**Book Review of James M. McPherson’s, *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief***

During the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln did not get much respect as a military leader. Lincoln himself deprecated his expertise even as he pushed West Point generals into more aggressive action. "If possible I would be very glad of another movement early enough to give us some benefit from the fact of the enemies communications being broken, but neither for this reason, or any other, do I wish anything done in desperation or rashness," he advised the commander of the Army of the Potomac in May 1863 after the Battle of Chancellorsville. "An early movement would also help to supersede the bad moral effect of the recent one, which is sure to be considerably injurious. Have you already in your mind a plan wholly, or partially formed? If you have, prosecute [sic] it without interference from me. If you have not, please inform me, so that I, incompetent as I may be, can try to assist in the formation of some plan for the Army."1

The nation's president did not have the military education or experience of his Confederate counterpart, Jefferson Davis. But Lincoln was a conscientious scholar - and he became a student of military tactics and eventually a better master of military strategy than his generals or Davis. "The President is himself a man of great aptitude for military studies," wrote aide John Hay early in the war. Historian T. Harry Williams said President Lincoln was "a great natural strategist, a better one than any of his generals. He was in actuality as well as in title the commander in chief who, by his larger strategy, did more than Grant or any other general to win the war for the Union." Historian James M. McPherson, argued, however that Lincoln was not a "natural strategist." Instead, Lincoln "worked hard to master this subject, just as had done to become a lawyer." President Lincoln's White House study paid off - certainly more than the West Point study of some of his subordinates.

Civil war journalist William A. Croffut wrote: "In critical moments Lincoln's judgment seems to have been superb - superior to that of his generals. Had [George B.] McClellan followed his advice, he would have taken Richmond. Had [Joseph] Hooker acted in accordance with his suggestions, Chancellorsville would have been a victory for the nation. Had [George] Meade obeyed his explicit commands, he would have destroyed Lee's army before it could have recrossed the Potomac." Lincoln aides and biographers John G. Nicolay and John Hay wrote: "General W[illiam] F. Smith says: "I have long held to the opinion that at the close of the war Mr. Lincoln was the superior of his generals in his comprehension of the effect of strategic movements and the proper method of following up victories to their legitimate conclusions.' General J[ames] H. Wilson holds the same opinion; and Colonel Robert N. Scott, in whose lamented death the army lost one of its most vigorous and best-trained intellects, frequently called Mr. Lincoln 'the ablest strategist of the war.'" Throughout the Civil War, Lincoln wanted to rely on professional military counsel, but he quickly learned at the outset of the war that he could not rely on the Union's top general, Winfield Scott, for firm, aggressive advice and that other generals held narrow, parochial views of the Union war effort.

Lincoln "learned quickly and proved to be a competent strategist. He abided by the old adage that in war, 'the main thing is to make sure that the main thing remains the main thing, " wrote military historian Mackubin T. Owens. "That Lincoln had the strategic insight to be a successful general is clear," wrote historian Gerald J. Prokopowicz. "In September 1861, he drafted a 'Memorandum for a plan of campaign' that was the closest thing to an overall strategic plan produced by anyone in the federal administration, with the exception perhaps of [Winfield] Scott's much-derided Anaconda Plan. In his advice to his generals, Lincoln displayed an intuitive understanding of such concepts as the advantage of interior lines and the importance of focusing on the objective." While Union generals repeatedly focused on taking the Confederate capitol at Richmond, Lincoln focused on cornering and defeating the Confederate army. In 1865, Ulysses S. Grant did that - first in Richmond and a few days later at Appomattox Court House.

James M. McPherson notes, it was President Lincoln who formulated the nation's overall strategy towards the war: "As president of the nation and leader of his party as well as commander in chief, Lincoln was principally responsible for shaping and defining national policy. From first to last, that policy was preservation of the United States as one nation, indivisible, and as a republic based on majority rule." McPherson noted that Lincoln enunciated policy and mobilized resources to effect that policy. He noted that "no matter how much this national strategy required maximum effort at all levels of government and society, the ultimate responsibility was the president's in his dual roles as head of government and commander in chief."13 Critics during and after the Civil War criticized Lincoln's military decisions without giving adequate weight to the political context in which those decisions were made. Lincoln scholar Frank J. Williams wrote: "The president well understood the difference between national strategy and military strategy. National strategy shapes a nation's political goals in wartime while military strategy uses armed forces to achieve these political goals."14

Lincoln knew and understood his responsibility. He progressively developed in his role as commander in chief, according to military historian Craig L. Symonds: "As he grew comfortable in holding the reins of power, Lincoln became more assertive as commander in chief...by 1862 he was beginning to exercise hands-on management, even issuing operation orders to division commanders; and by 1863 he was hitting his full stride as an activist commander in chief. As tentative as he was early on, he eventually became one of the most audacious of all American chief executives, authorizing a blockade and approving a conscription law, paper money, an income tax, and - most revolutionary of all - emancipation."

During 1861-1862, Lincoln repeatedly prodded McClellan into speedier action - without effect. The President understood that field conditions would never be perfect for aggressive action nor would there ever if the optimal number of troops or sufficient supplies. Perhaps because of his experience with McDowell and McClellan, Lincoln came to value Union commanders who exhibited initiative - like Generals Ulysses Grant and William T. Sherman and Admirals David Farragut and David Dixon Porter. "Lincoln expressed repeated frustration with the inability of his armies to march as light and fast as Confederate armies," noted McPherson. In mid-March 1862, his patience wore out with McClellan's inaction. McClellan's demotion from general in chief apparently galvanized him into action. Historian William Marvel wrote: "Within hours of learning that he was no longer general in chief, he arranged with the War Department for troop transports, consulted with the Navy Department for assurances that the Virginia could be contained, held a romantic division review beneath a glimmering moon, and convened his first council of war with the four corps commanders Lincoln had named."

By then, Lincoln's frustration was evident. Navy Secretary Welles reported that Mr. Lincoln "was shocked to find that of 140,000 whom we were paying for in Pope's army only 60,000 could be found. McClellan brought away 93,000 from the Peninsula, but could not to-day count on over 45,000. As regarded demoralization, the President said, there was no doubt that some of our men permitted themselves to be captured in order that they might leave on parole, get discharged, and go home." The president told some women visiting from Chicago: "The fact is the people haven't yet made up their minds that we are at war with the South. They haven't buckled down to the determination to fight this war through; for they have got the idea into their heads that we are going to get out of this fix, somehow, by strategy! That's the word - *strategy*! General McClellan thinks he is going to whip the rebels by strategy; and the army has got the same notion. They have no idea that the war is to be carried on and put through by hard, tough fighting, that will hurt somebody; and no headway is going to be made while this delusion lasts." President Lincoln continued: "They think there is a royal road to peace, and that General McClellan is to find it. The army has not settled down into the conviction that we are in a terrible war that has got to be fought out - no; and the officers haven't either.”

Lincoln understood the necessity to care and feed of the Union troops: "More fight will be got out of well-fed and well-cared-for soldiers and animals than can be got out of those that are required to make long marches with empty stomachs, and whose strength and cheerfulness are impaired by the failure to distribute proper rations at proper seasons." But the president was also impatient with repeated failures by the Army of the Potomac. Asked in April 1863 to grant a pass to visit Richmond, Lincoln replied in language he would repeat later in the war: "I would be most happy to oblige you if my passes were respected; but the fact is I have within the last two years given passes to more than two hundred and fifty thousand men to go to Richmond, and not one of them has got there yet in any legitimate way."

General Meade's lethargy in pursuing the army of Robert E. Lee after the Battle of Gettysburg greatly aggravated President Lincoln. General James B. Fry recalled: "Lincoln watched the operations of the armies in the field with the deepest interest, the keenest insight, and the widest comprehension. The congratulatory order which General Meade published to his troops after the battle of Gettysburg was telegraphed to the War Department. During those days and nights of anxiety, Lincoln clung to the War Office, and devoured every scrap of news as it came over the telegraph wires. He hoped for and expected substantial fruits from our dearly bought victory at Gettysburg. I saw him read General Meade's congratulatory order. When he came to the sentence about 'driving the invaders from our soil,' an expression of disappointment settled upon his face, his hands dropped upon his knees, and in tones of anguish he exclaimed, 'Drive the invaders from our soil! My God! Is that all?" When they later met, Lincoln inquired: "Do you know, General, what your attitude towards Lee after the battle of Gettysburg reminded me of?" Meade replied: "No, Mr. President - what is it?" Lincoln said: "I'll be hanged if I could think of anything else but an old woman trying to shoo her geese across a creek.”

Just as Mr. Lincoln came to master the issue of slavery, so too did President Lincoln come to master military affairs. His was less reliant on generals like Scott and Halleck than he had been at the beginning of the war. Frank J. Williams wrote: "Lincoln grew as a strategist; he asked questions; he read; he probed - anything within his power to win and shorten the war. Ironically it was Lincoln, a most unlikely military man, who became America's apostle of modern war."Lincoln also grasped impossible subordination - dismissing Major John Key in 1862 for saying: "The object [of the war] is that neither army shall get much advantage of the other; that both shall be kept in the field till they are exhausted, when we will make a compromise and save slavery." Lincoln reportedly claimed he "dismissed Major Key for his silly treasonable talk because I feared it was staff talk and I wanted an example."

One of the keys to Lincoln's leadership was his ability to listen - to generals and much lower ranking individuals in the army and navy. Naval historian Craig L. Symonds wrote: "Lincoln’s relationship with these two officers, David Dixon Porter and Samuel I. Du Pont, reveals several important characteristics about Lincoln's management of men, and ultimately his management of war. First, he was willing - even eager - to solicit the advice of experts. He listened carefully to Du Pont's plan for the blockade of the Southern coast, and even after others had raised questions about Porter's loyalty, he listened just as carefully to that officer's assessment of the situation at Vicksburg. Knowing he was not an expert, Lincoln was conscientious in soliciting the views of those who were. He let them play the role of teacher while he adopted that of the student. In the end, he graduated with honors."

After General Ulysses S. Grant captured Vicksburg on July 4, 1863, Lincoln wrote him: “I do not remember that you and I ever met personally. I write this now as a grateful acknowledgement for the almost inestimable service you have done the country. I wish to say a word further. When you first reached the vicinity of Vicksburg, I thought you should do, what you finally did--march the troops across the neck, run the batteries with the transports, and thus go below; and I never had any faith, except a general hope that you knew better than I, that the Yazoo Pass expedition, and the like, could succeed. When you got below, and took Port-Gibson, Grand Gulf, and vicinity, I thought you should go down the river and join Gen. Banks; and when you turned Northward East of the Big Black, I feared it was a mistake. I now wish to make the personal acknowledgement that you were right, and I was wrong."

**TO GENERAL G. B. McCLELLAN**

EXECUTIVE MANSION, WASHINGTON,
October 13, 1862.

MY DEAR SIR--You remember my speaking to you of what I called your over-cautiousness. Are you not over-cautious when you assume that you cannot do what the enemy is constantly doing? Should you not claim to be at least his equal in prowess, and act upon the claim?

As I understand, you telegraphed General Halleck that you cannot subsist your army at Winchester unless the railroad from Harper's Ferry to that point be put in working order. But the enemy does now subsist his army at Winchester, at a distance nearly twice as great from railroad transportation as you would have to do, without the railroad last named. He now wagons from Culpepper Court-House, which is just about twice as far as you would have to do from Harper's Ferry. He is certainly not more than half as well provided with wagons as you are. I certainly should be pleased for you to have the advantage of the railroad from Harper's Perry to Winchester; but it wastes an the remainder of autumn to give it to you, and, in fact, ignores the question of time, which cannot and must not be ignored.

Again, one of the standard maxims of war, as you know, is "to operate upon the enemy's communications as much as possible, without exposing your own." You seem to act as if this applies against you, but cannot apply in your favor. Change positions with the enemy, and think you not he would break your communication with Richmond within the next twenty-four hours? You dread his going into Pennsylvania. But if he does so in full force, he gives up his communications to you absolutely, and you have nothing to do but to follow and ruin him; if he does so with less than full force, fall upon and beat what is left behind all the easier.

Exclusive of the water line, you are now nearer to Richmond than the enemy is, by the route that you can and he must take. Why can you not reach there before him, unless you admit that he is more than your equal on a march? His route is the arc of a circle, while yours is the chord. The roads are as good on yours as on his.

You know I desired, but did not order, you to cross the Potomac below instead of above the Shenandoah and Blue Ridge. My idea was, that this would at once menace the enemy's communications, which I would seize if he would permit. If he should move northward, I would follow him closely, holding his communications. If he should prevent our seizing his communications, and move toward Richmond, I would press closely to him, fight him if a favorable opportunity should present, and at least try to beat him to Richmond on the inside track. I say "try;" if we never try, we shall never succeed. If he makes a stand at Winchester, moving neither north or south, I would fight him there, on the idea that if we cannot beat him when he bears the wastage of coming to us, we never can when we bear the wastage of going to him. This proposition is a simple truth, and is too important to be lost sight of for a moment. In coming to us he tenders us an advantage which we should not waive. We should not so operate as to merely drive him away. As we must beat him somewhere or fail finally, we can do it, if at all, easier near to us than far away. If we cannot beat the enemy where he now is, we never can, he again being within the entrenchments of Richmond.

[And, indeed, the enemy was let back into Richmond and it took another two years and thousands of dead for McClelland cowardice--if that was all that it was. I still suspect, and I think the evidence is overwhelming that he was, either secretly a supporter of the South, or, what is more likely, a politician readying for a different campaign: that of the Presidency of the United States.]

Recurring to the idea of going to Richmond on the inside track, the facility of supplying from the side away from the enemy is remarkable, as it were, by the different spokes of a wheel extending from the hub toward the rim, and this whether you move directly by the chord or on the inside arc, hugging the Blue Ridge more closely. The chord line, as you see, carries you by Aldie, Hay Market, and Fredericksburg; and you see how turnpikes, railroads, and finally the Potomac, by Aquia Creek, meet you at all points from WASHINGTON; the same, only the lines lengthened a little, if you press closer to the Blue Ridge part of the way.

The gaps through the Blue Ridge I understand to be about the following distances from Harper's Ferry, to wit: Vestal's, 5 miles; Gregory's, 13; Snicker's, 18; Ashby's, 28; Manassas, 38; Chester, 45; and Thornton's, 53. I should think it preferable to take the route nearest the enemy, disabling him to make an important move without your knowledge, and compelling him to keep his forces together for dread of you. The gaps would enable you to attack if you should wish. For a great part of the way you would be practically between the enemy and both WASHINGTON and Richmond, enabling us to spare you the greatest number of troops from here. When at length running for Richmond ahead of him enables him to move this way, if he does so, turn and attack him in rear. But I think he should be engaged long before such a point is reached. It is all easy if our troops march as well as the enemy, and it is unmanly to say they cannot do it. This letter is in no sense an order.

Yours truly,

A. LINCOLN.