

LINCOLN LORE

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THREE MILITARY BLUNDERS

The Deming pamphlet featured in Lincoln Lore for August 15, 1949, contained one reminiscence of the author which seemed to be of such significance that it deserves more than just a passing reference. It relates to Lincoln's reaction to certain military reverses during the Civil War, and points out with an unusual degree of emphasis the periods of remorse and disappointment which Lincoln experienced at intervals by the inability of his generals to follow through.

Inasmuch as the Hon. H. C. Deming was a congressional member of the Committee on Military Affairs he was frequently in conference with Mr. Lincoln about the progress of the war. In the course of the Deming lecture at Hartford, Conn. on June 6, 1865 the speaker stated:

"I once myself ventured to ask the President, if he had ever despaired of the country and he told me, that 'when the Peninsular Campaign terminated suddenly at Harrison's Landing, I was as nearly inconsolable as I could be and live.' In the same connection I inquired, if there had ever been a period in which he thought that better management, upon the part of his Commanding General, might have terminated the War and he answered that there were three, that the first was at Malvern Hill, where McClellan failed to command an immediate advance upon Richmond, that the second was at Chancellorsville, where Hooker failed to reinforce Sedgwick, after hearing his cannon upon the extreme right, and that the third was after Lee's retreat from Gettysburg, when Meade failed to attack him in the bend of the Potomac. After this commentary I waited for an outburst of denunciation, for a criticism at least upon the delinquent officers, but I waited in vain; so far from a word of censure escaping his lips, he soon added, that his first remark might not appear uncharitable, 'I do not know that I could have given different orders had I been with them myself; I have not fully made up my mind how I should behave, when minnie balls were whistling and these great oblong shells shrieking in my ear, I might run away.' The interview, which I am recalling, was last summer, (1864) just after Gen. Fremont had declined to run against him for the Presidency."

Abraham Lincoln as commander in chief of the Army of the Republic was in an advantageous position to best judge the wisdom of the movements of his widely distributed forces. We have here a statement made and reported almost contemporaneous with the events. In the opinion of this highest command if there had been "better management on the part of his commanding generals" it would have been possible to first terminate the war in 1862, that failing, on two different occasions in 1863.

Possibly the least prejudiced among the authors presenting formal studies of the military aspects of the Civil War has been contributed by Brigadier General Colin R. Ballard, C.B., C.M.G. at one time lecturer on military history at the British Staff College. At least, being an Englishman, he was free from provincial sectional influences and political preferences. His conclusions about Malvern Hill, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg are of interest in the light of President Lincoln's observations.

Malvern Hill

McClellan's Army of the Potomac on June 25, 1862 was within four miles of Richmond, the confederate capital. According to Ballard, on the above date the confederate forces numbered 86,000 and the union strength was 128,000, not including the much discussed McDowell corps of 35,000. Ballard concludes that although these 35,000 extra men had been made available to McClellan there is no evidence that he would have used them, in fact Ballard concludes even then, after a careful study of the General's technique, "McClellan

would not have attacked." On June 27 the army of the Potomac had retreated 2 miles, by the 30th 6 miles, and when the battle of Malvern Hill opened on July 1, McClellan was fourteen miles from Richmond. Malvern Hill was an excellent position, however, and here Lee was repulsed with heavy losses. Ballard sustains the viewpoint of Lincoln with respect to the behavior of McClellan at Malvern Hill by commenting: "In spite of the real success of Malvern Hill, McClellan decided to continue his retreat on Harrison Landing."

Chancellorsville

When a student of Lincoln recalls General Hooker the tendency is to think of the letter Lincoln wrote to him upon placing him at the head of the Army of the Potomac, with its final admonition, "Beware of rashness, but with energy and sleepless vigilance go forward and give us victories." At Chancellorsville, Hooker with 130,000 against Lee with 60,000, as far as numbers were concerned should not have feared the results of an advance.

Ballard's comment sustains Lincoln's opinion of bad generalship here on the part of Hooker in these words: "Hooker's situation was far from bad if he had taken advantage of it. . . . He knew the enemy was divided into two wings which lay east and west of him. Even united they could not equal him in numbers, separately either of them must be much inferior." . . . Lincoln in his last interview with Hooker said: "In your next battle put in all your men. Had this wise advice been carried out, the Federals were in a winning position."

Gettysburg

The decisive victory at Gettysburg largely overshadowed the urge to criticize General Meade for not ending the war during the first days of July 1863. Lincoln's students are familiar with the letter of disappointment which Lincoln wrote to Meade and then decided not to send it. This is the picture as Lincoln saw it. Meade at the opening of the Gettysburg battle had 60,000 veterans and 20,000 fresh troops in reserve while Lee had but 40,000. At the conclusion of three days fighting the Union soldiers had an army flushed with victory, while Lee's force was reduced to a defeated and retreating unit, retarded 24 hours by a washed out bridge. Ballard's conclusions that Meade had "a better chance, than ever presented itself to the Unionists, either before or after," to end the war at this time is in full agreement with the President's opinion.

Excerpts from a reminiscence of Robert Lincoln published in the *American Historical Review* for January 1927 reveals the story of his father's disappointment in the failure of Gen. Meade to end the war.

"Entering my father's room right after the battle of Gettysburg I found him in tears with head bent upon his arms resting on the table at which he sat."

After Robert had inquired the cause of his father's grief, he replied:

"My boy, when I heard that the bridge at Williamsport had been swept away, I sent for Gen. Haupt and asked him how soon he could replace the same.' He replied, 'If I were uninterrupted I could build a bridge with the material there within twenty-four hours and, Mr. President, Gen. Lee has engineers as skillful as I am.'

"Upon hearing this,' continued President Lincoln, 'I at once wrote Meade to attack without delay and, if successful, to destroy my letter, but in case of failure to preserve it for his vindication. I have just learned that at a council of war of Meade and his generals it had been determined not to pursue Lee and now the opportunity of ending this bitter struggle is lost.'"