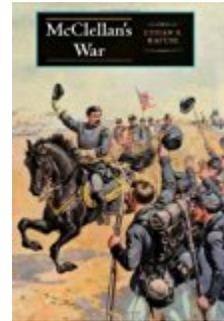


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ethan S. Rafuse. *McClellan's War: The Failure of Moderation in the Struggle for the Union*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. xiv + 525 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34532-5.

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## The Mystery of McClellan's Mind

This is a brave book. In attempting to rehabilitate the reputation of George B. McClellan, arguably the least respected major Union military leader of the Civil War, Ethan Rafuse takes on a task that might well give pause to the most fearless scholar. While Union General Phil Kearny famously proclaimed that his commander McClellan's conduct of operations could only be explained by cowardice or treason, a biting judgment that historians have for the most part essentially reaffirmed, Rafuse finds a more nuanced explanation for the general's decisions. McClellan's legendary and much-derided caution, the author argues, can best be understood as the product of his immersion in Whiggish and Enlightenment doctrines. Rafuse provides a clearly written, exhaustively researched, and massively detailed analysis of the general's career through his removal from command in late 1862, following which, the author argues, the moderate conciliatory policy McClellan advocated was no longer feasible.

McClellan's political education, the author argues, was most fundamentally shaped by the influence of his Whig father, a Philadelphia physician who, before his death in 1847, had been on intimate terms with many of the party's leaders, including Henry Clay and John M. Clayton. The support of Whig politicians ensured young McClellan's admission to West Point. In a nice bit of historical detective work, Rafuse reveals that the first draft of McClellan's autobiography contained a brief reference to the prevalence of Whig influences in his household during his youth, though the general deleted this refer-

ence in the published version.

The young officer's subsequent education at the U.S. Military Academy and service under Whig General Winfield Scott during the Mexican War further reinforced his "orientation toward the values of Whiggery: consciously directed order and discipline, hierarchy, moderation, and enlightened reason" (p. 49). Rafuse notes that McClellan's early idol, Scott, insisted on a rational, restrained (and rather McClellan-like) policy of limited war and leniency toward civilians during the Mexican War—though he does not note that Scott's well-intentioned efforts in this direction were rather less than successful.

The author reveals that McClellan broke with the Pennsylvania Whig party as the result of its nomination of William F. Johnston for governor in 1851. Johnson's outspoken opposition to the Fugitive Slave Act caused McClellan to denounce him as an "abolitionist" and throw his support behind the pro-Compromise Democratic candidate (p. 58). Thereafter, somewhat unfortunately for the author's argument, McClellan was to all appearances a loyal and zealous Democrat. He strongly supported his friend Stephen Douglas throughout the 1850s, particularly during the Little Giant's famous 1858 Senate campaign against Abraham Lincoln. Rafuse attributes McClellan's admiration for the arch-Democrat Douglas to the latter's ideological similarity to Whig titan Daniel Webster. Douglas and Webster both championed "the new market economy and its ethos of self-improvement and national development" and "blamed

the sectional conflict on irresponsible 'ultras' in both sections" (p. 73). This linkage is useful in advancing the author's argument, though one suspects that support for Douglas might conceivably be rooted in factors other than his resemblance to the great statesman of the party that he opposed.

McClellan's meteoric wartime career has been the source of bitter controversy from his time up to the present day. Many Republicans saw in his un-aggressive and conciliatory policies toward white Southerners some combination of timidity, perhaps engrained by his West Point engineering training, and disloyalty, rooted in his supposed sympathy for the South and slavery. Though Lincoln sustained the general with remarkable patience, even in the face of unanimous opposition to McClellan within his own cabinet following the Peninsula campaign, eventually even the ever-magnanimous Lincoln had enough of McClellan's inertia. For the most part the author advances an extremely favorable interpretation of the general's conduct of his 1861 and 1862 campaigns, although to my mind Kenneth P. Williams's cogent, if furious, attacks on McClellan's strategic, tactical, and even administrative performance, at the very least, leave room for doubt on this score.[1]

Unfortunately, Rafuse does not cover McClellan's 1864 presidential campaign, as the Democratic standard-bearer, in detail. This omission, along with the author's decision not to examine closely the general's post-1851 immersion in Democratic Party political culture, ultimately leaves his treatment of McClellan's political ideology less complete and convincing than it otherwise might have been. The general's dedication to the Democratic Party during most of his adult life remains the elephant in the room throughout most of this book, looming large but unacknowledged.

Rafuse is convincing in portraying McClellan as being influenced by the post-Enlightenment military tradition that encouraged "an emphasis on logistics, sieges, and carefully executed maneuvers whose costs and risks could be rationally calculated, as well as a reluctance to seek out the enemy army and accept the uncontrollable costs and risks associated with general engagements" (p. 390). He was hardly unique in this sense, however. No major Union military leader actually carried out or consistently advocated a policy of unrestrained "total war," the at times intemperate rhetoric of Benjamin Butler, John Pope, and William T. Sherman to the contrary. Civil

War military leaders operated within the context of an era of limited warfare—nonetheless, McClellan's extreme and exceptional caution stood out even at that time.

Rooting McClellan's caution in his Whig influences likewise seems useful only up to a point. Why would fellow former Whigs like Abraham Lincoln and William H. Seward (both much more committed party members than McClellan!), as well as the general's wartime political nemesis Benjamin F. Wade, have been able to abandon their supposed Whiggish caution and moderation to advocate a more aggressive war policy? Rafuse suggests that Lincoln was more affected by the democratizing influence of the Jacksonian Era than was McClellan, and hence less concerned with rigidly upholding the existing social and economic order. Perhaps, but again one suspects that this hardly tells the full story.

Perhaps class and gender offer more clues to McClellan's mindset and behavior than this book acknowledges. The model of the general as a would-be aristocrat, self-consciously embracing gentlemanly restraint in defiance of the dominant wartime model of masculine aggressiveness, offers as much or greater explanatory power than do his youthful political allegiances. And what about racism, a central component of Democratic political culture? McClellan's hostility toward abolitionism, as the author concedes, was the central issue in his personal political realignment. Was his opposition to wartime emancipation a matter of his desire to repress irrational passion and extremism, as the author would have it, or might other darker impulses have been at play as well? Support for slavery drew its power from more sources than simply the desire for order. The sources of the ever-mystifying McClellan's beliefs and performance seem to be more complex than this interesting and useful book's clever approach allows.

#### Note

[1]. Kenneth P. Williams, *Lincoln Finds a General: A Military Study of the Civil War*, vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan, 1949).

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