburg carnage.5


Unlike the hapless Burnside, McClellan had known when to fight and when not to fight. Significantly, given the general’s well-deserved reputation for caution, the emphasis was all too often on what McClellan would not have done. Commenting on the slaughter in front of the famous stone wall, some of the Fredericksburg wounded came right to the point: “McClellan would not have led us there—he knew better.” Survivors let their families know that their former commander would never have attacked such strong positions. Cursing Burnside and calling for McClellan’s return enlivened many a campfire conversation. Even soldiers who did not entirely share such sentiments recognized that McClellan and his allies were riding high on a wave of despondency in the army and at home.6

Surely, there must be some place for a man of McClellan’s talents. Herman Haupt, who supervised the military railroads, advised Lincoln to appoint a military council—including McClellan—to plan campaigns. That veteran adviser to presidents, Francis Preston Blair, whose son Montgomery served as Lincoln’s postmaster general, simply recommended bringing McClellan back to the Army of the Potomac. The general’s strongest supporters apparently expected his imminent summons to Washington, perhaps to replace Henry Halleck as general-in-chief. Blair agreed with that suggestion while

recommending that both Halleck and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton be sacked.\(^7\)

Few soldiers speculated about McClellan displacing Halleck; instead from many a campfire discussion came cries for their beloved general’s return to command the Army of the Potomac. Everyone from privates to corps commanders expressed opinions, and the enlisted men and junior officers seemed to believe that the army wanting McClellan back should settle the matter. In defending what amounted to citizen-soldier democracy, they fondly recalled how McClellan had cared for his men, and their affection appeared both genuine and deep. Many soldiers not only wished to see their beloved commander again but even claimed that the sentiment was nearly unanimous. Such conviction readily produced a strong expectation that McClellan would soon be with them.\(^8\)

And why not? According to this line of reasoning McClellan was the only man who could do the job; no one else could come close to restoring the army’s confidence. Such sentiments obviously reflected conservative views in the army, the opinions of many Democrats and

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some Republicans back home; they accompanied some sharp criticism of Lincoln, Stanton, Halleck, and Burnside. Let McClellan have a free hand and the military situation would surely improve, his most ardent supporters maintained. In this view, he was the general who could lead the army to victory.9

That the demoralized troops would quickly rally around McClellan became an article of faith for the general’s most fervent defenders inside and outside the army. Upon his return to command, McClellan would instantly revive spirits and reestablish discipline. “When George was commander-in-chief,” an enthusiastic Massachusetts volunteer declared, “everything went as merry as we could wish to have it.” For those who might still point to Little Mac’s lack of aggressiveness, a plain-spoken soldier in faraway Arkansas noted, “It is now nearly four months since McClellan was laid on the shelf. Richmond aint taken.”10

Yet the renewed calls for McClellan also reflected continuing divisions in the Army of the Potomac. Skeptics complained of a “McClellan clique” that trumpeted their hero’s supposed virtues and conspired against any potential rivals; in the aftermath of Fredericksburg they were assiduously working to undermine Burnside. “Rule or ruin has been the motto of many of his [McClellan’s] friends,” a Wisconsin surgeon grumbled. Naïve folks at home (especially those who freely criticized but refused to enter the ranks themselves) appeared blind to the general’s record of failure. Increasingly open Democratic support for McClellan in turn made some soldiers wary, and one veteran of


the regular army (echoing the views of the more radical Republicans) thought that there was about the general “too much of the traitor.”

There were many claims for McClellan’s popularity with the Army of the Potomac, but critics pointed to a coterie of the general’s friends ensconced in the brigade, division, and corps commands who continued to exert a malign influence. The always loyal General William B. Franklin—whose own performance at Fredericksburg could be generously described as lacklustre—thought McClellan’s stock was rising and sarcastically remarked that Burnside taking responsibility for the defeat let Lincoln and the cabinet off the hook. From Memphis, William T. Sherman—who took a back seat to no one in detesting politicians—predicted that “McClellan will be recalled sooner or later.” Admiral Andrew Foote claimed that McClellan was the only general capable of commanding a large army. Perhaps if he were given a free hand, the war could be brought to a speedy conclusion. “We must have McClellan back with unlimited and unfettered powers,” General Gouverneur Kemble Warren wrote from the army in Falmouth, Virginia; “his name is a tower to strength to every one here.”

Other reactions to the idea of bringing back McClellan ranged from mildly skeptical to nearly apoplectic. Stationed in western Virginia, Colonel Rutherford B. Hayes coolly assessed McClellan as a general with considerable weaknesses but acknowledged that he would not have made the same mistakes as Burnside. With considerable exaggeration and animus, James G. Barnard, who had once been the chief


engineer in the Army of the Potomac, claimed that most officers whose opinion might be worth hearing viewed their former commander as a “stupendous failure.” Political intrigue in the army, however, along with the maneuvers of leading Democrats would mean that dedicated partisans and naive civilians would continue to puff McClellan’s military prowess.  

McClellan followed the reports from Fredericksburg closely, expressed sympathy for his old friend Burnside, deplored the “useless” sacrifice, and somewhat cryptically remarked that “a change must come ere long—the present state of affairs cannot last.” Whether he expected a new command or not, McClellan continued to rail against Lincoln and the cabinet. His move to New York City—with the encouragement and warm support of influential politicians—further aligned him with the Democratic opposition. Partisan defenses of McClellan’s record along with the usual complaints about Radical Republicans hampering his operations grew ever louder and dovetailed with conservative critiques of the Emancipation Proclamation. According to Congressman Samuel S. Cox of Ohio, McClellan had been sacrificed to the Republicans’ “ebony fetish.”

Besides Democratic politicians with their eyes on the 1864 presidential election, conservative northerners also gave McClellan considerable support. Persistent claims that his removal from command had been a capital error along with more general disillusionment with Lincoln’s war policies echoed from not only the Brahmin business ranks of New England but also influential clergymen. Some conservative Republicans favored a rapprochement with McClellan. The army was a “great political, as well as war machine,” Francis Preston Blair bluntly told Lincoln, and McClellan “will bring them to the Support of the Country and to you.” During his mid-December trip to Washington to testify before the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the


War, McClellan met with Postmaster General Montgomery Blair and several conservative Republican officials who expressed warm support for him privately if not publicly. The inauguration of Democrat Horatio Seymour as governor of New York caused great consternation in Republican circles and perhaps made some party leaders more amenable to working with McClellan.¹⁵

The New York Herald even suggested that the return of McClellan—“with the exception of the President, the only honest man in and around Washington”—would help the Lincoln administration. Conservative editors continued to tout McClellan as a superior strategist and to blame the war’s mismanagement on Halleck, Stanton, and Radical Republican interference with the army. The gallant volunteers deserved a steady hand who would lead them to victory. Letters supposedly from officers and enlisted men published in Democratic newspapers echoed these sentiments.¹⁶ In some quarters, no praise for McClellan could be too lavish, especially in the aftermath of Fredericksburg. Comparisons to George Washington now complemented previous tributes to the “Young Napoleon.” Even the great commanders of history had never organized and fought such large armies. After Sherman’s failed assault on Vicksburg there was even a call for McClellan to displace Stanton (with Halleck’s position as general in chief abolished). The idol of the people—another encomium tossed the general’s way—would yet be restored to command; the public would demand it.¹⁷

With Union morale sagging in late 1862 and early 1863, Republicans talked wildly of a Democratic plot to bring back McClellan, perhaps


as the first stage of a military coup. The general’s friends “chuckled & secretly rejoice” over the Fredericksburg disaster, an Ohio Republican congressman groused. For their part defenders of the administration countered by disparaging McClellan’s military record. One of Lincoln’s private secretaries wrote an anonymous newspaper piece reminding people that Fredericksburg had been far less costly than the Peninsula Campaign. Republicans worried that McClellan’s continuing influence had caused much disaffection in the Army of the Potomac. The always blunt Thaddeus Stevens summed up the thinking of the radical faction: McClellan “must be broken down before he breaks us down.”

Fredericksburg had established a pattern and each major battle or change in commanders led to new calls for McClellan. In essence, McClellan became a cat’s paw for critics of the Lincoln administration, Democratic partisans, and disheartened northerners more generally. His name still evoked warm support and righteous anger and it was often impossible to separate army politics from civilian politics.

The replacement of Burnside with Joseph Hooker only intensified the discussion and created a fresh round of rumors. Whatever their opinion of Hooker, who had long schemed to take command, many soldiers persistently expressed respect if not deep longing for McClellan. A Pennsylvania captain noted how the troops still sang “McClellan’s our leader, he is gallant and strong.” Bring him back and Richmond would be taken, declared a Vermont lieutenant who added “if the politicians would let us alone.” McClellan’s removal had unleashed dangerous rivalries among the generals, and his return would presumably unify the army, restore discipline, and stop the


19. Bowen, Dear Friends at Home, 228; Walker, Quite Ready to be Sent Somewhere, 84; John W. Patterson to his wife, January 28, 1863, Patterson Papers, FSNMP; Charles Kinsman to Emeline Quimby, February 8, 1863, George W. Quimby Papers, Special Collections, University of Vermont.
recent wave of desertions. It was high time for the “chuckle heads” in Washington (including President Lincoln), a New York private advised, to realize that “the recall of McClellan will be an indispensable necessity.”

And “indispensable” was exactly the right word, the general’s most ardent friends avowed. Nobody but McClellan could reinvigorate the Army of the Potomac and lead it to victory. In fact, no one else could effectively command the Army of the Potomac, much less get it to fight effectively. Such dogmatic assertions regularly cropped up in comments made to camp visitors and in letters home. For sure, the men would fight under Hooker or any other commander but not with as much élan or confidence. The army would remain loyal to Lincoln, a Massachusetts officer informed his mother, but the army’s affection for McClellan might eventually make him president. Indeed remove all the McClellan supporters and “croakers,” a Michigan enlisted man warned his skeptical father, and “they will send the whole army home.” Even the reviews of troops proved disappointing and unenthusiastic affairs, because the soldiers might respect Hooker but they still loved Little Mac.


Widespread press coverage of McClellan’s activities in New York along with reports of an enthusiastic reception for the general in Boston further added to the impression of his popularity inside and outside the army. “Lionized” was how one observer commented on McClellan’s treatment by New Yorkers. With some sense of alarm, Republicans downplayed the size of crowds who gathered around the general, noted his approval by Copperheads, and accused him of unseemly political ambition.22

Perhaps just as disturbing to many Republicans were fresh rumors that began circulating not long after Hooker assumed command of the Army of the Potomac. Rumor had it that Lincoln considered bringing back McClellan but the cabinet had been opposed. Horace Greeley’s Tribune ridiculed such reports, but the rival New York Times suggested that some command should be found for McClellan, albeit not one that required “dash and vigor.” Enemies of Secretary of State William H. Seward tried to link his name with that of McClellan and other failed generals. Continuing support for McClellan especially mystified the radical faction, but Republicans had good reason to worry about the military situation in the eastern theater and the possible political fallout from continued stalemate.23

Radical Republicans took to the floor of Congress, denouncing McClellan and decrying reports of his reinstatement. In the House, George W. Julian of Indiana offered a detailed review of the general’s failures and concluded that McClellan’s “unflinching champions . . . would sooner see the Republic in ruin than the slaves set free.” Such statements reflected fears that Lincoln might succumb to political pressure and appoint McClellan to some command, even in the Army of the Potomac. Yet would this not be a way, more


conservative Republicans countered, to win the support of the so-called War Democrats for the administration? Lincoln’s friend Orville Hickman Browning bluntly informed the president that some officers said they would never fight under Hooker, and he believed that McClellan “possessed their confidence to a greater extent than any other man.” But Lincoln told Browning that McClellan would not fight, though he conceded the general’s high standing with “all educated military men.”

To Republican critics, it became all that more imperative to destroy McClellan’s public reputation and paint his most vocal supporters as Copperheads or even traitors. This made McClellan’s March 1863 appearance before Congress’s Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War of great importance politically if not militarily. McClellan reported being treated politely, though he thought his enemies were using the hearings to mount a “last grand attack.” Some observers described McClellan as nervously evasive, and rumors about the content of testimony by both the general and his critics appeared in the newspapers. A jubilant Zachariah Chandler predicted that the committee’s report would kill McClellan “deader than the prophets.” Charges that the general had never intended to seriously fight the Rebels and that he sympathized with the Copperheads followed closely the early April publication of the committee’s report. This document may have damaged McClellan’s reputation in the army and more broadly in the country but not nearly as much as Chandler, Benjamin F. Wade, or the other radicals had hoped. Democrats readily


dismissed the document as a partisan attempt to malign certain generals and protect others.  

The true test, however, would come not in congressional committee reports but on the battlefield, and so the defeat of Hooker at Chancellorsville loomed especially large for McClellan supporters and detractors alike. Here was a new low in Union morale, but Little Mac’s stock rose accordingly. Criticism of Hooker became strongly linked to calls for McClellan; the loss in faith in the former helped rekindle confidence in the latter. “The universal cry” arose once again: “Give us McClellan,” wrote George Armstrong Custer, who assumed that the Lincoln administration would have to agree. “I think the whole nation would cry out for McClellan,” one Massachusetts officer anticipated. Claims that the Army of the Potomac was virtually unanimous in such sentiments were obviously overblown, but just as after Fredericksburg so too after Chancellorsville, angry soldiers declared that McClellan would never have led them into such a disaster, and indeed could still save the country and crush the rebellion.


Calls for McClellan’s return to the Army of the Potomac or even an appointment as general-in-chief echoed from the ranks, but general officers certainly lent their support and in some cases their voices. General John Gibbon explained to McClellan at some length how Hooker had bungled, and Gibbon even recounted how one general at Chancellorsville had been mistaken for McClellan. Supposing that Little Mac was with the army again, “every man sprang to his feet to look but dejectedly sat down again when they discovered their mistake.” At various headquarters, generals openly talked about the need to bring back McClellan. Should their wish be granted, perhaps this time he would receive the necessary support from the administration and from the people.28

And so the now familiar cycle recurred. Reports about continued support in the army along with added comments and speculation in the Democratic press provoked the expected reaction. Indeed the seriousness of the calls for McClellan’s return appeared ironically in the very vehemence of Republican objections. “The government has not lost its memory, nor the people their senses,” a New York Times editorial asserted with perhaps more hope than conviction. To replace Hooker—despite Chancellorsville—with McClellan, given the latter’s record of failure, would be the height of folly. To many Republicans, it seemed there were diabolical plots afoot. The general’s supporters would attempt to dragoon the Lincoln administration into giving in and returning McClellan to the army, and so the Democrats (and the Confederates) could then hold out until the end of Lincoln’s term and make their champion president. Perhaps the taint of Copperhead support would prevent such a scheme from ever coming to fruition, but radicals fumed over the possibility that their bête noire Seward might be among the conspirators. Whether or not the secretary of state was involved, once again the Blairs appeared in the thick of things. After presenting Lincoln with a detailed critique of Hooker’s performance at Chancellorsville, Francis Preston Blair delicately raised the McClellan question. He blamed Stanton for having misled Lincoln about opposition to McClellan in the army, adding ominously that the secretary of war had become a tool of the radical faction and no true friend of the administration. The clear implication was that McClellan should

supplant Stanton or Halleck. A rumor soon circulated that McClellan had left New York on a train bound for Washington.29

At the same time there circulated—largely in Republican newspapers—reports that McClellan would resign his commission since he was no longer in active service. McClellan denied the claim, but diverse and contradictory rumors about his future kept cropping up. It was neither the defeat at Chancellorsville nor the continued support for McClellan in the army that fueled all this speculation. Once he had settled in New York with apparent financial assistance from local Democrats, the general inevitably became even more of a political lightning rod. Democrats (and some reporters) apparently with encouragement from the Blair clan courted him and sought to elicit his views on the war. Seward’s longtime ally Thurlow Weed offered similar advice, recommending that McClellan call for a vigorous prosecution of the war and disavow the Copperheads. McClellan remained wary of publicly addressing political issues and rebuffed overtures from Ohio to run for governor on the Democratic ticket in that state. Once Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia was heading north once again, word leaked out of McClellan meeting with Governor Horatio Seymour of New York—in the minds of many Republicans a worrisome political foe whose own stock appeared to be rising. So it appeared that regardless of his public reticence the general was becoming increasingly entangled in politics.30

By mid-June, Lee’s army was crossing the Potomac, and what the New York Herald termed the “Rebel Raid” only intensified both public and private discussion of the McClellan question. Restoring him to command became the surest way to stop the invasion, the general’s stronger advocates predictably argued. Not only would the soldiers show a renewed fighting spirit, but also communities would offer


30. Chicago Tribune, May 16, June 6, 17, 1863; Boston Herald, May 15, June 17, 1863; New York Herald, May 15, 1863; Charles C. Fulton to McClellan, May 29, 1863, Thurlow Weed to McClellan, June 12, 1863, Horatio Seymour to McClellan, June 15, 1863, McClellan Papers, LC; McClellan, Civil War Papers, 548–50; Darius Starr to “Brother Daniel,” June 18, 1863, Starr Papers, Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University.
more bounties for enlisting fresh troops and civilian morale would soar. Even many Republicans, it was claimed, and no few officials in Washington would rejoice to have the general leading his beloved troops in the field once more. And of course there was precedent: had not the administration called on McClellan to save the army (if not the country) shortly before the Battle of Antietam? Even some local officials and especially the Democratic press all kept up a drumbeat for McClellan aimed at putting added pressure on Lincoln and his advisers.31

Petitions and letters reached the White House from a variety of sources, including some conservative Republicans. Pennsylvania senator Edgar Cowan reported general despondency and bitter opposition to abolitionists in his state, adding that the “better sort of Republicans” favored bringing McClellan back to the Army of the Potomac. The general’s enemies supposedly acted largely out of political motives, and after both the Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville debacles, surely the general’s well-known prudence and caution appeared in a much more favorable light. Longtime Whig and future Gettysburg orator Edward Everett claimed that McClellan’s return would be worth fifty thousand additional troops; he added that the public still had great confidence in “our ablest commander” and that all Democrats along with a good many Republicans retained faith in McClellan. Some correspondents suggested that McClellan raise troops in Pennsylvania to counter the invading Confederates. Recommendations ran the gamut: the general might recruit in his home state; he might again command the Army of the Potomac; he might again become general-in-chief.32

At the end of June as the two armies were about to clash at that soon-to-be-famous crossroads town of Gettysburg, importunate pleas


arose to at least send McClellan to Pennsylvania. Even the moderate Republican and former governor of New York Edwin D. Morgan hoped the president could find some post for McClellan. On the eve of the fight at Gettysburg, Lincoln ally and influential Pennsylvania journalist Alexander K. McClure downplayed McClellan as a political threat to the administration and agreed with many Democrats that the general was just the man to rally the troops as the Confederates were moving ever deeper into the Keystone State.33

The president’s reply to McClure was truly Lincolnian: “Do we gain anything by opening one leak to stop another?” In an equally terse response to a similar plea from New Jersey’s Democratic governor, Joel Parker, Lincoln stated that only he understood the difficulties and complexities that had been involved in removing McClellan. Lincoln’s own cabinet remained largely opposed to bringing the general back, but there was also division and intrigue. Did former secretary of war and notorious spoilsman Simon Cameron now favor McClellan’s return, as rumor had it? Were Rebel sympathizers plotting to use McClellan in some sort of coup? And indeed Lincoln himself must have felt besieged and perhaps a little bemused by all the conflicting advice that poured in from prominent Pennsylvanians.34

Many officers and no few enlisted men followed the rumors and crosscurrents of news with more than passing interest. Familiar arguments echoed in letters home and in camp discussions: Richmond would have been liberated by this time had Lincoln not removed McClellan; the general’s wide popularity and singular ability meant

33. John E. Thompson to Abraham Lincoln, June 30, 1863, Edwin D. Morgan to Lincoln, July 1, 1863, Philadelphia Common Council to Lincoln, July 2, 1863, Joseph P. Bradley and Marcus L. Ward to Lincoln, July 2, 1862, Edwin D. Morgan to Lincoln, July 1, 1863, Alexander K. McClure to Lincoln, June 30, 1863, Lincoln Papers, LC. Yet McClure also worried that Lincoln had waited too long to bring back McClellan and thought it might be a political gift to the Democrats should the newly appointed commander of the Army of the Potomac, General George Gordon Meade, fail to defeat Robert E. Lee. McClure to Lincoln, July 1, 1863, Lincoln Papers, LC.

that he must again save the army and the nation. Out west, Sherman reportedly stated that only McClellan could cope with Lee. Doubts about McClellan’s loyalty to the Union cause were dismissed out of hand.35

Talk of McClellan’s return to command that had swirled about ever since his removal and had definitely spiked after Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville grew even more intense right before and even during the Battle of Gettysburg. When Hooker was replaced by General George Gordon Meade, there was some speculation that this was but a temporary move before McClellan was called back. The Washington rumor mill again had McClellan replacing Halleck, but the more common report, especially among troops in the Army of the Potomac, was that McClellan was about to become their commander once again.36

And indeed he had—at least according to reports that began circulating on the last two days of June and continued even as the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Northern Virginia headed for a confrontation in the Pennsylvania countryside. As Union forces moved toward Gettysburg, word came that McClellan was arriving with sixty thousand men or that he was already back in charge; news spread through the marching columns and cheers erupted. Should Meade be whipped by Lee, claimed the secretary of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, Frederick Law Olmstead, Lincoln would have to swallow his pride and turn to McClellan. For the time being, the performance of Meade and his army during the first three days of July put a quietus on


most of this speculation. McClellan himself conceded that Gettysburg would enable the administration to “keep me in retirement.”

Perhaps the result at Gettysburg would also stifle noisy Democrats who had taken advantage of military defeats to hail McClellan and keep the Lincoln administration on the defensive. Of course a few people would continue to hope or even expect that McClellan would yet take Halleck’s place or even assume some active command. In New York, McClellan remained the toast of local Democrats, but the New York draft riots and his consultations with Governor Seymour brought renewed charges of disloyalty. There had even been rumors, Edward Everett noted, that McClellan intended to raise an army, march on Washington, and “expel the present administration.” McClellan denied ever hearing about much less countenancing such a scheme, but the general’s Democratic friends often hurt him nearly as much as his Radical Republican enemies did.

In the fall of 1863 an effort by General John Sedgwick and others in the Army of the Potomac to raise money for a testimonial to McClellan greatly alarmed Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase as well as Stanton, who claimed the purpose was to insult the president. Lincoln allowed Stanton to handle the matter, and so a regulation forbidding


38. Strong, Diary of George Templeton Strong, 3:330; Edward Waldo Emerson, Life and Letters of Charles Russell Lowell (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 274, 278; Wainwright, Diary of Battle, 266; Buffalo Common Council to Abraham Lincoln, July 16, 1863, Lincoln Papers; Chicago Tribune, July 23, 1863; James Lawrence to George B. McClellan, July 24, 1863, Edward Everett to McClellan, July 25, 1863, William Denison to George B. McClellan, August 4, 1863, McClellan Papers, LC; McClellan, Civil War Papers, 555.
anyone in the army from “conveying praise, or censure, or any mark of approbation toward their superiors or others in the military service” was invoked to quash the project. In the aftermath of this contretemps, Provost Marshal General Marsena Patrick wondered whether the Army of the Potomac might even be broken up to get rid of the McClellan influence. The general’s unexpected endorsement of the Democratic candidate in the 1863 Pennsylvania governor’s election set off further alarms among Republicans and administration supporters but also distressed some of his friends in the Army of the Potomac. And as historian Stephen Sears has argued, McClellan recognized that this partisan action killed any chances of receiving another command.

Public discussion now centered more on McClellan’s political outlook than on his military future. In the fall of 1863, McClellan drafted a letter resigning his commission and pointedly thanked Lincoln “for the confidence and kind feeling you once entertained for me, and which I am unconscious of having justly forfeited.” But McClellan did not resign and in fact had been busily working on a report to vindicate his military record and respond to his critics. Not surprisingly this lengthy work of self-justification, which was printed early in 1864, changed few minds but became an important document in the approaching presidential election campaign. The skeptics remained unconvinced and even charged that McClellan had suppressed embarrassing documents; the general’s friends of course praised their hero’s effort, adding that his report cast Halleck, Stanton, and even the president in their true and unfavorable light. The most sanguine of McClellan allies further believed that opinion in the country was shifting in the general’s direction.


40. McClellan, Civil War Papers, 558–59; Chicago Tribune, October 21, November 3, 1863; Wainwright, Diary of Battle, 294; Stephen W. Sears, George B. McClellan, the Young Napoleon (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1988), 358.  

41. McClellan, Civil War Papers, 560–62; Sears, McClellan, 352–53; Gurowski, Diary, 3:102–10; Strong, Diary of George Templeton Strong, 3:409–10; Wainwright, Diary of Battle, 330–31; Patrick, Inside Lincoln’s Army, 336; Abbott, Fallen Leaves, 239.
And that conviction had remarkable staying power. After Ulysses S. Grant became general-in-chief in March 1864, there was again newspaper conjecture about a new appointment for McClellan. Perhaps he would command the Washington defenses or even the Army of the Potomac. Former New York governor Edwin D. Morgan suggested that McClellan be authorized—on the basis of his popularity in the army—to raise fifty thousand troops to be stationed at Elmira, New York, as a reserve force.42 Or more likely, some administration supporters feared, McClellan might simply become the Democratic presidential nominee. To head off this possibility Francis Preston Blair and his son Montgomery attempted to persuade McClellan to disavow a presidential candidacy in exchange for a new military command—presumably of the Washington defenses. Neither McClellan nor Lincoln showed any interest in this arrangement, and it died aborning.43

With the Overland Campaign grinding on and casualties mounting during the summer of 1864, the New York Herald recommended that Grant bring McClellan to Washington. His name alone would supposedly be enough to raise an army of one hundred thousand to operate in conjunction with the Army of the Potomac. When General Jubal Early’s troops threatened Washington, the Herald suggested that McClellan take over the capital’s defenses. Public confidence would soar and gold prices would fall back to a more reasonable level. A flurry of discussion in the army duly weighed both military and political considerations. Rumors flew once again, and Lincoln as usual heard from both sides and perhaps even considered finding a place for McClellan.44

McClellan’s friends and admirers might well have bemoaned the administration’s refusal to act, but in their view the course of the

42. New York Herald, April 1, 19, 1864; Boston Herald, April 20, 1864; Samuel L. M. Barlow to Montgomery Blair, April 26, 1864, Barlow Papers, Huntington Library; Edwin D. Morgan to Abraham Lincoln July 27, 1864, Lincoln Papers, LC.
43. Montgomery Blair to S. L. M. Barlow, April 28, May 1, 11, 1864, Barlow Papers, Henry E. Huntington Library; Francis Preston Blair to Abraham Lincoln, July n.d., 1864, Lincoln Papers, LC; Sears, McClellan, 364–66; McClellan, Civil War Papers, 574–75, 583–85.
Overland Campaign proved they had been right all along. “They [McClellan’s 1862 campaign and Grant’s recent campaign] both had the same objective—Richmond,” artillerist Charles Wainwright wrote at the beginning of a long diary passage comparing the two campaigns. “Both ended in the same way, failure and the James River.” But Wainwright and others also noted the costs of each general’s strategy. Republicans grew sensitive to charges that Grant’s offensive had generated unprecedented casualties. For McClellan’s most ardent supporters, a series of bloody but futile engagements showed a distinct lack of generalship from Grant. “What would be the cry against our old commander, Little Mac, if he had lost so many men in such a short time,” a Michigan sergeant grumbled. A Pennsylvania editor drew an equally sharp and partisan contrast: “Grant is to-day, after a loss of not less than 50,000 since the beginning of the campaign, where McClellan was, with comparatively no loss, when he began the first siege of Richmond.” As the Army of the Potomac advanced toward Petersburg, a Massachusetts artilleryman laid out the case in especially forceful language: “I fail to see what damn great things Grant has done more than George B. done before and he was cursed and reviled by the very men that now pretend to say that Grant is working wonders.” Grant’s movements had in fact been no more rapid than those of the oft-criticized McClellan; if the government had properly supplied McClellan with troops two years ago, the war would have long been over.45 In many ways, the argument had come full circle. Lincoln’s removal of McClellan had been a great blunder, the administration had ignored numerous suggestions and pleas for his return to command, and the nation was now reaping the fruit of all this folly. But soon enough the military campaigns of William T. Sherman and Philip H. Sheridan along with the presidential campaign would make much of this talk and speculation irrelevant. And since then, students of the Civil War have been quick to usher McClellan off the military stage much earlier, in November 1862, forgetting that many soldiers and civilians had not been in such a hurry.