McClellan at Sebastopol: The Delafield Commission and its Impact on the Siege of Yorktown

Joshua Elliot Leiner
Bates College, jleiner@bates.edu

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McClellan at Sebastopol: The Delafield Commission and its Impact on the Siege of Yorktown

An Honors Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
Bates College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By
Joshua Elliot Leiner

Lewiston, Maine
March 28, 2018
Acknowledgements

This project began where George McClellan’s Civil War career ended. One hot July afternoon in 2017, I visited the Antietam National Battlefield with my dad. At the end of our tour, my dad -- being the lawyer and historian that he is -- became engaged in an intellectual dispute with a volunteer docent over McClellan’s generalship and strategy. My dad cited Stephen Sears, the preeminent McClellan scholar, and the docent cited a new book by Ethan Rafuse. Though I considered myself knowledgeable in the Civil War, I could do nothing but stand idly by and observe; I did not have the historical chops with which to return fire. Leaving the battlefield that day, I decided to arm myself with the knowledge necessary to take part in the next McClellan conversation. Little did I know that a book recommendation from my dad and an even more strident one from the docent would lead to a year of research and my senior thesis. A year later, this is my contribution to the conversation.

Without my dad’s encouragement, this project would not have happened. The same is true for my mom. Like my dad, my mom is a lawyer, but most important, my chief counsel. I would also like to thank my brother, who has always set the bar high and forced me to measure up. In addition, I was lucky enough to have two great thesis advisors, Dr. Margaret Creighton and Dr. Andrew Baker. Both read countless drafts and helped me mold this thesis into its current form. While writing a paper of this length is a daunting task, they made the process straightforward. Finally, I’d like to thank the librarians at Bates, who were indispensable in my search for sources and were always available to answer any question about citations.
Table of Contents

Maps and Illustrations........................................................................................................................................p. 4

Introduction..................................................................................................................................................p. 6

Part One: Cementing Beliefs: McClellan’s Year in Europe and the Spurning of Abraham Lincoln........................................................................................................................................p. 25

Part Two: Visions of Sebastopol at Yorktown.................................................................................................p. 43

Conclusion..................................................................................................................................................p. 63

Bibliography................................................................................................................................................p. 74
Fig. 2. Map of the siege of Yorktown. (McClellan, George Brinton, *McClellan’s Own Story.* New York: Charles L. Webster & Co. 1887. 273).

Fig. 3. George Brinton McClellan. (“George Brinton McClellan.” *Civil War Trust.* https://www.civilwar.org/learn/biographies/george-b-mcclellanhttps://www.civilwar.org/learn/biographies/george-b-mcclellan).
Introduction

In early April 1862, General George Brinton McClellan, the thirty-five-year-old West Point graduate, Mexican War veteran, and commander of the newly formed Army of the Potomac, found himself at the head of a powerful army on the southern tip of the Virginia Peninsula, the land between the York and James rivers. The Confederacy’s destruction was in his grasp, or so it seemed. McClellan and his army were a mere sixty miles from Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy, and the bulk of the Confederate army lay to the north of the city. McClellan intended to promptly march up the Peninsula, where he would either besiege the rebel capital or fight a grand battle -- an “American Waterloo” -- on the ground of his choosing.¹ Richmond would fall. Coupled with a string of victories in the West, the war would soon come to an end. The Union would be restored.

But events did not go as planned. Marching up the Peninsula, McClellan’s army first made contact with rebel troops at Yorktown, where Confederate defenses were commanded by “Prince” John Magruder. At most, Magruder had only 15,000 troops and scant defenses impeding McClellan’s path.² Yet, instead of probing enemy positions and then assaulting them, McClellan chose to launch a siege. The siege of Yorktown lasted for four weeks, and before the rebels could be pummeled by Federal artillery, the defenders withdrew. The four weeks had given General Joseph Johnston, Confederate President Jefferson Davis, and his top military advisor, General Robert E. Lee, the opportunity to organize and consolidate the Army of Northern Virginia, ultimately paving the way for the Army of the Potomac’s defeat during the Peninsula Campaign that summer. The war would drag on for another three bloody years. The

¹ “American Waterloo” is a term used by Stephen Sears. Stephen W. Sears, To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1992), 98.
² To the Gates of Richmond, 29-30.
Arms and the Meaning of the Civil War

The Siege of Yorktown

The Siege of Yorktown is an often overlooked, yet pivotal moment of the Civil War. It would have dramatic implications on the remainder of the conflict and by extension, history since.

Launching a siege was not McClellan’s first choice. Originally, he intended to capture Yorktown not through battle, but by maneuver. McClellan planned to land the 1st Corps of his army on the eastern prong of the Peninsula (the Virginia Peninsula resembles an upside-down fork, and McClellan’s main army was on the western side), which would then destroy the Confederate guns that loomed over the right bank of the York River at Gloucester Point. By neutralizing the Confederate batteries, the U.S. Navy would be able to run ships down the York, thereby enveloping Yorktown.

Yet before McClellan could enact his plan, President Lincoln deprived him of the 1st Corps. Prior to the general’s departure for the Peninsula, Lincoln charged him with leaving adequate troops for the defense of Washington. The President believed that McClellan failed to do so, and as a consequence, he withheld the troops that he had promised to McClellan and instead used them to defend Washington. In fact, McClellan had left troops for the defense of Washington, but failed to properly inform Lincoln of his plan for the city’s defense. The general’s failure to communicate with Lincoln was not an oversight, but rather an intentional snubbing of his political superior. McClellan hated politicians. His Whig upbringing instructed him that they were useless people who inflamed the passions of partisans, and his belief was bolstered by his education at West Point and his experiences during the Mexican War.

Most important -- and hitherto undocumented by historians -- McClellan’s distaste for politicians was cemented by his experiences in Europe as a member of the Delafield Commission in 1855-56. The Commission was formed to investigate the military establishments of Europe and study the siege of Sevastopol, the site of the main Allied effort against the Russians in the
Crimean War. This was McClellan’s first experience dealing with diplomats and politicians in a professional context, and it was a complete disaster. Constantly delayed by politicians, the commissioners reached Sebastopol only after the substantial combat had taken place. McClellan never forgot how the politicians failed him. His antipathy towards politicians -- cemented in Europe -- contributed to the mindset that led him to spurn Lincoln prior to the Peninsula Campaign. By extension, this attitude ultimately led to the removal of the 1st Corps from his command. Deprived of the troops that he believed necessary for the taking of Yorktown by way of maneuver, McClellan decided to launch a siege.

The siege of Yorktown itself was also greatly influenced by McClellan’s experience as part of the Delafield Commission. While he did not arrive at Sebastopol in time to witness the action there, he did not fail to notice the results of the Allied artillery barrage. The Russian stronghold was utterly destroyed. McClellan believed that if he could reproduce the siege of Sebastopol at Yorktown, he would be resoundingly victorious. Indeed, in the midst of preparing for the siege of Yorktown, McClellan wrote his wife, “I do believe that I am avoiding the faults of the Allies at Sebastopol & quietly paving the way for a great success.” In fact, McClellan believed that a decisive victory was necessary due to his belief in the so-called “slave power” conspiracy. According to this theory, Southern aristocrats tricked the Southern population into secession. McClellan believed that only an overwhelming Union victory would break this spell and shatter the resolve of the Southern masses. A victory like that of the Allies at Sebastopol would do just that, and in April 1862, McClellan set to work to replicate Sebastopol at Yorktown.

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However, the situation at Yorktown was markedly different than the Russian predicament in the Crimea. Unlike the Russians, Confederate supply lines remained open, allowing them to both reinforce Yorktown and escape when they saw fit. McClellan ignored this seemingly obvious fact and pressed on for four weeks with his siege preparations. The rebels predictably retreated when they realized that they would lose the battle for Yorktown, and the delay of four weeks allowed the Confederacy to summon troops from across Virginia for a desperate stand in front of Richmond. McClellan’s decision to besiege Yorktown based on the principles of the siege of Sebastopol consequently lead to the Army of the Potomac’s defeat during the ensuing Peninsula Campaign.

Thus, this study broadly considers how McClellan’s experiences as a member of the Delafield Commission affected his outlook and generalship during the early Peninsula Campaign. Though there are countless noteworthy studies on George McClellan, the siege of Yorktown, the Peninsula Campaign, and even the Delafield Commission, none have adequately considered how the latter of these subjects impacted the former. The story of Yorktown began not in the sinking mud of the Virginia Peninsula in the spring of 1862, but across the Atlantic in palaces, government offices, and a Crimean port, seven years earlier.

* * *

For over 150 years, historians have vigorously debated the generalship, strategic acumen, and character of George McClellan. “By some persons he is considered the greatest strategist of the age,” wrote one anonymous author in 1864. “By others he is regarded as unfit to command even a hundred men.”\(^4\) In his classic compendium of Union commanders, *Generals in Blue*:

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\(^4\) Anonymous, *The Life, Campaigns and Public Services of General McClellan (George B. McClellan): the hero of Western Virginia, South Mountain and Antietam* (Philadelphia: T.B. Peterson and Brothers, 1864), 19.
Lives of the Union Commanders, Ezra Warner Jr. calls McClellan “one of the most controversial figures in American history.” Historian Joseph Harsh likewise asserts that “[s]ound and fury swirl around the historical reputation of George Brinton McClellan.”

Most historians have condemned McClellan’s generalship, with the exception of a few early biographers. James Havelock Campbell’s McClellan: A Vindication of the Military Career of George B. McClellan (1916), William Star Myers’ General George Brinton McClellan: A Study in Personality (1934), and H.J. Eckenrode’s and Bryan Conrad’s, George B. McClellan: The Man Who Saved the Union (1941), all paint McClellan as a brilliant, heroic general caught in a web of political intrigue, whose success at every turn was hampered by an unsympathetic, ignorant, Republican administration. These historians agree that McClellan’s attempts to mitigate loss of life and Southern property (slaves) were the appropriate approach in fulfilling the primary objective of the war -- the restoration of the Union. Some of these early sources lack detailed historical scholarship, but perhaps more important, they are all tinged with “Lost Cause” ideology. Started by former Confederates during Reconstruction, the Lost Cause was a literary tradition that emphasized the valor of Confederate soldiers and minimized the role of slavery in the Civil War. Lost Cause ideology was pervasive into the mid 20th century.

James Havelock Campbell asserts that McClellan was a military genius who was impeded by Lincoln, his administration, and Republicans. Campbell asserts that Secretary of War Edwin Stanton “desir[ed] for untrammeled supremacy and despotic power,” calls Lincoln’s treatment of McClellan “indefensible,” “brusque,” and “undignified,” and accuses the

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administration as a whole of being “manifestly derelict.”” In addition, Campbell cites no less than nine moves by the Republicans that hindered McClellan on the Peninsula. The titles of his chapters are likewise revealing; one is titled, “The Autocrat of the War -- The Fight Against the Coast Route -- Amazing Treachery,” and another, “The Coast Route Approved -- Underground Opposition.” Campbell denies that McClellan erred on the Peninsula, even going so far as to call the siege of Yorktown “indispensable to his advance,” and that the siege itself as being so successful as to have “no parallel in the annals of war.”

Campbell’s “Lost Cause” outlook can be seen in his discussion of McClellan’s conservative war plans. “He foresaw what was so terribly proven afterward in long years of bloodshed,” Campbell writes. “[T]he adoption of the overland route would needlessly drench the soil of Virginia, every foot of the way from Manassas to Richmond, with the bravest sons of the North and the South.” By focusing on the “needless” bloodshed of the “bravest sons of the North and the South,” Campbell is allowed to furnish what Civil War historian David Blight refers to as a “non-ideological memory of the Civil War,” one focused on the glorious, romantic experiences of soldiers rather than the principles for which they fought.

The Lost Cause tradition is equally prevalent in H.J. Eckenrode and Bryan Conrad’s 1941 work, George B. McClellan: The Man Who Saved the Union. As self-proclaimed “Southerners,” they believe McClellan was “a great general.” Their Lost Cause outlook is revealed when they

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10 McClellan: A Vindication of the Military Career of George B. McClellan, 163-164.
11 McClellan: A Vindication of the Military Career of George B. McClellan, 95.
12 David W. Blight, Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 103.
compare McClellan to Stanton; they describe the former “as conservative in politics, an advocate of states’ rights, frank, [and] free-spoken,” and the later as “sly, smooth, underhanded, devious, and tyrannical.”\textsuperscript{14} Notwithstanding the questionable accuracy of this description, the positive reference to “states’ rights” was central to Lost Cause ideology. In the words of David Blight, it is the interweaving of “honor, state rights, and racism” that Lost Cause proponents used to redeem the South following the Civil War. “States rights” was -- and still is -- a mantra used by Southern apologists to obscure the fact that owning human beings was the “right” for which the Confederacy fought. William Starr Myers, in his book, \textit{General George Brinton McClellan: A Study in Personality}, also espouses Lost Cause ideology. He labels Radical Republicans as “vindictives” and “demagogic,” and claims they attacked McClellan for his “moderate view in opposition to slavery, his reverence for the letter of the Constitution of the United States,” and his status as a “non-partisan.”\textsuperscript{15} To imply that Radical Republicans were against the rule of law obscures the fact that respecting the rule of law in 1861 meant leaving slavery intact. However, it would be unfair to place Myers -- and for that matter Eckenrode, Conrad, and Campbell -- alongside truly vicious Southern apologists, who wrote about “loyal slave culture” and cast the “Old South” in a wistful, romantic light.\textsuperscript{16} Rather, they are merely stained with the pervasive Lost Cause ideology that largely defined Civil War literature during the first half of the twentieth century.

Though he lived during a time when Lost Cause ideology was ascendant, Peter Smith Michie in his 1901 book, \textit{General McClellan}, was the first serious historian to cast McClellan in a negative light. During the Civil War, Michie was the chief engineer for the Union Army of the

\begin{footnotesize}
14 \textit{George B. McClellan: The Man Who Saved the Union}, 42.
16 \textit{Beyond the Battlefield}, 103.
\end{footnotesize}
James, and he carries a more authoritative voice than previous historians who were critical of McClellan. Though he posits the Lincoln administration as being “unfriendly and ungenerous,” Michie’s central argument is that McClellan, while possessing great organizational and tactical abilities, lacked the nerve to command troops in battle. Michie asserts that at Yorktown, McClellan failed because he was “characteristically non-aggressive as a commander,” and calls the general “timid, irresolute, halting, and extremely cautious.” He even asserts that the general had a “weakness in mental equipment.”

Michie’s critique of McClellan set the tone for historians writing in the mid-twentieth century, who were almost universally critical of McClellan. This trend is embodied in Kenneth P. Williams’ book, *Lincoln Finds a General: A Military Study of the Civil War* (1950), and T. Harry Williams’ *Lincoln and his Generals* (1952). Joseph Harsh, author of the 1972 historiographical study, “On the McClellan Go-Round,” refers to these historians and others as belonging to the “Unionist” school. He asserts that Unionist historians are marked by their “happiness with the final result of the Civil War,” and identify Lincoln and Grant as the two actors who are primarily responsible for the war’s conclusion. Unionist historians cast McClellan as a villainous character who impeded Lincoln and Grant, and by extension, the abolition of slavery and the reformation of the Union. While Harsh believes that some Unionist attacks on McClellan are valid, he asserts that they generally fail to view his decision-making within the political and social context of his time.

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17 The earliest historical criticism of McClellan can be found as early as 1890 in the works of John G. Nicolay and John Hay, Lincoln’s private secretaries. Joseph Harsh describes their objectivity as “fraudulent.” “On the McClellan-Go-Round,” 106.
19 *General McClellan*, 469.
Unionist interpretations prevailed for decades following Harsh’s study, most notably in James McPherson’s Pulitzer Prize winning work, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988), Stephen Sears’ *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* (1988), Joseph Glatthaar’s *Partners in Command: The Relationships Between Leaders in the Civil War* (1994), as well as the works of Bruce Catton, the preeminent Civil War popular historian. Sears’ work is considered by many to be the authoritative study on McClellan.21 In upholding the war’s just conclusion (abolition), Unionist historians were perhaps responding to the Lost Cause narrative of their predecessors, as well as the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Garry Gallagher remarks upon this trend in his book, *The Union War* (2011), where he writes, “[s]lavery, emancipation, and the actions of black people, unfairly marginalized for decades writing about the conflict, have inspired a huge and rewarding literature since the mid-1960’s.”22 Some recent works that typify this trend include Glen David Brasher’s 2012 work, *The Peninsula Campaign and the Necessity of Emancipation: African Americans and the Fight for Freedom*, and Chandra Manning’s 2007 book, *What this Cruel War was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War*.

Like Michie, Unionist historians argued that McClellan’s failures were due to mental and character flaws. Kenneth P. Williams wrote that McClellan’s “characteristics…led to his failure in the Peninsular and Antietam campaigns” and “completely unfitted him for high field command.” He later refers to McClellan as “unstable.”23 Ezra Warner Jr., writing in 1964, claimed that there were “deficiencies in [McClellan’s] makeup which prevented him from

21 Civil War historian Thomas Rowland writes that Sears is “[a]ppropriately hailed as the literary successor of Bruce Catton,” and has “established himself as the authority on [McClellan].” Thomas J. Rowland, “In the Shadows of Grant and Sherman: George B. McClellan Revisited,” *Civil War History*, vol. 40, no. 3 (1994): 204.
becoming one of history’s great commanders.”

Michael C.C. Adams, in his 1978 physiological study, *Our Masters the Rebels: A Speculation on Union Military Failure in the East*, argues that McClellan was “chronically overcautious” and that “[t]he nerve of the successful offensive general was not there.” In his book, *Reflections on the Civil War*, Bruce Catton poignantly criticized the character of McClellan, writing, “McClellan had practically all of the virtues necessary in a war leader except one -- he did not like to fight.”

Stephen Sears goes further, writing that McClellan was “a man possessed by demons and delusions.” Finally, and perhaps most damning, Joseph Glatthaar argues that “McClellan’s own personality lay at the heart of inaction,” and that his “psychological baggage” and “personality disorders,” impeded his ability to function as an army commander and general-in-chief.

Unionist historians view the abolition of slavery and the restoration of the Union as inevitable and condemn McClellan because they identify him as one who delayed the war’s conclusion. By contrast, they identify Lincoln, Grant, and Sherman as the primary agents in ending the war. Eric Foner, in his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*, comments on this trend when he writes, “[t]he problem is that we tend too often to read [Lincoln] backward, as an unproblematic trajectory toward a predetermined end.” This view is epitomized by the very title of Kenneth P. Williams’ book, *Lincoln Finds a General*, which implies that Lincoln throughout the war sought to find a general

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24 *Generals in Blue*, 474.


who could realize his radical war aims, a general he found in U.S. Grant. Hans L. Trefousse, in his 1969 book, *The Radical Republicans: Lincoln’s Vanguard for Racial Justice*, also pairs Lincoln with one of the final results of the war, abolition, by referring to him as a champion of “racial justice.” He too sees McClellan as an impediment to Union success, writing, “if the Federal army were ever to win, McClellan would eventually have to be removed.”

Stephen Sears similarly argues that the “Union cause would flounder” under McClellan “until a general with the same vision [of a grand strategy for prosecuting the war], U.S. Grant, took over the post.”

However, Unionist historians largely do not consider the possibility that McClellan’s views were in line with those of Lincoln, Grant, and Sherman. They also fail to consider the social and political context of 1861-62 when evaluating McClellan. Instead, as discussed above, they attribute McClellan’s poor decisions to his mental instability. As early as 1972, Joseph Harsh commented on this trend with respect to historians’ claims that McClellan was chronically slow:

> An historian may, of course, judge that a military action was conducted more slowly than surrounding circumstances permitted. But it is another thing altogether for the historian to assume the cause of the slowness lies in the personality of the commander without ever inquiring what reasons he might have had for acting as he did. To write simply that ‘McClellan conducted the siege of Yorktown cautiously,’ for instance, incites investigation of the causes of the caution. But to write, as is nearly always the case, that ‘the over-cautious McClellan wasted a month besieging Yorktown,’ is to combine description and explanation and shut out further inquiry. No one is left wondering why the siege lasted a month. It was because the Union commander was ‘by nature’ slow.

The first historian to answer Harsh’s call and critique the Unionist interpretation was Thomas J. Rowland. In his 1988 book, *George B. McClellan and the Civil War: In the Shadow of Grant*

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31 *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon*, 166.
Rowland does not argue that McClellan was a good commander, but rather establishes that Grant, Sherman, and Lincoln were guilty of the same sins that historians solely ascribe to McClellan. Rowland argues that Grant, Sherman, and Lincoln would not pass the mental health standards that historians have imposed on McClellan. After all, Grant was poor, depressed, and an alcoholic; Sherman experienced a nervous breakdown while in command in Kentucky; Lincoln suffered from chronic depression. Yet, with the possible exception of Sherman, few historians have attributed the actions of these figures to their faulty mental faculties. Furthermore, Rowland argues that unlike Grant, Sherman, and Lincoln, “[t]here is nothing in [McClellan’s] past to intimate a lurking, brooding, out-of-control maniac waiting to uncork on the Virginia Peninsula.”

Rowland asserts that McClellan’s tactics on the Peninsula can be attributed to his belief in the “slave power” conspiracy, the theory that the Southern, aristocratic, landowning class “hoodwinked” the majority of the Southern population into secession. Accordingly, McClellan believed that a decisive blow to the Confederacy would remove the wool from the eyes of the Southern masses, and peace and reconciliation would follow soon after. Anything short of a clear victory would strengthen Southern resolve and lead to a “remorseless struggle.” Rowland argues that only by besieging Yorktown could McClellan be assured of his army’s overwhelming, decisive success. Rowland also asserts that McClellan’s outlook during the Peninsula Campaign was reinforced by his intense study of the Swiss military theorist Baron Henry De Jomini, who believed in the concentration of force, precise maneuvers that would allow one’s army to dominate the field and capture tactical objectives, and limiting the scope of

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33 “In the Shadows of Grant and Sherman: George B. McClellan Revisited,” 210.
34 Thomas J. Rowland, George B. McClellan and Civil War History: In the Shadow of Grant and Sherman (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1988), 86, 78.
35 George B. McClellan and Civil War History: In the Shadow of Grant and Sherman, 78.
war so as to not include noncombatants or enemy property. Jomini was present if not pervasive in Civil War generalship, a fact acknowledged by many historians. The relationship between Jomini and the Civil War is so thorough as to prompt a full scale study by historian Carol Reardon, entitled *With a Sword in One Hand and Jomini in the Other: The Problem of Military Thought in the Civil War North* (2012).

Rowland also points out that Unionist historians are quick to judge McClellan for his moderate views on slavery. McClellan did not want to touch the issue of slavery, believing that doing so would alienate Southerners who were loyal to the Union. Unionists claim McClellan’s views were incompatible with those of Lincoln, who wished to use emancipation as a means to crush the rebellion. But as Rowland establishes, Lincoln’s actions in 1861 suggested that he thought along the same lines as McClellan as to how the war should be conducted with respect to slavery. That year, Lincoln rebuked both General John C. Fremont’s emancipation of the slaves in Missouri, as well as General David Hunter’s order to emancipate the slaves in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina. Rowland asserts that like Lincoln and McClellan, most Northerners in 1861 believed first in restoring the Union, and would accept that result with slavery left intact. This idea is supported by Mark Grimsley in his book, *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military policy towards Southern Civilians, 1861-1865*:

The North’s ultimate “hard war” policy was very far from the program with which it had begun the conflict. In fact, initially the Federal government

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36 “In the Shadows of Grant and Sherman: George B. McClellan revisited,” 217.
39 *George B. McClellan and Civil War History: In the Shadow of Grant and Sherman*, 88-89.
deliberately sought to exempt white Southerners from the burdens of war...The central assumption underlying the early policy was a faith that most white Southerners were lukewarm about secession, and if handled with forbearance, would withdraw their allegiance from the Confederacy once Union armies entered their midst...this conciliatory policy...remained the dominant posture towards Southern civilians until the summer of 1862.\textsuperscript{40}

Similarly, Gary Gallagher in \textit{The Union War} asserts, “[i]ssues related to the institution of slavery precipitated secession and the outbreak of fighting, but the loyal citizenry initially gave little thought to emancipation in their quest to save the Union.”\textsuperscript{41} Not all historians agree with Grimsley and Gallagher. Most notably, Chandra Manning argues that Union soldiers supported emancipation before Lincoln. However, she largely fails to take into consideration the social and political context of the time, referring to the cause for the “Union” as abstract, and questioning why anyone would choose to die for such an idea.\textsuperscript{42} On the contrary, Gallagher argues that the Union stood for “free labor, economic opportunity, and a broad political franchise [that Americans] considered unique in the world.”\textsuperscript{43} Gallagher’s view is supported by many historians, and combined with the undisputed racism and prejudice that existed in the North during the nineteenth century, it seems likely that at least many soldiers thought along the same lines as McClellan and Lincoln. Moreover, by all accounts, McClellan was beloved by his soldiers, and it is doubtful that they would so ardently support a man whose approach to the war they condemned. In sum, it seems McClellan was not alone in his delicate approach towards the South.

Thus, according to Rowland, McClellan’s strategy was not plagued by excessive caution, “demons,” or “delusions.” Rather, his strategy “was cogent, reasoned, and consistent with the

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{The Hard Hand of War}, 2-3.
\textsuperscript{41} \textit{The Union War}, 2.
\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Why this Cruel War was Fought}, 5.
\textsuperscript{43} \textit{The Union War}, 6.
conventional military wisdom and his personal views of the nature of the conflict… it mirrored the views of the administration and of a sizeable, if not shrinking, majority.” **Rowland argues that McClellan’s conservative, “Joministic” war policy was no longer tenable after the Union’s defeat during the Peninsula Campaign. Lee’s repulse of McClellan’s Army of the Potomac proved to the Northern public and the Republican Administration that the war could not be fought on a limited scope; if the North were to bring the South to heel, the “kid gloves” would have to come off.** In July 1862, Lincoln named John Pope, known for his radical views on the war, as the commanding general of the newly minted Army of Virginia. Later that month, Lincoln signed the Confiscation Act, which authorized the seizure of Southern property (i.e. slaves) that was considered of military value to the Confederacy. The Emancipation Proclamation finalized the radicalization of the war effort later that year, after the Union’s technical victory at Antietam. According to Rowland, McClellan’s failure to shift with Lincoln and the changing political tide is at the root of his failures, both as a general and in the eyes of historians. His strategy has since been deemed unrealistic and faulty because it failed and did not aim to eradicate slavery. Historians have lionized Lincoln and Grant’s “hard war” strategy because it succeeded and helped realize the moral imperatives of the war.

In his book, *McClellan’s War: The Failure of Moderation in the Struggle for the Union*, Ethan Rafuse expands upon Rowland’s study. Rather than simply examine McClellan’s politics and war aims within the context of the Civil War, he views McClellan’s actions in light of his

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**44 George B. McClellan and Civil War History: In the Shadow of Grant and Sherman**, 237.
**45 George B. McClellan and Civil War History: In the Shadow of Grant and Sherman**, 92.
**47 George B. McClellan and Civil War History: In the Shadow of Grant and Sherman**, 92.
Whig outlook, a product of his upbringing during the 1840s and 1850s. Whigs believed in tempering the passions of others to reach consensus, and they believed that educated, professional leaders were the only people who could rise above partisanship and selfishness to find solutions in the country’s national interest. Accordingly, Whigs believed that professional politicians were people who pandered to the ignorant masses rather than those who promoted the common good. Rafuse asserts that the Whig mindset was instilled in McClellan by his father, a prominent Philadelphia Whig, and reinforced by McClellan’s experiences at West Point and in the Mexican War. At West Point, McClellan became inundated with the Whig principles of discipline, hierarchy, and moderation. He saw these principles implemented during the Mexican War by the professionalism of Winfield Scott, who operated according to reasoned strategic thought. McClellan also affirmed his Whiggish revulsion of professional politicians during the Mexican War when, in his opinion, the Polk Administration intervened due to political considerations. Rafuse deduces that these experiences help explain McClellan’s distain for Lincoln, whom he viewed as a selfish, ignorant politician that was inflaming the passions of the North and the South, as well as McClellan’s conservative outlook on the war. McClellan’s Whig outlook was also on display at Yorktown. Conducting a siege would entail less loss of life and would allow McClellan to maintain professional control over the battlefield. By comparison, a frontal assault would only lead to the battle being waged by the unpredictable passions of unenlightened soldiers. Rafuse argues that in the Whiggish mind of McClellan, “there was simply no contest between the merits of a siege versus those of a frontal assault at Yorktown.”

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48 *McClellan’s War*, 5.
49 *McClellan’s War*, 21.
50 *McClellan’s War*, 49.
51 *McClellan’s War*, 207.
In part one of this study, I expand on Rafuse’s work. Just as McClellan’s schooling and Mexican War experiences reinforced his Whig values, so too did his time in Europe as a member of the Delafield Commission. The Delafield Commission was organized in 1855 by the Secretary of War (and future president of the Confederacy), Jefferson Davis. Davis was interested in the new technology that was being employed in the Crimean War and at the siege of Sebastopol in particular. Furthermore, he sought a new military doctrine for the U.S. Army. Thus, Davis asked the commissioners not only to observe the ongoing conflict in the Crimea, but also to make a detailed study of the armies across the European continent. In the pre-war U.S. Army, in which promotions and interesting assignments were few and far between, the commission was the most sought after assignment in the military. One of the three commissioners Davis selected for the mission was a 29-year-old rising star who was known for his fighting spirit and who had recently been promoted to the rank of captain: George Brinton McClellan.

While in Europe, McClellan and his fellow commissioners encountered numerous delays because of politicians. Though he and the commissioners arrived in Europe in April 1855, they failed to reach their primary objective -- Sebastopol -- before the final action took place there in September 1855. Though he took valuable lessons from his observations of the remnants of the siege, this was an incredibly frustrating experience for the young captain, as well as one that was professionally embarrassing. He expressed as much in the numerous letters that he sent home to his family. While McClellan’s Whig upbringing and negative experiences with politicians at West Point and in Mexico tempered his opinions about politicians, his experiences as a member of the Delafield Commission cemented McClellan’s mindset, because it was the first time that McClellan was interacting with politicians on his own in a professional context. The setbacks that McClellan and the commissioners suffered at the hands of politicians left a lasting
impression on the young man, and undoubtedly played a role in the mindset which led him to ignore Lincoln prior to the Peninsula campaign.

McClellan’s experiences in Europe influenced his attitude and behavior. They alone did not directly lead to the removal of McDowell’s corps. However, as I explore in part two, McClellan’s survey of the siege of Sebastopol undoubtedly played a major role in his decision to besiege Yorktown, as well as his execution of the siege. Several historians claim that McClellan’s participation in the siege of Vera Cruz during the Mexican War was the impetus for his decision to besiege Yorktown. While McClellan learned the principals of siege warfare at Vera Cruz, it was the siege of Sebastopol that provided the scale, modernity, and intensity that was comparable to the Army of the Potomac’s position on the Virginia Peninsula in 1862 (or at least as it existed in McClellan’s mind). Hence, in organizing the siege of Yorktown, McClellan asked not for his notes on the siege of Vera Cruz, but for his findings on Sebastopol.

In particular, McClellan thought that if he could replicate the Allied artillery barrage of the Crimean port, he would be rewarded with the overwhelming victory that he believed was necessary. McClellan believed in the “slave power” conspiracy, the theory that Southern aristocrats tricked the masses into secession. According to his reasoning, a Union victory that came at a heavy price would not be a victory at all; a battlefield strewn with the bodies of Yankee soldiers would only increase the South’s resolve to prosecute the war. McClellan believed that only through an overwhelming Union victory, one in which resistance was impracticable, could the bond between the Southern aristocrats and the masses be broken. With this connection shattered, the Confederacy would implode. When thinking about how to achieve such an impressive result, McClellan thought back to the destruction caused by the Allied
bombardment of Sebastopol. He believed that if he could do the same at Yorktown, he would destroy the foundation of the Confederacy.

Moreover, McClellan was not only intrigued by the overwhelming nature of the Allied victory at Sebastopol, but also believed that he was avoiding the mistakes of the Allies by not launching a frontal assault. The Allies failed in their first attempt to directly assault Sebastopol, and lost thousands of soldiers in the process. Even their “successful” assault came at the steep price of the lives of more than 10,000 soldiers. McClellan believed that by not attacking the rebels at Yorktown until he had properly pummeled them with artillery, he would avoid such losses, and gain the overwhelming victory that he believed was necessary. He miscalculated. In early April, Yorktown was ripe for the taking by frontal assault, and by launching a siege McClellan gave the rebels time to reinforce Yorktown, which then made an assault impracticable. Moreover, a siege could not work at Yorktown, because the rebels were not trapped; they could leave and reorganize anytime they wished. The Confederates did just that in early May, which then enabled them to defeat the Army of the Potomac later that summer outside of Richmond.

At Yorktown, McClellan was operating based on what he thought he knew. But what he knew was wrong.
PART 1

Cementing Beliefs: McClellan’s Year in Europe and the Spurning of Abraham Lincoln

General McClellan ignored Lincoln before leaving for the Virginia Peninsula, a move that cost him dearly. In March 1862, Lincoln ordered McClellan to organize the defenses of Washington, and the general submitted his plan for the capital’s defense on April 1. His plan was hard to understand even for the trained eye of a military man, and downright baffling for McClellan’s civilian superiors. Some men allotted for the defense of the capital were counted twice, while others were not in the vicinity of Washington at all. However, McClellan did not remain in Washington to explain his reasoning; on April 2, McClellan left for the Virginia Peninsula. He explained his hasty departure in a letter to his wife:

As soon as possible after reaching Alexandria I got the Commodore under weigh & “put off” -- I did not feel safe until I could fairly see Alexandria behind us…. I feared that if I remained at Alexandria I would be annoyed very much & perhaps be sent for from Washn. Officially speaking, I feel very glad to get away from that sink of iniquity.\(^{52}\)

McClellan did not wish to be “annoyed” by the ignorant president or the Radical Republicans, who had been hounding him for months. He only wished to get to the Peninsula and begin his grand campaign to end the war.

McClellan’s decision to ignore Lincoln manifested itself a week later, when the Army of the Potomac arrived at Yorktown. On April 5, within earshot of the snapping of gunfire, McClellan received a dispatch from Washington. It read, “[b]y direction of the President, McDowell’s army corps has been detached from the force under your immediate command, and the general is ordered to report to the Secretary of War.”\(^{53}\) McClellan had wished to land

\(^{52}\) George B. McClellan to Mary Ellen McClellan, April 1, 1862, in The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 223.
\(^{53}\) McClellan’s War, 205.
McDowell’s 1st Corps -- who were still stationed in Washington -- at the mouth of the Severn River. From there, they would march southwest to Gloucester Point, located across the York River from Yorktown, and destroy the Confederate batteries there. With the elimination of the guns at Gloucester Point, the navy would be able to sail up the York River past Yorktown, either transporting a force which would land behind Yorktown to envelop the confederates, or participating in the bombardment of the city, hastening the submission of the rebels. However, when Lincoln read McClellan’s spotty plan for Washington’s defense, he was furious; one observer remarked that the president was “justly indignant.” Lincoln had made it clear that the campaign could not commence “without leaving in, and about Washington” enough troops for Washington’s defense, and decided to withhold McDowell’s troops out of concern for the capital.  

Deprived of the 1st Corps, McClellan abandoned thoughts about a flanking movement via the York. He settled in for a siege that would last a month, a move that would cost his army the initiative and doom the ensuing campaign. All of this could have been avoided had McClellan simply told Lincoln how he planned to defend Washington.

McClellan ignored Lincoln prior to the Peninsula Campaign because he had contempt for the president. Not only did McClellan consider himself to be of higher social standing than

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54 George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon, 171.
55 Warren Hassler Jr., a historian sympathetic to McClellan, writes, “[t]he decision of the Union government to withhold the First Corps from McClellan was a vital one for the Federal effort in 1862...had McDowell not been detained, the Confederates would not have been given forty-five days in which to concentrate troops from all over Virginia and the South for a desperate defense of their capital. These six-odd weeks gave Lee and Davis time to assemble the largest Southern army every marshaled during the war, and thus enabled Lee, in the decisive battles in front of Richmond, for the only time in the war, to confront the Federals with approximately equal numbers.” Warren Hassler Jr., General George B. McClellan: Shield of the Union (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), 87.
56 Historian Chester Hearn calls the decision to besiege Yorktown the “one great flaw in McClellan’s triumphant advance on the Confederate capital.” Chester Hearn, McClellan and Lincoln at War (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012), 102.
Lincoln, but he also believed that the commander-in-chief was wholly ignorant in matters of war and unprepared to meet the challenges of the day. McClellan’s correspondence is filled with insults to Lincoln; he twice refers to him as a “gorilla.”

Many historians have written about McClellan’s poor relationship with Lincoln. Glatthaar writes that McClellan believed that “Lincoln’s casual manner” -- which sometimes included meeting officials in “carpet slippers” -- “his common habits and ways,” and his “apparently obtuse mind,” would be disastrous in prosecuting the war. Lincoln’s relaxed and informal nature, Glatthaar reasons, “rankled the cultured, aristocratic McClellan.”

Ethan Rafuse casts McClellan’s hostility towards Lincoln in the context of his dislike of all professional politicians, which he argues was a product of McClellan’s Whig upbringing in the 1830s. Whigs believed in tempering the passions of others to reach consensus, and they believed that educated professionals were the only people who could rise above partisanship and selfishness to find solutions in the country’s national interest. Accordingly, Whigs believed that professional politicians were people who “pandered to the ignorant masses” rather than those who promoted the common good. As a result, Rafuse argues that Whigs possessed a “powerful antipathy towards professional politicians” and considered them “selfish and unprincipled.”

Rafuse points out that McClellan’s father was a leading Philadelphia Whig and impressed Whig values upon his son. Indeed, in the first draft of McClellan’s memoirs, the general wrote that the “traditions and associations” of his household “were all on the side of the old Whig Party.”

This Whig mindset was further reinforced while McClellan was a cadet at West Point, where the

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57 George B. McClellan to Mary Ellen McClellan, November 17, 1861, in The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 135; George B. McClellan to Mary Ellen McClellan, November 18, 1861, in The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 136.
58 Partners in Command, 57-58.
59 McClellan’s War, 21.
60 McClellan’s War, 29.
Whig values of discipline, hierarchy, and moderation were emphasized. McClellan’s Whiggish elitism was then furthered as a junior officer in the Mexican War, during which the Polk administration intervened due to political considerations. Rafuse argues that these experiences foreshadowed McClellan’s tenuous relationship with Lincoln, as well as his failure to communicate with the president prior to the Peninsula Campaign.

Equally, if not more important, however, McClellan cemented his disdain for professional politicians in 1855-56 while in Europe as a member of the Delafield Commission. The commission’s objective was to learn about the military installations of Europe, and most important, they were to observe the ongoing war in the Crimea. This was the most important military expedition in decades, the most desirable assignment in the army, and the most important mission that McClellan was a part of between the Mexican War and the Civil War. Unlike the life experiences Rafuse chronicles, McClellan’s experiences with politicians in Europe was the first time he dealt with politicians on his own terms as a professional. He was not listening to his father rant about the feckless politicians or hearing about them second hand at West Point or in Mexico. While in Europe, McClellan depended on politicians and diplomats to help the commissioners reach Sebastopol, a city in the Crimea and the site of the Allied siege.

They failed him. Despite arriving in Europe nearly six months before the siege concluded, McClellan missed the war in the Crimea. In his letters home, McClellan blamed politicians and bureaucrats — both American and European — who made the commissioners jump through diplomatic hoops in their attempts to travel to Sebastopol. This experience was professionally embarrassing for the ambitious young man, and further heightened McClellan’s antipathy for politicians. Like his Whig upbringing, his experiences at West Point, and his...
service during the Mexican War, McClellan’s participation in the Delafield Commission precipitated his attitude towards Lincoln, his spurning of the president in the spring of 1862, and by extension, his failure on the Peninsula.

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During the 1850s, Secretary of War Davis became increasingly interested in the Crimean War. The Crimean War was a product of the weakening of the Ottoman Empire and the British and French desire to maintain the balance of power between themselves and Russia. Conflict began to brew when France and Russia started to jockey for control over Ottoman possessions in the Levant. Meanwhile, England became concerned with the prospect of Russia controlling the Dardanelles and the Bosporus Straits. After a series of failed diplomatic efforts, the French and British -- known as the Allies -- went to war against the Russians in the early spring of 1854.\(^62\) The scale of the conflict as well as the new technology that was being employed captured Davis' attention. The Crimean War featured steam-powered ships, massed rifled weaponry, railroads, and the telegraph system, and Secretary Davis was interested in how these technological innovations were being brought to bear.\(^63\) He sent the cream-of-the-crop of the antebellum American army to find out.

McClellan was in fact the youngest and most junior officer of the commission. He had gained a reputation as a fighting man in the Mexican War, where he was lauded for his coolness under fire. In 1855, at the age of twenty-nine, McClellan was appointed to the captaincy of a newly formed cavalry regiment after much political jockeying and assistance from Jefferson Davis. Davis had taken a liking to the young man, and in the early spring of 1855, tapped

\(^62\) The Kingdom of Sardinia also joined the Allies to fight against the Russians. “The Delafield Commission and the American Military Profession,” 190-191.

\(^63\) “The Delafield Commission and the American Military Profession,” 220.
McClellan for the commission to Europe. Davis also selected Major Richard Delafield and Captain Alfred Mordecai. Delafield had graduated first in his class at West Point in 1818, was renowned for building coastal forts, and had served as the superintendent at West Point. Mordecai had also graduated first in his class at West Point in 1823. He was appointed as the Assistant Chief of Engineers five years later, and Captain of the Ordnance Corps in 1832. At mid-century, Mordecai was the most accomplished military scientist in the United States.

In addition to visiting the Crimea, Davis asked the commissioners to investigate major European military establishments as well. Davis sought a new military doctrine for the U.S. army for fighting Native American Indians in the West, and he believed that such a model could be found in the armies of Europe. This was a unique request, as past commissions to Europe were sent to learn about single armies or one country, rather than the breadth of military knowledge across the continent. As a consequence, the 1855 commission to Europe was regarded as the greatest military expedition undertaken by the U.S. army in at least a generation.

Davis made it clear, however, that the focal point of the mission was to witness the Allied siege of Sebastopol. Sebastopol was the site of the Russian Black Sea Fleet and was the main focus of the Allied effort against the Russians. On September 25, 1854, 67,000 British, French, Turkish, and Sardinian troops began to besiege Sebastopol and its 7,000 defenders. The siege lasted roughly a year, during which time the Russian defenders swelled to 43,000 troops and

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64 The Young Napoleon, 45-46.
65 Davis likely asked Mexican War hero Robert E. Lee to join the commission as well, as Lee expressed regret at not being able to join the commission. That an officer as distinguished as Lee would regret not being able to go suggests both the commission’s importance as well as its high stature amongst the officer corps. Matthew Motten, “The Delafield Commission and the American Military Profession,” Ph.D. diss., Rice University, 1996, 194, 193-194, 202-205, 209, 222.
hunkered down behind increasingly impenetrable fortifications. The siege of Sebastopol involved all of the new technology that captured Davis’ attention, as well as more soldiers than any American had ever seen in battle. Sebastopol held key insights that would aid the development of the U.S. army and could potentially serve as a guide for future military confrontations with European powers.

On March 30, 1855, Davis ordered Delafield, Mordecai, and McClellan to “report to [Washington] without delay,” and on April 11, the commissioners set sail for England. Davis expected them to return by November 1. They would miss that date by more than five months, only returning to the United States in April 1856. Davis instructed the commissioners to act as diplomats and not as private citizens, meaning they had to receive official permission from foreign governments before traveling to the Crimea. Put mildly, the commissioners discovered the difficulties of diplomacy. Though they expected to reach the Crimea quickly, the commissioners were constantly delayed by diplomatic and bureaucratic setbacks, which led them to miss the war in the Crimea. McClellan’s experiences in Europe -- much like the early-life experiences that Rafuse chronicles -- contributed to his distaste for politicians, a mindset that led him to ignore Lincoln prior to the Peninsula Campaign.

McClellan’s first negative experience with a politician in Europe occurred in England, the commission’s first stop. Arriving in London on April 23, the commissioners met with James Buchanan, the American minister to the Court of St. James (and the future president of the United States). Much like they would at all of their stops, the commissioners sought the

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67 The Papers of George Brinton McClellan Sr., Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, microfilm reel no. 3, frame 253. Hereafter referred to as “GBMP 3.”
minister’s help in securing their passage to visit the British lines at Sebastopol. McClellan found Buchanan to be of very little help; in a letter to his brother, John, he wrote, “[w]ith all due deference to your partiality for Mr. Buchanan you must allow me to say that we are in no manner indebted to him for any assistance…”69 In McClellan’s view, the minister had failed to extend “any of those little courtesies” that they “might have expected,” and also failed to give the “official aid [the commission] had a right to demand.” It is unclear how Buchanan failed in his obligations; McClellan later wrote that the English have been “most friendly,” and they indeed granted the commission’s request to visit their camp at Sebastopol.70 The most McClellan had to say about the minister was that “[Buchanan had] no interest in his duty.”71 Most likely, Buchanan was indeed unhelpful, as all three commissioners came away from the experience with a negative impression of the man.72

After going through what McClellan called the “great humbug” of meeting the Queen, the commissioners traveled to Paris, where they arrived on May 7.73 There, McClellan had his second negative experience with a politician, this time with the American minister to France, John Mason. He believed that the minister was incompetent. Writing to his brother, McClellan complained that Mason was “not able even to obtain an interview with the Minister of Foreign Affairs.”74 He further expounded:

Here we still are my dear John…we have accomplished nothing here…Our country is peculiarly unfortunate in its diplomatic representatives abroad as far as we have yet seen…Mr. Mason has no influence or consideration whatsoever here.

69 George B. McClellan to John McClellan, May 2, 1855, GBMP 3: 273.
70 George B. McClellan to John McClellan, May 2, 1855, GBMP 3: 273.
71 George B. McClellan to John McClellan, May 22, 1855, GBMP 3: 293.
73 George B. McClellan to Elizabeth McClellan, April 25, 1855, GBMP 3: 270.
74 George B. McClellan to John McClellan, May 22, 1855, GBMP 3: 293.
Although Mason was perhaps incompetent, another explanation is that he was still suffering from the effects of a stroke. McClellan was aware of Mason’s condition, yet derided him none the less.\textsuperscript{75}

However, McClellan did not entirely blame Mason for the commission’s failure to immediately secure the paperwork for the commission to tour the French lines at Sebastopol; he also blamed the “d----d Ostend Conference.”\textsuperscript{76} The Ostend Conference was a meeting between Spanish, French, English, and American diplomats in October 1854, to discuss Spain’s sale of Cuba to the United States. The resulting manifesto suggested that if Spain refused to sell Cuba, America would take it by force. The Ostend Conference left many Europeans with a negative impression of the United States, especially in France.\textsuperscript{77} In McClellan’s estimation, the Ostend Manifesto brought about a “beautiful state of affairs” in which “the minister of any insignificant little German or Latin American country has more influence than [our diplomats].” The perceived failures of the Ostend Conference also fit perfectly into McClellan’s Whiggish belief that politicians were incapable of governing, and simply inflamed the passions of partisans.

As was the case in England, however, McClellan was too quick to judge Mason. The American minister was able to secure the commissioners a meeting with Count Walewski, the French foreign minister.\textsuperscript{78} Walewski gave the commissioners good and bad news: the French would allow them to visit their camps at Sebastopol, but only on the condition that they not also visit the Russian lines. When Delafield protested, the count abruptly told them that permission to

\textsuperscript{75} Moten aptly categorizes McClellan’s character when he writes, “[t]o read at length in McClellan’s correspondence is to develop a healthy dislike for the man.” “The Delafield Commission and the American Military Profession,” 216, 293.

\textsuperscript{76} George B. McClellan to John McClellan, May 22, 1855, GBMP 3: 293.

\textsuperscript{77} “The Delafield Commission and the American Military Profession,” 232.

\textsuperscript{78} Count Walewski was also the son of Napoleon I. George B. McClellan to John McClellan, May 22 1855, GBMP 3: 293; “The Delafield Commission and the American Military Profession,” 247-248.
visit the French lines was a courtesy that could be withdrawn. McClellan was incensed. Not only was Walewski a politician standing in the commission’s way, but he was rude as well. Despite their impatience to be underway, the commissioners were again delayed when the French Emperor, Napoleon III, invited the Americans to a reception. McClellan’s frustration with yet another delay is apparent by his terming the French ruler a “stolid stupid looking man” despite admiring the Emperor’s “talent.”

On June 1, the commissioners finally arrived at their next destination, Berlin. For the first time on their journey, they quickly experienced diplomatic success. Or at least they thought they did. On their first day there, the Americans met with the Russian minister, who immediately assured them that they would be able to visit the Russian lines at Sebastopol. However, he later told them that the Russian Governor in Warsaw, Marshal Prince I.F. Paskievich, was the only one who could officially grant permission for their journey to the Crimea. McClellan optimistically wrote to his sister on June 2, “before you get this, I will be in Sebastopol or the vicinity -- I hope.” While keeping in mind that it would take weeks for mail to reach the United States, this statement suggests that McClellan thought he would be in the Crimea sooner rather than later. This expectation would only serve to heighten McClellan’s later disappointment, as the commission would only reach Sebastopol in October, the decisive battle having already taken place.

On June 4, the commissioners boarded a train bound for Warsaw. Upon arriving there, they met with Marshal Paskievich. Contrary to what they had been told in Berlin, Paskievich informed the commissioners that only officials in St. Petersburg -- a six-day voyage from

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80 George B. McClellan to Elizabeth McClellan, May 12 1855, GBMP 3: 283.
82 George B. McClellan to Frederica McClellan, June 2, 1855, GBMP 3: 300.
Warsaw -- had the authority to grant the commissioners passage to the Russian lines at Sebastopol. Surprisingly, instead of criticizing Paskievich, McClellan went out of his way to praise him. McClellan’s estimation of the governor takes a decidedly different tone because Paskievich was not a professional politician, but rather a military officer. McClellan wrote to his brother, “[Paskievich] has done more, fought more battles, occupied more exalted positions than any General now living.” McClellan not only wrote admiringly of the general’s exploits, but his character as well. He wrote that the general possessed “no vanity” or “pomposity,” and that “his manner to all around him is most pleasant.” Indeed, Paskievich extended them courtesies so far withheld by other ministers. Most notably, he assigned a Russian officer to escort the Americans while in Warsaw.

McClellan’s positive view of Paskievich is in part reflective of his Whig upbringing. The Whiggish distrust of politicians was mirrored by adulation for professionals, whom they believed were capable of rising above the “partisan imperative.” For McClellan, this was true for professional soldiers more so than any other professional, as he understood the training and the expertise required for commanding men in battle. Matthew Moten, the only historian to publish a full-scale study of the Delafield Commission, noted that McClellan’s “affinity for fellow soldiers, even foreigners, stands in remarkable contrast to [his] evaluations of diplomats, even Americans.” Paskievich was just one of the many European military officers who met McClellan’s approval. His report on the expedition, published as *The Armies of Europe*, was according to Moten, “parochial” and “professionally chauvinistic.” Professional chauvinism was not only a theme for McClellan with regard to his European expedition, but in the Civil War

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83 George B. McClellan to John McClellan, June 7, GBMP 3: 307.
as well; when McClellan ignored Lincoln before leaving for the Peninsula Campaign, he was first and foremost showing his distain for a non-professional.

While the commissioners were in Warsaw, they learned that the Allies had attacked Sebastopol. McClellan feared that he would miss the action there, writing, “I begin to fear that decisive events may take place before we can get there -- so unfortunate have we been in our unavoidable detentions.” McClellan also worried that the commissioners would fail to live up to Jefferson Davis’ expectations, and the prospect of suffering professional embarrassment only served to increase his antipathy towards diplomats and politicians, and the French in particular.

In early July, when the commissioners were in St. Petersburg, McClellan wrote:

> It is very distressing to [miss] these assaults, & to know that we could have been there had the Frenchmen acted decently -- but it just was not in our power to prevent things from going as they have -- we have made every effort to get there & shall continue to do so to the last -- the good Lord knows I shouldn’t have to go home without having been to the Crimea.

McClellan repeatedly insisted on the blamelessness of the commission. In early June, he wrote to his brother that “delays, hindrances, & disappointments have been very frequent. There is the consolation however that it was not in our power to alter the course that matters have taken.”

McClellan’s belief that the commissioners were not to blame for their failure to reach Sebastopol was somewhat unfounded. Many private citizens traveled to the Crimea while the commissioners were in Europe, and Delafield later noted in his official report that they could have arrived at Sebastopol earlier if they had traveled in that capacity. However, Jefferson Davis insisted that

87 George B. McClellan to Elizabeth McClellan, 12 June 1855, GBMP 3: 315.
88 George B. McClellan to John McClellan, July 4, 1855, GBMP 3: 348.
89 McClellan would gain a reputation during the Civil War of absolving himself of any responsibly. George B. McClellan to John McClellan, June 7, 1855, GBMP 3: 307.
90 In his official report on the commission, Delafield wrote, “…both France and Russia interposing unexplained difficulties, through the meshes of diplomacy; all of which could have
the commissioners operate through the channels of diplomacy, which slowed their progress. As Moten notes, “without…diplomatic help, they might already have been in the Crimea.”

This notion certainly dawned on McClellan; politicians, not professional soldiers, had served as impediments to their mission. Had they traveled as private citizens, their brother officers in the Crimea would have probably received them warmly.

Though the Allied attack on Sebastopol in June was substantial, it was not decisive. The commissioners still had the opportunity to make it to Sebastopol in time to witness the action. However, when the Russians assured them that they would be able to repulse the Allies, the commissioners lost their urgency to reach the city. The Russians won the confidence of the Americans through their exemplary military facilities and parades, as well as the professional courtesies that they extended to the commissioners. McClellan’s letters home reflect an admiration for the Russians. He wrote to his mother that the Russian officers were “as intelligent, educated & gentlemanly a set of men as you will meet anywhere.” He later added:

I cannot but admire the manner [of] the Russian officers…there is no boasting about the gallantry of the defense -- no vile abuse of their adversaries -- but they always speak as brave soldiers, & gentleman should we regard such matters -- the contrast in this matter with the Alliance’s manner of talking, is much in favor of the Russians.

Similarly, McClellan wrote to his brother that the “Russian officers are as fine & intelligent a set especially in the Staff Crops as any officers -- & their men are far better than I had been taught to believe.” Convinced of Russian superiority, the commissioners decided that they could delay their voyage to Sebastopol. They left St. Petersburg for an eight-day excursion been avoided by going, as many civilians had done and continued to do, direct to Sebastopol, via Constantinople.”

91 “The Delafield Commission and the American Military Profession,” 256.
93 George B. McClellan to Mary Brinton McClellan, June 12, 1855, GBMP 3: 315.
94 George B. McClellan to John McClellan, July 4, 1855, GBMP: 334.
to Moscow. They then traveled back to St. Petersburg, and then proceeded to travel to northern Prussia. From there, they went back to Berlin, and then on to Vienna, where they planned to finally embark for the Crimea.

McClellan’s admiration for the Russians was again a manifestation of his Whig values. Whigs like McClellan believed that outward behavior -- i.e. politeness -- signaled one’s inner character. Robert H. Wiebe, in his book, *The Opening of American Society: From the Adoption of the Constitution to the Eve of Disunion*, discusses this belief, writing, “sons and daughters of respectable Americans learned to judge one another through a set of readily observed or inferred qualities of character. The most important evidence lay immediately on the surface….Everybody’s true self stood nakedly on display.”\(^95\) Rafuse similarly comments that for Whigs, “good taste, personal morality, social responsibility, and proper manners,” signaled a “shared…passion for self-improvement” and a “well-constructed character.”\(^96\) More so than any other people that the commissioners encountered, the Russians exhibited “proper manners;” they extended courtesies withheld by the Allies, their officers talked “like gentlemen,” and their formal parades were beautiful to behold. This signaled to McClellan that these men were of greater moral fiber than the Allies, and that they would ultimately prevail in their current struggle. The reality was quite the opposite. Russian officers in the mid-nineteenth century excelled in parade-ground formations, but in the words of one historian, lacked the “realistic preparation for battle.”\(^97\) Russian officers compelled their soldiers to discipline not through loyalty, but through vicious punishments. Furthermore, the Russian army was largely composed

\(^96\) *McClellan’s War*, 15.
of serfs, which is almost akin to having an army composed of slaves.\textsuperscript{98} While perhaps at a cursory glance it was impossible for McClellan to understand the deficiencies of the Russian military system, his high praise of Russian military prowess demonstrates his willingness to form conclusions about people simply based on their outward behavior. Such a tendency was apparent in his relationship with Lincoln. Just as he positively judged the Russians based on their “politeness,” McClellan viewed Lincoln negatively based on the president’s seemingly homespun nature.

The commissioners’ confidence in the Russians and their resulting excursions would prove to be fatal to the primary objective of their mission. On September 8, the Allies conducted a successful and decisive assault on the Russians, marking the last major engagement of the war.\textsuperscript{99} The Americans -- now without any sense of urgency -- only reached Sebastopol a month later, on October 8.\textsuperscript{100} While McClellan briefly found himself under sporadic fire, he and the other commissioners missed all the noteworthy action in the Crimea. They salvaged the trip by studying the remnants of the siege, not an unworthy endeavor for three highly trained military engineers, but surely not what they had traveled thousands of miles to see. McClellan in particular learned much from touring the lines at Sebastopol, and his impressions of the destruction of Sebastopol greatly shaped his decision to besiege Yorktown in April 1862.

After visiting other military installations in Europe, the commissioners finally returned home on April 28, 1856. Although the commission’s travels through Europe were not in vain, and though the commission in the two months prior to their arrival in Sebastopol lacked the urgency that they once did, the commissioners were undoubtedly disappointed and embarrassed

\textsuperscript{98} The Russian Army Under Nicholas I, 368.
\textsuperscript{100} “The Delafield Commission and the American Military Profession,” 292-293.
in their failure to reach the Crimea in time to witness any action. McClellan blamed his two companions, but most of all, he blamed the politicians. Over a period of several memorable, professionally important months, Buchanan, Mason, the Ostend Conference, Count Walewski, the French, and even his beloved Russians, delayed McClellan, denied him the respect he thought he was due, and caused him professional embarrassment. Meanwhile, military officers -- professional men -- lived up to his expectations. This contrast between professionals and politicians fit perfectly into McClellan’s Whig outlook, first cultivated in his Philadelphia home, then at West Point, and through his service during the Mexican War.

* * *

Six years later, upon taking overall command of the Union Army, McClellan’s Whiggish distain for politicians once again became apparent. Not only did McClellan consider Lincoln a feckless politician who inflamed the passions of both sides of the conflict, but he also believed that the president was of low character due to his behavior. In a November 1861 letter, he wrote his wife:

I went to the White House shortly after tea where I found “the original gorilla,” about as intelligent as ever. What a specimen to be at the head of our affairs now… [later] I went to Seward’s, where I found the “Gorilla” again, & was of course much edified by his anecdotes -- ever apropos, & ever unworthy of one holding his high position...I suppose our country has richly merited some great punishment, else we should not now have such wretched triflers of affairs…

Just as McClellan had lauded the Russians for their “gentlemanly” behavior, he condemned Lincoln as a “gorilla” for being the opposite; the president’s goofy “anecdotes” and his folksy

101 The most noteworthy product of the commission was the adoption of a new saddle that the United States armed forces would use until the abandonment of horses for armored cavalry in World War II. This saddle was known as the “McClellan saddle.” “The Delafield Commission and the American Military Profession,” 366.

102 George B. McClellan to Mary Ellen McClellan, November 17, 1861, in The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 135-136.
“intelligence” signaled to McClellan that Lincoln was not a man of high character and ability. Of course, he could not have been more wrong. But it was this belief -- a habit that was in part cultivated while a member of the Delafield Commission -- that led to his spurning of Lincoln, and by extension, the removal of McDowell’s corps.

McClellan’s experiences while on the Delafield Commission greatly contributed to his Whiggish, anti-politician mindset because it was the first time that the young man dealt with politicians on his own terms. In his work, Rafuse cites scholars of sociology and the importance they place on an individual’s family, schooling, and peer group in forming beliefs about politics and society. He argues that for McClellan, all three of these factors were inclined toward Whiggery: the “traditions and associations” of his household reflected Whig values, and his schooling at West Point and his experiences among his peer group in the Mexican War reinforced them. McClellan’s time in Europe was perhaps even more influential, because while McClellan rubbed elbows with politicians prior to voyaging to Europe, he did so largely in social or ceremonial settings, or with his father. Moreover, many of the politicians that the young McClellan encountered were Whigs. While in Europe, McClellan for the first time interacted with politicians in a professional context; he had a job to do, and he needed the help of politicians to do it. This first interaction with politicians was a failure. McClellan was entrusted with an important mission that he believed was hampered by people he was already predisposed to dislike.

In truth, McClellan’s plan for the defense of Washington was sufficient. Though scattered, the troops holding the Shenandoah Valley, southern Pennsylvania, and Manassas would have been able to quickly cut off any rebel strike from Richmond, Lincoln’s primary

103 *McClellan’s War*, 49.
concern. After the Peninsula Campaign, McClellan’s successor, John Pope, argued before the Congressional Committee on the Conduct of the War that “[i]t is not necessary…in order to protect the capital, that I should interpose myself between the enemy and the place itself.”  

Moreover, McClellan believed that for Confederate General Joseph Johnston to strike Washington, he would have to give up Richmond, a move that Robert E. Lee would later refer to as “swapping queens.” McClellan correctly believed that the probability of Johnston making such a brazen, strategically senseless move was highly unlikely. By placing army units where he did, McClellan allowed the Union to defend Washington without sacrificing the troops that he believed necessary for his campaign. However, his plan for Washington’s defense required a nuanced military understanding, something Lincoln, at least at this time, did not have. McClellan should have understood Lincoln’s discomfort and delayed his departure for the Peninsula to explain his plans to the president. However, his Whiggish anti-political attitude, in part fostered through his experiences as a member of the Delafield Commission, led him to depart for the Virginia Peninsula without a word to anyone. In doing so, he perhaps cost himself and the Union cause a great opportunity during the Peninsula Campaign.

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104 General George B. McClellan: Shield of the Union, 80.  
105 McClellan and Lincoln at War, 98.
PART TWO

Visions of Sebastopol at Yorktown

McClellan’s failure to communicate with Lincoln marked the beginning of his failure on the Virginia Peninsula, but it did not mark the end. Though Lincoln reduced the general’s army by nearly half in the days preceding his advance on Yorktown, the road to Richmond remained practically unblocked. Upon McClellan’s arrival on the Virginia Peninsula, he had a fighting force numbering 55,000, at least five times greater than that of his rebel adversary, General “Prince” John Magruder. Confederate deserters even reported that “Prince” John had only 8,000 men to block the Army of the Potomac’s advance. McClellan did not need McDowell’s 1st Corps to capture Gloucester Point, thereby enabling the Navy to send vessels down the York; he had enough men on hand to take Yorktown himself. McClellan could have placed a holding force before Yorktown and sent a division or even a corps to silence the guns across the York.

For McClellan, another, simpler option was available; Yorktown was vulnerable to attack by frontal assault. On April 5, 1862, on the far left of the Union line across from the Warwick River, division commander William “Baldy” Smith sent two regiments commanded by Winfield Scott Hancock to probe the rebel defenses. Smith ordered the mission without approval from his corps commander, General Erasmus Keyes, and Smith intended to tell Keyes about the probe after sending Hancock on his way (as the saying goes, it’s easier to ask for forgiveness than to ask for permission). Before “Baldy” could broach the subject with Keyes, word came in from McClellan’s headquarters: no advance was to be made upon the rebels until the army engineers determined the best course of action. Smith rushed back to recall Hancock, who reported that he had discovered an excellent location for a Federal assault, and with a few men, could rip open

106 To the Gates of Richmond, 35-36.
the Confederate line. But the word from headquarters was final; Hancock was called back. General Smith somberly noted that if McClellan’s message had come two hours later, the Union would have taken Yorktown that day. On the rebel side, General Magruder believed a Union assault was imminent. On April 6, as reinforcements were reaching him slowly, he telegraphed President Davis’ military advisor, General Robert E. Lee. He lamented, “[the Federals] have discovered a weak point” and that despite his admirable soldiers, “numbers must prevail.” Reinforcements, Magruder wrote, “will probably be too late.”107 The expected attack, however, never came. McClellan instead chose to besiege Yorktown, which gave the rebels time to reorganize the Army of Northern Virginia to make a stand in front of Richmond, which they did successfully later that summer.

Many historians argue that McClellan did not attempt a frontal assault or a flanking movement via the York River because he believed that he faced a much larger rebel army than the one that actually sat opposite him in early April. This was in part due to a ruse by “Prince” John, who had his 8,000 men continuously march back-and-forth from Yorktown and across the Warwick in order to give the illusion that the Confederate line was impregnable. Captured rebel soldiers furthered this deception when they reported that 40,000 men straddled the Peninsula, with General Joseph Johnston and 60,000 more rebels soon to follow.108 McClellan, who was prone to imagine the worst case scenario, telegraphed Stanton on April 7: “[i]t seems clear that I shall have the whole force of the enemy on my hands, probably not less than 100,000 men & possibly more.”109 McClellan’s training at West Point instructed him that defenders of an entrenched position commanded a five-to-one advantage over an attacker, and McClellan did not

107 To the Gates of Richmond, 42-44.
108 To the Gates of Richmond, 43.
109 Telegraph from George McClellan to Edwin M. Stanton, April 7, 1862, in The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan: Selected Correspondence 1860-1865, 232.
believe that he had enough men for such an assault at Yorktown. Equally important, the young general lacked the nerve -- unlike Lee a year later at Chancellorsville -- to divide his force for a flanking movement in the face of a larger army.\textsuperscript{110}

Ultimately, however, McClellan chose to besiege Yorktown not only because he believed that other modes of attack were unavailable, but also because he believed that it was the only way to achieve an overwhelming Union victory, something that the general believed was necessary. McClellan thought that an overwhelming Union victory was imperative because he believed in what historians have called the “slave power” conspiracy. According to this theory, Southern aristocrats hoodwinked the Southern masses into secession. McClellan and others believed that if the Union armies became bogged down in an indefinite struggle, the secessionist cause would become bolstered by the increased resolve of the Southern masses.\textsuperscript{111} On the other hand, if resistance to the federal government were to seem impracticable, Southern commitment to prosecuting the war would flag and the Confederacy would crumble from within. An assault on the rebel defenses at Yorktown -- which even if successful would cost the lives of many Union soldiers -- would not produce the decisive results that McClellan desired.

On the other hand, McClellan was well aware of the devastating effects of siege warfare. He was trained in the art of siege warfare as a cadet at West Point, participated in the siege of Vera Cruz during the Mexican War, and studied firsthand the siege of Sebastopol. Sebastopol in particular left a lasting impression. Though he failed to witness the action there, he did not fail to note the utter destruction wrought by the allies. McClellan thought that if he could reproduce the siege of Sebastopol at Yorktown, he would be awarded with the decisive Union victory that he so desperately sought.

\textsuperscript{110} “In the Shadows of Grant and Sherman: George B. McClellan Revisited,” 220.
\textsuperscript{111} \textit{George B. McClellan and Civil War History: In the Shadow of Grant and Sherman}, 78.
McClellan had come to believe in the necessity of a decisive Union victory after the first battle of Bull Run in July 1861. In a memo to Lincoln on August 2, 1861, McClellan -- who was then the recently appointed commander of the Army of the Potomac -- gave the president his plan for prosecuting the war, and also discussed how the nature of the conflict required an overwhelming victory. He wrote that in an “ordinary war,” the goal is to fight until a negotiated peace is reached. On the other hand, McClellan wrote, in “the present war,”

it has become necessary to crush a population sufficiently numerous, intelligent, and warlike to constitute a nation. We have not only to defeat their armed and organized forces in the field, but to display such an overwhelming strength as will convince all our antagonists, especially those of the governing, aristocratic class, of the utter impossibilities of resistance. Our late reverses [at Bull Run] make this course imperative.112

McClellan wrote that he believed that any degree of further rebel success would enable the Southern ruling class to “convince the mass of their people that we are inferior to them in force and courage, and to command all their resources.” McClellan impressed upon Lincoln that the war, “began with a class” but was now “with a people.” Overwhelming military success alone, the general wrote, could “restore the former issue.”

McClellan connected the need for overwhelming Union victory with the “slave power conspiracy.” In his autobiography, McClellan wrote that the “peculiar institution” of slavery created a society in which “the class of slaveholders” or the “highly educated whites” composed an “aristocracy.” According to McClellan, this ruling class “furnished the social and political leaders to whom the poor whites were, as a rule, accustomed to defer.” As a result, during the Civil War, these “poor whites” that made up the majority of the Confederate soldiers were

“habituated” towards obedience. Many key figures in the Union held similar views.\textsuperscript{113} Grant wrote in his memoirs that the “prevailing sentiment of the South would have been opposed to secession in 1860 and 1861” if not for the aristocratic “demagogues.”\textsuperscript{114} In June 1860, the then General-in-Chief of the U.S. army, Winfield Scott, intended to mass troops in Virginia and in border states in order to inspire loyal Southerners to rally to the Stars-and-Stripes. Scott believed that loyalists were in such numbers that this placing of troops -- along with his “Anaconda Plan” -- would end the war by early 1862. Lincoln himself championed this view; in a speech before Congress in July 1861, the president stated that it was doubtful whether the “majority of the legally qualified voters of any State, except perhaps South Carolina, are in favor of disunion,” and that “there is much reason to believe that the Union men are the majority in many, if not in every other one, of the so-called seceded States.”\textsuperscript{115} For his part, McClellan believed that Confederate success on the battlefield would only strengthen the obedience of the Southern masses to their aristocratic leaders, and he sought to break this connection through overwhelming federal force.

Indeed, small but strong pockets of pro-Union feeling existed in some regions of the South. The whole area of western Virginia, which McClellan severed for the Union in 1861, resulted in the formation of a new state, West Virginia. In eastern Tennessee, two-thirds of voters voted in a referendum on June 8, 1861 to stay in the Union.\textsuperscript{116} However, most Southerners who professed themselves as pro-union had a much different definition of “Union” than their Northern counterparts. One Southern “pro-Union” man who voted against secession wrote, “[w]e

\textsuperscript{113} McClellan’s Own Story, 39-40.
\textsuperscript{114} George B. McClellan and Civil War History: In the Shadow of Grant and Sherman, 79.
\textsuperscript{115} The Hard Hand of War: Union Military policy towards Southern Civilians, 1861-1865, 9, 29.
scorn Black Republicans...The State of Alabama cannot and will not submit to the Administration of Lincoln...We intend to resist...but our resistance is based upon...unity of action, with other slave states.” Another Southern “Unionist” echoed, “[c]operation before secession was the first object of my desire. Failing this I am willing to take the next best, subsequent cooperation or cooperation after secession.”117 Whoever Southern Unionists were, their loyalties were not necessarily bound with the Union, as many in the North imagined.118

According to McClellan’s reasoning, only overwhelming force would convince the supposedly wavering Southern masses to abandon the Confederacy. Thus, in his August 2, 1861 memo to Lincoln, McClellan requested a preposterous 273,000 troops for his operations in the East.119 An army of this size could surely achieve the convincing results that McClellan desired. Of course, he never received such a number; the army that McClellan found himself with in early April 1862 numbered 55,000 effectives. The general would be forced to gain his overwhelming victory another way.

McClellan believed that the answer of what to do at Yorktown could be found in his study of the siege of Sebastopol. While in the Crimea in 1855, he witnessed destruction beyond his imagination. The devastation wrought by the Allied siege of Sebastopol was on a scale that the world had never seen due to advancements in weaponry and the sheer number of guns that

118 Perhaps equally important, the “slave power” conspiracy allowed those in the North to believe that they were putting down a rebellion rather than a revolution. It had only been ninety years since the colonists had united to shed the yoke of British tyranny, and the creed of revolution was ingrained in American blood. The Northern belief that only a few, manipulating Southerners had forced the South into secession allowed them to believe that they were putting down a tyrannical uprising, and not acting as tyrants themselves. Such was the case for McClellan, whose grandfather served with distinction during the Revolution. The Hard Hand of War, 9; McClellan’s War: The Failure of Moderation in the Struggle for the Union, 10.
119 McClellan’s Own Story, 103.
were amassed. He thought that he could reproduce Sebastopol at Yorktown. Unfortunately, the historical example was inapt. Unlike the Russians, the Confederates had a well-maintained supply line with which to reinforce Yorktown and an established route that they could use to escape when their situation became untenable. Moreover, McClellan’s decision to besiege Yorktown gave the rebels time to amass the largest army they would ever muster during the war, which in turn lead to the Union’s defeat during the 1862 Peninsula Campaign.120

Sebastopol, the port for the Russian Black Sea Fleet, was the main focus of the Allied effort against the Russians during the Crimean War. On September 25, 1854, 67,000 British, French, Turkish, and Sardinian troops began to besiege Sebastopol and its 7,000 defenders. The siege would last roughly a year, during which time the Russian defenders swelled to 43,000 men, entrenched behind increasingly formidable fortifications.121 The Allies made two assaults on Sebastopol. The first, on June 18, 1854, was unorganized and unsuccessful, and resulted in massive Allied losses.122 On September 8, 1854, the Allies made a second, successful attack, effectively ending the war.

George McClellan and the rest of the Delafield Commission missed all the noteworthy fighting at Sebastopol. However, when the commissioners arrived in October 1855, the city’s destruction was plain to see. In a letter to his brother, McClellan described Sebastopol as being “knocked into a cooked hat.” “You cannot imagine,” he wrote, “the scene of destruction it

120 Rowland argues that among other reasons, McClellan was unsuccessful because the army he faced on the Peninsula was stronger than any Confederate army that a Union general would combat later in the war. He writes, “[t]he Confederate army that Grant and Sherman shredded to pieces in the final year of the war was clearly not the same as the one McClellan and other early Federal commanders faced in the first two years of the war. The South was on its last legs...the Army of Northern Virginia was incapable of mounting and sustaining a substantive offensive campaign by 1864.” George B. McClellan and the Civil War: In the Shadow of Grant and Sherman, 188.
121 “Sevastopol, sieges of.”
presents... the ground [is] peppered with shell holes & dying around as thick as thick can be.” In some places, McClellan wrote, a horseman could literally ride on a “pavement of shot.”¹²³ In another letter, McClellan described Sebastopol as “more desolate” than Pompeii.¹²⁴ At Pompeii, McClellan imagined that one would not feel much sorrow because its inhabitants died “centuries ago.” But at Sebastopol:

a short year since a beautiful & flourishing city, is now a mass of ruins -- not one house is uninjured, not one habitable, few have any fragment of a room, & not one solitary inhabitant is left. As you walk though its lonely streets you feel still more lonely when reminded of the cause by the shot & fragments of shells everywhere scattered about the few sentinels warning you that this, that or the other is a dangerous place...I have often been alone on the prairie with no living thing within sight or call -- but that is nothing to being in Sebastopol.

Upon visiting the Russian strongholds that the Allies captured on September 8, McClellan reported that he was “half surprised” that he did not see “heaps” of dead attackers and defenders, and that “[t]he earth everywhere” was “ploughed up by shot & shell -- exploded magazines...broken guns -- disabled carriages -- [and]charred timber.”¹²⁵

McClellan’s fellow commissioners shared his impressions. In his official report, Delafield solemnly wrote that “[b]lood-stained ruins alone were left to the victors as the fruits of the siege.” Mordecai described Sebastopol as “bewildering,” and like McClellan was surprised that “such a scene of ruin and destruction” was “lately a beautiful city.”¹²⁶ The Americans were not the only ones to comment on the city’s destruction. A young Russian artillery officer named Leo Tolstoy fought during the siege and wrote three stories about Russian soldiers at Sebastopol

¹²³ George B. McClellan to John McClellan, October 12, 1855, GBMP: 431.
¹²⁴ George B. McClellan to John McClellan, November 5, 1855, GBMP 3: 452.
¹²⁵ George B. McClellan to John McClellan, November 5, 1855, GBMP 3: 452.
that appeared in *Contemporary*, a Russian magazine.¹²⁷ These stories were later published together in *The Sebastopol Sketches*. The third story, “Sebastopol in August 1855,” is about the fall of Sebastopol, and includes scenes that are similar to McClellan’s descriptions of the city.

One of the protagonists of the story calls Sebastopol “hell on earth.”¹²⁸ In another section, Tolstoy describes a scene when Russian soldiers are entering the city one night in late August:

> The sky was dark and cloudless; the gloom was already being vividly lit by the glimmer of the stars and the constantly moving lights of shells and gunfire…Literally every second the air was shaken with increasing stridor and clarity by artillery discharges and explosions that followed one another in rapid succession.¹²⁹

In another scene, when one of the characters inquires about his house in Sebastopol, an officer replies, “[m]y dear fellow, the building was shelled to kingdom come ages ago. You won’t recognize Sebastopol now; there’s not a single woman left in the place, no taverns, no brass bands; the last pub closed down yesterday. It’s about as cheerful as a morgue.”¹³⁰ Other Russians commented on the devastation of Sebastopol as well. A Russian artillery officer reported, “Sebastopol looks like a graveyard.” He continued that

> with every passing day even its central avenues become more empty and gloomy -- it looked like a town that had been destroyed by an earthquake. On every face there is the same sad expression of tiredness and foreboding. There was no point going into town: nowhere did one hear the sound of joy, nowhere did one find any amusement.¹³¹

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¹²⁷ The third story in *Contemporary*, “Sebastopol in August 1855,” was the first piece that included Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy’s full name in the publication. Historian David McDuff asserts that Tolstoy’s pieces for *Contemporary* proved to him that his future lay in writing, not on the battlefield. Tolstoy would later write, “I failed to become a general in the army, but I became one in literature.” Leo Tolstoy, *The Sebastopol Sketches*, trans. and intro. by David McDuff, (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 26-36.

¹²⁸ *The Sebastopol Sketches*, 127.

¹²⁹ *The Sebastopol Sketches*, 137.

¹³⁰ *The Sebastopol Sketches*, 139.

Allied artillery was the main cause of Sebastopol’s destruction. At Sebastopol, both sides employed rifled cannon, which allowed for greater range, accuracy, and destructive power. However, it was the massing of Allied guns that truly precipitated Sebastopol’s demise. Over the course of the siege, the British amassed nearly to 1000 artillery pieces, and the French sent another 1,700. While not all of these guns were employed simultaneously -- the allies used 700 cannon during their September 8 assault -- the firepower was overwhelming and hitherto unheralded in warfare.\textsuperscript{132} In the final days before the September assault, the Allies fired 50,000 shells into Sebastopol each day, resulting in 2,500 daily Russian casualties.\textsuperscript{133} The sounds of the final days of gunfire were deafening. In “Sebastopol in August 1855,” Tolstoy describes how the gunfire in early September “merged into a continuous rolling thunder…Then finally, all the sounds united into one earth-shattering detonation.”\textsuperscript{134} He reported that “the sounds of the explosions succeeded one another without a break, merging into one another and making the air vibrate…”\textsuperscript{135} The September bombardment, while massive, pales in comparison to the total number of shot dispensed on Sebastopol during the year-long siege; according to Delafield, the Allies from October 1854 to September 1855 fired close to 2.4 million shells into the city.\textsuperscript{136} A French military official describing the effects of the Allied barrage wrote, “[w]e ourselves had no idea of the effects of our artillery. The town is literally crushed to bits. There is not a single house that our projectiles missed. There are no roofs left at all, and almost all the walls have been destroyed.”\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{132} “The Delafield Commission and the American Military Profession,” 297-298.
\textsuperscript{133} The Crimean War: A History, 386; The Russian Army Under Nicholas I, 1855-1865, 356.
\textsuperscript{134} The Sebastopol Sketches, 177.
\textsuperscript{135} The Sebastopol Sketches, 175-176.
\textsuperscript{136} “The Delafield Commission and the American Military Profession,” 298.
\textsuperscript{137} The Crimean War: A History, 395.
The destruction wrought by the Allied artillery was exactly what McClellan had in mind as he camped in front of Yorktown. A reproduction of Sebastopol at Yorktown -- where one could ride on a “pavement of shot” -- would surely provide the decisive victory that McClellan believed the Union required. McClellan also did not fail to note how the Allied bombardment dampened the spirits of the civilian population, a phenomenon that the general hoped to replicate with the Southern population. While McClellan is infamous for his genteel treatment of Southern civilians, he wished to disengage the masses of the Confederacy from the war effort. He wanted Yorktown to be like Sebastopol, where “nowhere did one hear the sound of joy.” Like Sebastopol, McClellan wished for Yorktown to become “as cheery as a morgue.”

Accordingly, McClellan ordered his engineers construct sixteen batteries in front of Yorktown to pummel the rebels. The total Union armament at Yorktown amounted to two 200-pound rifled guns, twelve 100-pound rifled guns, ten 13-inch mortars, 25 ten-inch mortars, seven eight-inch mortars, 12 4½-inch rifled siege guns, 12 30-pound rifled guns, 32 20-pound rifled guns, and two 8-inch siege-howitzers. Such an arsenal required 600 wagons of shot, shell, and powder. Peter Smith Michie, the historian and the chief engineer of the Army of the James, wrote that McClellan used “devises” that he had observed at Sebastopol to hasten his preparations. McClellan intended to unleash his 114 guns simultaneously, which would cast

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138 McClellan believed in a “hands-off” approach towards Southern civilians and property because he thought it would foster good will with Southern Unionists and pave the way for reconciliation between the two sides. Accordingly, McClellan believed that the army should not interfere with slavery. *McClellan’s War*, 5.
139 *McClellan’s Own Story*, 286-287.
140 *To the Gates of Richmond*, 58.
141 *General McClellan*, 248.
roughly 7,000 pounds of shot on the enemy’s fortifications. In his words, this would “create
the greatest possible moral and physical effect.” On April 23, as his massive preparations were
underway, McClellan wrote to his wife, Ellen, “I do believe that I am avoiding the faults of the
Allies at Sebastopol & quietly paving the way for a great success.” He asked for his wife to
send him his books on the Crimean siege.

McClellan intended to have his infantry storm the fortifications of Yorktown after a
heavy bombardment, much as the Allies did at Sebastopol. He planned to commence the
bombardment of Yorktown in the early morning of May 6, and if all went according to plan,
McClellan intended to assault Yorktown around noon. In his autobiography, McClellan claimed
that this plan would entail “very little loss” and that the result of such an attack was “reasonably
certain.” Again, the certainty of overwhelming success was an important theme for the young
general. In another letter to Ellen, McClellan wrote of “utterly defeat[ing]” the Confederates, but
also informs his wife that “[Yorktown] shall be attacked the first moment I can do so
successfully -- but I don’t intend to hurry it -- I cannot afford to fail.” McClellan was not alone
in believing that Union success was imperative. General Erasmus Keyes wrote to New York
Senator Ira Harris on April 7, “[i]f we win [at Yorktown] the rebellion will be crushed. If we lose
it the consequences will be more horrible than I care to foretell.”

142 Stephen Sears claims that this firepower “dwarfed” that of Sebastopol. While the Allies in the
Crimea possessed more firepower than the Union at Yorktown, perhaps Sears was referring to
the amount of fire on a concentrated area. To the Gates of Richmond, 58.
143 George B. McClellan to Mary Ellen McClellan, April 23, 1862, in The Civil War Papers of
George B. McClellan, 245.
144 To the Gates of Richmond, 48.
146 McClellan’s Own Story, 287-288.
147 George B. McClellan to Mary Ellen McClellan, April 19, 1862, in The Civil War Papers of
George B. McClellan, 243-244.
148 McClellan’s Own Story, 270.
Meanwhile, as the weeks dragged out on the Peninsula, Lincoln begged McClellan to advance on the Confederates. As early as April 7, in response to McClellan’s claim that he was not supplied with men sufficient for the campaign, the president telegraphed the general imploring him to attack immediately. He began the message by stating to McClellan that the general’s telegrams “do not offend me, [but] pain me very much.”¹⁴⁹ He continued, “I think you better break the enemies’ lines from York-town to Warwick River, at once. They will probably use time, as advantageously as you can…the present hesitation to move upon an intrenched enemy, is but the story of Manassas repeated.” He then added, “I beg to assure you that I have never written you, or spoke to you, in greater kindness of feeling than now…But you must act.”¹⁵⁰ When McClellan asked for additional Parrott guns from Washington for the siege, Lincoln responded, “[y]our call for Parrott guns from Washington alarms me -- chiefly because it argues indefinite procrastination. Is anything to be done?”¹⁵¹ When Lincoln pressed the general, McClellan imperiously wrote to his wife, “[t]he Presdt very coolly telegraphed me yesterday that he thought I had better break the enemy’s lines at once! I was much tempted to reply that he had better come & do it himself.”¹⁵² He did not get along with Lincoln before he left for the peninsula, and evidently little had changed in two weeks. To the president himself, McClellan wrote, “[d]o not misunderstand the apparent inaction here -- not a day, not an hour has been lost,

¹⁴⁹ General McClellan, 252.
¹⁵⁰ Abraham Lincoln to George B. McClellan, April 6, 1862, in The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 234.
¹⁵¹ Abraham Lincoln to George B. McClellan, May 1, 1862, in The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 251.
¹⁵² George B. McClellan to Mary Ellen McClellan, in The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 234.
works have constructed that may almost be called gigantic.”\textsuperscript{153} Indeed, “gigantic” preparations were underway to score McClellan’s overwhelming Union victory.

McClellan’s reluctance to attack can in part be attributed to his knowledge of the failed frontal assaults that occurred at Sebastopol. The first Allied assault on Sebastopol, on June 18, 1855, was marred by a lack of communication between the French and British commanders, and moreover a lack of competency.\textsuperscript{154} Before storming the Russian bastions, the Allies planned to carry ladders uphill over hundreds of yards of open ground under the gaze of Russian artillery. Upon reaching the walls of the fortifications, they were to climb their ladders over the walls in front of point-blank Russian fire. The night before the attack, Allied deserters told the Russians of the plan to assault, and Russian observers could plainly see the Allied preparations that were underway. The next day, the Allies carried out this haphazard attack, and in a few hours lost 7,000 men killed or wounded.\textsuperscript{155} Even the decisive Allied assault on Sebastopol came at a tremendous price; of the twelve assaults made on the Russian bastions, only one was successful, and more than 10,000 Allied troops fell at the hands of the Russians.\textsuperscript{156} McClellan credited spirited Russian soldiers for the city’s firm defense, but also lauded the formidable nature of Russian temporary defenses. McClellan later wrote that the siege of Sebastopol proved that “temporary works in the hands of a brave and skillful garrison are susceptible of a longer defense than was generally supposed.” He added, that the temporary defenses “were attacked as field

\textsuperscript{153} George B. McClellan to Abraham Lincoln, April 23, 1862, in \textit{The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan}, 246.

\textsuperscript{154} June 18 marked the fortieth anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo. The date was picked intentionally in an effort to heal British and French tensions. \textit{The Crimean War: A History}, 364.

\textsuperscript{155} \textit{The Crimean War: A History}, 367-371.

\textsuperscript{156} \textit{The Russian Army Under Nicholas I, 1855-1865}, 358.
works never were before and were defended as field works never had been defended.” At Yorktown, McClellan undoubtedly imagined that the Confederate defensive works -- both temporary and permanent -- would be just as formidable as those of the Russians.

Moreover, McClellan understood that only Russian carelessness made the second Allied attack successful. The French managed to capture one of the key Russian bastions -- and then the city -- only by attacking at the exact moment when the Russians were changing their guard. At the time of the attack, many Russians were eating lunch. McClellan wrote that had the Russian defense been “well managed,” and had they “preserved their order & discipline, & been well supported, they ought to have held the work.” Even so, as McClellan later wrote in his report on the Delafield Commission, “[the Russians repulsed the French with great loss, meeting with the bayonet the more adventurous men who reached the parapet. Thus, in five points out of six, the defenders were fully victorious.” In essence, McClellan believed the Allies were lucky. At Yorktown, as he wrote repeatedly, he was unwilling to leave his attack to chance.

McClellan knew the details of the Allied assaults and was determined to avoid such battles, as they would not lead to an overwhelming Union victory. Moreover, McClellan possessed an inflated view of Confederate military prowess, and he did not believe that they would be as careless as the Russians. Of course, had he attacked upon arriving at Yorktown,

159 George B. McClellan to John McClellan, November 5, 1855, GBMP: 452.
160 *The Armies of Europe*, 31.
161 Many people in the Union overestimated the Confederacy’s fighting power. Many Northerners believed that largely due to slavery, Southerners were predisposed to violence. Michael C.C. Adams cites McClellan’s chronic overestimation of Confederate forces as proof of
he would have been successful. The chief engineer of the Army of the Potomac, General Barnard, later asserted that “there was nothing whatsoever” along a long section of the rebel line, and that such a swath could have been “swept by our artillery fire” and easily carried by assault.¹⁶² When General Joseph Johnston arrived with reinforcements for Yorktown and inspected the defenses, he was astounded that McClellan had not attacked, and Magruder likewise expressed his surprise that McClellan “permitted day after day to elapse without an assault.”¹⁶³ McClellan’s aversion to frontal assaults deepened after his only offensive movement at Yorktown, on April 16, by which time the window of opportunity had closed. That day, he ordered William “Baldy” Smith to hamper rebel construction of fortifications at a place called Dam No.1, the very spot Hancock had pleaded to take ten days earlier. In a poorly coordinated and reinforced attack consisting of 192 soldiers, 83 were killed, wounded or captured, and an additional 82 Federal troops were lost in a counterattack.¹⁶⁴ After the attack, McClellan wrote to his wife, “I can’t go ‘with a rush’ over strong posts. I must use heavy guns and silence their fire.”¹⁶⁵ The siege grinded on, and day-by-day, the Confederates found themselves under the gaze of increasing numbers of federal artillery pieces. The Union troops did not advance; McClellan was “avoiding the faults of the Allies” at Sebastopol.

Of course, the Confederates did not stay to be pummeled by Union cannon. Johnston, who by the second week of April was in command of Confederate forces at Yorktown,
understood McClellan’s plans exactly. In late April, Johnston wrote Lee, “[t]he fight for Yorktown… must be one of artillery, in which we cannot win. The result is certain; the time only doubtful.” Similarly, General D.H. Hill, Johnston’s subordinate at Yorktown, wrote that McClellan’s control of the water could allow the Union general to “multiply his artillery indefinitely, and as his is so superior to ours, the result of such a fight cannot be doubtful.”

Consequently, on April 29, Johnston gave the orders to evacuate Yorktown. A few days later, on the evening of May 3, Confederate batteries opened fire to conceal the retreat up the Peninsula, and by the next morning, the 56,000 rebels who by late April occupied Yorktown, were gone.

McClellan was concerned when he began to suspect that the Confederates had fled. On May 3, the general wrote his wife that he did not like the “perfect quietness that reigns now,” and that “it don’t seem natural.” He hoped that the rebels would not attempt to get away without him giving them “a sound drubbing which they richly deserve.”

Soon though, his tune would change from one of uncertainty to one of confidence. On the morning of May 4, McClellan simply wrote to Stanton: “Yorktown is in our possession.” A few hours later, he again telegraphed the secretary of war, writing that he would “push the enemy to the wall.”

McClellan then rationalized his decision to besiege Yorktown rather than engage in a frontal assault. Upon inspecting the town, he wrote, “[t]heir works prove to have been most formidable & I am now fully satisfied of the correctness of the course I have pursued.

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166 To the Gates of Richmond, 59.
167 To the Gates of Richmond, 62.
168 George B. McClellan to Mary Ellen McClellan, May 3, 1862, in The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 252.
169 George B. McClellan to Edwin Stanton, May 4, 1862, in The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 253.
success is brilliant & you may rest assured that its effects will be of the greatest importance.”¹⁷⁰

He further rationalized his decision to besiege Yorktown in a letter to Ellen on May 8: “[i]t would have been easy for me to have sacrificed 10,000 lives in taking Yorktown, & I presume the world would have thought it more brilliant -- I am content with what I have done, & history will give me credit for it.”¹⁷¹ Again, McClellan might have been referencing the “successful” frontal assault by the Allies at Sebastapol in 1855, which cost more than 10,000 lives. Though McClellan would later reiterate his satisfaction with his performance at Yorktown, in reality he failed to give the Confederates “the drubbing” for which he had so long prepared. When Union soldiers went through the abandoned rebel camp, they found a message scrawled in charcoal across a tent: “He that fights and runs away, will live to fight another day. May 3.”¹⁷² This prophecy would come to fruition during the summer, when the rebels under Robert E. Lee beat the federal troops back before the “Gates of Richmond.”

When McClellan wrote to his wife that he was avoiding the mistakes of the Allies at Sebastopol, it was in fact he who was mistaken. The siege of Yorktown was an open siege; the rebels had the ability to either reinforce Yorktown from further up the Peninsula -- a maneuver they employed during the siege -- as well as evacuate the town whenever they saw fit. By contrast, the Russians failed to hold Sebastopol primarily due to their inability to resupply. Beginning in June 1855, the Allies blockaded the major Russian supply lines, which led to massive shortages in food, supplies, and ammunition. By the summer of 1855, Russian artillery

¹⁷⁰ George B. McClellan to Edwin Stanton, May 4, 1862, in The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 254.
¹⁷¹ George B. McClellan to Mary Ellen McClellan, May 8, 1862, in The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 260.
¹⁷² To the Gates of Richmond, 62.
commanders were ordered to fire at the rate of one shot for every four received by the Allies.\textsuperscript{173} Thus, it was not necessarily the overwhelming Allied fire alone that plagued the Russians; it was their inability to fight back. In the spring of 1862, by contrast, the Army of the Potomac was unable to cut Confederate supply lines in any way, and the Confederates were able to come and go as they pleased. If McClellan believed that Joe Johnston -- a man that he deeply respected -- would simply wait to be annihilated by Yankee guns, he was profoundly naïve.

Clearly, this study does not absolve McClellan from blame for his decisions at Yorktown. McClellan lacked the nerve and imagination of commanders like Robert E. Lee and U.S. Grant. He could have engaged in a flanking movement or could have carried Yorktown by assault had he acted in a timely manner. However, this study does question the belief that McClellan’s decisions were caused by the general’s supposed mental instability. While surely he might have been intimidated by the task before him, McClellan’s actions at Yorktown were guided by his belief in an overwhelming Union victory (a belief that was widespread), his experiences at Sebastopol, and his knowledge of the siege that occurred there. As it turned out, what he knew about Sebastopol and siege warfare did not help him at Yorktown.

Perhaps McClellan’s greatest flaw as a general was not that he was crazy or a coward, but that he was mentally inflexible. Instead of adapting a specific plan for the situation, he sought to fight war out of one of his textbooks, or out of his notes. McClellan’s unwillingness to adapt can be seen in several letters that he wrote prior to the campaign. In a letter to Stanton in mid-March 1862, he outlined two methods of taking Yorktown: one that is “rapid and decisive,” in which Navy boats ran up the York River to envelop Yorktown; the other, a siege, which he wrote could

\textsuperscript{173} The Crimean War: A History, 377-378.
lead to a “delay of weeks perhaps.” In a letter later in the month to another military official, McClellan wrote, “the first operation will be the capture of Yorktown & Gloucester, this may involve a siege (at least I go prepared for one) in case the Navy is not able to afford the means for destroying the rebel batteries at these points.” In both of these letters, McClellan never suggested that Yorktown could be taken by other means. When his first option became unavailable, he resorted to his second option, a siege, and never once thought of a quicker alternative. Peter Smith Michie, the historian and chief engineer of the Army of the James, perfectly sums up McClellan’s rigid mindset in writing, “[f]rom the very instant that the idea of a siege became the predominating one in his mind every advantage that the flank movement by water had put in this possession was sacrificed.” As a result, Michie argues, the subsequent campaign was “doomed to failure and disaster.”

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174 George B. McClellan to Edwin Stanton, March 19, 1862, in *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan*, 216.  
175 George B. McClellan to Joseph Totten, March 28, 1862, in *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan*, 218.  
176 *General McClellan*, 246.
Conclusion

The Delafield Commission left its mark on McClellan and the early Peninsula Campaign in two significant ways. First, it furthered his antipathy towards politicians. McClellan’s Whig upbringing first instructed him to be wary of politicians. Whigs believed that politicians only inflamed the passions of partisans in order to achieve personal gain and did not understand the best interests of the country. As Ethan Rafuse details, McClellan’s father imparted Whig values upon his son, which were then reinforced by his experiences at West Point and as a junior officer during the Mexican War. While in Europe as part of the Delafield Commission, McClellan and his fellow commissions were constantly delayed by politicians: first the English, then the French, and even the Russians, whom he also praised due to his Whiggish attraction to those whom he perceived as being polite. He criticized the Ostend Conference, which in his opinion was a meeting of partisan politicians who only served to inflame the passions of Europeans, who in turn impeded the commissioners. These delays caused McClellan to miss the events at Sebastopol, the focus of the commission.

Like the experiences that Rafuse chronicles, McClellan’s frustrating and professionally embarrassing tour through Europe tempered his opinion towards politicians. McClellan’s experiences as part of the Delafield Commission were equally, if not more significant than his experiences at West Point and the Mexican War, because while in Europe, McClellan was for the first time personally interacting with politicians in a professional context. He was no longer hearing about the banality of politicians in his living room, hearing about meddlesome politicians in the context of West Point, or even seeing the effects that politicians could have on warfare while in Mexico. In Europe, McClellan himself encountered politicians who impeded him, and his negative impressions about politicians were confirmed.
His antipathy towards politicians had a profound impact on the early Peninsula campaign, and by extension, the course of the Civil War. McClellan left for the Virginia Peninsula without meeting with Lincoln to explain his plans for Washington’s defense. McClellan believed that Lincoln was a politician who was ignorant in matters of war, impolite, and most important, one who inflamed the passions of partisans and did not understand the country’s best interests. Lincoln did not understand the general’s plan for the defense of Washington, and withheld McDowell’s 1st Corps from McClellan’s command as a result. Without these troops, McClellan abandoned the flanking movement that he had planned, and instead launched a costly siege.

Had McClellan explained his plans for Washington’s defense to Lincoln -- which were in fact sufficient -- and had the 1st Corps not been detached from McClellan’s command, the events at Yorktown might have gone differently. Yorktown might have been taken from the rebels in the matter of a few days or a week, and McClellan might have been able to march northwest to Richmond before the Confederates could have concentrated their troops around their capital. While such historical revisionism is fraught with contingencies, such a scenario is reasonable to believe had McClellan explained to Lincoln his plans for Washington’s defense. McClellan’s negative experiences with politicians in Europe did not directly cause him to spurn Lincoln prior to leaving for the Virginia Peninsula. Like the early life experiences that Rafuse chronicles, McClellan’s experiences as part of the Delafield Commission further informed his negative opinion of politicians, which in turn had an impact on the decisions that he made regarding his relationship and communication with Lincoln.

Second, McClellan’s experiences at Sebastopol as part of the Delafield Commission led him to besiege Yorktown. Approaching Yorktown in early April, McClellan believed that an overwhelming Union victory was necessary. Like many in the Union, he believed in the “slave
power” conspiracy, the theory that the Southern aristocracy tricked the masses into rebelling against the federal government. McClellan believed that if resistance to the Union were to seem impracticable, the Southern masses would abandon the war effort, and the Confederacy would implode. Thinking himself deprived of the necessary troops for a flanking movement, McClellan thought that the best way to convey the impossibility of resistance to the government was through replicating the Allied siege of Sebastopol at Yorktown. When McClellan visited Sebastopol in October 1855, he found the city utterly destroyed, a product of the estimated 2.4 million artillery shells that the Allies rained upon the Russian stronghold. He likened the destruction to the ruins at Pompeii. Surely, McClellan thought, if the Union could similarly reduce Yorktown and the rebel army there, it would cripple Southern resolve.

Consequently, McClellan gathered the guns to strike his blow. As the weeks ticked by, Lincoln objected, but his protestations and McClellan’s low impression of the president probably only served to strengthen the general’s conviction that a siege was the correct course of action. Furthermore, he knew that the Allied assaults of Sebastopol had come at a steep price; even the successful attack in September had cost the Allies 10,000 troops. McClellan believed he could ill afford to make such a bloody assault. The general also knew that the primary reason that the Allies were successful in September was due to Russian carelessness; the majority of the defenders at the time of the assault were quite literally out to lunch. The Confederates, under General Joseph Johnston, a man McClellan deeply respected, would not be so careless. Thus, in prosecuting the siege, McClellan wrote to his wife that he was avoiding the faults of the Allies at Sebastopol, and later rationalized his decision to besiege Yorktown by saying that he could have carried the town had he “sacrificed 10,000 lives.” McClellan truly believed that a siege was the only option.
He was wrong. Had McClellan attacked immediately upon arriving at Yorktown, a siege would not have been necessary. On April 6th -- a day after the Army of the Potomac’s arrival at Yorktown -- Brigadier General Winfield Scott Hancock, acting under the orders of Division Commander William “Baldy” Smith, quickly found a hole in the rebel line along the Warwick River. Before he could attack, however, McClellan called him back, reasoning that the army engineers were the only ones who could do proper reconnaissance. Had he pressed ahead with an attack, the Union would undoubtedly have carried Yorktown in short order. But McClellan was wary of attacking -- he wished to avoid “the faults of the Allies” -- and instead settled in for a siege. In early May, everything was ready for McClellan’s grand bombardment, but the Confederates had already slipped away.

After Yorktown, although the Union Army threatened Richmond, they lost the Peninsula Campaign. The largest battles that summer occurred over seven days on the outskirts of Richmond and are referred to as the “Seven Days Battles.” The largest battle of the Seven Days occurred on June 27, at the Battle of Gaine’s Mill. That day, Confederate General Robert E. Lee did what McClellan was so afraid to do: with roughly 54,000 men, he attacked an entrenched Union position consisting of 34,000 soldiers, a move which cost Lee nearly 8,000 troops but won him the battle.\textsuperscript{177} Ironically, the product of Gaine’s Mill was to convince McClellan to abandon the campaign and retreat towards the James River. Lee was so surprised by McClellan’s decision -- he fully expected the Yankees to stay and fight -- that he failed to take full advantage of the Union retreat.\textsuperscript{178} At Yorktown, McClellan was fixated on a decisive Union victory, believing such a triumph would reduce the South’s resolve. Ironically, it was a bloody battle --

\textsuperscript{177} To the Gates of Richmond, 223, 249.  
\textsuperscript{178} McClellan’s War, 226.
one in which the Union lost fewer troops their adversaries -- that caused McClellan’s resolve to crumble.

Soon thereafter, in July 1862, at the new Union base at Harrison’s Landing, President Lincoln visited his young general and his army. After the present surveyed the army, McClellan handed Lincoln a letter pertaining to his views on the war. In his letter, McClellan asked the president to adopt a policy that was “truly constitutional and conservative;” he implored Lincoln to make war upon the South’s “armed forces and political organizations,” and not upon the “population.” “[Not] for moment,” McClellan insisted, should the federal government seek to abolish slavery. Such a policy, McClellan reasoned, “would receive the support of almost all truly loyal men,” and would “deeply impress the rebel masses.” 179 He asked for 100,000 reinforcements to take Richmond. 180 McClellan still believed that the Southern masses -- the “population” -- were hoodwinked into secession, and that the Union could still win their allegiance through overwhelming military victory.

But Lincoln was no longer listening to McClellan. The rebels had beaten the federals on the Peninsula, and Southern Unionism was nowhere to be seen. A new strategy was called for. In June, Lincoln created the Army of Virginia, and named John Pope as its leader. Pope was a Republican, and his appointment marked the beginning of what historian John Matsui refers to as the “radicalization of the Union war effort.” 181 In July, Lincoln signed the Second Confiscation Act, which allowed for the Union to seize Southern property of military value to the

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179 George B. McClellan to Abraham Lincoln, July 7, 1862, in The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 344-345.
180 McClellan asked for the reinforcements in a telegram to Stanton on July 3. George B. McClellan to Edwin M. Stanton, July 3, 1862, in The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, 333.
181 “War in Earnest: The Army of Virginia and the Radicalization of the Union War Effort, 1862.”
Confederacy, including slaves. For the first time, the federal government was forcibly breaking the chains of bondage, a move directly at odds with McClellan’s view that Southern “property” was not to be touched. In the words of historian Thomas Rowland, the “kid gloves were coming off.”

In hindsight, McClellan’s blunders on the Peninsula paved the way for emancipation. Had McClellan defeated Johnston’s (and then Lee’s) army on the Peninsula, and had he subsequently been able to capture Richmond, the war would have ended without emancipation. The conciliatory policies that McClellan championed -- including his desire to return to the antebellum status quo with slavery intact -- would have been upheld. That the war dragged on for three more bloody years allowed the radical faction of the Republican Party and Lincoln to press for emancipation. This trend away from conservatism and conciliation and towards emancipation is exemplified in a letter Lincoln sent to the conservative New Yorker August Belmont in late July 1862. “Broken eggs cannot be mended,” the president wrote; “[the government] cannot much longer play a game in which it stakes all, and its enemies stake nothing.” With every drop of Northern blood that was spilled, the president was less inclined to conciliate the South. The culmination of this radicalization of the war was the issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. Against McClellan’s desires, the war was now not one of preservation, but of liberation as well.

Equally important, the Peninsula Campaign itself conveyed to the North the necessity of emancipation. Historian Glenn David Brasher points out that at the dawn of the campaign, most in the North did not welcome emancipation. Their opinion on African liberation changed,

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182 The Fiery Trial, 215.
183 George B. McClellan and Civil War History: In the Shadow of Grant and Sherman, 91-92.
184 The Fiery Trial, 220.
however, when throughout the campaign the value of slaves to the Confederacy became increasingly apparent. Specifically, the defenses around Richmond and at Yorktown were constructed using slave labor. When McClellan approached Yorktown, General Magruder begged Richmond to send more slaves to bolster his fortifications, and General Joseph Johnston referred to slaves as “indispensable” for the Confederacy. Brasher concludes by arguing that the siege of Yorktown -- a response to the strong defenses there -- was a product of slave labor.

“Evidence was mounting that the Confederacy was gaining significant military advantage from their slaves,” Brasher writes; “[t]he longer Magruder’s fortifications impeded McClellan’s army, the more the war endangered the institution of slavery.”185 Not only did the prolonging of the war allow for the radical faction of Congress and Lincoln to push for emancipation, but it also proved the necessity of freeing the slaves. The Confiscation Act was a manifestation of this realization. That McClellan was opposed to any measure freeing the slaves both demonstrates his deep commitment to Whiggish conciliatory values, as well as his indifference to the fate of those in bondage.

Following Pope’s defeat at the Second Battle of Bull Run, and Lee’s subsequent invasion of Maryland, McClellan was appointed to command the forces chasing the rebel general. After failing to destroy Lee’s weakened and vulnerable army after Antietam, however, his moment in the sun was over, and Lincoln removed him from command in November 1862. Still seeking a constitutional and conservative reconciliation, McClellan ran for president in 1864. With the Democratic platform imbued with “Copperhead” sentiment, McClellan lost badly to Lincoln. After the war, McClellan went on a self-imposed exile of sorts to Europe, only to return in 1868.

Ten years later, he was elected Governor of New Jersey, and served until 1881. He died in 1885, at the age of 58.

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Never before has there been a full-scale study examining the Delafield Commission and its impact on the Civil War. Though this study attempts to do so, it is incomplete. It focuses solely on the commission’s impact on George Brinton McClellan, who undoubtedly was the most important character in a story about the Delafield Commission and the Civil War, but perhaps not the only one. Thus, a more robust study on the on the Delafield Commission and its effects on the entirety of the conflict is required.

McClellan was not a man “possessed by demons and delusions,” as Stephen Sears suggests.186 Bruce Catton’s characterization that McClellan had “all the virtues necessary in a war except one -- he did not like to fight,” is closer, yet still misses the mark.187 McClellan did have all the virtues necessary to fight and direct a war on the scale of the Civil War. By all accounts, he was intelligent and steeped in the military profession. McClellan was perhaps the only one in the country who could organize the massive number of troops as effectively as he did, and he had an aptitude for planning great campaigns. He was no coward. In the Mexican War he was cool under fire, and more important, in his Western Virginia campaign of 1861, he attacked the Confederates with vigor.

Instead, like everyone else, McClellan acted based on what he knew. But what he knew -- and what he thought he knew -- was wrong. He was wrong to underestimate the military capacities of Lincoln, to view him as simply another useless politician, and he was misguided in consequently ignoring him before leaving for the Virginia Peninsula. His attitude towards

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186 George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon, xi.
187 Reflections on the Civil War, 83.
politicians was not unusual for those in the military establishment of the day, but his subsequent actions were inexcusable. Communication in wartime is critical, and for a general to ignore his civilian superior -- even one for whom he had contempt -- is to ask for a fumbling of execution. As Sears so aptly writes, “McClellan’s chief failing -- his persistent unwillingness to make common cause with the civilians charged with managing the war -- virtually nullified his accomplishments.”188

McClellan’s primary adversary after Yorktown, General Robert E. Lee, knew this all too well. In the words of Sears, “Lee was at pains to explain and discuss his every step with [Jefferson Davis], and he was rewarded with the president’s unstinting support.”189 It must be noted that Davis, unlike Lincoln, had ample military experience, which probably accounted for Lee’s trust in his superior. However, not all Confederate Generals shared Lee’s enthusiasm for Davis; General Joseph Johnston never respected Davis, a fact that he readily acknowledged.190 McClellan’s relationship with Lincoln also stands in stark contrast with that of the future General-in-Chief of the U.S. Army, Ulysses S. Grant. In Partners in Command, Joseph Glatthaar writes that Grant “understood the role of a general officer in wartime and the delicate relationship between commander in chief and soldier. Military men must subordinate themselves to political authorities.”191 On multiple occasions, with no request of the administration in mind, Grant sent his subordinates to Washington to explain and answer questions about the general’s

188 To the Gates of Richmond, 166.
189 To the Gates of Richmond, 154.
190 After he was wounded during the Peninsula Campaign and taken out of action, Johnston told one visitor at his bedside, “[t]he shot that struck me down is the very best that has been fired for the Southern cause yet…For I possess in no degree the confidence of our government, and now they have in my place one who does possess it.” To the Gates of Richmond, 154.
191 Partners in Command, 196.
decisions. Such actions gained Lincoln’s trust, which translated to the president giving Grant full discretion later in the war. It is hard to imagine McClellan acting similarly.

Throughout American history there has been tension between the military establishment and the civilian government, but Grant’s behavior towards Lincoln was the only rational option. As a general, he answered to the president. Like Grant, McClellan should have explained his plans to Lincoln, especially because he considered the president to be ignorant in matters of war. McClellan, a man who was charged with saving the country in its darkest hour, should have been able to overcome his predispositions and act as a professional.

McClellan’s decision to besiege Yorktown in early April 1862 is likewise faulty, yet more understandable. His decision was based foremost in the misguided yet widespread belief that the Confederacy would crumble in the face of a decisive Union victory. McClellan’s training at West Point and his belief that he faced a larger enemy suggested that to initiate a frontal assault would not accomplish such a victory, and Lincoln’s withholding of the 1st Corps led him to believe that he did not have enough men to engage in a flanking movement across the York River. For McClellan, launching a siege was the only logical option, and it was one with which he was comfortable. He was an engineer by training, participated in the siege of Vera Cruz, and studied the siege of Sebastopol, possibly the largest and certainly the most modern siege up to that point in history. McClellan believed that by using the siege of Sebastopol as a guide, he could destroy the army that sat opposite to him and triumphantly march up the Peninsula to Richmond.

McClellan’s decision to base the siege of Yorktown upon the principles of the Allied siege of Sevastopol was faulty. Unlike the Russians, Confederate supply lines remained open.

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192 Grant sent representatives to Washington after Vicksburg and after his successes in central and eastern Tennessee following the battle of Chickamauga. *Partners in Command*, 195, 200.
Moreover, organizing a siege on the scale of Sebastopol gave the Confederates the opportunity to reinforce Yorktown, rendering a Union assault impracticable. Moreover, the rebels could escape up the Peninsula when their situation at Yorktown became untenable; they were allowed to live and fight another day. McClellan’s defenders often cry that no Union general faced a stronger, more determined Confederate Army than the one McClellan faced during the Peninsula Campaign. They rightfully claim that the rebel army that Grant defeated on the same ground in 1864 was far weaker. What these historians fail to mention is that by launching a siege of four weeks at Yorktown, McClellan himself was responsible for the strengthening of the army that he would later face on the outskirts of Richmond.

In conclusion, McClellan was a difficult, stubborn, arrogant man. His conservative views on slavery are repulsive in the light of history. But he was neither delusional nor a coward. Instead, he acted based on what he knew, or what he thought he knew, about politicians and about warfare. He was wrong. Lincoln needed to be informed of his general’s plans for Washington’s defense, and replicating the siege of Sebastopol at Yorktown was unnecessary and costly in both time and blood. This study is not an attempt to forgive McClellan’s mistakes; rather, it is an attempt to understand them in the context of his experiences as a member of the Delafield Commission.
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