

## Chapter Twenty-six

“I Expect to Maintain This Contest Until Successful, or Till I Die, or Am Conquered, or My Term Expires, or Congress or the Country Forsakes Me”:

From the Slough of Despond to the Gates of Richmond

(January-July, 1862)

Lincoln’s decision to replace Simon Cameron with Edwin M. Stanton was a decisive turning point in the war. As William O. Stoddard aptly noted, it ended “the first scene in the great tragedy” after which “changes were gradual, but the old order of things passed away, and we passed from a peaceful into a military people, to whom the army was all in all.”<sup>1</sup> In the winter of 1861-62, the New York World predicted that Lincoln’s decisiveness in replacing Cameron “will confirm the opinion which has been for the last ten months slowly maturing in the public mind, that President Lincoln is the most self-poised and self-dependent statesman that could have been placed at the head of the government in this trying crisis. His whole course since his inauguration has exhibited moral robustness combined with masculine sense.” The editors acknowledged that the president “is slow and deliberate, pondering long and turning over an important subject many times in his thoughts before reaching a decision,” but once he “puts down his foot, he puts it down firmly” and “the Alps or the Andes are not more firmly planted on their bases than are his deliberate decisions.” The country “had many presidents who could

---

<sup>1</sup> William O. Stoddard, “White House Sketches No. 6,” New York Citizen, 22 September 1866, in Stoddard, Inside the White House in War Times: Memoirs and Reports of Lincoln’s Secretary, ed. Michael Burlingame (1890; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 166.

reach decisions more rapidly; but none, no not even Jackson, whose mind was more self-determined.”<sup>2</sup> Others saw parallels between the Rail-splitter and Old Hickory. George Templeton Strong detected in the president “a most sensible, straightforward, honest old codger,” both “clear-headed and sound-hearted,” whose “evident integrity and simplicity of purpose would compensate for worse grammar than his, and for even more intense provincialism and rusticity.” Withal, Strong judged in January 1862, Lincoln was the “best President we have had since old Jackson’s time.”<sup>3</sup> John Pendleton Kennedy predicted that Lincoln would “set down that great, broad, flat, long and heavy-shod foot of his, in good earnest, and that it will squelch the whole dozen reptiles who are now crawling across his path into an indistinguishable mass of slime.”<sup>4</sup>

In January 1862, Lincoln began to assert himself in dealing with generals, just as he had earlier done with the cabinet. He followed the sound advice of Edward Bates, who urged him to act as commander in chief and create “some military organization about his own person” with a few aides “to write and carry his orders, to collect his information, to keep his military books and papers, and do his bidding generally.” The attorney general “insisted that, being ‘Commander in chief’ by law,” Lincoln “must command – especially in such a war as this.”<sup>5</sup> Lyman Trumbull informed Illinois Governor Richard Yates that Lincoln “at last seems to be waking up to the fact . . . that the responsibility is upon him,

---

<sup>2</sup> New York World, 15 January, 13 March 1862.

<sup>3</sup> Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas, eds., The Diary of George Templeton Strong, 1835-1875 (4 vols.; New York: Macmillan, 1952), 3:188, 204 (entries for 23 October 1861 and 29 January 1862).

<sup>4</sup> John Pendleton Kennedy to Robert C. Winthrop, Baltimore, 16 February 1862, Winthrop Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>5</sup> Howard K. Beale, ed., The Diary of Edward Bates, 1859-1866 (Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1930, vol. IV; Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1933), 218, 20 (entry for 31 December 1861). Cf. Russell H. Beatie, The Army of the Potomac (2 vols.; Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002), 2:430-31.

& I think he has resolved hereafter not to content himself with throwing all army movements on the Generals commanding, on the ground that he is no military man. He seems inclined to take a personal supervision of matters to some extent, & see that Generals & subordinate officers do their duty.”<sup>6</sup> Yates rejoiced to learn that the president “is taking firm hold of the helm.”<sup>7</sup> The secretary of war started issuing commands “by order of Abraham Lincoln, Commander-in-chief” instead of “by order of General McClellan.”<sup>8</sup> When a general suggested delaying an offensive to gain time for strategy to work its wonders, Lincoln rejected the advice. “Time is worth as much to us as to the rebels,” he replied.<sup>9</sup>

Lincoln also began standing up to domineering members of Congress, among them the outspoken, combative Senator Benjamin F. Wade of Ohio, known as Bluff Ben. A leader of the Radical Republicans, Wade resented Lincoln’s story-telling. One day in early January 1862, the senator replied stiffly to a presidential tale: “Sir, you are not a mile from Tophet [i.e. hell] and you are riding a swift locomotive at that!” Lincoln rejoined: “well, there is one consolation – I shall not have to part long from my senatorial friends. You will be along by the next train!”<sup>10</sup> (A similar version of this story appeared

---

<sup>6</sup> Trumbull to Yates, Washington, 6 February 1862, L. U. Reavis Papers, Chicago History Museum. The same point was made in a special Washington dispatch, undated, Chicago Tribune, 6 February 1862.

<sup>7</sup> Yates to Trumbull, Springfield, 14 February 1862, Lyman Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>8</sup> Washington correspondence, 9 February, New York Evening Post, 10 February 1862.

<sup>9</sup> Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 8 April, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 12 April 1862.

<sup>10</sup> Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 22 January, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 24 January 1862. Cf. Washington correspondence, 11 January, New York Herald, 12 January 1862. A similar version of this story appeared in the Washington correspondence, 7 July, New York Commercial Advertiser, 8 July 1862: “‘I tell you, Mr. President,’ said a Senator one day, ‘unless a proposition for emancipation is adopted by the government, we will all go to the d—l. At this very moment we are not over one mile from h—l.’ ‘Perhaps not,’ replied the President, ‘as I believe that is just about the distance from here to the Capitol, where you gentlemen are in session.’”

in the New York Commercial Advertiser: “‘I tell you, Mr. President,’ said a Senator one day, ‘unless a proposition for emancipation is adopted by the government, we will all go to the d—l. At this very moment we are not over one mile from h—l.’ ‘Perhaps not,’ replied the President, ‘as I believe that is just about the distance from here to the Capitol, where you gentlemen are in session.’”<sup>11</sup> The journalist Benjamin Perley Poore thought that politicians “do not exactly fancy ‘Old Abe,’ for they cannot use him, nor will he be guided by them, for he prefers to decide for himself on all important topics.”<sup>12</sup>

As Lincoln took charge of his administration more forcefully, he won increased respect from Congress. When that body met in December, according to Samuel Bowles, editor of the influential Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, “many of his old political friends treated him with marked neglect and discourtesy.” But in late March, Bowles reported from Washington that “all are hastening to do him reverence. His integrity, his wisdom, his caution, his strength as a man and a statesman are warmly admitted on all hands; and he has, more than any other man in the nation, the respect and confidence of Congress.”<sup>13</sup>

By the spring, the public too had come to share that opinion. “The confidence felt by all loyal men in the integrity and wisdom of President Lincoln forms one of the most marked and hopeful features of the existing political condition of our country,” observed the Philadelphia Press in April. “Even those who do not approve all his acts accord to him perfect rectitude of purpose and fervent patriotism. Compelled to grapple with more fearful difficulties, and to promptly decide more important questions, than any of his

---

<sup>11</sup> Washington correspondence, 7 July, New York Commercial Advertiser, 8 July 1862.

<sup>12</sup> Washington correspondence by Ben: Perley Poore, 1 January, Boston Journal, 3 January 1862.

<sup>13</sup> “Notes at Washington” by S[amuel] B[owles], Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 27 March 1862.

predecessors, he exhibits, in every phase of the terrible struggles through which we are passing, so much prudence, firmness, and unmistakable devotion to the interests of the nation, that every honest man feels and acknowledges that the President always tries to do exactly right.”<sup>14</sup> The Providence Journal rejoiced that Lincoln was “not merely the nominal executive of our government” but had become “really the President. He has the reins in his own hands.”<sup>15</sup> Democratic Judge Edwards Pierpont of New York remarked that Lincoln “is rising above all exterior influence and learning to depend upon himself and taking his own judgment” and “that Seward, even, has little influence with him now.” Somewhat condescendingly, the fastidious Pierpont added: “He is greater than he seems. His manners are so against him, but he is great from being so good, so conscientious.”<sup>16</sup>

If Lincoln’s manners offended Pierpont, the voters found them to their liking. Journalist Poore noted that the president “will sometimes throw his legs upon the table, as if in his law office in Springfield, and illustrate his position by a good story, or by a colloquial expression, drawn from the mother wit and humor of the prairie people. But this pleasant manner endears him the more to the great mass of those who elected him.”<sup>17</sup> Also endearing the president to his constituents was his patience in dealing with advisors and critics. “Mr. Lincoln is a good listener,” reported the New York Commercial Advertiser. “He will patiently hear any man, (unless he is reminded of an anecdote, which he at once relates,) and he thus patiently gathers tribute from all, often submitting

---

<sup>14</sup> Philadelphia Press, 21 April 1862.

<sup>15</sup> Providence Journal, 13 March 1863

<sup>16</sup> Pierpont told this to Maria Lydig Daly. Daly, Diary of a Union Lady, 1861-1865, ed. Harold Earl Hammond (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1962), 135-36 (entry for 22 May 1862).

<sup>17</sup> Washington correspondence by Ben: Perley Poore, 1 January, Boston Journal, 3 January 1862.

to severe criticisms from tried friends.”<sup>18</sup> (One of those friends, Truman Smith, grumbled that the “amiable President seems to be averse to hurting any body and I shall not be surprised if the traitors on submission secure to themselves the benefit of a general amnesty.”)<sup>19</sup> In late January, a New Yorker declared that Lincoln, Stanton, and McClellan “are not only the popular favorites of the hour but the hope of all thoughtful and patriotic men.”<sup>20</sup>

Lincoln’s greater assertiveness was especially appreciated by leaders from his own region. When he asked a western governor, “Will the people of the West sustain the government through the onerous taxation which must be imposed upon them?” he received an emphatic response: “They will endure anything, if they are convinced that they have got a government.”<sup>21</sup> In February, Illinois Congressman William Kellogg approvingly reported that Lincoln “is determined to move on to the accomplishment of the great work before him firmly and surely.”<sup>22</sup> Illinois Democrats liked the president because they believed he would “not suffer himself to be driven or coaxed into making a war for the abolition of slavery.”<sup>23</sup>

Lincoln did not burn with a desire to wield power, but his keen sense of responsibility led him to perform his duties conscientiously, onerous though he found them to be. In April 1862, he told an Illinois friend: “This getting the nomination for

---

<sup>18</sup> Washington correspondence, 27 January, New York Commercial Advertiser, 28 January 1862.

<sup>19</sup> Smith to Henry Shelton Sanford, 19 February 1862, Sanford Papers, in John Y. Simon, “Lincoln and Truman Smith,” Lincoln Herald 67 (1965): 127.

<sup>20</sup> E. P. Norton to S. S. Cox, New York, 31 January 1862, Cox Papers, Brown University.

<sup>21</sup> Washington correspondence, 9 February, New York Evening Post, 10 February 1862.

<sup>22</sup> William Kellogg to Joseph Gillespie, Washington, 9 February 1862, Joseph Gillespie Papers, Chicago History Museum.

<sup>23</sup> J. R. Scroggs to S. S. Cox, Freeport, Illinois, 6 March 1862, Cox Papers, Brown University.

President, and being elected, is all very pleasant to a man's ambition; but to be the President, and to meet the responsibilities and discharge the duties of the office in times like these is anything but pleasant. I would gladly if I could, take my neck from the yoke, and go home with you to Springfield, and live, as I used, in peace with my friends, than to endure this harassing kind of life."<sup>24</sup> In March, Lincoln said of the presidency: "It is a big job; the country little knows how big."<sup>25</sup>

In exercising his new-found assertiveness, Lincoln continued to face a daunting challenge in McClellan. Persuading him to move proved as difficult as ever. Among Little Mac's chief defects were the ones that the general mistakenly ascribed to Robert E. Lee, who he alleged "is too cautious & weak under grave responsibility" and "wanting in moral firmness when pressed by heavy responsibility & is likely to be timid & irresolute in action."<sup>26</sup> This assessment is a classic example of the psychological mechanism of projection – accusing others of having one's own flaws.

#### PRESIDENTIAL READING

As Lincoln took greater control of his administration, he had little time to relax.<sup>27</sup> In January, when chided for inaccessibility, he said that he simply could not accommodate everybody who wanted to see him and exclaimed: "I have not looked into a newspaper for a month!"<sup>28</sup> He told an Illinois friend "that he had no time to read many

---

<sup>24</sup> Noyes W. Miner to John Y. Scammon et al., Belvidere, Illinois, 1 August 1871, Quincy, Illinois, Whig, 16 March 1872, copied in the New York Times, 23 March 1872.

<sup>25</sup> Wendell Phillips, speech in Boston, 17 April, in The Liberator (Boston), 25 April 1862.

<sup>26</sup> Sears, Young Napoleon, 180.

<sup>27</sup> Washington correspondence, 20 January, Philadelphia Inquirer, 21 January 1862.

<sup>28</sup> New York Tribune, 18 January 1862; Washington correspondence, 21 January, New York Evening Post, 22 January 1862.

letters & none to read newspapers.”<sup>29</sup> Some administration supporters mistakenly interpreted these remarks as a scandalous admission that the president cared little for public opinion.<sup>30</sup> But that was not the case. “He read very little,” John Hay recalled. “Scarcely ever looked into a newspaper unless I called his attention to an article on some special subject. He frequently said ‘I know more about that than any of them.’”<sup>31</sup> In 1863, Hay’s coadjutor, John G. Nicolay, reported that except for telegraphic dispatches in the Washington press, “the President rarely ever looks at any papers, simply for want of leisure to do so.”<sup>32</sup> Nicolay and Hay’s assistant, William O. Stoddard, recalled that Lincoln “cared little” for newspaper opinion. In 1861, the president instructed him “to make a regular synopsis, every morning, of . . . the most important utterances of the leading public journals.” Stoddard complied for a couple of weeks but “gave it up in utter despair of securing his attention” to the digest he prepared. Lincoln “knew the people so much better than the editors did,” Stoddard explained, “that he could not bring himself to listen with any patience to the tissue of insane contradictions which then made up the staple of the public press.”<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> George W. Rives to Lyman Trumbull, Paris, Illinois, 12 February 1862, Lyman Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>30</sup> Cephas Brainerd to George W. Julian, New York, 28 January 1862, and [F. M. Finch?] to Julian, Franklin, 26 January 1862, Giddings-Julian Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>31</sup> John Hay to Herndon, Paris, 5 September 1866, Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, eds., Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 332; Michael Burlingame and John R. Turner Ettliger, eds., Inside Lincoln's White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 40-41 (entry for 24 September 1862).

<sup>32</sup> Nicolay to the Chicago Tribune, Washington, 19 June 1863, in Michael Burlingame, ed., With Lincoln in the White House: Letters, Memoranda, and Other Writings of John G. Nicolay, 1860-1865 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 116.

<sup>33</sup> William O. Stoddard, “White House Sketch No. 2,” New York Citizen, 25 August 1866, in Stoddard, Inside the White House, ed. Burlingame, 148.



When an army officer volunteered to write a defense of the administration, Lincoln told him: “Oh, no, at least, not now. If I were to try to read, much less answer, all the attacks made on me, this shop might as well be closed for any other business. I do the very best I know how – the very best I can; and I mean to keep doing so until the end. If the end brings me out all right, what is said against me won’t amount to anything. If the end brings me out wrong, ten angels swearing I was right would make no difference.”<sup>34</sup> In 1865, Lincoln said: “As a general rule, I abstain from reading the reports of attacks upon myself, wishing not to be provoked by that to which I can not properly offer an answer.”<sup>35</sup>

Lincoln also avoided reading newspapers because he was, as he said, too “thin-skinned.” Mary Lincoln recalled that press criticism caused her husband “great pain.” When she tried to share with him hostile journalistic commentary, he would say: “Don’t do that, for I have enough to bear.”<sup>36</sup> One Sunday afternoon he spent an hour perusing a series of bitter anti-administration editorials clipped from Henry Ward Beecher’s New York Independent.<sup>37</sup> The eminent preacher snobbishly dismissed Lincoln: “It would be difficult for a man to be born lower than he was. He is an unshapely man. He is a man that bears evidence of not having been educated in schools or in circles of refinement.”<sup>38</sup> Upon finishing Beecher’s salvos, Lincoln indignantly threw them down and quoted

---

<sup>34</sup> Francis B. Carpenter, The Inner Life of Abraham Lincoln: Six Months at the White House (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1867), 258-259.

<sup>35</sup> Public address, 11 April 1865, in Roy P. Basler et al., eds., The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln (8 vols. plus index; New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953-55), 8:401.

<sup>36</sup> Carpenter, Six Months at the White House, 230-231.

<sup>37</sup> For excerpts from those editorials, see Paxton Hibben, Henry Ward Beecher: An American Portrait (New York: G. H. Doran, 1927), 158.

<sup>38</sup> Hibben, Henry Ward Beecher, 156.

heatedly from the Second Book of Kings: “Is thy servant a dog, that he should do this thing?”<sup>39</sup> He sharply criticized an editor of that journal, Henry C. Bowen, who protested that he only controlled the commercial, not editorial, side of the paper and therefore could do nothing about Beecher’s attacks.<sup>40</sup>

Beecher was pleased that Lincoln read his barbs and rejoiced “that the arrow is well directed,” but his brother Thomas Beecher, a recruiting officer in upstate New York, criticized his naiveté about the degree of public support for emancipation: “I am satisfied that the day you succeed in writing your magnificent principles on our national banner, you will have only a flag and a sentiment; the army, the men with one consent will say, ‘We ain[’]t going to fight for the Niggers.’ You remember [your earlier years in] Indiana. Do you soberly think that those fighting Hoosiers would hurry to enlist for the sake of freeing the slave? Will negro hating Illinois that now gives nigh half her men to the war, consent to fight for the slaves she despises? I can answer for rural New York. The more emancipation you talk, the less recruits you can enlist.”<sup>41</sup>

Ward Hill Lamon heard Lincoln cry out after learning of criticism like Beecher’s: “I would rather be dead than, as president, thus abused in the house of my friends.” When Henry J. Raymond’s New York Times was severely critical of Lincoln, he made it clear that Raymond would be appointed to no government position.<sup>42</sup> The president once

---

<sup>39</sup> Carpenter, Six Months at the White House, 230.

<sup>40</sup> Henry C. Bowen to Lincoln, Brooklyn, 2 December 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>41</sup> Isabella Beecher Hooker to John Hooker, 19 November 1862, in Debby Applegate, The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 341; Thomas Beecher to Henry Ward Beecher, 10 August 1862, Beecher Papers, Yale University.

<sup>42</sup> Ward Hill Lamon, Recollections of Abraham Lincoln, 1847-1865, ed. Dorothy Lamon Teillard (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Washington, D.C.: The Editor, 1911), 261.

protested to Sydney Howard Gay, managing editor of the New York Tribune, about an unfair article in that paper. “But I don’t care what they say of me,” he told Gay. “I want to straighten this thing out and then I don’t care what they do with me. They may hang me.”<sup>43</sup>

Instead of perusing newspapers to gauge the mood of the country, Lincoln relied on what he called “public opinion baths” – that is, talking with innumerable callers. He acknowledged to journalist Charles G. Halpine that it was a “heavy tax” on his time to do so, but insisted that “no hours of my day are better employed than those which thus bring me again within the direct contact and atmosphere of the average of our whole people.” Government officials moved in such limited circles that they could easily lose touch with the electorate. By regularly admitting all comers, even those with “utterly frivolous” concerns, he was able to obtain “a clearer and more vivid image of that great popular assemblage, out of which I sprang, and to which at the end of two years I must return.”<sup>44</sup>

Lincoln read only a tiny percentage of the letters that poured into the White House, for most business correspondence was routed to the appropriate departments. At his request, White House secretaries summarized the incoming mail for him. “Mr. Nicolay, please run over this & tell me what is in it,” he endorsed one particularly long missive.<sup>45</sup> John Hay estimated that Lincoln “did not read one [letter] in fifty that he

---

<sup>43</sup> Gay told this to Josephine Shaw Lowell. William Rhinelander Stewart, The Philanthropic Work of Josephine Shaw Lowell (New York: Macmillan, 1911), 23 (diary entry for 3 April 1862).

<sup>44</sup> Don E. Fehrenbacher and Virginia Fehrenbacher, eds., Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 194.

<sup>45</sup> Endorsement dated 23 December 1862 on a letter from Henry P. Tappan to Lincoln, University of Michigan, 22 November 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

received.”<sup>46</sup> Similarly, William O. Stoddard guessed that only three or four per cent of the items in the White House mail bag actually reached the president’s desk. According to Stoddard, “there never was on earth such another omnium gatherum as the President’s mail.” It consisted of “applications for office, for contracts, for pardons, for pecuniary aid, for advice, for information, for autographs, voluminous letters of advice, political disquisitions, religious exhortations, the rant and drivel of insanity, bitter abuse, foul obscenity, slanderous charges against public men, police and war information, military reports,” and “threatening letters.” Stoddard could not get the president to take seriously the threats, which averaged one a day. If Lincoln bothered to notice them at all, he responded with “contemptuous ridicule.”<sup>47</sup>

The president had little time for voluminous documents. When he received an exceptionally long, detailed committee report on artillery, he threw it down, exclaiming: “I should want a new lease of life to read this through! Why can't a committee of this kind occasionally exhibit a grain of common sense? If I send a man to buy a horse for me, I expect him to tell me his 'points' – not how many hairs there are in his tail.”<sup>48</sup>

To a caller presenting a long petition, he stated bluntly: “I’m not going to read that.”

“Why not?”

---

<sup>46</sup> John Hay to Herndon, Paris, 5 September 1866, Wilson and Davis, eds., Herndon's Informants, 331.

<sup>47</sup> Stoddard, “White House Sketch No. 4,” New York Citizen, 8 September 1866, Stoddard, Inside the White House, ed. Burlingame, 157-58.

<sup>48</sup> Carpenter, Six Months at the White House, 254.

“Why, if all these thing were read it would take fifty Presidents to do the business.”

“But this once, do just read mine.”

Holding up the lengthy document, Lincoln exclaimed: “Read that! Why I don’t expect to live long enough to read it through.”<sup>49</sup>

Eating into Lincoln’s time was a constant demand that he solve minor disputes and deal with other petty matters. In 1863, Stoddard reported from the White House that the president was besieged by “the same unceasing throng in the ante-rooms . . . bent on dragging him ‘for only a few minutes only,’ from his labors of state to attend to private requests, often selfish, often frivolous, sometimes corrupt or improper, and not so often worthy of the precious time and strength thus wasted.” Lincoln, said Stoddard, “belongs to the nation – it is seldom that the affairs of any one man cannot be righted, save by bringing to his aid the delegated power of a whole people. No man, however, will see this, when his eyes are veiled by his interest. But who can doubt that our worthy and wise Chief Magistrate would do better, to bring to the grand yet delicate questions which must be finally decided by him alone, a mind unwearied by listening to private griefs or wishes, and unexhausted by pouring out his too ready sympathies upon misfortunes which, powerful as he is, he cannot remedy.”<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Washington correspondence, 19 October, New York Evening Post, 21 October 1865.

<sup>50</sup> Washington correspondence, 6 April, New York Examiner, 9 April 1863, Michael Burlingame, ed., Dispatches from Lincoln's White House: The Anonymous Civil War Journalism of Presidential Secretary William O. Stoddard (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 145.

Those griefs, misfortunes, and wishes were so numerous that Lincoln once remarked that “it seemed as if he was regarded as a police justice, before whom all the petty troubles of men were brought for adjustment.”<sup>51</sup> A typical case involved an army officer who had not been paid because of a technicality. After perusing a sheaf of papers justifying the claim, the president instructed the paymaster-general to honor it. To an intercessor on the officer’s behalf, Lincoln said: “You have no idea of the number of cases of a somewhat similar character that are continually being presented to me – cases which, in the present state of affairs, there seems no adequate provision to meet. I am sitting here from day to day, just like a Justice of the Peace, hearing and determining this class of cases.”<sup>52</sup> In the summer of 1863, an enlisted man pestered Lincoln with a matter that the president thought should be handled by the soldier’s superior officer. When his advice was ignored, Lincoln peremptorily barked: “Now, my man, go away! I cannot attend to all these details. I could as easily bail out the Potomac with a spoon.”<sup>53</sup>

Sometimes Lincoln resorted to gentle sarcasm when confronted by importunate visitors. A delegation once appealed to him to help the Washington fire department obtain new equipment. He interrupted their presentation, gravely remarking: “It is a mistake to think that I am at the head of the fire department of Washington. I am simply the President of the United States.”<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> J. G. Holland, The Life of Abraham Lincoln (Springfield, Massachusetts: Gurdon Bill, 1866), 429

<sup>52</sup> W. I. G., “Two Stories of the Martyr President, Exemplifying the Goodness of His Heart and His Sense of Justice,” Appleton’s Journal, January 1880. This took place in the summer of 1862. For a similar story, see Donald D. Parker, “Early Territory Residents Had Close Lincoln Contact,” Sioux Falls, South Dakota, Argus-Leader, 12 February 1956.

<sup>53</sup> John Hay, “Life in the White House in the Time of Lincoln,” Century Magazine 41 (1890):33-34.

<sup>54</sup> William Bender Wilson, A Few Acts and Actors in the Tragedy of the Civil War in the United States (Philadelphia: by the author, 1892), 109-10.

When a landlord complained to Lincoln that he could not collect his rents, the president expressed sympathy but asked, “what would you have me do? I have much to do, and the courts have been opened to relieve me in this regard.” Sheepishly his caller said, “I am not I the habit of appearing before big men.” With customary modesty, Lincoln replied: “and for that matter, you have no need to change your habit, for you are not before very big men now.” Patiently he concluded the interview by making an obvious point: “I can’t go into the collection business.”<sup>55</sup>

Lincoln had to make the same point to a woman who was owed money: “I am really very sorry, madam, very sorry. But our own good sense must tell you that I am not here to collect small debts. You must appeal to the courts in regular order.” To an army officer, he exclaimed: “What odd kinds of people come in to see me, and what odd ideas they must have about my office! Would you believe, Major, that the old lady who has just left, came in here to get from me an order for stopping the pay of a Treasury clerk, who owes her a board bill of about \$70. . . . She may have come here a loyal woman, but I’ll be bound she has gone away believing that the worst pictures of me in the Richmond press only lack truth in not being half black and bad enough.”<sup>56</sup>

An allegedly loyal Southerner asked Lincoln to sign papers permitting him to recover substantial sums for property damaged in the war. The president heatedly observed that the claimant's documents did not prove that he deserved the money. “I know what you want,” Lincoln snapped, “you are turning, or trying to turn me into a justice of the peace, to put your claims through. There are a hundred thousand men in

---

<sup>55</sup> “Reminiscences of President Lincoln,” by the editor of the Lowell, Massachusetts, Citizen, in Frank Moore, ed., Anecdotes, Poetry, and Incidents of the War: North and South. 1860-1865 (New York: Bible House, 1867), 482-83.

<sup>56</sup> Carpenter, Inner Life of Abraham Lincoln, 279.

the country, every one of them as good as you are, who have just such bills as you present; and you care nothing of what becomes of them, so you get your money.”<sup>57</sup> When a poor woman from Michigan came begging money to help meet her mortgage, Lincoln listened patiently, perused her letters “with a half humorous, half vexed expression,” and pledged a modest sum to help her out.<sup>58</sup>

To a gentleman seeking presidential aid in pressing a claim for damages that soldiers had done to his farm, Lincoln exclaimed: “Why, my good sir, I couldn’t think of such a thing. If I considered individual miseries, I would find enough worries for twenty Presidents!” When his interlocutor failed to take the hint, Lincoln said he was reminded of an expert pilot back in Illinois who was deftly guiding a steamboat through some rapids. As the craft pitched and rolled in the turbulent water, a young boy accosted him with a plea: “Say, Mister Cap, I wish you’d just stop your boat a minute. I’ve lost my apple overboard!”<sup>59</sup>

Visiting clergy often annoyed the president. One day when a minister called at the White House, Lincoln greeted him, invited him to sit, took his own chair, and announced, “I am now ready to hear what you have to say.”

“Oh, bless you sir, I have nothing to say. I merely called to pay my respects.”

With relief written all over his face, Lincoln rose, took the clerical visitor’s hand in both of his, and exclaimed: “My dear sir, I am very glad to see you. I am very glad to see you indeed. I thought you came to preach to me!”<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> Frazer Kirkland, ed., Reminiscences of the Blue and Gray, ’61 to ’65 (Chicago: Preston, 1895), 640-41.

<sup>58</sup> Stoddard, “White House Sketch No. 10,” New York Citizen, 20 October 1866, Stoddard, Inside the White House, ed. Burlingame, 188.

<sup>59</sup> New York Evening Post, 1 February 1864.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.



Lincoln put in unusually long hours attending to minor problems as well as more weighty public business. When the First Lady was away (which was often), he would eat breakfast, lunch, and often dinner alone in his office while working away steadily. Receiving callers from 9 a.m. till 4 p.m., he seemed to Stoddard like “a man who carried a load too great for human strength; and, as the years went on and the load grew heavier, it bowed him into premature old age. He was the American Atlas.”<sup>61</sup>

Signs of this aging process were obvious in the winter of 1861, when Lincoln looked “gaunt” and “considerably careworn.”<sup>62</sup> In mid-January a dinner guest said that it “was evident that he was harassed by haunting cares; the obligation of politeness to his guests made him endeavor to be agreeable; he would tell a funny story to my mother who sat next to him, or make some amusing remark to his other neighbor, then when the attention of these ladies was called away, Mr. Lincoln’s thoughts lapsed into their ‘sea of troubles’ and flew far away.”<sup>63</sup> The president, wrote a Washington correspondent, “is not so cheerful as he used to be, is a little more grave in his demeanor, and is somewhat worn, but he shows no signs of physical or mental decay. A month’s respite from all the cares of office would doubtless set him right.”<sup>64</sup> This news caused alarm, for it was

---

<sup>61</sup> Stoddard, “White House Sketches Nos. 2, 4,” New York Citizen, 25 August, 8 September 1866, Stoddard, Inside the White House, ed. Burlingame, 149, 157.

<sup>62</sup> Washington correspondence by “Miriam” (Mrs. John A. Kasson), 16 January, Iowa State Register (Des Moines), 26 January 1862; Washington correspondence, 20 January, Philadelphia Inquirer, 21 January 1862.

<sup>63</sup> Marie Caroline Post, The Life and Mémoires of Comte Régis de Trobriand, Major-General in the Army of the United States (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1910), 252.

<sup>64</sup> Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 1 January, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 4 January 1862.

widely believed that “Mr. Lincoln’s face is an almost unfailing barometer to the condition of public affairs – whether serene or the reverse.”<sup>65</sup>

As his anxiety grew, Lincoln’s temper shortened. To increasingly vehement criticism of McClellan’s tardiness in attacking the Confederates, he stated that “there was probably but one man in the country more anxious for a battle than himself, and that man was McClellan.” He “repudiated in words of withering rebuke those who make the charge that he or Mr. Seward or General McClellan were temporizing or delaying out of any consideration for rebels or rebel institutions, or that they indulged any thought of ending the war by any means other than by conquest on the battlefield.”<sup>66</sup> He insisted that “McClellan is not a traitor; his difficulty is that he always prefers to-morrow to to-day. He never is ready to move. I think the immense importance of the interests at stake affects him thus. In this he is very much like myself. When I was practicing law at Springfield, I sometimes had a case involving a man’s life or death, and I never could feel that I was ready to go on with the trial; I always wished to postpone it; and when the next court came round I felt a similar impression that I was not ready, whatever preparations I had made.”<sup>67</sup>

#### CHEERING NEWS FROM KENTUCKY AND TENNESSEE

As time passed, Lincoln grew more optimistic. On January 19, Union troops under the exceptionally capable Virginian George H. Thomas won a battle at Mill Springs, Kentucky, killing 148 of the enemy (including General Felix K. Zollicoffer)

---

<sup>65</sup> Washington correspondence by Sigma, 11 July, Cincinnati Commercial, 15 July 1862.

<sup>66</sup> Letter by Congressman A. S. Diven, quoted in the Columbia, Missouri, Statesman, 14 February 1862.

<sup>67</sup> This comment was made on 17 January 1862 to Moncure Conway, editor of the Boston Commonwealth, and William Henry Channing. Boston Commonwealth, 6 September 1862. See also the Washington correspondence by Agate [Whitelaw Reid], 25 July, Cincinnati Gazette, 29 July 1862.

while losing only 55 men.<sup>68</sup> The president was “in fine spirits” upon hearing of that victory, which he looked upon as the first in a series that would last throughout the warmer months.<sup>69</sup> Also cheering was word that General Ambrose E. Burnside and his men had safely reached North Carolina, where they quickly defeated the Confederates at Roanoke Island.<sup>70</sup> (The president had been annoyed by delays in launching that operation, which finally departed in January.)<sup>71</sup> On February 5, Lincoln said “that he felt more confidence now than ever in the power of the Government to suppress the rebellion.”<sup>72</sup>

The next day, U. S. Grant took Fort Henry on the Tennessee River, and on February 16, he captured a Rebel army at Fort Donelson on the Cumberland, causing Washington to go “wild with excitement.” The wife of a prominent government official told friends back in Iowa: “Our hearts are bursting with gratitude, our tears start, we grasp hands, we laugh, we say ‘God be thanked;’ our country’s honor is vindicated, the stain of our Flag is forever blotted out!”<sup>73</sup> At the capital, an army officer noted, “some think that the back bone of the rebellion, as it is called, is broken forever.”<sup>74</sup>

Lincoln was one of those optimists. When Joshua Speed protested against a rumored plan to award a general’s stars to Cassius M. Clay – then serving as U. S.

---

<sup>68</sup> Ron Nicholas, “Mill Springs: The First Battle for Kentucky,” in Kent Masterson Brown, ed., The Civil War in Kentucky: Battle for the Bluegrass State (Mason City, Iowa: Savas, 2000), 47-73.

<sup>69</sup> Washington correspondence, 21 January, New York Herald, 22 January 1862; Washington correspondence, 20 January, Philadelphia Inquirer, 21 January 1862; Washington correspondence by Vidette, 21 January, New York Commercial Advertiser, 22 January 1862.

<sup>70</sup> Washington correspondence, 21 January, New York Herald, 22 January 1862. Burnside sailed on January 11 and captured Roanoke Island on February 8.

<sup>71</sup> Washington correspondence by R. M. H., 15 January, Indianapolis Journal, 21 January 1862.

<sup>72</sup> Washington correspondence, 6 February, New York Tribune, 7 February 1862.

<sup>73</sup> Washington correspondence by “Miriam” (Mrs. John A. Kasson), 20 February, Iowa State Register (Des Moines), 1 March 1862.

<sup>74</sup> Major J. G. Benton to James Watson Webb, Washington, 28 February 1862, James Watson Webb Papers, Sterling Library, Yale University.

minister to Russia – the president said “that he was now in great hopes that the rebellion would pretty much ended” before Clay could return from St. Petersburg.<sup>75</sup>

(Lincoln came to regret offering a commission to Clay. In December 1862, the “much annoyed” president refused to see that general, saying Clay “had a great deal of conceit and very little sense, and that he did not know what to do with him, for he could not give him a command – he was not fit for it.”<sup>76</sup> But feeling sorry for the unpopular Clay, he nominated him to serve once again as minister to Russia despite the objections of Sumner and Seward. Seeing that the president was “vexed and grieved” at the prospect that the Senate might well reject Clay, Seward magnanimously agreed to abandon his opposition and help secure the indiscreet Kentuckian’s confirmation.)<sup>77</sup>

At Fort Donelson, Grant captured several thousand Confederates. This successful joint operation represented the first major Northern victory in the war; it not only opened the South to invasion along two rivers but also forced the rebels to forsake their positions in Kentucky and much of Tennessee. Tired of hearing reports that all was quiet on the Potomac, many Northerners scoffed when McClellan’s partisans claimed that their hero, as general-in-chief, should receive credit for those victories.

Lincoln rejoiced at the triumph of Grant and Foote. When the news arrived and someone jubilantly suggested “Let’s have a drink,” the tee-totaling president drolly

---

<sup>75</sup> Speed to Joseph Holt, Washington, 4 February 1862, Holt Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>76</sup> Theodore Calvin Pease and James G. Randall, eds., The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning (2 vols.; Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1925-33), 1:595 (entry for 12 December 1862).

<sup>77</sup> Washington correspondence by Whitelaw Reid, 10 March 1863, Cincinnati Gazette, n.d., scrapbook, Reid Family Papers, Library of Congress.

responded: “All right bring in some water.”<sup>78</sup> Informed that the victory had been achieved with the help of many Illinois troops, he remarked: “I cannot speak so confidently about the fighting qualities of the Eastern men, but this I do know – if the southerners think that man for man they are better than our Illinois men, or western men generally, they will discover themselves in a grievous mistake.”<sup>79</sup> For weeks

Lincoln had been working behind the scenes to provide Grant and Foote with floating mortars, the brainchild of Gustavus Fox, who realized that the Mississippi, Cumberland, and Tennessee Rivers would be convenient invasion routes and that to attack forts along their banks, mortars on boats would be essential. While still in charge of the Department of the West, Frémont to his credit approved the idea and ordered the construction of a mortar fleet at Cairo. It was to assist the army in a thrust led by Grant, who had obtained permission from Halleck to launch an offensive down the Tennessee. Special beds had to be manufactured to accommodate the gigantic thirteen-inch mortars. This was successfully accomplished for a flotilla being constructed in New Jersey at the behest of David Dixon Porter, who was planning to attack New Orleans, but Lincoln grew anxious as the work on a similar fleet in Cairo was seemingly abandoned. On January 10, the cabinet learned that nobody knew anything about those vessels. When he made inquiries, Lincoln was infuriated to discover that no mortars had been constructed for Foote’s armada and only two mortar beds. He instructed Navy Lieutenant Henry A. Wise “to put it through.” With fierce determination, he told Wise on January 23, “I am going to devote

---

<sup>78</sup> Dillard C. Donnohue, interview with Jesse W. Weik, 13 February 1887, Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, eds., Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 692.

<sup>79</sup> Nicolay, journal entry for 17 February 1862, in Burlingame, ed., With Lincoln in the White House, 69.

a part of every day to these mortars and I won[']t leave off until it fairly rains Bombs.”<sup>80</sup> He wanted “to rain the Rebels out” and “treat them to a refreshing shower of sulphur and brimstone.”<sup>81</sup> When word of the president’s special interest in the flotilla reached Cairo, it galvanized the officers and men there.

Wise turned to the firm of Cooper and Hewitt, which speedily completed the beds by mid-February and sent them westward in boxcars plainly labeled “U. S. GRANT, CAIRO. NOT TO BE SWITCHED UNDER PENALTY OF DEATH.”<sup>82</sup> A similar feat was accomplished by a Cincinnati foundry. Lincoln supervised all these efforts closely. Despite his best endeavors, the mortar flotilla was not ready in time for Foote and Grant’s campaign. Happy as he was with the news from Tennessee, Lincoln was “[m]ad about mortars.” He remarked that “he must take these army matters into his own hands. The Navy have built their ships and mortars for N[ew] O[rleans] and are ready to go. Gen. McC[lellan] & [the chief of army ordnance, General James W.] Ripley & all are to blame.”<sup>83</sup>

#### ONE-MAN RESEARCH-AND-DEVELOPMENT BUREAU FOR NEW WEAPONRY

Lincoln was mad at General Ripley for other reasons as well. In keeping with his long-standing interest in things mechanical, the president studied weaponry as well as strategy and during the first two years of his administration became in effect a one-man research and development branch of the War Department as well its chief strategist. But

---

<sup>80</sup> Henry A. Wise to A. H. Foote, Washington, 23 January 1862, in Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:108.

<sup>81</sup> Henry A. Wise to A. H. Foote, Washington, 31 January 1862, William P. Palmer Collection, Western Reserve Historical Society.

<sup>82</sup> Edwin M. Stanton, “In the Matter of Mortars for the United States,” [25 January 1862], Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>83</sup> Virginia Fox diary, [26?] January 1862, Levi Woodbury Papers, Library of Congress.

Ripley (known as “Ripley Van Winkle”) proved obstinate and recalcitrant. Trying to get that unimaginative, cantankerous general to adopt technological innovations was as difficult as it was to get McClellan, Halleck, or Buell to attack the enemy.

Lincoln concerned himself with weaponry of all kinds: small arms, artillery, flame throwers, rockets, submarines, mines, iron-clad ships, and explosives. Often he tested new-fangled rifles himself. An inventor with a patent of his own, he encouraged all sorts of innovations, most notably the breech-loading rifle and the machine gun. His interest in the latter began in June 1861, when he observed tests of “the Union Repeating Gun,” modestly described by its salesman as “an army in six feet square.” Lincoln dubbed it the “coffee-mill gun” because its hopper, into which bullets were poured, resembled that culinary apparatus. Impressed by what he saw, Lincoln in October, after witnessing a second test firing, ordered all of the ten guns then available at \$1300 apiece. On October 26, the president called on McClellan and “began to talk about his wonderful new repeating battery of rifled gun, shooting 50 balls a minute.” Lincoln was “delighted with it,” and asked the general to “go down and see it, and if proper, detail a corps of men to work it.”<sup>84</sup> Characteristically, Little Mac hesitated to act, asking Cameron if fifty could be purchased at the rather steep price. Lincoln then demanded that the general back his decision to purchase them. Impatiently the president told the salesman promoting the weapon that McClellan “knows whether the guns will be serviceable. I do not. It avails nothing for him that he has no objection to my purchasing them.” Ultimately Little Mac agreed, and on December 19 Lincoln ordered the purchase of fifty coffee-mill guns.<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> Burlingame and Ettliger, eds., Hay Diary, 28-29 (entry for 26 October 1861).

<sup>85</sup> \*Bruce, Lincoln and the Tools of War, 118-23.

More significantly, Lincoln championed the introduction of breech-loading rifles, which allowed a soldier to avoid the cumbersome, time-consuming, and dangerous procedures necessary to reload single-shot muzzle-loaders: while standing or kneeling he must take a from a pouch a paper cartridge containing powder and bullet, tear it open with his teeth, pour the powder into the barrel, stick the ball point-first into the muzzle, pull out a ramrod, jam the bullet home, replace the ramrod in its tube, raise the weapon, half-cock the hammer, remove the spent percussion cap, place a new one on the nipple, and cock the hammer once more. Had breech-loaders been widely adopted by the North early in the war, that conflict might have been significantly shortened.

Lincoln did his best to persuade the war department to equip the army with breech-loaders, which he enjoyed testing himself. Often inventors submitted prototypes of their wares to him, and he inspected many of them carefully, especially rifles. Early one morning in 1861, he and William O. Stoddard took target practice on the grassy mall behind the White House, the president using a new Spencer single-shot breech-loader and his assistant a converted Springfield rifle (known as a Marsh gun after its inventor) that also loaded at the breech. As they banged away at a large pile of scrap lumber in violation of the standing order to fire no weapons in the District, the leader of a small army squad rushed over, shouting: “Stop that firing!” When the president stood up, the troopers, recognizing their commander in chief, abruptly wheeled about and scurried off. “Well, they might have stayed to see the shooting,” the president remarked. The two men frequently tested new rifles in this fashion. (Lincoln was, Stoddard recalled, “a very good



shot.” At a demonstration by a sharpshooter unit, the president reportedly “took a rifle and elicited surprise from the spectators by the accuracy of his shot.”<sup>86</sup>

Lincoln was convinced that the breech-loader was “the army rifle of the future.”<sup>87</sup> When others tested the Marsh gun, they became as enthusiastic as Lincoln and recommended its adoption. Ripley, however, rejected that advice. In mid-October 1861, the president overruled him, insisting that he order 25,000. Two months later, Lincoln also demanded that 10,000 Spencer rifles be purchased, despite Ripley’s objections. The Spencer rifle was superior to the Marsh, for it was a repeater, carrying a clip of seven rounds, and was capable of firing fourteen shots per minute without overheating. While trying one out, Lincoln whittled a piece of wood into a gun sight which improved the weapon’s accuracy. (That innovation was not adopted, however.)<sup>88</sup>

Lincoln also favored breech-loading artillery, which Ripley opposed. In the fall of 1861, the president ordered the purchase of a few so-called “Ellsworth guns,” designed by Eli Thayer for Elmer Ellsworth’s zouaves. In addition, he prevailed on the war department to buy thirty small muzzle-loading three-pounders devised by James Woodruff, a good friend of Orville H. Browning. But Ripley managed to thwart the president’s plan to order two other breech-loading fieldpieces.<sup>89</sup>

#### PUSHING ON A STRING: ATTEMPTS TO GOAD McCLELLAN INTO ACTION

---

<sup>86</sup> Stoddard, Inside the White House, ed. Burlingame, 21-23, 163; Washington correspondence, 22 September 1862, New York World, 23 September 1861; Washington correspondence, 20 September, Philadelphia Press, 21 September 1861.

<sup>87</sup> Stoddard, Inside the White House, ed. Burlingame, 21.

<sup>88</sup> Bruce, Lincoln and the Tools of War, 107-17.

<sup>89</sup> Bruce, Lincoln and the Tools of War, 124-30.

Lincoln agreed with Stanton's insistence that "while men are striving nobly in the West, the champagne & oysters on the Potomac must be stopped."<sup>90</sup> The new secretary of war said that if Little Mac did not move soon, he (Stanton) "should move him."<sup>91</sup> The president had waited patiently – and in vain – for McClellan's plan of operations and, like the electorate, he was growing restless. "It is wonderful how public opinion is changing against McClellan," an Ohioan reported in late February.<sup>92</sup> An editor quipped that he had no time to look over the many monthly magazines he received and was tempted to send them to Little Mac, "whose forte seemed to be reviewing."<sup>93</sup>

To smoke the general out, Lincoln resorted to an unusual expedient: on January 27, he issued "President's General War Order No. 1," commanding all land and naval forces to begin a "general movement" against the enemy on George Washington's birthday, February 22.<sup>94</sup> (Privately, Stanton explained that "the Government was on the verge of bankruptcy, and at the rate of expenditure, the armies must move or the Government perish.")<sup>95</sup> As Hay observed, the issuance of this general war order marked a turning point: "He wrote it without any consultation and read it to the Cabinet, not for their sanction but for their information. From that time he influenced actively the operations of the Campaign. He stopped going to McClellan's and sent for the general to

---

<sup>90</sup> Stanton to Charles A. Dana, Washington, 24 January 1862, Dana Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>91</sup> Washington correspondence by "Linkensale," 14 January, Iowa State Register (Des Moines), 21 January 1862.

<sup>92</sup> G. W. Gans to John Sherman, Eaton, Ohio, 23 February 1862, John Sherman Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>93</sup> Fanny Garrison to Theodore Tilton, Boston, 6 April 1862, Tilton Papers, New-York Historical Society. She referred to an editorial in James Redpath's Pine and Palm.

<sup>94</sup> Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:111-12. He may have been prompted by Stanton to take this step. Howard K. Beale and Alan W. Brownsword, eds., Diary of Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy under Lincoln and Johnson (3 vols.; New York: Norton, 1960), 1:95.

<sup>95</sup> Stanton to Herman Dyer, Washington, 18 May 1862, Stanton Papers, Library of Congress.

come to him. Every thing grew busy and animated after this order.”<sup>96</sup> When the order was released to the press in March, the Cincinnati Gazette called it “the stroke that cut the cords which kept our great armies tied up in a state of inactivity.”<sup>97</sup> On January 31, Lincoln followed up with “President’s Special War Order No. 1,” directing the Army of the Potomac to attack Confederate supply lines at Manassas, a strategy he had proposed to McClellan several weeks earlier.<sup>98</sup> The New York Tribune optimistically predicted that Lincoln as de facto commander-in-chief of the army, along with the “prodigiously energetic” Stanton, “will now lift his war out of mud and delay, and carry it to victory.”<sup>99</sup>

Goaded into action by these presidential war orders, Little Mac hastened to the Executive Mansion to register objections and ask permission to submit an alternative plan. Lincoln may well have exclaimed to himself, “At last!”

The general wrote a twenty-two page document proposing an attack on Richmond from the lower Chesapeake. He would move the Army of the Potomac by water to the hamlet of Urbanna on the Rappahannock River, then drive toward the Confederate capital, forty miles to the west, before Johnston’s force at Manassas could shift to protect the city. In this reply, McClellan argued that it was “by no means certain” that victory could be achieved following the Manassas plan, but that an attack via Urbanna would provide “the most brilliant result” (as “certain by all the chances of war”) partly because the roads in the lower Chesapeake region “are passable at all seasons of the year.” (To his

---

<sup>96</sup> Burlingame and Ettlinger, eds., Hay Diary, 35 (entry for March 1862).

<sup>97</sup> Cincinnati Gazette, 3 March, quoted in the Cincinnati Commercial, 14 March 1862.

<sup>98</sup> Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:115.

<sup>99</sup> Washington correspondence, 5 February, New York Tribune, 6 February 1862.

dismay, he was to find that such was not the case at all. How he reached such an erroneous conclusion is hard to understand.)<sup>100</sup>

The president offered to defer to the general if Little Mac could satisfactorily answer five questions: “1st. Does not your plan involve a greatly larger expenditure of time, and money than mine? 2nd. Wherein is a victory more certain by your plan than mine? 3rd. Wherein is a victory more valuable by your plan than mine? 4th. In fact, would it not be less valuable, in this, that it would break no great line of the enemy's communications, while mine would? 5th. In case of disaster, would not a safe retreat be more difficult by your plan than by mine?”<sup>101</sup> Inexplicably, McClellan did not deign to respond.

Now Lincoln faced a dilemma: he must order McClellan to carry out the Manassas plan, or find a new general to do so, or acquiesce in the Urbanna strategy. (In late February and early March, he repeatedly alluded to another option, saying “that if the army of the Potomac could not otherwise be made to move, he would take command of it in person.”)<sup>102</sup> But who should take Little Mac's place? There was no obvious alternative, as Lincoln told an indignant Benjamin Wade when the Ohio senator urged him to replace McClellan with anybody. “Wade, ‘anybody’ will do for you, but not for me. I must have

---

<sup>100</sup> McClellan to Lincoln, Washington, 31 January [3 February] 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress. There is some confusion about the chronology of this correspondence. McClellan sent his long memorandum of February 3 to Stanton, for some unknown reason dated 31 January 1862. It is possible that while writing it, he received Lincoln's letter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and replied in the course of this long document. There is no other reply to Lincoln's questions. For a thoughtful discussion of this matter, see Stephen W. Sears, ed., The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1989), 170-71. See also Beatie, Army of the Potomac, 1:557.

<sup>101</sup> Lincoln to McClellan, Washington, 3 February 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:118-19.

<sup>102</sup> Washington correspondence, 12 March, New York Evening Post, 13 March 1862.

somebody.”<sup>103</sup> (Wade’s colleague Henry Wilson was so disgusted with McClellan that he would have preferred to see even the aged John E. Wool in command.)<sup>104</sup> If Lincoln reluctantly concluded to retain the general in command, would he order him to attack the Manassas supply lines? Lincoln confided to Charles Sumner that Little Mac’s scheme “was very much against his judgment, but that he did not feel disposed to take the responsibility of overruling him.”<sup>105</sup>

Chase shared Lincoln’s view that an attack on Confederate supply lines was preferable to the Urbanna scheme.<sup>106</sup> But on February 13, McClellan assured the treasury secretary that he would be in Richmond by the end of that month.<sup>107</sup>

So the president reluctantly consented to the Young Napoleon’s plan, but only with the understanding that enough troops would be left behind to defend Washington in case the Confederates attacked the capital while the Army of the Potomac was eighty miles away. If Washington were captured, the blow to the North’s prestige might prove fatal, possibly leading to European recognition of the Confederacy and defeat in the war. McClellan promised to leave a sufficient force to protect the city. The number was to be determined by all twelve division commanders, who jointly recommended a force of 40,000-50,000. That seemed reasonable, since McClellan had assured them that enemy at Manassas and Centerville numbered over 100,000. Unfortunately, Lincoln and McClellan

---

<sup>103</sup> Henry Wilson interviewed by Nicolay, 16 November 1875, in Michael Burlingame, ed., An Oral History of Abraham Lincoln: John G. Nicolay’s Interviews and Essays (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 83-84.

<sup>104</sup> C. B. Raymond to Samuel J. Tilden, Boston, 19 April 1862, Samuel J. Tilden Papers, New York Public Library.

<sup>105</sup> Sumner to John A. Andrew, Washington, 27 April 1862, Beverly Wilson Palmer, ed., The Selected Letters of Charles Sumner (2 vols.; Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), 2:112.

<sup>106</sup> Chase to Lincoln, Washington, 8 March 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>107</sup> J. W. Schuckers, The Life and Public Services of Salmon Portland Chase (New York: D. Appleton, 1874), 446.

did not agree on a specific number, nor did they identify which troops would protect Washington.<sup>108</sup>

In mid-February, Lincoln prodded McClellan indirectly by having Stanton congratulate General Frederick W. Lander for showing “how much may be done in the worst weather and worst roads by a spirited officer at the head of a small force of brave men, unwilling to waste life in camp when the enemies of their country are within reach.”<sup>109</sup> This was widely interpreted as a rebuke to Little Mac.<sup>110</sup>

Meanwhile, pressure on the Young Napoleon to break the Confederate hold on the upper and lower Potomac grew ever stronger. The blockade of that river below Washington cut the capital off from all seafaring traffic save warships; Rebel control of the river above the city obstructed a main rail line between the Atlantic seaboard and the Ohio Valley (the Baltimore and Ohio). An exasperated Lincoln impatiently asked Welles if the enemy batteries along the river could not be destroyed. The navy secretary said it could be easily done by 10,000 troops, but McClellan would never agree to it.<sup>111</sup> Little Mac assumed that the lower Potomac would be opened when his Urbanna offensive got underway.

As for the upper Potomac, McClellan took action to keep Confederates from disrupting the B. and O. railroad. In late February, he ordered troops under General Nathaniel P. Banks to move toward Winchester, Virginia. To facilitate that offensive, a light pontoon bridge was thrown across the Potomac at Harpers Ferry; it was to be

---

<sup>108</sup> Allan Nevins, The War for the Union (4 vols.; New York: Scribner, 1959-71), 2:60.

<sup>109</sup> Stanton to Lander, Washington, 17 February 1862, Stanton Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>110</sup> Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 19 February, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 21 February 1862.

<sup>111</sup> Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 11 March, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 15 March 1862.

supplemented by a permanent bridge of heavy timbers resting upon canal boats anchored in the river. On February 27, when those vessels tried to enter a lift lock in order to move from the Chesapeake and Ohio canal to the river, they proved six inches too wide. The entire operation had to be called off, prompting the usually humorless Chase to quip that the Winchester expedition had died of lockjaw.<sup>112</sup> Horace White of the Chicago Tribune, who aptly described the fiasco as “Ball’s Bluff all over again, minus the slaughter,” reported that Lincoln was in “a h[ell] of a rage” and “swore like a Phillistine” upon learning of it.<sup>113</sup> He banged his fist on a table and exclaimed: “Why in hell didn’t he measure first!” This was the only time Nicolay heard his boss swear, and his assistant, William O. Stoddard, said he “never knew Mr. Lincoln so really angry, so out of all patience.” The president, Stoddard recalled, “was alone in his room when an officer of McClellan’s staff was announced by the doorkeeper and admitted. The president turned in his chair to hear and was informed, in respectful terms, that the advance movement could not be made.

“‘Why?’ he curtly demanded.

“‘The pontoon trains are not ready –’

“‘Why in [hell] ain’t they ready?’

---

<sup>112</sup> John G. Nicolay and John Hay, Abraham Lincoln: A History (10 vols.; New York: Century, 1890), 5:168.

<sup>113</sup> Sears, Young Napoleon, 158; Horace White to Joseph Medill, Washington, 3 March 1862, Charles Henry Ray Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

“The officer could think of no satisfactory reply, but turned very hastily and left the room. Mr. Lincoln also turned to the table and resumed the work before him, but wrote at about double his ordinary speed.”<sup>114</sup>

When Stanton confirmed the bad news, the president, “in a state of utter despondency,” asked: “What does this mean?”

“It means it is a d[amne]d fizzle. It means he [McClellan] doesn’t intend to do anything,” replied the secretary of war.

“Why could he not have known whether his arrangements were practicable?” Lincoln queried in exasperation.

The president then summoned McClellan’s chief of staff (and father-in-law), General Randolph B. Marcy, and spoke sharply to him:

“‘Why in the Nation, General Marcy,’ said he excitedly, ‘couldn’t the General have known whether a boat would go through that lock before spending a million dollars getting them there? I am no engineer, but it seems to me that if I wished to know whether a boat would go through a hole or a lock, common sense would teach me to go and measure it. I am almost despairing at these results. Everything seems to fail. The general impression is daily gaining that the General does not intend to do anything. By a failure like this we lose all the prestige we gained by the capture of Fort Donelson. I am grievously disappointed – almost in despair.’” When Marcy attempted to defend his son-in-law, Lincoln abruptly dismissed him.<sup>115</sup> On March 1, the president described to

---

<sup>114</sup> Nicolay told this to Jay Linn Torrey. Unidentified newspaper clipping, “Anecdotes of Abraham Lincoln,” Lincoln Shrine, A. K. Smiley Library, Redwoods, California; William O. Stoddard, Abraham Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life (New York: Fords, Howard, & Hulbert, 1884), 285.

<sup>115</sup> John C. Ropes, “A Conversation with Edwin M. Stanton [in late September 1869],” manuscript dated Boston, 8 February 1870, Horatio Woodman Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society; Nicolay memorandum, 27 February 1862, in Burlingame, ed., With Lincoln in the White House, 72.



Charles Sumner the canal boat misadventure, which “excited him very much, so that he expressed himself angrily.” Lincoln said he would speak plainly to the general.<sup>116</sup> Six days later, while conversing with Mrs. Virginia Fox, he said apropos of a recent visit to the Young Napoleon: “There has been an immense quantity of money spent on our army here on the Potomac & there is nothing done – the country & the Congress & every one is anxious & excited about it.” Mrs. Fox said she had read accounts of it in the papers and assumed that the administration and the generals knew more about what was needed than did the editors. Lincoln replied: “We won’t mention names, & I’ll tell you how things are. [Let me] state a proposition to you. Suppose a man whose profession it is to understand military matters is asked how long it will take him & what he requires to accomplish certain things, & when he has had all he asked & the time comes, he does nothing.”<sup>117</sup>

The public was beginning to regard the Army of the Potomac, whose delays and blunders contrasted sharply with the success of Grant’s army in the West, “as a gigantic joke.”<sup>118</sup> When some defenders of Little Mac credited him with devising the strategy that led to Grant’s victory at Fort Donelson, a skeptic mocked him, acidly observing that the “high and dry” canal boats formed “a stupendous and sublime exhibition of his never-can-be-sufficiently-bragged about strategy! Such is the splendid result of all this fanfaronade that stupid dunderheads have been attempting to cram into the ears of the people about a General who fights all his battles a thousand miles away from fire! Lord, Lord, how this world is given to folly! How old Jack [Falstaff] would laugh at that

---

<sup>116</sup> Sumner to John A. Andrew, Washington, 2 March 1862, Palmer, ed., Sumner Letters, 2:103.

<sup>117</sup> Virginia Fox diary, entry for 7 March 1862, Levi Woodbury Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>118</sup> Washington correspondence, 20 February, New York Tribune, 22 February 1862.

‘strategy,’ which won Donelson by telegraph, when there wasn’t a wire within a hundred miles of Donelson, and yet couldn’t get a canal boat right under its own nose (old ‘strategy’s’ nose I mean) into the river, after six months’ preparation!”<sup>119</sup> Another wag quipped that “McClellan is waiting for the Chinese population of California to increase to such a vast number that they will be able to cross the Rocky Mountains and bring up his right wing, by which time the Russian Possessions and Greenland will have a redundant population, which can be drafted down to the support of the grand left wing of the Union army.” Then and only then “the war will commence in earnest!”<sup>120</sup> Chase was warned that the army’s delay “has created a vast deal of dissatisfaction with the people” and that the government would soon find it impossible to borrow at anything less than extortionate interest rates.<sup>121</sup>

Disenchantment with McClellan was slopping over onto Lincoln. Democratic Congressman John Hickman of Pennsylvania told his colleagues that “the country has felt a great lack of confidence, not only in the President, but in the military leaders appointed by him.”<sup>122</sup> (Two years later the president said of Hickman: “I was much disappointed that he failed to be my friend.”)<sup>123</sup> Lincoln seemed ready to fire Little Mac. On March 3, when a Pennsylvania congressman said that he and his colleagues felt “humiliated at the long siege of the Capital, and the blockade of the Potomac,” Lincoln replied that “if Gen. Washington, or Napoleon, or Gen Jackson were in command on the Potomac they would

---

<sup>119</sup> Washington correspondence by “Linkensale,” 4 March, Iowa State Register (Des Moines), 12 March 1862.

<sup>120</sup> Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 22 January, Springfield, Massachusetts, Republican, 24 January 1862.

<sup>121</sup> John Young to Chase, Cincinnati, 3 April 1862, Chase Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>122</sup> Washington correspondence, 12 March, New York Commercial Advertiser, 13 March 1862.

<sup>123</sup> Burlingame and Ettliger, eds., Hay Diary, 245 (entry for 8 November 1864).

be obliged to move or resign the position.” With “decided emphasis” he added that “the army will move, either under General McClellan or some other man and that very soon.”<sup>124</sup>

Congress, too, was losing patience with the commanding general. Just as a resolution calling on the president to remove Little Mac was about to be introduced by Pennsylvania Representative John Covode, word arrived from North Carolina that Burnside had captured New Berne. Since McClellan received some credit for planning that operation, Covode held his fire.<sup>125</sup>

#### PRIVATE TRAGEDY: THE DEATH OF WILLIE LINCOLN

Lincoln’s despair at the canal boat fiasco was doubtless intensified by the crushing blow he had sustained a week earlier when his beloved eleven-year-old son Willie died. The president described him as “a very gentle & amiable boy.”<sup>126</sup> A Springfield friend, the black barber William Florville, wrote Lincoln that he deemed Willie “a Smart boy for his age, So Considerate, So Manly: his Knowledge and good Sence, far exceeding most boys more advanced in years.”<sup>127</sup> Others called Willie a lad “of unusual intelligence” and a “favorite with all who visited the White House.” He was exceptionally self-possessed, frank, “studious and intellectual,” as well as “sprightly, sweet tempered and mild mannered.”<sup>128</sup> William O. Stoddard noted that he “was a child

---

<sup>124</sup> James H. Campbell to his wife, Juliet Lewis Campbell, Washington, 4 March 1862, Campbell Papers, Schoff Civil War Collection, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>125</sup> Washington correspondence, 18, 19 March, New York Commercial Advertiser, 19, 20 March 1862.

<sup>126</sup> Owen Lovejoy to his children, Washington, 23 February 1862, Lovejoy Papers, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>127</sup> William Florville to Lincoln, Springfield, 27 December 1863, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>128</sup> Nathaniel P. Willis in Elizabeth Keckley, Behind the Scenes; or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1868), 106-7; Washington correspondence, 21 February,

of great promise, and far more quiet and studious than his mercurial younger brother.”<sup>129</sup> Horatio Nelson Taft, father of Willie’s best friend in Washington, thought him “an amiable good hearted boy,” a “ceaseless talker, ambitious to know everything, always asking questions, always busy,” one who “had more judgment and foresight than any boy of his age that I have ever known.”<sup>130</sup> Taft’s daughter Julia praised Willie as “the most lovable boy I ever knew, bright, sensible, sweet-tempered and gentle mannered.”<sup>131</sup> His manners were indeed gracious, as one eminent visitor to the White House discovered when he introduced some of his friends to the lad, who was playing in the driveway. In response, Willie said, pointing to the ground: “Gentlemen, I am very happy to see you. Pray be seated.”<sup>132</sup> His tutor in Washington, Alexander Williamson, reported that the youngster “had only to con over once or twice a page of his speller and definer, and the impression became so fixed that he went through without hesitation or blundering, and his other studies in proportion.”<sup>133</sup> Willie aspired to be a teacher or clergyman.<sup>134</sup>

In early February, the boy contracted a fever which laid him low and caused his mind to wander so badly that he became delirious.<sup>135</sup> (It is not certain exactly what the illness was. It may have been typhoid, smallpox, or tuberculosis. Some suspected that the

---

Philadelphia Inquirer, 22 February 1862; Washington correspondence, 24 February, New York Herald, 26 February 1862.

<sup>129</sup> William O. Stoddard, “White House Sketches No. 2,” New York Citizen, 25 August 1866, in Stoddard, Inside the White House in War Times, ed. Burlingame, 150.

<sup>130</sup> Horatio Nelson Taft diary, Library of Congress (entries for 13 January, 20 February 1862).

<sup>131</sup> Julia Taft Bayne, Tad Lincoln’s Father (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 8.

<sup>132</sup> Noah Swayne told this to Seward’s daughter Fanny. Diary of Fanny Seward, 5 February 1863, in Patricia Carley Johnson, ed., “Sensitivity and Civil War: The Selected Diaries and Papers, 1858-1868, of Frances Adeline Seward” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Rochester, 1963), 647.

<sup>133</sup> New York World, weekly edition, 8 March 1862.

<sup>134</sup> Washington correspondence, 21 February, Philadelphia Inquirer, 22 February 1862.

<sup>135</sup> Washington Evening Star, 21 February 1862.

White House basement promoted disease. It was, according to Stoddard, “perennially overrun with rats, mildew and foul smells” and probably “the cause of the well-known mortality in the upper part of the building.”<sup>136</sup> At the same time, Tad grew sick. For days the president was so attentive to the boys, spending night after night at their bedsides, that he hardly tended to public business.<sup>137</sup> On February 18, Edward Bates noted that Lincoln was “nearly worn out, with grief and watching.”<sup>138</sup> White House receptions were cancelled. As time passed, Willie became so weak that he resembled a shadow. The disease finally killed him on February 20. When he died, his father chokingly announced to his principal White House secretary: “Well, Nicolay, my boy is gone – he is actually gone!” and burst into tears.<sup>139</sup> That day a journalist reported that “it would move the heart of his bitterest political enemy . . . to witness the marked change which grief has wrought upon him.”<sup>140</sup> The next morning he appeared “completely prostrated with grief” when speaking with Elihu B. Washburne, who told his wife that Lincoln “is one of the most tender-hearted of men and devotedly attached to his children.”<sup>141</sup> He was so grief-stricken that close friends worried about the effect that Willie’s death would have on him. For the

---

<sup>136</sup> William O. Stoddard, “White House Sketches No. 1,” New York Citizen, 18 August 1861, in Stoddard, Inside the White House in War Times, ed. Burlingame, 145.

<sup>137</sup> Stanton to Chase, Washington, 16 February 1862, Chase Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; Washington correspondence, 10, 25 February, New York Commercial Advertiser, 11, 26 February 1862; Washington correspondence, 11 February, New York World, 12 February 1862.

<sup>138</sup> Beale, ed., Bates Diary, 233 (entry for 18 February 1862).

<sup>139</sup> Nicolay, journal entry for 20 February 1862, in Burlingame, ed., With Lincoln in the White House, 71.

<sup>140</sup> Washington correspondence, 20 February, Philadelphia Inquirer, 21 February 1862.

<sup>141</sup> Elihu Washburne to his wife, [Washington], 21 February [1862], Washburn Family Papers, Washburn Memorial Library, Norlands, Maine.

next two days he remained “in a stupor of grief” and took little interest in public affairs.<sup>142</sup>

On February 23, Lincoln started to recover. The following day the Rev. Dr. Phineas D. Gurley conducted a funeral at the White House, a service that Lincoln had asked Orville H. Browning to arrange. There, as he stood with his eyes full of tears and his lips aquiver, gazing his boy’s corpse, a look of the utmost grief came over his face, and he exclaimed that Willie “was too good for this earth . . . but then we loved him so. It is hard, hard to have him die!”<sup>143</sup> Repeatedly he said, “This is the hardest trial of my life. Why is it? Oh, why is it?”<sup>144</sup> His body shook convulsively as he sobbed and buried his face in his hands. Elizabeth Keckly, Mrs. Lincoln’s modiste and close friend, never observed a man so grief-stricken.<sup>145</sup>

A woman who attended the funeral complained that it “was in very bad taste, ostentatious & showy.” She thought that “one needed only to look at the poor President, bowed over & sobbing audibly to see he had nothing to do with the pageant. The services by Dr Gurley were endlessly long and offensively fulsome. I felt glad that the poor Mother was ill in bed & so escaped the painful infliction.”<sup>146</sup>

By the end of February, Lincoln had regained strength enough to resume his duties. Then D. W. Bartlett noted that he “is frequently called up three and four times in a

---

<sup>142</sup> Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 26 February, Springfield, Massachusetts, Republican, 28 February 1862.

<sup>143</sup> Reminiscences of Shelby Cullom, Chicago Record-Herald, 8 February 1914; Keckley, Behind the Scenes, 103.

<sup>144</sup> Anna L. Boyden, Echoes from Hospital and White House: A Record of Mrs. Rebecca R. Pomroy’s Experience in War (Boston: D. Lothrop, 1884), 56.

<sup>145</sup> Keckley, Behind the Scenes, 103.

<sup>146</sup> Mrs. Henry A. Wise (nee Charlotte Everett) to her father, Edward Everett, Washington, 2 March 1862, Everett Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

night to receive important messages from the West. Since his late bereavement he looks sad and care-worn, but is in very good health again.”<sup>147</sup>

It took a long time for Lincoln to recover completely. On March 6, while attending the funeral of General Frederick W. Lander, the president appeared so grief-stricken as to be scarcely recognizable. “I certainly never saw a more impressive picture of sorrow,” an observer recalled. “There seemed to be none of the light of the recent victories in his pale, cadaverous face.” As the president descended from his carriage, he hesitated “as if about to stagger back into the carriage, and then seemed to collect himself for the duty at hand, with a fatigued air, which seemed to say, ‘What will come next?’”<sup>148</sup> Willie died on a Thursday, and for several weeks afterward Lincoln would take time out from work on Thursdays to mourn.<sup>149</sup>

Between the time of Willie’s death and his funeral, an applicant for a Michigan postmastership barged into the White House clamoring to see the president. When Lincoln emerged from his office inquiring about the commotion, the importunate office-seeker demanded an interview, which was granted. Upon learning what his caller wanted, he angrily asked: “When you came to the door here, didn’t you see the crepe on it? Didn’t you realize that meant somebody must be lying dead in this house?”

“Yes, Mr. Lincoln, I did. But what I wanted to see you about was important.”

With some heat, the president exclaimed: “That crepe is hanging there for my son; his dead body at this moment is lying unburied in this house, and you come here, push

---

<sup>147</sup> Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 26 February, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 28 February 1862; Washington correspondence, 27 February, New York Evening Post, 28 February 1862.

<sup>148</sup> “Washington as It Appeared in March, 1862,” Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 23 January 1887.

<sup>149</sup> Stoddard, Inside the White House in War Times, ed. Burlingame, 67.

yourself in with such a request! Couldn't you at least have the decency to wait until after we had buried him?"<sup>150</sup>

Willie's younger brother Tad had also contracted a fever and seemed near death. Dorothea Dix, who called at the White House to express her condolences, detailed a nurse, Rebecca Pomroy, to help tend the sick youngster and his distraught mother. Mrs. Pomroy, who had lost all her family except for one son who was then serving in the army, tried to console the president by assuring him that thousands of Northerners prayed for Tad every day. "I am glad of that," he replied, then hid his face in his hands and wept. On February 24, just before returning to his office, he looked at his youngest son and told Mrs. Pomroy: "I hope you will pray for him, and if it is God's will that he may be spared, and also for me, for I need the prayers of many."<sup>151</sup> The pious nurse explained how her faith in God had sustained her through the loss of her husband and two children. Lincoln, who called her "one of the best women I ever knew," arranged to have her son promoted to lieutenant.<sup>152</sup> Her faith may well have strengthened Lincoln's own. Mrs. Lincoln said that her husband reflected more intently on the ways of God after Willie's death.<sup>153</sup>

A month after the boy's funeral, William O. Stoddard reported that Lincoln had "recovered much of his old equanimity and cheerfulness; and certainly no one who saw

---

<sup>150</sup> Francis B. Fox to Ida Tarbell, New York, 13 November 1939, Tarbell Papers, Allegheny College.

<sup>151</sup> Rebecca R. Pomroy, "What His Nurse Knew," Magazine of History, 32 (No. 1, extra number 150, 1932), 47.

<sup>152</sup> Lincoln to Stanton, Washington, 15 July 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:326.

<sup>153</sup> Mary Todd Lincoln, interviewed by Herndon, [September 1866], Wilson and Davis, eds., Herndon's Informants, 360.



his constant and eager application to his arduous duties, would imagine for a moment that the man carried so large a load of private grief, in addition to the cares of a nation.”<sup>154</sup>

But some knew it, including LeGrande Cannon, who in May observed Lincoln weep convulsively after reciting from Shakespeare’s King John the lament of Constance for her dead son: “And, Father Cardinal, I have heard you say/ That we shall see and know our friends in heaven./ If that be true, I shall see my boy again.” He had dreamed of Willie and wanted to believe that he had actually communed with him, though he understood that he did not in reality.<sup>155</sup> He once asked an army officer late in the war, “Do you ever find yourself talking with the dead? Since Willie’s death I catch myself every day involuntarily talking with him, as if he were with me.”<sup>156</sup> On the final day of Lincoln’s life, he told his wife: “We must both be more cheerful in the future; between the war and the loss of our darling Willie, we have been very miserable.”<sup>157</sup>

Like her husband, Mary Lincoln was wracked with grief. To Elihu Washburne she lamented that the White House seemed “like a tomb and that she could not bear to be in it.” Willie, she said, “was the favorite child, so good, so obedient, so promising.”<sup>158</sup> It certainly made her feel guilty as well as sorrowful, for two weeks earlier she had thrown an elaborate and highly controversial party for hundreds of guests. She came to regard his

---

<sup>154</sup> Washington correspondence, 24 March, New York Examiner, 27 March 1862, Burlingame, ed., Dispatches from Lincoln’s White House, 66.

<sup>155</sup> This occurred on May 7, when the president was visiting Fort Monroe. LeGrande Cannon, Personal Reminiscences of the Rebellion, 1861-1866 (New York: Burr Printing House, 1895), 173-74; LeGrande Cannon to Herndon, near Burlington, Vermont, 7 October [1889], Wilson and Davis, eds., Herndon’s Informants, 679; Burlingame, Inner World of Lincoln, 66, 103-4. The quoted passage appears in King John, act 3, scene 4, lines 79-81.

<sup>156</sup> Matthew Simpson’s funeral oration in David B. Chesebrough, No Sorrow Like Our Sorrow: Northern Protestant Ministers and the Assassination of Lincoln (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1994), 135.

<sup>157</sup> Carpenter, Six Months in the White House, 293.

<sup>158</sup> Washburne to his wife, [Washington,] Tuesday [20 May 1862], Washburn Family Papers, Washburn Memorial Library, Norlands, Maine. She said this on May 16.

death as punishment for her vanity and for her decision to give the party while two of her sons lay sick abed. Months later she described her “crushing bereavement” to a friend: “We have met with so overwhelming an affliction in the death of our beloved Willie a being too precious for earth, that I am so completely unnerved.”<sup>159</sup> She wrapped herself so profoundly in mourning that Lincoln one day led her to a window, pointed to an insane asylum in the distance, and said: “Mother, do you see that large white building on the hill yonder? Try and control your grief, or it will drive you mad, and we may have to send you there.”<sup>160</sup>

That excessive grieving caused some popular resentment. For months after Willie’s death Mary Lincoln forbade the Marine Band to hold its traditional and very popular weekly concerts on the south lawn of the White House. When this ban persisted, the public grew restive. Gideon Welles suggested that the concerts be given in the Lafayette Park across the street, she also refused permission in her imperious manner, employing the royal we: “It is our especial desire that the Band, does not play in these grounds, this summer. We expect our wishes to be complied with.”<sup>161</sup> (Lincoln had enjoyed those concerts, sometimes requesting “Dixie” after the band had played “Yankee Doodle” and “Hail Columbia.”)

Mary Lincoln’s sister Elizabeth Edwards was summoned from Springfield to help calm the First Lady down. Lincoln urged Mrs. Edwards to stay at the White House as long as she possibly could: “you have Such a power & control Such an influence over

---

<sup>159</sup> Mary Lincoln to Julia Ann Sprigg, Washington, 29 May 1862, in Justin G. Turner and Linda Levitt Turner, eds., Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 127.

<sup>160</sup> Keckley, Behind the Scenes, 104-105.

<sup>161</sup> Mary Lincoln to John Hay, Washington, 22 May 1862, Hay Papers, Library of Congress.

Mary – Come do Stay and Console me,” he told her.<sup>162</sup> From Washington, Elizabeth Edwards reported to her family that “my presence here, has tended very much to soothe, the excessive grief” of Mrs. Lincoln. In her agony, Mary Lincoln was unable to help care for her younger son, Tad, who also ran a dangerous fever. According to Elizabeth, Mary “has been but little with him, being utterly unable to control her feelings.”<sup>163</sup>

When a woman friend visited the White House to offer condolences to the First Lady, she turned on her, asking accusingly: “Madam, why did you not call upon me before my ball? I sent you word I wished to know you.”

“Because my country was in grief, as you now are, and I shunned all scenes of gayety.”

“I thought so! Those who urged me to that heartless step (alluding to the ball) now ridicule me for it, and not one of them has . . . come, to share my sorrow. I have had evil counselors!”<sup>164</sup>

When Elizabeth Edwards went back to Illinois, Mrs. Lincoln turned for comfort to her dressmaker, Elizabeth Keckly, a black woman whose only son had been killed in battle the previous year. Mrs. Keckly, who had accepted her own loss stoically, looked askance at the First Lady’s manifest inability to control her grief. The modiste, however, did what she could to console her friend.<sup>165</sup> For additional solace, Mary Lincoln consulted spiritualists who could allegedly enable her to communicate with her dead

---

<sup>162</sup> Elizabeth Todd Edwards, interviewed by Herndon, [1865-66], Wilson and Davis, eds., Herndon's Informants, 444-45.

<sup>163</sup> Ruth Painter Randall, Mary Todd Lincoln: Biography of a Marriage (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953), 287.

<sup>164</sup> Randall, Mary Todd Lincoln, 289.

<sup>165</sup> Jennifer Fleischer, Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly: The Remarkable Story of the Friendship between a First Lady and a Former Slave (New York: Broadway Books, 2003), 231; Keckly, Behind the Scenes, 105-6.

sons. On several occasions she held séances at the White House, some of which Lincoln attended.

With Willie, Lincoln had known the special pleasure that a parent derives from having a child who is a near-clone. The boy's tutor thought that he "was the exact counterpart of his father," and the poet and editor Nathaniel P. Willis, a fixture in Mrs. Lincoln's White House circle, agreed that Willie "faithfully resembled his father" in all important respects.<sup>166</sup> A neighbor in Springfield remembered that Willie "was the true picture of Mr. Lincoln, in every way, even to carrying his head slightly inclined toward his left shoulder."<sup>167</sup> So close were they that the president could read Willie's mind. One day at breakfast in the White House, Willie's emotional brother Tad broke out crying because soldiers to whom he had given religious tracts mocked him. When paternal hugs and kisses failed to comfort the boy, Willie set his mind to devise some way to ease Tad's hurt feelings. Willie silently thought for a long while, then suddenly looked up with a smile at his father, who exclaimed: "There! you have it now, my boy, have you not?" Turning to his wife's cousin, Lincoln observed: "I know every step of the process by which that boy arrived at his satisfactory solution of the question before him, as it is by just such slow methods I attain results."<sup>168</sup>

The death of Willie deprived Lincoln of an important source of comfort and relief from his heavy official burdens. The boy was his favorite child. The two were quite close

---

<sup>166</sup> Alexander Williamson, interviewed in the New York Press, 14 April 1889; Keckley, Behind the Scenes, 107.

<sup>167</sup> Josiah Kent, Illinois State Journal (Springfield), 9 January 1909.

<sup>168</sup> Elizabeth Todd Grimsley, "Six Months in the White House," Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society 19 (1926-1927): 53-54.

and frequently observed holding hands.<sup>169</sup> Springfield neighbors said Lincoln “was fonder of that boy than he was of anything else.” Bob and Tad took after their mother, and did not resemble Lincoln physically or temperamentally.<sup>170</sup> The president’s eldest son, with whom he shared little in common, was attending college in Massachusetts. His youngest son, the hyperactive, learning-disabled, effervescent Tad, was not a clone like Willie. Julia Taft recalled that he “had a quick, fiery temper,” was “implacable in his dislikes,” but could be “very affectionate when he chose.”<sup>171</sup>

In the wake of Willie’s death, the president’s love for Tad grew stronger as he displaced onto him the powerful feeling he had harbored for the older boy. He explained to a friend that he wished to give Tad “everything he could no longer give Willie.”<sup>172</sup> Lincoln derived great comfort from Tad’s fun-loving, irrepressible nature and delighted in his common sense. Though Tad suffered from learning disabilities and a speech impediment that made it hard to understand him, his indulgent father was unconcerned and often said: “Let him run; he has time enough left to learn his letters and get poky.” Occasionally Lincoln tried to tame the lad, but was forced to acknowledge that the effort was futile. A White House guard thought that Tad was “the best companion Mr. Lincoln ever had – one who always understood him, and whom he always understood.” Thus Tad became, to some degree, another Willie for his grief-stricken father.<sup>173</sup>

---

<sup>169</sup> Willis in Keckley, Behind the Scenes, 106-10.

<sup>170</sup> Stoddard, Inside the White House in War Times, ed. Burlingame, 66.

<sup>171</sup> Bayne, Tad Lincoln’s Father, 3.

<sup>172</sup> Helen Nicolay, Lincoln’s Secretary: A Biography of John G. Nicolay (New York: Longmans, Green, 1949), 133.

<sup>173</sup> Margarita Spalding Gerry, ed., Through Five Administrations: Reminiscences of William H. Crook, Body-Guard to President Lincoln (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1910), 23.

David Davis sympathized with Lincoln and feared that “if he should lose his other son, he would be overwhelmed with sorrow & grief.” Davis suspected that the death of Willie would not “be a lesson” to the First Lady, though he hoped that it “may change her notions of life.”<sup>174</sup>

#### TAKING CHARGE: MORE WAR ORDERS

On March 8, Lincoln called McClellan to the White House and evidently spoke plainly to him, as he had told Sumner he would. According to Little Mac, the president said that “it had been represented to him . . . 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 thus left defenseless.” The general said he then leapt up and “in a manner perhaps not altogether decorous towards the chief magistrate” insisted that Lincoln retract the charge. “I warned him to be careful, & again told him that I would not permit him to cast the slightest doubt upon my intentions.” McClellan then said he would submit his Chesapeake plan to a vote of his division commanders to demonstrate that he was no traitor.<sup>175</sup> (This account seems implausible, but Lincoln evidently did have sharp words for McClellan about the botched Winchester campaign.)

When the Army of the Potomac’s twelve division commanders were polled, eight favored and four opposed the Urbanna plan.<sup>176</sup> Among the minority was John G. Barnard,

---

<sup>174</sup> Davis to his wife Sarah, St. Louis, 23 February 1862, Davis Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield; David Davis to W. W. Orme, [St. Louis], 23 February 1862, Orme Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield.

<sup>175</sup> George Brinton McClellan, McClellan’s Own Story: The War for the Union (New York: C. L. Webster, 1887), 195-96.

<sup>176</sup> Samuel P. Heintzelman journal, entry for 8 March 1862, Heintzelman Papers, Library of Congress.

who sensibly objected that the main Confederate army could easily move to the lower Chesapeake from Manassas and thwart the Union advance. Joining Barnard in dissent were McDowell, Samuel P. Heintzelman, and E. V. Sumner. By a seven-to-five margin, the generals also supported McClellan's plan to ignore the blockade of the lower Potomac. Only two favored an immediate attack on the enemy batteries commanding the river. Later Stanton acidly remarked, "we saw ten generals afraid to fight." Lincoln was less critical, saying to them: "I don't care, gentlemen, what plan you have, all I ask is for you to just pitch in!"<sup>177</sup> "Napoleon himself," he added, "could not stand still any longer with such an army."<sup>178</sup>

Also on March 8, Lincoln issued "General War Order No. 2," directing that the Army of the Potomac's dozen divisions be organized into four army corps, to be commanded by three of the dissenting generals plus Erastus Keyes, who had supported the Urbanna plan only if the enemy were first cleared from the banks of the Potomac.<sup>179</sup> (For three months Lincoln had been urged to take this step, for it was feared that the army's cumbersome organization made its defeat inevitable.)<sup>180</sup> The following morning, the president reconvened the war council to announce his approval of the Urbanna scheme and urge all the generals "to go in heartily" for it.<sup>181</sup>

---

<sup>177</sup> McDowell, speech at San Francisco, 21 October 1864, New York Herald, 4 December 1864.

<sup>178</sup> Stephen Sears, To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), 7.

<sup>179</sup> Burlingame and Ettliger, eds., Hay Diary, 35 (entry for [March 1862]); Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:149; Sears, McClellan, 159-60.

<sup>180</sup> Washington correspondence, 10 March, National Anti-Slavery Standard (New York), 15 March 1862.

<sup>181</sup> Samuel P. Heintzelman journal, entry for 8 March 1862, Heintzelman Papers, Library of Congress.

To a resentful McClellan, Lincoln explained his reasons for establishing the corps. He had made that decision “not only on the unanimous opinion of the twelve generals of division, but also on the unanimous opinion of every military man I could get an opinion from, and every modern military book yourself only excepted. Of course, I did not, on my own judgment pretend to understand the subject.”<sup>182</sup>

Lincoln issued a third General War Order, stating that the move to the lower Chesapeake must begin by March 18, that sufficient troops be left behind to protect Washington, and that the blockade of the lower Potomac be lifted.<sup>183</sup> Finally plans for the long-delayed advance seemed in place. McClellan would sail his army down the Chesapeake, move swiftly overland to Richmond, and capture the city before Johnston could hasten to its rescue.

The choice of a jumping-off point for the Urbanna expedition had been discussed at a war council two days earlier. Then Lincoln objected to the proposal to launch the armada from Annapolis, arguing that “taking the whole army first to Annapolis, to be embarked in transports, would appear to the extremely sensitive and impatient public opinion very much like a retreat from Washington. It would be impolitic to explain that it was merely a first step by way of the Chesapeake Bay and Fort Monroe towards Richmond.” He asked if 50,000, or even 10,000, troops could not be sent directly down

---

<sup>182</sup> Lincoln to McClellan, Washington, 9 May 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:209-10.

<sup>183</sup> Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:151.



the Potomac. Eventually it was decided to use Alexandria rather than Annapolis as the launch site.<sup>184</sup>

On March 11, Lincoln issued yet another war order, this time removing the Young Napoleon from his position as general-in-chief of all armies. At a cabinet meeting that day, McClellan became the target of sharp criticism. Seward “spoke very bitterly of the imbecility which had characterized the general[’]s operations on the upper Potomac.”<sup>185</sup> Stanton condemned the army’s “great ignorance, negligence and lack of order and subordination – and reckless extravagance.” He noted that McClellan “has caused all reports to be made to him, and he reports nothing – and if he have any plans, keeps them to himself.” In his diary, Bates wrote that “I think Stanton believes, as I do, that McC. has no plans but is fumbling and plunging in confusion and darkness.” The attorney general reiterated his earlier advice that Lincoln “take his constitutional position, and command the commanders – to have no ‘General in Chief’ – or if he wd. have one, not allow him to be also a genl. in detail i. e. not command any particular army.”<sup>186</sup> The president said “that though the duty of relieving Gen McC. was a most painful one, he yet thought he was doing Gen McC. a very great kindness in permitting him to retain command of the Army of the Potomac, and giving him an opportunity to retrieve his errors.”<sup>187</sup> Just after McClellan left for the Peninsula, Lincoln told the journalist Samuel Bowles “that though he had relieved him from the general command, in part because he was not satisfied with his course, he had confidence that now he had taken the field at the

---

<sup>184</sup> John G. Nicolay and John Hay, Abraham Lincoln: A History (10 vols.; New York: Century, 1890), 5:221.

<sup>185</sup> Burlingame and Ettliger, eds., Hay Diary, 36 (entry for [Mach 1862]).

<sup>186</sup> Beale, ed., Bates Diary, 239 (entry for 11 March 1862).

<sup>187</sup> Burlingame and Ettliger, eds., Hay Diary, 36 (entry for [Mach 1862]).

head of his especial division of the army, he would push forward the campaign as rapidly as possible, and prove worthy of the position.”<sup>188</sup>

In that same war order, Lincoln created a new military district, the Mountain Department in eastern Tennessee and western Virginia, and placed Frémont in charge. Before doing so, the president told a friend of the Pathfinder: “He has not had fair play – I will give it to him.”<sup>189</sup> Lincoln had long been assuring Frémont’s advocates that the Pathfinder would be given a command when one opened up or was created.<sup>190</sup> Not all Radicals were insisting that this be done. Josiah G. Holland asked George William Curtis: “are we not making more fuss over Gen Fremont than there is any call for? A curse on the politicians! I hate them. I believe in McClellan and Halleck and Burnside and Banks, and excepting the President and Chase I do not believe in anything else but the good God above us all.”<sup>191</sup>

Lincoln did not consult with Montgomery Blair, the Pathfinder’s bitter enemy, for he realized that his postmaster general would balk, and Lincoln wished to avoid a confrontation. In August 1861, Blair had written Frémont a letter criticizing the president and the cabinet: “The main difficulty is . . . with Lincoln himself. He is of the whig school, and that brings him naturally not only to incline to the feeble policy of whigs, but to give his confidence to such advisers.”<sup>192</sup> To embarrass Blair, the Pathfinder leaked it to

---

<sup>188</sup> “Notes at Washington,” by S[amuel] B[owles], n.d., Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 27 March 1862.

<sup>189</sup> Washington correspondence, 12 March, New York Evening Post, 13 March 1862.

<sup>190</sup> Washington correspondence, 10 March, National Anti-Slavery Standard (New York), 15 March 1862.

<sup>191</sup> Josiah G. Holland to George William Curtis, New York, 18 April 1862, Curtis Papers, Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences.

<sup>192</sup> Blair to Frémont, 24 August 1861, New York Herald, 8 March 1862; Washington correspondence, 6 April, New York Tribune, 7 April 1862.

the press. On March 6, when Blair asked Lincoln to read it, the president refused, “saying he did not intend to read it as it was never written for that purpose.” Blair admitted that it was foolish and apologized: “I regret it most sincerely – but it is due to you to make some amend by resigning my place & explain fully what I meant – & omitted in a hasty private letter – I leave the whole thing to you & will do exactly as you wish.”

“Forget it, & never mention or think of it again,” Lincoln replied. “I know what you meant for you [were] very frank about your feelings & views at the time[.] Genl Scott was the Old Whiggism you meant – [you] talked plainly enough – But the Old Hero has done his country noble service – & it was natural to trust him – but his vigor is past.”<sup>193</sup> Lincoln magnanimously added “that he was too busy to quarrel.” If Blair did not “show him the letter he would probably never see it.”<sup>194</sup>

Such forbearance was characteristic of Lincoln. If friends mentioned attacks on him, he would steer the conversation in a different direction or simply remark, “I guess we won’t talk about that now.”<sup>195</sup>

Yet another presidential war order stipulated that enough troops must be left behind to render Washington “entirely secure” in the judgment of both McClellan and his division commanders; that the advance must begin no later than March 18; and that no more than two of the four corps could depart before the enemy batteries along the Potomac were eliminated.

---

<sup>193</sup> Elizabeth Blair Lee to Samuel P. Lee, Silver Spring, Maryland, 6 March 1862 in Virginia Jeans Laas, ed., Wartime Washington: The Civil War Letters of Elizabeth Blair Lee (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 106-7.

<sup>194</sup> Burlingame and Ettlinger, eds., Hay Diary, 36 (entry for [March 1862]).

<sup>195</sup> Noah Brooks, “Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln,” Harper’s New Monthly Magazine 31 (July 1865): 225.

In 1864, Lincoln explained that “the pressure from the people at the North and Congress . . . forced him into issuing his series of ‘Military orders.’”<sup>196</sup> He also felt political pressure from Frémont and his allies to bolster the Pathfinder’s forces in the Mountain Department. So in late March, against the emphatic advice of some advisors, he detached General Louis Blenker’s division from McClellan and sent it to Frémont , who said he could seize the railroad at Knoxville if he had those reinforcements.<sup>197</sup> Lincoln told Little Mac “that he knew this thing to be wrong and . . . that the pressure was only a political one to swell Fremont’s command.”<sup>198</sup>

Commenting on the president’s war orders, the New York Herald remarked: “Lincoln holds the reins, and is handling them, as he has handled them from the beginning, with the skill and discretion of an old campaigner.”<sup>199</sup> McClellan, however, resented them, even though some accorded with his own views. He had, for instance, planned to organize the divisions into corps after a major battle revealed his generals’ strengths and weaknesses; he had agreed to leave sufficient troops behind to protect the capital; and the March 18 deadline fell within the time frame he had established in his own mind. He did not like the choice of corps commanders, but they were the most senior generals, and army tradition dictated that seniority must be taken seriously.<sup>200</sup>

Suddenly word arrived that the Confederates had abandoned their entrenchments at both Manassas and Centerville and were heading south toward the Rappahannock.

---

<sup>196</sup> Ulysses S. Grant, Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant (2 vols.; New York: C. L. Webster, 1885-86), 1:407.

<sup>197</sup> Ethan Allen Hitchcock diary, New York, 1 June 1862, copy, William A. Croffut Papers, Library of Congress; Lincoln to McClellan, Washington, 15 June 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:273.

<sup>198</sup> McClellan’s Own Story, 165.

<sup>199</sup> New York Herald, 6 April 1862.

<sup>200</sup> Sears, Young Napoleon, 160-61.

(General Johnston feared an attack, like the one recommended by Lincoln, which his inferior numbers could not withstand.) The incredulous, stupefied McClellan, for unknown reasons, sent 112,000 troops arrayed for battle toward Centerville and Manassas, where he discovered that the artillery which had so intimidated him was the same sort which he had earlier feared on Munson's Hill: Quaker cannon (logs painted black).

Once again the general stood embarrassed before the disgusted people of the North, who, according to John Hay, "said a great deal about it and thought a great deal more."<sup>201</sup> Scornfully the president remarked that the gun platforms at Centerville were too flimsy to support real artillery.<sup>202</sup> Members of Congress were enraged. "We shall be the scorn of the world," William Pitt Fessenden fumed. "It is no longer doubtful that Genl. McLellan is utterly unfit for his position," the Maine senator told his cousin. "He has had more than 200,000 fine troops here for five months, supplied with every thing needful, and yet has been held in check, at an expense of three hundred millions by an army of not half his numbers, badly armed & supplied."<sup>203</sup> Francis E. Spinner angrily concluded that "McClellan either knew that there were less than 50,000 men opposing his 247,000, and that they were moving three days before he started, or he didn't. If he did know, he must be a traitor, if he didn't he is an incompetent."<sup>204</sup> The Washington bureau chief of the New York Tribune asked rhetorically: "How long can the country afford to

---

<sup>201</sup> Burlingame and Ettlinger, eds., Hay Diary, 35 (entry for [Mach 1862]).

<sup>202</sup> Wendell Phillips to his wife Ann, en route from Milwaukee to Madison, Wisconsin, 31 March 1862, Phillips Papers, Harvard University.

<sup>203</sup> Fessenden to Elizabeth Warriner, Washington, 15 March 1862, Fessenden Papers, Bowdoin College.

<sup>204</sup> Spinner to Timothy C. Day, Washington, [ca. 15 March] 1862, in Sarah J. Day, The Man on a Hill Top (Philadelphia: Ware Brothers, 1931), 260.

worship this do-nothing, this moral coward, if not, as some think, traitor?”<sup>205</sup> The spectacle of “an army of 200,000 allowing an enemy encamped within 27 miles, to go quietly away” struck Adam Gurowski as “something like treason.”<sup>206</sup>

In executive session on March 14, the senate considered a resolution calling for McClellan’s removal.<sup>207</sup> Three days later a congressional delegation visited the White House to urge that a new commander be named for the Army of the Potomac.<sup>208</sup> Senator Fessenden bemoaned Lincoln’s failure to dismiss Little Mac: “Every movement has been a failure. And yet the President will keep him in command, and leave our destiny in his hands. I am, at times, almost in despair. Well, it cannot be helped. We went in for a rail-splitter, and we have got one.”<sup>209</sup> The New York Herald denounced Little Mac as a “Quaker general.”<sup>210</sup> The Confederates’ move, remarked a journalist, “disarranges all McClellan’s plans, and puts his reputation in a delicate and dangerous position. He can only sustain himself by immediate and decided victories.” No one “with the brains of a woodchuck can take a good look at Manassas without feeling certain that McClellan has made a gigantic blunder in submitting all winter to the Potomac blockade.”<sup>211</sup> Thomas Ewing wrote Lincoln that in Ohio significant “doubts are entertained of McClelland[’]s loyalty, and as I think with reason– He commenced his career with unbounded popularity– Our public here bore with his inaction long & patiently – one excuse after

---

<sup>205</sup> Adams S. Hill to Henry W. Bellows, [Washington], 2 April [1862], Bellows Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>206</sup> Gurowski to Zachariah Chandler, Washington, 12 March 1862, Chandler Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>207</sup> New York Tribune, 17 March 1862.

<sup>208</sup> Washington correspondence, 17 March, New York Herald, 18 March 1862.

<sup>209</sup> Fessenden to Elizabeth Warriner, Washington, 15 March 1862, Fessenden Papers, Bowdoin College.

<sup>210</sup> New York Herald, 18 March 1862.

<sup>211</sup> Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 12 March, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 14 March 1862.

another was used and admitted, until at last the retreat of the rebel army from Manassas, with their mighty armaments and munitions of war, without an attempt at prevention have convinced his best friends that he is either false or strangely incompetent– I for myself cannot conceive it possible that that retreat could have been effected without his knowledge – the like was never heard of in the history of the world.”<sup>212</sup>

The news saddened and angered Lincoln, who hoped that the Army of the Potomac would win a smashing victory at Manassas. It was not an unreasonable expectation, for if McClellan had moved against the Confederates there on February 22, as Lincoln had ordered him to, Little Mac might well have routed the enemy.<sup>213</sup>

Lincoln interpreted the withdrawal of the Confederates as portent that there would be “a hot summer campaign, with the deadly fevers of the south to aid the enemy and to harass and destroy the government forces.”<sup>214</sup> Michigan Senator Zachariah Chandler told a fellow Radical that “Old Abe is mad, and the war will now go on!”<sup>215</sup>

The president wanted to replace Little Mac with a senior officer, Ethan Allen Hitchcock, whom Winfield Scott recommended highly.<sup>216</sup> On March 15, Stanton amazed that sixty-three-year-old general by offering him command of the Army of the Potomac. According to Hitchcock, the war secretary “spoke of the pressure on the President against

---

<sup>212</sup> Thomas Ewing to Lincoln, Lancaster, Ohio, 9 April 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>213</sup> For a different view, see Beatie, Army of the Potomac, 2:557.

<sup>214</sup> Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 11 March, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 15 March 1862.

<sup>215</sup> George W. Julian in Rice, ed., Reminiscences, 52-53.

<sup>216</sup> W.A. Croffut, ed., Fifty Years in Camp and Field: Diary of Major-General Ethan Allen Hitchcock U.S.A. (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1909), 432.

McClellan, saying that the President and himself had had the greatest difficulty in standing against it.” Hitchcock declined on the grounds of poor health.<sup>217</sup>

With Johnston’s Confederates heading for the Rappahannock, McClellan had to alter his plans, for the Army of the Potomac could not safely land at Urbanna on that river. His fallback location was Fort Monroe at the tip of the Virginia Peninsula, formed by the James and York Rivers.

#### MONITOR VS. MERRIMACK

On March 8, the Confederate ironclad ram Virginia, better known as the Merrimack, further upset McClellan’s plans by destroying two Union frigates in Hampton Roads and driving others aground. When word of this naval disaster reached Washington, panic quickly spread. Would that powerful warship sail up the Potomac and destroy the capital and sink McClellan’s transports, thus wrecking the planned offensive?<sup>218</sup> On the morning of March 9, Lincoln sent for Gideon Welles, who joined other cabinet members at the White House. There “general excitement and alarm” prevailed. Lincoln, according to the navy secretary, “was so excited that he could not deliberate or be satisfied with the opinions of non-professional men.” So, accompanied by Orville H. Browning, the president left the White House to fetch John A. Dahlgren, commander of the Washington Navy Yard. Lincoln announced to Dahlgren that he had “frightful news.” As they rode back to the White House, the president indicated that he “did not know whether we might not have a visit [from the Merrimack] here.” Dahlgren “could give but little comfort,” saying only that “such a thing might be prevented, but not

---

<sup>217</sup> Hitchcock diary, entry for 15 March 1862, ibid., 439.

<sup>218</sup> Theodore Calvin Pease and James G. Randall, eds., The Diary of Orville Hickman Browning (2 vols.; Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1925-33), 1:552 (entry for 9 March 1862).



met. If the ‘Merrimac’ entered the river it must be blocked; that was about all which could be done at present.” He explained that since the Confederate ironclad drew less than twenty-two feet of water, it could attack Washington or even “go to New York, lie off the City, and levy contributions at will.” In his diary, Dahlgren noted that “the President was not at all stunned by the news, but was in his usual suggestive mood.” The captain felt sorry for Lincoln: “Poor gentleman, how thin and wasted he is!”<sup>219</sup>

Back at the White House, Dahlgren’s inability to recommend a means to stop the Merrimack intensified the cabinet’s panic. Stanton was nearly frantic, predicting that the Confederates would destroy the fleet, capture Fort Monroe, and arrive in Washington by nightfall, demolish the Capitol and other public buildings, or perhaps it would sail further north and level New York and Boston or exact tribute from those cities. The secretary of war scurried frantically from room to room, then sat down only to leap up after scribbling a bit, then swung his arms about while raving and scolding. He wired instructions to New York that an ironclad counterpart to the Merrimack be constructed immediately. Welles calmly informed him that the previous night a new Union ironclad, the Monitor, had already reached Hampton Roads and would challenge the Confederate behemoth that very day. When Stanton learned that the Monitor mounted only two guns, he expressed incredulity and contempt, which deepened the anxiety of Lincoln and the others. Again and again the president and the secretary of war strode to the window to peer down the river to see whether the Merrimack was steaming toward the capital. Lincoln was relieved when Welles, contradicting Dahlgren, insisted that the heavily armored

---

<sup>219</sup> Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 1:62; Pease and Randall, eds., Browning Diary, 1:532-33 (entry for 9 March 1862); John A. Dahlgren, diary, copy, Nicolay Papers, Library of Congress (entry for 9 March 1862).

Confederate ship drew so much water that she could only be effective in Hampton Roads and the Chesapeake.<sup>220</sup>

Stanton, however, felt no relief. Intensifying his gloom was the excitable Montgomery Meigs, who stampeded. “I do not see that any thing can be done,” he gloomily announced, unless the Monitor “succeeds in disabling her with her eleven inch guns.” The Merrimack, Meigs speculated, might “come up to Washington or go to Annapolis & destroy our transports.” The rebel ironclad could also possibly reach New York and “call for the specie for coal for any thing she wants & compel it to be given up by burning the city.” The quartermaster general made several suggestions: “Notify the steamers at Annapolis to be ready to run for it – send the transports back into the canal or into some shallow water out of her reach. Notify the authorities at N Y, & Balt[imore] & Boston & Portland to be on the lookout & prepare obstructions . . . . Get steamers ready to run into her[,] the only thing except the Monitor’s eleven inch guns that can do her any harm.”<sup>221</sup>

With Lincoln’s authorization, Stanton, in cooperation with Dahlgren and Meigs, ordered several boats loaded with rocks and sunk at Kettle Bottom shoals to prevent the Merrimack from reaching Washington.<sup>222</sup> When Welles and Fox protested against the “stone fleet,” Lincoln suspended the war secretary’s instructions, stipulating that the boats obstruct the channel only if the Confederate ironclad was approaching. The furious

---

<sup>220</sup> Burlingame and Ettlinger, eds., Hay Diary, 35 (entry for [Mach 1862]); Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 1:62-65; Pease and Randall, eds., Browning Diary, 1:533 (entry for 9 March 1862).

<sup>221</sup> Meigs to his father, Washington, 9 March 1862, Meigs Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>222</sup> Dahlgren had suggested that some boats “be loaded to be got ready for blocking the Potomac. The President directed McClellan Meigs and myself to arrange for the blocking, and Sec. of War joined our party in the next room.” John A. Dahlgren, diary, copy, Nicolay Papers, Library of Congress (entry for 9 March 1862); Dahlgren to Lincoln, Washington, 9 March 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress; Pease and Randall, eds., Browning Diary, 1:533 (entry for 9 March 1862).

Stanton sniffed that Lincoln was under the impression that Fox possessed “the entire amount of knowledge in the naval world.”<sup>223</sup> (Months later, when asked about the many idle canal boats lining the bank of the Potomac near the shoals, Lincoln explained: “Oh, that is Stanton’s navy. That is the fleet concerning which he and Mr. Welles became so excited about in my room. Welles was incensed and opposed the scheme, and it seems Neptune [i.e., Welles] was right. Stanton’s navy is as useless as the paps of a man to a sucking child. There may be some show to amuse the child, but they are good for nothing for service.”)<sup>224</sup>

Lincoln had endorsed the idea of ironclad ships months earlier, when it seemed as if the Confederates would build one. (The French and British fleets already included a few such vessels.) When plans for the unusual craft were presented to him, he remarked: “All I have to say is what the girl said, when she put her foot into the stocking, ‘It strikes me there’s something in it.’”<sup>225</sup> Construction of the Monitor had begun in October. Despite its small size, it fought the Merrimack to a draw and forced the Confederate vessel to retreat to its base, where it remained bottled up until the Rebels felt compelled to blow it up later in the spring, lest it fall into Union hands.

On March 10, Lieutenant Henry A. Wise, who had observed the historic battle at Hampton Roads, described it to the cabinet, emphasizing the bravery of the Monitor’s Captain, John L. Worden. When he concluded, Lincoln arose and said: “Well, gentlemen,

---

<sup>223</sup> Benjamin P. Thomas and Harold M. Hyman, Stanton: The Life and Times of Lincoln’s Secretary of War (New York: Knopf, 1962), 181.

<sup>224</sup> Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 1:65.

<sup>225</sup> Cornelius S. Bushnell to Welles, n.p., n.d. [received 16 March 1877], Welles Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

I am going to shake hands with that man,” and proceeded to Wise’s house, where Worden lay abed, his scorched eyes covered with bandages.

There Wise said to the skipper of the ironclad, “Jack, here’s the President, who has come to see you.”

As he shook Lincoln’s hand, Worden remarked: “You do me great honor, Mr. President, and I am only sorry that I can’t see you.”

Lincoln burst into tears and replied: “No, sir, you have done me and your country honor and I shall promote you. We owe to you, sir, the preservation of our navy. I can not thank you enough.” He then “expressed the warmest sympathy with his suffering, and admiration of his bravery and skill.”<sup>226</sup> A few days thereafter, Welles, on behalf of the president, formally thanked the lieutenant and his crew in a gracious letter.<sup>227</sup>

Worden explained that the captain of the Merrimack could have won the battle by sending a boarding party to jam the Monitor’s turret and to disable its engines by pouring water into the machinery. Acting on this information, Lincoln promptly forbade the Union ironclad to go “sky-larking” toward Norfolk.<sup>228</sup>

Two months later, the president -- along with Chase, Stanton, General John E. Wool, and others -- visited the Monitor. The ship’s paymaster wrote that “Mr. Lincoln had a sad, care worn & anxious look in strong contrast with the gay cortege by which he was surrounded. As the boat which brought the party came alongside every eye sought the Monitor but his own. He stood with his face averted as if to hide some disagreeable

---

<sup>226</sup> Letter by Henry A. Wise, published in the Boston Daily Advertiser, n.d, copied in the Boston Journal, 20 March 1862; Worden’s narrative, Worden Papers, Lincoln Memorial University, Harrogate, Tennessee; Washington correspondence, 10, 11 March, New York Tribune, 11, 12 March 1862; Washington correspondence, 10, 11 March, New York Tribune, 10 March, Philadelphia Inquirer, 11 March 1862.

<sup>227</sup> Welles to Worden, Washington, 15 March, New York Herald, 29 March 1862.

<sup>228</sup> Lincoln to Welles, Washington, 10 March 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:154.

sight. When he turned to us, I could see his lip quiver & his frame tremble with strong emotion & imagined that the terrible drama in these waters of the ninth [eighth] and tenth [ninth] of March was passing in review before him.” He shook hands with the officers, examined the ship closely, and asked to be presented to the crew. The captain objected that they were busy with their chores and not presentable. “That is just as I want to see them, sir,” replied the president. Hat in hand, he bowed right and left as he slowly passed between two rows of enlisted men.<sup>229</sup>

#### THE PENINSULAR CAMPAIGN BEGINS

With the Merrimack neutralized, the Army of the Potomac began sailing for the Peninsula on March 17, one day before Lincoln’s deadline. In a good mood, McClellan wrote that the president “is all right – he is my strongest friend.”<sup>230</sup> But Lincoln harbored grave doubts about the general. On April 2, he told Orville Browning that General Scott “and all the leading military men around him, had always assured him” that McClellan “possessed a very high order of military talent, and that he did not think they could all be mistaken – yet he was not fully satisfied with his conduct of the war – that he was not sufficiently energetic and aggressive in his measures.” Lincoln added that he had studied McClellan “and taken his measure as well as he could – that he thought he had the capacity to make arrangements properly for a great conflict, but as the hour for action approached he became nervous and oppressed with the responsibility and hesitated to meet the crisis, but that he had given him peremptory orders to move now, and he must

---

<sup>229</sup> William F. Keeler to his wife Anna, aboard the Monitor, 7 May 1862, Robert W. Daly, ed., Aboard the USS Monitor: 1862: The Letters of Acting Paymaster William Frederick Keeler, U.S. Navy, to His Wife, Anna (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute, 1964), 106-7.

<sup>230</sup> McClellan to S. L. M. Barlow, Washington, 16 March 1862, Sears, ed., McClellan Papers, 213.

do it.” Upset by criticism of his delays and hints that he was disloyal, McClellan called at the White House on April 1 and “shed tears when speaking of the cruel imputations upon his loyalty” and defended himself against such allegations.<sup>231</sup>

With McClellan on the Peninsula, Lincoln relied on telegrams from the general to keep abreast of the army’s progress. When he discovered that those messages were routed first to Stanton, he became so angry that he chastised messengers who forwarded the communications to the war secretary. A boy employed by the American Telegraph Company remembered how the “very mad” president exclaimed to a sentry at the gate: “Send up to the door for the officer in charge [of receipting telegrams] and tell him that when telegrams come here addressed to me they should and must be delivered to me. Tell him also that if he sends any more of my telegrams over to Mr. Stanton’s house I’ll drive him away from here. Mr. Stanton has enough telegrams of his own and should not have mine.” He said to the messenger boy, “Tell your folks that I must have my telegrams, and that if these soldiers about the door interfere any more I’ll drive every one of them away. I don’t want them and never did want them about the place.”<sup>232</sup>

After the first 58,000 Union troops reached their destination (many more were on the way), Little Mac on April 4 began his march toward Richmond, seventy-five miles distant. He came to an abrupt halt upon encountering a weakly-held Confederate line stretching across the Peninsula from Yorktown to the James River. The flamboyant Confederate commander John Magruder skillfully deployed his 17,000 troops, marching and counter-marching them in a successful attempt to fool McClellan into thinking his

---

<sup>231</sup> Pease and Randall, eds., Browning Diary, 1:537-38 (entry for 2 April 1862).

<sup>232</sup> Reminiscences of Charles Frederick, Washington Star, 1899, clipping, Lincoln Scrapbooks, 4:65, Judd Stewart Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

force was much larger than it actually was. In fact, it could easily have been swept away by the Army of the Potomac. But the hypercautious Union commander decided to besiege Yorktown, wasting a month in preparation for a massive bombardment. During that interval, Joseph E. Johnston was able to reinforce Magruder; McClellan had squandered a glittering opportunity to advance swiftly to the gates of Richmond.<sup>233</sup> Upon seeing the weakness of Magruder's forces, Johnston remarked: "No one but McClellan could have hesitated to attack."<sup>234</sup> Lincoln said "there was no reason why he [McClellan] should have been detained a single day at Yorktown, but he waited and gave the enemy time to gather his forces and strengthen his position."<sup>235</sup>

One excuse McClellan gave for his timidity was the president's decision to withhold Irvin McDowell's corps, which had originally been slated to sail to the Peninsula. Lincoln changed that plan at the last minute when he discovered that Little Mac, in violation of the relevant War Order, had not left enough men behind to guarantee the safety of Washington.<sup>236</sup> The president was indignant when informed that only 19,022 raw troops (which he called "the refuse of the army") were in and around the capital instead of the 40,000 to 50,000 recommended by McClellan's division commanders.<sup>237</sup> Such legerdemain would have justified Little Mac's removal, but Lincoln had no confidence in the other generals of the Army of the Potomac. When notified of the

---

<sup>233</sup> Kenneth P. Williams, Lincoln Finds a General: A Military Study of the Civil War (5 vols; New York: Macmillan, 1949-59), 1:165.

<sup>234</sup> Johnston to Lee, 22 April 1862, in Williams, Lincoln Finds a General, 1:166.

<sup>235</sup> Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 1:124 (entry for 12 September 1862).

<sup>236</sup> Lincoln to Stanton, Washington, 3 April 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln 5:179.

<sup>237</sup> Burlingame, Inner World of Lincoln, 184; memo by Col. John P. C. Shanks, "Conversation between President Lincoln & Col. Zagonyi, Written out by Col. Shanks who was present at the interview," recounting a conversation with Lincoln on 15 June 1862, Gay Papers, Columbia University; Stanton to Herman Dyer, Washington, 18 May 1862, Stanton Papers, Library of Congress.

president's action, the Young Napoleon called it "the most infamous thing that history has recorded. . . . The idea of depriving a General of 35,000 troops when actually under fire!"<sup>238</sup> To Lincoln he telegraphed an urgent appeal: "In my deliberate judgement the success of our cause will be imperilled when it is actually under the fire of the Enemy, and active operations have commenced. Two or three of my Divisions have been under fire of artillery most of the day. I am now of the opinion that I shall have to fight all of the available force of the Rebels, not far from here. Do not force me to do so with diminished numbers."<sup>239</sup> To his wife the Young Napoleon grumbled that enemies in Washington, among them Lincoln and Stanton, were conspiring to undermine his offensive and that they were "traitors . . . willing to sacrifice the country & its army for personal spite & personal aims."<sup>240</sup>

When the pro-McClellan press denounced Stanton for undermining the general's offensive, Lincoln assured a congressman that the charge was "wholly false, and that nothing had been done that he, the president, did not feel it to be his solemn duty to do, and that he assumed the entire responsibility of the military movements recently made."<sup>241</sup>

In fact, Lincoln's decision to withhold McDowell's corps did not compel Little Mac to besiege Yorktown instead of racing up the Peninsula.<sup>242</sup> Even before Lincoln's message arrived, McClellan had already decided not to turn the Confederate forces at

---

<sup>238</sup> McClellan to his wife, near Yorktown, 6 April 1862, Sears, ed., McClellan Papers, 230.

<sup>239</sup> McClellan to Lincoln, Fort Monroe, 5 April 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>240</sup> McClellan to his wife, before Yorktown, 11 April 1862, Sears, ed., McClellan Papers, 235; draft version of McClellan's Own Story, in Sears, Young Napoleon, 176-78.

<sup>241</sup> Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 6 June [misdated 22 May], Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 9 June 1862.

<sup>242</sup> Williams, Lincoln Finds a General, 1:164.



Yorktown.<sup>243</sup> To encourage the Young Napoleon to move, Lincoln ordered McDowell to advance overland toward Richmond. Perhaps the spur of competition could galvanize Little Mac, who would not want McDowell to have the honor of taking the Confederate capital.<sup>244</sup>

Perhaps, too, word of the battle of Shiloh in Tennessee would stir McClellan to action. On April 6 and 7, the combined forces of Grant and Buell fought an exceptionally bloody battle against Confederates under the gifted commander Albert Sidney Johnston, who was killed in the fighting. Johnston had at first seemed victorious, catching Grant off guard, but on the second day of fighting Buell's reinforcements allowed the Federals to drive the enemy from the field. The victory paved the way for the capture of Memphis in June.

In reply to Little Mac's pleas, Lincoln wired on April 6: "You now have over one hundred thousand troops, with you . . . . I think you better break the enemies' line from York-town to Warwick River, at once. They will probably use time, as advantageously as you can."<sup>245</sup> Disturbed by McClellan's lack of self-confidence, and losing patience with the army's sluggish progress, Lincoln on April 9 again bluntly implored him to move: "Your despatches complaining that you are not properly sustained, while they do not offend me, do pain me very much." After the Army of the Potomac sailed, "I ascertained that less than twenty thousand unorganized men, without a single field battery, were all you designed to be left for the defence of Washington, and Manassas Junction; and part of this even, was to go to Gen. Hooker's old position. Gen. Banks' corps, once designed

---

<sup>243</sup> Sears, Young Napoleon, 176-77.

<sup>244</sup> Henry L. Dawes to his wife, Washington, 5 April 1862, Dawes Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>245</sup> Lincoln to McClellan, Washington, 6 April 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:182.

for Manassas Junction, was diverted, and tied up on the line of Winchester and Strausburg, and could not leave it without again exposing the upper Potomac, and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. This presented, (or would present, when McDowell and Sumner should be gone) a great temptation to the enemy to turn back from the Rappahanock, and sack Washington. My explicit order that Washington should, by the judgment of all the commanders of Army corps, be left entirely secure, had been neglected. It was precisely this that drove me to detain McDowell. I do not forget that I was satisfied with your arrangement to leave Banks at Mannassas Junction; but when that arrangement was broken up, and nothing was substituted for it, of course I was not satisfied. I was constrained to substitute something for it myself. And now allow me to ask ‘Do you really think I should permit the line from Richmond, via Mannassas Junction, to this city to be entirely open, except what resistance could be presented by less than twenty thousand unorganized troops?’ This is a question which the country will not allow me to evade. There is a curious mystery about the number of the troops now with you. When I telegraphed you on the 6th. saying you had over a hundred thousand with you, I had just obtained from the Secretary of War, a statement, taken as he said, from your own returns, making 108,000 then with you, and en route to you. You now say you will have but 85,000, when all en route to you shall have reached you. How can the discrepancy of 23,000 be accounted for? As to Gen. Wool's command, I understand it is doing for you precisely what a like number of your own would have to do, if that command was away. I suppose the whole force which has gone forward for you, is with you by this time; and if so, I think it is the precise time for you to strike a blow. By delay the enemy will relatively gain upon you – that is, he will gain faster, by fortifications and

re-inforcements, than you can by re-inforcements alone. And, once more let me tell you, it is indispensable to you that you strike a blow. I am powerless to help this. You will do me the justice to remember I always insisted, that going down the Bay in search of a field, instead of fighting at or near Manassas, was only shifting, and not surmounting, a difficulty – that we would find the same enemy, and the same, or equal, intrenchments, at either place. The country will not fail to note – is now noting – that the present hesitation to move upon an intrenched enemy, is but the story of Manassas repeated. I beg to assure you that I have never written you, or spoken to you, in greater kindness of feeling than now, nor with a fuller purpose to sustain you, so far as in my most anxious judgment, I consistently can. But you must act.”<sup>246</sup> On May 1, the president similarly responded to McClellan’s request for more artillery: “Your call for Parrott guns from Washington alarms me – chiefly because it argues indefinite procrastination. Is anything to be done?”<sup>247</sup>

Lincoln was understandably puzzled at McClellan’s audit of his troops. The general counted only the enlisted men present for duty, whereas the president counted all those being fed and equipped by the war department, which in addition to the ones on McClellan’s list included officers, men on sick call, denizens of the guardhouse, and noncombatants. Disingenuously, Little Mac used the latter method of calculation when estimating the size of the enemy forces.<sup>248</sup> In exasperation, the commander-in-chief declared that getting troops to McClellan was like trying to gather fleas in a barn: “the

---

<sup>246</sup> Montgomery Blair to McClellan, [Washington], 9 April, McClellan Papers, Library of Congress; Pease and Randall, eds., Browning Diary, 1:540 (entry for 10 April 1862); Lincoln to McClellan, Washington, 9 April 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:184-85.

<sup>247</sup> Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:203.

<sup>248</sup> Sears, Young Napoleon, 179.

more you shovel them up in the corner the more they get away from you.”<sup>249</sup> But he wanted to give McClellan no cause for complaint, so over the objections of Stanton and Generals Ethan Allen Hitchcock, Montgomery C. Meigs, James W. Ripley, and Lorenzo Thomas, Lincoln shipped McClellan two brigades of engineers plus William B. Franklin’s division from McDowell’s corps, even though he declared “that the force was not needed by General McClellan.”<sup>250</sup> (According to Henry Winter Davis, Stanton “refused to sign the order for Franklin’s division to go to McClellan & talked about resigning,” whereupon Lincoln “signed the order & told him he could resign or not as he saw fit.”)<sup>251</sup> To help replace those units, Lincoln ordered Banks to send Shields’ division to McDowell. The reassignment of Shields proved to be a blunder, but Lincoln at the time believed that no enemy forces were nearby in the Shenandoah Valley; he also mistakenly thought that Banks had 35,000 troops (including Shields) and could spare a division.<sup>252</sup> As Lincoln explained to Edwards Pierpont, “McClellan worried me so for more troops that I sent McDowell to him and then weakened Banks to strengthen McDowell. McClellan is all the time writing for more troops.”<sup>253</sup>

---

<sup>249</sup> Richard C. McCormick’s reminiscences, New York, 29 April 1865, New York Evening Post, 5 May 1865, semi-weekly edition. Cf. Burlingame and Ettlinger, eds., Hay Diary, 76 (entry for [July-August 1863]).

<sup>250</sup> Stanton to Herman Dyer, Washington, 18 May 1862, Stanton Papers, Library of Congress. McClellan had asked Gustavus Fox to persuade Lincoln to send more troops. Fox’s wife recorded in her diary that “Gus obtained an order for General Franklin’s division to go to McClellan.” Virginia Fox diary, 9 April 1862, Levi Woodbury Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>251</sup> Henry Winter Davis to Samuel Francis Du Pont, Baltimore, 6 May 1862, transcript, S. F. Du Pont Papers, Hagley Museum, Wilmington, Delaware. Stanton was “much annoyed” at Chase for being away from Washington when this decision was made. Hiram Barney to Chase, New York, 17 April 1862, Chase Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>252</sup> Memo by Col. John P. C. Shanks, “Conversation between President Lincoln & Col. Zagonyi, Written out by Col. Shanks who was present at the interview,” recounting a conversation with Lincoln on 15 June 1862, Sydney Howard Gay Papers, Columbia University.

<sup>253</sup> Pierpont told this to Maria Lydig Daly. Daly, Diary of a Union Lady, 1861-1865, ed. Harold Earl Hammond (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1962), 140 (entry for 5 June 1862).

While Lincoln’s confidence in McClellan was “greatly shaken,” popular confidence in the president remained strong. According to Maine Governor Israel Washburn: “our people are faithful, confiding, patriotic – they do believe in the President – they trust, honor & love him.”<sup>254</sup> After traveling through the Midwest, Hiram Barney reported that the “hearts of the people there are with the President – they speak of him as a gift of God for the times.”<sup>255</sup> Henry W. Bellows wrote upon his return from Washington to New York that “Uncle Abe is very popular – a shrewd, firm, clear & strong man.”<sup>256</sup> The president, Charles A. Dana declared, “is the most popular man & the most confided in, since Washington. Since the death of his boy led Mrs Abe into retirement, there has been nothing to diminish the public trust and attachment.”<sup>257</sup>

To some commentators, Lincoln’s leadership had come to seem indispensable. William O. Stoddard asked readers of the New York Examiner: “Did you ever try to realize the idea of losing our good Chief Magistrate? Perhaps not, but suppose you try, and then look around you in imagination for the man whom you could trust, and whom the people would trust, to take the reins from his dead hand. The fact is, that at present the country has entire confidence in no one else.”<sup>258</sup>

McClellan did not love and trust Lincoln; in fact, he deeply resented presidential prodding. After the war, Alexander K. McClure asserted that if the general had “understood and treated Lincoln as his friend, as I know Lincoln was, he could have

---

<sup>254</sup> Elihu B. Washburne to Israel Washburn, [Washington], 26 [April 1862]; Israel Washburn to Hannibal Hamlin, Augusta, 23 May 1862, Israel Washburn Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>255</sup> Barney to Chase, New York, 30 June 1862, Chase Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>256</sup> Henry W. Bellows to Joseph Bellows, New York, 1 February 1862, Bellows Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>257</sup> C. A. Dana to J. S. Pike, New York, 28 May 1862, Pike Papers, University of Maine.

<sup>258</sup> Washington correspondence, 21 April, New York Examiner, 24 April 1862, Burlingame, ed., Dispatches from Lincoln's White House, 74.

mastered all his combined enemies.”<sup>259</sup> Little Mac said he felt like telling his commander-in-chief that if he wished the Confederate line broken, “he had better come & do it himself.”<sup>260</sup>

#### THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF TAKES NORFOLK AND TRIES TO BAG STONEWALL JACKSON

In fact, Lincoln did feel impelled to visit the army and actually helped direct the capture of Norfolk and the subsequent destruction of the ironclad Merrimack.<sup>261</sup> On May 3, just as McClellan was finally ready to begin shelling Yorktown, the 56,000-man Confederate army there under Joseph E. Johnston pulled back toward Richmond. Little Mac, surprised by that retreat, had made no plans to pursue. On May 5, when some elements of the Army of the Potomac engaged Johnston’s rearguard at Williamsburg, they took serious losses (2230 killed, wounded, or missing); for most of the fight, Little Mac was absent from the field.

That same day, eager to infuse some energy into McClellan, to persuade the army and navy to cooperate more effectively, and to launch an offensive against Norfolk, Lincoln sailed for the front, accompanied by Stanton, who suggested the trip. Chase, General Egbert Viele, and several others joined the presidential party.<sup>262</sup> Because

---

<sup>259</sup> McClure to Ellen McClellan, Philadelphia, 13 January 1892, McClellan Papers Library of Congress.

<sup>260</sup> McClellan to his wife, before Yorktown, 8 April 1862, Sears, ed., McClellan Papers, 234.

<sup>261</sup> Chester D. Bradley, “President Lincoln’s Campaign Against the Merrimac,” Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society 51 (1958): 59-85; William E. Baringer, “On Enemy Soil: President Lincoln’s Norfolk Campaign,” Abraham Lincoln Quarterly 7 (1952): 4-26; Robert H. Joynt, “Abraham Lincoln and the Capture of Norfolk,” Lincoln Herald 76 (1974): 69-79.

<sup>262</sup> Egbert L. Viele, “A Trip with Lincoln, Chase, and Stanton,” Scribner’s Monthly, October 1878, 814-22; Chase to his daughter, 7 May 1862, John Niven, ed., The Salmon P. Chase Papers (5 vols.; Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1993-1998), 3:185-88; Chase to Greeley, 12 September 1862, copy, Chase Papers, U. P. A. microfilm ed.; Fortress Monroe correspondence, 5 July, New York Herald 9 July 1862; Ethan Allen Hitchcock diary, Washington, 8 May 1862, copy, William A. Croffut Papers, Library of

McClellan appeared so uninterested in those matters (he said he was too busy to see the president), Lincoln decided to take charge himself. The Young Napoleon unwisely passed up an opportunity to repair his frayed relations with the president. Lincoln was convinced that General William B. Franklin could have taken Norfolk when the Army of the Potomac first reached the Peninsula if he had not stayed on shipboard.<sup>263</sup>

Upon arriving in Hampton Roads, Lincoln visited the Vanderbilt, a huge, powerful ship that Cornelius Vanderbilt had tried to donate to the government in 1861. His offer had been turned down, but after the Merrimack made her destructive debut, Lincoln personally reversed the earlier decision. Since she was equipped with a ram to attack the Confederate behemoth, Lincoln “felt confident that the Vanderbilt alone was able to destroy the Merrimac.”<sup>264</sup> (Impressed with the prowess of the Merrimack, he recommended that steam rams be used to defend Northern harbors. The idea went nowhere.)<sup>265</sup>

But in case the Vanderbilt could not destroy the Confederate ironclad, Lincoln thought of another way to do so. At Fort Monroe, he consulted with the general in charge of that facility, John E. Wool, and with the chief naval commander in the area, Flag Officer Louis M. Goldsborough.<sup>266</sup> After a bit of sightseeing, he asked General Wool:

---

Congress; Chase to Horace Greeley, n.p., n.d., in Flower, Stanton, 156; Cannon, Personal Reminiscences of the Rebellion, 153-75.

<sup>263</sup> Lincoln told this to Fessenden on May 17. Fessenden to his son Frank, Washington, 17 May 1862, Fessenden Papers, Bowdoin College.

<sup>264</sup> Pease and Randall, eds., Browning Diary, 1:535 (entry for 19 March 1862); Fort Monroe correspondence, 7 May, New York Herald, 12 May 1862.

<sup>265</sup> “President Lincoln’s Notion for Harbor Defence,” undated [1885], unidentified clipping, Nicolay Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>266</sup> Stanton to Wool, Washington, 4 May 1862, and on board the Miami, 4 May 1862, Wool Papers, New York State Library; Goldsborough to his wife and daughter, Hampton Roads, Virginia, 7, 10, 12 May 1862, Goldsborough Papers, Library of Congress.

“Why don’t you take Norfolk?” and speculated that “it may be easier taken than the Merrimac; and, once [Norfolk is] in our possession, the Merrimac, too, is captured, not, perhaps, actually, but virtually she is ours.”

“Pooh,” replied the general, “you don’t understand military necessity.”<sup>267</sup>

Soon thereafter Lincoln learned from a Yankee tugboat captain freshly escaped from Norfolk that the city was nearly deserted and could be easily taken. The president resolved to spur the military to do just that.<sup>268</sup> He ordered Goldsborough, who was known for “masterly inactivity,” to attack Rebel forts commanding the James; they were promptly knocked out of commission.<sup>269</sup>

With those threats removed, the next question was where to land Wool’s troops. On May 9, Lincoln, along with Wool, Stanton and Chase, scouted the south bank of the James. It was his idea and he took charge of the reconnaissance. When their ship, the revenue cutter Miami, came under enemy fire, Lincoln was told that he should seek safety in another part of the vessel. He replied: “Although I have no feeling of danger myself, perhaps for the benefit of our country, it would be well to step aside.”<sup>270</sup> At first no place seemed ideally suited for a landing. Lincoln nonetheless thought of a plan:

---

<sup>267</sup> New York Tribune, 13 May 1862; Norfolk correspondence, 11 May, New York Herald, 13 May 1862.

<sup>268</sup> Undated dispatch “from our own reporter,” New York Tribune, 13 May 1862. When Wool said he would dispatch 10,000 men, Lincoln asked if that would be enough to overcome the 20,000 Confederate soldiers reportedly in Norfolk. Another account of this conversation has Lincoln express doubts that the city could be taken. “Mr. President,” Wool replied, “you are not a military man, and do not understand the situation. If you will stay here forty-eight hours, I will present Norfolk to you.” Cannon, Personal Reminiscences of the Rebellion, 157-59.

<sup>269</sup> Fort Monroe correspondence, 9 May, New York Herald, 12 May 1862; Goldsborough to Fox, Hampton Roads, 8 May 1862, Robert Means Thompson and Richard Wainwright, eds., Confidential Correspondence of Gustavus Vasa Fox, Assistant Secretary of the Navy, 1861-1865 (2 vols.; New York: Printed for the Naval History Society by the De Vinne Press, 1918-19), 1:268.

<sup>270</sup> Fort Monroe correspondence, 9 May, New York Herald, 12 May 1862; “Captain F. A. Rowe’s Reminiscences,” New York, March 1905, in Philip Corell, ed., History of the Naval Brigade, 99<sup>th</sup> N.Y. Volunteers, Union Coast Guard, 1861-65 (New York: Regimental Veteran Association, 1905), unpaginated.



“Those old canal boats that I saw near the wharf at the fort do not draw more than a foot of water when they are entirely empty. These may easily be placed in such a position at high water that the ebb tide will leave them – or, rather, the one nearest the shore – entirely dry, while at the outer one, which may be securely anchored, there will be a depth of seven or eight feet – plenty for the numerous fleet of light draughts that we have at our disposal.” Bearing this in mind, a spot was selected at Willoughby’s Point, about eight miles from Norfolk. Union sailors dubbed it “Lincoln’s Choice.” The president was rowed to shore and inspected the terrain. Upon his return to Fort Monroe, the troops who were to seize the town cheered him enthusiastically.<sup>271</sup> It was determined to launch an assault immediately.

During the night of May 9-10, four regiments were dispatched, but a squabble between two generals about rank hampered their progress. Meanwhile, Lincoln asked Colonel Joseph R. Carr why his troops were not participating in the advance. When the colonel explained that General Wool had ordered them to Camp Hamilton, Lincoln vehemently flung down his hat and gave vent to his keen disappointment and disapproval. “Send me some one who can write,” he barked. To Wool’s aide, he dictated an order that Carr’s troops should be dispatched to Norfolk and that the Union forces already underway should press forward swiftly.<sup>272</sup> A Union captain observed the president “rushing about, hollering to someone on the wharf – dressed in a black suit with

---

<sup>271</sup> Fortress Monroe correspondence, 9 May, New York Tribune, 12 May 1862; Fort Monroe correspondence, 9 May, New York Herald, 12 May 1862; Fortress Monroe correspondence, 9 May, Baltimore American, n.d., copied in the Washington Star, 12 May 1862.

<sup>272</sup> Joseph B. Carr, “Operations of 1861 around Fort Monroe,” Robert Underwood Johnson, Clarence Clough, eds., Battles and Leaders of the Civil War (4 vols.; New York: Century, [1887-88]), 2:152

a very seedy crape on his hat, and hanging over the railing, he looked like some hoosier just starting for home from California, with store clothes and a biled shirt on.”<sup>273</sup>

The order was carried out, and Norfolk soon surrendered, though the delays which precipitated Lincoln’s hat-throwing allowed the Confederates time to destroy shipping and burn the navy yard at Portsmouth. Late at night, Wool returned to announce the good news. Lincoln, sitting on his bed, was amused when the excitable Stanton, clad in a nightshirt, rushed into the stateroom and impulsively hugged Wool, lifting him up in delight. “Look out, Mars!” the president jocularly exclaimed. “If you don’t, the General will throw you!” Tongue in cheek, the president suggested that the artist Emanuel Leutze, who was then painting large historical canvases for the Capitol, be commissioned to execute one depicting Stanton’s embrace of Wool.<sup>274</sup> Later, the general quipped that he had “not yet recovered from the hug which Stanton gave him, nor will he ever recover from the shock given him by seeing so great a man as Stanton, so exalted a man as the president, in his night-shirt.”<sup>275</sup>

Fearing that the Merrimack might be captured, the Rebels set it afire and watched it explode spectacularly. On behalf of Lincoln, Stanton formally thanked and congratulated Wool, who was promoted to major general. The president, said the war secretary, ranked the destruction of the Merrimack and the occupation of Norfolk “among the most important successes of the present war.”<sup>276</sup>

---

<sup>273</sup> Capt. Wilson Barstow to Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard, Baltimore, 12 May 1862, Barstow Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>274</sup> Cannon, Personal Reminiscences of the Rebellion, 173, 161-62, 167-68; Carpenter, Six Months at the White House, 104-5.

<sup>275</sup> Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 13 May, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 17 May 1862.

<sup>276</sup> Stanton to Wool, Washington, 16 May 1862, Wool Papers, New York State Library.

The James River was now accessible to the Union navy, which could theoretically sail up to the docks of Richmond. But when Stanton ordered Goldsborough to do so, that timid captain hesitated, unsuccessfully appealing to the president to rescind the order. Meanwhile, the Merrimack's crew had reinforced Fort Darling on Drewry's Bluff, ninety feet above the river and seven miles from the Confederate capital. On May 15, when the Union navy finally moved up the James, Rebel artillery on those imposing heights successfully drove it back. If Goldsborough had promptly executed the order which Lincoln seconded, he might not have been defeated.<sup>277</sup> The president was deeply disappointed.<sup>278</sup>

Another naval disappointment was the failure to capture the blockade runner Nashville, which repeatedly eluded the Union fleet off Wilmington, North Carolina. It had recently delivered 60,000 arms to the Rebels. In May, upon learning that it had made its fourth successful run in two months, Lincoln indignantly threatened to call the naval officer in charge to account.<sup>279</sup>

Lincoln was also exasperated with McClellan, who had said he was not discouraged by the navy's failure to reach Richmond. Sarcastically the president remarked to Fox: "I would not be discouraged if they [the Union flotillas] were all destroyed. No."<sup>280</sup> Yet Lincoln objected to indirect criticism of Little Mac during a dinner

---

<sup>277</sup> Virginia Fox diary, 19 November 1862, Levi Woodbury Papers, Library of Congress; Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 1:73, 142; Cannon, Personal Reminiscences of the Rebellion, 155; Sears, Peninsula Campaign, 93-94.

<sup>278</sup> Fox to Goldsborough, Washington, 17 May 1862, Thompson and Wainwright, eds., Confidential Correspondence of Fox, 1:269.

<sup>279</sup> Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 14 May, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 17 May 1862.

<sup>280</sup> Ari Hoogenboom, Fox of the Union Navy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), p?\*

at Wool's headquarters. "I will not hear anything said against Genl McClellan," he insisted; "it hurts my feelings."<sup>281</sup>

On May 11, as Lincoln and his entourage sailed back to Washington, he believed that the Union cause was making as much progress as could reasonably be expected.<sup>282</sup> He took pride in his handiwork, explaining: "I knew that Saturday night that the next morning the Merrimac would either be in the James river or at the bottom. Mr. Stanton, Commodore Goldsborough and myself had a long conversation on the subject. I knew that, Norfolk in our possession, the Merrimac would have no place to retire to, and therefore I took the step which resulted in the capture of that place. The result proved my figuring correct."<sup>283</sup>

Others shared Lincoln's estimate of his role. A correspondent of the New York Herald reported that it was "generally admitted that the President and Secretary Stanton have infused new vigor into both the naval and military operations here."<sup>284</sup> Among those voicing that opinion were an officer on the Monitor who remarked that it "is extremely fortunate that the President came down as he did – he seems to have infused new life into everything, even the superannuated old fogies," and Captain Wilson Barstow, who thought that the "attack on Norfolk is entirely due to Abe, who insisted upon its being

---

<sup>281</sup> Capt. Wilson Barstow to Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard, Baltimore, 12 May 1862, Barstow Papers, Library of Congress. Barstow was told this by one Col. Falls, owner of the boat company which operated out of Fort Monroe. Falls alleged that he heard Lincoln utter these words.

<sup>282</sup> Washington correspondence, 11 May, New York Herald, 13 May 1862.

<sup>283</sup> Garrison's Station, New York, correspondence, 25 June, New York Herald, 26 June 1862.

<sup>284</sup> Willoughby point correspondence, 10 May, New York Herald, 12 May 1862. A similar view was expressed by the correspondent of the New York Times. Fortress Monroe correspondence, 11 May, New York Times, 13 May 1862.

done at once.”<sup>285</sup> The sailors aboard the president’s flag ship, the Baltimore, ascribed the success of the Norfolk campaign to Lincoln’s ability to energize it. They also declared that the president was “a trump” and marveled at the way he seemed so comfortable aboard ship.<sup>286</sup> En route back to Washington, Chase wrote his daughter: “So has ended a brilliant week’s campaign of the President; for I think it quite certain that, if he had not come down, Norfolk would still have been in possession of the enemy, and the ‘Merrimac’ as grim and defiant and as much a terror as ever.”<sup>287</sup>

Lincoln returned to Washington “in high spirits, greatly refreshed and invigorated by his sojourn at the seat of war.”<sup>288</sup> He was cheered not only by the success of the Norfolk campaign but also by several other recent Union triumphs, including the capture of New Orleans in late April. Word of that victory he received gleefully.<sup>289</sup> The previous month, he humorously read a caller a telegram announcing the defeat of Confederate forces at Pea Ridge, Arkansas: “Here’s the dispatch. Now, as the showman says, ‘Ladies and Gentlemen, this remarkable specimen is the celebrated wild he-goat of the mountings, and he makes the following noise, to wit.’”<sup>290</sup> He also rejoiced at the surrender of Fort Pulaski outside Savannah, Georgia (April 11), and at John Pope’s capture of both the town of New Madrid, Missouri (March 14) and of Island No. 10 in the Mississippi (April 7).

---

<sup>285</sup> William F. Keeler to his wife Anna, aboard the Monitor, 9 May 1862, Daly, ed., Aboard the USS Monitor, 115; Wilson Barstow to Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard, Baltimore, 12 May 1862, Barstow Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>286</sup> Washington Evening Star, 12 May 1862.

<sup>287</sup> Niven, ed., Chase Papers, 3:197.

<sup>288</sup> Washington correspondence, 12 May, New York Times, 13 May 1862.

<sup>289</sup> Washington correspondence, 27 April, New York Times, 28 April 1862.

<sup>290</sup> Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas, eds., The Diary of George Templeton Strong, 1835-1875 (4 vols.; New York: Macmillan, 1952), 3:210 (entry for 16 March 1862).

The good news improved Lincoln's appearance as well as his spirits. In late April, a journalist reported that he "is looking better than he did the day of his inauguration. He has gained steadily in health, strength, and even in weight."<sup>291</sup> Helping to improve his morale were laudatory press notices like the editorial in the Iowa State Register, which said that recent victories in the field "are due in a great measure to the prescience and sagacity of President Lincoln."<sup>292</sup>

Others also anticipated the future hopefully. Lyman Trumbull predicted that "the rebels will abandon Richmond without any serious battle, when they discover that we are advancing on them with our whole Army of the Potomac." Similarly, the senator expected Confederates in the West would retreat before oncoming Union forces.<sup>293</sup> Sanguine though Lincoln was, he exclaimed to an optimist who predicted that the war would soon be over, "No; we have a big job yet on hand to finish the war!"<sup>294</sup>

While at Fort Monroe, Lincoln wrote McClellan about the reorganization of the army. The general had created two new corps for his favorites, Fitz John Porter and William B. Franklin, and had removed division commander Charles S. Hamilton. The dismissal of Hamilton seemed to Lincoln most unjust, but he could not restore him without deposing McClellan.<sup>295</sup> Ominously the president advised Little Mac that by relieving Hamilton he had "lost the confidence of at least one of your best friends in the Senate." He told McClellan that in Washington, the reorganization "is looked upon as

---

<sup>291</sup> Washington correspondence, 28 April, New York Evening Post, 29 April 1862.

<sup>292</sup> Iowa State Register (Des Moines), 25 May 1862.

<sup>293</sup> Trumbull to John A. McClernand, Washington, 24 May 1862, McClernand Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield.

<sup>294</sup> Washington correspondence by D. W. Bartlett, 18 July, New York Independent, 23 July 1862.

<sup>295</sup> Adams S. Hill to Sydney Howard Gay, [Washington, 20 May 1862], Sydney Howard Gay Papers, Columbia University.

merely an effort to pamper one or two pets, and to persecute and degrade their supposed rivals. I have had no word from Sumner, Heintzelman, or Keyes. The commanders of these Corps are of course the three highest officers with you, but I am constantly told that you consult and communicate with nobody but General Fitz John Porter, and perhaps General Franklin. I do not say these complaints are true or just; but at all events it is proper you should know of their existence. Do the Commanders of Corps disobey your orders in any thing?” Lincoln asked rhetorically: “are you 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. The success of your army and the cause of the country are the same; and of course I only desire the good of the cause.”<sup>296</sup>

Lincoln may have considered firing McClellan at this point. According to Senator Henry Wilson, there was “evidence on file in the Department in the President’s own hand-writing proving that his visit to Fort Monroe convinced him of the entire incapacity of Gen. McClelland, and that he had made up his mind to remove him, and would have done so in three days had not [Congressman Owen] Lovejoy’s unfortunate resolution inspired by Forney, interposed.” (Lovejoy’s resolution, which passed the House on May 9, praised Little Mac’s “high military qualities which secure important results with but little sacrifice of human life.”) Adams S. Hill reported that “it was the President who on last Saturday stated that had it not been for Lovejoy’s resolution he would have removed McClellan.”<sup>297</sup>

---

<sup>296</sup> Lincoln to McClellan, Fort Monroe, 9 May 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:209.

<sup>297</sup> Adams S. Hill to Sydney Howard Gay, Washington, [7 or 8 or 9] June [1862], Sydney Howard Gay Papers, Columbia University.

In mid-May, McClellan clamored once again for reinforcements, alleging that he had only 80,000 effective troops and the enemy had double that number (a characteristically gross overestimate of Confederate forces).<sup>298</sup> Earlier, when Lincoln offered to send McDowell's corps to him from Fredericksburg with the understanding that McDowell would remain in charge of those troops, Little Mac refused to accept them on those terms. Now he backed down and expressed willingness to take reinforcements under any arrangement, though he wanted them shipped via water. Lincoln agreed to send McDowell to McClellan, but overland in order to screen Washington.<sup>299</sup>

On May 22-23, Lincoln again visited the troops, this time McDowell's corps at Fredericksburg. Stanton and Dahlgren accompanied him. Now that it had been decided to forward McDowell's troops to McClellan, the president wanted to expedite that transfer, just as he had expedited the capture of Norfolk a few days earlier. While proceeding from the landing at Aquia Creek to the general's headquarters, he admired the new railroad bridge across Potomac Creek, an immense structure 400 feet long and 100 feet high which, he said wonderingly, contained nothing but "beanpoles and cornstalks." He reviewed the troops and consulted their commander, who declared he could be ready to march south on Sunday the 25<sup>th</sup>. But Lincoln suggested that he "take a good ready" that Sabbath and start out on Monday.<sup>300</sup> While inspecting the troops, he was within view of Confederates across the river who could have shot him. Commented one journalist, "Mr. Lincoln is certainly devoid of personal timidity."<sup>301</sup>

---

<sup>298</sup> McClellan to Lincoln, 14 May 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>299</sup> Lincoln to McClellan, Washington, 21 May 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:226.

<sup>300</sup> Herman Haupt, Reminiscences of General Herman Haupt (Milwaukee: Wright & Joys, 1901), 49-50.

<sup>301</sup> Washington correspondence, 9 July, New York Evening Post, 10 July 1862.



When the president returned to Washington, he became quite agitated by news that on the previous day, May 23, Stonewall Jackson had captured Colonel John R. Kenly, cut his regiment at Front Royal to pieces, routed Nathaniel P. Banks' other forces, and had begun driving them down the Shenandoah Valley toward the Potomac. Deeply affected by Colonel Kenly's fate, Lincoln suffered keen anxiety as he learned of Banks' pell-mell retreat, which resembled the disgraceful flight from the Bull Run battlefield.<sup>302</sup> To Charles Sumner he vividly described how "Banks' men were running & flinging away their arms, routed & demoralized."<sup>303</sup>

As Banks tried to rally his men, he called out: "Don't you love your country?"

"Yes," replied one trooper, "and I am trying to get to it as fast as I can."

The Confederates captured so much material that General J. E. B. Stuart deemed Banks the best supply officer in Jackson's corps. George William Curtis voiced the dismay of many Northerners when he exclaimed: "how we have been out Generaled!"<sup>304</sup>

Panic gripped the capital, which seemed in danger of being taken by the enemy. In fact, some anxious residents fled northward.<sup>305</sup> "We have been 'stampeded' all day with news from Gen. Banks' army," Nicolay wrote from the White House. "Only a few minutes ago, a woman came up here from Willards to see me to ascertain if she had not

---

<sup>302</sup> Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 28 May, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 30 May 1862; Banks to Lincoln, Strasburg, 24 May 1862, Banks Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>303</sup> Sumner to Richard Henry Dana, Washington, 26 May 1862, Richard Henry Dana Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>304</sup> George William Curtis to Charles Eliot Norton, n.p., 26 May 1862, George William Curtis Papers, Harvard University.

<sup>305</sup> Washington correspondence, 26 May, New York Evening Post, 27 May 1862.

better leave the city as soon as possible.”<sup>306</sup> Not since Bull Run had fear for the safety of Washington been so intense.

Lincoln accepted responsibility for the debacle. By sending Shields’ division to McDowell, he made Banks’ diminished force of 4000 a tempting target for Jackson’s corps, four times as strong. Whenever anyone tried to blame Stanton or others for that fateful decision, Lincoln quickly replied: “I did it!”<sup>307</sup>

Word that Banks had escaped across the Potomac greatly relieved the president.<sup>308</sup> “I then determined to capture his pursuers,” to “entrap Jackson in the Valley,” he recalled.<sup>309</sup> Boldly directing that effort, he spent long hours at the war department firing off telegrams.<sup>310</sup> One altered McDowell’s orders: instead of marching south from the Rappahannock with all his men to join McClellan, he was to send 20,000 of them west to block Jackson’s line of retreat. The president told McDowell: “Every thing now depends upon the celerity and vigor of your movement.”<sup>311</sup> McDowell assigned James Shields’ division to carry out Lincoln’s order. (When told that Shields was crazy, the president said he was reminded “that George III had been told the same of one of his generals, namely, that he was mad. The King replied he wished he would bite his other

---

<sup>306</sup> Nicolay to Theresia Bates, Washington, 25 May 1862, in Burlingame, ed., With Lincoln in the White House, 78-79.

<sup>307</sup> Washington correspondence, 26 May, Chicago Tribune, 31 May 1862; Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 28 May, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 30 May 1862. A good example of criticism of Stanton is Dr. L. M. Baker to Banks, Newburyport, 26 May 1862, Banks Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>308</sup> Banks to Lincoln, Williamsport, 26 May 1862, Banks Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>309</sup> Memo by Col. John P. C. Shanks, “Conversation between President Lincoln & Col. Zagonyi, Written out by Col. Shanks who was present at the interview,” recounting a conversation with Lincoln on 15 June 1862, Sydney Howard Gay Papers, Columbia University. Lincoln allegedly told Leonard Swett that he made that decision against his better judgment and in response to pressure from his military advisors. Swett to his wife Washington, 10 August 1862, David Davis Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield.

<sup>310</sup> Washington correspondence, 29 May, Cincinnati Commercial, 30 May 1862.

<sup>311</sup> Lincoln to McDowell, Washington, 24 May 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:233.

generals.”)<sup>312</sup> Lincoln directed Frémont’s 17,000 men to move thirty miles east from Franklin to Harrisonburg on the Valley Turnpike, Jackson’s escape route.<sup>313</sup> “Do not lose a minute,” Lincoln warned the Pathfinder.<sup>314</sup> He urged McClellan to support that portion of McDowell’s corps which was to keep marching south.<sup>315</sup> In addition, the battered remnants of Banks’ army were ordered to regroup and pursue Jackson from the north, a directive which they were slow to obey.<sup>316</sup> To prevent the Confederates from entering Maryland, the president ordered a force from Baltimore to occupy Harpers Ferry.

With significant help from Stanton, Lincoln was now acting as general-in-chief as well as commander-in-chief.<sup>317</sup> To assist those two civilians, sixty-three-year-old General Ethan Allen Hitchcock reluctantly agreed to come out of retirement. On March 15, Lincoln conferred with that officer and asked him to serve as an advisor, for he admitted frankly that he himself “had no military knowledge.” (Similarly, in February he had told Governor Richard Yates of Illinois that “he knew but little of military matters” and therefore “he must trust to the Commander in Chief.”)<sup>318</sup> The president read Hitchcock an anonymous letter severely condemning McClellan and calling for his removal. That missive, explained Lincoln, gave some indication of the pressure he faced.<sup>319</sup>

---

<sup>312</sup> Madeleine Vinton Dahlgren, ed., Memoir of John A. Dahlgren (Boston: Osgood, 1882), 375 (diary entry for 24 May 1862).

<sup>313</sup> Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:230.

<sup>314</sup> Lincoln to Frémont, Washington, 24 May 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:230, 231.

<sup>315</sup> Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:232.

<sup>316</sup> Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:247; Harrington, Banks, 79.

<sup>317</sup> Washington correspondence, 28 May, New York Times, 29 May 1862; Thomas and Hyman, Stanton, 183.

<sup>318</sup> Yates to Trumbull, Springfield, 14 February 1862, Lyman Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>319</sup> Thomas and Hyman, Stanton, 185-86; William A. Croffut Papers, copy of Hitchcock diary, 15 March 1862, Library of Congress; Hitchcock to Mary Mann, Washington, 15 March 1862, Hitchcock Papers, Library of Congress.

Meanwhile in the West, Henry W. Halleck appealed for reinforcements. In response, Lincoln patiently explained his inability to comply. “I beg you,” wrote the president on that busy May 24, “to be assured we do the best we can. I mean to cast no blame when I tell you each of our commanders along our line from Richmond to Corinth [Mississippi] supposes himself to be confronted by numbers superior to his own. Under this pressure we thinned the line on the upper Potomac until yesterday it was broken, at heavy loss to us, and Gen. Banks put in great peril, out of which he is not yet extricated, and may be actually captured. We need men to repair this breach, and have them not at hand.”<sup>320</sup> He advised Halleck to be cautious while approaching Corinth.

To cheer up the badly disappointed McDowell, who regarded the altered plans as a “crushing blow,” Lincoln on May 24 told him: “The change was as painful to me as it can possibly be to you or anyone.”<sup>321</sup> The next day he wired McDowell’s patron, Treasury Secretary Chase, who was visiting the general at Fredericksburg: “I think it not improbable that [Confederate generals Richard] Ewell [Stonewall] Jackson and [Edward] Johnson, are pouring through the gap they made day-before yesterday at Front-Royal, making a dash Northward. It will be a very valuable and very honorable service for Gen. McDowell to cut them off. I hope he will put all possible energy and speed into the effort.”<sup>322</sup>

Between them, Banks, Frémont and McDowell might be able to block Jackson’s retreat. Lincoln knew that the Confederates intended “by constant alarms to keep three or

---

<sup>320</sup> Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:231.

<sup>321</sup> McDowell to C. A. Hecksher, 17 June 1862, Barlow Papers, in Nevins, War for the Union, 2:128; Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:233

<sup>322</sup> Lincoln to Chase, Washington, 25 May 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:234-35.

four times as many of our troops away from Richmond as his own force amounts to.”<sup>323</sup> Even so, he decided to take a gamble: if McDowell, Frémont, and Banks moved quickly and cooperated with each other, their 40,000 combined troops could bag Jackson’s 17,000. There was a reasonable chance that the plan would work, should those troops move quickly.

For the next month, Lincoln continued to supervise Union forces in the Valley. On May 25, he concluded that Jackson’s move was “a general and concentrated one,” not a mere feint. Therefore he wired McClellan: “I think the time is near when you must either attack Richmond or give up the job and come to the defence of Washington.” After explaining how Banks was being routed by Jackson and fleeing towards Harpers Ferry, Lincoln assured Little Mac: “If McDowell’s force was now beyond our reach, we should be utterly helpless. Apprehension of something like this, and no unwillingness to sustain you, has always been my reason for withholding McDowell’s force from you. Please understand this, and do the best you can with the force you have.”<sup>324</sup>

This message has been misinterpreted as evidence that a panicky Lincoln was thinking defensively, concerned above all with saving Washington. But it was sent the day after he urged McDowell and Frémont to take the offensive and bag Jackson. He did not order them to fall back to defend the capital. Similarly, Lincoln’s telegram to McClellan was designed to prod him into attacking Richmond.

Angered by Frémont’s decision to proceed to the relief of Banks via Mooresfield, far north of his assigned spot, Lincoln caustically remarked that “there are three kinds of animals: there is a horse & a mule & a jackass. A horse when he is broken will obey the

---

<sup>323</sup> Lincoln to Frémont, Washington, 15 June 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:270-71.

<sup>324</sup> Lincoln to McClellan, Washington, 25 May 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:236, 237.

reins easily, a mule is hard to guide but still you can make him go rightly. But a jackass you can't guide at all!!”<sup>325</sup> A caller at the White House remembered that the president “complained bitterly of the disobedience of orders by Fremont” and, when it was suggested that he criticize the Pathfinder in the press, Lincoln “said rather bitterly that he had quite enough to do without writing for the papers.”<sup>326</sup> Impatiently, the president ordered Frémont to Strasburg, south of Harrisonburg on the Valley Turnpike. (In mid-June, Lincoln explained that when he ordered Frémont to Harrisonburg, he had been unaware that the Pathfinder’s “supplies had not reached him & that he was not prepared to cross the mountains. If I had known that, if he had so informed me I would have ordered him to rest two days until his stores came & then cross the mountains.” To one of Frémont’s subordinates he complained that the general “should have notified me that he could not go to Harrisonburg by the route I directed.”)<sup>327</sup>

On May 28, Lincoln spurred McDowell on: “it is, for you a question of legs. Put in all the speed you can.”<sup>328</sup> As McDowell and Frémont converged on Strasburg, it looked as if they might close the pincers on Jackson. But that wily Confederate, driving his men hard, slithered between his pursuers and escaped up the Valley, burning bridges behind him. On June 8, he wheeled about and bloodied Frémont in a rearguard action at Cross Keys. The following day he did the same thing to Shields at Port Republic. Soon

---

<sup>325</sup> Henry Winter Davis to Samuel Francis Du Pont, Baltimore, [no day indicated] June 1862, transcript, S. F. Du Pont Papers, Hagley Museum, Wilmington, Delaware.

<sup>326</sup> Oran Follett, “Account of an Interview with President Lincoln at Washington, [28] October 1862,” evidently written in 1866, enclosed in Jake Zeitlin to Carl Sandburg, Los Angeles, 11 June 1940, Lincoln Collection, Reminiscences folder no. 2, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield.

<sup>327</sup> Memo by Col. John P. C. Shanks, “Conversation between President Lincoln & Col. Zagonyi, Written out by Col. Shanks who was present at the interview,” recounting a conversation with Lincoln on 15 June 1862, Sydney Howard Gay Papers, Columbia University.

<sup>328</sup> Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:246.

thereafter he left the Valley and returned to Lee unmolested, for Lincoln directed Frémont to stay at Harrisonburg, sent Banks to protect Front Royal, and had Shields return to Fredericksburg. The administration was so anxious about any future attacks by Stonewall's men that two of McDowell's divisions were left in or near the Valley. Thus Jackson had succeeded in keeping some of McDowell's force from linking up with McClellan. It was a masterful campaign.

As the Confederates evaded the trap Lincoln had set, he complained about the failure to bag them. A journalist reported that with “an entire week to do the work in” the president “felt certain that Jackson should have been captured, and cannot comprehend the excuses made by the generals who should have taken him.”<sup>329</sup> He was especially disappointed in Shields, explaining that if the general “had not drilled his men about so much [and] he had moved in strength to Port Republic & held or destroyed the Bridge Fremont would have destroyed Jackson[']s entire army. Shields drilled his forces along the mountain road South from Front Royal until his forces were 40 miles apart & fearing that the forces of Fremont were also scattered in the race I ordered him to stop at Harrisonburg.”<sup>330</sup>

Critics chastised Lincoln for his decision to send part of McDowell's corps to the Valley rather than to McClellan, but in retrospect his thinking seems sound. Jackson might have been bagged if the amateur Union generals had been more capable and if they had not been plagued with torrential rain at crucial times. Moreover, it seems unlikely

---

<sup>329</sup> Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 3 June, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 7 June 1862.

<sup>330</sup> Memo by Col. John P. C. Shanks, “Conversation between President Lincoln & Col. Zagonyi, Written out by Col. Shanks who was present at the interview,” recounting a conversation with Lincoln on 15 June 1862, Gay Papers, Columbia University.

that the chronically timid McClellan would have taken Richmond even if he had had all of McDowell's men at his disposal.<sup>331</sup>

#### DEFEAT: LEE WHIPS McCLELLAN

Meanwhile, on May 31 and June 1, Little Mac had fought Joseph E. Johnston in a bloody, indecisive battle at Fair Oaks (also known as Seven Pines), five miles from the Confederate capital. During the action, the Rebel commander was wounded and replaced by Robert E. Lee. McClellan, horrified by the severe losses his army sustained, grew increasingly reluctant to assault the enemy directly; now more than ever was he disposed to rely on maneuver and siege operations. Lincoln viewed the fighting “as the last desperate effort of the rebels in which they had thrown their whole strength. The defeat he regarded as final.” It was not.<sup>332</sup>

To help replace the Army of the Potomac's losses, the president gave McClellan control of the Fort Monroe garrison, from which the general promptly summoned nine regiments. In addition, reinforcements from Baltimore and Washington, as well as another division of McDowell's corps from Fredericksburg, rushed to augment the army on the Peninsula. From North Carolina, 7,000 men of Burnside's division were assigned to McClellan's command. But two divisions of McDowell's corps (commanded by Rufus King and James B. Ricketts) were left in the Valley to deal with any potential threat from Jackson, whose whereabouts were unknown to the Union forces. Because King and Ricketts did not join him, the Young Napoleon characteristically complained about a lack of support. “Honest A has again fallen into the hands of my enemies,” he wrote his wife,

---

<sup>331</sup> Thomas and Hyman, Stanton, 197.

<sup>332</sup> Washington correspondence, 2 June, Cincinnati Commercial, 3 June 1862.



“& is no longer a cordial friend of mine!”<sup>333</sup> To be sure, Lincoln had on June 15 told him that he could not forward Shields’s division because it “has gotten so terribly out of shape, out at elbows, and out at toes, that it will require a long time to get it in again.”<sup>334</sup> But McClellan was well furnished with troops. On April 1, he had 158,419 on his rolls (including McDowell’s corps and Blenker’s division) and on June 20 he had 156,838. The loss of the 45,000 troops of Blenker and McDowell was made up by 40,000 replacements.<sup>335</sup>

As time passed, Lincoln grew impatient to know why the Army of the Potomac remained idle after the battle of Fair Oaks. On June 5, Nicolay reported from the White House that “McClellan’s extreme caution, or tardiness, or something, is utterly exhaustive of all hope and patience, and leaves one in that feverish apprehension that as something may go wrong, something most likely will go wrong.”<sup>336</sup> The president also objected to McClellan’s excessive tenderness in dealing with enemy property, most notably a house near Richmond belonging to Robert E. Lee (known at the White House.) Before the war, Little Mac had promised Lee that if hostilities broke out, that dwelling would be protected. On June 16, according to D. W. Bartlett, “Mr. Lincoln ‘put his foot down’ . . . , declaring that he would break the engagement between the two generals” for, he “said he wasn’t bound by any such promise.” He ordered that Lee’s White House be used as a Union hospital.<sup>337</sup>

---

<sup>333</sup> McClellan to his wife, Camp Lincoln, 22 June 1862, Sears, ed., McClellan Papers, 305.

<sup>334</sup> Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:272.

<sup>335</sup> Williams, Lincoln Finds a General, 1:216-17.

<sup>336</sup> Nicolay to Therenia Bates, Washington, 5 June 1862, Burlingame, ed., With Lincoln in the White House, 80.

<sup>337</sup> Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 17 June, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 20 June 1862; Washington correspondence, 16 June, Cincinnati Commercial, 17 June 1862.

On June 18, Lincoln gently prodded McClellan yet again: “I could better dispose of things if I could know about what day you can attack Richmond, and would be glad to be informed, if you think you can inform me with safety.”<sup>338</sup> That day the president told Orville H. Browning that he had reluctantly gone along with McClellan’s plan only after the division commanders so strongly endorsed it. Now, however, he was convinced that he was right when he urged that the fight should have been made near Manassas.<sup>339</sup>

Anxious about the fate of the army, fearful that McDowell might be attacked before he could link up with McClellan, and eager for counsel, Lincoln on June 23 slipped out of Washington to meet with Winfield Scott at West Point.<sup>340</sup> Reportedly the president, who had recently remarked that Scott was “worth all the rest” of the generals, asked about “the present state of the campaign, and the best policy to bring the war to a speedy end.” Scott offered advice regarding the “necessity for immediate reorganization of the army, and what changes would be necessary in the several military departments.”<sup>341</sup> No formal record of their five-hour conversation survives except a memo by the Old Fuss and Feathers approving Lincoln’s decision to send McDowell’s corps to McClellan. The retired general also assured Lincoln that the forces of Frémont and Banks were properly deployed.<sup>342</sup> Newspapers speculated that the president was

---

<sup>338</sup> Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:276

<sup>339</sup> Pease and Randall, eds., Browning Diary, 1:552 (entry for 18 June 1862).

<sup>340</sup> Leonard Swett to his wife, Washington, 10 August 1862, David Davis Family Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield.

<sup>341</sup> New York Evening Express, 25 June 1862; Adams S. Hill to Sydney Howard Gay, Washington, 23 June 1862, Gay Papers, Columbia University.

<sup>342</sup> Scott to Lincoln, West Point, 24 June 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress. Lincoln told a friend that it was feared that as McDowell drew near Richmond, Lee might attack and defeat him before he could link up with McClellan. “It was upon this question and nothing else” that he visited Scott. Leonard Swett to his wife Laura, New York, 10 August 1862, David Davis Family Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield.

about to remove McClellan, but on his return trip to Washington, he scotched that rumor by telling a crowd at Jersey City that his visit to West Point “was not to make or unmake any generals now in the army.”<sup>343</sup> In all likelihood, the president and Scott discussed a plan to unite the corps of Frémont, Banks, and McDowell under one commander, as Chase had recommended.<sup>344</sup>

That new commander was to be John Pope, who had been summoned from the West. On June 26, Pope met with Lincoln, who persuaded him to accept the newly-created Army of Virginia, combining the 45,000 troops of the three corps in the Shenandoah Valley.<sup>345</sup> Pope was reluctant to undertake the assignment, explaining that he was outranked by all three of the major generals who were to serve under him (Banks, Shields, and Frémont); they and their troops might well be reluctant to follow his lead uncomplainingly. (In fact, Frémont resigned his commission in protest and was replaced by Franz Sigel, much to the consternation of abolitionists like Henry T. Cheever, who exclaimed: “How dreadful [are] the new blunders of the President. How shameful [is] the treatment of Fremont.”<sup>346</sup> Kentuckians, however, were delighted to see the Pathfinder go.) Pope argued that “I should be much in the situation of the strange dog, without even the right to run out of the village.”<sup>347</sup>

Pope’s selection was dictated more by politics than by considerations of military merit. Chase and Stanton pressed Lincoln to name him, for they were tired of

---

<sup>343</sup> New York correspondence, 25 June, New York Herald, 26 June 1862.

<sup>344</sup> New York Herald, 25 June 1862.

<sup>345</sup> He would also have the Washington command of Samuel D. Sturgis.

<sup>346</sup> Henry T. Cheever to his sister Elizabeth, Worcester, 3 July 1862, Cheever Papers, American Antiquarian Society.

<sup>347</sup> Peter Cozzens and Robert I. Girardi, eds., The Military Memoirs of General John Pope (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 120-22.

McClellan's everlasting delays and suspicious of his political conservatism. They wanted a fighting general to replace the Young Napoleon, and Pope had proved aggressive in the West. In April, he captured Island No. 10 in the Mississippi, taking 5,000 prisoners along with abundant supplies and artillery. Pope had also seized the town of New Madrid, Missouri. The general's outspoken hostility to slavery also endeared him to the Radicals. In addition, Stanton wished to embarrass McClellan, whom he had come to despise. The war secretary had been trying in vain to persuade Lincoln to replace McClellan with Napoleon B. Buford.<sup>348</sup>

Instead of Pope, Lincoln might have chosen Grant, but that general's record was tarnished by the close call he had experienced at the battle of Shiloh in early April. There he had incautiously allowed his army to be surprised by the Confederates, who almost defeated him before reinforcements from Don Carlos Buell arrived and turned the tide. Lincoln nearly yielded to critics insisting on Grant's removal. The president told Elihu Washburne, the general's patron in Congress: "Grant will have to go. I can't stand it any longer. I am annoyed to death by the demands for his removal." When Washburne remonstrated, saying Grant's removal "would be an act of injustice to a deserving officer," the president relented, saying: "Well, Washburne, if you insist upon it, I will retain him, but it is particularly hard on me."<sup>349</sup> Gustave Koerner claimed that if it had "not been for the most strenuous efforts of Washburne, who stood very high at Washington, . . . there is no doubt but Grant would have been deprived of his

---

<sup>348</sup> Pease and Randall, eds., Browning Diary, 1:539 (entry for 2 April 1862).

<sup>349</sup> General Augustus L. Chetlain, "Recollections of General U. S. Grant," Military Essays and Recollections: Papers Read Before the Commandery of the State of Illinois, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States (Chicago: McClurg, 1891), 1:30.

command.”<sup>350</sup> In 1864, Washburne told Grant that “when the torrent of obloquy and detraction was rolling over you, and your friends, after the battle of Shiloh, Mr. Lincoln stood like a wall of fire between you and it, uninfluenced by the threats of Congressmen and the demands of insolent cowardice.”<sup>351</sup>

Warned that Pope was “a braggart and a liar,” Lincoln replied that “a liar might be as brave and have [as much] skill as an officer.” He thought that “Pope had great cunning.”<sup>352</sup> Pope’s tasks were to shield Washington, defend the Shenandoah Valley, and move south up the Valley and then turn to assault Richmond from the west as McClellan did so from the east.<sup>353</sup>

But Lee thwarted that strategy by attacking on the very day of Pope’s appointment. The Confederate general had resolved to act boldly in the face of superior forces instead of waiting for McClellan to besiege Richmond. (Lee had managed to scrape together 92,000 troops. McClellan had 115,000 present for duty). Attack, attack, attack was Lee’s motto. In preparation for an offensive, he ordered his cavalry under J. E. B. Stuart to determine the enemy’s position. In mid-June, with 1,200 horsemen, Stuart rode completely around the Army of the Potomac, in the process discovering that its right flank was unprotected. With this information, Lee took a gamble, concentrating most of his army north of the Chickahominy River. If McClellan had been at all bold, he could have easily brushed aside the remaining Confederate forces south of the river and

---

<sup>350</sup> Thomas J. McCormack, ed., Memoir of Gustave Koerner, 1809-1896 (2 vols.; Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Torch Press, 1909), 2:216. A. K. McClure’s allegation that Lincoln said “I can’t spare this man – he fights” is highly suspect. Brooks Simpson, “Alexander McClure on Lincoln and Grant: A Questionable Account,” Lincoln Herald 95 (1993): 83-86.

<sup>351</sup> Washburne to Grant, Washington, 24 January 1864, John Y. Simon, ed., Grant Papers, 9:522-23.

<sup>352</sup> Beale, ed., Welles Diary, 1:104, 126.

<sup>353</sup> Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:287.

marched into Richmond. In the final week of June, Lee, counting on Little Mac's timidity, launched a series of battles that became known as the Seven Days.

On the eve of that bloody offensive, McClellan desperately appealed to Stanton in an extraordinary telegram: "I incline to think Jackson will attack my right and rear. The rebel force is stated at 200,000, including Jackson and Beauregard. I shall have to contend against vastly superior odds if these reports be true; but this army will do all in the power of men to hold their position and repulse any attack. I regret my great inferiority in numbers, but feel that I am in no way responsible for it, as I have not failed to represent repeatedly the necessity of re-enforcements; that this was the decisive point, and that all the available means of the Government should be concentrated here. I will do all that a general can do with the splendid army I have the honor to command, and if it is destroyed by overwhelming numbers, I can at least die with it and share its fate. But if the result of the action, which will probably occur to-morrow, or within a short time, is a disaster, the responsibility cannot be thrown on my shoulders; it must rest where it belongs."<sup>354</sup>

On June 26, Lincoln replied to this panicky message, saying it "pains me very much. I give you all I can, and act on the presumption that you will do the best you can with what you have, while you continue, ungenerously I think, to assume that I could give you more if I would. I have omitted and shall omit no opportunity to send you reenforcements whenever I possibly can."<sup>355</sup>

That day Lee began his offensive. McClellan retreated, but instead of returning to his base at White House Landing on the Pamunkey River, he moved south to Harrison's

---

<sup>354</sup> McClellan to Stanton, Camp Lincoln, 25 June 1862, Sears, ed., McClellan Papers, 308.

<sup>355</sup> Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:286.

Landing on the James, thirty-five miles from Richmond, where Union gunboats could fend off pursuers. On June 30, as the fighting raged and news from the front was scarce, Lincoln called at the patent office, where D. W. Bartlett saw him with “a peculiar look of pain, anxiety and discouragement on his countenance.”<sup>356</sup> In the final battle of the Seven Days, at Malvern Hill, Lee rashly hurled his men against an exceptionally strong Union position from which artillery cut the attackers down; their bodies covered the field like windrows. (The doomed assault grimly foreshadowed Pickett’s charge at Gettysburg one year and two days later.) Instead of following up with a counterattack that might well have carried Richmond, McClellan retreated to Harrison’s Landing, where he established a new base. In doing so, he abandoned 2,500 wounded men and destroyed tons of precious material. As the bad news poured into the White House, Lincoln summoned Gustavus Fox, an excellent raconteur, whose amusing anecdotes cheered him up.

On June 28, as he was sidling toward the James, Little Mac telegraphed once again to Stanton complaining bitterly about the administration’s failure to reinforce him: “If we have lost the day we have yet preserved our honor, and no one need blush for the Army of the Potomac. I have lost this battle because my force was too small. I again repeat that I am not responsible for this, and I say it with the earnestness of a general who feels in his heart the loss of every brave man who has been needlessly sacrificed to-day. I still hope to retrieve our fortunes, but to do this the Government must view the matter in the same earnest light that I do. You must send me very large re-enforcements, and send them at once. I shall draw back to this side of Chickahominy, and think I can withdraw all our material. Please understand that in this battle we have lost nothing but men, and

---

<sup>356</sup> Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 22 July, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 24 July 1862.

those the best we have. In addition to what I have already said, I only wish to say to the President that I think he is wrong in regarding me as ungenerous when I said that my force was too weak. I merely intimated a truth which to-day has been too plainly proved. If, at this instant, I could dispose of 10,000 fresh men, I could gain a victory to-morrow. I know that a few thousand more men would have changed this battle from a defeat to a victory. As it is, the Government must not and cannot hold me responsible for the result. I feel too earnestly to-night. I have seen too many dead and wounded comrades to feel otherwise than that the Government has not sustained this army. If you do not do so now the game is lost.” McClellan closed with a remarkably insubordinate blast: “If I save this army now, I tell you plainly that I owe no thanks to you or to any other persons in Washington. You have done your best to sacrifice this army.”<sup>357</sup>

Before passing this message on to his boss, the scandalized supervisor of telegraphs in the war department, Edward S. Sanford, omitted the last two sentences. Even in its bowdlerized version, that telegram angered Stanton, who took it to Lincoln and said “with much feeling ‘You know – Mr President that all I have done was by your authority.’”<sup>358</sup>

Lincoln magnanimously overlooked McClellan’s insolence and tried to calm him. “Save your Army at all events,” he wired in response to Little Mac’s frantic telegram of June 28. “Will send re-inforcements as fast as we can. Of course they can not reach you to-day, to-morrow, or next day. I have not said you were ungenerous for saying you needed re-inforcement. I thought you were ungenerous in assuming that I did not send them as fast as I could. I feel any misfortune to you and your Army quite as keenly as you

---

<sup>357</sup> O.R., I, 11, 1:61.

<sup>358</sup> Pease and Randall, eds., Browning Diary, 1:559 (entry for 14 July 1862).



feel it yourself. If you have had a drawn battle, or a repulse, it is the price we pay for the enemy not being in Washington. We protected Washington, and the enemy concentrated on you; had we stripped Washington, he would have been upon us before the troops sent could have got to you. Less than a week ago you notified us that re-inforcements were leaving Richmond to come in front of us. It is the nature of the case, and neither you or the government is to blame.”

The president ordered Dix, Burnside, Halleck, Hunter, and Goldsborough to rush to McClellan’s assistance. But, as Lincoln told the Young Napoleon on July 1, there was little hope that they could make a difference: “It is impossible to reenforce you for your present emergency. If we had a million of men we could not get them to you in time. We have not the men to send. If you are not strong enough to face the enemy you must find a place of security, and wait, rest, and repair. Maintain your ground if you can, but save the army at all events, even if you fall back to Fort Monroe. We still have strength enough in the country, and will bring it out.”

The following day, Lincoln continued to reason with his panicky general: “When you asked for 50,000 men to be promptly sent you, you surely labor under some gross mistake of fact.” He pointed out that all the Union troops east of the Alleghenies (around Washington, in the Shenandoah Valley, at Fort Monroe, and elsewhere) did not number more than 75,000. “Thus the idea of sending you 50,000, or any other considerable force, promptly is simply absurd. If in your frequent mention of responsibility you have the impression that I blame you for not doing more than you can, please be relieved of such impression. I only beg that, in like manner, you will not ask impossibilities of me. If you think you are not strong enough to take Richmond just now, I do not ask you to try just

now. Save the army, material, and personnel, and I will strengthen it for the offensive as fast as I can.”<sup>359</sup>

Despite such sensible, patient advice, McClellan continued to make wildly unrealistic demands. “To accomplish the great task of capturing Richmond and putting an end to this rebellion reinforcements should be sent to me, rather much over than much less than 100,000 men. I beg that you will be fully impressed by the magnitude of the crisis in which we are placed.”<sup>360</sup> The weary president replied on July 4: “Under these circumstances the defensive, for the present, must be your only care. Save the army – first, where you are, if you can; and secondly, by removal, if you must.”<sup>361</sup> The next day he assured the general that “the heroism and skill of yourself, officers, and men, are, and forever will be appreciated. If you can hold your present position, we shall ‘hive’ the enemy yet.”<sup>362</sup>

Though polite in his correspondence with McClellan, the president felt bitter about the general’s demands. When asked the size of the Confederate army, Lincoln replied sarcastically: “Twelve hundred thousand, according to best authority. . . . no doubt of it. You see, all of our Generals, when they get whipped, say the enemy outnumbered them from three to five to one, and I must believe them. We have four hundred thousand men in the field, and three times four make twelve.”<sup>363</sup>

On July 2, Lincoln was relieved to learn from the Prince de Joinville, a member of McClellan’s staff, that the troops had fought well, enjoyed good morale, and were in a

---

<sup>359</sup> Lincoln to McClellan, Washington, 2 July 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:301.

<sup>360</sup> McClellan to Lincoln, 3 July 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>361</sup> Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:305-6.

<sup>362</sup> Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:307.

<sup>363</sup> Cincinnati Commercial, 12 September 1862.

strong position, with their flanks covered by gunboats.<sup>364</sup> But as the magnitude of the defeat became apparent, Lincoln understandably despaired. On July 3, D. W. Bartlett noticed “profound sorrow” in his face.<sup>365</sup> In the wake of the defeat, Bartlett reported, Lincoln “for days and weeks” looked “as if he had no friend on earth.”<sup>366</sup> Lincoln told a congressman that when “the Peninsular campaign terminated suddenly at Harrison’s Landing, I was as nearly inconsolable as I could be and live.”<sup>367</sup> A White House caller in mid-July said “Mr. Lincoln presented a careworn, anxious appearance.”<sup>368</sup> He was especially downcast because he believed that Little Mac might have ended the war by seizing Richmond after the fight at Malvern Hill.<sup>369</sup> The president described himself to Bishop Charles Gordon Ames of Illinois as “the loneliest man in America.”<sup>370</sup>

To help relieve his gloom, Lincoln resorted to humor. Shortly after the battle of Malvern Hill, when a senator called at the White House, the president said that his visitor’s sad face reminded him of a story.

“Mr. President,” came the stuffy reply, “this situation is too grave for the telling of anecdotes. I do not care to listen to one.”

Riled by those words, Lincoln said: “Senator, do you think that this situation weighs more heavily upon you than it does upon me? If the cause goes against us, not

---

<sup>364</sup> Gustavus V. Fox to his wife Virginia, Washington, 2 July 1862, Fox Papers, New-York Historical Society.

<sup>365</sup> Washington correspondence, 28 November, New York Independent, 3 December 1863.

<sup>366</sup> Washington correspondence by Van [D. W. Bartlett], 17 December, Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican, 19 December 1862.

<sup>367</sup> Henry C. Deming, Eulogy of Abraham Lincoln (Hartford: A. N. Clark, 1865), 40.

<sup>368</sup> A Mr. Hill, a member of a committee of the synod of the reformed Presbyterian church which called on Lincoln on July 17. New York Evening Post, 28 July 1862.

<sup>369</sup> Deming, Eulogy of Lincoln, 40.

<sup>370</sup> W. H. Smith in “Lincoln as the Loneliest Man,” clipping from the Drayter (?) Gleaner, 2 November 1937.

only will the country be lost, but I shall be disgraced to all time. But what would happen if I appeared upon the streets of Washington to-day with such a countenance as yours? The news would spread throughout the country that the President's very demeanor is an admission that defeat is inevitable. And I say to you, sir, that it would be better for you to infuse some cheerfulness into that countenance of yours as you go about upon the streets of Washington."<sup>371</sup> To keep up morale, Lincoln somehow managed to retain his equanimity.

In those trying times, Lincoln and the First Lady unostentatiously and unceremoniously visited many Washington hospitals, filled with the wounded veterans of the futile campaign.<sup>372</sup> A journalist, observing the Lincolns at a hospital on July 26, remarked that it "was a scene of sublime interest to witness the President of the Republic taking a few hours from the care and anxieties of official business, to mingle his sympathies with the wounded and brave of our armies, and his wife placing fragrant flowers in their hands."<sup>373</sup>

Lincoln's solicitude for sick and wounded of all ranks endeared him to the troops. One enlisted man told his father, a bitter critic of the administration, that the president had "a heart which does honor to the ruler of a christian people." Many "maimed and invalid soldiers in the Hospitals at Washington will ever cherish his name for the words of sympathy & consolation received from him when they wer[e] suffering from their honored wounds." Lincoln "has alway[s] the same warm hand and ready smile for a

---

<sup>371</sup> Theodore Burton, address given in 1909, in Addresses Delivered at the Lincoln Dinner of the Republican Club of New York in Response to the Toast Abraham Lincoln, 1887-1909 (New York: Republican Club of New York, 1909), 307-8.

<sup>372</sup> Washington Sunday Chronicle, 27 July 1862.

<sup>373</sup> Washington correspondence by B. M. F., 29 July, Cincinnati Gazette, 1 August 1862.

private soldier as he has for a Major General.” Recently “while he was walking in one of the parks of the city he was approached by a poor invalid soldier who had some petition or other.” Instead of brushing him off “as many of our 2d Lieut[enants] and many of our city bugs would have done,” Lincoln “sat down on the grass beside the suppliant, spoke kindly to him, gave him words of cheer, with a pencil endorsed his petition, and sent him on his way rejoicing.” While “that was a simple act,” it nevertheless “speaks volumes.”<sup>374</sup>

Also cheering up the soldiers was Lincoln’s merciful treatment of those condemned to death by courts martial.<sup>375</sup> On September 4, Private William Scott, a “plain, raw country boy” from Vermont who had fallen asleep on sentry duty, was sentenced to die before a firing squad in five days.<sup>376</sup> When Lincoln received appeals for clemency from the officers of Scott’s regiment as well as from leading Washington clergymen, he assured them that he would consider the matter carefully. A Washington correspondent reported that the death sentence “was freely criticized in the city, and the general expression was that to shoot the soldier would be a terrible mistake. Mutineers have been let off with a term at Tortugas as laborers. Rebels captured, fighting against the Government, are released on parole, but a zealous soldier, for sleeping at his post, must

---

<sup>374</sup> Hilon Parker to his father, Fort [Meigs?], 2 August 1863, Hilon Parker Papers, Clements Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>375</sup> Bell Irvin Wiley, “Billy Yank and Abraham Lincoln,” Abraham Lincoln Quarterly 6 (1950): 103-20; William C. Davis, Lincoln’s Men: How President Lincoln Became Father to an Army and a Nation (New York: Free Press, 1999), passim.

<sup>376</sup> Washington correspondence 11 September, Springfield, Massachusetts, Republican, 13 September 1861. See also Anne C. King to Lincoln, Washington, 8 September 1861, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress. A highly romanticized version of the reprieve of Scott, the so-called “sleeping sentinel,” was told by Francis Janvier in a book-length poem (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson, 1863). See also Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, Supplement One, 202-04n; L. E. Chittenden, Recollections of President Lincoln and His Administration (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1891), 266-83; L.E. Chittenden, Lincoln and the Sleeping Sentinel: The True Story (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1909); Thomas P. Lowry, Don’t Shoot That Boy! Abraham Lincoln and Military Justice (Mason City, Iowa: Savas, 1999), v-x; Davis, Lincoln’s Men, 169-71; Carl Sandburg, Abraham Lincoln: The War Years (4 vols.; New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1939), 3:528-33.

receive the extreme penalty. It was felt that to carry it into execution would at once stop all recruiting.”<sup>377</sup> A day before the firing squad was scheduled to carry out its grim assignment, McClellan, who had approved the sentence, issued an order announcing that “the President of the United States has expressed a wish that as this is the first condemnation to death in this army for this crime, mercy may be extended to the criminal. This fact, viewed in connection with the inexperience of the condemned as a soldier, his previous good conduct and general good character, and the urgent entreaties made in his behalf, have determined the Major General to grant the pardon so earnestly prayed for.”<sup>378</sup> The press lauded the action as “a high tribute to the great goodness of our excellent President.”<sup>379</sup> Seven months later Scott was killed in action. According to a contemporary account, in his last moments the lad “raised to heaven, amid the din of war, the cries of the dying, and the shouts of the enemy, a prayer for the President.”<sup>380</sup> A comrade of Scott’s recorded the soldier’s final words and sent them to the White House: “Tell President Lincoln that I thank him for his generous regard for me, when a poor soldier under the sentence of death. Tell him that I died for my country with six bullets shot into me, by my enemies and his enemies and my country's enemies. And oh, tell him, that I hope that God will guide and direct him and take care of him in all the scenes through which he may be called to pass. Yes, God bless President Lincoln for he will one day give him victory over all our enemies.”<sup>381</sup>

---

<sup>377</sup> Washington correspondence by C., 9 September, Chicago Tribune, 14 September 1861.

<sup>378</sup> Mrs. J. Blakeslee Frost, The Rebellion in the United States; or, The War of 1861 (Boston: Degen, Estes and Priest, 1862), 352-53.

<sup>379</sup> Washington Sunday Morning Chronicle in Sandburg 531.xe

<sup>380</sup> Philadelphia Inquirer, n.d., copied in the New York Commercial Advertiser, 21 April 1862.

<sup>381</sup> Paschal P. Ripley to Lincoln, Montpelier, Vermont, 9 January 1865, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

Lincoln's willingness to reprieve death sentences for sleeping sentinels, deserters, and other soldiers accused of military offenses, became legendary, and for good reason.<sup>382</sup> When Congressman Henry L. Dawes urged him to spare the life of a nineteen-year-old constituent found guilty of desertion, the president replied "that the War Department insisted that the severest punishment for desertion was absolutely necessary to save the army from demoralization." He added: "But when I think of these mere lads, who had never before left their homes, enlisting in the enthusiasm of the moment for a war of which they had no conception and then in the camp or on the battle field a thousand miles from home, longing for its rest and safety, I have so much sympathy for him that I cannot condemn him to die for forgetting the obligations of the soldier in the longing for home life. There is death and woe enough in this war without such a sacrifice."<sup>383</sup>

One day in 1863, after spending six hours with the president reviewing courts martial proceedings, John Hay confided to his diary: "I was amused at the eagerness with which the President caught at any fact which would justify him in saving the life of a condemned soldier. . . . Cases of cowardice he was specially averse to punishing with death. He said it would frighten the poor devils too terribly, to shoot them. On the case of a soldier who had once deserted & reenlisted he endorsed, 'Let him fight instead of shooting him.' One fellow who had deserted & escaped after conviction into Mexico, he

---

<sup>382</sup> Lowry\*; \* Robert I. Alotta, Civil War Justice: Union Army Executions under Lincoln (Shippensburg, Pennsylvania: White Mane, 1989); J. T. Dorris, "President Lincoln's Clemency," Lincoln Herald 55 (1953): 2-12, and "President Lincoln's Clemency," Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society 20 (1928): 547-68.

<sup>383</sup> Dawes, "A Study of Abraham Lincoln," typescript, pp. 53-57, Dawes Papers, Library of Congress.

sentenced, saying ‘We will condemn him as they used to sell hogs in Indiana, as they run.’”<sup>384</sup>

Lincoln called such sessions “butcher days.”<sup>385</sup> Late one night at the telegraph office in McClellan’s headquarters, the president “arose from his chair to leave, straightened himself up and remarked: ‘Tomorrow night I shall have a terrible headache.’” When asked the reason why, with a “sad and sorrowful expression” he replied: “Tomorrow is hangman’s day and I shall have to act upon death sentences.”<sup>386</sup>

Joseph Holt, judge advocate general of the army, recalled that when reviewing courts martial cases, Lincoln “shrank with evident pain from even the idea of shedding human blood. . . . In every case he always leaned to the side of mercy. His constant desire was to save life.”<sup>387</sup>

Lincoln also extended clemency to over 300 prisoners convicted by civil courts. He especially favored those who had served in the military, who had spouses or sons in the service, or who indicated a desire to serve in the military. Among the most common beneficiaries of presidential mercy were the young, those who had women as intercessors

---

<sup>384</sup> Michael Burlingame and John R. Turner Ettliger, eds., Inside Lincoln's White House : The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 64 (entry for 18 July 1863).

<sup>385</sup> William O. Stoddard, “White House Sketch No. 7,” New York Citizen, 29 September 1866, in Stoddard, Inside the White House in War Times: Memoirs and Reports of Lincoln's Secretary, ed. Michael Burlingame (1890; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 171.

<sup>386</sup> General George Stoneman in Osborn H. Oldroyd, ed., The Lincoln Memorial: Album Immortelles (New York: G. W. Carlton, 1883), 221.

<sup>387</sup> Holt, interview with Nicolay, Washington, 29 October 1875, in Michael Burlingame, ed., An Oral History of Abraham Lincoln: John G. Nicolay's Interviews and Essays (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 69.



pleading their cases, those who appeared penitent, and those who displayed “good conduct.”<sup>388</sup>

Army officers, including William T. Sherman, often complained that presidential pardons and reprieves undermined army discipline. When chided for lacking the sternness of an Andrew Jackson, he replied: “I am just as God made me, and cannot change.”<sup>389</sup> One cold winter’s night, Lincoln explained to Schuyler Colfax why he persisted despite such criticism. The Indiana Congressman had called to obtain a pardon for a condemned man. Lincoln agreed, and as he prepared to affix his signature on the necessary document, he explained that “it rests me after a hard day’s work that I can find some excuse for saving some poor fellow’s life, and I shall go to bed happy tonight as I think how joyous the signing of this name will make himself, his family, and his friends.”<sup>390</sup> Lincoln’s mercy also paid political dividends, for members of Congress felt grateful to the president whenever he reprieved a constituent, an act which predisposed the beneficiary as well as his family and friends to vote Republican.<sup>391</sup>

Though Lincoln’s mercy was legendary, it was also finite. Holt reported that there “was only one class of crimes I always found him prompt to punish – a crime which occurs more or less frequently about all armies – namely, outrages upon women. He

---

<sup>388</sup> dorris lh article 2-; P.S. Ruckman, Jr., David Kincaid, “Inside Lincoln’s Clemency Decision Making,” Presidential Studies Quarterly 29 (1999): 84-99.

<sup>389</sup> Schuyler Colfax, Life and Principles of Abraham Lincoln: Address Delivered at the Court House Square, at South Bend, April 24, 1865 (Philadelphia: J. B. Rodgers, 1865), 17.

<sup>390</sup> Colfax in Allen Thorndike Rice, ed., Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln by Distinguished Men of His Time (New York: North American Review, 1888), 338-39.

<sup>391</sup> Richard Nelson Current, The Lincoln Nobody Knows l the tenderhearted\* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958), pp?\*

never hesitated to approve the sentence in these cases.”<sup>392</sup> In addition to rapists, the president also showed little compassion for thieves, murderers, and Confederate recruiters plying their trade in the North.<sup>393</sup> Hay noted that the president “was only merciless in cases where meanness or cruelty were shown.”<sup>394</sup> Over the course of the war he approved death sentences for 267 condemned soldiers.<sup>395</sup>

In rejecting pleas for mercy, Lincoln sometimes displayed anger. When a man and a woman came seeking a pardon for a convicted spy, he listened to their story "impatiently and with a darkening face." According to a woman who observed the conversation, Lincoln finally "burst in, abruptly and sternly" saying: “There is not a word of this true! And you know it as well as I do. He was a spy, he has been a spy, he ought to have been hanged as a spy. From the fuss you folks are making about him, who are none too loyal, I am convinced he was more valuable to the cause of the enemy than we have yet suspected. You are the third set of persons that has been to me to get him pardoned. Now I'll tell you what – if any of you come bothering me any more about his being set at liberty, that will decide his fate. I will have him hanged, as he deserves to be. You ought to bless your stars that he got off with a whole neck; and if you don't want so see him hanged as high as Haman, don't you come to me again about him.”<sup>396</sup>

When asked by a Presbyterian minister to pardon a deserter, Lincoln snapped: "Not a word more, Dr. Paxton. I can do nothing in the matter. I will not interfere. You

---

<sup>392</sup> Holt interviewed by Nicolay, Washington, 29 October 1875, in Burlingame, ed., Oral History of Lincoln, 69-70.

<sup>393</sup> Lowry, Don't Shoot That Boy, 257-63 and passim.

<sup>394</sup> Burlingame and Ettlinger, eds., Hay Diary, 64 (entry for 18 July 1863).

<sup>395</sup> Alotta, Civil War Justice, 30.

<sup>396</sup> Mary Livermore my story 568\*

should not come here trying to undermine the morale of my armies. Those increasing desertions must be stopped. If you had stopped to think, you would not have come on this foolish errand. So go back to Pittsburgh and try to be a more loyal citizen."

Eventually, however, he relented and pardoned the soldier.<sup>397</sup>

## NORTHERN DESPAIR

In the wake of McClellan's defeat, the Northern public despaired. Massachusetts Congressman Henry L. Dawes exclaimed: "Oh the bitterness of the cup we are compelled to drink. With a larger army than the world ever saw before, a more abundant treasury than was ever before poured into the awful maw of war, with a patriotism pervading every soul deep and abiding as his religion, buoyant and enthusiastic as hope, this nation has gone to war with the most infamous and causeless rebellion God ever permitted to exist among a set of men arrogant conceited empty-headed, leading a set of ragged sand-hillers, with no arms they did not steal, no means they did not plunder, no credit they did not have to create, and what has the nation achieved but discomfiture disgrace and ruin. . . . The Administration seems paralyzed."<sup>398</sup> Senator William P. Fessenden fretted that "Seward's vanity & folly & Lincoln's weakness & obstinacy have not yet quite ruined us, but I fear they will."<sup>399</sup> One exasperated Ohioan asked: "Is there any hope that Mr. Lincoln will require that there shall be no more unnecessary delays?"<sup>400</sup> The New York Evening Post complained that Lincoln had "trusted too much to his subordinates," with whom he had "not been sufficiently peremptory," and that "his whole administration has

<sup>397</sup> John D. Paxton, Lynchburg, Va., "Abraham Lincoln at Bay," manuscript in the J. G. Randall Papers, Library of Congress. The author was the son of the minister who spoke to Lincoln.

<sup>398</sup> Dawes to his wife Electa, Washington, 3 July 1862, Dawes Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>399</sup> Fessenden to Elizabeth Warriner, Washington, 6 July 1862, Fessenden Papers, Bowdoin College.

<sup>400</sup> N. C. McFarland to John Sherman, Hamilton, 8 July 1862, John Sherman Papers, Library of Congress.

been marked by a certain tone of languor and want of earnestness which has not corresponded with the wishes of the people.”<sup>401</sup> McClellan was widely considered to have “no capacity for his position” and was “more than suspected of being a coward, morally and physically.”<sup>402</sup>

Abolitionists were especially irate. On June 29, Wendell Phillips accused Lincoln of “doing twice as much today to break this Union as [Jefferson] Davis is. We are paying thousands of lives & millions of dollars as penalty for having a timid & ignorant President, all the more injurious because honest.”<sup>403</sup> Samuel J. May Jr. harshly observed that if the North lost the war “Lincoln is the criminal” responsible for the failure.<sup>404</sup>

Remarking on such negativity, Seward observed that “[o]ur people and the outside world as well, think that we can throw double aces every time, and are grieved and alarmed when they fail to win once out of four times.” Optimistically he predicted: “We shall go through – though the times are not cheerful just now.”<sup>405</sup>

REPLENISHING THE ARMY: “WE ARE COMING, FATHER ABRAHAM, THREE HUNDRED THOUSAND MORE”

As McClellan fell back, Lincoln responded to the defeat on the Peninsula by arranging to expand the army. When Seward offered to arouse Northern governors, the president gave him a strongly-worded letter to show them: “What should be done is to

---

<sup>401</sup> New York Evening Post, 7 July 1862.

<sup>402</sup> N. C. McFarland to John Sherman, Hamilton, 8 July 1862, John Sherman Papers, Library of Congress; Fessenden to Elizabeth Warriner, Washington, 6 July 1862, Fessenden Papers, Bowdoin College.

<sup>403</sup> Phillips to Charles Sumner, n.p., 29 June 1862, Sumner Papers, Harvard University.

<sup>404</sup> Samuel J. May, Jr., to “Dear Charles,” Leicester, Mass., 17 July 1862, May Papers, Boston Public Library.

<sup>405</sup> Seward to James Watson Webb, Washington, 18 July 1862, James Watson Webb Papers, Yale University.

hold what we have in the West, open the Mississippi, and, take Chatanooga & East Tennessee, without more – a reasonable force should, in every event, be kept about Washington for its protection. Then let the country give us a hundred thousand new troops in the shortest possible time, which added to McClellan, directly or indirectly, will take Richmond, without endangering any other place which we now hold – and will substantially end the war.” He closed with a sentence of iron: “I expect to maintain this contest until successful, or till I die, or am conquered, or my term expires, or Congress or the country forsakes me.”<sup>406</sup>

After conferring with Governors Morgan of New York and Curtin of Pennsylvania, Seward recommended that they and their counterparts band together and request Lincoln to ask them for a fresh levy of 500,000 men. They did so, and in response the president decided to split the difference between that figure and the one he had originally floated. On July 11, he called on the governors for 300,000 new troops.<sup>407</sup>

Lincoln hoped that the new men would be added to already existing regiments. To Edgar F. Brown he explained that “if he could get 50,000 troops to fill up decimated regiments they would be as effective as 150,000 in new regiments under inexperienced officers” but added “that so many desired to be officers that it was difficult to get recruits for those regiments which had already their quota of officers.”<sup>408</sup> After making a similar

---

<sup>406</sup> Lincoln to Seward, Washington, 28 June 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:292.

<sup>407</sup> Seward, Seward at Washington, 1:100-12, 124-25; Curtin to Alexander K. McClure, n.p., 16 February 1892, in McClure, Lincoln and Men of War Times, 270n.

<sup>408</sup> Edgar F. Brown to “Dear Hannah,” Washington, 27 July 1862, Edgar F. Brown Papers, Library of Congress.

point to a New York delegation, he intimated “that it would not be necessary to resort to drafting in order to raise the number of men required under the call.”<sup>409</sup>

But a draft seemed necessary, for volunteering did not pick up that summer. Plaintively Congressman Dawes asked: “How is the President going to get 300,000 more volunteers, and of what use [would they be] under such leaders if he did?”<sup>410</sup> A colleague of Dawes’s from Ohio told Lincoln: “We find it very difficult to get men to enlist here,” for “they say they will be put to guarding rebel property or digging ditches in some swamp instead of fighting the enemy.”<sup>411</sup> Pennsylvanians felt the same way. After touring the Keystone State, Congressman John Covode reported that “people won’t recruit armies until better satisfied with conduct of the war: guarding rebel property using soldiers instead of negroes to dig ditches not to their mind.”<sup>412</sup> The governor of New Hampshire reported that “our reading, thinking, intelligent, patriotic young men are inquiring with commendable Solicitude into the propriety of wasting their strength and energy in daily and nightly watchings of Rebel estates and other property, or in keeping accurate and detailed accounts of all such property as is of absolute necessity for their comfort and convenience while prosecuting the war, or in building corduroy roads and bridges in Chickahominy Swamps.”<sup>413</sup> In Chicago, Joseph Medill accurately predicted that there

---

<sup>409</sup> Washington correspondence, 30 July, New York Tribune, 31 July 1862.

<sup>410</sup> Henry L. Dawes to his wife, Washington, 5 July 1862, Dawes Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>411</sup> Harrison G. O. Blake to Lincoln, Medina, Ohio, 28 July 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>412</sup> Adams S. Hill to Sydney Howard Gay, Washington, n.d., Gay Papers, Columbia University.

<sup>413</sup> Nathaniel S. Berry, et al. to Lincoln, Concord, 30 July 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

would “be a feeble response to the late call for 300,000 volunteers to serve under proslavery generals to fight for ‘Union and Slavery.’”<sup>414</sup>

The disappointing response to the new appeal led Congress to institute a quasi-draft. On July 17, it passed a Militia Act authorizing the secretary of war to call on states for nine-month militiamen above and beyond the regular three-year recruits. If the quotas were not met, the administration could institute a draft.<sup>415</sup> The necessity for a draft was obvious to men like George Templeton Strong, who in late July asked rhetorically: “Why in the name of anarchy and ruin doesn’t the President order the draft of one million fighting men at once?”<sup>416</sup> That same month the Cincinnati Commercial editorialized: “Let us have a draft and that instantly.”<sup>417</sup>

To a sympathetic Frenchman, Lincoln explained that the draft was necessary because in America “every soldier is a man of character and must be treated with more consideration than is customary in Europe.” Therefore, “our great army for slighter causes than could have prevailed there has dwindled rapidly, bringing the necessity for a new call, earlier than was anticipated.” While predicting that the government “shall easily obtain the new levy,” he warned that a draft might be resorted to. Strangely enough, he said, “the Government is now pressed to this course by a popular demand,” for thousands of men “who wish not to personally enter the service are nevertheless anxious to pay and send substitutes, provided they can have assurance that unwilling persons similarly

---

<sup>414</sup> Medill to Lyman Trumbull, Chicago, 4 July 1862, Lyman Trumbull Papers, Library of Congress. Such sentiments were widely shared. Washington correspondence by Sigma 2, 7 July 1862, Cincinnati Commercial, 7, 11 July 1862.

<sup>415</sup> James W. Geary, We Need Men: The Union Draft in the Civil War (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1991), 22-31.

<sup>416</sup> Nevins and Thomas, eds., Strong Diary, 3:244 (entry for 26 July 1862).

<sup>417</sup> Cincinnati Commercial, 9 July 1862.

situated will be compelled to do like wise.” Moreover, “volunteers mostly choose to enter newly forming regiments, while drafted men can be sent to fill up the old ones, wherein, man for man, they are quite doubly as valuable.”<sup>418</sup>

In August, Stanton issued a call for 300,000 militia and warned that a draft would be used if necessary. Despite fierce opposition, particularly among Irish and German immigrants, the governors eventually raised more men than the administration had requested.<sup>419</sup> Helping the recruitment effort was a new song written by a fighting Quaker abolitionist, James S. Gibbons: “We Are Coming, Father Abraham, Three Hundred Thousand More.”

As Massachusetts prepared to send new regiments of both three-year recruits and nine-months militiamen, problems with a hidebound army paymaster and disbursing officer obstructed the process. When Governor John A. Andrew appealed for federal help in breaking the logjam, Lincoln impatiently replied on August 12 that the governor should tell the responsible officials “that if they do not work quickly I will make quick work with them. In the name of all that is reasonable, how long does it take to pay a couple of Reg[imen]ts? We were never more in need of the arrival of Reg[imen]ts than now – even to-day.”<sup>420</sup>

Upon learning that McClellan’s chief of staff, General Randolph B. Marcy, had predicted that the Army of the Potomac might be forced to capitulate, Lincoln became so excited that he summoned him to the White House, where he told the general sternly: “I understand you have used the word ‘Capitulate’ – that is a word not to be used in

---

<sup>418</sup> Lincoln to Agenor-Etienne Gasparin, Washington, 4 August 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:355-56.

<sup>419</sup> \*Heseltine, Lincoln and the War Governors, 277-81.

<sup>420</sup> Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:367.



connection with our army.” Marcy blurted out that he was only talking hypothetically, which relieved Lincoln.<sup>421</sup>

#### SHOVELING FLEAS ACROSS A BARNYARD: VISIT TO THE FRONT

Now Lincoln must decide what to do with the Army of the Potomac. Some advisers, including Stanton and Montgomery Meigs, feared that Lee would attack Washington while the army licked its wounds. The quartermaster general urged Lincoln “to withdraw the army from a dangerous & useless position, & use it to defend the free states & as a nucleus for new armies.”<sup>422</sup> (Meigs had a tendency to panic. One night, while the army lay at Harrison’s Landing, he awakened the president “to urge upon him the immediate flight of the Army from that point – the men to get away on transports & the horses to be killed as they c[oul]d not be saved.” Lincoln calmed him down and later remarked: “Thus often I who am not a specially brave man have had to sustain the sinking courage of these professional fighters in critical times.”)<sup>423</sup>

Fearing that McClellan might surrender the army, Lincoln hurried down to Harrison’s Landing to confer with him.<sup>424</sup> Stanton, Assistant Secretary of War Peter H. Watson, and Frank Blair accompanied the president, who wanted to learn whether the army could possibly be starved out while the enemy attacked Washington.<sup>425</sup> Before

---

<sup>421</sup> Chase memorandum, in Schuckers, Chase, 447; Pease and Randall, eds., Browning Diary, 1:559 (entry for 14 July 1862); Sears, Young Napoleon, 226. Marcy received similar treatment from Stanton when he spoke of capitulation. Cozzens and Girardi, eds., Memoirs of Pope, 122.

<sup>422</sup> Meigs pocket diary, entry for 5 July 1862, Library of Congress.

<sup>423</sup> Burlingame and Ettlinger, eds., Hay Diary, 191 (entry for 28 April 1864). On July 5, Meigs recorded in his diary that Lincoln “thinks I tried to stampede him.” Meigs pocket diary, Library of Congress (entry for 5 July 1862).

<sup>424</sup> Washington correspondence by Agate [Whitelaw Reid], 10 July, Cincinnati Gazette, 14 July 1862.

<sup>425</sup> Charles Sumner told this to Adams Hill. Adams S. Hill to Sydney Howard Gay, Washington, 10 July 1862, Gay Papers, Columbia University.

departing the capital, Lincoln assured congressional supporters that “henceforth the war shall be conducted on war principles.” They were persuaded that he had finally “convinced himself of the folly of rose-water warfare.”<sup>426</sup>

Upon the president’s arrival at Harrison’s Landing, the nearby soldiers, quartermasters, and surgeons cheered him repeatedly.<sup>427</sup> (McClellan asserted that during a review, he “had to order the men to cheer & they did it very feebly,” but numerous eyewitness accounts contradict his account.)<sup>428</sup> A New Yorker wrote, “Talk of McClellan’s popularity among the soldiers. It will never measure 1/100<sup>th</sup> part of Honest Abe’s. Such cheers as greeted him never tickled the ears of Napoleon in his palmiest days.”<sup>429</sup> Another trooper from the Empire State recalled that “we cheered his presence to the echo.”<sup>430</sup> In the New York Herald appeared a dispatch by a soldier who reported that as Lincoln “rode slowly along the lines, the cheering was most enthusiastic. It evidently gratified and cheered both officers and men to witness this evidence of a lively interest in their welfare and sympathy with them of the President. On his part, he seemed to be much pleased with his reception, and to be satisfied that the Army of the Potomac was yet a living institution.”<sup>431</sup> A general remarked “that the visit was worth a reinforcement of ten thousand men.”<sup>432</sup> In his diary, a lieutenant described the reaction: “Long and hearty was the applause and welcome which greeted him. His presence after the late

---

<sup>426</sup> Washington correspondence by Agate [Whitelaw Reid], 10 July, Cincinnati Gazette, 14 July 1862.

<sup>427</sup> Harrison’s bar correspondence, 9 July, New York Times, 12 July 1862.

<sup>428</sup> McClellan to his wife, Berkeley, 17 July 1862, Sears, ed., McClellan Papers, 362.

<sup>429</sup> Sears, ed., McClellan Papers, 362; Sears, Young Napoleon, 227.

<sup>430</sup> William C. Davis, Lincoln’s Men: How President Lincoln Became Father to an Army and a Nation (New York: Free Press, 1999), 68, citing Charles A. Fuller, “Personal Recollections,” p. 46.

<sup>431</sup> Harrison’s landing correspondence, 9 July, New York Herald, 11 July 1862.

<sup>432</sup> Washington correspondence, 11 July, New York Evening Post, 12 July 1862

disaster . . . seemed to infuse new ardor into the dispirited army.”<sup>433</sup> Doubtless that was one of Lincoln’s aims in visiting the front.

To help achieve that goal, the president scaled the outer line of an artillery battery and made a brief, informal address to the troops: “Be of good cheer; all is well. The country owes you an inextinguishable debt for your services. I am under immeasurable obligations to you. You have, like heroes, endured, and fought, and conquered. Yes, I say conquered; for though apparently checked once you conquered afterwards and secured the position of your choice. You shall be strengthened and rewarded. God bless you all.” These remarks were greeted with hearty cheering.<sup>434</sup>

A chaplain observing a review thought that Lincoln cut a ludicrous figure, for it seemed “as though every moment the Presidential limbs would become entangled with those of the horse he rode and both come down together, while his arms were apparently subject to similar mishaps. That arm with which he drew the rein, in its angles and position, resembled the hind leg of a grasshopper – the hand before – the elbow away back over the horse’s tail. The removal of his hat before each regiment was also a source of laughter in the style of its execution – the quick trot of the horse making it a feat of some difficulty, while, from the same cause, his hold on it, while off, seemed very precarious.” And yet “the boys liked him, in fact his popularity in the army is and has been universal. Many of our rulers and leaders fall into odium but all have faith in

---

<sup>433</sup> David Herbert Donald, Lincoln (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1995), 359, citing Charles N. Walker and Rosemary Walker, eds., “Diary of war of Robert S. Robertson” Old Fort News, 28 (January-March 1965), 42.

<sup>434</sup> New York Evening Post and New York Herald, 14 July 1862.

Lincoln. ‘When he finds it out,’ they say, ‘it will be stopped.’<sup>435</sup> Shortly after the review, a Massachusetts soldier wrote that “Abraham Lincoln has acted the part of a Wise Man. No one man in the Country has so many supporters as Old Abe. . . . Let Abraham Lincoln say the Word, then let every man, wither Abolitionists, Proslaverites, Fanatics, Radicals, Moderates or Conservatives of whatever Party or Distinction, hold up both hands and with one unanimous voice say Amen.”<sup>436</sup> Lincoln’s paternal streak led him to call the troops as “my boys.” They in turn regarded him as a benevolent father.<sup>437</sup>

A sailor aboard the Monitor thought that the president “seemed to be in better spirits than I supposed he would be. His visit here has been a good thing, serving to give more confidence to the army by his presence among them.”<sup>438</sup>

But while his spirits were buoyed by the army’s good relatively condition, they were depressed by a long letter that McClellan handed him upon his arrival. In that remarkable document, which became known as the Harrison’s Landing letter, the Young Napoleon insolently and menacingly offered detailed advice about “civil and military policy, covering the whole ground of our national trouble.” The president acknowledged that the views he expressed “do not strictly relate to the situation of this army, or strictly come within the scope of my official duties.” Patronizingly he lectured the president on his responsibilities: “Our cause must never be abandoned; it is the cause of free institutions and self-government. The Constitution and the Union must be preserved,

---

<sup>435</sup> Joseph Hopkins Twichell to his father, near Harrison’s Landing, 9 July 1862, Peter Messent and Steve Courtney, eds., The Civil War Letters of Joseph Hopkins Twichell: A Chaplain’s Story (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 165-66.

<sup>436</sup> Davis, Lincoln’s Men, citing Gregory A. Coco, ed., “From Ball’s Bluff to Gettysburg,” 116.

<sup>437</sup> Burlingame, Inner World of Lincoln, 83; Bell I. Wiley, “Billy Yank and Lincoln,” Abraham Lincoln Quarterly 6 (1950): 103-20; Davis, Lincoln’s Men, passim.

<sup>438</sup> William F. Keeler to his wife Anna, aboard the Monitor, 23 July 1862, Daly, ed., Aboard the USS Monitor, 189.

whatever may be the cost in time, treasure, and blood. If secession is successful, other dissolutions are clearly to be seen in the future. Let neither military disaster, political faction, nor foreign war shake you settled purpose to enforce the equal operation of the laws of the United States upon the people of every State.” (As he read those sentences, Lincoln may well have been reminded of Jefferson’s words in the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident.”)

In this document, McClellan presumptuously urged that the war be conducted “upon the highest principles known to Christian civilization,” with all the property rights of the Confederates scrupulously protected, including slaves. “Neither confiscation of property, political executions of persons, territorial organization of States, or forcible abolition of slavery should be contemplated for a moment. . . . Military power should not be allowed to interfere with the relations of servitude, either by supporting or impairing the authority of the master, except for repressing disorder.” Such a conservative policy, the Young Napoleon predicted, “would receive the support of almost all truly loyal men” and “would deeply impress the rebel masses and all foreign nations.” Ominously he warned that if such a policy were not followed, “the effort to obtain requisite forces will be almost hopeless. A declaration of radical views, especially upon slavery, will rapidly disintegrate our present armies.”<sup>439</sup> Here McClellan meddled with slavery policy almost as blatantly as Frémont , Hunter, and Cameron had done. Without mentioning them specifically, Little Mac criticized Lyman Trumbull, John Pope, and Charles Sumner.

It is hard to know how Lincoln felt about McClellan’s brazen letter. After receiving it from the general’s hand, he read it, thanked its author, and said nothing about

---

<sup>439</sup> McClellan to Lincoln, Harrison’s Landing, \*

it to him. He jestingly told Frank Blair that Little Mac’s advice reminded him “of the man who got on a horse, and the horse stuck his hind foot into a stirrup. The man said, ‘If you’re going to get on I’ll get off.’”<sup>440</sup>

Though he could joke about the document, it “struck the President painfully,” according to Gideon Welles. Lincoln may have regarded it as a veiled threat to march on Washington and overthrow the government. The navy secretary wrote that within the Army of the Potomac “there was a belief, hardly a design perhaps, among a few of their indiscreet partisans, that these generals, better than the Administration, could prescribe the course of governmental action.”<sup>441</sup> McClellan’s letter convinced him that the general intended to run for president in 1864.

The Young Napoleon told his wife that Lincoln had probably not profited much from his visit to Harrison’s Landing, “for he really seems quite incapable of rising to the height of the merits of the question & the magnitude of the crisis.” The general added that “I did not like the Presdt’s manner – it seemed that of a man about to do something of which he was much ashamed.”<sup>442</sup> To his good friend S. L. M. Barlow, McClellan complained that Lincoln “asked for no explanation, expressed not dissatisfaction – treated me with no confidence, & did not ask my opinion, except in three questions –

“1<sup>st</sup>. ‘How many troops have you left?’

“2<sup>nd</sup>. ‘How many did you lose in the late actions?’

“3<sup>rd</sup>. ‘Can you move this Army still further in retreat?’”<sup>443</sup>

---

<sup>440</sup> Carl Sandburg note, source unidentified, Sandburg-Barrett Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago.

<sup>441</sup> Welles, “History of Emancipation,” in Albert Mordell, comp., Selected Essays of Gideon Welles: Civil War and Reconstruction (New York: Twayne, 1959), 235-36.

<sup>442</sup> McClellan to his wife, Berkeley, 9, 10 July 1862, Sears, ed., McClellan Papers, 348.

<sup>443</sup> Sears, ed., McClellan Papers, 370.

Upon returning to the White House, Lincoln seemed to Nicolay “in much better spirits” for having “found the army in better condition and more of it than he expected.”<sup>444</sup> Such optimism disturbed Congressman Dawes, who called it “the most alarming symptom in the complication of our diseases.” Dawes shuddered to think “that we have no more of a man at the helm and that things are to continue under such leaders. I don’t know that there is any hope.”<sup>445</sup>

Lincoln may have been cheered to find more troops in the Army of the Potomac than he anticipated, but he nevertheless worried about the enormous number of absentees. On July 13, he asked McClellan what had happened to the more than 160,000 men who had been sent to the Peninsula: “When I was with you the other day we made out 86,500 remaining, leaving 73,500 to be accounted for. I believe 23,500, will cover all the killed, wounded and missing in all your battles and skirmishes, leaving 50-000 who have left otherwise. Not more than 5000 of these have died, leaving 45,000 of your Army still alive, and not with it. I believe half, or two thirds of them are fit for duty to-day. Have you any more perfect knowledge of this than I have? If I am right, and you had these men with you, you could go into Richmond in the next three days. How can they be got to you? and how can they be prevented from getting away in such numbers for the future?”<sup>446</sup>

Lincoln’s suggestion that McClellan go on the offensive amused the general. “It is so easy,” he wrote his wife, “for people to give advice – it costs nothing!” It would be

---

<sup>444</sup> Lyman Trumbull to his wife, Washington, 12 July 1862, Trumbull Family Papers, Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield; Nicolay to Therenia Bates, Washington 13 July 1862, in Burlingame, ed., With Lincoln in the White House, 85.

<sup>445</sup> Henry L. Dawes to his wife, Washington, 12 July 1862, Dawes Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>446</sup> Lincoln to McClellan Washington, 13 July 1862, Basler, ed., Collected Works of Lincoln, 5:322.

impossible for him with only 75,000 combat-ready men to attack 150,000 to 170,000 entrenched Confederates.<sup>447</sup> When he told Lincoln that, the president gave up hope for a renewed assault on the enemy capital. He predicted to Orville H. Browning that if he could somehow by magic send McClellan 100,000 reinforcements, the general “would be in an ecstasy over it, thank him for it, and tell him that he would go to Richmond tomorrow, but then when tomorrow came he could telegraph that he had certain information that the enemy had 400,000 men, and that he could not advance without reinforcements.”<sup>448</sup> Sarcastically Lincoln remarked that the general “had so skilfully handled his troops in not getting to Richmond as to retain their confidence.”<sup>449</sup>

Lincoln voiced his astonishment and exasperation to others, including four callers who came to the White House on July 11: “I can’t tell where the men have gone in that army. I have sent there, at one time and another, one hundred and [sixty] thousand men, and I can only find just half that many now. Where can they have gone? Burnside accounts to me for every man he has taken – so many killed in battle, so many wounded, so many sick in the hospitals, so many absent on furloughs. So does Mitchell. So does Buell, and so others; but I can’t tell what has become of half the army I’ve sent down to the Peninsula.” When he wondered aloud if many of the missing men would never come back, he was told by Congressmen John A. Gurley of Ohio and Isaac N. Arnold of Illinois, “You won’t get many men in our section unless there be a change.” Lincoln

---

<sup>447</sup> McClellan to his wife, Berkeley, 15 July 1862, Sears, ed., McClellan Papers, 358.

<sup>448</sup> Pease and Randall, eds., Browning Diary 1:563 (entry for 25 July 1862).

<sup>449</sup> Gideon Welles, Lincoln and Seward (New York: Sheldon, 1874), 197.



rejoined: “And some won’t come if there be one.” They replied, “We’ll give ten for every one that doesn’t.”<sup>450</sup>

#### MEA CULPA: MAGNANIMOUSLY ACCEPTING BLAME FOR DEFEAT

In the wake of defeat, McClellan was roundly criticized. Michigan Senator Zachariah Chandler called the general “an imbecile” and “an awfull humbug” who “deserves to be shot.”<sup>451</sup> In an attempt to shift blame away from McClellan, the general’s allies launched a campaign to vilify Stanton.<sup>452</sup> From Philadelphia came rumors of ugly statements justifying the assassination of the war secretary.<sup>453</sup> Edward Everett Hale hoped Lincoln would wring Stanton’s neck and throw “his ‘impulsive’ head out of the window.”<sup>454</sup>

Such vilification of Stanton made Lincoln indignant.<sup>455</sup> Privately he said of the Peninsular campaign, “I am responsible . . . . If the result has been disastrous blame no one else!” Erastus Brooks, a partisan Democratic journalist, noted that by such “frank confessions, which are often more generous to others than just to himself, the President draws friends around him, and makes many friends of those, who have been warm opponents of his policy, principles and his election.”<sup>456</sup>

---

<sup>450</sup> Washington correspondence by Sigma, 13 July, Cincinnati Commercial, 18 July 1862; Washington correspondence by Agate [Whitelaw Reid], 13 July, Cincinnati Gazette, 16 July 1862; Adams S. Hill to Sydney Howard Gay, Washington, 12 July 1862, Gay Papers, Columbia University. Gurley was Hill’s informant.

<sup>451</sup> Chandler to his wife, Washington 6, 11 July 1862, Chandler Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>452</sup> New York Herald, 9 July 1862.

<sup>453</sup> Hiram Barney to Chase, New York, 5 July 1862, Chase Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>454</sup> Edward Everett Hale to Henry W. Bellows, Brookline, Massachusetts, 8 July 1862, Bellows Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>455</sup> Washington correspondence by Agate [Whitelaw Reid], 13 July, Cincinnati Gazette, 16 July 1862.

<sup>456</sup> Washington correspondence by [E]rastus B[rooks], 12 July, New York Evening Express, 14 July 1862.

In August, Lincoln repeated this mea culpa at a huge war rally in Washington. The atmosphere was electric with anticipation, with artillery salvos and martial music stirring excitement. Standing on the east portico of the Capitol, where he had taken the oath of office seventeen months earlier, he addressed a wildly enthusiastic crowd of 10,000, which expected an inspirational pep talk. Amid all the waving banners and other patriotic hoopla, they greeted the president with several minutes of deafening cheers.<sup>457</sup> Benjamin Brown French, who had helped organize the rally, said he had “never witnessed more enthusiasm than was manifested at his appearance. It shows how he is beloved. He is one of the best men God ever created.”<sup>458</sup> Finally, Lincoln’s sad and solemn expression induced the crowd to quiet down.<sup>459</sup>

The president had not anticipated that he would be asked to speak and did so only when the crowd insisted on it after the first scheduled orator had finished. Modestly he began by stating that he had little of interest to say that the others on the platform could not better express than he might. “The only thing I think of just now not likely to be better said by some one else, is a matter in which we have heard some other persons blamed for what I did myself. [Voices–“What is it?”] There has been a very wide-spread attempt to have a quarrel between Gen. McClellan and the Secretary of War. Now, I occupy a position that enables me to believe, at least, that these two gentlemen are not nearly so deep in the quarrel as some pretending to be their friends. [Cries of “Good.”] Gen. McClellan's attitude is such that, in the very selfishness of his nature, he cannot but wish to be successful, and I hope he will, and the Secretary of War is precisely in the

---

<sup>457</sup> Washington correspondence, 6 August, New York Herald, 7 August 1862.

<sup>458</sup> Benjamin Brown French, Witness to the Young Republic: A Yankee's Journal, 1828-1870, ed. Donald B. Cole and John J. McDonough (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1989), 405.\*date?

<sup>459</sup> Washington correspondence by Agate [Whitelaw Reid], 7 August, Cincinnati Gazette, 11 August 1862.

same situation. If the military commander in the field cannot be successful, not only the Secretary of War, but myself, for the time being the master of them both, cannot be but failures. [Laughter and applause.] I know Gen. McClellan wishes to be successful, and I know he does not wish it any more than the Secretary of War for him, and both of them together no more than I wish it. [Applause and cries of “Good.”] Sometimes we have a dispute about how many men Gen. McClellan has had, and those who would disparage him say that he has had a very large number, and those who would disparage the Secretary of War insist that Gen. McClellan has had a very small number. The basis for this is, there is always a wide difference, and on this occasion perhaps a wider one, between the grand total on McClellan's rolls and the men actually fit for duty; and those who would disparage him talk of the grand total on paper, and those who would disparage the Secretary of War talk of those at present fit for duty. Gen. McClellan has sometimes asked for things that the Secretary of War did not give him. Gen. McClellan is not to blame for asking for what he wanted and needed, and the Secretary of War is not to blame for not giving when he had none to give. [Applause, laughter, and cries of “Good.”] And I say here, so far as I know, the Secretary of War has withheld no one thing at any time in my power to give him. [Wild applause, and a voice, “Give him enough now!”] I have no accusation against him. I believe he is a brave and able man, [applause,] and I stand here, as justice requires me to do, to take upon myself what has been charged upon the Secretary of War as withholding from him.”<sup>460</sup>

---

<sup>460</sup> Washington correspondence, 6 August, New York Tribune, 7 August 1862

Lincoln disappointed some by failing to offer confidence-inspiring rhetoric. The following day an Illinoisan told him: “you ought to take a stronger stand. The nation expects you to. You are looked up to with confidence. Rouse the soul of the people.”<sup>461</sup>

Others praised Lincoln’s impromptu speech extravagantly. Whitelaw Reid called it “remarkable, alike for the courageous assumption of unpopular responsibility, and for the characteristic honesty with which he refrained from boastful promises and stirring declarations that the war should now soon be ended.” Reid could think of “no more striking scene” in “all the history of the Republic.” Rhetorically he asked: “Was ever the ruler of a great people, in a moment when his personal popularity was so flatteringly brought home to him by his people, known voluntarily to assume, without special necessity therefor, such popular odium as the President honestly sought to transfer from the Secretary [of War] to himself?”<sup>462</sup> Reporters noted that the crowd “was delighted with the manly manner in which the President assumed the whole responsibility in the Stanton-McClellan imbroglio.”<sup>463</sup> The Providence Journal lauded the president’s “straightforward manliness and homely common sense.”<sup>464</sup> Throughout the war, Lincoln’s profound magnanimity won him respect and affection from many others.<sup>465</sup>

---

<sup>461</sup> This was said the day after the speech when Leonard Swett and another Illinoisan called at the White House. Speech by Swett, 26 April 1880, Chicago Times, 27 April 1880.

<sup>462</sup> Washington correspondence, 6 August, New York Tribune, 7 August 1862; Washington correspondence by Agate [Whitelaw Reid], 7 August, Cincinnati Gazette, 11 August 1862.

<sup>463</sup> Washington correspondence, 6 August, Chicago Tribune, 7 August 1862; Washington correspondence, 6 August, Cincinnati Gazette, 7 August 1862.

<sup>464</sup> Providence Journal, 12 August 1862.

<sup>465</sup> Washington correspondence by John W. Forney, 7 July, Philadelphia Press, 8 July 1862.