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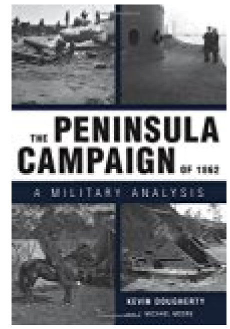

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Another Look at McClellan's Peninsula Campaign

Although not as popular as such major Civil War battles as Gettysburg, Antietam, or Fredericksburg, the Peninsula Campaign has attracted the attention of a number Civil War and military historians in the last several years. In addition to the work of Stephen Sears, both Thomas Rowland and Ethan Rafuse have written major works on George McClellan that have dealt extensively with the Peninsula Campaign.[1] Although slimmer and far less scholarly in terms of archival sources, Kevin Dougherty and J. Michael Moore provide a succinct summary of the Peninsula Campaign that offers both a comprehensive treatment of the campaign's major battles as well as a penetrating analysis of the significance of both Union and Confederate operations during this campaign. What distinguishes this study from previous ones is the attempt "to analyze the campaign in the context of current and enduring military doctrine" (p. viii).

As conceived by George McClellan initially, the Peninsula Campaign (originally the Urbanna plan) was an amphibious turning movement. Instead of attacking Confederate forces located at Manassas Junction in Virginia, McClellan would initiate a turning movement, transporting Union forces from Annapolis, Maryland, via the Chesapeake Bay, to Urbanna, Virginia on the Rappahannock River. From there, it was a quick march to Richmond. If Confederate forces under Joseph Johnston withdrew from Manassas and were able to occupy Richmond prior to McClellan's army, Union forces would cross to the south bank of the James River and operate against Richmond from the south. McClellan believed his plan was faster than the overland route and less costly because it would most likely avoid dangerous frontal assaults–the Confederate army would probably be forced to attack McClellan in an effort to drive Federal forces from Richmond.

The essentials of the plan changed when Johnston withdrew his army from the Manassas area to the Rappahannock River in early March 1862. According to Dougherty and Moore, this meant that Johnston would have positioned his army between Union forces at Urbanna and Richmond. As a result, McClellan changed his plan, landing at Fortress Monroe, near the James River on the York-James Peninsula. After taking Yorktown, Union forces would advance to West Point. Using the Richmond and York River railroad, McClellan would advance on Richmond and, in all probability, initiate siege operations on the Confederate capital. Although Abraham Lincoln was skeptical of McClellan's plan, he was eventually persuaded to support it. However, as the authors note, Lincoln's support was contingent on a number of conditions and the most important condition was the requirement that Washington, D.C. be furnished with enough troops to make it invulnerable to a Confederate attack.

After providing a straightforward narrative of the campaign, from the fall of the Yorktown through the Seven Days battles and the Union retreat to Harrison's Landing on the James River in early August 1862, the authors turn to analysis and assessment. Since McClellan failed to take Richmond or destroy the Army of Northern Virginia, and he had his own Army of the Potomac withdrawn from the banks of the James River, the campaign was an obvious failure. Why did the campaign fail? And how does the performance of each major commander stack up against contemporary standards of command? Dougherty and Moore offer several sensible reasons for McClellan's lackluster performance. For McClellan's campaign to be successful, he needed productive collaboration with the U.S. Navy, and particularly from North Atlantic Blockade Squadron commander, Louis Goldsborough. As an amphibious operation, a good working relationship with the navy was essential. During the Civil War, however, the theory of unified command or joint operations was non-existent. Other than the commander-in-chief, there was no joint chiefs of staff to coordinate the various branches of the armed services. Hence, neither Goldsborough nor McClellan could order the assistance of the other. McClellan, note Dougherty and Moore, thought Goldsborough had promised him naval firepower to help reduce the fortifications at Yorktown; however, Goldsborough saw his only duty as making sure that the dangerous Confederate ironclad, *Merrimack*, was bottled up at nearby Norfolk. What was needed, the authors point out, was an informal, but nevertheless, close collaboration based on the model of Ulysses Grant and Andrew Foote in the western theater; however, the personalities of both men prevented such collaboration.

"Few can fault McClellan as an administrator, builder of an army, or planner," the authors write. "Instead, his fault lay in execution" (p. 140). Indeed, two primary traits were responsible for McClellan's inability to execute: his inflexibility and his contempt for civilian authority. In a number of different contexts, the authors point out McClellan's inflexibility. McClellan laid siege to Yorktown because that is what he planned to do all along. He simply would not deviate from his plan, whatever the circumstances. A notable shortcoming related to inflexibility was McClellan's failure to plan branches, options that are built into a plan that are dependent upon victory, defeat, or stalemate. As the author's note, McClellan did not incorporate much in the way of surprise in his operations. He was predictable to his core. McClellan preferred low-risk siege operations and lacked the flexibility to boldly maneuver or take risks based on what he thought the enemy might do. While some of this inflexibility was the result of Union weaknesses (for instance, sub-par intelligence gathering), much of it, according to the authors, was simply the result of McClellan's training and temperament. When judged against many enduring military concepts–the element of surprise, anticipation, or planning branches–McClellan's generalship was defective.

A by-product of his experience in Mexico, McClellan was suspicious of civilian leaders. During the Civil War, his tortured relationship with Abraham Lincoln, the authors argue, contributed to his failure on the Peninsula. Knowing, for instance, that the President was skeptical about the Peninsula Campaign largely because of fears about the safety of Washington, D.C, McClellan did little to relieve the president's concerns. In fact, McClellan failed to inform Lincoln of how he had arranged troops in the Washington environs and the Shenandoah Valley to respond to a Confederate threat. When the Confederacy sent Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson into the Shenandoah to threaten Washington, D.C., Lincoln took the bait and withheld McDowell's corps from McClellan. "In spite of his knowledge of Lincoln's misgivings about the Peninsula Plan and fears for Washington," Dougherty and Moore write, "McClellan refused to take the president into this confidence and give him a sense of security" (p. 64).

Indeed, while Lincoln's ideas of grand strategy evolved in the spring and summer of 1862 and would incorporate military as well as such political and economic measures as emancipation and confiscation, McClellan clung to his narrow definition of the war and failed to acknowledge the political environment in which the president had to operate. Not only did McClellan fail to keep his commander-in-chief apprised of his plan early on in the war, his harsh descriptions of Lincoln and other cabinet officers demonstrate a complete lack of subordination to civilian authority. According to Dougherty and Moore, McClellan did not exercise the military doctrine of objective that is, taking clearly defined action that was subordinate to the objectives as determined by his commander-in-chief. "This represents one of McClellan's greatest shortcomings as Lincoln's subordinate," Dougherty and Moore note, "the failure to understand the president's developing grand strategy" (p. 146).

When judged against McClellan as a commander, Robert E. Lee, in the estimation of Dougherty and Moore, comes off much more favorably, particularly when judged by the standards of contemporary military doctrine. If McClellan was inflexible, Lee anticipated the enemy's movement and tried to stay one step ahead. With superior intelligence gathering, Lee determined that McClellan was retreating to the James and quickly developed a plan to trap and destroy the Union army. Throughout the Peninsula Campaign, it was Lee who dictated the time and tempo of the campaign. Lee, according to the authors, implemented the important principle of simultaneity when he advised Jefferson Davis to send Jackson to the Shenandoah and caused Lincoln to divert McDowell's corps from reinforcing McClellan. The only major shortcoming that plagued Lee during the Peninsula Campaign was formulating complicated attacks that could not be simultaneously implemented by generals who were not experienced with offensive warfare. During the battles of Mechanicsville and Gaines Mill, uncharacteristic sluggishness by Jackson led to attacks that were piecemeal and uncoordinated. In pursuing the retreating Federal army to Harrison's Landing, the attacks at Savage Station were similarly uncoordinated and ineffective.

Dougherty and Moore have written a brief, concise account of one of the major campaigns of the Civil War. Although sparse in terms of primary sources, the authors provide their readers with a comprehensive account of the campaign and solid analysis that judges the campaign according to the maxims of contemporary military doctrine. Although an effective analysis of the Peninsula Campaign, the monograph is less effective as the result of some minor deficiencies. For instance, the book gets off to slow start with a tedious collection of short biographies of the major and minor figures of the Peninsula Campaign. Together these short biographies read like the *Dictionary of American Biography* and provide, in the opinion of this reviewer, an awkward way to approach the subject at hand. Additionally, the work provides detailed accounts of geography, terrain, and battles. More frequent and more detailed maps would certainly assist the reader in understanding the strategy, tactics, and battles of the Peninsula Campaign.

Dougherty and Moore rightfully criticize McClellan for his failure to subordinate himself to the Lincoln administration, arguing that McClellan failed to appreciate the military, political, and economic aspects of the war. At the same time, the authors neglect to adequately spell out the reasons for McClellan's point of view. It was not a peculiarity of the Young Napoleon, but rather an instance of Jominian thinking that characterized an entire generation of West Point educated officers. In the recent Mexican War, Winfield Scott had waged a war based on professionalism, minimizing contact with civilians, and devoid of radical social or economic objectives. McClellan's contention that the war should be limited in scope and not involve civilians or social institutions was not something out of the mainstream, but representative of an educated officer corps in the United States. This was simply the way a large percentage of West Point officers thought about warfare.

Finally, Dougherty and Moore end their account of the Peninsula Campaign without providing their readers with the strategic significance of the removal of the army from the James River in early August 1862. Radical Republicans had attacked McClellan throughout the campaign, charging him with cowardice and lack of enthusiasm for the Union cause. Because of its association with McClellan, the amphibious approach to Richmond was taboo for the rest of the war. Even in January 1864 when Grant suggested sending a Union force of 60,000 via the ocean (to land in Suffolk, Virginia and begin a raid on Raleigh, North Carolina), Henry Halleck rejected his advice, arguing that the only legitimate avenue to Lee's army and Richmond was the Washington/Richmond line. Thus McClellan's failure on the Peninsula dramatically limited the strategic options available for subsequent Union commanders.

Despite these limitations, however, Dougherty and Moore have provided a solid, albeit brief, account and analysis of the Peninsula campaign. Most serious students of the American Civil War will benefit from it.

Note

[1]. Stephen W. Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1992); Thomas J. Rowland, *George B. McClellan and the Civil War History: In the Shadow of Grant and Sherman* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1998); and Ethan S. Rafuse, *McClellan's War: The Failure of Moderation in the Struggle for the Union* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005).

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