Carl Shusko

Close Reading Essay #2

Understanding Lincoln

**General Lincoln?**

President Lincoln understood the limits of his powers as commander in chief, but could not stop himself from pushing his own views of military strategy on his Union generals. In an April 9, 1862 letter to General George B. McClellan, Abraham Lincoln opened the letter “Your despatches complaining that you are not properly sustained, while they do not offend me, do pain me very much” (Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln to George B. McClellan, April 9, 1862 1862). This letter demonstrated Lincoln’s desire to be involved in Union tactical and strategic decisions. President Lincoln had a difficult and often contentious relationship with his Union Army commanders, particularly in the first years of the war. This led to a battle over who was in charge of Union military strategy during the war because repeated Union losses led to Lincoln’s lack of trust in the strategic decisions of Union generals.

In order to truly understand this letter, it is important to look at the context surrounding this letter. In April of 1862 General McClellan was conducting his peninsula campaign in which he was attempting to capture Richmond from the east but was not having a lot of success due to his cautious nature and overestimation of enemy forces (Donald 1995). Lincoln was very frustrated with General McClellan’s “over-cautiousness” which he wrote in several letters (Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln to George B. McClellan, April 9, 1862 1862). General McClellan was a good organizer as commander of the Army of the Potomac and well-liked by the soldiers under his command, but was very cautious to commit his men to battle (Donald 1995). This led to many letters, telegrams and conversations between Lincoln and McClellan. As cited by historian John Waugh, Lincoln was very concerned that McClellan’s peninsula campaign left Washington vulnerable to attack by the Confederate Army (Waugh 2011). Another historian Michael Burlingame echoed Lincoln’s frustration with McClellan stating “[Lincoln was] disturbed by McClellan’s lack of self-confidence, and losing patience with the army’s sluggish progress” (Burlingame 2008, 3283-3284). In response to Lincoln’s April 9 letter, General McClellan expressed his own frustration, “If they will simply let me alone I feel sure of success—but, will they do it” (Waugh 2011)? President Lincoln did not trust his generals, especially McClellan, to operate completely on their own.

In his letter to General McClellan, Lincoln cited his “explicit order that Washington should, by the judgment of all the commanders of Army corps, be left entirely secure, had been neglected” (Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln to George B. McClellan, April 9, 1862 1862). When Lincoln agreed to let General McClellan institute his peninsula campaign, he did so under the premise that Washington would not be left vulnerable (Donald 1995). Due to his own increasing knowledge of military strategy and his lack of trust in his generals, Lincoln developed his own military strategy. Lincoln outlined this strategy to both General McClellan and General Don Buell in 1862 in letters (Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln to Don Carlos Buell, January 13, 1862 1862). His strategy emphasized the need to attack the Confederate Army in coordination with other Union armies to spread out the Confederates, then attack the weak points (McPherson 2008). Lincoln constantly questioned the decisions of Union commanders. He suggested strategy and tactics to McClellan, Buell, Hooker and Meade amongst others.

Did Lincoln fancy himself a budding Napoleon or Caesar? Did he wish to take on more of a role in making Union military strategy? Lincoln certainly prepared to do just that. Lincoln borrowed *Elements of Military Art and Science* by Henry W. Halleck from the Library of Congress among other books on military strategy (Donald 1995, 329). Lincoln found time to study military strategy despite the difficult political demands of his job as president. He voraciously read the many reports from the field on the current military situation (Donald 1995, 331). He also kept up a dialogue through telegrams, letters and reports that kept him updated on the current military situation. Due to the widespread use of the telegraph, Lincoln was able to keep in constant contact with his generals in the field.

In Lincoln’s April letter to McClellan, he constantly questioned McClellan’s decisions. Lincoln even questioned McClellan’s own estimates of Union troop strength because of McClellan’s penchant to overestimate the enemy’s numerical strength (Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln to George B. McClellan, April 9, 1862 1862). Many Union officers resented this micro-managing by Lincoln and other Union leaders. McClellan, himself, bristled at Lincoln’s constant criticism worried that “I have not one single friend at the seat of gov’t” (Waugh 2011). Later in the war, it led to General Reynold’s refusal to take command of the Union Army before the battle of Gettysburg in 1863 because Reynolds wanted to plan his own troop movements without interference from Washington and Lincoln refused his request (Explore PA History n.d.). McClellan was not the only general he questioned, he also questioned the decisions made by Buell, Grant and Sherman at various points in the war.

Despite his questioning of his generals and studies of military strategy, Lincoln reminded himself that he was no military man (Donald 1995, 331). In the McClellan letter, Lincoln reiterated this belief when he ended with “This letter is no sense an order” (Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln to George B. McClellan, April 9, 1862 1862). Lincoln included this in numerous telegrams and letters to Union commanders, in letters to Buell, Grant and Sherman. In an 1862 letter to General Buell, Lincoln stated “For my own views, I have not offered, and do not now offer them as orders” (Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln to Don Carlos Buell, January 13, 1862 1862). Why did Lincoln send these letters when they were not orders? Even though Lincoln attempted to push Union generals to implement his strategy he knew the limits of his powers as commander in chief. But this did not prevent Lincoln from pushing, criticizing or scolding his military leaders when they did not live up to Lincoln’s expectations or follow his recommendations. Unlike McClellan, all Union generals did not bristle at the criticisms lobbed by President Lincoln. After a very critical letter from Lincoln to Joseph Hooker, the new commander of the Army of the Potomac, Hooker responded that this was “just such a letter as a father might write to a son. It is a beautiful letter, and although I think he was harder on me than I deserved, I will say that I love the man who wrote it” (Burlingame 2008, 3283-3284). Historians, like Martin Burlingame, saw these letters as methods to get the best out of his generals (Burlingame 2008, 3284).

In true Lincoln form, Lincoln closed his letter to McClellan with “I beg to assure you that I have never written you…in greater kindness of feeling now, nor with a fuller purpose to sustain you…But you must act” (Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln to George B. McClellan, April 9, 1862 1862). Lincoln reminded McClellan of his affection for him, but like a loving father Lincoln prodded him to attack. In the letter, Lincoln urged “And, once more let me tell you, it is indispensable to you that you strike a blow…you must act” (Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln to George B. McClellan, April 9, 1862 1862). Lincoln’s letter to McClellan demonstrated Lincoln’s desire to be involved in Union tactical and strategic decisions. Lincoln constantly urged McClellan and other Union generals to attack the Confederates. But this constant involvement of Lincoln held the Union army back because the army commanders never had full autonomy in the field, they had to deal with constantly changing orders and questioning by the higher ups in Washington, like Lincoln. The main problem with McClellan as Union commander was he never won enough battles to gain Lincoln’s trust. When Lincoln finally trusted General Grant and ceded more control to him in the later years of the war, the Union Army finally began to gain the upper hand over the Confederates.

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