

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN, THE MILITARY STRATEGIST

Current events often invite the recall for attention of certain books which might have enjoyed a much wider reading, if they had appeared at a more opportune season. Such a book is "The Military Genius of Abraham Lincoln," written by Brigadier General R. Colin Ballard, of England, and published in 1926. One need not emphasize the timeliness of such a discussion in the light of the present war effort.

*Lincoln Lore* bulletin has often stressed the value of comments about Abraham Lincoln by Englishmen, because the authors are not so likely to be motivated in their conclusions by political or provincial bias. The opinion of H. G. Wells, with respect to Lincoln's place of pre-eminence in world civilization, the tribute of Lord Curzon who placed two of Lincoln's orations among the three outstanding pieces of eloquence in the Anglo-Saxon tongue, and the emphasis by Lord Shaw on Lincoln's contribution to the legal profession are but cases in point.

Gen. Ballard, of the English army, has given us the most scholarly discussion available on Abraham Lincoln as a military leader. The book read years ago, was again called to the editor's attention by an inscription in a copy, in possession of George P. Hambrecht, director of Vocational Education for the state of Wisconsin. On the preliminary blank pages of the book, in the handwriting of the author and dated March 21, 1927, are these autobiographical statements which are made available through the kindness of Mr. Hambrecht, to whom the notations were addressed:

### *Autobiographical Note*

"I am afraid that this book will seem to you rather cold. I resisted the temptation to let myself go on the personality of Lincoln—the lovable nature of man, the strength and wisdom of the Statesman, because this book is intended as a military essay. I did not want to bias military judgment by dwelling too much on the character of the hero.

"You might like to know how I came to take up the subject of Lincoln. In 1911 I was appointed as lecturer on military history at the British Staff College, and was ordered to make a special study of the American Civil War. It did not appeal to me at all. My attention had been devoted to Napoleon, Wellington, and Von Moltke, and I thought that the efforts of a lot of untrained amateurs would provide little in the way of instruction for high browed regular officers such as we considered ourselves.

"But orders were orders, and so I began to read seriously. After I had been through Ropes, Grant's Memoirs, and 'Battles and Leaders,' I found myself absorbed in the subject, and went on with all the enthusiasm of a convert.

"It is pleasing to remember that in 1912 I stated emphatically that there was more to be learnt from the Civil War than from any other campaign in history. The events of the Great War (World War No. 1) have all tended to prove that Lincoln was supreme as a statesman.

"What I like about him is Grant's description—'In matters of public duty he got what he wished, but in the least offensive way.'

"Our country (England) was flooded with southern propaganda, in which the 'Times' (London) had led the way; financial interests were entirely bound up with the South; military experts declared the North to be incapable of winning the war. Lincoln never lost his temper, but 'got what he wished in the least offensive way'—and got it every time. It was the finest bit of statesmanship the world has ever seen."

### *The McClellan Episodes*

The most unfavorable light in which President Lincoln has been placed as a military leader, usually has been related to some McClellan episode. The criticisms have been largely due to political bias or military prerogative. It is interesting to note the comments of General Ballard who has not been influenced by political interests at least. Ballard concluded that McClellan's own writings will forever convict him in the Lincoln controversies, and should determine very definitely his actual status as a military leader.

Ballard came to the conclusion that the motto of the General could be found in his own words: "I will attack so soon as I feel that my army is strong enough," and commented that such an ideal condition never arrived and probably never would, although McClellan usually had from two to four times as many men as the forces against him. Ballard suggested that Lincoln eventually had but one test he applied to McClellan, before relieving him of his command, and that was "would, and could he defeat the enemy." Lincoln was convinced finally that McClellan would not attack.

Ballard made some point of the political ambition of McClellan and quoted a letter written by Fernando Wood in which the General was urged to "conduct the war in such a way as to conciliate the Confederates."

### *General Meade's Objective*

It is interesting to note that General Ballard confirmed Lincoln's conclusion with respect to Meade's allowing "the crop to go to waste" at Gettysburg where the war should have ended. Ballard called attention to Lincoln's distrust when he read Meade's dispatch which implied he would "drive the enemy from our soil." It was Lincoln's purpose "not to drive the enemy away but to prevent him from getting away."

Ballard made further comment on this most trying situation by stating, "Lincoln, the amateur strategist, grasped it at the time, while his professional soldiers were congratulating themselves on driving the enemy from our soil."

### *Richmond, Berlin, Tokyo*

Possibly there is a rebuff of the popular demand of today, in a military dispatch which Lincoln sent, and emphasized by Ballard as the highest type of military strategy. Lincoln advised, "I think that Lee's army and not Richmond is your main objective." There was a great clamor for the capture of Richmond then, as there is for the attack on Berlin and Tokyo today, but the German army, which continually has been the objective of the Russians with their encircling maneuvers, is feeling the pressure of military strategy.

### *Political Interference*

There is one very interesting conclusion which General Ballard must have written for the eyes of his contemporary English statesmen:

"My belief is that Lincoln was solely responsible for the strategy of the North and proved himself a very capable strategist. But (a very big 'but') this does not mean that other politicians should try to follow his example. The general principles regarding amateur strategists and political interference in war have been proved by history—my point is that general principles do not govern a case of exceptional genius."