“The Spirit Which You Have Aided to Infuse”: A. Lincoln, Little Mac, Fighting Joe, and the Question of Accountability in Union Command Relations

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In January 1863, Abraham Lincoln wrote a letter to Major General Joseph Hooker on the latter’s assumption of command that month. In the letter Lincoln famously addressed rumors that Hooker had called for a dictator in order to place Union civil-military relations, badly warped in the months that preceded Hooker’s ascension to command, on a more proper footing. Lincoln also decided to address a significant problem that had plagued the Army of the Potomac during and after George B. McClellan’s time in command. “The government will support you to the utmost of its ability, which is neither more nor less than it has done and will do for all commanders,” Lincoln assured Hooker before warning him, “I much fear that the spirit which you have aided to infuse into the Army, of criticizing their Commander, and withholding confidence from him, will now turn upon you. I shall assist you as far as I can, to put it down. Neither you, nor Napoleon, if he were alive again, could get any good out of an army, while such a spirit prevails.”

Praise for Lincoln’s letter, both its content and its tone; its chastisement of Hooker for making the letter necessary; and its expression of concerns about Hooker’s character while he was in command are common in recent literature that touches on the Union war effort and American civil-military relations. In his two-volume biography of Lincoln, for instance, Michael Burlingame proclaimed it one of Lincoln’s

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“most eloquent letters”; writing in the tone of “a wise, benevolent father, he praised Hooker while gently chastising him for insubordination toward superior officers.” In a 2015 study of how American presidents have dealt with generals, retired army colonel Matthew Moten portrayed the letter as a pivotal event in Lincoln’s evolution as commander in chief. Using the letter as an epigraph to set up his discussion of Lincoln’s troubled efforts to manage his generals during the first two years of the war, Moten said the missive was “a pithy encapsulation of all he had learned” from the time McClellan had, to Moten’s deep lament, been the preeminent general in blue and merits recognition as “the most extraordinary exposition of political-military relations in American history.” Moten praises Lincoln’s taunting Hooker “to meet the enemy and defeat him in battle before trying to become Caesar” and that in “demonstrating that he understood the limitations of the army and its new commander . . . [Lincoln] had matured as commander in chief.” Unfortunately, Hooker failed to take heed of Lincoln’s wisdom, compelling the president to, as he had with McClellan, discard “Hooker as another dull implement.”

Clearly, Joseph Hooker possessed severe flaws as a general and as a human being. Reflecting on his experience with the Army of the Potomac, John Gibbon described Hooker as a man who was “in the habit of talking very freely and did not hesitate to criticize not only his brother-officers, but his commander. . . . In fact I don’t think Hooker ever liked any man under whom he was serving.” Historian Brooks D. Simpson declared that while the sobriquet “Fighting Joe” may have been merited, “the truth was that it might have been better had Hooker been known as ‘Bragging Joe’ or ‘Backstabbing Joe,’ for those names were equally warranted.” Hooker was aware of his reputation,

2. Michael Burlingame, Abraham Lincoln: A Life, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 2:487, 495–500. James McPherson, in his study of Lincoln’s efforts as commander in chief, likewise makes clear that Hooker’s character and actions made the “extraordinary” letter necessary and that Hooker’s deficiencies made prophetic the president’s warning that the “spirit” Hooker was responsible for infusing into the army might turn on him. James McPherson, Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 163–64. For his part, Allen Guelzo has argued the letter was the consequence of a need “to bring Hooker to heel by reminding him that it was only with serious reservations that he had been appointed to command,” but, lamentably, “Hooker . . . proceeded to confirm every one of [Lincoln’s] reservations” and it became “Hooker’s turn to fall prey to the same rumor mill he had so often turned himself.” Allen Guelzo, Fateful Lightning: A New History of the Civil War and Reconstruction (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 331–32, 334.

though he later self-servingly attributed his conduct to being “too earnestly in the War to look on blunders approvingly, or silently.”

Yet it would be wrong to attribute to Hooker entire, or even principal, blame for the troubles that attended his time as a member of the Army of the Potomac’s high command. While some of Hooker’s failings were indeed unique to him, it cannot be ignored that to survive in the hothouse environment that was the Army of the Potomac, much less have any prospect of success, he and other generals had to tailor their actions to their environment. On the surface, this task should have been easy enough. After all, at the core of how armies function is the chain of command; one respects the authority and obeys the orders of one’s superiors and in turn receives the same respect and obedience from one’s subordinates. Of course, rarely in any army are things this neat and simple, but in the Army of the Potomac things had become especially problematic by the time Hooker took command. By then, it had been firmly established that members of the high command were not only allowed but also actively encouraged to subvert the chain of command. The man ultimately responsible for this attitude and the resulting actions was not Hooker or McClellan, or any other general for that matter. Rather, it was the man at the very top of the chain of command.

To be sure, given the tumult within the eastern army’s high command during and in the aftermath of McClellan’s time as commander of the Army of the Potomac, the warnings contained in Lincoln’s letter were necessary, and it is understandable that McClellan and Hooker have received considerable criticism for the impact they had on the command culture in the eastern theater. Yet historians who have lauded Lincoln’s management of civil-military relations in general and

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this letter in particular have tended to miss badly where accountability for the situation that made the letter necessary primarily rested. Unquestionably, McClellan and Hooker acted in ways that sowed dissension, but they did so as they endeavored to negotiate an exceedingly problematic environment in regard to command relations, one whose parameters had been set by Lincoln himself.

In fact, from the beginning of the war, Lincoln conducted his duties in ways that all but guaranteed the sort of dissension within the high command that he rather disingenuously deprecated. Instead of being seen as evidence of Lincoln’s greatness as a commander in chief and manager of men, the letter to Hooker must be viewed as the consequence of serious shortcomings in Lincoln’s performance in both regards, shortcomings that had severe consequences for the Union war effort during both McClellan’s and Hooker’s tenures in command. Indeed, Lincoln’s pledge in his letter to Hooker to “assist you as far as I can, to put down . . . the spirit which you have aided to infuse” is one that history can only judge as grossly unfulfilled.5 If Lincoln possessed the degree of self-awareness necessary to be as successful as commander in chief as historians have claimed, he had to recognize it was unfair and manifestly dishonest for him and history to place blame for problems in the high command of the Army of the Potomac exclusively or even primarily at Hooker’s feet—or indeed any general officer’s.6

Lincoln arrived in Washington in February 1861 with little administrative or executive experience, certainly none that would adequately prepare him for the great task of running what would become a massive Union war machine. He could, of course, look to James K. Polk’s relatively recent efforts to manage generals during the war with Mexico, but much in Polk’s conduct was problematic.7 From almost the moment

5. Lincoln to Hooker, January 26, 1863, Basler, Collected Works, 6:79.

6. A notable exception to the refusal of historians to criticize Lincoln for giving officers not only authorization but also encouragement to intrigue against their superiors has been Brooks D. Simpson in his Abraham Lincoln and the Gettysburg Campaign (Gettysburg, Pa.: Farnsworth Military Impressions, 1998) and the aforementioned The Civil War in the East: Struggle, Stalemate, and Victory. Lamentably, as the works cited previously indicate, these studies have not received the recognition nor made the impression on recent scholarship they deserve.

war was declared in May 1846, Polk, motivated by a combination of partisan political and personal differences with Major General Winfield Scott, did all he could to undermine the authority of the army’s commanding general. Polk did this by first sidelining Scott and then endeavoring to appoint a political loyalist above him as lieutenant general. When this effort failed and circumstances gave him little choice but to give Scott permission to take command in the field, Polk ensured that Scott’s principal subordinates in the campaign for Mexico City were loyal Democrats who, should it come to it, he expected to follow the administration’s priorities over Scott’s. The general was able to surmount these difficulties and achieve success, in part by relying heavily on West Point–trained junior officers in his management of the army. Scott’s victories, though, did little to allay Polk’s determination to undermine the general, which Scott exacerbated by helping negotiate a treaty with the Mexican government that did not match Polk’s ambitions, but that the president had no choice but to accept.

The most notorious of the division commanders Polk appointed to check Scott’s authority was Gideon Pillow. Unlike the West Point graduates Scott preferred to work with and through, Pillow had no formal military education and demonstrated precious little competence in the field. Instead, he owed his general’s commission and command of a division purely to his friendship with President Polk. After the campaign for Mexico City was over, Pillow and another division commander made clear their loyalties by provoking a public dispute with Scott. The administration happily seized on the controversy to order a court of inquiry that, to Polk’s delight, effectively tarnished Scott’s reputation and the laurels he so richly won in the course of his brilliant campaign. Hooker, as a key member of Pillow’s staff, not only

8. Historian Richard Bruce Winders notes, “During the war, President Polk appointed . . . thirteen volunteer generals. Although some had previous military experience, these men had one trait in common—all were loyal Democrats with years of service to the party. Winders, Mr. Polk’s Army: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1997), 37.

9. “A twenty-fifth rate country lawyer” was how Lieutenant George B. McClellan, speaking for many officers in the regular army, described Pillow in 1847. “Pillow [did] nothing at Vera Cruz and worse than nothing at Cerro Gordo. I was so unfortunate to be under his command at Cerro Gordo, and to his folly, his worse than puerile imbecility, the miscarriage on his side of the action is entirely to be attributed.” McClellan to Daniel Sturgeon, October 30, 1847, in The Mexican War Diary and Correspondence of George B. McClellan, edited by Thomas W. Cutrer (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 136. A full account of Pillow’s life and career is provided in Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes Jr. and Roy P. Stonesifer Jr., The Life and Wars of Gideon J. Pillow (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).
had a proverbial front-row seat to the entire unseemly spectacle but also was pulled into the controversy and contributed to Polk’s and Pillow’s efforts through his testimony to the court, which Hooker’s leading biographer has described as “not critical of Scott” but “very important in substantiating Pillow’s side of the major issues.” By contributing to Pillow’s efforts, Hooker effectively damned himself in Scott’s eyes and in those of other West Point-educated officers, who respected Scott as a military professional and commander and scorned Pillow as a self-serving military incompetent and political hack.10

As has been well documented by historians, Lincoln had serious qualms about Polk’s management of the conflict with Mexico. Yet, in his management of generals, Lincoln would follow Polk’s example in having few compunctions about injecting dissension into his high command. To his credit, unlike Polk, who blatantly managed the appointment of generals and command assignments for partisan political ends, Lincoln began the war incorporating his appointment of generals into a larger effort to mute partisan differences on behalf of the Union cause. This intention was manifest in his appointment of prominent Democrats such as John McClernand, George McClellan, and Robert Patterson to important commands early in the war.

Nonetheless, Lincoln would encounter considerable difficulty in his management of general officers. Many of the problems that Lincoln and the Union war effort had in the East have, with no little justification, been blamed on George McClellan.11 To be sure, McClellan’s

10. For a fine discussion of the Scott-Pillow controversy, see Timothy D. Johnson, A Gallant Little Army: The Mexico City Campaign (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 257–65. Hooker’s service on Pillow’s staff and participation in the court of inquiry are discussed in Hebert, Fighting Joe Hooker, 29–35. According to legend, when negotiating the surrender of Fort Donelson, Ulysses S. Grant told his Confederate counterpart that he did not want to take Pillow prisoner and that “if I’d got him, I’d let him go again. He would do us more good commanding you fellows!” Hamlin Garland, Ulysses S. Grant: His Life and Character (New York: Doubleday and McClure Company, 1898), 192.

11. Though nearly three decades old, the best full biography of McClellan remains Stephen W. Sears, George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1988). Among the studies that focus on his troubled relationship with his political masters are Brian Holden Reid, “General McClellan and the Politicians,” Parameters 17 (September 1987): 101–12, and John C. Waugh, Lincoln and McClellan: The Troubled Partnership (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2010). My essay “General McClellan and the Politicians Revisited,” Parameters (Summer 2012): 71–85, looks at the subject by incorporating the conceptual analysis of civil-military relations found in the works of Samuel Huntington, Eliot Cohen, and others. It naturally draws heavily on findings regarding McClellan’s political and cultural views and how they effected his approach to the political and military problem of the sectional conflict contained in my McClellan’s War: The Failure of Moderation in the Struggle for the Union (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).
particular personality unquestionably played a role in his problems, for it led him to respond to the problems he faced in ways that fostered trouble between the general and others in the chain of command. It is by no means unreasonable, however, to see McClellan’s conduct in this regard as an understandable response to actions taken by Lincoln and others that he rightly viewed as undermining the chain of command, which he headed, and, by doing so, compromising his efforts to restore the Union.

McClellan arrived in Washington in July 1861 to find himself in “a new & strange position here—Presdt, Cabinet, Genl Scott & all deferring to me—by some strange operation I seem to have become the power of the land.” Unquestionably, the reception McClellan received in Washington had a deleterious effect on the general’s ability to maintain a healthy perspective on matters, swelling what was already a fairly healthy ego. Lincoln’s enthusiasm for McClellan in fact led British journalist William Howard Russell to use the general’s first name as a verb, declaring in his diary, “Every one . . . is willing to do as he bids: the President confides in him, and ‘Georges’ him.”12 Indeed, probably no one did more to distort McClellan’s sense of his own importance and place in the chain of command during his initial month in Washington than the president. That there was a problem with this lionizing became evident only weeks after McClellan’s arrival, when the general’s actions provoked a clash with Scott that would expose Lincoln’s issues respecting the chain of command.

The immediate issue was McClellan’s expressions of concern to members of the Lincoln administration over the security of Washington in early August 1861. When Scott properly objected to his subordinate’s assessment of affairs and the tone of his correspondence, McClellan saw fit to write directly to Lincoln to withdraw a letter on the matter that the commanding general found objectionable. Though Lincoln showed McClellan’s letter to Scott “for the patriotic purpose of healing differences,” Scott nonetheless complained to Secretary of War Simon Cameron about “deliberation between [McClellan] and some of the members of the Cabinet, by whom all the greater war questions are to be settled, without resort to or consultation with me, the nominal General-in-Chief of the Army. . . . He is in frequent communication with portions of the Cabinet and on matters appertaining

to me. That freedom of access and consultation have, very naturally, deluded the junior general into a feeling of indifference toward his senior.”13

Scott was too aware of how things stood and too experienced in such situations to miss the fact that McClellan had the professional respect and personal fondness of the president to a degree that the old general would never enjoy. Consequently, rather than deal with the disrespect for his authority that the future promised to hold, Scott used the issue of his advanced age and poor health to request replacement as general-in-chief. “It would be as idle for me as it would be against the dignity of my years,” Scott declared, “to be filing daily complaints against an ambitious junior.” Lincoln, though, did not immediately act on Scott’s request, nor did he see any reason to curtail his preference for personal consultation with McClellan (to the point the general eventually felt compelled to find hideaways in the capital from a “‘browsing’ Presdt”) rather than working through Scott, or to order other members of his administration to do the same.14

Finally, in mid-September Scott felt he had to respond to McClellan’s ongoing disregard for the chain of command, and to the civil authorities who were enabling and encouraging him in this regard, by drafting an order to be issued to the army stating, “junior officers on duty [are] not permitted to correspond with the general-in-chief, or other commander, on current official business, except through intermediate commanders; and the same rule applies to correspondence with the President direct, or with him through the Secretary of War, unless it be by the special invitation or request of the President.” When he sent the order to Cameron on October 4, Scott included with it a letter in which he stated, “I hailed the arrival here of Major-General McClellan . . . he, however, had hardly entered upon his new duties, when, encouraged to communicate directly with the President and


14. McClellan to his wife, October 31, 1861, in Sears, Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 113. By early September, Scott’s authority had been so diminished that one man who encountered the general on the street declared afterward in his diary that “two months ago . . . his was the most honored name in the States. . . . He is still Commander-in-Chief of the army, and affects to direct movements and to control the disposition of the troops, but a power greater than his increases steadily at General McClellan’s head-quarters.” Russell, My Diary North and South, 519–20.
certain members of the Cabinet, he in a few days forgot that he had any intermediate commander, and has now long prided himself in treating me with uniform neglect.” In light of McClellan’s conduct—and by extension that of the president and his cabinet—Scott understandably felt compelled to wonder “has then, a senior no corrective power over a junior officer in case of such persistent neglect and disobedience?” He dismissed the possibility of arresting McClellan and trying him by court martial, though he thought it “would probably soon cure the evil,” on the grounds that open conflict between him and McClellan “would be highly encouraging to the enemies and depressing to the friends of the Union.” Thus Scott concluded the only course available to him was continue his “long forbearance . . . till the arrival of Major General [Henry] Halleck” in Washington to take his place as commanding general.15

Scott would get neither respect for his preference in regard to his successor nor fulfillment of his faint hope that the administration might curtail McClellan’s insubordination. Just the opposite occurred. When what McClellan privately labeled “the Scott war” reached its culmination in late October, Lincoln decided the time had come to accept Scott’s resignation. McClellan, not Halleck, was chosen as Scott’s successor. Lincoln was correct when he later asserted that “the designation of General McClellan is therefore in considerable degree, the selection of the Country as well as of the Executive.”16 However, by not punishing but rather rewarding an officer who had so blatantly and disrespectfully defied the chain of command, Lincoln’s actions also sent a powerful message to the army. It was one that would have resonated with anyone, like Hooker, who might have been wondering about the fate of those who challenged their superiors’ authority with Abraham Lincoln as president.

Indeed, Hooker owed the first step in his rise to prominence to an incident that suggested that it did one no damage to bad-mouth, in front of the commander in chief, others who exercised military command. Upon reaching Washington in June 1861, Hooker encountered difficulty securing what he deemed a worthy place in the Union war effort and probably attributed it (no doubt correctly) to Scott’s memories of the Pillow affair. Finally, though, Hooker secured a meeting

with Lincoln in late July and made clear in its course that he was a man who would not hesitate to tear others down in order to build himself up. “Mr. President,” declared Hooker, “I was at the battle of Bull Run the other day, and it is neither vanity or boasting in me to declare that I am a damned sight better General than you, Sir, had on that field.”17 Appointment as a brigadier general followed soon thereafter, along with command of a brigade in the force McClellan was organizing around Washington. What Hooker thought of the subsequent clash between McClellan and Scott is not clear, but he could not have been unaware of it. Nor could he have missed the fact that, when left to Lincoln’s arbitration, it was resolved in favor of the “ambitious junior.”

McClellan had served in Scott’s army in Mexico and unflinchingly supported Scott in his struggles with the Polk administration, but he did not seem to have let the Pillow controversy color his dealings with Hooker. This lack of prejudice was evident in October when Hooker was elevated to division command and ordered to Budd’s Ferry, Maryland, to watch the Potomac downstream from Washington. This assignment, given the distance between Hooker’s headquarters and the capital, was in effect a quasi-independent command. It was also one of the more important assignments any division commander received in McClellan’s army. In addition to guarding the lower Potomac, it made Hooker the natural choice to lead a crossing of the Potomac below Washington to support an effort to turn the Confederate position at Manassas Junction, which would have given Hooker a significant role in the operational plan McClellan was inclined to implement prior to his appointment as general-in-chief in November.18

Indeed, in early December, one month after McClellan had assumed office as general-in-chief, Lincoln wrote to the general to propose such a move as part of a larger effort to attack the Confederates at Manassas Junction. McClellan, though, replied on December 10 that he had his “mind actively turned towards another plan of campaign” but did not describe it. Lincoln did not ask for details and instead in word and deed made clear that he intended to defer to McClellan and the

17. Hebert, Fighting Joe Hooker, 49.

18. In March 1862, Fitz John Porter told Samuel Heintzelman that McClellan’s plan in September 1861 had been to cross the Occoquan but that “in Nov . . . he changed it. Franklin and Andrew Porter also knew of it. I doubt whether another officer did.” Entry for March 8, 1862, Heintzelman diary, Samuel Peter Heintzelman Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, reel 7.
chain of command in the development and execution of operational plans.\textsuperscript{19}

Lincoln’s restraint in this regard, though, did not last. In the month that followed, McClellan fell ill with typhoid fever. Thus Lincoln, in part due to urging by his cabinet and pressure from the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, once again asserted himself in the management of the army by engaging directly with the general-in-chief’s subordinates. On January 10, Lincoln decided to call two of McClellan’s division commanders, Irvin McDowell and William B. Franklin, to the capital and consult with them regarding the time and place for the army to initiate operations. Together, and in meetings with the president and members of his cabinet, McDowell and Franklin spent nearly three days engaged in discussion and debate over operational options, organizational requirements, and timelines for operations.\textsuperscript{20} In what could not have been an oversight, unless one is to believe the president was inexcusably clueless as to the effect this might have on the general and his relations with the officers involved, at no point did Lincoln notify McClellan. Instead, McClellan had to learn about what the president and his subordinates were up to from a third party, Edwin Stanton. Under the circumstances, McClellan would have been hard pressed to not give credence to Stanton’s description of the participants in the meetings “counting on your death and . . . already dividing among themselves your military goods and chattels.”\textsuperscript{21}

That McClellan would see not just a lack of respect for the chain of command but also conspiratorial motives behind the whole affair was eminently understandable—and was evident in the grouchy, defensive tone of his contributions to the last of the councils on January 19. "Memorandum to George B. McClellan on Potomac Campaign,” (ca. December 1, 1861), Basler, \textit{Collected Works}, 5:35; McClellan to Lincoln, December 10, 1861, Sears, \textit{Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan}, 143; Allen Thorndike Rice, ed., \textit{Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln by Distinguished Men of His Time} (New York: North American Review, 1888), 74–75.


\textsuperscript{21} George B. McClellan, \textit{McClellan’s Own Story: The War for the Union, the Soldiers Who Fought It, the Civilians Who Directed It, and His Relations to It and to Them}, edited by William C. Prime (New York: Charles L. Webster, 1887), 155.
From his experiences as witness to Scott’s difficulties during the Mexican War and his own “Scott war,” McClellan understood as well as anyone the dangers of a chief executive encouraging those who might be disgruntled with their place in the chain of command. Making matters worse, the U.S. Congress’s Joint Committee on the Conduct of War had recently conducted hearings in which division commanders were asked about McClellan’s plans. This questioning was making evident, and exacerbating, friction in the Army of the Potomac high command between division commanders like Franklin and Fitz John Porter, who enjoyed McClellan’s personal friendship and full professional confidence, and more senior officers, like Edwin Sumner and Samuel Heintzelman, who did not. Moreover, although McClellan may not have been aware of it, members of the committee were then directly in contact with Heintzelman, fanning and feeding off his resentment toward the much younger McClellan.

In addition, behind closed doors members of the committee urged Lincoln to separate McClellan’s duties as general-in-chief and commander of the Army of the Potomac, with the latter assignment being


23. When asked if he had ever been consulted by McClellan on military affairs or had any knowledge of McClellan’s plans, Heintzelman informed the committee that he had “never been consulted” and had “not the slightest idea—not the slightest” of McClellan’s plans. He also testified that “chief officers” in the army felt slighted by McClellan and that he “thought it very singular that I never had a question asked me about the position of affairs.” Heintzelman testimony, December 24, 1861, in U.S. Congress, Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, 3 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1863), 1:117–18; 120–21. Hereafter cited as JCCW (1863).

Two days later, Irvin McDowell stated that while McClellan had “always expressed himself so kindly towards me,” he did not know McClellan’s plans. McDowell testimony, December 26, 1861, ibid., 131. That same day, Franklin informed the committee McClellan had “consulted with me quite often” and that he did “know something in regard to” McClellan’s plans but would not disclose them without seeing McClellan first. He did, though, concede that he thought there “is something wrong about” McClellan’s not having had a council of war with his division commanders. Franklin testimony, December 26, 1861, ibid., 122, 129, 130. On December 28, Porter told the committee that he had “a portion of General McClellan’s plans, a small portion only—and I decline giving any information whatever in relation to future movements.” He also stated that while McClellan had not convened a council of war of all the division commanders, he had discussed plans with “three or four” division commanders. Porter testimony, December 28, 1861, ibid., 171–72, 178.

given to McDowell. There is no evidence whatsoever that McDowell, while understandably miffed at first at McClellan’s coming to Washington to take command after First Manassas, was anything but a loyal subordinate and in return, though not to the extent Porter and Franklin did, initially enjoyed McClellan’s professional respect. Yet, that those seeking to reduce McClellan’s power were seeing in McDowell a potential ally, given his previous experience in independent command and good relationship with Treasury Secretary Salmon Chase, an ally of the Joint Committee, was not hard to anticipate. This combined with McDowell’s being a participant in the councils of war to inflict massive damage on his relationship with McClellan that, to the detriment of both and consequently to the entire Union war effort in Virginia in 1862, never healed.25

Of course, it is necessary to recognize that the president’s actions, while unfortunate in their effects, were also understandable. McClellan’s illness and the prospect of a vacuum at the head of the army were matters Lincoln could not ignore, and his seeking the advice of others and deciding to take a stronger hand as commander in chief were eminently reasonable. Nonetheless, by taking these actions, he had altered the civil-military climate in a way that was decidedly problematic. With McDowell being pulled away from him, senior division commanders resenting him, hostility from Congress growing, and Edwin Stanton’s friendship turning to hostility upon his seizing the reins at the War Department, it was entirely reasonable for McClellan

25. Salmon P. Chase, Inside Lincoln’s Cabinet: The Civil War Diaries of Salmon P. Chase, edited by David Donald (New York: Longmans, Green, 1954), 57–58. In his memoirs, McClellan bitterly complained that McDowell “intrigued against me to the utmost of his power,” a charge which there is little in the historical record to support. McClellan, McClellan’s Own Story, 71. Indeed, throughout the spring of 1862, McDowell’s correspondence and conduct show he was in fact much more in sympathy with and supportive of McClellan’s take on matters than Lincoln’s. See, for instance, McDowell to his wife, June 15, August 1, 1862, Irvin McDowell Letters, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park Library, Fredericksburg, Va.; Franklin, “First Great Crime of the War,” 81; McDowell to Lincoln, May 24, 1862, OR, vol. 12, pt. 3: 220–21; and Latham Anderson, “McDowell’s Explanation of the Failure of the First Corps to Join McClellan,” in Sketches of War History, 1861–1865: Papers Read before the Ohio Commandery of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, 1903–1908, edited by Theodore F. Allen, Edward S. McKee, and J. Gordon Taylor (Cincinnati: Monfort and Company, 1908), 6:71–77. Given his important role in the Union war effort in 1861–62 and his extensive service in the postwar U.S. Army, the lack of a good, modern biography of McDowell is a significant gap in Civil War historiography. Probably the best source available on his prewar life and wartime career is “Major General Irvin McDowell,” in Whitelaw Reid, Ohio in the War: Her Statesmen, Her Generals, and Soldiers, 2 vols. (New York: Moore, Wilstach, and Baldwin, 1868), 1: 656–94.
to fear that his authority as the head of the military chain of command had—with the president being an active contributor to the process—in the matter of a mere month been seriously undermined.  

Making matters worse, in the month that followed the meetings with McDowell and Franklin, a serious disagreement between Lincoln and McClellan emerged over operational planning. Instead of directly attacking the Confederates at Manassas Junction or crossing the Potomac just below Washington, McClellan proposed a much bolder turning movement that would have the Army of the Potomac operate against Richmond along the rivers of the Virginia Tidewater that were south of the Potomac. McClellan assumed this move would force the Confederates to retreat from Manassas and thus leave Washington and the Shenandoah Valley completely secure; Lincoln was not so confident regarding the soundness of this assumption. Nonetheless, in February Lincoln decided to let McClellan implement his plan. In early March, though, he called the general to his office and, according to McClellan, stated “it had been represented to him (and he certainly conveyed to me the distinct impression that he regarded these representations as well-founded) that my plan of campaign . . . was conceived with the traitorous intent of removing its defenders from Washington, and thus giving over to the enemy the capital and the government.” McClellan, understandably, objected vehemently to the accusation and told the president that he had a meeting scheduled with his division commanders that day and offered to present his plan to them for their take on the matter.

By doing this, McClellan unwisely gave Lincoln an opportunity to further undermine his authority. Lincoln was not slow to seize it. Eight of the twelve division commanders, it turned out, approved McClellan’s plan. Opposed to it were three of the army’s senior division commanders, McDowell, Heintzelman, and Edwin Sumner, and John Barnard, the army’s chief engineer, while Erasmus Keyes “voted,” in Barnard’s words, “with some qualification.” (Hooker was the lone division commander who was not present at the meeting, which undoubtedly was to his benefit, as he was not compelled to take


a side in the dispute and thus alienate either McClellan or the president.) Neither Lincoln nor Stanton was pleased when the results of the council reached them. Nonetheless, the following day Lincoln told the twelve generals he had decided to approve McClellan’s plan. He also told them that he had made another decision. The army’s divisions would be combined to form five corps, a measure all of the division commanders had advised Lincoln they believed to be necessary.

McClellan himself believed such a move was necessary as well, had told the president and others as much weeks before, and though he would undoubtedly have preferred junior men like Porter, Franklin, and perhaps William F. Smith and Hooker as his principal subordinates, deferred to seniority when he told Lincoln his initial choices to lead the corps. But by March, undoubtedly due to the undermining of the chain of command by Congress and the president and his advisers, and their seeing the senior division commanders as allies in their efforts, the general had become resistant to the move. Lincoln, though, had clearly determined by March 8 that the commander of the North’s principal army needed, if not complete emasculation of his authority, at least a major check on it. It is also clear that, like Polk, he had identified in the appointment of general officers the means to apply that check. This was evident in the five generals selected to command corps—McDowell, Sumner, Heintzelman, Keyes, and Nathaniel Banks. Three were on record as being opposed to McClellan’s strategy, and it was clear to anyone inside and outside the army that they were not members of the general’s circle of trusted subordinates.

The meaning and ramifications of Lincoln’s decision were immediately evident to observers in the capital, who rightly interpreted it as a sign of the president’s declining confidence in McClellan and, in the words of one of the general’s critics in Washington, “a victory over the mischievous purposes of McClellan.” But, to be fair to Lincoln,


29. “There were some blank faces,” Heintzelman recorded in his diary when Lincoln announced the appointment, “as I am confident some others expected a place.” Entry for March 8, 1862, Heintzelman Diary, Heintzelman Papers, reel 7. “President’s General War Order No. 2,” March 8, 1862, Basler ed., Collected Works, 5:150–51.

it is difficult to see what else he could have realistically done in the selection of corps commanders that would have avoided creating deep divisions within the Army of the Potomac’s high command. To have appointed corps commanders more to McClellan’s liking would have certainly made for a more smoothly operating chain of command in the Army of the Potomac but would have required a high degree of moral courage on the president’s part. It would have been understandably taken as an insult by the senior officers and angered influential members of Congress and the administration who distrusted McClellan and saw a need for friends in the army high command who could check and provide a counterbalance to what they believed to be the general’s problematic perspective on how to manage military affairs. Still, there is no question that in taking the actions he did, Lincoln followed in Polk’s footsteps, sowing the seeds for serious and enduring problems in the Army of the Potomac high command.

As a consequence of the army reorganization, Hooker found his division assigned to Heintzelman’s Third Corps. This was significant, for Heintzelman was keenly aware that he did not fully enjoy McClellan’s confidence. Also among the division commanders who found themselves under Heintzelman were Porter and Charles Hamilton. Porter was perhaps McClellan’s most trusted subordinate, as would be evident during the Yorktown siege when McClellan, willing to provoke such intense grumbling that it reached Lincoln, appointed Porter “director of the siege.” Hamilton, on the other hand, would be removed from command by McClellan personally for his conduct, despite pleas from Lincoln to reconsider the move on the grounds that when McClellan “relieved General Hamilton of his command . . . [he] thereby lost the confidence of at least one of [his] best friends in the Senate.”31

Hamilton’s replacement would be Philip Kearny, who brought to division command an impressive military record but also many of the negative character traits that Hooker would soon exhibit. Kearny had an impressive record as an officer and unquestioned value as a fighter,

31. Lincoln to McClellan, May 9, 1862, Basler, Collected Works, 5:208. McClellan refused to reconsider Hamilton’s replacement, despite a note from Lincoln on May 21 reporting that he had “just been waited on by a large Committee who present a petition signed by twenty-three Senators and eighty four Representatives, asking me to restore Gen. Hamilton to his Division. I wish to do this, and yet I do not wish to be understood as rebuking you.” Lincoln to McClellan, May 21, 1862, ibid., 227; McClellan to Lincoln, May 22, 1862, in Sears, Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 273.
but had difficulty accepting his subordinate position, had no shortage of confidence in his own judgment, and lacked self-discipline, all of which made him a chronic malcontent who was incapable of keeping his complaints about those higher in the chain of command to himself. With Heintzelman as its first commander, the Hamilton imbroglio, Porter’s presence, and Kearny’s arrival, it is not surprising that the corps Hooker belonged to would have a difficult relationship with McClellan, emerge as a discordant element within the Army of the Potomac during the Peninsula Campaign, and be a source of almost constant friction within the army until it was abolished in early 1864.32

During the Yorktown siege, Heintzelman did not make it difficult to figure out his attitude toward his commanding officer. For part of the operation, he allowed a correspondent from the *New York Tribune*, a newspaper that was aligned with the Radical Republicans who had courted Heintzelman and become hostile to McClellan during the previous winter, to share his tent. Not surprisingly, articles criticizing McClellan soon began appearing in the paper. Heintzelman also noted in his journal on April 29 that the army commander’s closeness to Porter was creating “great dissatisfaction” among fellow generals and made clear that he was someone who was perceived to be sympathetic to their complaints. “No less than three generals report to me about it,” he declared, “and one of them this morning was afraid his name would have to be changed to Porter before he would be able to do anything.”33

Then came the May 5, 1862, Battle of Williamsburg. Although it was Hooker’s and Kearny’s commands who carried the heaviest burden in the fighting, McClellan’s initial report was most enthusiastic about the conduct of Winfield Scott Hancock and his command. Though McClellan subsequently labored to correct the misperception this created after more information about the battle reached him, neither Hooker nor Kearny ever forgave McClellan for failing to accord their service

32. “Oddly enough,” historian Stephen R. Tafe observes, “although McClellan’s antennae were finely tuned to detect enemies both real and imagined, he never recognized the growing cancer in the Third Corps and he continued to praise Kearny and especially Hooker even as they denounced him with increasing vehemence and fury behind his back.” Stephen R. Tafe, *Commanding the Army of the Potomac* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 19–21.

the immediate recognition they believed their conduct and abilities merited.

Then, after the battle, McClellan saw in what he perceived to be dubious performances by his corps commanders a rationale for reestablishing the authority over the army that Lincoln had diminished. He wrote to the War Department asking for something he believed any general needed but he had been deprived of, namely “full & complete authority to relieve from duty with this army Commanders of Corps or Divisions who prove themselves incompetent.” Lincoln responded by advising the general on May 9 that he was “constantly told . . . that you consult and communicate with nobody but General Fitz John Porter, and perhaps General Franklin.” Lincoln then asked McClellan if he truly felt “strong enough, even with my help—to set your foot upon the necks of Sumner, Heintzelman, and Keyes all at once? This is a practical and very serious question for you . . . Do the Commanders of Corps disobey your orders in any thing?” Lincoln was certainly correct that McClellan faced a “practical and very serious question” in trying to figure out how to deal with his subordinates. In the course of chastising the general, Lincoln also deemed it necessary to defend the decision to organize corps on the basis of “the unanimous opinion of every military man I could get an opinion from, and every modern military book.” Yet at no point did Lincoln acknowledge that it was his selection of the particular corps commanders, whom he knew McClellan had significant personal and professional issues with, and his creation of an environment where a general could never be fully sure of subordinates he himself did not handpick, that had fueled the problem.

McClellan accepted authorization that came that day from Washington to reorganize his army as he saw fit but, with Lincoln’s warning in mind, decided on a middle course in taking advantage of his


35. McClellan to Stanton, May 8, 1862, Sears, Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 258.

36. Lincoln to McClellan, May 9, 1862, in Basler, Collected Works, 5:208–9. The president said he “had no word from Sumner, Heintzelman, or Keyes” on matters within the army, but it is hard to believe that Lincoln’s sources were not in some way close to these officers.
new authority. After a council of war on May 12 to which only Porter and Franklin were invited, McClellan decided not to relieve Sumner, Heintzelman, and Keyes. Instead, he came up with a solution that was undoubtedly unsatisfactory to all parties involved but was probably the least objectionable one available. He kept Sumner, Heintzelman, and Keyes in command of corps but shuffled the divisions to create two additional corps and assigned them to Porter and Franklin. Hooker and Kearny remained under Heintzelman, while Porter’s division was separated from the Third Corps and combined with another to create the Fifth Corps under Porter’s command. It was with this organization that the Army of the Potomac advanced to the proverbial gates of Richmond in May 1862 and then fell back to the banks of the James River in the course of the Seven Days Battles of late June and early July.

In the aftermath of the Seven Days, Lincoln made his way to the Army of the Potomac’s encampment at Harrison’s Landing to personally see for himself the army’s condition. It was evident that Lincoln’s confidence in McClellan’s approach to operations was exhausted. The Shenandoah Valley Campaign and Seven Days Battles had reinforced the president’s nagging skepticism about the wisdom of operating against Richmond from the Peninsula and his desire to look to officers who were nominally McClellan’s subordinates in his search for takes on matters that were more agreeable with his own. Once again driving home the dual roles of corps commanders—to faithfully execute the orders of the army commander while feeling free to undermine his authority by bypassing the chain of command when they disagreed with the army commander—while visiting Harrison’s Landing, Lincoln not only spoke to McClellan but also solicited the views of the corps commanders. He inquired as to the condition of their commands, the security of the army at Harrison’s Landing, the health of the encampment there, and, most critically, “if it were desired to get the Army away, could it be safely effected?”

By the time the army reached Harrison’s Landing, Hooker’s own confidence in McClellan had taken a severe hit, as was evident in a newspaper whose editor was a frequent guest at Hooker’s headquarters. Still, his disenchantment did not quite match Kearny’s, in part because McClellan made clear that he considered Hooker one of his

38. Memorandum of Interviews between Lincoln and Officers of the Army of the Potomac, July 8–9, 1862, in Basler, Collected Works, 5:310–12.
more able subordinates by pushing for Hooker’s promotion to major general, telling him privately of his preference for him over some of the officers then exercising corps command, and placing him in command of an expedition to reoccupy Malvern Hill in early August. Indeed, in testimony to the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, Hooker claimed he had urged McClellan in August to disregard orders from Washington to evacuate the Peninsula and instead attack Richmond, recognizing “if we were unsuccessful it would probably cost him his head, but that he might as well die for an old sheep as for a lamb.”

In any case, by then Lincoln, who had never liked the Peninsula strategy and felt his concerns had been validated by the course of events during the first half of 1862, had already taken actions that he believed would begin to remedy the situation. The first was his decision in late June to combine the forces that had been operating in northern Virginia and the Shenandoah Valley into a single command, which was christened the Army of Virginia. To command it, Lincoln selected Major General John Pope, who had a record of success in the western theater and hailed from a family that Lincoln had a longstanding relationship with. Perhaps most significant, Pope, being Republican in his political sympathies, was keenly aware that members of the party both inside and outside the administration greatly desired the presence in the capital of someone in uniform who shared their growing disdain for McClellan and his “pets” in the Army of the Potomac. Thus, on his arrival in Washington, Pope let it be known to anyone who would listen—and Radical Republicans like Salmon Chase, Zachariah Chandler, and Ben Wade gave him plenty of opportunities to do so—that he believed McClellan was unfit to command and fundamentally wrong-headed in his views on conducting operations. Pope seized opportunities during his testimony to the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War to make clear he shared Lincoln’s disagreement with McClellan’s taking the Army of the Potomac to the York-James Peninsula. That this was the case became clear when Pope issued a series of orders promising to wage a harder war


against southern civilians and, most famously, a proclamation to his army on July 14 in which he declared,

I have come from the West, where we have always seen the backs of our enemies. . . . Dismiss from your minds certain phrases, which I am sorry to find so much in vogue amongst you. I hear constantly of “taking strong positions and holding them,” of “lines of retreat,” and of “bases of supplies.” Let us discard such ideas. . . . Let us study the probable lines of retreat of our opponents, and leave our own to take care of themselves. . . . Success and glory are in the advance, disaster and shame lurk in the rear.41

Although they pleased Lincoln and other Republicans, Pope’s actions sowed the seeds for trouble when he found himself—as circumstances almost inevitably dictated he would—in situations where the ability to enjoy mutual trust with subordinate officers was critical.

41. John Pope to the Officers and Soldiers of the Army of Virginia, July 14, 1862, OR, vol. 12, pt. 3: 473–74. Certainly neither Lincoln nor his advisers could have been surprised that Pope’s actions would be poorly received by McClellan and his associates. Pope’s orders and proclamations led Porter to declare that “Genl Pope has not improved since his youth and has now written himself down what the military world has long known, an ass. His address to his troops will make him ridiculous in the eyes of military men . . . and will reflect no credit on Mr. Lincoln. . . . If the theory he proclaims is practiced you may look for disaster.” By July 22, McClellan was writing his wife with unseemly delight that it appeared “the Pope bubble is likely to be suddenly collapsed . . . the paltry young man who wanted to teach me the art of war will in less than a week either be in full retreat or badly whipped.” Porter to J. C. G. Kennedy, July 17, 1862, Fitz John Porter Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, container 3; McClellan to Marcy, July 13, 1862, Sears, Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 356; McClellan to his wife, July 22, 1862, ibid., 368.
found it understandably difficult to fully confide in or trust officers from the Army of the Potomac, above all Porter, who were tainted by their association with McClellan—and vice versa, which invariably had a negative impact on the management, course, and outcome of operations.42

During the Second Manassas Campaign, Hooker appears to have kept whatever thoughts he had about Pope and McClellan to himself, focused on leading a division, and emerged from the campaign as one of the few bright spots for the Union Army. The same, though, could not be said of Kearny. During the campaign, Kearny deliberately and maliciously exacerbated Pope’s anxiety regarding the degree to which he could trust officers from McClellan’s army.43 He then proceeded during the battle to demonstrate that he believed himself free to disregard orders whenever he wished, which compromised Federal efforts on August 29. In contrast, Hooker attracted further positive attention by his conduct in fighting at Kettle Run and at Second Manassas. When Pope’s defeat placed affairs back under McClellan’s direction, Hooker’s promotion to command of the Army of Virginia’s Third Corps followed. Although what would soon thereafter be rechristened the First Corps, Army of the Potomac, had suffered heavily during the Second Manassas Campaign and appeared to McClellan to be “in bad condition as to discipline and everything else,” the general was

42. Specifically, Pope might well have avoided being driven from the field at Manassas on August 30 had he heeded Porter’s counsel regarding the presence of James Longstreet’s wing of the Army of the Northern Virginia on the battlefield. Instead, angry that Porter had not fully complied with orders the previous day (because unbeknownst to Pope, due in part to his unwillingness to trust Porter’s reports on the matter, the situation on the ground rendered them impracticable) he refused to listen to Porter on August 30, ordered another assault on the Confederate line, and set the conditions for the Confederate attack that forced the Union army to leave the field in defeat. John J. Hennessy, Return to Bull Run: The Campaign and Battle of Second Manassas (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 311–437.

43. A participant in an August 26 meeting at Pope’s headquarters later recalled being “struck with the earnestness with which General Kearny was trying to impress upon General Pope the utter futility of hoping for any help from the Fifth Corps of the Army of the Potomac. He was perfectly fierce in his denunciation of what he called the spirit of McClellanism pervading officers in high command of that army. . . . Kearny insisted that cooperation on the part of the officer in command of the Fifth Corps should not be looked for nor depended upon.” Daniel Leasure, “Personal Observations and Experiences in the Pope Campaign in Virginia,” in Glimpses of the Nation’s Struggle: A Series of Papers Read before the Minnesota Commandery of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States (St. Paul, Minn.: St. Paul Book and Stationery, 1887), 147–48.
confident that “Hooker will . . . soon bring them out of the kinks & will make them fight if anyone can.”

Of course, during the Maryland Campaign, Hooker’s performance only led to a rise in his standing. After Antietam, where McClellan initially delegated conduct of the battle on the Union right to him and he was wounded in the foot, the man John Gibbon proclaimed four days later to be “the best fighting general in the army” received a warm letter from McClellan expressing “intense regret” at his injury and informing him that he had asked Washington to promote him to brigadier general in the regular army. The guns had barely fallen silent in western Maryland, though, before Hooker had set his eyes on replacing McClellan as commander of the Army of the Potomac. His appreciation of the rules Lincoln had established for how the game was played was evident in his understanding that McClellan’s efforts on his behalf, while gratifying, were of much less value to his ambitions than the good opinion of Lincoln and Republicans in Washington.

Within days after his wounding, Hooker made his way to the capital. On September 23, 24, and 25, Hooker, keenly understanding that McClellan’s stock with the administration was low, let Secretary of Treasury Chase know that he shared his belief that McClellan’s generalship was too cautious, resulting in missed opportunities on the Peninsula, and that if the army had been under his own leadership, things would have been much different. Hooker did the same in a meeting with Vice President Hannibal Hamlin and continued his cultivation of good relations with the bitterly anti-McClellan New York Tribune, whose correspondent George Smalley had been at Hooker’s side for much of the Battle of Antietam and written glowingly of the general’s conduct afterward, in part by letting it be known that he fully endorsed the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. Pope further advanced Hooker’s cause on September 30 when he warned the War Department of a “pretorian faction in the Army of the Potomac” that was loyal to McClellan. To this faction, Pope declared, “Hooker, by his rising reputation and known hostility to them and their purposes, is becoming dangerous. . . . Do not allow such transparent intrigue

44. McClellan to his wife, September 12, 1862, Sears, Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 450.
45. Gibbon to his wife, September 21, 1862, John Gibbon Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia; McClellan to Hooker, September 20, 1862, Sears, Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 474.
to induce you to consent that Hooker should be separated from that army. You will find him a true man and one of incalculable use.”

Although Hooker’s injury gave him time to build his standing with McClellan’s growing legion of enemies inside and outside the Lincoln administration, it kept him from the army when Lincoln finally decided it was time to be rid of McClellan. Despite Hooker’s open lusting for the post, during the first week of November Lincoln selected Ambrose Burnside to succeed McClellan as commander of the Army of the Potomac. When Burnside, as Washington anticipated, urged that McClellan be retained in command, the officer from the War Department who delivered the news made clear to Burnside that the administration was finished with General McClellan. The only question was who the successor would be. If Burnside did not accept the job, he would force the administration to turn to someone else, someone who did not share his sense of humility or scruples when it came to tending to his ambitions. Shortly thereafter, corps commander Darius Couch recalled that Burnside told him “he did not like to take the command, but that he did so to keep it from going to someone manifestly unfit for it. I assumed that he meant Hooker.”

A few days later, Hooker returned to the army and assumed command of the Fifth Corps, whose former commander, Fitz John Porter, was then preparing to make his way to Washington to stand trial. The formal charges involved Porter’s conduct during the Second Manassas Campaign, for which he would be convicted and punished—a conviction that the emergence of evidence in the decades that followed


48. During McClellan’s last month in command, one officer in the Army of the Potomac concluded the army’s difficulties were rooted in the inability of its commander to demand and expect obedience from those below him. This, he believed, was a consequence of the fact that “the commanders of corps are appointed by the President, really by Stanton, and cannot be removed by McClellan; while any other general officer, if relieved of command, has only to go to Washington and cry loudly against McClellan to be either reinstated or given a better position.” Ultimately, he decided that “an army to do really great things must be a despotism, and entirely under the control of its commander.” Charles S. Wainwright, A Diary of Battle: The Personal Journals of Charles S. Wainwright, edited by Allan Nevins (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998 [1962]), 118.

proved unmerited, though political partisanship would delay Porter’s redemption for years. In addition to being a miscarriage of justice, the court-martial of Porter was one of the more bitter fruits of Lincoln’s management of his generals. By fostering an environment where generals felt encouraged to openly criticize, intrigue against, and defy the judgment of their superiors, Lincoln had made something like the Porter case almost inevitable. Pope’s inability to see anything other than angling on behalf of personal ambition and a willingness to undermine perceived rivals in Porter’s actions was not surprising in the slightest. After all, this sort of conduct had enabled Pope to win the hearts of Lincoln and other members of his administration upon his arrival in Washington. It was only natural to assume that Porter was playing the same game, for that was the game in the East, a game whose rules Lincoln had established. The purpose of Porter’s court-martial was not to put an end to the game—only Lincoln himself could do that and events would show he was not willing to do so in January 1863—but to send a message to McClellan loyalists within the Army of the Potomac that they would be at a disadvantage in the game and should tread lightly. Given that loyalty to McClellan and disdain for Washington meddling remained strong in the army and could not be expunged without a dangerously sweeping purge of the officer corps, this could only doom whatever faint hope existed for a truly healthy command climate in the Army of the Potomac.

50. As one of the most significant figures in the early history of the Army of the Potomac and the central character in one of its most bitter and significant controversies, Porter and his case have been examined in a number of noteworthy works. Henry Gabler, “The Fitz John Porter Case: Politics and Military Justice” (Ph.D. diss.: City University of New York, 1979); Stephen W. Sears; “The Court Martial of Fitz John Porter,” in Sears, Controversies and Commanders, 52–73 and, especially, John J. Hennessy, “Conservatism’s Dying Ember: Fitz John Porter and the Union War, 1862,” in Rafuse, Corps Commanders in Blue, 14–60.

51. John J. Hennessy, “Evangelizing for Union, 1863: The Army of the Potomac, Its Enemies at Home, and a New Solidarity,” Journal of the Civil War Era 4 (December 2014), 541. It was not just in the Army of the Potomac where Lincoln’s management of generals was sowing trouble at this time. During the fall of 1862, one of Ulysses S. Grant’s subordinates took advantage of Lincoln’s open door to win approval from the president for a scheme to undercut Grant. This, of course, was John A. McClernand, who Lincoln authorized to recruit an army for a campaign against Vicksburg without telling Grant. The fruits of this would be evident in the friction that plagued the Army of the Tennessee’s efforts until Grant, with the assistance of Henry Halleck, the U.S. Navy, and McClernand’s own actions, was finally able in June 1863 to rid himself of McClernand’s presence—and then only with a major pending victory at Vicksburg firmly securing Grant’s authority and prestige and making the benefits of crossing him not worth the cost. Richard L. Kiper, Major General John Alexander McClernand: Politician in Uniform (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1999), 135–273.
If anyone thought that the problems in the Army of the Potomac’s high command would dissipate once George McClellan was gone, they were sadly mistaken. Indeed, things got worse under Burnside—with the principal beneficiary being Joseph Hooker. Burnside began his tenure in command by reorganizing the army into multicorps “grand divisions” and choosing Sumner, Franklin, and Hooker to lead them. Sumner and Franklin were selected because they were the senior officers in the army, though both were men whose reputations and status were clearly on the wane in November 1862. Sumner was over sixty years old, and the prospects for his further advancement were dim. The strain of command in the Civil War was enough to break men in the prime of their lives, and it was obvious that his best days were behind him. Indeed, this had been evident to McClellan in early 1862, contributed to his preference for other men to command corps, and was certainly evident by the time Burnside took command. For his part, Franklin was tainted by the fact that, with the exception of Porter, no other general in the army was as closely associated personally and professionally with McClellan.52

In contrast, Hooker’s star was undeniably on the rise. He was also a man who made no effort to conceal his ambitions and willingness to do just about anything to gratify them. It is no surprise that Burnside developed a decidedly jaundiced view of Hooker’s character by November 1862, as it was not difficult to see that Hooker coveted command of the Army of the Potomac and believed himself far more deserving of the job than Burnside. Moreover, unlike Sumner and Franklin, Hooker was willing to play the Washington game—and had the will and ability to play it to the president’s satisfaction. Consequently, throughout Burnside’s unfortunate tenure in command, Hooker openly second-guessed his decisions (making a point of putting his objections on record for the benefit of interested parties in Washington) and missed no opportunity to express his low opinion of Burnside’s acumen and management of affairs. At Fredericksburg, this rivalry culminated in Hooker trying to talk Burnside out of committing his command to the attack on Marye’s Heights and taking it upon himself to suspend the assaults without authorization, with the tone of his protests leading one of Burnside’s aides to describe Hooker’s conduct and demeanor as “ungentlemanly and unpatriotic.”

52. Sumner deserves a modern biographer, not just due to his role in the Civil War but because of his extensive and important service in the antebellum army. The best study of Franklin’s life and career is Mark A. Snell’s From First to Last: The Life of Major General William B. Franklin (New York: Fordham University, 2002).
Hooker’s attitude had not improved a week later when he explained his decision to suspend the attack to the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War by snidely stating he did so, “finding that I had lost as many men as my orders required me to lose.” Hooker did not limit his criticism to Burnside either. Well aware of the low opinion the Joint Committee had of anyone infected with “McClellanism,” he also criticized Franklin’s performance in the battle—simultaneously bolstering his own standing with influential Republicans and feeding discontent with a potential rival for Burnside’s job.53

To be sure, there was much to criticize in how the Union army conducted operations at Fredericksburg. Still, whether Hooker was correct or not in his assessment of Burnside and Franklin’s conduct, his personal conduct was reprehensible and could not be tolerated if the army was to operate effectively. Of course, Hooker was not going to alter his course as long as he thought there would be no significant penalty for his actions. Unfortunately for Burnside and the army, the commander in chief was not about to change his style of managing the army and the chain of command to impose such a penalty, especially not to the detriment of an officer as popular with Republicans as Joe Hooker.

Indeed, in the weeks after Fredericksburg, Lincoln not only did nothing to tamp down growing dissension within the Army of the Potomac but also once again demonstrated his willingness to feed it. Less than a week after Fredericksburg, Franklin and William F. Smith bypassed the chain of command and addressed a letter directly to Lincoln. They declared that operations along the army’s current line of operations could not be successful and advocated a return to the line of operations McClellan had employed earlier that year on the James River—in effect insisting that the president acknowledge that he had been wrong about the Peninsula Campaign. Lincoln was neither able nor willing to do this, though on December 22 he wrote back to Franklin and Smith promising to “try to give” their proposal “more deliberate consideration, with the aid of military men.” Lamentably but predictably, Lincoln did not see any need to rebuke or

53. Sixth Corps commander William F. Smith later recalled how when Burnside presented his first operational plan for dealing with the Confederates at Fredericksburg, turning the Confederate left by a crossing of the Rappahannock River at Skinker’s Neck, Hooker was the only officer present who refused to support Burnside’s plan. William F. Smith, Autobiography of Major General William F. Smith, 1861–1864, edited by Herbert M. Schiller (Dayton, Ohio: Morningside, 1990), 60; George C. Rable, Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg! (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 256; Hooker testimony, December 20, 1862, JCCW (1863), 1:668, 670.
even acknowledge the impropriety of Franklin’s and Smith’s decision to bypass the chain of command. Burnside, indeed any army commander, would have no doubt thought quite differently on the matter.54

With Lincoln evidently once again giving the green light to grumblers, a little over a week after Franklin and Smith sent their note, two other officers, John Newton and John Cochrane, sought an audience in Washington for their complaints about the state of affairs in the Army of the Potomac. On December 30, Lincoln gave them that audience. He listened to their complaints about the army’s condition and, while they both disclaimed any intention of damaging Burnside’s status, it was not difficult for Lincoln to deduce from what they had to say that the general had lost the army’s confidence.55

When Burnside traveled to Washington to talk with Lincoln the following day, the president “frankly told me,” the general later recalled, “that some general officers of my command had called upon him, and represented that I was on the eve of another movement . . . and that they were satisfied that if the movement was made, it would result in disaster.” Burnside, who had fully accepted responsibility for the defeat at Fredericksburg, responded he was willing to step aside as army commander on the grounds that it was clear his authority was fatally undermined, though he was kind enough not to call Lincoln to account for his role in that development. Lincoln, though, refused to accept Burnside’s offer. The following day, Burnside submitted a formal request for removal from command. Lincoln again refused to accept it, and Burnside returned to an army in which his authority was no longer respected.56

With Lincoln unwilling to do what was necessary to reinforce Burnside’s authority or put a stop to the actions that had made such an effort necessary, the general decided he had to do it himself. As grumbling reached a fever pitch as a consequence of the infamous “Mud March” Burnside acted, drafting on January 23, 1863, what became known as General Orders No. 8. Having learned the identities of the two officers who met with Lincoln, Burnside declared Newton and Cochrane would be dismissed from the service for “going to the President of the United States with criticisms upon the plans of the

54. Franklin and Smith to Lincoln, December 20, 1862, OR, vol. 21: 868–70; Lincoln to Franklin and Smith, December 22, 1862, Basler, Collected Works, 6:15.
55. Newton testimony, February 9, 10, 1863, in JCCW (1863), 1:730–41; Cochrane testimony, February 9, 10, 1863, ibid., 741–46.
commanding officer.” On the grounds that they “can be of no further service in this army,” he directed that Franklin, Smith, and three other officers be relieved of duty with the Army of the Potomac. He also mandated that William T. H. Brooks, “for complaining of the policy of the Government, and for using language tending to demoralize his command is . . . dismissed from the military service of the United States.” It was Hooker’s case, though, that Burnside placed first and foremost in the order, declaring:

General Joseph Hooker, major-general of volunteers and brigadier-general U.S. Army, having been guilty of unjust and unnecessary criticisms of his superior officers, and of the authorities, and having, by the general tone of his conversation, endeavored to create distrust in the minds of officers who have associated with him, and were calculated to create incorrect impressions, and for habitually speaking in disparaging terms of other officers, is hereby dismissed [from] the service of the United States as a man unfit to hold an important commission during a crisis like the present, when so much patience, charity, confidence, consideration, and patriotism are due from every soldier in the field.57

In light of what Burnside had been through and how little consideration Lincoln had systematically demonstrated for the chain of command in general, and during the past month in particular, it would have been eminently understandable had Burnside decided, whether out of impulse or deliberate calculation, to simply issue the orders on his own authority. To his credit, Burnside, showing more respect for the chain of command than Lincoln typically did (and no doubt justifiably fearing his authority would be further undermined by the president if he did otherwise), decided to place the orders before Lincoln for his approval before issuing them.58

Although he was undoubtedly motivated by a desire to lighten his own burdens, by drafting these orders and placing them before Lincoln, Burnside did the Union war effort a potentially invaluable service. He gave the president an opportunity to send a clear and unmistakable message to the entire army and its general officer corps; namely, that the days of not only tolerating but also encouraging subversion of the chain of command had come to an end. Lamentably, Lincoln was unable or unwilling to seize the opportunity. Rather than back the beleaguered Burnside, he ended his tenure as Army of the

Potomac commander. Regardless of whether it was the right move on the merits, this sent a terrible message to the army—that generals unhappy with a senior commander could, by complaining directly to the president, undermine that commander’s authority to the point that his tenure in command could no longer continue. (Burnside has rarely received accolades for his generalship, but given the circumstances under which he commanded the Army of the Potomac, a fair degree of charity in assessing his performance is certainly merited.) This message was bad enough. Lincoln sent an even worse one to the army when he chose Hooker as Burnside’s replacement, a man who had just been accused by his superior officer—and with no little justification—of meriting dismissal not only from his command but from the army entirely for the contemptuous attitude he had taken toward his superior and the chain of command.

To be sure, the administration did relieve from duty with the Army of the Potomac a number of the officers Burnside listed out in General Orders No. 8 (though they were retained in the service and would resurface elsewhere). Yet Hooker’s appointment, both because it involved the head of the army and because of his conspicuous zeal for self-promotion at the expense of any other consideration, was more than enough to indicate that that president still saw no need to alter his conduct in regard to dealing with the army and its chain of command. Moreover, with the exception of Sumner, the officers relieved from duty with the Army of the Potomac in January 1863 were generally known to be associates of McClellan. Consequently, it was reasonable to see their removal, following on the heels of Porter’s conviction by court-martial and dismissal from the service on January 21, not as an effort to punish those who behaved badly in regard to the chain of command, which as Burnside’s order indicated was most execrable in Hooker’s case, but driven by a desire to punish those associated

59. An effort to rehabilitate Burnside can be found in William Marvel, *Burnside* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), an exceptional study whose case for reconsidering the traditional image of Burnside as a well-meaning, bungling incompetent seems to have made little impression on scholarship in the years since publication. In a truly outstanding discussion of the post-Fredericksburg upheaval in the Army of the Potomac, A. Wilson Greene insightfully concludes, “Burnside should have dispersed this poisonous atmosphere. He failed to do so in part because his superiors declined to provide the context in which the general could confidently purge the army of its disloyal elements.” Greene, “Morale, Maneuver, and Mud: The Army of the Potomac, December 16, 1862–January 26, 1863,” in *The Fredericksburg Campaign: Decision on the Rappahannock*, edited by Gary W. Gallagher (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 216.
Thus for those inclined to do so, it was not difficult to see in Lincoln’s management of the Army of the Potomac’s high command in January 1863 personal and partisan prejudice rather than disapproval of, and a desire to put an end to, the backbiting within the army.

No one needed Lincoln to seize the opportunity January 1863 presented to put the weight of his office behind the chain of command and make clear failure to strictly respect it would no longer be tolerated—both by his subordinates and himself—more than the man who inherited Burnside’s troubled army. Instead, all Hooker got was a private letter from Lincoln. To be sure, Lincoln was correct in chastising Hooker for his conduct. However, the president was either disingenuous, or unforgivably incapable of recognizing and acknowledging his own culpability, when he laid blame for “the spirit” that prevailed in the army at Hooker’s feet. Were Hooker the only case of an ambitious general having subverted the chain of command, Lincoln would have been eminently justified in blaming him. But Hooker was not an exception—except perhaps in the degree of his openness and zealousness in pursuit of self-promotion—but rather the inevitable product of Lincoln’s management of his generals to that point in the war.

Of course, Lincoln did pledge to “assist [Hooker] as far as I can” to put down “the spirit . . . of criticising their Commander, and withholding confidence from him.” Yet during his very first meeting with Hooker after the change in command, Lincoln acceded to a request from the general that made this promise hollow. Due to conflicts both personal and professional that dated to before the war and had been exacerbated during it, Hooker had a poor relationship with Henry W. Halleck, the army’s general-in-chief. Fearing Halleck’s hostility might compromise his efforts, Hooker asked Lincoln whether he could

60. General Orders No. 20, January 25, 1863, OR, vol. 25, pt. 2: 3. Sumner, although not indicted by Burnside in those orders, was relieved from duty from the Army of the Potomac, as was Franklin, in the orders announcing the transfer of command from Burnside to Hooker. Newton remained with the Army of the Potomac and would ascend to command of a corps at Gettysburg. Brooks, Smith, and Cochrane were assigned to duty elsewhere. Smith later attributed his relief to Hooker on the grounds of being known as “a devoted adherent of General McClellan.” Smith, Autobiography, 66.

deal with the president directly instead of going through Halleck. Predictably, Lincoln agreed. (Hooker did not, though, completely cut Halleck out of the chain of command and corresponded extensively with the general-in-chief during his time in command.) While undoubtedly pleased with Lincoln’s granting his request, Hooker was truly short-sighted to ask for it—though given Lincoln’s history it is hard to blame Hooker for thinking such a request would be appropriate and granted. It was likewise irresponsible of Lincoln to accede, for once again the president had demonstrated his willingness to subvert the principle of the chain of command, something Hooker, now that he was at the top of the Army of the Potomac, had a vested interest in maintaining.

Nonetheless, Hooker managed to mute grumbling within the army by the vigor with which he plunged into his responsibilities as army commander and the effectiveness of his efforts to restore the army’s health and morale in the weeks after his appointment. Indeed, after the war, Hooker would declare that he “never did my country better service than when I reorganized the Army of the Potomac during the winter of 1862–3.”62 The willingness to set aside reservations about Hooker’s character this restoration fostered among his subordinates, however, was destroyed by the course and outcome of the Chancellorsville Campaign. And it could have come to the surprise of no one—least of all Hooker—that afterward “the spirit” resurfaced with a vengeance with his own subordinates fulfilling Lincoln’s warning that it could “now turn upon you”—once again, with Lincoln’s sanction and encouragement.

The army had barely completed its initial march to reach Chancellorsville crossroads when grumbling about and open second-guessing of Hooker’s generalship began. The bravado with which Hooker congratulated his command on their crossing of the Rappahannock and Rapidan rivers to reach Chancellorsville, though understandable, stirred considerable uneasiness among senior commanders. When Hooker decided to order the army to halt its movement toward Fredericksburg and withdraw from high ground on the road between those

points back into the Wilderness after initial contact with the Confederates on May 1, Fifth Corps commander George Gordon Meade, among those whose unease at Hooker’s appointment had been allayed by his effectiveness in revitalizing the army, famously questioned the state of the army commander’s grasp of the situation. “My God,” Meade exclaimed, “if we can’t hold the top of a hill we certainly cannot hold the bottom of it!” Another corps commander, Darius Couch, met with Hooker that night, communicated to him the disappointment of his subordinates, and found himself anything but reassured by Hooker’s declaration, “It is all right. . . . I have got Lee just where I want him.” “To hear from his own lips that the advantages gained by the successful marches of his lieutenants,” Couch later recalled, “were to culminate in fighting a defensive battle in that nest of thickets was too much, and I retired from his presence with the belief that my commanding general was a whipped man.”

By the time the campaign ended with Hooker withdrawing the army across the Rappahannock during the night of May 5–6, a number of subordinates were ready to take advantage of any opportunity

63. Francis A. Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1886), 224; Darius Couch, “The Chancellorsville Campaign,” *Battles and Leaders*, 3:159–61. While history has almost universally chastised Hooker for his decision to withdraw back into the Wilderness, it did have a logic to it and led to an engagement around Chancellorsville that was not completely unfavorable to the Union. Hooker was correct when he declared he had given Lee no choice but to “ingloriously fly, or come out from behind his defenses and give us battle on our own ground.” Of course, by assuming the defensive, Hooker gave Lee the opportunity to send Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson on his famous flank march on May 2. As Hooker justifiably never tired of pointing out, however, what success Jackson’s efforts achieved that day was a consequence of Eleventh Corps commander Oliver O. Howard’s failure to exercise the diligence headquarters directed him to use in ensuring the security of his position from the sort of attack that Jackson launched on May 2. Even then, despite Jackson’s attack having routed the Eleventh Corps, Hooker and his subordinates were able to effectively limit its effect. Consequently, when day broke on May 3, Hooker had indeed given Lee little choice but to attack his fortified lines. Lee did so and, while able to wrest possession of Fairview and Chancellorsville from Hooker, the Army of Northern Virginia suffered a heavy bloodletting in the process. Although the campaign ended with Hooker retreating across the Rappahannock River, when it was over Lee seems to have concluded that Hooker’s command had made him pay a cost for the victory at Chancellorsville that was unacceptably high for the benefits it provided the Confederacy. General Orders No. 47, April 30, 1863, *OR*, vol. 25, pt. 1:171; “Fighting Joe Hooker: He Fights the Battle of Chancellorsville Over Again,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 23, 1872; Henry Heth to J. William Jones, June 1877, in *Southern Historical Society Papers*, 52 vols. (1876–1959; reprint, Millwood, N.Y., 1977), 4:153–54; Ethan S. Rafuse, “Battlefield Echoes: MOPs, MOEs, and Chancellorsville,” *Civil War Monitor* 3 (Spring 2013): 22–23, 74.
to do unto Hooker as he had done unto so many others. As usual, Lincoln was all too happy to provide that opportunity. On May 7 he, accompanied by Halleck, arrived at Falmouth to discuss matters with Hooker. Lincoln returned to Washington evidently satisfied enough by Hooker’s explanation of the army’s performance to keep him in command. Halleck, though, stuck around after Lincoln left and no doubt was unsurprised to learn that Hooker’s performance had been found wanting by many in the army as, in one man’s words, “generals and staff-officers had but poor success in stopping anywhere short of the whole truth.” By May 14 enough evidence of the discontent in the army had reached Lincoln to lead him to close a letter to Hooker about the possibility of renewing operations by stating, “I have some painful intimations that some of your corps and Division Commanders are not giving you their entire confidence. This would be ruinous, if true; and you should therefore, first of all, ascertain the real facts beyond all possibility of doubt.”64

Hooker immediately went to Lincoln to personally discuss the situation and asked him for the names of the officers who were dissatisfied with his generalship. Lincoln did not provide them but, Hooker subsequently recalled, did confide that he “had derived his information from Governor [Andrew] Curtin, of Pennsylvania, and a citizen of Philadelphia by the name of Barclay.” Hooker knew that after paying a visit to his headquarters on May 12, Curtin and Barclay had spent time with cavalry commander George Stoneman, whose problematic performance during the campaign had already attracted Hooker’s ire, and with Meade before making their way to Washington. Hooker expressed—no doubt somewhat disingenuously—surprise at news of discontent among his subordinates, later recalling, “I said to the President that if any of the corps or division commanders were not supporting me I had not been informed.” Hooker then made the extraordinary request—no doubt recognizing from experience that it would be impossible to prevent the president from doing it anyway—that “the President himself . . . ascertain their feelings on their coming to Washington, and that whenever they applied for permission to come I would request them to call on him.”65


65. Hooker testimony, March 13, 1865, JCCW (1865), 1:151. According to leading Meade scholar Christopher Stowe, the citizen from Philadelphia was likely Clement Biddle Barclay, an adviser to Curtin and correspondent of Meade’s.
When Hooker returned to the army the day after this meeting, he confronted Meade. In the immediate aftermath of the Chancellorsville Campaign, Meade expressed dismay with Hooker’s generalship in letters to his wife and to Curtin and was keenly aware that he was by no means alone in his sentiments. Two of his fellow corps commanders, Couch and Henry W. Slocum, asked him to join them in an effort to petition Lincoln for a change of army commanders during the president’s visit on May 7. Meade told both Couch and Slocum that he “would not join in any movement against Hooker,” though he assured them that he shared their opinions of Hooker’s performance and “that if the President chose to call on me officially for my opinions, I would give them.” Nonetheless, not even a week had passed since the end of the campaign before Meade received word from Couch, Slocum, and Sixth Corps commander John Sedgwick that they were willing to waive seniority and serve under him if that was what it took to get rid of Hooker. Meade advised his wife that he had no interest in commanding the army and thought Hooker’s position was “very secure,” though he acknowledged “Hooker has disappointed the army and myself.”

Despite his personal admiration for Hooker, newspaperman George Smalley, who spent a week after Chancellorsville with the Army of the Potomac on what he described as “a mission of inquiry,” was stunned to find just how much the army had lost confidence in its commander and to have officers urge him to let Meade know of their desire that he replace Hooker. By the time Smalley reached Meade, though, the general had heard enough on the matter to anticipate what Smalley was about to say and declared, “I don’t know that I ought to listen to you.”

When Hooker confronted Meade on May 15 about his conversations with Curtin, Meade was taken aback to learn that Curtin not only had divulged what Meade believed was a private conversation but also told Washington that Meade and First Corps commander John Reynolds had led him to believe the entire army had lost confidence in Hooker. Meade initially thought he had mollified Hooker by explaining nothing had been said he had not already told Hooker directly’. Within a week, though, Meade declared to his wife that he was “at

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open war with Hooker.” Still, unable to think of a better replacement and hopeful that Hooker would do better in the future, he expected that Hooker would remain in command.68 One of Meade’s brigade commanders was less charitable. “I do not wish,” Alexander Webb informed his wife, “to try another battle under the Hero of Chancellorsville. I have no faith in him.” “We have lost physically and numerically, but still more morally,” a division commander in Slocum’s Corps informed his family on May 29, “by a universal want of confidence in the commanding general, growing out of the recent operation. I have not met the first officer who does not feel this.”69

The security of Hooker’s position received a boost when members of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War left the army’s encampments with their confidence in Hooker unshaken. Nonetheless, the general’s allies in Washington could not ignore the troubling level of discontent among his subordinates. On May 23, Hooker’s strongest supporter in the administration, Treasury Secretary Chase, wrote to the general to express alarm at his willingness to let subordinates share their opinions freely in Washington. “I fear it is a mistake to have chiefs of Corps come up here to tell their different stories,” Chase advised; “There must indeed be no disaffection. Better far make new generals of the best captains or lieutenants.”70 However much he might have wanted to follow Chase’s proposed course of action, Hooker appreciated as well as anyone that it was decidedly unlikely Lincoln would desist from giving unhappy subordinates opportunities “to tell their different stories.” Since there was no point in trying to prevent it, Hooker appears to have concluded he might as well accept the inevitable and indulge the president’s desire to hear “stories.”

What Lincoln heard was little charity toward Fighting Joe. “No one whose opinion is worth anything,” division commander John Gibbon declared on May 25, “has now any confidence in General Hooker and the President has been told so.” Three days earlier, Couch had told Lincoln that Hooker should be relieved and Meade take his place. Couch also undoubtedly advised the president, as Meade believed he had earlier that month, that he was no longer willing to serve

69. Webb to his wife, May 20, 1863, Alexander S. Webb Papers, Yale University Library, New Haven, Conn.; Williams to his daughter, May 29, 1863, in From the Cannon’s Mouth: General Alpheus S. Williams, edited by Milo M. Quaife (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995 [1959]), 204.
under Hooker’s command. On June 2 Lincoln met privately with Reynolds and discussed the possibility of his replacing Hooker, but nothing came of the proposal. Eight days later, despite signs that a major campaign would soon be under way, Couch decided he could no longer serve under a commander he believed incapable of producing anything but “purposeless slaughter” and stepped down as commander of the Second Corps.71

As Lee’s army began moving west toward the Shenandoah Valley and then north across the Potomac River, Hooker and the Union war effort needed few things more than a clear and firm reassertion of the chain of command. Yet the only person who could provide this was the man at the very top of that chain. As the Army of the Potomac moved north in response to the Confederate offensive, Hooker wrote Lincoln from his new headquarters at Fairfax Station on June 16, seeking assistance in bolstering his authority. The source of his concern, though, was not the men grumbling below him but the man above him. “You have been long aware,” wrote Hooker, “that I have not enjoyed the confidence of the major-general commanding the army, and I can assure you so long as this continues we may look in vain for success.”72

As Burnside had before him, Hooker offered Lincoln an opportunity to adjust his management of the chain of command. Unlike before, though, in what must have been an unpleasant surprise to Hooker, this time Lincoln took it. At 10 p.m. that night, the president wrote back to Hooker to inform him he could no longer work around Halleck. “To remove all misunderstanding,” Lincoln bluntly declared, “I now place you in the strict military relation to General Halleck. . . . I shall direct him to give you orders and you to obey them.”73

This letter was exactly what the army needed: a clear, unambiguous statement from the commander in chief asserting the principle of the chain of command. It was long overdue. Lincoln certainly, by doing nothing to discourage generals from expressing their discontent with Hooker, had failed to that point to keep his pledge to aid Hooker in

73. Lincoln to Hooker, June 16, 1863, OR, vol. 27, pt. 1: 47. Of course, Lincoln could not resist trying to absolve himself of blame for the problematic chain of command. The president asserted he had “not intended” that Hooker see Halleck as an obstacle to be worked around rather than a superior officer to be worked through when he gave Hooker’s authorization to bypass Halleck, but placed blame on the situation on Hooker’s shoulders, declaring, “it seems to be differently understood.”
putting “the spirit” down in the army in which subordinates felt free to openly question the authority of its commander. Unfortunately for Hooker, he would not get to find out if the letter from Lincoln meant the president had seen the error of his ways and finally realized he must alter his management of affairs that had “aided to infuse” friction into the Army of the Potomac’s high command. Halleck wasted little time provoking a dispute with Hooker over control of the Harpers Ferry garrison; in response, Hooker submitted his resignation from command. The Lincoln administration promptly accepted it and appointed Meade as his successor.74

In one of the more influential recent studies of civil-military relations, political scientist Eliot A. Cohen challenged the value of the concept of “objective” civil-military relations articulated by political scientist Samuel P. Huntington. The Huntingtonian concept of separate spheres between political leaders and military leaders, in which politicians stay out of the management of military operations while generals stay out of political and diplomatic concerns, Cohen argued, while popular, was both unhealthy and impracticable. Not only did it fly in the face of Carl von Clausewitz’s dictum that war and politics were inextricable, but also, Cohen observed, “in practice the ‘high’ politics of war is suffused . . . with ‘low’ or domestic politics.” Consequently, it was neither realistic nor desirable for civilian leaders to refrain from exercising extensive oversight over the military, a point Cohen underlined by pointing to the troubled but ultimately successful wartime leadership of Lincoln, Winston Churchill, and David Ben-Gurion.75

While Cohen is certainly correct that Lincoln had a duty to exercise close oversight over his generals to ensure that their management of operations was in line with national security objectives, and the North’s ultimate victory can be seen as vindication of his leadership, the consequences of his conduct in this regard must also be acknowledged. There can be little doubt that the degree to which Lincoln interfered in command relations fostered tremendous friction within the Army of the Potomac and that it had real consequences on the battlefield. Given the limited tools a commander had at his disposal

for exercising control of so vast a force as the Army of the Potomac, he had little choice but to delegate considerable discretion to subordinates and trust they would exercise it on the basis of objective military considerations rather than personal or political ones. It was exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, for a commander to do this when he knew subordinates had been given sanction to bypass the chain of command to complain about their superiors.

There is little doubt that Abraham Lincoln did one of his many tremendous services to historians, for whom command controversies always offer welcome grist for the proverbial mill, in helping foster a tumultuous command climate with the Army of the Potomac. But by undermining the chain of command, his actions greatly complicated the efforts of its commanders, which had serious negative consequences for the men under their command and the larger Union war effort. History has effectively and properly held generals accountable when they conducted themselves in ways that had negative consequences for the Union war effort. It is necessary that history do the same with Lincoln.