Abraham Lincoln and the American Military Tradition

GLENN W. LaFANTASIE

Toward the end of the black winter of 1863, when Union morale plummeted and President Abraham Lincoln himself despaired over the inability of the Northern armies to win decisive victories, Walt Whitman, the poet of American democracy, viewed things differently. From the hospitals in Washington, D.C., where he worked as a volunteer nurse, Whitman saw Lincoln as a commander-in-chief of extraordinary abilities who would, in the end, lead the Union cause to victory. The president, he wrote, showed "an almost supernatural tact in keeping the ship afloat at all, with head steady, not only not going down, and now certain not to, but with proud and resolute spirit, and flag flying in sight of the world, menacing and high as ever." Although two grueling years remained to be fought before Lincoln would win the war, Whitman succinctly expressed what would become the prevailing view of how Abraham Lincoln's astounding military talents would make him the nation's greatest commander-in-chief.[1]

Ever since his death by an assassin's hand, which occurred at the very moment of his triumph over the Confederacy, Lincoln's reputation as a president and commander-in-chief has remained consistently high—a received wisdom that even modern historians refuse to overturn. While some criticism of his handling of the military has been inevitably raised—including his poor choice of commanders for the Army of the Potomac, his meddling in strategic matters that should have been better left to his generals, or his curtailment of civil liberties by suspending the writ of habeas corpus—those who knew Lincoln during his presidency, and the historians who have come after him, have heaped praise on him for his astuteness as the civilian commander who won America's most tragic and bloody war. The fact that Lincoln lacked any formidable military experience himself, except

1. Walt Whitman to Nat and Fred Gray, March 19, 1863, in "Two Civil War Letters," *American Heritage* 8 (October 1957): 64. This essay, in slightly different form, was presented at the Civil War Institute Summer Conference at Gettysburg College on June 13, 2023.

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for a brief stint as a volunteer in Illinois during the Black Hawk War of 1832 (a tour of duty that he later publicly mocked), made the 16th president's achievements as commander-in-chief seem all the greater. Just as Lincoln came to be regarded by Americans as the savior of the Union, and as the nation's best and most effective president, so too has he been seen as the country's unequaled commander-in-chief.[2]

2. The historical literature on Lincoln as commander-in-chief is vast and generally approves of his actions. See, for instance, in order of publication: Archibald Forbes, "Lincoln as a Strategist. Part I," *North American Review* 155 (July 1892): 53–68, "Lincoln as a Strategist, Part II, *North American Review* 155 (August 1892): 160–70; William H. Lambert, *Abraham Lincoln: Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States*, October 11, 1899 (Pittsburgh: n.p., 1899); Moses Harris, "Lincoln, The Commander-in-Chief" (1903), *War Papers*, Commandery of the State of Wisconsin, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, 4 vols. (Milwaukee: Burdick & Allen, 1891–1914), 3:160–67; Francis V. Greene, "Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief," *Scribner's Magazine* 46 (July 1909): 104–15; Arthur Latham Conger, "President Lincoln as War Statesman," *Proceedings of the Society at Its Sixty-Fourth Annual Meeting Held October 19, 1916* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1917); Colin R. Ballard, *The Military Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1926); James G. Randall, *Constitutional Problems Under Lincoln* (New York and London: D. Appleton and Co., 1926); Kenneth P. Williams, *Lincoln Finds a General*, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1949–1957); Bruce Catton, *The Army of the Potomac Trilogy* [*Mr. Lincoln's Army* (1951); *Glory Road* (1952); *A Stillness at Appomattox* (1953)], ed. Gary W. Gallagher (New York: Library of America, 2022); T. Harry Williams, *Lincoln and His Generals* (New York: Knopf, 1952); Bruce Catton, *This Hallowed Ground: The Story of the Union Side of the Civil War* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1956); Richard N. Current, "The Military Genius," in *The Lincoln Nobody Knows* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1958), 131–63; Edward M. Coffman, "Lincoln as Military Strategist," *Lincoln Fellowship of Wisconsin Historical Bulletin*, No. 23 (Madison: Lincoln Fellowship of Wisconsin, 1968); John David Smith, *Abraham Lincoln: A Most Unlikely Military Man* (Fort Wayne, Ind.: Lincoln National Life Insurance Co., 1978); Archer Jones and Herman Hattaway, "Lincoln as Military Strategist," *Civil War History* 26 (December 1980): 293–303; Mark E. Neely, Jr., *The Fate of Liberty: Abraham Lincoln and Civil Liberties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Gabor S. Boritt, ed., *Lincoln, The War President* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Gabor S. Boritt, ed., *Lincoln's Generals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); David Herbert Donald, "Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis as Commanders in Chief," in Gabor S. Boritt, ed., *The Lincoln Enigma: The Changing Faces of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 72–85; William E. Gienapp, *Abraham Lincoln and Civil War America: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Glenn W. LaFantasie, "How Lincoln Won and Lost at Gettysburg," *Leadership in the Campaign and Battle of Gettysburg*, Papers of the Ninth Gettysburg Military Park Seminar (Gettysburg: National Park Service, 2002), 195–211; Daniel A. Farber, *Lincoln's Constitution* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Geoffrey Perret, *Lincoln's War: The Untold Story of America's Greatest President as Commander in Chief* (New York: Random House, 2004); Burrus M. Carnahan, *Act of Justice: Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and the Law of War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007); James M. McPherson, *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008); Craig L. Symonds, *Lincoln and His Admirals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Michael

Yet there is at least one glaring blind spot in our view of Lincoln as a commander-in-chief. For all the intensive scrutiny that has been concentrated on Lincoln and his times, and particularly the attention that has been paid to how Lincoln went about fighting the Civil War, we still have not confronted in any direct way a nagging question that goes to the very core of how the 16th president exercised his duties as commander-in-chief: If he managed the Union war effort with such magnificence, as so many historians have claimed, why was it so difficult for him to find the right generals to lead his armies or to get those generals to follow his orders, at least until he promoted Ulysses S. Grant to the high station of general-in-chief of the Union armies? True, scholars have posed the question over and again, but their answers always emphasize Lincoln's startling and generally exceptional performance as commander-in-chief, with a specific emphasis on how he learned quickly to understand military matters and how he defined his duties on the job. But what I think we have missed about him are the layers of complexity, the inconsistencies and contradictions, that lie beneath the surface of how he went about fighting the War for the Union.

At the simplest level, we may clearly see some of those complexities in Lincoln's deeply emotional response to the war. In carrying out his duties as the nation's civilian commander of the military, Lincoln was forced to face every aspect of the conflict. When he took office, many of his opponents believed he was incapable of handling the crisis that confronted him and the nation. At first, Lincoln agreed with them. He told a visiting Illinois friend that "he was entirely ignorant not only of the duties, but of the manner of doing the business." Even as he gained confidence in the White House, the war grew more and more intense, spiraling out of control as all wars do, and the burdens that Lincoln carried became monumental and physically apparent to even casual observers. John Nicolay, his private secretary, remembered "how he would sometimes sit for an hour in complete silence, his eyes almost shut, the inner man apparently as far away from him as if the form in

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Les Benedict, "Lincoln, the Powers of the Commander in Chief, and the Constitution," *Cardozo Law Review*, 29 (June 2008), 927–60; Jonathan W. White, *Abraham Lincoln and Treason in the Civil War: The Trials of John Merryman* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011); John Fabian Witt, *Lincoln's Code: The Laws of War in American History* (New York: Free Press, 2012); Brian R. Dirck, *Lincoln and the Constitution* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012); Jonathan W. White, *Emancipation, the Union Army, and the Reelection of Abraham Lincoln* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014); Stephen W. Sears, *Lincoln's Lieutenants: The High Command of the Army of the Potomac* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

his chair were a petrified image." As casualties mounted with every battle, Lincoln unfairly placed the blame on himself. If he tried to hide what he was feeling, he usually failed, for, as one congressman pointed out, "his face was always a title-page."[3]

He couldn't bear the suffering, but he did bear it. As president and commander-in-chief, Lincoln was the embodiment of the Union cause, and his single-mindedness of purpose became one of his greatest assets as a wartime leader. Despite his disquieting doubts and haunting sorrows, he repeatedly showed a formidable strength and resoluteness, often under enormous pressure. To John Palmer, an Illinois politician and general, Lincoln articulated in plain terms his policy and purpose: "My hope is to save the Union. I do the best I can today, with the hope that when tomorrow comes I am ready for its duty."[4]

Yet beneath the surface of his convictions lurked a discomfiting ambivalence toward the war and the military that could, at times, undermine his efforts, weaken his resolve, and impair his purpose. It was, in fact, an ambivalence that reflected a central paradox in American attitudes toward the military that has existed since the country's founding—an inherited tradition that opposed professional armies as a threat to liberty and a contradictory tradition that advanced the idea of a standing and professional army as a necessary protection against foreign military threats and violent internal dissent. The ambivalence has been evident from the time of the Revolutionary War and the Constitution, through the time when Lincoln rose to prominence in the first half of the 19th century, and on through the 20th century until our own time, when we continue to feel mixed emotions about our national security and the best means to ensure it. Lincoln, like many Americans, perhaps like *most* Americans, could not escape the ambivalence. While it succeeded in pulling him in different directions at once, as it also pulled and tugged at many Northerners and Southerners of the Civil War generation, it also helped him to become a far more distinctive commander-in-chief than we have generally recognized.

3. Robert L. Wilson to William H. Herndon, February 10, 1866, in Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, eds., *Herndon's Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements about Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 207; Helen Nicolay, "Characteristic Anecdotes of Lincoln," *Century* 84 (September 1912): 699; Henry L. Dawes, "Recollections of Stanton under Lincoln," *Atlantic Monthly* 73 (February 1894): 165.

4. Lincoln to William H. Seward, June 28, 1862, in Roy P. Basler, Marion Dolores Pratt, and Lloyd A. Dunlap, eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press for the Abraham Lincoln Association, 1953–55), 5:292, hereafter cited as *CW*; John M. Palmer, ed., *The Bench and Bar of Illinois: Historical and Reminiscent*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1899), 2:759.

His ambivalent attitudes toward the military and war were not necessarily damaging or ineluctably detrimental to the Union war effort. But they were, all things considered, very American.

In his younger days, while serving one term in Congress at the end of the Mexican-American War, Lincoln made a name for himself by railing against how President James K. Polk had overstepped his constitutional authority as commander-in-chief by manipulating the nation into an unwanted war. But if Lincoln, a Whig, took an unpopular stand—unpopular to most Democrats and even some Whigs in his home state—against the conflict with Mexico, his opinions about war and the military in general were not necessarily consistent over time.[5] In 1832, for example, he joined the state's volunteer force with the intention of fighting Indians, serving first as a captain and later as a lowly private in the Black Hawk War. His enlistment, however, seems to have been motivated by economic necessity rather than ardent patriotism and, although the evidence is scanty, perhaps by his own racial prejudice toward indigenous peoples. There is some conflicting evidence as to whether he and his men ever saw combat. Nevertheless, Lincoln looked back on his brief military service through rose-colored glasses. Years later he claimed that his success in being elected a company captain "gave me more pleasure than any I have had since."[6] Yet, while serving in Congress in the late 1840s, he used

5. See, for example, Current, *The Lincoln Nobody Knows*, 189–91; Gabor S. Boritt, "War Opponent and War President," in Boritt, ed., *Lincoln, the War President*, 179–211.

6. Lincoln to Jesse Fell, December 20, 1859, *CW* 3:512. For Lincoln's war experience, see Harry E. Pratt, "Lincoln in the Black Hawk War," *Bulletin of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, No. 54 (December 1938): 3–13; Wayne C. Temple, *Lincoln's Arms, Dress, and Military Duty During and After the Black Hawk War* (Springfield: State of Illinois Military and Naval Department, 1981). As to Lincoln's attitude toward Indians, see David A. Nichols, *Lincoln and the Indians: Civil War Policy and Politics* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978); Richard Striner, "Lincoln and Native Americans," in *Lincoln and Race* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), 64–69; Michael S. Green, *Lincoln and Native Americans* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2021). Lincoln's grandfather was killed by Indians in 1784, whereupon son Mordecai took immediate revenge and shot dead the offending Indian. Lincoln's father, Thomas, often told the tale of the Indian attack and his brother Mordecai's quick—and lethal—response. Mordecai Lincoln conspicuously remained an Indian-hater all his life. Young Abraham heard the story often in his childhood and took up repeating it in his adulthood. When he served in the Black Hawk War, he implicitly supported the policy of Indian Removal under President Andrew Jackson and later never voiced any opposition to removing indigenous peoples from their native lands. In 1862, after the great Sioux uprising in Minnesota, military tribunals convicted 303 natives of murder and rape and ordered their execution. After reviewing the trial records, and ranking rapists more deserving of execution than murderers, Lincoln commuted the death sentences of all but 38 Sioux. He was thus responsible for the greatest mass commutation of capital punishment

his very brief time as a soldier for political purposes to make fun of himself and oppose the militant expansionism of the Polk administration. More generally, he raised doubts about "the exceeding brightness of military glory," which he called "that attractive rainbow, that rises in showers of blood—that serpent's eye, that charms to destroy."[7] Lincoln's more substantive criticisms called into question Polk's actions as commander-in-chief. To his law partner in Springfield, William H. Herndon, he explained: "Allow the President to invade a neighboring nation, whenever *he* shall deem it necessary to repel an invasion, and you allow him to do so, *whenever he may choose to say* he deems it necessary for such purpose—and you allow him to make war at pleasure."[8]

The irony is, of course, that Lincoln himself would become commander-in-chief 13 years later and would wield war powers far greater than any that Polk had exercised during the Mexican-American War. In his first few months in office, Lincoln responded to the firing on Fort Sumter by calling up the militia and raising an army of 75,000 volunteer soldiers, blockading Southern ports, expanding the regular army, suspending the writ of habeas corpus, and doing whatever was necessary to suppress the Southern rebellion, winning congressional approval for his actions by the following summer. Lincoln justified his actions to Congress on July 4, 1861, when he said that "these measures, whether strictly legal or not, were ventured upon, under what appeared to be a popular demand, and a public necessity."[9]

Surely here was an irony not only apparent but palpable. Stretching far back to his days in New Salem, Illinois, Lincoln was remembered as a "Peace Maker" in the village. On the way to his inauguration,

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sentences in American history, while, at the same time, the largest mass legal execution in American history. The extant records reveal no soul-searching by Lincoln over his decision. On the Dakota war of 1862, see Scott W. Berg, *38 Nooses: Lincoln, Little Crow, and the Beginning of the Frontier's End* (New York: Pantheon, 2012); Gustav Niebuhr, *Lincoln's Bishop: A President, A Priest, and the Fate of 300 Dakota Sioux Warriors* (New York: HarperOne, 2014); Kenneth Carley, *The Dakota War of 1862: Minnesota's Other Civil War* (St. Paul.: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001). For a more positive assessment of Lincoln and indigenous peoples, see Mark E. Neely, Jr., "Pale-Faced People and Their Red Brethren," *Lincoln Lore*, No. 1686 (August 1978): 1–3.

7. Lincoln, Speech in the U.S. House of Representatives, January 12, 1848, *CW*, 1:439. For Lincoln's objections to the Mexican-American War, see Gabor S. Boritt, "A Question of Political Suicide? Lincoln's Opposition to the Mexican War," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 57, No. 1 (Feb. 1974): 79–100; Mark E. Neely, Jr., "Lincoln and the Mexican War: An Argument by Analogy," *Civil War History* 24 (1978): 5–24.

8. Lincoln to William H. Herndon, February 15, 1848, in *CW*, 1:451–52.

9. Edward Bates, Suspension of the Privilege of the Writ of Habeas Corpus, July 5, 1861, quoted in Carnahan, *Act of Justice*, 53; Lincoln, Message to Congress in Special Session, July 4, 1861, *CW*, 4:429.

he told the New Jersey legislature that "the man does not live who is more devoted to peace than I am." He made a heartfelt plea for peace to the nation and in particular to the South in his inaugural address on March 4, 1861, appealing to what he called "the better angels of our nature." But his hopes for peace vanished in the fire and smoke that engulfed Fort Sumter. The war came, and suddenly this man of peace was transformed into what John Hay, his assistant secretary, called "a backwoods Jupiter" who hurled "the bolts of war."[10]

Lincoln did seem, nevertheless, to have a sense that as a backwoods Jupiter he had become something undesirable, someone he had never set out to be, someone quite different from the young congressman who had criticized President Polk for unjustly starting a war and spilling American blood. With the Civil War in full bore, Lincoln chillingly remarked to an Indiana senator, "Doesn't it seem strange that I should be here—I, a man who couldn't cut a chicken's head off—with blood running all around me?" He sounded as if he were talking more to himself than to anyone else. Lincoln did not, could not, escape the great tragedy of the war—the death of so many young men, the great, inescapable, prevalence of death that, as he later said, "carried mourning to almost every home, until it can almost be said that the 'heavens are hung in black.'[11] If anything, he seemed to recognize and feel the war's heart-rending tragedy all too well, all too deeply. In the end, though, his fatalism helped him accept what had befallen him.

Sounding like a character in a Nathaniel Hawthorne story, Lincoln called himself a "fatalist," which meant he believed that destiny carried him along its path, as if he rode as an unwilling and powerless passenger in the Fates' chariot. He told Isaac N. Arnold, a congressman from Illinois, that "I have all my life been a fatalist. What is to be will be, or rather, I have found all my life as Hamlet says: 'There's a divinity that shapes our ends / Rough hew them how we will.'" Likewise, he wrote to Albert Hodges in 1864, "I claim not to have controlled events,

10. Isaac Cogdal, Interview, 1865–1866, in Wilson and Davis, eds., *Herndon's Informants*, 440; Lincoln, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1861, *CW*, 4:271; John Hay to John Nicolay, September 11, 1863, in Michael Burlingame, ed., *At Lincoln's Side: John Hay's Civil War Correspondence and Selected Writings* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 54.

11. Emanuel Hertz, ed., *Lincoln Talks: A Biography in Anecdote* (New York: Halcyon House, 1939), 427; Lincoln, Speech at Great Central Sanitary Fair, June 16, 1864, *CW*, 7:394; David Homer Bates, "Lincoln's Forebodings of Defeat at the Polls," *Century Magazine* 74 (August 1907): 621. The quotation is given in slightly different form in Bates, *Lincoln in the Telegraph Office* (New York: Century Co., 1907), 284.

but confess plainly that events have controlled me." But this passive pose was actually a means of avoidance, a way in which he might lessen the misery that plagued him so relentlessly and a means by which he might elude direct responsibility for the war's progress or its setbacks. As an escape mechanism, as a tool of avoidance, his fatalism did not work very well. He may have believed that historical forces pushed or pulled him to fulfill his lot in life, but those circumstances and events kept requiring him to take action, whether he wanted to or not, and often led to his exercising of free will, something his Calvinistic fatalism preferred to discount. When he did act, it frequently brought about painful consequences, which he also could not evade. It took a heavy toll. Nicolay believed it was "impossible to portray by any adequate words, the labor, the thought, the responsibility, the strain of intellect and the anguish of soul he endured."[12] Lincoln's ambivalence remained intact. Hopeful of victory, he ordered men into battle; frustrated by defeats, he slipped into gloom.

His words and deeds as commander-in-chief fully revealed his mixed emotions about war. Early in the war, Hay observed that "the President is himself a man of great aptitude for military studies."[13] While Lincoln may have picked up the rudiments of strategic theory in his hasty consultation of military books borrowed from the Library of Congress, he had great difficulty in giving direct orders to his generals, many of them the commanders whom he placed in charge of the Army of the Potomac, the Union force in the Eastern Theater. Some of his critics carped about his indecisiveness and his slowness to act, but when it came to issuing orders to his military commanders, Lincoln's greatest difficulty was his lack of confidence and his sometimes costly hesitancy. He never once doubted the constitutional principle of civilian control over the military. Lincoln just found it difficult, given his ambivalence, to exercise that control with an iron hand.

12. Isaac N. Arnold, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Chicago: Jansen, McClurg & Co., 1885), 81; Lincoln to Albert G. Hodges, April 4, 1864, *CW*, 7:282; Helen Nicolay, *Lincoln's Secretary: A Biography of John G. Nicolay* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1949), 105. For the *Hamlet* quotation, see William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, ed. Louis B. Wright and Virginia A. LaMar (New York: Washington Square Press, 1957), 5.2.11–12.

13. John Hay, "Washington Correspondence," November 2, 1861, in Burlingame, ed., *Lincoln's Journalist: John Hay's Anonymous Writings for the Press, 1860–1864* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998), 130. William G. Greene, his neighbor and business partner in New Salem, also believed that Lincoln "had a considerable Eye for military affairs." William G. Greene, Interview, May 30, 1865, in Wilson and Davis, eds., *Herndon's Informants*, 19.

In no instance was this ambivalence more evident than in his contentious relationship with Major General George B. McClellan. It was still early in the war when Lincoln appointed McClellan to take over the Department of Washington, following the Union defeat at Bull Run in July 1861, and eventually the Army of the Potomac; later still, Lincoln gave McClellan the job of general-in-chief of all the Union armies. Yet there is also no denying that the two men clashed almost from the very start of their dealings, although Lincoln seemed genuinely to have liked McClellan and he often gave the general the benefit of the doubt, a gesture that McClellan found unable to extend in return. But McClellan, who suffered a profound insecurity from having been elevated to a military command of great responsibility beyond his own talents, and yet who believed that he was Lincoln's superior in intellect and breeding, was not solely to blame for his frequent disagreements with the president. Lincoln unwittingly contributed to his general's antics and tantrums (and even to McClellan's inertness) not only because the president lacked experience as a commander-in-chief, but also because his ambivalence to war hampered him in exercising decisive authority over McClellan (and a number of other Union generals).

Lincoln's greatest dissatisfaction with McClellan stemmed from the general's inertia and his inability to commit his army to battle. Over a dismally long period of time, stretching from July 1861 to November 1862, the two men could not see eye-to-eye. Lincoln never should have approved McClellan's campaign to take Richmond by driving up the Virginia peninsula between the York and James rivers, but even after he approved it the president continued to have doubts about the general's ability to accomplish what had been promised to the administration. Yet he could not bring himself to confront McClellan directly, give him straightforward orders, and force him to act—or cashier him. Even McClellan's failure to follow up his victory at Antietam in September 1862 was not enough for Lincoln to rid himself of the general once and for all. Political concerns, to be sure, weighed heavily on Lincoln, who believed he had to wait until the fall elections had taken place before he could oust McClellan, the darling of the Democratic Party. But Lincoln seemed unable to make up his mind about McClellan. On October 29, 1862, he wrote the general to say that he was "much pleased with the movement of the army." A week later the president fired him. At the heart of all this indecision was not only inexperience and Lincoln's own uncertainty as commander-in-chief, or a civilian's predilection to defer to professional soldiers, or a politician's calculated and careful steps, or even just poor management

skills, but Lincoln's pronounced and unescapable ambivalence toward war.[14]

The ambivalence, though, was not Lincoln's alone. He inherited a worldview in which Americans were traditionally ambivalent toward war, especially to any idea of a standing army or a professional military force. Lincoln's ambivalence mirrored the Founders' bequest of divided sentiments over what part the military should play in the new republic. On one hand, the so-called "radical Whig" tradition saw professional and standing armies as a menace to a virtuous republic and its vital liberties. On the other hand, the "moderate Whig" tradition advocated a standing and professional army—serving, of course, under proper constitutional restraints—as an imperative guard against the possibility of foreign invasion or the rising up of rowdy citizens. These contrasting traditions, which together comprised the American military tradition, were offshoots of English Whig ideology dating back to the Commonwealth men of the late 17th century and the coffee-house radicals of the early 18th century—a group of proficient English tract writers and political philosophers who opposed royal authority in all its guises and who eventually had an inordinate influence on the ideology of the American Revolution.[15]

14. Lincoln to George B. McClellan, October 29, 1862, *CW*, 5:481. On Lincoln and McClellan, see George C. Rable, *Conflict of Command: George McClellan, Abraham Lincoln, and the Politics of War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2023); Stephen W. Sears, "Lincoln and McClellan," in Boritt, ed., *Lincoln's Generals*, 1–50; John C. Waugh, *Lincoln and McClellan: The Troubled Partnership Between a President and His General* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Chester G. Hearn, *Lincoln and McClellan at War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012); John G. Nicolay and John Hay, "Lincoln and McClellan," *Century Magazine* 36 (July 1888): 393–415; M. L. Houser, *Lincoln and McClellan* (East Peoria, Ill.: Courier Printing Co., 1946).

15. For the "radical Whig" and "moderate Whig" military traditions and American views concerning militias and standing armies, see Lawrence Delbert Cress, "Radical Whiggery on the Role of the Military: Ideological Roots of the American Revolutionary Militia," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40 (January–March 1979): 43–60; George Guttridge, *English Whiggism and the American Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963); John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); John Phillip Reid, *In Defiance of the Law: The Standing-Army Controversy, the Two Constitutions, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1981); Cress, *Citizens in Arms: The Army and Militia in American Society to the War of 1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982); William B. Skelton, "Samuel P. Huntington and the Roots of the American Military Tradition," *Journal of Military History* 60 (April 1996): 325–38. On the importance of Whig ideology in the American Revolution, see Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealth Man: Studies in the Transmission, Development, and Circumstance of English Liberal Thought from the Restoration of Charles II until the War with the Thirteen Colonies* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press,

The war for American independence, however, did not reconcile these differing views; it only exacerbated and solidified the conflict between them. After the war, those who accepted the thinking of the radical Whigs assumed that any soldier willing to forgo his own liberty for the sake of obeying a president or a general suffered from a lack of virtue.[16] In the debate over the ratification of the Constitution, the authors of *The Federalist* argued the moderate Whig position, for the Constitution itself enabled the creation of a standing army, but Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, two of the three authors of *The Federalist*, expressed uncertainty—and thus tried to downplay the possibility—that such a standing army would ever be used explicitly for the purpose of suppressing domestic uprisings or rebellions. Patrick Henry, a staunch Antifederalist, would not buy it. If the Constitution were to be ratified, he complained, "a standing army we shall have also, to execute the execrable commands of tyranny." Henry's fellow Antifederalists loudly called for amendments that would, among other things, protect the right to bear arms (by relying, in a robust radical Whig fashion, on a citizens' militia), and prohibit standing armies outright.[17]

Even so, neither the Constitution nor its Bill of Rights remedied the divergence between the moderate and radical Whig attitudes toward the military. Instead, the Constitution injected even more ambivalence into American ideas about the military. In the first place, the Constitution instituted a dual land army consisting of national and state forces,

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1959); Trevor Colbourn, *The Lamp of Experience: Whig History and the Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1965); Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, enlarged ed. (1967; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992); Bailyn, *The Origins of American Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1968); Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787*, with a new preface (1969; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765–1776* (New York: Knopf, 1972); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975); Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763–1789*, rev. ed. (1982; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1991); Melinda Zook, *Radical Whigs and Conspiratorial Politics in Late Stuart England* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

16. Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 61–63; George Washington to the Continental Congress, September 2, 1776, Washington Papers, Library of Congress; Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1988), 162.

17. Patrick Henry, Speech, June 5, 1788, in *The Anti-Federalist Papers and the Constitutional Convention Debates*, ed. Ralph Ketchum (New York: Mentor, 1986), 206; Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 339–48.

what otherwise might be called a combination of the moderate and radical Whig approaches, by establishing a standing army in Article I, Section 8, and protecting the existence of state militias in the Second Amendment. In the second place, the Constitution granted Congress power to raise an army, but gave the president authority to serve as commander-in-chief. It could be said that the Constitution successfully perpetuated ambivalent attitudes to the military by turning them, with something less than consistency, into fundamental law.[18]

No matter how much he dismissed his military experience in the Black Hawk War and tried to turn it into a burlesque, Lincoln gained from that war a clear perspective on how citizen soldiers, whatever their many faults, formed the backbone of the nation's military security. His volunteer service gave him the insight and knowledge that would prove so vital to him as commander-in-chief during the Civil War, when he established a strong bond of affection between himself and the soldiers who served in the Union army, especially the Army of the Potomac. As the war grew worse and worse, Lincoln shored up soldier morale by frequently visiting the fortifications around Washington, the wounded in the city's army hospitals, and the camps of the Army of the Potomac to review the troops. "Mr. Lincoln's manner toward enlisted men, with whom he occasionally met and talked," wrote the journalist Noah Brooks, "was always delightful in its bonhomie and its absolute freedom from anything like condescension." In the election of 1864, the soldiers returned Lincoln's affection by voting overwhelmingly for him, despite the fact that he was the instrument who had sent so many of their comrades to their death and whose orders might, at any time, push the survivors and new recruits back into harm's way.[19]

18. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), 143–95.

19. Noah Brooks, *Washington in Lincoln's Time* (New York: Century Co., 1895), 77–79. On Lincoln's relationship with ordinary soldiers, see Ida M. Tarbell, "Lincoln's Love for the Soldier," *New York Times*, December 6, 1908; Bell Irvin Wiley, "Billy Yank and Abraham Lincoln," *Abraham Lincoln Quarterly* 6 (June 1950): 103–20; William C. Davis, *Lincoln's Men: How President Lincoln Became Father to an Army and a Nation* (New York: Free Press, 1999). For his early refusal and later willingness to enlist black troops, see Dudley Taylor Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Negro Troops in the Union Army, 1861–1865* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1956); John T. Hubbell, "Abraham Lincoln and the Recruitment of Black Soldiers," *JALA* 2 (1980): 6–21; Noah Andre Trudeau, *Like Men of War: Black Troops in the Civil War, 1862–1865* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998); John F. Marszalek, "Marching to Freedom: The U.S. Colored Troops," in Harold Holzer and Sara Vaughn Gabbard, eds., *Lincoln and Freedom: Slavery, Emancipation, and the Thirteenth Amendment* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), 113–29; John David Smith, *Lincoln and the U.S. Colored Troops* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013); Douglas R. Egerton, *Thunder at the Gates: The Black Civil War Regiments that Redeemed America* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

Lincoln also won the hearts of his soldiers with a legendary magnanimity that now defines the spirit of the man. In his dealings with soldiers, Lincoln's magnanimity was abundantly evident in the number of times he pardoned accused soldiers and saved them from the death penalty or other punishments. His pardons produced high morale among the soldiers, not only for those saved from condemnation, but also for their comrades who took pride and, no doubt, some consolation in the commander-in-chief's mercy. It may well be that Lincoln's leniency toward soldiers also sprang from his own experience as a volunteer in arms. He profoundly understood citizen soldiers and respected them.[20]

Although Lincoln forged a bond with the citizen volunteers who served in the Union armies, he consistently expressed mistrust of the military professionals who led his armies, most of them West Pointers. Exasperated with the professionals, he appointed his so-called political generals, politicians like John A. McClernand and Frank P. Blair, to compensate for the incompetency of generals like McClellan, Burnside, and Hooker. In the case of McClernand, who repeatedly failed to understand the chain of command and sought to undermine Grant in the Western Theater, Lincoln chose poorly, but Grant finally got rid of McClernand during the Vicksburg campaign. In the case of Frank Blair, however, Lincoln discovered that he had made an excellent choice; Blair became one of the Union army's best commanders and field generals, who confirmed Lincoln's own suspicion that a citizen soldier could rise to the occasion and acquire the talents of leadership and combat command.[21]

20. Schuyler Colfax in Allen Thorndike Rice, ed., *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln by Distinguished Men of His Time* (New York: North American Publishing Co., 1888), 338. On Lincoln's magnanimity and pardons, see Jonathan Truman Dorris, *Pardon and Amnesty under Lincoln and Johnson: The Restoration of the Confederates to Their Rights and Privileges, 1861–1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953); Neely, *The Fate of Liberty*; Thomas P. Lowry, *Don't Shoot That Boy! Abraham Lincoln and Military Justice* (Mason City, Iowa: Savas Publishing, 1999); P. S. Ruckman and David Kincaid. "Inside Lincoln's Clemency Decision Making," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 29 (March 1999): 84–99; Jonathan W. White, "'Sweltering with Treason': The Civil War Trials of William Matthew Merrick," *Prologue* 39 (Summer 2007): 26–36; Joseph C. Fitzharris, "Field Officer Courts and U.S. Civil War Military Justice," *Journal of Military History* 68 (January 2004): 47–72; Christian G. Samito, "The Intersection between Military Justice and Equal Rights: Mutinies, Courts-Martial, and Black Civil War Soldiers," *Civil War History* 53 (June 2007): 170–202; Jonathan W. White, "The Presidential Pardon Records of the Lincoln Administration," *JALA* 39: 2 (Summer 2018): 55–65.

21. On McClernand, see Richard L. Kiper, *Major General John Alexander McClernand: Politician in Uniform* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1999); Christopher C. Meyers, *Union General John A. McClernand and the Politics of Command* (Jefferson, N.C.:

Not even the rise of Ulysses S. Grant to supreme command of the Union army altered Lincoln's misgivings about military professionals. After breaking the siege of Chattanooga in November 1863, Grant wanted to capture Mobile, Alabama, but the president, Secretary of War Stanton, and General-in-Chief Henry W. Halleck rejected the plan. As Grant's star rose in the wake of his many victories, rumors buzzed around Washington and elsewhere that Grant might run for president in the 1864 election. Lincoln worried about Grant's possible candidacy, but Grant's friends reassured the president that Grant held no political ambitions. Nevertheless, Lincoln's distrust of Grant rose higher, well beyond what the rumors of Grant's drinking had aroused. Wanting his army to wage another campaign, Grant proposed attacking Raleigh, North Carolina, and using a victory there as a point of departure for an assault on Wilmington, about 125 miles to the south. These actions, Grant believed, would cut off supplies to Virginia and force General Robert E. Lee to lead his army out of the Old Dominion to face the threat of Grant's maneuvers. Halleck, somewhat misunderstanding the intent of Grant's strategy, vetoed the plan by reminding Grant that the objective of the Union forces was to destroy Lee's army. Thus, Lincoln and his administration had killed two of Grant's carefully prepared plans of action following his highly lauded victories at Vicksburg and Chattanooga.[22]

All in all, Lincoln and Grant did work remarkably well together, but after the war Grant erred in claiming that Lincoln, during their first meeting when Grant went to Washington to receive his commission as general-in-chief in March 1864, let the general know that he was turning over to him the entire handling of the Union forces. According to Grant, Lincoln assured him that "he was not going to interfere with my operations." In telling all this to his aide Horace Porter, Grant added, "He said . . . that he did not want to know my plans; that it was, perhaps, better that he should not know them, for everybody he met was trying to find out from him something about

McFarland & Co., 2010). Frank P. Blair, Jr., has no modern biography, but badly deserves one. In its stead, one must settle for William Ernest Smith, *The Francis Preston Blair Family in Politics*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1933), which does not adequately cover Blair's military career. See also Brooks D. Simpson, "Lincoln and His Political Generals," *JALA* 21:1 (Winter 2000): 63–77; David Work, *Lincoln's Political Generals* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009); Benton Rain Patterson, *Lincoln's Political Generals: The Battlefield Performance of Seven Controversial Appointees* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2014).

22. Bruce Catton, *Grant Takes Command* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969), 101–2; Brooks D. Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph over Adversity, 1822–1865* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2000), 250–51.

the complicated movements, and there was always the temptation to 'leak.'"[23] If this was communicated by Lincoln to Grant as a promise, then the commander-in-chief broke it and did so on several different occasions. After Grant laid siege to Petersburg, for example, Lincoln said to him, "I cannot pretend to advise, but I do sincerely hope that all may be accomplished with as little bloodshed as possible"—a less than subtle reference to the accusations made after the battle of Cold Harbor that Grant was nothing more than a butcher. Lincoln as commander-in-chief never stopped being suspicious of Grant or maintaining his superior position over the general-in-chief.[24] His doubts about military professionals remained constant for the entire war.

As commander-in-chief, Lincoln's greatest military achievement came on January 1, 1863, when he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, an executive order that was "a fit and necessary war measure" and "an act of justice" against the Confederate states in rebellion. Although the proclamation exempted the border states and areas under the control of the Union military, such as Tennessee and portions of Louisiana and Virginia, it was the war's most revolutionary measure that gave freedom to all slaves behind the lines of the ever-advancing Union army and transformed that army into an army of deliverance, liberation, and freedom. No small thing, the Emancipation Proclamation meant that the Federal forces henceforth would fight a war for the Union *and* a war for freedom. It also, using sly psychological leverage, made the North a force for liberty and the South a defender of slavery. The proclamation was revolutionary in its intent and effects. It opened the opportunity for the official enlistment of black soldiers into the Union army. Some white soldiers who had enlisted in the wake of Fort Sumter denounced the proclamation and

23. Horace Porter, *Campaigning with Grant* (New York: Century Co., 1906), 26. In his *Memoirs*, Grant described how the president supposedly pulled out a map of Virginia and briefed the new general-in-chief on how Lee's army should be destroyed, an incident Grant probably dreamed up to make plain his independence from Lincoln, for he reiterated, "I did not communicate my plans to the President." See Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles L. Webster & Co., 1886), 2:123. On Lincoln and Grant, see John Y. Simon, "Grant, Lincoln, and Unconditional Surrender," in Boritt, ed., *Lincoln's Generals*, 161–98; Brooks D. Simpson, "Lincoln and Grant: A Reappraisal of a Relationship," in Frank J. Williams, William D. Pederson, and Vincent J. Marsala, eds., *Abraham Lincoln: Sources and Style of Leadership* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press., 1994), 109–23. Simon's essay emphasizes how Lincoln and Grant developed a smooth working relationship with each other, while Simpson sees significant cracks in that relationship and argues that Lincoln did not give Grant *carte blanche* after naming him general-in-chief.

24. Porter, *Campaigning with Grant*, 223.

asserted with some punch that they did not want to fight for emancipation of enslaved blacks. Most Union soldiers, however, came to accept the proclamation, for they understood that freeing the slaves removed a vital resource upon which the Confederacy depended, particularly as unpaid labor that could be used to build roads and fortifications and drive wagon teams or haul supplies. For black soldiers, the proclamation lifted the Union cause to the higher purpose that they had longed for, thus transforming the war into a crusade for freedom.[25]

In the long run, the nation and its people had not only become a "house divided against itself," as Lincoln had warned it might in 1858.[26] The people themselves were profoundly divided over whether there should be a war, whether it was a war to save the Union, or a war to end slavery, how it should be fought, how strenuously it should be waged, how the hostilities should be ended, how the war should be won, how the war should be lost, what spoils the victor should reap, how the vanquished and their leaders should be treated. Beneath the surface of the Civil War generation's pronounced ambivalence was the shared inheritance of an American military tradition that heralded

25. Lincoln, Emancipation Proclamation, January 1, 1863, *CW*, 6:29–30; W. H. Blake to Schuyler Colfax, November 7, 1862, quoted in Allan Nevins, *The War for the Union, Volume 2: War Becomes Revolution* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), 239; John F. Shorter et al. to Lincoln, July 16, 1864, RG 94, L-211 1864, Letters Received, Series 360, Colored Troops Division, Adjutant General's Office, National Archives. On the proclamation, see Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010); Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004); Louis P. Masur, *Lincoln's Hundred Days: The Emancipation Proclamation and the War for the Union* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012); Todd Brewster, *Lincoln's Gamble: The Tumultuous Six Months that Gave America the Emancipation Proclamation and Changed the Course of the Civil War* (New York: Scribner, 2014); John Hope Franklin, *The Emancipation Proclamation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1963); Ira Berlin et al., *Slaves No More: Three Essays on Emancipation and the Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Edna Greene Medford, *Lincoln and Emancipation* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015); White, *Emancipation*; Michael Vorenberg, *The Emancipation Proclamation: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010); Harold Holzer, Edna Greene Medford, and Frank J. Williams, *The Emancipation Proclamation: Three Views* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); Holzer and Gabbard, eds., *Lincoln and Freedom*; Carnahan, *Act of Justice*; Michael Burlingame, *The Black Man's President: Abraham Lincoln, African Americans, and the Pursuit of Racial Equality* (New York and London: Pegasus Books, 2021). See also Joseph P. Reidy, *Illusions of Emancipation: The Pursuit of Freedom and Equality in the Twilight of Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019). For Union soldier support of the Emancipation Proclamation, see also Davis, *Lincoln's Men*, 89–108.

26. Lincoln, House Divided Speech, June 16, 1858, *CW*, 1:461.

the virtues of a citizen soldiery while at the same time acknowledging the need for a professional military that could wage effective and victorious warfare.

It was Lincoln's ambivalence toward war and the military, I would suggest, that shaped his role as commander-in-chief, and it was his dedication to the Union cause and to the Emancipation Proclamation, more than anything else, that let him cut through his mixed emotions to gain the clarity he needed, the decisiveness his civilian command of the military required, to reach a modicum of trust in Grant and his other able military subordinates. Eventually he trusted Grant enough to let the general smash the South and win the war. Lincoln's commitment to the Emancipation Proclamation, in a very real sense, successfully prevailed over the inherited ambivalence of the American military tradition and its conflicting dynamics. Yet that tradition did not end with the Civil War. Lincoln may have conquered his own ambivalence, but he did not slay the tradition or supplant its legacy. Even in the modern United States, where a professional volunteer military depends fully on the citizen soldiers of the Reserves and the National Guard to carry out its combat missions, the ambivalence of the American military tradition endures. Perhaps its survival—the strength of its persistent legacy—helps to explain why Americans so often find themselves at odds over the issue of war. Perhaps, too, the tradition's tenacious ambivalence accounts for why we so often find it easy to start our wars only to discover, by hard-learned lessons, how very difficult it is to end them.