

# LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor  
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

NUMBER 1174

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

OCTOBER 8, 1951

## LINCOLN'S COMPROMISE GENERALS

Shortly after the battle of Antietam President Lincoln made this statement: "I had been brought to fear that there was a class of officers in the Army, not very inconsiderable in numbers, who were playing a game to not beat the enemy when they could, on some peculiar notion on the proper way to save the Union." One officer, Major John J. Key, was brought before the President for having commented on the failure of the Union army to attack at a strategic time: "That was not the game. The object is that neither army shall get much advantage of the other, and both shall be kept in the field till they are exhausted when we will make a compromise and save slavery."

To a critic of his policy in conducting the war Lincoln wrote: "What would you do in my position? Would you drop the war where it is? Or would you persecute it in the future with elder stalk squirts charged with rose-water? Would you deal lightning blows rather than heavier ones?"

Before the opening of the personal papers of President Lincoln, which had been presented to the Library of Congress by Robert Lincoln, the general public anticipated that the documents might contain information of a sensational nature. Some Lincoln students were led to believe that a certain member of the President's official family might be involved in the assassination plot and that when the papers were finally made available the real facts about the conspiracy would be made known. This group of critiques were doomed to disappointment for no such proofs have been discovered.

However, there are among the 40,000 manuscripts some documents which might be classified as sensational, especially those documents which submit evidence to support the claim that General George B. McClellan's conduct was treasonable. It might be expected that these charges would appear immediately after his nomination for the Presidency in October 1864, when any false step he might have taken could be used against him. The charges were laid before the President in a disconnected series of communications which referred to the behavior of General McClellan at the time of the Battle of Antietam and his compromising attitude as a military commander.

A Union refugee by the name of P. Wellington from Pine Bluff, Ark., then residing at Cincinnati, Ohio swore to a testimony he made on October 16, 1864 which reported a conversation he had overheard in his store at Pine Bluff in June or July 1863. He mentioned by name six "noted Arkansas rebels" and said "some nine or ten officers representing five or six of the rebel states" were present. After the group dispersed Wellington asked General Benjamin Houston, one of the Arkansas officers present, whom he knew well: "how it comes that General McClellan was always spoken of in highest terms by leading southern men?" This was the reply in part: "Gen. McClellan will never take Richmond. He is playing a double game and the Devil himself can't catch him."

According to Wellington another group of rebel officers were gathered in Dr. Sledges store in Pine Bluff, Ark. in late July or early August 1863. Four were named and mention was made of "seven or eight Texas officers, one of same of high rank," a Mr. Lenain and a Mr. Parrott, private citizens were also present. The discussion centered around the Virginia campaign and "The Texans were greatly elated about some points which they considered of great advantage gained by some of McClellan's movements." Capt. McNally of Arkansas is then said to

have made this comment, "If we had not been outwitted by our friends in Yankeedom who guided the earlier movements of McClellan we would indeed have something to boast of today." Col. Bell of Arkansas is said to have taken issue with Capt. McNally with this retort: "I am afraid his (McClellan's) promises will prove no better than some of the sneaking hounds whose sympathies are based on *self-interest* only." Capt. McNally is said to have responded as follows: "I differ with you Col., Little Mack is monstrous ambitious and hopes to rule at the White House and we ought to make just allowance for what he has already done."

P. Wellington concluded his affidavit with this observation having mixed among Southern, both of rebel and loyal inclinations: "I never found one (loyal man) to sustain McClellan, but have found most every intelligent rebel ready to eulogize him as a true Southerner at heart."

At the same time Lincoln had spread before him the Wellington affidavit he received, a memorandum dated Washington, D. C., Oct. 17, 1864 and signed William Hughes. It appeared under a caption "The Battle of Antietam" and submitted this reference with respect to the battle: "Mrs. Wheeler the widow of rebel Capt. Wheeler, sister of Lieut. Skinner and niece of Col. Ashby, rebel cavalry, stated that General McClellan sent a message to General Lee to "get away across the river on Friday night that the other generals were pushing him, General McClellan, on them." Mr. Hughes also advised that Mrs. Wheeler referring to this same occasion stated "that her husband Capt. Wheeler and her brother Lt. Skinner told her that Gen. McClellan with the Union Army could have captured or destroyed all Lee's army but for the timely warning from General McClellan to Lee." Mr. Hughes further continued that "the above statement was made by this lady on the 13 of October 1864 at the house and in the hearing of Mr. William Bayless on Capital Hill and Mr. Bayless thinks 'the lady would not hesitate to make the above statement on oath if called for'."

Ezra Conkling of Cincinnati had become convinced that McClellan had committed treasonable acts and sent some correspondence to the President which he had received from Rev. Isaac P. Langworthy of Chelsea, Massachusetts. The letter in question reviews an incident related to Rev. Langworthy by Judge Advocate Hosmar "who had carried a dispatch to McClellan's headquarters during the battle of Scott's Bluff or Antietam, I not remembering which." Hosmar claimed while waiting for his return orders "a paroled prisoner from Lee came in and brought a line which was handed to McClellan. He read it and turned to Porter and said, 'what do you think I have here?'" Thereupon Hosmar claimed McClellan read this message aloud:

"Dear Mac, don't drive us to the wall this time. Yours, Cavalry." (Gen. Lee's signature).

Still another critical letter received by Lincoln, presented evidence submitted by Capt. Milton Cline that the owners of the house where Lee made his headquarters claimed McClellan came there on the eve of the battle of Antietam. These four independent testimonials would support the following statement of President Lincoln to John Hay after the President returned from a visit to McClellan shortly after the battle of Antietam:

"I began to fear he (McClellan) was playing false—that he did not want to hurt the enemy. I saw how he could intercept the enemy on the way to Richmond. I determined to make the test. If he let them get away I would remove him. He did, so I relieved him."