

Pres. L. & his Generals

The president of the United States is the commander-in-chief of the army and navy. It is his right not only to call out troops and appoint officers, but to direct campaigns. This military authority of the president has not been conspicuous in the war just ended, though if hostilities had lasted longer it might have been as necessary for Mr. McKinley to have exercised his power as it was for Abraham Lincoln in the Civil War. It was several months after the war between the North and South began, a much longer time in fact than the entire war with Spain has covered, before Mr. Lincoln found it necessary to take the military reins in his hands and to issue orders directing movements. He shrank at first from any such action because as he very frankly owned he knew nothing about military matters and he did not want to embarrass his generals. He was made the more sensitive on this point because the first great battle of the War, -that of Bull Run- an unforgettable disaster- was fought at his wish and against the advice of the commander-in-chief of the army, General Scott. For several months after Bull Run the president gave no direct orders, though he would write long letters to his generals of what he called "suggestions." To a commander in the West he

said:
"Knowing how hazardous it is to bind down a distant commander in the field to specific lines and operations, as so much always depends on a knowledge of localities and passing events, it is intended, therefore, to leave a considerable margin for the exercise of your judgment and discretion."

And again when writing about a plan which he had deeply at heart he said:

"For my own views, I have not offered and do not offer them as orders; and while I am glad to have them respectfully considered, I would blame you to follow them contrary to your own clear judgment, unless I should put them in the form of orders."

It was fully six months after he appointed McClellan to the command of the Army of the Potomac before he could be persuaded to issue a decisive order for that general to move. If one will try to picture what would have happened to Mr. McKinley last spring if he had had an army of nearly 200,000 men lying within

twenty miles or so of the Spaniards, for fully three months after it was well equipped and pretty well drilled, and had not ordered their general to attack, he will have an idea of what Mr. Lincoln endured in the winter of 1861 and 62 before he compelled McClellan to move on Richmond.

Mr. Lincoln stood all the angry pressure of the country because he thought McClellan "knew his business." Nor would he make an order for the general to move until he had practically mastered the whole subject of military tactics. No man ever studied harder for a couple of months that Lincoln did before he asserted himself as commander-in-chief. He crammed on every military book he could get hold of. He knew his army down to the last man. He studied maps as Von Molke did down to the smallest stream and elevation. He summoned every military expert within reach and asked questions until their heads spun and they went away wondering how the man learned so much of the subject. All this he forced himself to do before he would order McClellan to advance.

Even after he began to give positive orders he allowed the largest latitude in their execution. Indeed Lincoln never became peremptory with his generals. His office as commander-in-chief seems to have aroused a kind of paternal feeling in him towards all those under him. He was their father and must be kind and just to them. Again and again this feeling came out. Nothing kinder and at the same time franker was ever written to a subordinate than the letter which the president sent General Hooker in January, 1863, when he appointed him commander of the Army of the Potomac:-

Executive Mansion, Washington, D.C.
January 26, 1863.

Major-General Hooker.

General: I have placed you at the head of the Army of the Potomac. Of course I have done this upon what appear to me to be sufficient reasons, and yet I think it best for you to know that there are some things in regard to which I am not quite satisfied with you. I believe you to be a brave and skillful soldier, which of course I like. I also believe you do not mix politics with your profession, in which you are right. You have confidence

in yourself, which is a valuable if not an indispensable quality. You are ambitious, which, within reasonable bounds, does good rather than harm; but I think that during General Burnside's command of the army you have taken counsel of your ambition and thwarted him as much as you could, in which you did a great wrong to the country and to a most meritorious and honorable brother officer. I have heard, in such a way as to believe it, of your recently saying that both the army and the government needed a dictator.

Of course it was not for this, but in spite of it, that I have given you the command. Only those generals who gain successes can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship. The government will support you to the utmost of its ability, which is neither more nor less than it has done and will do for all commanders. I much fear that the spirit which you have aided to infuse into the army, of criticizing their commander and withholding confidence from him, will now turn upon you. I shall assist you as far as I can to put it down.

Neither you nor Napoleon, if he were alive again, could get any good out of an army while such a spirit prevails in it; and now beware of rashness. Beware of rashness, but with energy and sleep less vigilance go forward and give us victories.

Yours very truly,

A. LINCOLN.

Hooker had a manly heart and the president's words appealed to the best that was in him. Noah Brooks tells how he heard the general read the letter soon after its receipt. "He finished reading it," writes Brooks, "almost with tears in his eyes; and as he folded it and put it back in the breast of his coat, he said 'That is just such a letter as a father might write to a son. It is a beautiful letter and although I think he was harder on me than I deserved, I will say that I love the man who wrote it.'"

Throughout the war Mr. Lincoln was beset by his generals to right their wrongs and gratify their ambitions. He was quick to see the motives at the bottom of complaints and pleas and when he thought them petty he bluntly said so, at the same time reminding the applicants that winning battles, not haggling for honors, was a soldier's business just then. Thus in March, 1863, Rosecrans became disturbed because Grant outranked him and he wrote Lincoln asking that his commission be dated earlier. Lincoln at once saw the reason of the request and he replied:

"Now as to your request that your commission should date from December, 1861. Of course, you expected to gain something by this; but you should remember that precisely so much as you should gain by it others would lose by it. If the thing you sought had been exclusively ours, we would have given it cheerfully; but, being the right of other men, we having a merely arbitrary power over it, the taking it from them and giving it to you becomes a more delicate matter and more deserving of consideration. Truth to speak, I do not appreciate this matter of rank on paper as you officers do. The world will not forget that you fought the battle of Stone River, and it will never care a fig whether

you rank General Grant on paper, or he so ranks you."

When it happened, as it sometimes did, that the jealousies between generals became open conflicts, and Lincoln was called upon by one or the other to interfere, he never hesitated to refuse if he felt that his interference would complicate matters. Generally he managed to put into his refusal a word of good sense which if it had been heeded would have saved the country much disagreeable scandal and often would have saved the contestant his reputation. A case to the point occurred in January, 1863, when McClelland and Halleck were having trouble and McClelland appealed to Lincoln. The president's reply was terse but sufficient:-

"I have too many family controversies, so to speak, already on my hands to voluntarily, or so long as I can avoid it, take up another. You are now doing well- Well for the country and well for yourself- much better than you could possibly be if engaged in open war with General Halleck. Allow me to beg that, for your sake, for my sake, and for the country's sake you give your whole attention to the better work."

A few months later McClelland, who had commanded a corps in Grant's army during the advance on Vicksburg, was relieved for insubordination. Lincoln was much distressed by McClelland's disgrace. The two men were citizens of Springfield, Illinois, and though they were of opposite political parties, they had always been on friendly terms. Lincoln felt that McClelland was important because he held a large Democratic constituency to the government and so for political as well as personal reasons he deplored his removal. But interfere he would not and when McClelland wrote begging for a new investigation Lincoln replied:-

"Better leave it where the law of the case has placed it. For me to force you back upon General Grant would be forcing him to resign. I cannot give you a new command, because we have no forces except such as already have commanders.

I am constantly pressed by those who scold before they think, or without thinking at all, to give commands respectively to Fremont, McClellan, Butler, Sigel, Curtis, Hunter, Hooker, and perhaps others, when, all else out of the way, I have no commands to give them. This is now your case; which, as I have said, pains me not less than it does you. My belief is that the permanent estimate of what a general does in the field is fixed by the 'cloud of witnesses' who have been with him in the field; and that relying on these, he who has the right needs not to fear."

It would not be difficult to extend these quotations to great length for throughout the war the president showed the same patience and good sense in cases where it seemed to him that his

counsels might be useful. He never spared those to whom he wrote; he never hesitated to lay bare their offenses and their base motives, but he did it with an insight and a great-heartedness which softened the unreasoning and impetuous and for the time at least made them better soldiers and wiser men. Though he wrote so large a number of these letters of counsel, he never wrote one thoughtlessly, nor indeed if he could help it. He realized thoroughly the delicacy of giving unsought advice and only when he felt it his duty did he write. Even after he had written he sometimes was a long time in sending. Not long ago the War Department secured an admirable letter of good counsel which the President wrote in December, 1861 to General David Hunter, who was dissatisfied with his place in the West and was inundating the War Department with what Mr. Lincoln called "ugly letters". On the back of the letter General Hunter had written: "The President's reply to my 'ugly letter.'" This lay on his table a month after it was written and when finally sent was by a special conveyance with the direction that it was only to be given to me when I was in a good humor." There is in existence a draft of a letter dated September 25, 1863 and addressed to General A. E. Burnside in which Lincoln reviews the daily promises that general had been making to move to the aid of Rosecrans, then shut up in Chattanooga, and his steady move "the contrary way." When the president wrote the document he evidently felt that Burnside's own reports were the severest witnesses against him, for in his opening sentence he declared that Burnside's conduct made him "doubt whether he was awake or dreaming." Yet justified as he undoubtedly felt he was when he wrote the letter, he never sent it. He held it, hoping as he always did that something would happen to make it unnecessary. The events of the next few weeks outlawed this particular document and it exists today simply as a proof of Lincoln's unwillingness to criticize and advise unnecessarily.

Although so uniformly kind even in his rebukes there is more than one case on record where President Lincoln's patience

failed and he sent a telegram of bitter sarcasm to a general. Such was his message to McClellan on October 24, 1862, when that general after five idle weeks refused to pursue the enemy because his cavalry horses had sore tongues. It was a drop too much for Lincoln.

"I have just read your dispatch about sore-tongued and fatigued horses," he wired, "Will you not pardon me for asking what the horses of your army have done since the battle of Antietam that fatigues anything?"

Yet even for this telegram he half apologised two days later:

"Most certainly I intend no injustice to any, and if I have done any I deeply regret it. To be told, after more than five weeks' total inaction of the army, and during which period we have sent to the army every fresh horse we possibly could, amounting in the whole to 7918, that the cavalry horses were too much fatigued to move, presents a very cheerless, almost hopeless, prospect for the future, and it may have forced something of impatience in my dispatch."

One pleasant feature of Mr. Lincoln's relations to his generals was the heartiness with which he acknowledged every advance. "God bless you and your army," was the gist of many a telegram, many a verbal message which he sent. Perhaps of all these congratulatory messages none so pleasanter reading in the light of later events than the President's letter to General Grant after Vicksburg. In a way it may be called Lincoln's first recognition of Grant:-

"Major-General Grant.

My dear General: I do not remember that you and I ever met personally. I write this now as a grateful acknowledgment for the almost inestimable service you have done the country. I wish to say a word further. When you first reached the vicinity of Vicksburg, I thought you should do what you finally did- march the troops across the neck, run the batteries with the transports, and thus go below; and I never had any faith, except a general hope that you knew better than I, that the Yazoo Pass expedition and the like could succeed. When you got below and took Port Gibson, Grand Gulf, and vicinity, I thought you should go down the river and join General Banks, and when you turned northward, east of the Big Black, I feared it was a mistake. I now wish to make the personal acknowledgment that you were right and I was wrong.

Yours very truly,

A. Lincoln.

Comparatively little of Lincoln's close relations with his generals was known to the public during the war. It was not until twenty years after his death when his secretaries, Messrs. Nicolay and Hay published their great work, a work which must remain through all time the most important source for the history of Abraham Lincoln, that the greater number of these letters ^{wise, keen, kind} were given to the public. It remains to be seen whether twenty years from now Mr. McKinley's chosen biographer will be able to lay before the world any corresponding documents.