Review

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George C. Rable, *Conflict of Command: George McClellan, Abraham Lincoln, and the Politics of War*. Conflicting Worlds. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2023. Pp. xii + 476.

I have eagerly awaited the appearance of this book ever since I learned that George Rable, one of the best Civil War historians in the business, had embarked on a new study of the fraught relationship between Abraham Lincoln, America's greatest secular saint, and George Brinton McClellan, a prime candidate for status as its greatest, most arrogant, and most petulant man-child. Generally speaking, historians exult in revising history. Indeed, in most respects, I would characterize revisionism as their central concern: asking new questions, critiquing old assumptions, applying new conceptual frameworks and methodologies, and so on. In contrast, the historical verdict on the Lincoln-McClellan relationship has remained remarkably static for nearly 75 years, ever since the 1952 publication of *Lincoln and His Generals* by T. Harry Williams, which I think many historians would join me in considering a classic work in the field of Civil War military history.

Williams devoted almost half the book to the Lincoln-McClellan relationship. In his view, Lincoln was probably America's greatest war president and a better natural strategist than any of his generals, Ulysses S. Grant included. Lincoln was also a thoroughly decent man with thoroughly decent motives, as well as a fount of homespun wisdom. McClellan, on the other hand, was, in Williams's withering phrase, "the problem child of the Civil War." In essence, Williams argued that Lincoln did his best to create a strong working relationship with McClellan and McClellan did his toxic worst to sabotage that relationship. Because Williams was an intelligent historian with an irresistible writing style and an air of vast certainty about everything—judging by his prose he seems never to have been blessed by a moment of self-doubt—Williams demolished McClellan with a combination of accuracy (McClellan assuredly had flaws), acid observations, rhetorical sleight of hand, and a heads-I-win-tails-you-lose

Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association, Vol. 45, No. 2, 2024
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narrative strategy whereby Lincoln (who also had flaws) emerged unscathed, notwithstanding the fact that he plainly allowed McClellan to undertake an operation, the Peninsula Campaign, in which he had no confidence and which he dramatically undermined at several junctures. A great war president who felt that way should not have allowed McClellan to undertake the operation in the first place.

We have occasionally seen historians attempt to modulate Williams's takedown of McClellan: through an adoring, unconvincing biography of "Little Mac" (Warren W. Hassler, Jr); by pointing out that McClellan was one of the few Civil War commanders whose military strategy had a clear relationship to political objectives (Joseph L. Harsh); by observing that McClellan's reputation has suffered by unfair comparisons to Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman, who during the war's early years made mistakes arguably as serious as those by McClellan (Thomas J. Rowland); and by offering an amplified, more sophisticated version of the Harsh thesis arguing that McClellan's real sin, so to speak, was his fidelity to the Lincoln administration's original commitment to restoring the Union without destroying slavery or making war upon Southern civilians after Lincoln decided in mid-1862 that victory required both measures and that the war must become a remorseless, revolutionary struggle (Ethan S. Rafuse). And we have consistently seen these efforts fail to disturb Williams's version of the Lincoln-McClellan relationship, as evidenced by two popular history books on the subject (one by Chester G. Hearn and the other by John C. Waugh) that claim to deepen our understanding of the relationship but, alas, are mere glosses on the Williams thesis.

Enter George Rable, an historian of remarkable gifts who has published respected books on an array of different subjects on the Civil War era, among them Reconstruction violence; women and Southern nationalism; the Confederate republic as a failed attempt to rescue the Founders' vision of American political culture; a campaign study (Fredericksburg) that is a triumph of historical imagination; and a remarkable interpretive synthesis about American religion during the Civil War. Rable is not always convincing but his work is always thought-provoking in the best sense of the term.

In *Conflict of Command*, Rable largely—one might say resolutely—eschews the familiar framing the Lincoln-McClellan relationship in terms of praise or blame, condemnation or rehabilitation. He positions himself as neutral on these matters, and although he reaches the same inescapable conclusion as others that the relationship failed spectacularly (it would be a bold revisionist indeed who would argue otherwise), he reaches that conclusion by a decidedly different route.

To some extent, *Conflict of Command* builds upon and extends the interpretation advanced by Rafuse in *McClellan's War: The Failure of Moderation in the Struggle for the Union* (Indiana University Press, 2005). It also places the Lincoln-McClellan relationship within the expansive web of Civil War political culture, in much the same way that several historians have recently done with the Union Army of the Potomac (a partial list of whom would include John Hennessey, Zachery Fry, John Matsui, and Jonathan White). He intentionally has little to say about the way in which the relationship shaped military operations and dwells instead upon how the outcome of those operations shaped the relationship. In short, the things that most interested T. Harry Williams do not much interest George C. Rable (notwithstanding the fact that Rable studied under Williams at Louisiana State University).

Structurally, *Conflict of Command* at first resembles a parallel biography of Lincoln and McClellan. This is literally true of the book's first chapter, in which Rable supplies necessary background about the two men, with emphasis on their shared ambition for high status in American society. It figures prominently in the second chapter, whose centerpiece is their shared responsibility to save the Union—McClellan militarily and Lincoln politically and as commander in chief. But as the book progresses, its dominant structure emerges. Rable is writing less about Lincoln and McClellan through the traditional lens of their direct interactions—played out either face-to-face or via telegraph and dispatch—than of how their relationship was interpreted by the throngs of politicians and politically-minded commentators who made it one of the most closely scrutinized relationships between president and military commander in American history.

When Rable comments directly on the Lincoln-McClellan relationship, he does so in an even-handed way that deliberately avoids the appearance of praise or blame. His focus is on the politicians, opinionmakers, officers and soldiers who were fixated on little else but the allocation of praise or blame, their appraisals usually dominated by political partisanship. This ceaseless kibbitzing by powerful men did much to complicate the Lincoln-McClellan relationship and set the conditions for its dysfunctional nature. And the breaking point for the relationship was less about deteriorating rapport between the two men or disagreements about military strategy than it was about a basic disagreement over how to respond to the increasingly destructive stalemate that the conflict had become by mid-1862. McClellan wanted to adhere to the original policy of a war to restore the Union without further alienating white Southerners or opening the Pandora's box of emancipation, fearing that a departure from this policy would make a difficult situation worse. Lincoln, of course, had reached the opposite conclusion.

With the best will in the world, this would have eradicated all possibility of a functional relationship between the two men. But for the time being, Lincoln and McClellan had to find ways to maintain the tenuous relationship that remained, a task complicated by the ceaseless swirls and eddies generated by the wider political culture. "All too many of the actors involved—Lincoln, McClellan, [General in Chief Henry Wager] Halleck, [Secretary of War Edwin] Stanton, and others," Rable notes of the situation that obtained after the abandonment of the Peninsula Campaign, "sought to avoid direct confrontations, often put off decisions, and allowed others to sow seeds of discord. At this point, aside from the obvious costs of military stalemate, the politics of war was exacting a heavy price" (p. 205).

Most historians place the terminus of the Lincoln-McClellan relationship with McClellan's relief from command of the Army of the Potomac on November 5, 1862 (which, Rable notes, provoked fury among most members of that army). Instead, Rable pursues the relationship through the 1864 presidential election, when the two men vied for the highest office in the land.

In the months after McClellan's relief, the prominence of the Lincoln-McClellan relationship in the first two years of the war prompted an unusually extended commentary by politicians and opinionmakers about the reasons for its demise. The reasons differed but critics generally agreed on one point: McClellan would be a likely Democratic contender for the Executive Mansion in 1864. In the meantime, the critique of the relationship continued in various ways; for example, Halleck's negative appraisal of McClellan in his official report on 1862 military operations, and several courts of inquiry, courts-martial, and congressional investigations of generals associated with McClellan that tacitly revisited his tenure in command of the Army of the Potomac. The defeats at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville invited calls for McClellan's restoration to command and raised questions about Lincoln's effectiveness as commander in chief. Hopes for McClellan's return to the Army of the Potomac reached their apogee on the eve of the battle of Gettysburg, when rumors swept the army that McClellan was back in charge, or coming to reinforce the army with a column of 60,000 men or, on the last day of the battle, that McClellan had *already* arrived on the field with 30,000 men.

The victory of Major General George Gordon Meade at Gettysburg put an end to fantasies of McClellan's return, but his failure to prevent Lee from escaping to safety across the Potomac invited comparison with McClellan's failure the year before. Meade's retention in command raised questions about why McClellan had been relieved after making the same error. The same was true the next spring, when Grant lost 53,000 men to reach the same place—the outskirts of Richmond—that McClellan had reached, almost bloodlessly, two years before.

McClellan spent much of 1863 composing a book-length report on the operations of the Army of the Potomac under his command that almost blatantly doubled as a political document for the 1864 election by tacitly but unmistakably arguing that as commander in chief, Lincoln had been a disaster. This hit Lincoln where he was most vulnerable, because the election was essentially a referendum on Lincoln's conduct of the war. It required a powerful counteroffensive by Lincoln supporters to paint McClellan as a military imbecile whose flawed approach to strategy had been driven by his partisan political views. Evidence for either position could be amassed, and one could reasonably argue that, taken on the whole, McClellan came off better than Lincoln. In August 1864, Lincoln feared that McClellan would win the election, which might well have occurred if not for Sherman's capture of Atlanta in early September, hard on the heels of a Democratic convention whose central plank was that the war had failed and a negotiated peace settlement must be found. The plank placed McClellan, who favored continuing the war, in an untenable position, and he lost decisively. Interestingly, Lincoln mused that had the Democrats nominated McClellan on a platform calling for a "vigorous prosecution of the war," his own chance for re-election might have been in real jeopardy (p. 319).

Rable's account of the Lincoln-McClellan relationship does not terminate even with the outcome of the 1864 election. It extends to McClellan's poignant reflections on Lincoln after the assassination of his nemesis. "Now I cannot but forget all that had been unpleasant between us & remember only the brighter parts of our intercourse" (p. 336) His remembrance of the darker parts would, of course, return with a vengeance in his memoir, *McClellan's Own Story*, published posthumously in 1887. And in any case, Rable concludes, Lincoln's assassination made him a martyr president, with McClellan fated to become his foil, "a simple story later baked into the standard Civil War narrative" (p. 336).

I have only one minor criticism to make of this important addition to Civil War scholarship. It omits a concluding summary of Rable's argument, which I would have appreciated. And I have one nakedly petty regret, which is that I would have enjoyed having Rable's appraisal of the Lincoln-McClellan relationship in its military operational dimension (he surely must have an opinion!), in effect flirting with the cardinal sin of reviewing the book the author did not write. As for the book the author did write: I consider *Conflict of Command* required reading for any Civil War scholar and rewarding for lay students of the conflict.