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Lincoln as War President

The importance of practical wisdom

By Mackubin Thomas Owens — October 18, 2014

A common thread among comments on my recent NRO posts regarding the Civil War sesquicentennial is that, given its material advantages, everyone knows that the Union was predestined to win the war. But the old adage is true: “It’s not the things we don’t know that get us into trouble; it’s the things we know that just ain’t so.” So it is with the inevitability of a Union victory.

The fact is that, throughout history, materially weaker opponents have defeated stronger ones. The late historian of the Vietnam War Colonel Harry Summers recounted a joke that applies in this case. After the election of 1968, the Nixon Pentagon fed all of the relevant data regarding the United States and North Vietnam into a super-computer and asked: “When will we win?” The computer processed the data and spat out its answer: “You won in 1964.”

The problem with looking only at relative material power was identified by the 19th-century Prussian “philosopher of war,” Carl von Clausewitz:

The moral elements are among the most important in war. They constitute the spirit that permeates war as a whole, and at an early stage they establish a close affinity with the will that moves and leads a whole mass of force, practically merging with it, since the will is itself a moral quantity. Unfortunately they will not yield to academic wisdom. They cannot be classified or counted. They have to be seen or felt. . . . It is paltry philosophy if in the old-fashioned way one lays down rules and principles in total disregard of moral values. As soon as these appear one regards them as exceptions, which gives them a certain scientific status, and thus makes them into rules. Or again one may appeal to genius, which is above all rules; which amounts to admitting that rules are not only made for idiots, but are idiotic in themselves.

Thus genius, will, courage, boldness, and the like exert at least as much influence on the outcome of a war as the physical measures of strength. The relative “value of the objective” of

both sides also matters.

The history of war illustrates that physical power is not enough to win wars. The physical elements of power must be organized in accordance with a concept of strategy, designed to achieve not only a military but also a political goal. As president, Abraham Lincoln played an instrumental role in doing this.

On the surface, Lincoln seemed ill-prepared to meet the military challenges generated by the War of the Rebellion. Indeed, by all measures, the Confederate president, Jefferson Davis, would seem to have had the edge. He was a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, he had a distinguished record during the Mexican War, he had been secretary of war during the administration of Franklin Pierce, and, as a U.S. senator from Mississippi, he had chaired the Committee on Military Affairs.

In contrast, Lincoln had served as a captain of militia during the Black Hawk War, during which he had seen no action. Indeed, as a Whig congressman for only one term, Lincoln had poked fun at his own military record by way of mocking the attempt by the Democrats during the election campaign of 1848 to turn Lewis Cass of Michigan into a military hero comparable to the Whigs' Zachary Taylor:

By the way, Mr. Speaker, did you know I am a military hero? Yes sir; in the days of the Black Hawk war, I fought, bled, and came away. Speaking of General Cass's career reminds me of my own. I was not at Stillman's defeat, but I was about as near it, as Cass was to Hull's surrender; and like him, I saw the place very soon afterwards. . . . If General Cass went in advance of me in picking huckleberries, I guess I surpassed him in charges upon the wild onions. If he saw any live fighting Indians, it was more than I did; but I had a good many bloody struggles with the mosquitoes; and although I never fainted from loss of blood, I can truly say I was often very hungry.

His one term in Congress was lackluster. He gained notoriety for opposing the Mexican War, as did most Whigs, and demanding of President James Polk that he show the very spot upon which Mexico had provoked the conflict.

What was Lincoln's role in Union victory? Some have concluded that his contribution was minimal. As noted above, it is argued that, given the relative power of the North, Union victory was assured beforehand. Lincoln's role was superfluous at best, and negative at worst – his propensity for interfering in the details of military operations was counterproductive.

A variation of this view holds that Lincoln's main contribution to Union victory was to find the right general. According to this view, Lincoln had to wade through a mass of incompetents until

he found Ulysses S. Grant, who led the Union armies to success.

In recent years, historians have begun to give Lincoln more credit as a war leader: He demonstrated flexibility and strategic acumen. He skillfully managed both his cabinet and his generals, and even Congress, where he had to maintain a working majority of Republicans and War Democrats if the war was to be won. He did not hesitate to overrule his advisers, both military and civilian. As Eliot Cohen of the Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) has noted, "Lincoln had not merely a powerful intellect but an extraordinarily orderly and balanced one." These historians have acknowledged that the Union's material advantage was not sufficient in itself to ensure victory. Lincoln had to make the decisions that translated this advantage into military and political success.

We sometimes forget that he also had to defeat the strategy pursued by the Confederacy. As Clausewitz reminds us, war involves an active opponent who acts and reacts to our strategy, often in unexpected ways. And certainly, with field commanders as talented as Robert E. Lee, Confederate armies did confound Union plans on more than one occasion.

LINCOLN AND UNION STRATEGY

Strategy is a species of prudence. Like the prudent man, the strategist never loses sight of the proper end. But he must be able to adapt his actions in pursuit of that end to particular conditions. Although Lincoln had no military education, he learned quickly and proved to be a competent strategist. He abided by the old principle that, in war, "the main thing is to make sure that the main thing remains the main thing." As his letter to Horace Greeley illustrated, the "main thing" for Lincoln was to preserve the Union. But, like any good strategist, Lincoln proved willing to adapt his strategy to the circumstances in order to achieve this goal.

Strategy is a plan of action for using available means to achieve the ends of policy. The modern conception of strategy originated with two 19th-century theorists of war, the Baron Antoine-Henri Jomini and Clausewitz, who understood strategy to be the art of assembling and employing forces in terms of time and space. Within time and space, strategy does three things.

First, strategy links ends and means, ensuring that there is no mismatch between the two. Second, strategy helps to establish a priority among ends. Since means are limited, not everything can be done. Strategy ensures that choices are made among competing ends. As Frederick the Great observed, "He who tries to defend everything ends up defending nothing." Finally, strategy helps to conceptualize resources as means. In other words, it translates raw inputs such as men and money into the divisions and fleets that will be employed for the object of war. To carry out a strategy, one must have the right tactical instrument. Even the best-conceived strategy will fail unless it can rely on the right instrument to implement it.

Strategy is both a process and a product. As such, it is dynamic. It must adapt to changing conditions, e.g. geography, technology, and social conditions. A strategy that works under one set of conditions might not work under different ones. To develop and execute a strategy requires that one be able to comprehend the whole and be able to bring the right instrument to bear at the right time and in the right place in order to achieve the object of the war. In Clausewitz's formulation, strategy is the use of the engagement for the purpose of the war. The strategist must therefore define an aim for the entire operational side of the war that will be in accordance with its purpose. In other words, he will draft the plan of the war, and the aim will determine the series of actions intended to achieve it: He will, in fact, shape the individual campaigns and, within these, decide on the individual engagements.

A strategy can be judged according to a number of criteria. These include: 1) the adequacy of the strategy for achieving the end and its fit with the character of the war; 2) the degree to which it took account of the strengths and weaknesses of the enemy and tactical, operational, logistical, and geographical constraints; 3) the appropriateness of the means to the achievement of the political objectives; 4) the degree to which attainment of the military objective translated into the achievement of political objectives; 5) the degree to which the actual conduct of the war corresponded to the strategic conception at the beginning of the war; 6) the match between the strategy and social conditions, i.e. the degree to which the strategy fit the "genius" of the people; 7) the ability of the government to maintain public support for the war and the chosen strategy; 8) the ability of social and political factors to withstand the shock of war; and 9) the costs and risks of the chosen strategy compared with the outcome. Finally, we must always ask, *Were there better strategic alternatives than the one chosen?* In terms of these criteria, Lincoln's strategy was extremely successful.

In a strictly military sense, Lincoln understood that the key to victory for the Union was a strategy of "concentration in time," i.e., the simultaneous application of military force at multiple points, making it difficult for the Confederacy to defend its territory. Although this principle was not successfully implemented until 1864, Lincoln articulated it in early 1862, when, distressed by the immobility of his armies, he issued his General War Order No. 1, directing Union forces to move in concert on Washington's birthday, February 22, 1862. And Grant wrote that, in April 1864, when he explained his intention to have all forces, even those on the defensive, advance at the same time, Lincoln replied, "Oh, yes! I see that. As we say out West, if a man can't skin he must hold a leg while somebody else does."

He also understood that a successful strategy required Union armies to defeat Confederate armies. To use Clausewitz's term, Lincoln understood that it was the Confederate army, not territory or the Confederate capital, that constituted the Confederacy's "center of gravity." Crush

the armies and the back of the rebellion would be broken. “I think Lee’s army and not Richmond, is your true objective point.”

Finally, he understood the importance of the West in Union strategy. In early 1862, Union armies had employed the Tennessee River as the “main line of operations” to penetrate deep into western Tennessee and northern Mississippi, turning Confederate defenses on the Mississippi River and in Kentucky. Grant’s subsequent victory at Shiloh permitted Union forces to seize major parts of the Confederacy’s one remaining east-west railroad line and opened the way to both Vicksburg on the Mississippi River and Chattanooga. The capture of the latter permitted Union forces eventually to penetrate the Appalachian barrier and seize Atlanta.

Of course there was a great deal more to Lincoln’s strategy than the military element. His was also a political strategy, the main weapon of which became emancipation at the end of 1862. Emancipation struck at not only the war-making potential of the Confederacy but also the heart of the southern social system. But Lincoln had to tread carefully for domestic political reasons, because while emancipation was welcomed by abolitionists and their radical Republican allies in Congress, it was denounced by conservative Democrats in the North and loyal slaveholders in the slave states that remained in the Union. Lincoln needed the support of both groups in order to prosecute the war successfully.

LINCOLN AND HIS GENERALS

Eliot Cohen has demonstrated that Lincoln’s presidency is by no means the model of the “normal” theory of civil-military relations, wherein the civilian authority establishes the goals of the war and then steps out of the way to permit the generals to implement what they believe to be the best military measures to achieve those goals. Lincoln was an activist commander-in-chief who frequently “interfered” with his generals by asking questions and goading them to perform more aggressively.

Perhaps the most important challenge Lincoln faced in the area of civil-military relations was that, early in the war, his generals pursued the war they wanted to fight rather than the one their commander-in-chief wanted them to fight. The clearest example of this problem was General George McClellan, who disagreed with many of Lincoln’s policies, and indeed may have attempted to sabotage them.

There is perhaps no more remarkable document in the annals of American civil-military relations than the letter McClellan gave to Lincoln when the president visited the Army of the Potomac at Harrison’s Landing on the James River in July of 1862. McClellan, who had been within the sound of Richmond’s church bells only two weeks earlier, had been driven back by Robert E. Lee in a series of battles known as the Seven Days.

McClellan's letter went far beyond the description of the state of military affairs that McClellan had led Lincoln to expect. Instead, McClellan argued against confiscation of rebel property and interference with the institution of slavery. "A system of policy thus constitutional and conservative, and pervaded by the influences of Christianity and freedom, would receive the support of almost all truly loyal men, would deeply impress the rebel masses and all foreign nations, and it might be humbly hoped that it would commend itself to the favor of the Almighty." McClellan continued that victory was possible only if the president was pledged to such a policy. "A declaration of radical views, especially upon slavery, will rapidly disintegrate our present Armies," making further recruitment "almost hopeless."

Advice from a general, no matter how inappropriate, is one thing. But for a general to act on his own without consulting his commander-in-chief smacks of insubordination. In early June of 1862, while the Army of the Potomac was still moving toward Richmond, McClellan had designated his aide, Colonel Thomas Key, to represent him in prisoner-of-war negotiations with the Confederates, represented by Howell Cobb. But McClellan went far beyond the issue at hand, authorizing Key to investigate the possibility of peace between the sections. In response to Cobb's assertion that southern rights could be protected only by independence, Key replied that "the President, the army, and the people" had no thought of subjugating the South but desired only to uphold the Constitution and enforce the laws equally in the States. McClellan apparently thought it was part of his duty to negotiate with the enemy on the terms for ending hostilities and to explain to that enemy the policies and objectives of his commander-in-chief without letting the latter know that he was doing so.

McClellan did not try to hide his efforts at peace negotiations from Lincoln. Indeed, he filed Key's report with Secretary of War Stanton and asked him to give it to the president. Stanton acceded to McClellan's request, but reminded him that "it is not deemed proper for officers bearing flags of truce in respect to the exchange of prisoners to hold any conference with the rebel officers upon the general subject of the existing contest."

McClellan's generalship was characterized by a notable lack of aggressiveness. He was accused of tarrying when John Pope's Army of Virginia was being handled very roughly by Lee at Second Manassas. Indeed, one of his corps commanders, Fitz-John Porter, clearly serving as a surrogate for McClellan, was court-martialed for his alleged failure to come to Pope's aid quickly enough. A month later, McClellan was accused of letting Lee slip away to fight another day after Antietam, and, after another bout of inactivity, Lincoln relieved him.

Radical Republicans charged that his lack of aggressiveness arose out of a near-treasonous sympathy for the South. I believe it was more a matter of his disagreeing with Lincoln's war aims. In any event, McClellan's language and that of some of his officers was often intemperate.

McClellan wrote his wife that “I have commenced receiving letters from the North urging me to march on Washington & assume the Govt!!” He also wrote her about the possibility of a “coup” after which “everything will be changed in this country so far as we are concerned & my enemies will be at my feet.”

He did not limit the expression of such sentiments to private correspondence with his wife. Lincoln and his cabinet were aware of the rumors that McClellan intended to put “his sword across the government’s policy.” McClellan’s quartermaster-general, Montgomery Meigs, expressed concern about “officers of rank” in the Army of the Potomac who spoke openly of “a march on Washington to ‘clear out those fellows.’” Such loose talk did not help McClellan or his army in Lincoln’s eyes.

Lincoln understood that he must take action in order to remind the army of his constitutional role. He did so by disciplining Major John Key, aide-de-camp to general-in-chief Henry Halleck and brother of the Colonel Thomas Key who was McClellan’s aide. Lincoln wrote Major Key that he had learned of a troubling exchange between the major and a brother officer. According to Lincoln’s source, Key had said in response to a query from another officer as to “why . . . the rebel army [was not] bagged immediately after the battle near Sharpsburg [Antietam]” that “that is not the game. The object 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 dismissed Key from the service, despite pleas for leniency (and the fact that Key’s son had been killed at Perryville), writing him that “it is wholly inadmissible for any gentleman holding a military commission from the United States to utter such sentiments as Major Key is within proved to have done.” He remarked to John Hay “that if there was a ‘game’ ever among Union men, to have our army not take an advantage of the enemy when it could, it was his object to break up that game.” At last recognizing the danger of such loose talk on the part of his officers and soldiers, McClellan issued a general order calling for the subordination of the military to civil authority. “The remedy for political errors, if any are committed, is to be found only in the action of the people at the polls.”

It is easy to criticize McClellan, but his view of the war was not uncommon during its early phases. Even Lincoln deplored the potential resort to a “remorseless revolutionary struggle” against the South. But by the summer of 1862, he realized that the Confederacy would not relent unless the character of the war changed. There were substantial political risks for Lincoln and the Republicans, but he concluded that the only way to save the Union was to ratchet up the pressure. The successful Union generals were those who adapted to the changing circumstances. McClellan was not one of them.

As I noted in an earlier [article](#) on NRO, one of the enduring fictions of the Civil War is that, early in the war, Lincoln had to weed out incompetent generals before he found Grant and Sherman, while the Confederates were blessed from the outset with superior talent. The fact is that there was only one successful Confederate army: the Army of Northern Virginia under Robert E. Lee. Its western counterpart, the Army of Tennessee, was consistently defeated by Union forces.

So why did it take Lincoln so long to find his general? Why did Lincoln rely on McClellan rather than Grant or Sherman in 1862? The answer is that Grant's greatness was not apparent in 1862. Neither was Sherman's. Indeed, in 1862, there was little difference between McClellan and Grant concerning how to conduct the war. But Grant changed his view after the bloodletting at Shiloh. He realized that the South could be subdued only by hard fighting. McClellan still believed in "soft" war.

In addition, neither Grant nor Sherman acquitted himself particularly well in battle during the early phases of the war. Grant had won a victory at Belmont, Mo., and captured Forts Henry and Donelson. He was also the victor at Shiloh, but both he and Sherman had been badly surprised at that battle. Indeed, Grant's army was very nearly destroyed. Thus it is unfair to both Lincoln and McClellan to compare the latter in 1862 to Grant and Sherman in 1864. Under the circumstance that prevailed at the beginning of the conflict, McClellan was Lincoln's only real choice.

Indeed, most of Lincoln's personnel choices make a great deal of sense when examined in context. Lincoln's first general-in-chief was Winfield Scott, recognized as the greatest American soldier between Washington and Grant. But Scott, who had conducted a brilliant campaign that culminated in the capture of Mexico City during the Mexican War, was old and infirm when the Civil War began. Scott formulated the first Union strategy, the so-called Anaconda Plan, which provided the framework for the conduct of the war. But Lincoln was dissatisfied with Scott's advice regarding Fort Sumter, and the old general clearly lacked the necessary vigor to provide the required military leadership.

Lincoln replaced Scott as general-in-chief with McClellan. The latter's record was exemplary. He was first in his class at West Point, had served with distinction during the Mexican War, had been sent as an observer of the Crimean War, and after resigning his commission, had risen to president of the Illinois Central Railroad. At the outbreak of the war, McClellan had been offered command of the military forces of several states. He chose Ohio. He had defeated Confederate forces under Robert E. Lee in western Virginia (now West Virginia), becoming the Union's first military hero. Lincoln appointed him both general-in-chief and commanding

general of the Army of the Potomac. When Lincoln expressed concern that both jobs were too much for one man, McClellan replied, "I can do it all."

But Lincoln was right. As a field commander, McClellan could not properly carry out his tasks as general-in-chief, so Lincoln replaced him with Henry Halleck in the spring of 1862. Halleck was a true military intellectual who was commander of the Department of Missouri when Lincoln tapped him for general-in-chief. It was he who formulated the plan to use the Tennessee River as the "main line of operation" by which Union forces outflanked Confederate forces on the Mississippi River and in Kentucky. But as general-in-chief, Halleck was a disappointment to Lincoln, acting primarily as a conduit for communications between Lincoln and his generals, in essence a mere clerk.

Lincoln replaced Halleck with Grant in 1864. Grant was by far the Union's most successful field commander. Commanding the Army of the Tennessee, he snatched victory from defeat at Shiloh in April 1862, achieved victories at Corinth and Iuka in the fall of that year, and, after a masterful campaign, captured Vicksburg in July of 1863. He subsequently was elevated to commander of Union armies in the West, in which capacity he oversaw the capture of Chattanooga in November of 1863. As general-in-chief, Grant implemented Lincoln's strategy of concentration in time. During the Virginia Campaign of spring-summer, 1864, and the siege of Petersburg, he made his headquarters in the field with the Army of the Potomac, largely because Lincoln had never quite forgiven its commander, George Meade, for failing to pursue Lee more vigorously after Gettysburg.

Lincoln's real right-hand man in the conduct of the war was Edwin Stanton, the secretary of war. Stanton's great contribution to Lincoln and the Union cause was to supply the energy and vigor necessary to prosecute the war.

One of Lincoln's great strengths as commander-in-chief was his decisiveness in relieving failed generals. In this, he differed greatly from the Confederate president. In 1862, he relieved not only McClellan, but also John Pope after Second Manassas, Don Carlos Buell as commander of the Army of the Cumberland, and Ambrose Burnside, McClellan's successor, after the disaster at Fredericksburg. In 1863, he relieved Joseph Hooker as commander of the Army of the Potomac early in the Gettysburg campaign, and William S. Rosecrans after his Army of the Cumberland was mauled at Chickamauga. Lincoln described him as "confused and stunned, like a duck hit on the head."

In contrast, Jefferson Davis left Braxton Bragg in command of the Army of Tennessee long after his leadership was compromised by the opposition and resentment of his subordinate commanders. Davis's attitude toward his generals was driven by personality. One of the reasons

Davis did not relieve Bragg was gratitude: He believed that Bragg had saved his command at Buena Vista during the Mexican War. On the other hand, Davis fought with generals Joseph Johnston and P. G. T. Beauregard over supposed personal affronts.

Lincoln never let sentiment or his personal opinion of an officer get in the way of his assessment of the officer's military potential. Lincoln was willing to accept a great deal from his generals if they would give him victory. This is illustrated by two cases. On one occasion, Lincoln visited McClellan at his headquarters. McClellan was not present when the president arrived, so Lincoln and his secretary John Hay waited. When McClellan returned, he went directly upstairs, although he knew Lincoln was there. Some time later, McClellan sent an orderly to advise Lincoln that the general had retired for the evening. When Hay criticized the president for permitting such an affront, Lincoln replied that "it was better at this time not to be making points of etiquette and personal dignity." Lincoln was willing to forgive such behavior if only McClellan would deliver him victories.

An even better example is the letter that Lincoln sent to General Joseph Hooker when he appointed him commanding general of the Army of the Potomac in early 1863:

I have placed you at the head of the Army of the Potomac. Of course I have done this upon what appear to be sufficient reasons. And yet I think it best for you to know that there are some things in regard to which, I am not quite satisfied with you. I believe you to be a brave and a skillful soldier, which, of course, I like. I also believe you do not mix politics with your profession, in which you are right. You have confidence in yourself, which is a valuable, if not an indispensable quality. You are ambitious, which, within reasonable bounds, does good rather than harm. But I think that during Gen. Burnside's command of the Army, you have taken counsel of your ambition, and thwarted him as much as you could, in which you did a great wrong to the country, and to a most meritorious and honorable brother officer. I have heard, in such a way as to believe it, of your recently saying that both the Army and the Government needed a Dictator. Of course it was not for this, but in spite of it, that I have given you command. Only those generals who gain successes, can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship. The government will support you to the utmost of its ability, which is neither more nor less than it has done and will do for all commanders. I much fear that the spirit which you have aided to infuse into the Army of criticizing their Commander, and withholding confidence from him, will now turn upon you. I shall assist you as far as I can, to put it down. Neither you, nor Napoleon, if he were alive again, could get any good out of an army, while such a spirit prevails in it.

And now, beware of rashness. Beware of rashness, but with energy, and sleepless vigilance, go forward, and give us victories.

One of the major challenges Lincoln faced with regard to his choices for high command was to satisfy the demands of different groups within the electorate whose support he needed to prosecute the war, especially War Democrats and German Americans. For instance, one of the reasons Lincoln did not sack McClellan sooner was that such a move would have agitated the Democrats, who revered him as an obstacle to what they took to be the radical policies of the Republicans and their abolitionist allies. These, the Democrats believed, were destined to ruin the Union and lose the war.

On occasion, this need for balance created problems. For example, in the fall of 1862, Grant was preparing for a move south along the Mississippi Central Railroad to capture Vicksburg. Meanwhile, John McClernand, a War Democrat and friend of Lincoln from Illinois, convinced the president to permit him to raise an independent command in the Northwest, also for action against Vicksburg. McClernand argued that Grant was moving too slowly and that raising the new force would rekindle the patriotism of the Northwest in the wake of the unpopular preliminary Emancipation Proclamation.

When Grant got wind of McClernand's actions, he telegraphed General-in-Chief Henry Halleck for clarification of his authority. Halleck assured Grant that he had control of all troops in his department, and then organized McClernand's force into two corps subordinate to Grant. McClernand complained to Lincoln, but the president backed Grant.

In general, Lincoln performed effectively as a military leader. He understood what had to be done and then found the generals who could implement his vision. The Union may have possessed a material edge over the Confederacy, but it was necessary to develop and implement a strategy that would translate this advantage into victory. This Lincoln did.

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