

SOME EVIDENCE OF THE INFLUENCE OF POLITICS ON THE EFFICIENCY OF THE ARMY, 1861-5.

Political pressure began on the army before the battle of Bull Run. The enlisted men were mustered in for only three months and "General Scott is urged not to lose their services, but to get into Richmond before they are disbanded." The political leaders looked upon the war as a short affair and really compelled the military men to move "On to Richmond." This cry forced Scott to go before he was ready and partly accounts for the panic after the battle.²

When McClellan took charge of the army it was in a pretty badly demoralized condition. "The best troops in the world officered as these were by the vicious system of election, would fail the best general."³ McClellan says they roamed around Washington at will and were drunken and disorderly.⁴ Sherman contradicts this in part, saying, "We had a good organization, good men, but no cohesion, no real discipline, no respect for authority, no real knowledge of war."⁵ He is the only one I have found who is willing to say anything in favor of the organization, while Russell contradicts this. It may be questioned how there could be a good organization and at the same time no respect for authority. "When I assumed command it was clear that a prompt advance was wholly impracticable. * * * I repeat that it was not worthy to be called an army."⁶ McClellan lays due emphasis upon the disastrous effects that defeat had on the army, for in this is his justification for slowness. Michie says his task was full of difficulties, "especially is this so in a government by the people where newspaper editors and other self-constituted exponents of public opinion are first in the field with their impatient suggestions; the personal influence, exerted through potent political leaders, for rank and command can not always be ignored."⁷

¹ Russell, Wm. H. "My Diary North and South." 147.

² Russell, 146; Sherman, W. T. "Memoirs of Gen. Sherman," I, 207.

³ Michie, Peter S. "General McClellan," 99.

⁴ McClellan, Geo. B. "McClellan's Own Story," 68.

⁵ Sherman, I. 210.

⁶ McClellan, 71.

⁷ Michie, 101.

McClellan now began by patient work to create his army but he did not get it created before the politicians got ready to use it, and his further insistence on delay paved the way for discontent.¹ McClellan kept his councils to himself and kept on at his work and his drilling. That he was making an efficient army is generally admitted, though Sherman, and Nicolay and Hay try to cast doubt on it.²

At any rate the country wanted him to do something, and by December 1st President Lincoln became nervous and submitted a plan of campaign to McClellan. In December McClellan fell sick and the President called in various military men to get their opinions on his plan. They all agreed it was a good one. McClellan got well and attended one of these conferences. He treated the whole matter with coolness, and this aroused Chase, who asked him point blank what he intended to do and when he was going to do it. McClellan gave Chase to understand it was none of his business, but satisfied Lincoln that he had a plan in mind.³

In the meantime there was a strong demand made on the President and cabinet that something be done.⁴ "Instead of one mind there were many minds influencing the management of military affairs."⁵ McClellan made no move except to disagree with the President on the plan suggested and finally Lincoln ordered the army to move by February 22nd. Whether or not McClellan was justified in waiting until he felt his army was satisfactory is a question that military men do not agree upon. At any rate McClellan felt so justified and was "the only one who did not seem to feel the full force of the public demand."⁶

Barnard, McClellan's chief engineer, says McClellan should have made a light draft of men and "should do something."⁷ Granting that no great movement could be made during the winter, he should do something or "he would find himself virtually destitute of power to carry out his plans when the moment proper for such a movement should arrive, and so it happened."⁸

¹ Webb, A. S. "The Peninsula Campaign of 1862." 12.

² Sherman, I, 220; Nicolay and Hay, "Abraham Lincoln." IV, 444.

³ Nicolay and Hay, V. 158; Webb, 14.

⁴ Nicolay and Hay, V. 169.

⁵ Webb, 15.

⁶ Webb, 172.

⁷ Barnard, J. G. "Peninsula Campaign," 8.

⁸ Barnard.

But it was something like Bull Run that McClellan feared. Before he moved, "half of Congress was opposed to McClellan's plan and looked on him with distrust.* * * When the army was to go by Annapolis, I felt confident that one-half would no sooner be embarked than the other would be ordered back to Washington," and he adds: "No one living in Washington could doubt this."¹ Webb thinks McClellan did not show dash enough to hold confidence. He further thinks "he did not give to the will of the President and the demands of the people the weight to which they were entitled,"² but in view of the fact that neither President nor people knew anything about war, it is plainly a question how far he should rely on them.

"And now it came to be commented upon that McClellan's adherents were men who were politically opposed to the administration. On the other hand the radical leaders who desired speedy action found that other generals were not in accord with the commanding general's policy of inaction."³ Lord Lyons wrote his home government November 17, 1862, that McClellan was regarded as the representative of the conservative principle in the army.⁴ By mixing political convictions with professional obligations, he "cut from under his feet that firm political support which was so essential for a continuance in active military command."⁵

"All the so-called interference, all the real interference with McClellan's plans—all the want of confidence in his ability as a leader of an active army—all the want of faith in his intentions to fully support the views of the government, arose from the belief that in and about McClellan's headquarters there was a lack of faith in the government and of sympathy with the administration."⁶ Whatever the cause it seems pretty conclusive that the radical leaders having failed to force McClellan to attack the Southern army, now sought to discredit him, and, possibly, as he claims, ruin him. "Having failed to force me to advance at a time when an advance would have been madness, they withheld the means of success when I came in contact with the enemy."⁷

¹ Barnard, 9.

² Webb, 169, 173.

³ Michie, 156.

⁴ Barnard, 58.

⁵ Michie, 472.

⁶ Webb, 169.

⁷ McClellan, 150.

Blenker's division was first taken away from him and assigned to Fremont's new mountain division.¹ Lincoln wrote McClellan in a letter dated March 31, 1862, "if you could know the full pressure of the case I am sure you would justify it."² Later on McDowell's corps was taken from McClellan and of this Webb says: "The government (for it was not Lincoln alone, but Secretaries Chase and Stanton and Generals Hitchcock and Thomas, and whoever else were in the secret council) the government, we repeat, was responsible for this state of things."³ He then goes on to say Washington could be defended without these men and that if McClellan kept the Rebels active Washington was in no danger. Without them there was no show for McClellan to keep the Rebels occupied.⁴ Webb calls it the greatest blunder that could have been permitted. "But with a blind indifference to whatever might result from it these men persuaded the President to cripple the army sent out on a special mission * * * and did everything to insure disaster to the Peninsula Campaign."⁵ Webb also complains that McClellan was further hindered by appointing foreigners on his staff to the exclusion of intelligent Americans. This was done he claims by the government.⁶ McCulloch seems to think politics had something to do with McClellan's retirement, for he speaks of it as a political necessity, and Pinkerton, who was closely associated with McClellan, says he was "subjected to the prosecutions of the most malignant political intriguers."⁷

Speaking of Secretary Cameron, McClellan says: "I could not always dispose of arms and supplies as I thought the good of the service demanded. For instance, when a shipment of unusually good arms arrived from Europe, and I wished them for the army of the Potomac, I found that they had been promised to some political friend. As I had no idea who might be selected in Mr. Cameron's place and as he supported me in purely military affairs, I objected to his removal and saved him." But he was later removed. "Instead of using his (Stanton's) new position to assist me he threw every obstacle in my way, and did all in his power to create difficulty and distrust between

¹ Michie, 228, 286.

² Greeley, Horace. "American Conflict," II, 129.

³ Webb, 178.

⁴ Barnard, 9.

⁵ Webb, 179.

⁶ Webb, 184.

⁷ Pinkerton. "The Spy of the Rebellion," 458.

the President and myself. * * * Before I actually commenced the Peninsula Campaign I had lost that cordial support of the Executive which was necessary to attain success." ¹ Michie says Stanton "was always a potent factor in the conduct of military operations," and "unable to understand the cause of McClellan's inactivity, he soon became an active ally of the committee on the conduct of the war and opposed, though not always openly, McClellan's plan of campaign." ²

After the conference held between McClellan, McDowell, Franklin, Chase, Stanton and Lincoln, in which the President's plan was discussed, "the lines were more closely drawn between those who defended and those who opposed him (McClellan), many men of influence in the councils of the nation publicly assailed him, vigorously denounced his lethargy and incapacity, and some even went so far as to question the purity of his motives by expressing doubt as to his loyalty." "The committee on the conduct of the war was casting discredit upon him and undermining his influence in the suggestions and doubts promulgated during the examination of his subordinates." ³ "But Stanton's intemperate haste to have the army move somehow or somewhere gave the latter (McClellan) the opportunity to get his army away from the politicians at Washington, which his controlling desire too eagerly embraced at the sacrifice of his usual prudence and cool judgment." ⁴ Webb also traces the influence of this committee and says the chairman, Wade, "demanded" that the blockade of the Potomac be raised and "used pretty strong and emphatic language" on the subject in the presence of the Secretary of War and General McClellan. Well might McClellan refer to "geese" in high places. Michie speaks of the committee on the conduct of the war as men "without military education" who soon felt "sufficient confidence in their military perception" to not need military education. ⁵ The committee was "composed of men not only ignorant but unconscious of their ignorance." They soon had plans of their own which they soon found witnesses to fortify. They were of "restless activity and radical views," convinced "that acts of Congress could create disciplined armies out of patriotic volunteers with-

¹ McClellan, 152-4.

² Michie, 167-8.

³ Michie, 184-5; 199.

⁴ Michie, 213.

⁵ Michie, 165.

out having recourse to the time requisite to organize, drill and discipline them." These men powerfully influenced the President and the Cabinet and the country. Through this committee the President was influenced to organize the Army of the Potomac into four corps. McClellan protested and wanted him to wait till the men had seen service in the field, but the President would not wait.¹

After the battle of Williamsburg, McClellan asked permission to remove the corps commanders for incompetence. There were but three corps with him then. Lincoln writes him: "I am constantly told that you have no consultation with them (Sumner, Heintzelman and Keyes). When you relieved General Hamilton * * * you lost one of your best friends in the Senate. But to return; are you strong enough—are you strong enough even with my help—to set your foot upon the necks of Sumner, Heintzelman and Keyes at once?"²

There seems to have been a general tendency among military men to ask for everything in sight. McClellan's trouble with guns has been cited. Sherman went to Indiana to get troops for the Kentucky army and found the Indiana people equipping and fitting out men, "but they were called for as fast as mustered in, either for the army of McClellan or Fremont." At Springfield he found the same general activity, "but these men had also been promised to Fremont."³ "Since that time (November, 1861) he (Fremont) had been without a command. I believed, as did many others, that political intrigue was keeping Fremont back."⁴

Stanton answered Dana February 1, 1862, and says: "The pressure of members of Congress for clerk and army appointments * * * and the persistent strain against all measures essential to obtain time for thought, combination and conference, is discouraging in the extreme—it often tempts me to quit the helm in despair. When Stanton went into the War Department there was great dissatisfaction in the Tribune office with McClellan."⁵ Any one who will read Dana's Recollections will, I think, become convinced that too much weight was laid on the opinion of one man, be he ever so good and true.

¹ Webb, 166.

² Michie, 282-3.

³ Sherman, I, 222.

⁴ Dana, C. A. "Recollections of the Civil War." 5.

⁵ Dana, 6-8.

McClelland, an Illinois Democrat, was placed in command by Lincoln for the political effect he had on the Illinois Democrats and the country generally. Grant kept him as long as he could for exactly the same reason. Though, if Dana is correct, he was incompetent and Grant knew it.¹

Rhodes tells how McClure tried to have Lincoln remove Grant and claimed to represent the friends of the administration, but I could get no more facts on this point than Rhodes gives.²

In the case of Benj. F. Butler, President Lincoln would not tell Butler why he was removed from New Orleans. It surely was not from lack of confidence, for Lincoln offered to Butler Grant's command and several others. At least so Butler says. The Rebels knew Butler was to be removed long before Butler or his superior did, and Greeley says "it is probable that the French Minister, whose government had been displeased with General Butler's management in New Orleans, was the immediate source of rebel assurance on this point."³ Butler blamed the French Minister and it seems strange that if Butler did wrong, Lincoln should be afraid to say so.

John M. Schofield's is the only other case I found where charges of political influence were made. Schofield was recommended for a Major-Generalship. He was recommended by President Lincoln, the Secretary of War, Generals Halleck, Grant and Sherman, but the military committee of the Senate reported against him. His friend Senator J. B. Henderson writes to him and tells him "to whip somebody anyhow." Schofield replied April 15, 1864; and says: "No doubt I might easily get up a little claptrap on which to manufacture newspaper notoriety and convince the Senate of the United States that I had won a great victory and secure my confirmation. Such things have been done, alas, too frequently during this war. * * * I answer that when the management of military affairs is left to military men, the rebellion will be put down very quickly, and not before. I rather think if you let Grant alone, and let him have his own way, he will end the war this year." By way of introduction to the subject he says: "To have pleased the radical politicians of that day would have been enough to have ruined any soldier."⁴

¹ Dana, 32, 59, 90.

² Rhodes' *History of U. S.*, III, 628; McClure, A. K. "Lincoln and War Times," 179.

³ Greeley, II, 105.

⁴ Schofield, J. M. "Forty-Six Years in the Army," 117-119.

And again, "There has been much irrelevant discussion about the ability or inability of commanders in the North and South. The fact is that political instead of military ideas control in a very large degree the selection of commanders in the Union armies; while for three whole years the authorities in Washington could not see the necessity of unity of action in all the armies under one military leader. It required three years of costly experience to teach the government that simple lesson taught in military text books. As experience finally proved, there was no lack of men capable of leading even large armies to victory, but, with few exceptions, they were not put in command until many others had been tried. Information as to military fitness was not sought from military sources."¹

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¹ Schofield, J. M., 517.