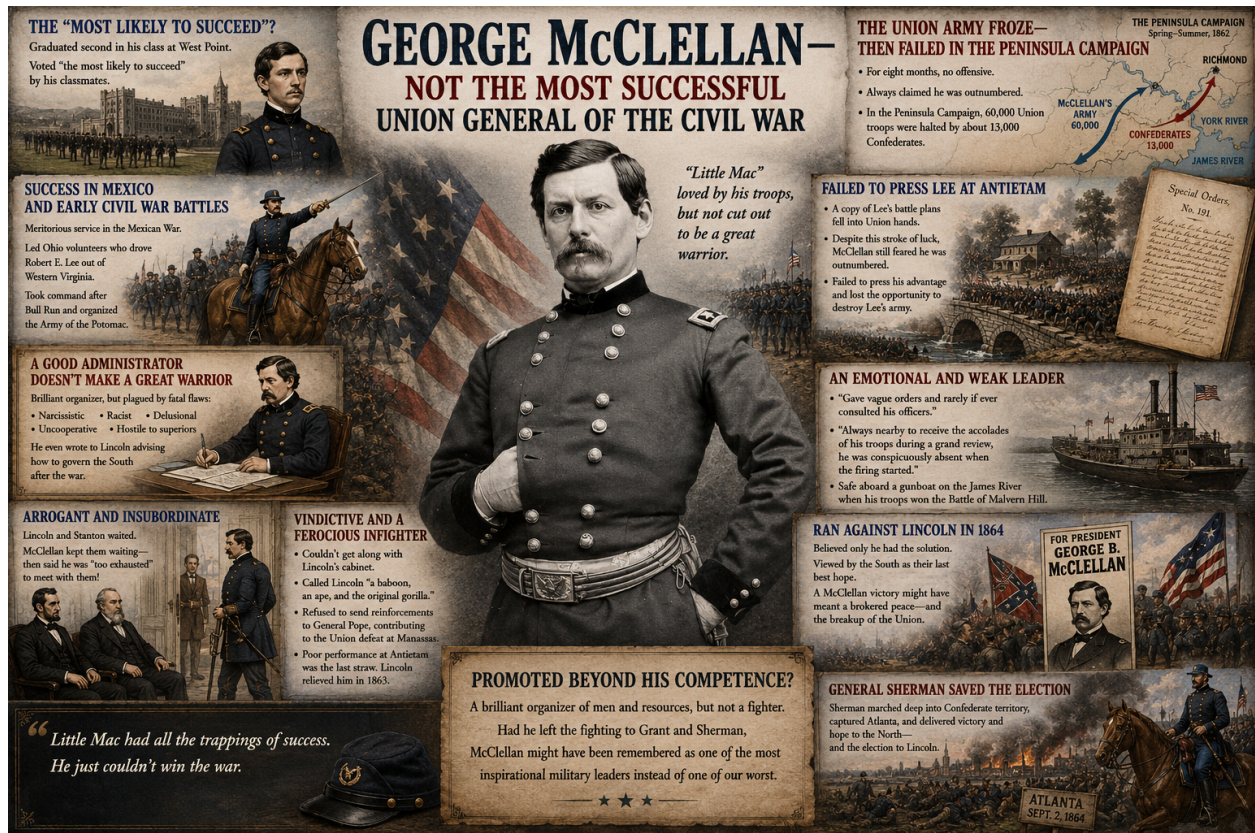


George McClellan--Brilliant Organizer, Reluctant Warrior

By Curtis Jerry Smothers



One of the least successful military leaders the United States ever produced graduated second in his class at West Point and was voted "the most likely to succeed" by his own classmates. Equally ironic, he was much loved by his own troops. The men called him "Little Mac." (He was short in stature.)

He was George B. McClellan from Pennsylvania, and had it not been for the fact that he was actually required to fight, he probably would have been a successful military leader.

Successful in Mexico and early Civil War Battles

Already a successful businessman and having amassed a meritorious military record in the Mexican War and as leader of the Ohio volunteers who chased Robert E. Lee and his Confederate Army out of Western Virginia, McClellan took command of a dispirited Union Army after their defeat at Bull Run. He was a brilliant organizer and whipped a ragtag undisciplined Federal army of volunteers into a proud, disciplined, and well armed Army of the Potomac.

A good administrator doesn't make a great warrior

When it came to fighting, however, Little Mac proved to be in over his head. He was also handicapped by some serious personality faults: He was according to Thomas Flagel ("The History Buff's Guide to the Civil War," 2003, Cumberland House Publishing) "narcissistic, uncooperative, racist, delusional, and openly hostile towards his superiors." He once sent a letter to Lincoln advising the President how to govern the South after the war.

One cannot read McClellan's [Harrison's Landing letter](#) without being struck by its breathtaking hubris. Rather than reporting to his Commander in Chief, McClellan presumed to instruct Abraham Lincoln how to conduct the war, govern the South, and preserve the Union. It was the work of a general who seemed to believe he understood the nation's needs better than its elected President.

Arrogant and insubordinate behavior

There is one famous anecdote where President Lincoln and War Secretary Stanton walked to McClellan's residence in Washington, D.C., to confer on some matter. McClellan arrived late and walked past Lincoln and Stanton, who were waiting in an outer room.

A few minutes later a servant came down and informed the President and the Secretary that the general would be unable to meet with them because he was too exhausted!

Union Army froze in place and then failed in the Peninsula Campaign

As leader of the largest and best equipped army in the history of the United States, for eight months McClellan did not mount a single offensive against the rebels. Displaying borderline paranoia, in the field he always claimed that he was outnumbered and could not start the fight without reinforcements.

McClellan's "offensive" in the spring of 1862 Peninsula campaign was halted when a force of about 13,000 Confederates halted McClellan's army of 60,000. (McClellan swore that there were at least 200,000 well armed rebels between him and Richmond.)

Failed to press Lee at Antietam

In McClellan's second chance - he had previously been replaced by Lincoln a year earlier - McClellan again proved to be the timid, paranoid general. At the battle of Antietam, McClellan was the beneficiary of one of the greatest strokes of luck of the Civil War. A copy of Lee's battle plans, including troop strength, fell into Union hands. Despite documented evidence to the contrary, McClellan still feared that he was outnumbered and failed to press his advantage and lost an opportunity to destroy Lee's army.

An emotional and weak leader

McClellan was an emotional and unstable man. According to Flagel, "he gave vague orders and rarely if ever consulted his officers. Always nearby to receive the accolades of his troops during a grand review, he was conspicuously absent when the firing started."

On one occasion, however, McClellan's lack of leadership was of great benefit, "McClellan was safely aboard a gunboat (according to Fligel) on the James River when his troops threw back Robert E. Lee at the battle of Malvern Hill."

Vindictive and ferocious infighter

Perhaps McClellan's worst trait and greatest disservice to his country was the vindictive and ferocious way he fought people on his own side. He could not get along with Lincoln's cabinet, and he repeatedly treated Lincoln with disrespect calling Lincoln a "baboon, an ape, and the original gorilla."

Finally, McClellan's refusal to send reinforcements to General Pope contributed to yet another Union defeat at Manassas. His poor performance at Antietam (despite knowing Lee's plans) were the last straw. Lincoln relieved McClellan of command in 1863.

Ran against Lincoln in 1864

Delusional to the last, McClellan decided that only he had the solution to our country's problems. He ran against Lincoln in the presidential election of 1864, and he was viewed by the South as the last best hope for their cause. Had McClellan won the election, there probably would have been a brokered peace between North and South, resulting in a breakup of the Union.

General Sherman saved the election

Fortunately, it was a better fighting Union general who prevented the disaster of a McClellan presidential victory. William Tecumseh Sherman marched his army deep into Confederate territory and captured Atlanta, at

once delivering a tremendous victory and morale raiser to the North, and more importantly for our country's future, the election to Lincoln.

Probably promoted beyond his competence

Perhaps George B. McClellan is an unfortunate example of a person being promoted beyond his competency. Had he been able to remain in charge of organization, supply, and discipline and left the fighting to the likes of Sherman and Grant, he might have been remembered as one of the most inspirational military leaders instead of one of our worst.

George B. McClellan may have been the finest organizer the Union Army ever produced—but organizing an army and leading it to victory are two very different talents.