

Hill, and Stonewall Jackson, who stunned the others by his arrival (everyone believed he was still in the Valley). Lee outlined his daring plan to attack McClellan's right flank; the lead element would be Stonewall Jackson's. Jackson said he could withdraw his men from the Valley and have them ready to attack on 25 June, only two days away. Longstreet and Lee demurred that surely Jackson needed more time. Jackson agreed to the morning of 26 June. As it happened, Jackson would be very, uncharacteristically, late.

By 3:00 p.m. on 26 June, Hill decided he had waited long enough. He ordered his men forward, inaugurating the Battle of Mechanicsville. Hill's impetuosity meant his men had to cross open ground under deadly fire. Artillery captain "Willie" Pegram rushed up support, but Pegram was so badly outnumbered—by about thirty batteries (which quickly pinpointed his position) to six—that he lost more than half his artillerists and four of his six cannons in a matter of minutes.

Hill's action was a mistake, but the Confederates were inspired by the line of bluecoats retreating before them. The Federals reformed at heavily fortified Beaver Dam Creek: 30,000 men in a virtually impregnable position. Hill was not impressed. He ordered his men to attack. With Lee and Jefferson Davis looking on, and dusk falling on the field, Hill threw his forces at the Yankee right flank. His men "made the hills and valleys and woods ring with their Confederate yells as they eagerly pressed forward with anticipation of coming victory."⁵ But victory eluded them under the withering fire and the entangling brambles that kept them from reaching the Union line.

Hill, however, refused to give up. Failing on the right and center of the Union line, he tried the left—and the results were worse: Union fire ripped through the charging Confederates. Hill had shown more ardor and personal courage than tactical brilliance at Mechanicsville, but Lee did not criticize him. He valued Hill's spirit. If there was any blame to be laid it was with Jackson who had not only not arrived, not only badly

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

underestimated how long it would take him to reach the field, but had failed to get a messenger to Lee to tell him where he was. Jackson and his men were simply worn out mentally and physically; they had asked too much of themselves.

What to do next? The answer, it turned out, was to walk in and seize the Federal position at Beaver Dam Creek. The Union General FitzJohn Porter had left only a token holding force and withdrawn his men in the night. So it was victory after all—at least on this field.

Porter had withdrawn behind Powhatan Creek at Gaines's Mill. The Confederates pursued him and gave him battle once again. Maxcy Gregg's brigade had charged, pushing the Federal skirmish line back, but only to get his own men pinned down by Federals in positions on the high ground. What neither Hill nor Gregg knew was that the Federal line was three lines deep, entrenched or fortified at each line, a total of about 35,000 men, approachable only across a field of fire that was a muddy, swampy mess.

Hill drew up his entire force to come to Gregg's rescue. Longstreet would be in support on his right, and Jackson, reportedly soon to arrive, would be on his left. Longstreet had the lead but his troops got bogged down by the terrain, and were further impeded by Union artillery fire. Hill, champing at the bit again, decided he could not wait. His own artillery opened fire and his men went charging in—unsupported by either Longstreet or Jackson.

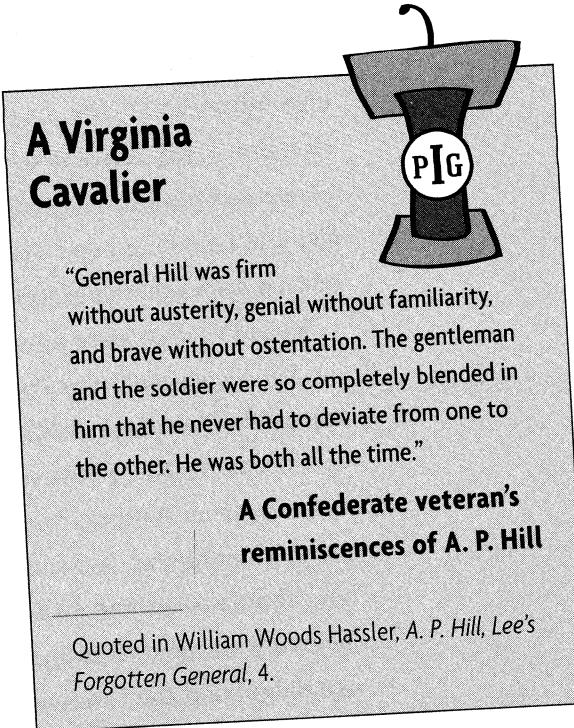
Gregg's men got into the first Union entrenchments, but were pushed out in fierce hand-to-hand fighting. All along the line, the Confederates surged forward only to melt back under Union fire—and then surged forward again. The Light Division was becoming considerably lighter. Hill did not recall his troops, but sent orders for them to cease the offensive and hold their bloody ground. Jackson at last arrived, still apparently dazed from exhaustion, and at 7:00 p.m. Lee sent his combined forces against the Union position. The Federals were driven back until darkness

became their shield. But the position at Gaines's Mill now belonged to the Confederates.

Hill and his Light Division had distinguished themselves in these, the opening of the Seven Days' Battles, and they would continue to do so. It was a handsome compliment to the young major general that his was the hardest fought regiment in the army; his men were the best in pursuit of the Federals and the most reliable at taking positions.

Another compliment to his leadership was when he rode up to Lee and Jefferson Davis who were surveying the battlefield under enemy fire. Hill said with less than his usual charm, "This is no place for either of you, and as commander of this part of the field I order you both to the rear!" "We will obey your orders," said Jefferson Davis, with a slight smirk. Artillery fire burst closer, but Davis's horse and Lee's trotted only a short distance away. Hill charged back, "Did I not tell you to go away from here, and did you not promise to obey my orders? Why, one shot from that battery over yonder may presently deprive the Confederacy of its President and the Army of Northern Virginia of its commander!"⁶ "Little Powell" was more than big enough to stand up for good sense.

At the Battle of Frayser's Farm, Hill's (and Longstreet's) troops again bore the brunt of the fighting, with Hill storming about the battlefield on his horse Prince, encouraging, leading, and even grabbing the standard of the 7th North Carolina and telling them to charge with him or he would die alone. His leadership was inspirational, but at Frayser's Farm he also



Quoted in William Woods Hassler, *A. P. Hill, Lee's Forgotten General*, 4.

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

showed the tactical skill that Lee hoped to see in him. Hill was proving he deserved his stars.

Battles front and rear

Unfortunately, Hill's next enemy was James Longstreet. After a Richmond journalist wrote up Hill's praises to the exclusion of Longstreet, Longstreet had his aide Moxley Sorrel write an indignant reply. Hill was now affronted at what he thought was Longstreet's slighting of the Light Division. Hill refused to communicate with Longstreet's command. Longstreet put him under arrest and Hill challenged Longstreet to a duel. General Lee reconciled the two commanders, at least to the point of tolerating each other, and then sent Hill to join Stonewall Jackson.

Jackson's men were moving north to defend Virginia from the blustering Union general John Pope. Despite orders from Lee to keep Hill well apprised of his plans, Jackson pursued his council of one, with comically disastrous results. Because some generals were informed of changes in movements and others were not, their marching orders became a hash-work of confusion. Jackson was definitely not on his best form. It didn't help that Jackson and Hill didn't like each other. Hill had not forgotten Jackson's failures to support the Light Division during the Seven Days campaign; and the Cromwellian Jackson found it hard to appreciate the Cavalier Hill.

But at the Battle of Cedar Mountain, six miles south of Culpepper, it was Hill and his troops who again carried the day. Jackson's men had engaged the enemy first; when Hill arrived, it was with a perfectly timed and placed assault; the Light Division smashed the Federals and led the pursuit. The battlefield brought Hill a new charger, a grey stallion named Champ. It did not, however, bring him an improved relationship with Jackson.

Nevertheless, Jackson was dependent on Hill's stalwart leadership at the Battle of Second Manassas, which followed on 29 August 1862. Hill's

performance was not perfect—in arranging his troops he had left a dangerous 175 yard gap within his front line—but it was bravely led, hard fought, and, against heavy odds, successful. Jackson had perhaps 18,000 effectives on the field. Marching towards him were 63,000 men under the command of Union General John Pope. Hill's men withstood the first Union assault and then gallantly counterattacked, scattering the blue-coats. But this was only the opening round. The Federals came back in force, and the violent collision of armies became one of hand-to-hand combat, among bursting artillery shells, crackling muskets, and smoky fires ignited in the woods and grass. Though some of the Confederates were reduced to fighting with rocks, bayonets, and muskets used as clubs (in the absence of ammunition) they refused to buckle.

In the bloody ebb and flow of battle, the Confederates repelled Federal attacks all day long. Hill, however, had to confess to Jackson, via a messenger, that if the Federals mounted another attack, he would do the best he could, but with no ammunition, his men would be hard-pressed.



Southern Chivalry (with a Four-Letter Word)

At the Battle of Cedar Hill, Federal Brigadier General Henry Prince surrendered to Hill in the midst of the fighting.

"General, the fortunes of war have thrown me into your hands," said Prince, standing at attention.

"Damn the fortunes of war, General!" replied Hill. "Get to the rear! You are in danger here!"*

* Quoted in James I. Robertson, Jr., *General A. P. Hill: The Story of a Confederate Warrior*, 107.

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

Henry Kyd Douglas, an aide to General Jackson, remembered that "Such a message from a fighter like Hill was weighty with apprehension." Jackson replied, "Tell him if they attack him again he must beat them." Douglas and Jackson rode to meet Hill and listened to his concerns, to which Jackson said: "General, your men have done nobly; if you are attacked again you will beat the enemy back."

Suddenly musket fire erupted along Hill's position. "Here it comes," Hill announced, and immediately rode off to join his men. Jackson called after him: "I'll expect you to beat them."

Beat them he did, and when Hill sent a message to Jackson confirming his success, a grim smile creased Jackson's face. "Tell him I knew he could do it."

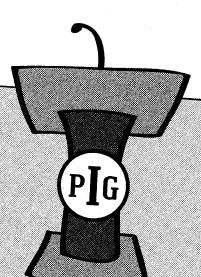
The next day the Federals came again, but this time, forming up alongside Jackson were James Longstreet's men, and when Longstreet turned them loose, the grey tide swept the bluecoats away, with Hill's men jumping into the counterattack. And Hill fought well again—and again with a shortage of ammunition—at Ox Hill on 1 September 1862.

Despite such victories, the mountain-bred Calvinist and the Piedmont cavalier fell into another dispute over marching orders. Jackson put Hill under arrest, though he did have the good sense to release him before

A Captured Yankee on Southern Manners

"We were most civilly treated by the rebels, whom we found to be...men like ourselves; only the rebels were not nearly as profane as our men—in fact, they used no profane language at all. They shamed us."

Quoted in James I. Robertson, Jr., *General A. P. Hill: The Story of a Confederate Warrior* (Vintage Books, 1992), 139.



action at Harpers Ferry and allowed Hill to resume his command until
the end of the Maryland campaign.

Bloody roads

Hill seized Harpers Ferry and was given the task of arranging and executing the terms of the Yankee surrender (which under the chivalrous Hill were very liberal) while Jackson moved north into the bloodiest day's fighting of the war, at Sharpsburg. But it was Hill who once more turned the tide. Moving to the sound of the guns, he force-marched his men to the rescue of Lee's army, making a dramatic arrival at the battle field, sweeping away Ambrose Burnside's bluecoats who might otherwise have broken the Confederates, and convincing General McClellan not to press his luck against the valiant Army of Northern Virginia. When the Confederates withdrew, it was Hill's men who slapped the pursuing Federals a bloody repulse.

The campaign concluded, Hill demanded a hearing on his arrest by Jackson. Lee replied that no trial was necessary, because surely an officer of Hill's caliber would never disappoint General Jackson again. Hill was not mollified and reiterated his demand for a hearing. But even the stubborn Jackson, at this point, wanted to let the matter drop. Lee met with his generals, and though he could not reconcile them, he at least restored them to a status of receiving each other with cold and reluctant civility. Lee, in the meantime, named Longstreet and Jackson as the commanders of the First and Second Corps of the army. "Next to these two officers," Lee wrote to Jefferson Davis, "I consider A. P. Hill the best

Neither a Borrower Nor a Lender Be—to Yankees

At Sharpsburg, a major asked Hill if he knew the Federal commander Ambrose Burnside. Hill replied that he ought to: Burnside still owed him \$8,000 on an unpaid loan.

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

commander with me. He fights his troops well, and takes good care of them.”⁸

At Fredericksburg, Hill was charged with anchoring the right side of the Confederate line, but he was apparently distracted with grief. His eldest daughter had died of diphtheria, and the normally ardent commander was noticeably absent from the action. In arranging his line, he had allowed it to be separated by a wide patch of swampy woods, leaving a gap in the center of about 600 yards. When the Federals crashed into Hill’s line, they inevitably found the gap, pouring into Maxcy Gregg’s unprepared men who were arrayed behind it as a reserve. Gregg was killed, but the Confederates bravely closed ranks and plugged the gap, driving the Federals back and ending the major action on Hill’s side of the field.

Before the Light Division left Fredericksburg, Hill had recovered his composure, and his men donated \$10,000 to help the poor in the battered, old, picturesque town. It was a typical, chivalrous gesture from Hill’s command.

At Chancellorsville, despite their personal animosities, Hill and Jackson cooperated as well as they ever did, with the Light Division joining Jackson’s audacious sweep across the Federal front, and filing in as the reserve to pursue the Federals that Jackson drove from the field.

But just as Jackson was shot down at dusk scouting ahead of Confederate lines, so too Hill and his staff were shot at by Confederate troops only fifty yards away. Hill had been riding ahead calling out for the Confederates to cease fire. But in the darkness, the grey-clad infantry thought it was a Yankee trick. Hill plunged from his horse at the crackle of close-range musketry and was miraculously unscathed. When he heard that Jackson was hit, he went immediately to help his commander. It was Hill who cradled Jackson’s head and bandaged his arm to stanch the bleeding. Hill called for a surgeon, before moving out to secure the position around Jackson.

Unfortunately, Hill himself was then wounded by Federal shell fire. *He nevertheless regained his horse and directed troops into position until he could be relieved by J. E. B. Stuart as temporary commander of the Second Corps.* Hill returned to command four days later, but Jackson would not return at all. In his final feverish hours he was heard to call out: "Order A. P. Hill to prepare for action!"

After Jackson's death, Lee appointed General Richard Ewell, a Jackson favorite, commander of the Second Corps. It was a popular choice among Jackson's men. But Lee had a promotion for A. P. Hill as well. In a letter to President Jefferson Davis, Lee had said that Hill was "upon the whole...the best soldier of his grade with me,"⁹ recommended him for promotion to lieutenant general, and proposed that the Army of Northern Virginia should now be divided into three corps, rather than two. Jefferson Davis approved, and the Third Corps went to A. P. Hill.

Corps commander

The Third Corps' first action was Gettysburg, but their corps commander was terribly sick, ashen-faced, tired, and perhaps distracted by pain. Nevertheless, it was his men who stumbled into the Yankees first and precipitated the greatest battle of the war. As dusk crept up on the first day of battle, Lee asked Hill whether his men could press the attack. The normally belligerent cavalier said no, his men had marched and fought themselves out. It was then that Lee turned to the usually equally belligerent Richard Ewell who came to the same conclusion about the Second Corps. It was not an auspicious beginning for the newly configured Army of Northern Virginia, and these were not the answers that Stonewall Jackson would have given.

On the second day, Hill's men were to act in support of Longstreet. The troops of the Third Corps most deeply involved, those under General Richard Anderson, were badly managed—in part because Hill assumed

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

that Longstreet would coordinate their attack and Longstreet assumed that they would remain under Hill's direction. Hill again seemed insufficiently aggressive, dispirited in the wake of Longstreet's sluggishness, and disengaged from his responsibilities.

On the third day, Hill, unlike Longstreet, was an enthusiast for the planned assault on the Union center. He asked permission to lead the attack and Lee should have given it to him and allowed Hill to commit the entire Third Corps to the charge (instead of holding most of it in reserve—a role that would have been better served by Longstreet, who was always better at counterpunching). Had "Little Powell" led the charge at the Union line, with the entirety of the Third Corps, with all the celerity of a commander convinced of the plan's worth, the Confederates might have won the battle of Gettysburg.

Instead, a surly, insubordinate Longstreet was charged with making an attack he was convinced would fail, and which he did everything possible to delay and cancel. Longstreet was the wrong man for the job; Hill would have been the right one. Moreover, Hill's relationship with Longstreet was very nearly as cold as his relationship had been with Jackson; and as on the second day, neither commander took responsibility for directing Hill's men in the attack; each general assuming it was the other's prerogative or responsibility. The result, of course, was a disaster.

On 14 October 1863, Hill thought he had found his redemption, when he caught a large body of Federals napping at Bristoe Station, Virginia, not far from Manassas. But in his haste to attack the Federals before they could escape, he neglected to reconnoiter the ground. His precipitate assault did, indeed, catch the Federals by surprise, but as General Henry Heth's division was hurried to pursue the fleeing Yankees, it ran into a flank attack by blue-coated troops concealed behind a railroad cutting. Hill had seen the risk—though he had only a vague idea of enemy numbers behind the railroad tracks—but assumed that his artillery could keep the Federals at bay, and was simply eager to fight. He didn't realize that

concealed behind those tracks were three Union divisions that had a clear killing ground to enfilade the attacking Confederates.

When the entrenched Federals opened fire, cutting a swathe through the grey-clad ranks, the Confederates reformed and redirected their attack at the Yankees behind the railroad tracks. It was a brave but dangerous choice. They managed to break through the first Union line, but were trapped by the second and driven back with heavy losses. James I. Robert-*Son*, one of Hill's best biographers, estimates that Hill lost a man—killed, wounded, or captured—every two seconds of the battle. Hill's impetuosity had its place, but not here, and probably never as a corps commander, a role that actually never suited Hill. He needed to be in among the fighting men, not directing the movements of a corps.

Hill knew he had blundered and confessed as much in his official report. The next day, after the Yankees had continued their retreat, Hill rode over the ground with Lee and repeatedly apologized for his costly error. Lee offered Hill no excuses. But as was often the case, he issued no sharp rebuke either, knowing it was beside the point. Hill knew he had erred, and knew he had disappointed Lee. Finally Lee said, "Well, well, General, bury these poor men and let us say no more about it."¹⁰ Hill, however, could never let the dead bury their dead at Bristoe Station. For the rest of the war, his failure there, and his increasingly faltering health, depressed his spirits—and his effectiveness.

On the first day of the Battle of the Wilderness (5 May 1864), Hill fought his corps like his old self (even if physically he was ailing), directing his troops with remarkable skill in a very hot fight. But his physical disabilities began to tell that night, and not enough was done to prepare the next day. Hill had expected (and so did Lee) that Longstreet would be up with reinforcements. Longstreet, however, was late, and when the Federals hit Hill's battered lines on the morning of 6 May, the Southerners were unprepared for the ferocious attack. Though in tremendous pain, Hill gallantly rode up and down the lines encouraging the troops, organizing the

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

defense, even directing batteries of enfilading artillery fire at the front. When Longstreet's men finally rolled onto the field, Hill led his men in a counterattack against the Federals (so far in advance was Hill that he was nearly captured by lead units of the Union army).

Two days later, an enfeebled Hill asked Lee to give command of the Third Corps to another general, at least temporarily. Lee reluctantly granted his request, giving the Third Corps to Jubal Early, while Hill remained with the troops aboard an ambulance. He eventually returned to command, and battered as he was, he and Lee endured together, the great slogging match between the counterpunching Army of Northern Virginia and the relentless, hard-pounding Ulysses S. Grant, all the way through most of the siege of Petersburg.

On 19 June 1864, a woman saw Lee and Hill during Sunday services at an Episcopal church. The woman described Hill as "a small man, but [one who] has a very military bearing, and a countenance pleasing but inexpressibly sad."¹¹ Hill's physical state was an apt reflection of the state of the Confederacy, battling on, with a remembrance of past happiness and nobility, now turned inexpressibly sad and worn down. But as Lee proved himself a master of defensive tactics in these final months, so did Hill, whose leadership rebounded even if his health did not.

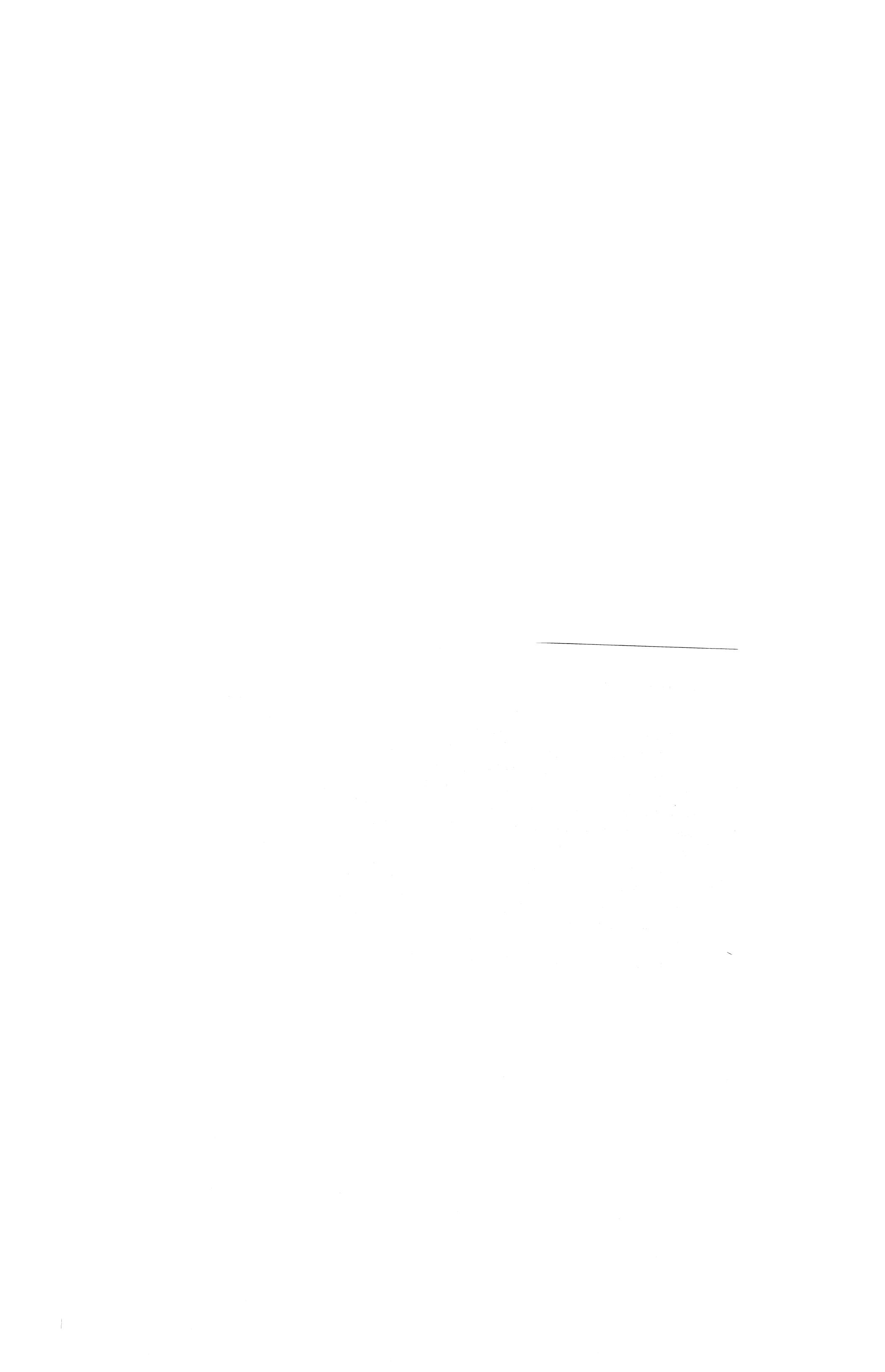
By the winter of 1864, his strength, vitality, and even his ability to concentrate were visibly failing. The swashbuckling Hill now found it difficult and painful to mount a horse. But he remained intent on his duties, and rode his lines. He was returning from an early morning conference with Lee on 2 April 1865 when he met his fate. The Confederate line had been broken and Hill was determined to rally his men. Lee admonished him to be careful. Careful was not a word easily applied to Hill.

In his search for the front, the desperately sick Hill rode along a no-man's land. Along the way, he captured and sent to the rear, under escort, two Federal infantrymen. With his remaining companion, courier George Tucker, he rode on, until he found two more Yankees leveling muskets at

him. Hill drew a revolver and called on them to surrender. Instead, the blast of a .58 caliber bullet smashed through Hill's heart, killing him.

When Lee heard the news, he replied sadly, "He is now at rest, and we who are left are the ones to suffer."¹² Like Jackson in his delirium, Lee in his final moments also called for "Little Powell": "Tell A. P. Hill he must come up." *Perhaps no other general*, besides Lee, was so much a part of the Army of Northern Virginia. General James Alexander Walker said of him that "of all the Confederate leaders [Hill] was the most genial and lovable in disposition . . . the commander the army idolized."¹³

Hill fought virtually the entire war. He represented the Virginia of manners, courtly graces, chivalry, and patriotism. If he is little remembered today, compared with Jackson, Longstreet, and J. E. B. Stuart, he deserves to be recognized for the gallant Southern soldier that he was.



GEORGE B. MCCLELLAN (1826-1885)



"I am in no way responsible."¹

George McClellan was in the wrong profession—though it didn't seem like it at the time.² He rocketed his way through West Point—in which he enrolled before he was even sixteen years old, having been classically educated already, including two years at the University of Pennsylvania—graduating second in his class (he thought he should have been first, a feeling he often had in life) in 1846 at the age of nineteen. His military career was equally meteoric. He went straight to combat in Mexico. Come the Civil War, he was, at age thirty-four, appointed a major general in the United States Army, second in rank only to Winfield Scott. And between these wars, he had been a highly paid railroad executive. Successful in academic and business pursuits, recognized as a gifted administrator, born leader, and supremely well-qualified young military

Guess What?

↳ Lincoln's top commander, McClellan, was a Democrat who loathed abolitionists and disparaged the idea of racial equality

↳ When McClellan led his troops into western Virginia, he threatened to "crush any attempt at insurrection" by the Southern slaves

↳ A failure as commander of the Army of the Potomac, he made quite a decent governor of New Jersey

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

officer, "chock full," as one colleague noted, "of big war science,"³ McClellan seemed bound to succeed. He was the "Young Napoleon."

McClellan himself noted, "I find myself in a new & strange position here—Presdt, Cabinet, Genl Scott & all deferring to me—by some strange operation of magic I seem to have become *the* power in the land. I almost think that were I to win some small success now I could become Dictator or anything else that might please me—but nothing of that kind would please me—*therefore I won't* be Dictator. Admirable self denial!"⁴ Admirable, indeed, because he seemed well suited to the role. He was a resentful subordinate, a man convinced that, in his words, "I can do it all,"⁵ but also one never to take blame for a failure, which was always someone else's fault. Deference he accepted as his due. He had an ill-disguised contempt for his commander in chief, for General Scott (whom he forced into retirement), and for anyone else who might second-guess, interfere, offer contrary ideas, or provide anything less than blind and complaisant support of his every demand—and his every excuse.

When he married, it was to a Presbyterian who converted him to a Calvinism rather different in kind from Stonewall Jackson's. Jackson took comfort from the doctrine of predestination that he had nothing to fear on the battlefield—God would collect him in His own good time. McClellan took predestination to affirm that he was God's elected military savior of the Union. This messianic impulse—common amongst Northern abolitionists—perhaps should have steered Little Mac to a career in politics, a calling he did eventually heed; though, ironically, he was a political enemy of the abolitionists.

From his days at the academy, McClellan disdained Yankees and gravitated to Southerners, at least those of a gentlemanly sort. McClellan was very much an adherent to the cult of the gentleman, which is no bad thing in itself, but with McClellan, it was more the snobbery of a Philadelphia doctor's son than it was the aristocratic poise and *noblesse oblige* of the Southern planter class.

Though a conservative Democrat who loathed abolitionists (on occasion accusing them of "rank & open treason"⁶), a moderate on the issue of slavery (he took a slave-servant named Songo with him to Mexico), and a man who preferred Southern gentlemen for company, McClellan was nevertheless a firm Unionist. He once told Navy Secretary Gideon Wells that he detested "both South Carolina and Massachusetts, and should rejoice to see both States extinguished." These two states, he argued, had always been seats of extremism, driving otherwise reasonable Americans to quarrel.

The great moral crusade for McClellan was the preservation of the Union—not the abolition of slavery. Slavery was a constitutional right, as affirmed by the Supreme Court, and so therefore deserving of every legal protection. The idea of racial equality was repugnant to him, if not just flat-out ridiculous: "I confess to a prejudice in favor of my own race, & can't learn to like the odor of either Billy goats or niggers"⁷ (a sentiment he confessed to, incidentally, *after* the war). He did, however, also volunteer that he would have found—had it been in his power and been his responsibility—an equitable way to abolish slavery that both adequately compensated and protected the slave-owner while liberating and assisting the slave. But then again, McClellan always believed that he had the right plan for everything.

Apprenticeship in Mexico

Though doctors benefited much more in prestige than in pay in mid-nineteenth century America, things came easily to young McClellan growing up in Philadelphia. He had a strong family and parents who emphasized education. McClellan's mind was quick, and he never had to study much to excel. Such precocious acuity had the downside of making him dogmatically certain of his opinions.

Originally it was assumed he would be a lawyer. But the prospect was so dull, and, to his parents, the attractions of a free education seemed so

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

inviting, that West Point became his alma mater—and once in, he considered himself a professional soldier. One of his earliest professional prejudices, honed in Mexico watching the rabble of rowdy volunteers and citizen-soldier officers (appointed through political connections), was that war was a job for those trained to the task: civilians should butt out—or take their orders and their training from those qualified to give them. Later, Abraham Lincoln would not be among those deemed so qualified.

He had, as the British say, a “good war,” seeing action, performing admirably, learning from Winfield Scott’s masterful campaigning, and leading the life of a gay young blade (he embarked for war even more fully and colorfully armed than A. P. Hill, with saber, bowie knife, pistols stuffed in his belt and a double-barreled shotgun in his hand). He scoffed at danger, ate and drank the best Mexico could provide (when not in the field), and romanced a señorita named Nachita, who, a friend reported, “cried uninterruptedly for the space of a week” after he left Mexico City, “but as she has done the same thing several times before for others, don’t cut your throat.”⁸ He also continued his military education—something he would do throughout his life, even while a railroad executive—picking through the volumes in the library of a Catholic seminary, looking “for something readable among their shelves of bad theology”⁹ (a very McClellan comment), and latching onto Bernal Diaz’s riveting first-person account of Cortez’s conquest of Mexico, reading it in the original Spanish.

McClellan found peacetime service dull, though he was given far more special assignments than most young officers, in no small part because one of his patrons was the Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis, who, like most people, thought highly of this young lieutenant who radiated professionalism. Even when he botched an assignment, as he did while investing a northern route for the transcontinental railroad, he did so in a way that stood on his dignity, or rather on his assumption that whatever he believed to be true was true. In this case, without adequate scout-

ing, he believed there were obstacles in his path—only there weren't—a failing that would repeat itself during the War.

More to his taste, perhaps, was an assignment that took him to Europe with two officers much his senior (he dismissed them as old fuddy-duddies). The party had hoped to inspect the armies of both sides in the Crimean War, but had to make due with the Allied forces, and with some other travels. It was from this jaunt that McClellan came back with a design for "the McClellan saddle" (based on a Hungarian model as adapted by the Prussians) that became standard issue to the U.S. Cavalry for the rest of its existence. He also taught himself Russian well enough to translate Russian books. McClellan, indeed, was something of a linguist. He could read books in German, Spanish, or French, and translated a book on French bayonet tactics.

When he left the service to become a railroad executive, he was more than once tempted to resign (if he had been allowed to) in order to rejoin the colors to fight Mormons (in the bloodless "Mormon War") or to join a mercenary unit that might independently extend America's manifest destiny farther south, as filibusters like William Walker attempted to do. But the circumstances were never right—not until the war to restore the Union.

Before that occurred, however, he made one last peacetime conquest. After nearly six years of diligent wooing, he married Miss Ellen Marcy in May 1860. She had rejected his proposal of marriage in 1854, been compelled by her parents to break her engagement to A.P. Hill in 1856, and had enjoyed many suitors in between, most of them military swains, as her father was himself an officer. The marriage was an extremely happy one; whatever his other failings, McClellan was an admirably loyal husband. They had two children, a girl, Mary ("May"), and a boy named after his father, but as there could only be one "Little Mac," the other became little Max.

The price of generalship

Men often become more cautious in their forties, as life experience, family responsibilities, and physical decline set in. War, too, is a sobering experience, and McClellan had seen war, though he gave every appearance of not being in the least traumatized by it. McClellan was still only in his thirties when he reached high command. He believed he was predestined by Providence to save the Union. He was certain that only he knew what to do in the crisis. But it was what he knew that perhaps was the problem. "There is only one safe rule in war," he said: "to decide what is the very worst thing that can happen to you, & prepare to meet it."¹⁰ Compare this principle to Robert E. Lee's contrary one that Richmond was never so safe as when it was *undefended* (that is, rather than wait and prepare for the worst to happen, seize opportunities to upset the balance of your opponent). Lee, like McClellan, believed in defensive entrenchments. He was not imprudent, but his goal was ever and always to drive the enemy back and threaten him where he felt he was vulnerable, and to use fortifications as pivots for offensives.

McClellan had various grand offensive strategies as well, of course, though Scott thought them impractical, and Lincoln, though generally supportive of McClellan, doubted them too. More important than this, however, was McClellan's consistent magnification of the enemy, often to three times its actual size. His evidence for these miscalculations seemed based less on actual intelligence than either on his own fears or his own grandiose imagination: if he was to save the Union, surely it would have to be against nearly insurmountable odds. The battles of the Young Napoleon would be among the greatest in history.

They were anyway—certainly in American history. But there is no excuse for not seeing things as they are (at which Lee excelled) and for taking the counsel of one's fears (an apothegm of Stonewall Jackson's). McClellan consistently saw things as he imagined them to be and, as he

himself said, thought the only safe rule was to prepare oneself to meet the very worst that could happen.

The first campaigns

McClellan started his Civil War service, it is sometimes forgotten, in the West. In April 1861, he became a major general of Ohio volunteers (he was at the time a resident of Ohio, as an executive with the Ohio and Mississippi railroad). By May he was commanding the Department of the Ohio, which included Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana for starters, but soon began annexing other neighboring areas into its responsibilities, which is what brought McClellan to western Virginia, and his first shift from raising, supplying, and training troops to fighting them.

Western Virginia was sympathetic to the Union. It was also crucial to Federal transportation and communications, because the Baltimore and Ohio railroad passed through it. When reports reached McClellan's desk of Confederate activity in the area, with Johnny Rebs threatening to burn the railroad bridges, he was authorized to act. Entering slave-holding Virginia, he issued a proclamation stating that he would not only not interfere with slavery, which was no more illegal now than it had ever been, but pledged that "with an iron hand," he would "crush any attempt at insurrection" by the slaves.¹¹ The burnt bridges were rebuilt and a small detachment of Confederates at Philippi was scattered (and six were killed) by Federal artillery, prompting Northern newspaper headlines about "the Philippi Races." To cap it all, pro-Union politicians in western Virginia organized to have their counties secede from the state—one act of secession of which Lincoln approved.

As commander of an army of occupation, McClellan reaffirmed his commitment to defending the property rights of all, whether secessionist or Unionist, and he maintained a strict discipline. There was no winking

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

at depredations against slaveholders. He also sounded a note that seemed right and proper, but would prove frustrating to his commander in chief: he promised “not to move” into action “until everything is ready” and he would not “depart from my intention of gaining success by manoeuvring rather than by fighting; I will not throw these men of mine into the teeth of artillery & intrenchments, if it is possible to avoid it.”¹² To be fair, he also pledged to “move with the utmost rapidity & energy” when “everything is ready.”

McClellan was very popular with his troops. He turned them into fine model soldiers, and he was immensely careful with their lives. He was not, however, careful in his judgments of others. McClellan, of all people, severely rebuked one of his brigadier generals in the Rich Mountain campaign in western Virginia for accurately reporting that the enemy force he was assigned to divert outnumbered him. He added, “I confess I feel apprehensive unless our force could equal theirs.” McClellan responded with abuse, threatening to replace Brigadier General Thomas A. Morris—who had already proven his worth in the successful surprise attack at Philippi—telling him, in another McClellan turn of phrase, “I propose taking the really difficult & dangerous part of this work on my own hands.” McClellan’s column would “decide the face of the campaign.... I have spoken plainly—I speak officially—the crisis is a grave one, & I must have Generals under me who are willing to risk as much as I am.”¹³

As McClellan’s authoritative biographer Stephen Sears acknowledges, McClellan’s “risk was in fact slight.” But the self-dramatization and the rush to blame others—even before anything has gone wrong—these are very much the McClellan touch that President Lincoln later came to know so well. In fact, a reinforced Morris (McClellan gave in with an extra regiment) faced an equal number of Confederates, about 4,000 troops on either side. McClellan and his column of 7,000 men, meanwhile, met 1,300 Confederates (less than half the number McClellan expected) at Rich Mountain.

He confessed his nervousness to his wife: "I realize the dreadful responsibility on me—the lives of my men, the reputation of the country, and the success of the cause.... I shall feel my way and be very cautious, for I recognize the fact that everything requires success in my first operations. You need not be alarmed as to the result; God is on our side."¹⁴

Needless to say, the Battle of Rich Mountain (11 July 1861) was not the epochal event McClellan thought it was, though it was a Union victory,

affirming, for the newspapers anyway, McClellan as the Young Napoleon. To Brigadier General William Rosecrans, McClellan was a good deal less than that. Rosecrans had led the assault on Rich Mountain and thought McClellan had abandoned him by not committing the rest of the column to the attack. In a subsequent Federal pursuit of the enemy, McClellan himself was free in assigning blame to every officer not named McClellan: "Unless I command every picket & lead every column I cannot be sure of success."¹⁵ Were he alive today, McClellan would no doubt be in favor of cloning.

To this point, McClellan's war had been one of distant musketry, heard, not seen or felt; of plans achieved or miscarried, not executed on a hot battlefield. He had done every task of preparation and planning skillfully and well. But for one so liberal with criticism, he had not yet himself been in the firing line against the Confederates. This was unusual for Civil War generals, who actually had a 50 percent higher chance of being killed or wounded than enlisted men. He might have been wise to keep himself back from the action, but it was certainly unusual.

More important than the Battle of Rich Mountain and its aftermath, however, was the Federal defeat at First Manassas. The government in Washington was in panic. Who else could they turn to but the Young Napoleon? He accepted their summons and became the commander of

the Army of the Potomac, a name that he gave the army.

McClellan told his wife, "Who would have thought, when we were married, that I should so soon be called upon to save the country?"¹⁶ The

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

key words being, of course, "so soon"; in the long run, it was inevitable that McClellan should save his country. He rode on cap-waving excursions (or inspections) among the men, eliciting huzzahs and raising morale (both theirs and no doubt his), but he was also a diligent administrator, orderly in his methods, and decisive in enforcing discipline. When it came to organization and preparation, he was everything he thought himself to be.

His signal failing was his system of intelligence. Allan Pinkerton, the famous detective, was the man charged by McClellan to gather and report news of the enemy. Pinkerton and his men proved better at passing on wild rumors and the ingratiating exaggerations of deserters than anything else. But Pinkerton's consistent inflation of enemy numbers was exactly what McClellan wanted to hear, because it fit his own vision of the challenge before him. Winfield Scott was entirely more skeptical, and accurate, in assessing the size of the Confederate army, and confident that it posed no risk to Washington.

McClellan, typically, regarded him as either "a *dotard* or a *traitor*... he is a perfect imbecile. He understands nothing, appreciates nothing & is ever in my way." Lincoln was no better. McClellan dismissed him as an "idiot" and took up calling him "the Gorilla." Both men were condemned for not recognizing that "the enemy have from 3 to 4 times my force" (in fact, McClellan outnumbered the enemy, and would always do so, usually by odds of at least two to one) and for not seeing "the true state of affairs," which was actually a false state of affairs.¹⁷

McClellan threatened that "if he [Winfield Scott] *cannot* be taken out of my path, I will resign and let the admin[istration] take care of itself.... The people call upon me to save the country—I *must* save it and cannot respect anything that is in the way."¹⁸ McClellan won the dispute, Scott was retired, and in November 1861, the commander of the Army of the Potomac became also general in chief of the army. When the president asked him if he felt capable of performing two such weighty jobs at once, McClellan reassured him, "I can do it all."¹⁹

McClellan could do it all, but believed that Lincoln and his cabinet could do next to nothing, and needed to be kept far away from his areas of responsibility. He repeatedly snubbed the president, refusing to meet with him whenever the great general thought it inconvenient or tiresome. He was surly to congressmen and cabinet members (and anyone else) who pressed him for his plans...unless of course he was himself leaking these plans to the *New York Herald*. He was, as ever, quick to assign blame to others, whether for military defeats (such as the ill-attempted Federal attack at Ball's Bluff on 21 October 1861) or even for the fact that the Army was becoming extremely adept at parading, but of little proven use at fighting. "If it is so the fault will not be mine,"²⁰ might well serve as the emblematic McClellan quote, a motto for his personal coat of arms.

McClellan as commander

Of McClellan's great on to Richmond drive, advancing up the Peninsula, one might wish to say as little as possible—for McClellan's sake. But of course, the great commander wouldn't quite see it that way. For him, it was a tremendous struggle against politicians in Washington who continually connived against him because he was a Democrat and not an abolitionist radical, against overwhelming Confederate numbers (which were, in fact, much smaller than his own), and pulled off one of the greatest tactical withdrawals of all time from the gates of Richmond (in other words, was handily defeated by Robert E. Lee's smaller army).

McClellan had his supporters in the press (chiefly among Democrat-leaning papers) and certainly in the ranks. But Lincoln and his cabinet

Vive le Général McClellan!

McClellan, "the Young Napoleon," was flattered to have on his staff three French royals from the House of Orange: the Prince de Joinville, the Duc de Chartres, and the Comte de Paris. They helped bring France's famed success in arms to the Army of the Potomac.

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

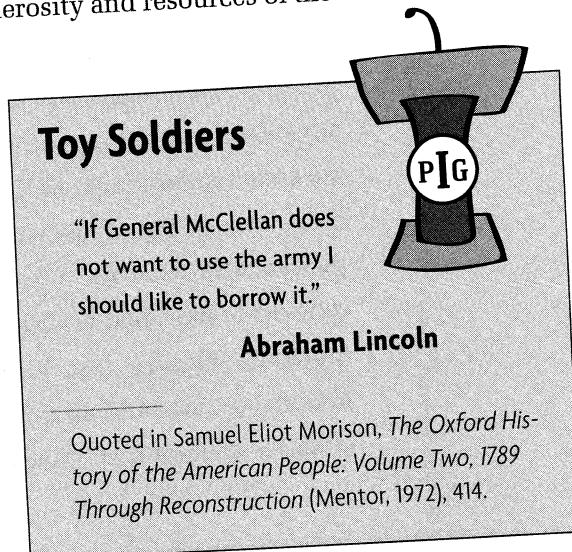
and many of the Republican-leaning newspapers and even some of McClellan's officers and men were beginning to have their doubts about a commander who was so cautious, so full of contempt for his civilian masters (though he stopped well short of countenancing a military coup, which was sometimes—perhaps merely to blow off steam—discussed by others), and who, while dutiful in the hours he spent in preparing his army, was rarely on the field of battle.

Whether humbugged by "Prince John" Magruder, whose humble Confederate outpost convinced McClellan that he faced the bulk of the Confederate army (inspecting Magruder's positions, Joe Johnston quipped, "No one but McClellan could have hesitated to attack"²¹) or making ludicrous assessments of his enemy whose audacity and daring with inferior numbers would drive him to abandon his march on Richmond ("I prefer Lee to [Joseph E.] Johnston—the former is too cautious & weak under grave responsibility—personally brave and energetic to a fault, he yet is wanting in moral firmness when pressed by heavy responsibility & is likely to be timid & irresolute in action"²²), McClellan's record is frankly embarrassing to consider.

It is one thing to have arranged a battle as best one can and fail. It is quite another, however, to bleat, as McClellan did before the Battle of Mechanicsville (26 June 1862), "I am in no way responsible...as I have not failed to represent repeatedly the necessity for reinforcements....If the result...is a disaster, the responsibility cannot be thrown on my shoulders."²³ Or take this dispatch, written in the early morning hours of 28 June, after the Confederates had driven his men back in a desperate frontal assault of the sort the McClellan would never have dared contemplate, "I have lost this battle because my force was too small. I again repeat that I am not responsible for the result....[T]he government has not sustained this army. If you do not do so now the game is lost. If I save this army now, I tell you plainly that I owe no thanks to you or any other persons in Washington. You have done your best to sacrifice this army."²⁴

One cannot imagine Grant or Lee writing such words. They had neither the ego, nor the self-deception, nor the weakness of character, nor the submission to panic that lies behind them. And it is surely, at a minimum, a lack of gratitude, if not an unbalanced sense of conspiracy, to assert that the Secretary of War for the Union wanted the army to be sacrificed, either out of bullheaded civilian stupidity or in order to discredit McClellan politically. Despite McClellan's complaints—driven in part by Lincoln's withholding of troops to protect Washington—the Army of the Potomac lacked for nothing, thanks to the generosity and resources of the Federal government. Though he hardly gave him credit for it, Lincoln was McClellan's great defender, even if an exasperated one. It was he who returned McClellan to command the Army of the Potomac after General Pope's defeat at Second Manassas, and it was he who recognized that even if McClellan could not lead men into battle, he was a genius at organizing them and preparing them for it. But McClellan did not raise his own units the way a Bedford Forrest did, equipping the men with supplies paid for out of his own pocket. It was the Confederate army that was always strapped for resources, yet Confederate generals didn't bemoan their fate, the way McClellan did, as a spoiled, egocentric child.

Where some saw failure—for which he blamed others—he saw himself as a grand strategist and masterful tactician extracting chestnut victories from the fire of war: “the officers & men feel that I saved the day,” he said at Williamsburg, as his army slogged its way up the Peninsula. Whether they did or not, McClellan always knew that this was true: he *had* saved the day from the “utter stupidity & worthlessness”²⁵ of his



Quoted in Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People: Volume Two, 1789 Through Reconstruction* (Mentor, 1972), 414.

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

corps commanders and the treacherous, two-faced, conspiring, interfering politicians in Washington. In McClellan's mind there was no man so indispensable as himself: "I feel too that I must not unnecessarily risk my life—for the fate of my army depends upon me & they all know it."²⁶ One wonders if he ever needed to remind them. It is certain that Lincoln had to remind McClellan that his constant appeals for more troops would leave the Federal government with no more than 25,000 troops to cover every other theatre of the war.

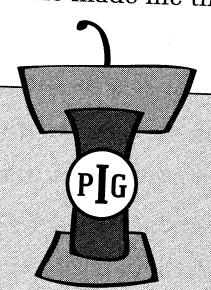
The fate of the Army of the Potomac under McClellan's command was to skedaddle from Richmond. Even when McClellan was privy to Lee's plans, outnumbered him more than two to one, and had every possible advantage over him, as at the Battle of Sharpsburg, the daring Confederate commander fought McClellan to a draw, or perhaps a tactical Confederate victory. When Lee withdrew from the field, McClellan declined to pursue him save for a half-hearted, *pro forma* attempt. He was too relieved to have had his army survive the battle. He reported that "at that moment—Virginia lost, Washington menaced, Maryland invaded—the national cause could afford no risks of defeat."²⁷ To his wife he was more effusive, content that "God has in his mercy a second time made me the

McClellan on Why Lee Defeated Him in the Battle for Richmond

"I think I begin to see his [God's] wise purpose in this....If I had succeeded in taking Richmond now the fanatics [abolitionists] of the North might have been too powerful & reunion impossible."

George McClellan

Quoted in Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* (Ticknor & Fields, 1988), 235.



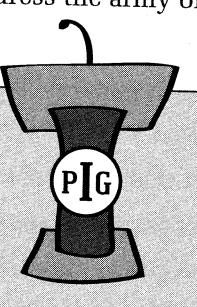
instrument of saving the nation.”²⁸ McClellan’s record is thus one of bluster and recrimination, failure and refusal to confront failure, leavened only by his capacity for organization and training, at which he was indeed expert. It was fighting at which he lacked. Rather than a general, he should have been a bureaucrat...

... or perhaps a politician. In the political arena, his enormous ego put him at one with many another seeker of public office. And as a politician, his ideas were not ones easily dismissed. As a general he had been appalled by the way General John Pope had waged war on Southern civilians as well as on Southern troops. He thought that to restore the Union meant to fight the war in such a way that respected Christian values and that presented the Union as something the people in the South would *want* to rejoin. That meant treating civilians with every proper consideration. It meant fighting solely to preserve the Union, not to wage a radical, ideological war to extinguish an institution recognized as legal by the Constitution and the Supreme Court and that was, however unfortunate, a cornerstone of Southern life.

Early in their relationship, McClellan had said of the “well-meaning baboon,” the president of the United States: “The Presdt is perfectly honest & is really sound on the nigger question.”²⁹ In fact, of course, the president proved far less “sound” than McClellan hoped, which was one reason why he ran against him for president in 1864 as the nominee of the Democratic Party. But there were other more admirable reasons. He was shocked when, two days after the Battle of Sharpsburg, Lincoln suspended the writ of habeas corpus and imposed military courts on civilians accused of hindering the war effort or assisting the enemy. McClellan believed that the Emancipation Proclamation violated the Constitution as did Lincoln’s suspension of traditional American civil rights. Such overthrowing of the Constitution made a mockery of McClellan’s cause of restoring and preserving the Constitutional Union (as he saw it). He was committed to fighting secession, not to forcing through the wants and

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

desires of an abolitionist cabal. McClellan believed that the “infamous” Emancipation Proclamation and the suspension of habeas corpus had “at one stroke of the pen” changed America’s “free institutions into a despotism.”³⁰ Nevertheless, he allowed himself to be persuaded that, as a serving soldier, the course of duty required him to keep his opinions private, and to address the army on the need of submitting to civil authority.



Abraham Lincoln on General McClellan’s “Army of the Potomac”

“So it is called, but that is a mistake; it is only McClellan’s bodyguard.”

Quoted in Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* (Ticknor & Fields, 1988), 331.

The president, however, had lost patience with McClellan, as well as the political will to defend the Democrat general from his Republican enemies. On 5 November 1862, just after the midterm elections, Lincoln ordered him relieved from duty. McClellan was now free of military constraints. If he wished, he could oppose Lincoln as a rival politician—and that is exactly what happened.

Citizen McClellan

Lincoln resisted all efforts—after the humiliation of Ambrose Burnside at Fredericksburg and Joseph Hooker at Chancellorsville—to restore McClellan to command, though he recognized that among many in the army there was a strong sympathy for Little Mac. Such “McClellanism” was regarded as a threat, but not so great a one as to risk restoring a commander in whom the president had utterly lost confidence.

In the summer of 1864, the Democratic Party elected General McClellan as its candidate for president. McClellan was a pro-war Democrat—that is, one who believed that the Union must be restored before there could be peace. But the party’s platform and its chosen vice presidential candidate were in favor of an immediate armistice, to be followed by

negotiations to restore the Union. McClellan refused to budge from his principles, while simultaneously trying to fudge the differences between the wings of the Democratic Party.

The Democrats had expected that by nominating McClellan, they would win the soldier vote. But the peace plank of the Democratic platform made that impossible. In the event, Lincoln defeated McClellan handily, with the general capturing only three states: New Jersey, Delaware, and Kentucky. The margin in the electoral college was 212 votes for Lincoln to 21 for Little Mac. It was a trouncing defeat, though to the general's credit he had taken the high road in the campaign, doing as little electioneering as possible, behaved as a gentleman, and accepted the electoral voice of the people as the voice of God's will. He was indeed a better politician than he was a soldier.

He finally resigned his commission only to find that his political notoriety made it impossible for him to resume his role as a railroad executive. He considered becoming a mercenary, including putting himself at the service of the French Emperor Maximilian of Mexico, which would have been an outcome devoutly to be wished—had he been more successful in French uniform than Federal blue.

But instead of returning to arms, he relied on his investment income to live the life of a European exile, a role that suited him better still. He delighted in interviews with Helmuth von Moltke, chief of the Prussian general staff, and the famed Swiss military strategist Antoine-Henri, Baron de Jomini, marveled at Rome, and enjoyed the high reputation he had in the cities of Europe. He did not return home until 1868, in time to see Ulysses Grant elected president. He also found that he was now again employable, and so pursued engineering and railroad work. He did not return to politics until 1876, when he enthusiastically endorsed and campaigned for the Democratic Party candidate for president, Samuel J. Tilden, against the Republican (and eventual winner) Rutherford B. Hayes. That, in turn, led to New Jersey's Democratic Party electing

The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Civil War

McClellan as its gubernatorial candidate in 1877—and this was an election he won.

Moreover, he governed well, trimming spending, abolishing direct state taxes on individuals, and bringing to bear all the skills of organization and management that he had developed as a general and businessman. This was his *métier*. He served but a single term, and then returned to private life. His last political hurrah was campaigning for Grover Cleveland, though political rivals denied him his hope of being appointed Cleveland's secretary of war. McClellan died at age fifty-eight in 1887. His son, George B. McClellan Jr. ("Max"), took up the profession that should have been his father's, becoming a congressman from New York and then mayor of the Big Apple (1904-09). That bloodless field of conflict was McClellan's true home.