

General McClellan and the Politicians Revisited

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Along with the Newburgh Conspiracy of 1783 and Harry Truman's tangles with Douglas MacArthur during the Korean War, George B. McClellan's problematic career as a general during the Civil War is frequently held up as one of the great episodes of tension, if not crisis, in the history of American civil-military relations.¹ In 1987, British scholar Brian Holden Reid published an essay in this journal titled "General McClellan and the Politicians," in which he provided an insightful and compelling discussion of the events and forces that shaped McClellan's dealings with Washington during his tenure in command.² In the decades since the appearance of Reid's essay, though, a rich body of literature has appeared on both the Civil War and the subject of civil-military relations. It seems worthwhile to revisit the subject of Reid's essay and consider what insight the outpouring of recent theoretical literature on civil-military relations may offer on how we think about McClellan's dealings with Washington during his time in command.

By far the most famous and influential concept in the field of civil-military relations is the one Samuel Huntington advocated in his landmark work *The Soldier and the State*. This concept, which Huntington labeled "objective civilian control," has become so ubiquitous that political scientist Eliot A. Cohen has labeled it the "normal" theory of civil-military relations. "The essence of objective civilian control is the recognition of autonomous military professionalism," Huntington declared, "professionalizing the military, by rendering them politically sterile and neutral . . . ready to carry out the wishes of any civilian group which secures legitimate authority within the state. . . . The antithesis of objective civilian control is military participation in politics," he added, a notion "fundamentally out of place in a society in which the division of labor has been carried to the point where there emerges a distinct class of specialists in the management of violence." In the conduct of war, Huntington advocated a clear division of responsibility between the political leader, whose job is to define the broader policy ends for which wars are fought, and the military man, whose job is to manage the military means provided for achieving those ends.³

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In truth, Huntington simply gave a label to a concept that had informed attitudes toward civil-military relations for as long as militaries had been viewed as distinct from other governmental institutions. Huntington was correct, though, in his observation that the appeal of this idea received a decided boost from the increased specialization of labor that accompanied the market and industrial revolutions of the nineteenth century and gave rise to the concept of professionalism in various fields. As historian John Shy noted, during the nineteenth century, “the modern military profession emerged in Western societies, with rationalized recruitment, education, promotion, retirement, staff systems—all the features of a separate, specialized priesthood of technicians, increasingly distinct from the civilian world.” Among the forces that both drove and reflected this development was the prominence enjoyed by the writings of Baron Antoine Henri Jomini. Jomini’s effort to identify and articulate principles to guide the “priesthood of technicians” in the conduct of war, writes Shy, fostered a mindset that anticipated Huntington’s concept of objective control by giving “this emergent profession . . . the prestige of science as well as a rationale for the professional claim to autonomy. . . . The lesson was clear: a government should choose its ablest military commander, then leave him free to wage war according to scientific principles.”⁴

Yet, as Carl von Clausewitz noted, war is an activity whose inherent complexities make it exceedingly problematic to establish hard and fast principles for how it is to be conducted. This is especially the case in the relationship between military and political leaders, for war is, Clausewitz observed, “never an isolated act” separate from politics but rather “a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means. . . . The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose.”⁵ Recent history has offered compelling evidence that the relationship between the military and politics may be too complex for a clear prescriptive formula such as Huntington’s to be suitable. The two decades since the 1991 Gulf War, whose conduct seemed to many to offer a sparkling vindication of the normal theory of civil-military relations,⁶ have seen a series of developments and episodes that suggested to a number of observers there are significant challenges in American civil-military relations and the entire issue needed to be revisited in a serious manner.⁷

Although some recent observers have taken as their point of departure agreement with Huntington’s approach to how civil-military relations should work,⁸ a number have expressed deep dissatisfaction with it. The most prominent dissenter, due to the breadth of his work and stature within the defense intellectual community, has been the aforementioned Cohen. Cohen argues that Huntington’s notion that political leaders should recognize and respect a sharp separation of spheres between political and military concerns is badly mistaken. The truly great war statesmen, he contends, owed much of their success to the fact that they understood this relationship and did not hesitate to interject themselves into areas that, on the surface, seemed the purview of the professional military. Cohen labels what should take place between political leaders

and military commanders an “unequal dialogue—a dialogue, in that both sides expressed their views bluntly . . . and unequal, in that the final authority of the civilian leader was unambiguous and unquestioned.”⁹

Rooted in a desire to ensure that interaction between the military and political spheres is properly appreciated and managed is a concept articulated by military scholar Rebecca Schiff that is carried forward in the analysis of civil-military relations by authors Peter Roman and David Tarr. In her 1995 essay introducing the concept, Schiff labeled it “concordance.” In contrast with theories that emphasize “the separation of civil and military institutions,” she declared, “the theory of concordance highlights dialogue, accommodation and shared values or objectives among the military, the political elites, and society.”¹⁰ For their part, Roman and Tarr agree that the concept of “a civil military dichotomy hardly captures the complexity of the decision-making environment.” They argue that a healthy concept of civil-military relations needs to recognize that, while there are differences between them, military leaders and civil authorities at the highest levels in fact engage with each other on a more collegial than hierarchical basis, with differences between their worlds being less compelling than their mutual membership in a community of “national security professionals.” Membership in this community is held by both civilians and the military and, when properly managed, ensures areas of overlap between military and political endeavors are addressed. It also recognizes war is not a purely military endeavor and facilitates the synergistic employment of all elements of national power.¹¹

To be sure, there are significant differences in the maturity and scope of formal governing institutions between now and 1861 to 1862; however, the value of what today is known as the interagency process was as compelling for those who fought the Civil War as it is for modern national security professionals. So too was the overlap between the political and military that Clausewitz observed is always an essential element of war.¹² This relationship is definitely illustrated in the case of national security professional George B. McClellan.

McClellan was born in 1826, the son of a prominent physician and educator who maintained a household where, his son would later recall, “traditions and associations . . . were all on the side of the old Whig Party.”¹³ In the environs where McClellan spent his formative years, the Whig Party represented those in America who tended to be enthusiastic about the country’s economic and cultural modernization due to the market and industrial revolutions of the first-half of the nineteenth century, out of which emerged the modern concept of professionalism. These Whigs were less enthusiastic, though, about the modernization of politics during the 19th century. Socialized in the aristocratic politics of the Early Republic and meritocratic ethos of the market revolution, they possessed an elitist vision of politics that valued consensus, and were uncomfortable with the egalitarian and hyperpartisan political culture Andrew Jackson and his followers in the Democratic Party introduced to the nation during the 1820s and 1830s.

McClellan's outlook on politics was reinforced by experiences at West Point and in the antebellum army, institutions that shared a great deal in their attitudes toward politics and society with the Whigs.¹⁴ Both socialized officers to embrace a hierarchical vision of society, while encouraging them to stand apart from partisan and parochial interests and be politically neutral in the exercise of their duties, many of which involved acting as agents of the sort of state-driven economic modernization that Whigs advocated. Not surprisingly, in light of the fact that their cultures echoed so strongly the ethos of the environment in which he spent his formative years, McClellan excelled at West Point and in the antebellum army. He finished second in the West Point class of 1846, won brevet promotions for his service during the Mexican War, and, by the time he left the service in 1857 to pursue opportunities in the civilian world, was widely considered one of the stars of the officer corps.

Evidence indicates these experiences instilled in McClellan a potentially problematic perspective regarding civil-military relations. First among its features was an intense disdain for politicians. This was a product of McClellan's Whig socialization and a manifestation of his embrace of the emergent concept of military professionalism,¹⁵ which was rooted in a belief that there were sharp distinctions between the roles and functions of military men and the rest of society. Central to this concept was the notion that military matters could not be adequately comprehended by those who lacked specialized training and the best thing they could do was to delegate management of military affairs to those who possessed it.¹⁶

Yet if McClellan's experiences before the war had predisposed him to accept elements of the Huntingtonian approach to civil-military relations, the problems he encountered in the war offered compelling evidence that in the real world there was a need to modify notions of the military man's "proper" role in dealing with politicians. When McClellan arrived in Washington in July 1861, he could hardly have anticipated the degree to which civil authorities were seized by an intense determination—indeed eagerness—to defer to him in the management of military affairs. Within a week after his arrival, it was evident that he could have no illusion that, even had he desired it, he would be left alone in a Huntingtonian military sphere that was clearly separate from politics.¹⁷ Badly stung by what had happened when they interjected themselves into military matters preceding First Manassas, Lincoln and the rest of what served in 1861 as Washington's community of national security professionals were pleased with the energy and manifest competence with which McClellan managed affairs—and happy to take whatever credit his work reflected on them. In part because it confirmed his own sense of things, Lincoln also sanctioned McClellan's making his presence known in discussions on topics that were not strictly military, such as the question of whether emancipation should be a war aim.¹⁸

If judged by the "normal" prescription for the clear separation of roles between the military and political worlds, the state of civil-military relations during McClellan's first months in Washington was in a number of ways unsatisfactory. But if the test is what was accomplished, this period must be viewed

more positively. In 1861, the country needed a strong military leader, one who was willing to take responsibility and act energetically to address the many problems at hand, even if that meant occasional intrusions on that leader's part into matters that were not strictly military. By December, the performance of the Army of the Potomac in a grand review at Munson's Hill, the level of management the Union war effort enjoyed from Missouri to Virginia, and the strong network of fortifications around the capital offered compelling testimony to McClellan's effectiveness, and that of the system of concordant civil-military relations that had been a critical part of his efforts.

Of course, the test of civil-military relations is not when there is harmony but when there is tension. Unfortunately for McClellan, in December 1861 the situation began to change significantly due mainly to impatience with the progress of the war and, above all, dissatisfaction with the failure of McClellan's army to commence major operations.¹⁹ Another factor was concern over the state of Federal finances. When reports that the Treasury Department was having difficulty raising money reached him, McClellan decided on his own initiative to pay a call on Secretary Salmon Chase. McClellan then proceeded to make Chase one of the few men outside his circle of military confidants who knew about his plan not to attack the Confederates at Manassas and Centreville as was expected, but instead to take the Army of the Potomac to Urbanna on the Rappahannock River and, using the rivers of the Virginia tidewater, launch his campaign against the rebel capital of Richmond.²⁰

Viewed from the normal theory of civil-military relations, this was an extraordinary event, for McClellan was bringing into his confidence a man whose role and functions should have given him distance from such a strictly military question as where the army was going to conduct operations. Yet, from the perspective of Roman and Tarr, McClellan's engaging in dialogue on such a matter with Chase as a fellow national security professional was eminently appropriate. It demonstrated a proper recognition on McClellan's part of the central importance of finance in the conduct of war, a belief that made it appropriate to include principle economic advisors among the class of national security professionals and for military men to pursue concordance with them.²¹

In the weeks that followed McClellan's meeting with Chase, civil-military tensions increased as the Congressional Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War began its operation, with its members determined to assert their role in the community of national security professionals.²² It was a determination that had been evident from the beginning of the war and one grounded in a deep distrust on the part of its members of the professional military, which in turn was fueled by deep skepticism of claims by West Point trained officers that they possessed a unique level of specialized expertise that was necessary to successfully exercise command. It was also rooted in the fact that McClellan made no secret of his opposition to attacking slavery, something many influential Republicans sincerely believed needed to be a part of the war effort. The men who provided the driving energy to the committee had joined the general exultation at McClellan's arrival in Washington and the zeal and competence

with which he subsequently managed the situation around the capital. As long as they did so, McClellan indulged their desire for engagement with the community of national security professionals.

Military inactivity and the Lincoln administration's handling of John C. Fremont's attack on slavery in Missouri, however, severely soured Republicans in Congress on how the executive branch was managing the war. To them, reluctance to attack slavery and to commence major military operations were two sides of a badly minted coin. Consequently, by December 1861, the members of the committee were determined to assert their place in the community of national security professionals in order to advance what McClellan believed to be misguided views on the conduct of the war. Unfortunately, rather than continuing to engage them collegially as fellow national security professionals, McClellan recoiled, with one of the ways he and his associates endeavored to defend themselves being the assertion of boundaries between the professional military and civil authorities.

Making matters worse, just as the Joint Committee began its work in late December, McClellan fell ill with typhoid fever. He endeavored to maintain an active engagement with the president in the weeks that followed, but at critical times his illness incapacitated him. Lincoln responded by actively intervening in military affairs for the first time in an independent, substantive way since McClellan's arrival in Washington. He wrote to western commanders in an attempt to urge them forward. He also organized councils of war to, in the words of one of the participants, "obtain our opinion as to the possibility of soon commencing active operations with the Army of the Potomac . . . provided he could see how it could be made to do something."²³

The composition of these councils is suggestive. They included the president, secretary of state, secretary of treasury, an assistant secretary of war (the secretary of war, Simon Cameron, was in the process of being removed from office during this same period), and, representing the professional military, the quartermaster general and two division commanders from the Army of the Potomac. In short, it was a meeting of Lincoln's national security community and provided an excellent forum for the pursuit of concordance between the civil and military leadership. Lamentably, it was during the last of these meetings, on 13 January, that McClellan's stance toward civil-military relations once again took a Huntingtonian turn. When pressed to present the group with his plans, McClellan adamantly refused unless explicitly ordered to do so by the president.²⁴

In failing to extend his confidence to a group whose members clearly merited recognition as fellow national security professionals who wanted to achieve concordance with the general, McClellan made a serious mistake. To be sure, a desire to maintain operational security²⁵ and not unreasonable doubts about the judgment of some of the civil officials he had to deal with may have made McClellan's reticence understandable. Nonetheless, his Huntingtonian turn in his dealings with Congress and his fellow national security professionals in early 1862—and the fact that he seemed to be selective in his approach

to civil-military relations depending on his own interests—had the effect of bitterly antagonizing officials who were well-placed to do serious harm to his efforts. While it can be reasonably argued that the differences were so profound that no approach on the general's part, short of total surrender on what he believed with good cause to be sound policy and principles, could have repaired his relations with these civilian security professionals, it is also clear that after January 1862 McClellan would never enjoy full concordance with the Lincoln administration or Congress. Both would be much more assertive in their dealings related to military affairs—and understandably so in Lincoln's case after the perils of delegating so much to one man were vividly illustrated during McClellan's bout with typhoid.

From a Huntingtonian viewpoint, Lincoln's subsequent management of the Peninsula and Shenandoah Valley Campaigns offer textbook examples of the consequences of political leaders failing to grant the professional military autonomy in the conduct of operations. But if one eschews this approach in favor of Cohen, Schiff, and Roman and Tarr's concepts of officers and civil officials belonging to a national security professional class engaged in dialogue in pursuit of concordance, Lincoln's engagement was entirely and unquestionably appropriate. Indeed, if matters in which political and military considerations were intertwined—as they assuredly were in 1862—it was essential they be properly and fully addressed. Of course, if Lincoln's engagement is not assessed on the basis of whether it adhered to a Huntingtonian notion of institutional propriety, then analysis should focus on the simple question of whether the president's efforts produced an effective dialogue. One of the problems for Lincoln, from a historical perspective, is that in this light he does not come off well. In his engagement with McClellan during the Peninsula Campaign, Lincoln was often inconsistent, alternating between expressions of support for McClellan's efforts to implement his plans and expressions in word and deed or unmistakable hostility toward them.

Probably the most important substantive factor in undermining Lincoln's and McClellan's ability to achieve concordance was their profound disagreement over operational planning. As McClellan had told Chase, he wanted to take his army to the rivers of the Lower Chesapeake and operate in the Virginia tidewater region east of Richmond. This, he believed, would compel the enemy to react in a manner that would produce conditions far more favorable to the Union than could be expected from another advance on Manassas Junction.²⁶ When he learned about McClellan's plan, Lincoln made clear that he did not like it. Instead, the president preferred the general engage the enemy somewhere in the region between Alexandria and the Rappahannock River. While a number of factors contributed to Lincoln's thinking on the matter, none were as compelling as his concern about the security of the lower Shenandoah Valley and Washington if McClellan were to take his army to the Lower Chesapeake.²⁷

Finally, McClellan offered to put his plan of operations before his subordinate generals, believing it would facilitate concordance by providing a compelling demonstration of professional military judgment on a military

problem. When they voted in favor of the plan, Lincoln gave McClellan authorization to implement it. That concordance had not been achieved, and the president's intense dissatisfaction was unalleviated, was evident in his issuing orders that same day mandating the organization of the Army of the Potomac into a corps configuration. Indeed, Lincoln turned McClellan's appeal to professional military judgment against him by appointing to corps command officers who openly shared his reservations about the general's plan. It was also evident in the president's complaint after hearing the results of the generals' deliberations, remarkable for what it suggests about Lincoln's mental character and confidence in his own judgment at that point in the war, that, "We can do nothing else than accept their plan We can't reject it and adopt another without assuming all responsibility in the case of the failure of the one we adopt."²⁸ As a consequence, it is not surprising that McClellan's already innate suspicion of politicians and desire for Huntingtonian autonomy was inflamed to a white-hot pitch by the time he left Washington.²⁹

There is also the fact that Lincoln was almost certainly wrong on the substantive merits of the case. His decision in early April to withhold a corps commanded by Irvin McDowell from McClellan's army was a gross overreaction to the situation in the Shenandoah Valley. It also undermined McClellan's ability (his plan having been modified as a consequence of events into an advance from Fort Monroe up the York-James peninsula) to undertake a joint operation against the Confederate garrison at Yorktown. Such an operation could have quickly overcome the obstacle the Confederate defenders there presented and spared the Union army the month-long siege operation that eventually captured the town but strained Lincoln's patience. Then, as McClellan advanced on Richmond, Lincoln issued orders dictating that he use the York River Railroad as his line of communications and place his army in a position from which his right flank could link up with McDowell's command, which Lincoln directed to march south from Fredericksburg. McClellan complied with his superior's wishes, though in doing so he was compelled to put his army in an exceedingly problematic position astride the Chickahominy River with his right flank and rear vulnerable to a Confederate turning movement until McDowell arrived. In late May, Lincoln once again overreacted to problems in the Shenandoah Valley by diverting a significant portion of McDowell's command to the region in a move that, as McDowell presciently warned the president at the time, would not produce any measureable benefits for the Union cause.³⁰ With mismanagement of McDowell's command preventing him from joining McClellan in a timely manner, the Confederates were able to take advantage of McClellan's vulnerable right wing and compel the Federal commander to make a risky move to a new position on the James River.³¹

In the aftermath of the Seven Days Battles, McClellan endeavored to reinvigorate his dialogue with the president through what became known as the Harrison's Landing Letter. In this document, which the general wrote to detail "my general views concerning the existing state of the rebellion," he urged the president to resist growing pressure to take a harder line toward the

Confederacy. McClellan acknowledged he was weighing in on matters that “do not strictly relate to the situation of this Army or strictly come within the scope of my official duties” but felt compelled to advise Lincoln that he believed the war “should not be, at all, a War upon population; but against armed forces and political organizations. Neither confiscation of property, political executions of persons . . . or forcible abolition of slavery should be contemplated for a moment.”³² Though intended purely for Lincoln, the letter eventually was made public and the impression among many then and since is that McClellan wrongly crossed a line; it was, in the words of historian Charles Royster, “McClellan’s de facto declaration of his candidacy for the presidency as a Democrat.”³³

This was not the case. There is little evidence McClellan had his eye on political office during his active service. While others were thinking about him in this regard, McClellan’s own writings evince little interest in, but rather an intense disgust for and desire to stay out of, the world of what he later called “practical politics.”³⁴ There is nothing in the language of the Harrison’s Landing Letter that hints otherwise. To be sure, if one follows the Huntingtonian perspective in which there should be clear lines of demarcation between the military and political worlds, then it is hard to dispute that McClellan, as he acknowledged, was crossing it. But if viewed as an effort to engage in dialogue with the president as a fellow national security professional, complaints regarding McClellan’s actions are far less compelling. At the time, there was serious debate in the North over whether to persist in an approach to the rebellion that emphasized conciliation and assured Southerners of a return to the status quo antebellum if they laid down their arms. McClellan had not discussed the matter with the president in months and, in light of the fact that Lincoln had recently countermanded an attack on slavery by a commander in South Carolina, historian Russell Weigley is on solid ground when he concludes the general “was not so much questioning as seeking to reaffirm the President’s existing policy.”³⁵

Moreover, the question of emancipation and federal policy toward Southern civilians was not one in which military and political considerations could be separated; it had significant military implications. Thus, it demanded an active strategy dialogue among the North’s national security professionals. Indeed, for McClellan not to have initiated a dialogue with Lincoln on the matter and make his own views clear (while appropriate from a Huntingtonian vision of his role) would have been the height of irresponsibility. Indeed, if there is any problem to be found in this episode, it is in the failure on Lincoln’s part to communicate with McClellan on the matter, especially when the president was on the verge of making fundamental changes in the direction of the war.

McClellan’s status as Lincoln’s top military commander came to a formal end with the appointment of Henry W. Halleck as general-in-chief on 11 July 1862. This confirmed and accelerated the process by which McClellan’s place in the Lincoln administration’s team of national security professionals was inexorably diminished. It took place in the context of, and contributed to, ever-growing antagonism between McClellan and Washington as a consequence of the events of the late summer of 1862. First, Lincoln and Halleck

decided, over McClellan's vehement objections, to order the Army of the Potomac back to northern Virginia. Then, General John Pope, after promising to wage war in a way that was more to the liking of McClellan's critics, failed to fulfill hopes that he would both vindicate the president's decision and discredit and supplant McClellan as the principle Federal commander in Virginia. In early September, Lincoln felt he had no choice but to turn over to McClellan the effort to halt a Confederate incursion into Maryland, though the general's personal conduct during the Second Manassas Campaign (the only time in his military career when his conduct actually may have merited characterization as insubordinate) aroused further suspicion among Republicans, principle among them the president.³⁶ Despite McClellan's victory in the Maryland Campaign and sincere efforts afterward by him and the president to revive concordance, it proved impossible to restore a healthy dialogue between the two or to restore the general's standing among the administration's national security professionals. This was confirmed in early November with McClellan's dismissal from command of the Army of the Potomac.

In the aftermath of Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, George H. W. Bush assembled his advisors to discuss how to respond. Colin Powell later recalled during the deliberations asking "whether it was worth going to war to liberate Kuwait. It was a Clausewitzian question which I posed so that the military would know what preparations it might have to make. I detected a chill in the room. The question was premature, and it should not have come from me I was only supposed to give military advice."³⁷ Powell was correct that he had raised a Clausewitzian question, for it addressed a matter where the political and military inextricably overlapped. Yet the fact that it produced a "chill in the room," one Powell indicates was rooted in a sense that it was inappropriate for a military man to have asked it, also illustrates how ascendant Huntington's normal theory of civil-military relations was in the decades after Vietnam. In the end, the important thing was that the question was asked and a dialogue took place. It is in recognition of this that Cohen, Schiff, and Roman and Tarr have advocated different ways of thinking about the relationship between political and military leaders. Indeed, the meeting Powell described offers a fine example of what Cohen meant when he advocated thinking of civil-military relations as a dialogue. It is also in line with Roman and Tarr's conception of civil-military relations taking place among a community of national security professionals.

As Andrew Bacevich observed, the attempt in the Huntingtonian tradition to draw "the clearest possible line to prevent politics and war from becoming too tangled up with one another" not only conflicts with the reality of war but also carries significant dangers. "[W]hat gets lost in drawing such distinctions," warns Bacevich, "is any possibility of strategic coherence Fighting is, of course, integral to war. But, in ways not always appreciated by or even agreeable to those who actually pull triggers and drop bombs, war is also and always profoundly political."³⁸ It is in part to ensure Clausewitz's observations regarding the relationship between war and politics are fully appreciated, and help students and practitioners of the military art recognize

and avoid the potential pitfalls of a rigidly prescriptive approach, that students of civil-military relations have generated such a rich body of literature over the past decades.

The case of George McClellan is one in which this literature can be applied in guiding how we think about civil-military relations. If one follows the dictates of the authors referred to in this article, and views McClellan as but one member of a national security organization amongst whom a proper dialogue took place during the Civil War in search of concordance, aspects of his conduct that appear condemnable in the Huntingtonian paradigm may be understood as not just acceptable but appropriate. By the same token, complaints by McClellan and his defenders about intrusions into military matters by members of Congress and the Lincoln administration must also be deemed wrongheaded. Freed from the need to worry about whether they adhere to an artificial concept of how generals and statesmen should interact, one needs to focus on the question of effectiveness. In the end, the true test of civil-military relations is whether members of a country's national security structure achieve a complementary relationship between political ends and military ways and means, ensuring the latter are optimally directed to the attainment of the former. It is on that basis, not whether Huntington's prescriptive approach is followed, that civil-military relations in general, and in McClellan's case in particular, should be assessed.

NOTES

1. See, for instance, Mackubin Thomas Owens, "Rumsfeld, the Generals, and the State of U.S. Civil-Military Relations," *Naval War College Review* 59, no. 4 (Autumn 2006): 74-77. Eliot A. Cohen aptly observes that in historical memory the conflicts between Lincoln and his generals have "assumed something of the status of parables." Eliot A. Cohen, "The Unequal Dialogue: The Theory and Reality of Civil-Military Relations and the Use of Force," in *Soldiers and Civilians: the Civil-Military Gap and American National Security*, ed. Peter Feaver and Richard H. Kohn (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 439. The popular image of McClellan as a case study in military insolence persists despite the compelling case made by Russell F. Weigley that "the seeker of precedents for more recent military challenges to civilian policy will not find them in the stewardship of George B. McClellan." Indeed, Weigley has lauded the example McClellan set as the first West Point educated "thoroughly professional officer" to exercise supreme command in regards to civil-military relations. Russell F. Weigley, "The American Military and the Principle of Civilian Control from McClellan to Powell," *The Journal of Military History* 57, no. 5 (December 1993): 32-34.

2. Brian Holden Reid, "General McClellan and the Politicians," *Parameters* 17, no. 3 (September 1987): 101-12.

3. Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Practice of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 83-85; Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002), 4-5.

4. John Shy, "Jomini," in *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, edited by Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 160-61.

5. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Eliot Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 78, 87.

6. This view was exemplified by George H.W. Bush's self-congratulatory remarks that: "We did the politics and you superbly did the fighting . . . Colin Powell, ever the professional . . . sought to ensure that there were sufficient troops for whatever option I wanted, and then the freedom of ac-

tion to do the job once the political decision had been made. I was determined that our military would have both. I did not want to repeat the problems of Vietnam (or numerous wars throughout history) where the political leadership meddled.” Quoted in Cohen, *Supreme Command*, 3. Cohen offers a very different take on civil-military relations in the Gulf War, finding anything but a Huntingtonian division of labor within the Bush administration and much to criticize in the war’s conduct and results. *Ibid.*, 188-200.

7. Good starting points for understanding recent literature on civil-military relations and issues that have inspired it are Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, “The Gap: Soldiers, Civilians and their Mutual Misunderstanding,” *The National Interest* 61 (Fall 2000): 29-37; James Burk, “Theories of Democratic Civil-Military Relations,” *Armed Forces and Society* 29, no. 7 (Fall 2002): 7-29; Peter Feaver, Richard H. Kohn, and Lindsay P. Cohn, “Introduction: The Gap Between Military and Civilian in the United States in Perspective,” in *Soldiers and Civilians*, ed. Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 1-5; Frank Hoffman, “Bridging the Civil-Military Gap,” *Armed Forces Journal* 145 (December 2007): 18-20; and Mackubin Thomas Owens, *U.S. Civil-Military Relations After 9/11: Renegotiating the Civil-Military Bargain* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 2-5.

8. Michael C. Desch, “Hartz, Huntington, and the Liberal Tradition in America: The Clash with Military Realism,” in *American Civil-Military Relations*, ed. Suzanne C. Nielsen and Don M. Snider (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 93, 111.

9. Cohen, *Supreme Command*, 209.

10. Rebecca L. Schiff, “Civil-Military Relations Reconsidered: A Theory of Concordance,” *Armed Forces and Society* 22 (Fall 1995): 7- 24.

11. Peter J. Roman and Peter W. Tarr, “Military Professionalism and Policymaking: Is There a Civil-Military Gap at the Top? If So, Does It Matter?” in *Soldiers and Civilians*, ed. Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 406-07. Barry R. McCaffrey illustrated how the importance of interagency collaboration increased as one rose in rank when he declared, “as a battalion or brigade commander in combat, I would pay attention only to my intelligence and operations staff officers; as a division or corps commander, I would pay attention only to my logistics and communications staff officers; as a joint theater commander, however, I would listen only to my legal officer, my public affairs officer, and my State Department political advisor.” McCaffrey, “Foreword,” in *American Civil-Military Relations: The Soldier and the State in a New Era*, ed. Suzanne C. Nielsen and Don M. Snider (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), xiv. See also Colin Clark, “The Dempsey Doctrine Unveiled: Never Use The Military Alone,” *AOL Defense*, (May 1, 2012), <http://defense.aol.com/2012/05/01/the-dempsey-doctrine-unveiled-never-use-the-military-alone/> (accessed May 3, 2003).

12. For an effective and useful corrective to the myth of a tradition of political neutrality on the part of high-ranking army officers during the nineteenth century, see Phillip S. Meilinger, “Soldiers and Politics: Exposing Some Myths,” *Parameters* 40, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 74-86.

13. George B. McClellan, “Austria, June [20] 1866—Early Draft of Autobiography,” George B. McClellan Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. This analysis of McClellan, his views toward politics, and the forces that shaped them is condensed from the much fuller treatment of these subjects in my *McClellan’s War: The Failure of Moderation in the Struggle for the Union* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

14. Preminent among works on the antebellum officer corps and its *mentalite* is William B. Skelton, *An American Profession of Arms: The Army Officer Corps, 1784-1861* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992). The affinity between Whiggery and the culture at West Point is a central theme of my essay, “‘To Check . . . the Very Worst and Meanest of Our Passions’: Common Sense, ‘Cobbon Sense’, and the Socialization of Cadets at Antebellum West Point,” *War in History* 16 (September 2009): 406-24. Particularly influential in informing my thinking on these matters has been the work of Samuel J. Watson, whose notable published works on the antebellum army include “Manifest Destiny and Military Professionalism: Junior U.S. Army Officers’ Attitudes Toward War with Mexico, 1844-1846,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 99, no. 4 (April 1996): 466-98; Samuel J. Watson, “How the Army Became Accepted: West Point Socialization, Military Accountability, and

the Nation-State During the Jacksonian Era,” *American Nineteenth-Century History* 7, no. 2 (June 2006), 219-51; and Samuel J. Watson, *Jackson’s Sword: The Army Officer Corps on the American Frontier, 1810-1821* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, forthcoming).

15. The centrality of military professionalism in McClellan’s outlook is recognized in nearly all recent studies of the general, with the pioneering work being Edward Hagerman, “The Professionalization of George B. McClellan and Early Civil War Command,” *Civil War History* 21 (June 1975): 113-35.

16. Of course, however understandable, a disdain for politics and politicians was not a good thing for a man to possess who would have to deal extensively and closely with politicians during the Civil War. Moreover, while military professionalism had taken hold within the officer corps by the middle of the nineteenth century, in much of America it was a different story. The idea that professional training and socialization was necessary to successfully command military matters should be left to military men was not one that enjoyed popularity in a society that celebrated the citizen soldier. For an insightful recent treatment of this, see Carol Reardon, *With a Sword in One Hand and Jomini in the Other: The Problem of Military Thought in the Civil War North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 55-88.

17. “I find myself in a new and strange position here,” McClellan declared shortly after his arrival in Washington, “President, Cabinet, General Scott and all deferring to me, by some strange operation of magic I seem to have become *the* power of the land.” It was not just in the executive branch that McClellan found such an ardor. “I went to the Senate,” an astonished McClellan wrote, “to get it through (the bill increasing number of Aides) and was quite overwhelmed by the congratulations I received and the respect with which I was treated. . . . They give me my way in everything, full swing and unbounded confidence. All tell me that I am held responsible for the fate of the Nation and that all its resources shall be placed at my disposal.” McClellan to his wife, July 27, 30, 1861 quoted in *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan: Selected Correspondence, 1860-1865*, ed. Stephen W. Sears (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1989), 70, 71.

18. At the same time, throughout this period McClellan made clear in word and deed his subordination to civil authorities, though there were instances of private grouching that should be treated as no more than that. When Lincoln came under pressure from politicians over affairs west of the Appalachians, for instance, McClellan accommodated the president’s concerns as he developed his overall strategy. Ethan S. Rafuse, “McClellan and Halleck at War: The Struggle for Control of the Union War Effort in the West, November 1861-March 1862,” *Civil War History* 49 (March 2003), 34.

19. This discussion of the developments that soured McClellan’s relations with the Lincoln administration and Congress draws on the treatment of the subject in Ethan S. Rafuse, *McClellan’s War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 156-95.

20. George B. McClellan, *McClellan’s Own Story: The War For the Union, The Soldiers Who Fought It, the Civilians Who Directed It and His Relations to It and to Them (1886)* (New York: Charles L. Webster, 1887), 157-58, 203. This meeting probably took place on December 12 and lasted about an hour and a half. Robert B. Warden, *An Account of the Private Life and Public Services of Salmon Portland Chase* (Cincinnati, OH: Wilstach, Baldwin, & Co., 1874), 391.

21. It was also recognition of the fact that Chase had been, since the beginning of the war, actively involved in military affairs to a far greater extent than almost anyone else in the Lincoln administration and far more than one, on the surface, would expect from the secretary of treasury. The appointment of Ohioans McClellan and Irvin McDowell, for instance, to the two most important commands organized in the aftermath of Fort Sumter owed much to Chase, the state’s former governor. Chase to McClellan, July 7, 1861, in *The Salmon P. Chase Papers, vol. 3: Correspondence, 1858-March 1863*, ed. John Niven (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1996), 74. Even before then, McClellan engaged in direct correspondence with Chase in which they discussed military matters. McClellan to Chase, 26 June 1861, in *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan*, 36-37.

22. The best study of the Joint Committee is Bruce Tap, *Over Lincoln’s Shoulder: The Committee on the Conduct of the War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

23. "Gen M'Clellan's Illness," *New York Tribune*, January 1, 1862; "Our Washington Correspondence . . . Health of Gen. M'Clellan," *The New York Times*, January 4, 1862; Edward Bates, *The Diary of Edward Bates, 1859-1866*, ed. Howard K. Beale (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 219; Lincoln to Halleck and Buell, December 31, 1861, Lincoln to Halleck, 1 January 1862, Lincoln to Buell, January 1 and 4, 1862, in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 70 vols. in 128 parts (U.S. War Department, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), ser. 1, vol. 7: 524, 526, 530; Henry J. Raymond, "Memorandum of General McDowell," *The Life and Public Services of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Derby and Miller, 1865), 773.

24. William B. Franklin, "The First Great Crime of the War," in *The Annals of the Civil War: Written by Leading Participants North and South*, ed. Alexander K. McClure (1878; reprint New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 76-79; Raymond, "Memorandum of General McDowell"; Montgomery C. Meigs, "General M.C. Meigs on the Conduct of the War," *American Historical Review* 26 (January 1921), 292-93.

25. McClellan's concerns about operational security were understandable in light of the fact that he had recently seen sections of Simon Cameron's annual report and Lincoln's annual message to Congress appear in newspapers before they were officially submitted and the publication in a newspaper of information about the defenses around Washington. T. Harry Williams, *Lincoln and the Radicals* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1941), 59-60; David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 324-25; "The National Lines Before Washington. A Map Exhibiting the Defences of the National Capital, and Positions of the Several Divisions of the Grand Union Army," *The New York Times*, December 4, 1861; McClellan to Cameron, December 9, 1861, in *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan*, 142.

26. McClellan laid out the operational rationale for his plan in McClellan to Stanton, January 31, 1861 [3 February] 1862, in *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan*, 162-70.

27. This was a concern that events proved exaggerated. McClellan effectively addressed the problem through the construction of strong fortifications around the capital and providing more than adequate manpower in the Valley and around Washington to handle any threat. These measures were inadequate, though, to allay the president's anxiety—an anxiety McClellan's enemies in Washington were all too happy to stoke. Indeed, at one point, Lincoln called the general to his office and told him, McClellan later recalled, "it had been represented to him (and he certainly conveyed to me the distinct impression that he regarded these representations as well founded) that my plan of campaign . . . was conceived with the traitorous intent of removing its defenders from Washington, and thus giving over to the enemy the capital and the government." McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story*, 195-96.

28. Donald, *Lincoln*, 340; McClellan to his wife, April 1, 1862, in *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan*, 223.

29. This would be manifest in a refusal in March and April 1862 to accept offers of assistance from friends in helping him cultivate relationships in Washington. One warned the general that, "You have secluded yourself from political associations and interests. I and others who know you understand this but . . . [i]f you leave [Washington] with your rear undefended your tenure of office is not worth a week's purchase." This made little impression on McClellan, whose only effort in this regard was to ask his friend Samuel Barlow to do what he could to see that papers he had ties with merely "defend me from the most malicious attacks." Gibbs to McClellan, March 13, 1862, McClellan Papers; McClellan to Barlow, March 16, 1862; McClellan to his wife, April 1, 1862, *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan*, 213. McClellan's resistance to playing the political game became a source of exasperation for Barlow, who pleaded with the general to cultivate political support and assured him it was possible to "touch pitch and not be defiled." Barlow to "my dear Col," February 23, 1862, Barlow to McClellan, July 18, August 9, 1862, *Samuel L. M. Barlow Papers*, Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.

30. McDowell to Lincoln, May 24, 1862, *OR*, vol. 11, pt. 3: 220-21. The best study of the Peninsula Campaign and Seven Days Battles is Stephen W. Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1988), while Peter Cozzens's *Shenandoah 1862:*

Stonewall Jackson's Valley Campaign (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), offers an exemplary account of operations in the Valley.

31. When McClellan informed Washington of his decision to move to the James, it was in the aftermath of a battle at Gaines' Mill (the third in a series of engagements that would become known as the Seven Days' Battles) in which his forces had suffered heavy casualties fighting off Confederate attacks. Unfortunately, McClellan unwisely decided to give vent to his frustration in an infamous telegram to the War Department. "The Government has not sustained this army," he declared, "If I save this army now . . . I owe no thanks to you or to any other persons in Washington—you have done your best to sacrifice this Army." McClellan to Stanton, June 28, 1862, *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan*, 322-23. Though McClellan's charge was manifestly absurd, he can certainly be forgiven for believing the good faith with which he conducted the campaign, both operationally and in terms of civil-military relations, had not been fully reciprocated. To be sure, expressions of disgust with his superiors appeared in McClellan's private correspondence throughout the campaign. Publically, though, he maintained an active engagement with Washington and the tone and substance of his correspondence and actions throughout the campaign on the Peninsula offer no evidence of his acting in anything but good faith. Though he made no doubt of his objections to them in his dialogue with the administration, McClellan ultimately accepted his superiors' directives and conformed operations to them when ordered to do so. When he did resist, neither the tone nor substance of his official correspondence ever crossed the line into active insubordination. It must also be said that, while his conduct during the later stages of the Seven Days Battles was problematic enough to suggest a physical and mental breakdown, McClellan generally made sound decisions in handling his army throughout the time it was on the Peninsula. And when it came to the biggest question on which the campaign's outcome turned, the management of McDowell's command, McClellan was clearly right on the substance. That is, one holds the highly dubious belief that in 1862 operations in the Shenandoah Valley were more important than operations in front of the Confederate capital.

32. McClellan to Lincoln, July 7, 1862, in *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan*, 344-45.

33. Charles Royster, "Comment on John Shy, 'The Cultural Approach to the History of War' and on Russell Weigley, 'The American Military and the Principle of Civilian Control from McClellan to Powell,'" *The Journal of Military History* 57 (December 1993), 60.

34. McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story*, 34.

35. Weigley, "The American Military and the Principle of Civilian Control," 34.

36. For McClellan's conduct during the Second Manassas Campaign, see Edward H. Bonekemper III's "General Disobedience: 'Little Mac' let John Pope Twist in the Wind," *Civil War Times* 49 (December 2010), 32-39, and my "Little Mac Acting Badly?—A Response." Both can be found at <http://www.historynet.com/gen-george-mcclellan-at-second-manassas.htm>.

37. Colin Powell with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1996), 450.

38. Andrew Bacevich, "A Modern Major General," *New Left Review* 29 (September-October 2004), <http://www.newleftreview.org/?view=2529>. Indeed, it is in the Huntingtonian tradition that Bacevich locates the roots of much of the trouble American arms encountered in Iraq and Afghanistan. In his approach to civil-military relations, Bacevich argues, General Tommy Franks was driven by "a set of convictions and prejudices common among officers of his generation In essence, they want to reverse the verdict of Vietnam. More specifically, they have sought to purge war of politics . . . although the author of *American Soldier* mouths Clausewitzian slogans, when it comes to the relationship of war and politics, he rejects the core of what Clausewitz actually taught. And in that he typifies the post-Vietnam American officer."