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IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

CHAPTER XXXV

Learning About Men

Up to the defeat of the Unionists at Bull Run on July 21, 1861, President Lincoln had given much more time to considering military appointments than he had to military movements; - political, not military strategy was his concern. He gave the army the best officers he could put his hands on, not forgetting ever the effect of the appointment on the people back home. He left the handling of the army to his Secretary of War, Simon Cameron, and the commander, General Scott. What he asked of them was to give him the results which would sustain the spirit of the North and hold together its antagonistic elements.

Bull Run put the military side of the war squarely up to Lincoln. He saw that he had been wrong at more than one point. In the first place he had allowed himself to be deceived about the simplicity of the task. Here again his Secretary of State, Mr. Seward, had over influenced him. Ninety days and it would all be over, Seward said; and Gen. Scott, echoing Seward, had agreed. Everybody seemed to think it easy - but everybody had been wrong. As he watched the beaten troops straggling back into Washington from their disastrous expedition into Virginia all day July 22, his mind worked like a clock. Even while listening to the
explanations and accusations of officers and observers, reading the
distracted comments of press and public, he roughly analyzed the
situation and mapped out his course.

His first act was a masterly bit of strategy. Along with
the harrowing details of the defeat which flooded the North the day
after the battle, there came the announcement that the President had
called Gen. George B. McClellan to Washington and that he was to be
given the command of a newly created Division - the Division of the
Potomac - the Division which was to take Richmond. The news did
what Lincoln anticipated - turned attention from the shame they were
suffering to considering victories which they were certain would
follow in McClellan's wake, for the "Young Napoleon" as they called
McClellan, was the only man who had given the country victories
so far. He had indeed done a masterly bit of work, driving the enemy
out of Western Virginia in a series of quick, sharp movements, though
it was not his battles which had earned him his title, but his bulle-
tins, so like those by which the young Napoleon Bonaparte sixty-five
years before had thrilled a ragged and despairing France.

No such disgraceful rout as Bull Run would ever come to
the "Young Napoleon." He was not one to fall back - his movements
were forward - always forward. Now Richmond would be taken - Thus
Lincoln by his instinct of what was needed to rally the country
at this sad moment had turned popular despair to hope.

The President was warmly praised for his quick decision,
and he let it be known that he was putting himself fully behind
McClellan. He told the General that he could have whatever he wanted that the country had to give if he would only get the army into shape and give them a victory. McClellan asked what Lincoln must have known the country was the shortest of, and that was patience. "Don't let them hurry me," was the General's chief request, and Lincoln promised. In the meantime he and his cabinet, and all loyal Washington, for that matter, went out of their way to emphasize the brilliancy of the stroke by playing up McClellan. The adulation the General received bewildered even him a little — at first! He wrote his wife:

"I find myself in a new and strange position here — 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 is an immense task that I have on my hands, but I believe I can accomplish it. . . . When I was in the Senate chamber today, and found those old men flocking around me; when I afterward stood in the library, looking over the capitol of our great nation, and saw the crowd gathering around to stare at me, I began to feel how great the task committed to me. Oh! how sincerely I pray to God that I may be endowed with the wisdom and courage necessary to accomplish the work. Who would have thought, when we were married, that I should so soon be called upon to save my country?"

While McClellan was picturing the homage he was receiving, Lincoln was setting down a re-analysis and re-valuing of his task. It is from these days that the Military Memoranda date. They were efforts, apparently, to clear his mind, to get clearly before him the fields of operation, the tasks necessary in each and the orders that should go to the men in charge of each task. The first of these, made two days after Bull Run, is amateurish enough, but as the first written document in his development in military thinking, it is
important. Indeed, it seems to me to bear about the same relation to his growth as a military leader that his first address to Sangamon County in 1832 does to his growth as a political leader.

"Memoranda of Military Policy Suggested by the Bull Run Defeat"

(July 23, 1861)

"1) Let the plan for making the blockade effective be pushed forward with all possible dispatch.

"2) Let the volunteer forces at Fort Monroe and vicinity under General Butler be constantly drilled, disciplined, and instructed without more for the present.

"3) Let Baltimore be held as now, with a gentle but firm and certain hand.

"4) Let the force under Patterson or Banks be strengthened and made secure in its position.

"5) Let the forces in Western Virginia act till further orders according to instructions or orders from General McClellan.

"6) (Let) General Frémont push forward his organization and operations in the West as rapidly as possible, giving rather special attention to Missouri.

"7) Let the forces late before Manassas, except the three-months men, be reorganized as rapidly as possible in their camps here and about Arlington.

"8) Let the three-months forces who decline to enter the longer service be discharged as rapidly as circumstances will permit.

"9) Let the new volunteer forces be brought forward as fast as possible, and especially into the camps on the two sides of the river here.

(July 27, 1861)

"When the foregoing shall be substantially attended to:

"1) Let Manassas Junction (or some point on one or either of the railroads near it) and Strasburg be seized, and permanently
held, with an open line from Washington to Manassas, and an open line from Harper's Ferry to Strasburg - the military men to find the way of doing these.

"2) This done, a joint movement from Cairo on Memphis; and from Cincinnati on East Tennessee."

By this time, the summer of 1861, it must have been clear to him that his chief difficulty was going to be in finding men with sufficient singleness of purpose to carry out the tasks that he had set down in his outline; but he could not have sensed at that moment all the friction, disappointments, defeats, despair that were to come in finding these men of a single purpose. Already he had discovered how many of the men to whom he entrusted undertakings were restless, ineffective and unhappy in their positions if they were not receiving constant attention. And not attention from their immediate superiors, but his attention. They wanted to rush back to Washington, talk things over with him, tell him of their troubles, recount their successes, impress their importance, and usually, beg for some new and higher task although the one assigned to them was still undone. Already he had begun to couple with an appointment the order, "Tell him when he starts to put it through - not to be writing or telegraphing back here but to put it through."

This first summer brought him a startling example of a very opposite kind of difficulty, however. A man who, when given responsibility, cut himself off from his superiors, assumed responsibilities which were not within his sphere, and far from "writing or telegraphing back" did not make even the necessary
reports for the guidance of headquarters. What was he to do when a popular hero like Gen. John C. Frémont went outside his province, and without consultation, issued an order which was in direct conflict with a policy which he had himself repeatedly laid down. This was what Frémont did at the end of August 1861 when he issued what might be called the first Emancipation Proclamation of the war.

"The property, real and personal, of all persons in the State of Missouri who shall take up arms against the United States, or who shall be directly proven to have taken an active part with their enemies in the field, is declared to be confiscated to the public use, and their slaves, if any they have, are hereby declared freemen."

This was a bomb indeed to be thrown suddenly upon the desk of a President when innaugurated six months before had said, "I have no purpose directly or indirectly to interfere with the institution of slavery in the states where it exists," — a President whose legislative arm, the Congress, had but recently pledged itself to the same policy.

There was a trouble danger in Frémont's order. First, it cut into what was at the moment the most delicate and essential factor of Lincoln's policy — holding the Border States to the Union. At that moment Lincoln knew the Kentucky legislature to be veering to unionism, but the moment the order was known, it settled back on its haunches, refusing to budge until the order was modified. One whole company of Kentucky volunteers threw down their arms when it was known that Frémont was carrying out the policy. That very arms that he had furnished Kentucky he saw might be turned
of "The Pathfinder"; his large share in winning California to
freedom; his splendid run in 1856 as the first presidential can-
didate of the Republican party, his romantic elopement with Jessie
Easton - everything that the public knew about him had captivated
the imagination. In a situation as ticklish as Lincoln was in,
the value of such an asset must not be debased for anybody if he
could help it. He himself had from the start done his utmost to
thrust Frémont forward. The General had been in Europe when the
war broke out and when he came back in July Lincoln had practically
told him he could have any appointment that was open. He chose
the Division of the Northwest with headquarters in Missouri.

He seems to have had an idea as we gather from his later
comments that in this department he would have something of his
old life - the mountains, the forests and plains. He found there
was a vast difference between exploring the Northwest and handling
the Northwest at this juncture.

The military problem at the start in Missouri had been
similar to that in Western Virginia which McClellan had handled so
amazingly, that is, to sweep the Confederate forces out of the
State and so administer affairs that she would hold the large loyal
population. But there had been nobody to take care of Missouri
in the way that McClellan had taken care of Western Virginia. When
Frémont arrived he found his troops divided, outnumbered and in
peril. He found grafting and disorganization in the civil and
military establishments. He found the unionists broken into factions, unreasonable, quarrelsome, unmanageable. Here were problems calling for insight, tact, patience, quick decision; and Frémont from the start seemed lacking in all these qualities. He failed to relieve his hard pressed generals and brought about two serious defeats of the Unionists. Stealing and inefficiency increased. At the same time, he gave one of the most curious personal exhibits in the whole Civil War, separating himself from his colleagues, admitting only favorites, and practically cutting himself off from Washington. The grandeur and isolation in which he lived was like that of an Eastern potentate, so markedly so that one of the bits of comment that reached Lincoln was that Frémont was preparing to turn his department into a Northwestern empire and make himself its ruler. Now, how persuade a general of this fashion to modify an order?

Lincoln must have had a doubt, as I have said, of the reception of the letter which he sent by special messenger. It certainly was a tactful enough letter, the paragraph referring to the freeing of slaves reading as follows:

"I think there is great danger that the closing paragraph, in relation to the confiscation of property and the liberating slaves of traitorous owners, will alarm our southern Union friends and turn them against us; perhaps ruin our rather fair prospect for Kentucky. Allow me, therefore, to ask that you will, as of your own motion, modify that paragraph so as to conform to the first and fourth sections of the Act of Congress entitled, 'An act to confiscate property used for insurrectionary purposes,' approved August 6, 1861, and a copy of which act I here-with send you."
It was the wife of the General, Jessie Benton Frémont, who carried back the reply to this carefully worded suggestion. The reply was that the General refused to modify his order, that it it was to be modified, Lincoln must do it. There is no doubt that she tried to bully the President into taking her view of the matter. It was, as far as I know, Mr. Lincoln's first real set-to in the war with a high spirited and self-confident woman. Of women who came offering themselves for service, seeking wounded sons or lovers or husbands, praying for pardons, he had already seen not a few. To them he was all gentleness and courtesy; but could he handle an ambitious, imperious, major-general of a woman - one who all her life had had her way with her men folks? He had a bad hour with her, and as he said, it took all his "awkward tact" - his word not mine - his tact must have been superhuman - to escape a quarrel. But he refused to quarrel, while he refused to yield; and Mrs. Frémont left in anger.

But if the President had not quarreled, he came off profoundly irritated and aggrieved. "Don't mention them," he broke out to a caller who came soon after Mrs. Frémont left with a grist of complaints. "I meet insults standing between two fires, and the constant blazes of anger. Why, not an hour ago, a woman, a lady of high blood, came here, opening her case with mild expectoration, but left in anger, flaunting her handkerchief before my face, and saying, 'Sir, the general will try titles with you. He is a man and I am his wife.' I will tell you before you guess. It was Jessie, the daughter of 'Old Bullion', and how her eye flashed! Young man, forget your annoyances. They are only flea-bites to mine."
Mr. Lincoln did as Fremont requested, he modified the order, and, as he had foreseen, a great to-do broke out. He had to explain even to old friends like Browning. This letter to Browning is the first of the long series of admirable letters on his public policies, which the war brought out. It shows exactly how he felt in September of 1861.

"My dear Sir: Yours of the 17th is just received; and coming from you, I confess it astonishes me. That you should object to my adhering to a law which you had assisted in making and presenting to me less than a month before is odd enough. But this is a very small part. General Frémont's proclamation as to confiscation of property and the liberation of slaves is purely political and not within the range of military law or necessity. If a commanding general finds a necessity to seize the farm of a private owner for a pasture, an encampment, or a fortification, he has the right to do so, and to so hold it as long as the necessity lasts; and this is within military law, because within military necessity. But to say the farm shall no longer belong to the owner, or his heirs forever, and this as well when the farm is not needed for military purposes as when it is, is purely political, without the savor of military law about it. And the same is true of slaves. If the general needs them, he can seize them and use them; but when the need is past, it is not for him to fix their permanent future condition. That must be settled according to laws made by law-makers, and not by military proclamations. The proclamation in the point in question is simply 'dictatorship.' It assumes that the general may do anything he pleases - confiscate the lands and free the slaves of loyal people, as well as of disloyal ones. And going the whole figure, I have no doubt, would be more popular with some thoughtless people than that which has been done! But I cannot assume this reckless position, nor allow others to assume it on my responsibility."

Mrs. Frémont had threatened Lincoln in her interview that the General would "try titles" with him, and that is what he now did, with the hearty backing of those who disagreed with Lincoln about the object of the war. If Frémont had been able to give the country a victory in the field, to lessen in the least degree the wholesale
stealing that was going on in his department, to rule the obstreperous factions, he could have carried off any title he wanted so far as Lincoln was concerned. The last thing in the world that the President wanted was for Frémont to prove himself so incompetent that he would have to be removed.

But the General gave him nothing but failures. Lincoln tried every method of assisting him, and it was only when everything had failed that he finally sent an order relieving him. The degree of his reluctance in forcing the issue comes out in this order. The messenger was told that if he found Gen. Frémont had fought a battle and won, that he was on the battlefield or was expecting soon to be there - he should not deliver the message. No military movement was in sight, and after a hazardous and thrilling trip past the guards with which Frémont had hedged himself in, the message was laid before him.

Frémont had been a hero before, but he was a martyr now, - a martyr to emancipation. Ignoring his failures in the field and his notorious mal-administration, a big body of the best men in the North - Bryant, Whittier, Wendell Phillips and hundreds of influential writers, teachers, speakers, thundered at Lincoln, extolling Frémont. Lincoln took it philosophically, and the first chance he had to use Frémont he took. The General ruined his chance as he had in Missouri. He failed in his operations, and when his army was made a segment in the new army of Virginia under Pope, he refused to serve as a subordinate.
But even this did not weaken his position with his followers — he had become an issue, the champion of emancipation. And those who saw that as the end of the war rather than the saving of the Union, rallied behind him. He was to be their next candidate. Thus, before the end of 1861 Lincoln had made a contemptuous enemy of a man from whom he had hoped great things in his task of saving the Union, and he also had given the faction of his party most disappointed with his policies a candidate for his place in 1864.

Yet in spite of the fact that Frémont had been

responsible for all these serious troubles, he seems never to have been unjust in his judgment of him. When Frémont's critics urged his personal corruption, Lincoln said that he thought it was the wicked and designing men about him that were responsible. As for his extravagance, of which much was made, he said he had looked into the matter and he could not see that Frémont had done any worse in that line than the Eastern commanders. The only trouble with Frémont, Lincoln said, was that he had "absolutely no military capacity," and he had to have military capacity.

It was not only in Frémont that Lincoln was discovering among men in high places in the fall of 1861, incapacity, toleration of corruption, extravagant expenditure of public funds, encroachment on his authority. He had a case of it in his cabinet: His Secretary of War, Simon Cameron, whose enemies had been pursuing him whole-heartedly ever since he went into office, had given them plenty of ammunition, for in the running of his department, rogues
fattened as they had in Missouri under Frémont. Disappointment over the failure of the armies naturally centered on him. Was he not the Secretary of War? To complete the parallel between him and Frémont, Cameron in his report to Congress in December, without consulting Lincoln, came out with the advocacy of the arming of the slaves against the South - a measure almost as sure to drive away the still sensitive Border States as Frémont's emancipation proclamation had been.

When Lincoln read this he ordered the report withdrawn, and a little later tactfully ousted the Secretary of War from a place where he was doing so much harm into one where he could do no harm - the ministry to Russia. Cameron unlike Frémont played up to the President's desire to have the break made without scandal or noise. The request for his resignation, he wrote Lincoln, was a generous response to his own "avowed purpose to retire from the cabinet" and the post offered him was "one of the highest diplomatic positions"at his disposal and provided "the confidence and esteem" of the President.

Certainly, the ways of men are baffling beyond understanding! Here was a hero and an idealist convicted of the same errors, to use the mildest term, as Cameron had been refusing to continue in the service of the country and confessedly doing all the could to weaken the administration in a time of trouble. And here was a bold and blustering politician, scorned by the uncorruptibles, taking his downfall like a gentleman, and relieving rather than increasing the difficulties of the government. And to
carry the contrast on, Frémont's interference with the administration's policy on slavery brought him a tremendous radical backing — but it won Cameron nothing.

Lincoln was certainly learning about men — learning in his school of confusion, pressure, unexpected happenings. Neither day or night was quiet — men came with a thousand requests, so often puerile, selfish, and yet often wise, helpful. Delegations pressed upon him: — scared bankers from the North, sorrowing women with schemes of mercy, Abolitionists threatening revenge if emancipation was not declared, conservatives threatening revenge if it was, soldiers to shake his hand, ambassadors to pay respects. News came with every hour — so little of it glad, some of it even made him stagger on his feet, as in October when they told him of the death of his dear and early friend, Col. Baker at Ball's Bluff.

Always he must be ready for this news whether a blow or a new problem.

Then he was a personage — so hard for him! He must receive and dine the Prince de Joinville, raise flags, sit on the platform, review soldiers, visit camps. And then there was Congress. The fall had brought forth the inevitable committee on the conduct of the war, with all its inevitable outcries, investigations, interference. Enough, another certainly, but not all! The early winter gave him one lesson, that a president of the United States, whatever his domestic difficulties, cannot free himself from foreign relations. His first serious experience as a member of the world's family of nations will be taken up in the next chapter.