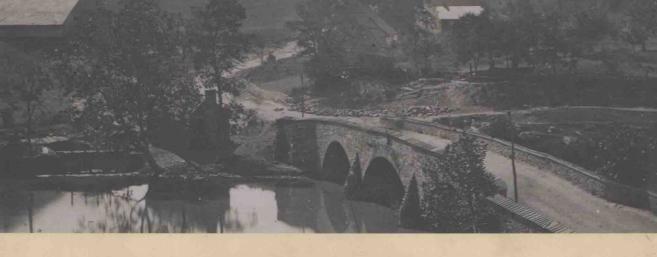


The Maryland Campaign of September 1862



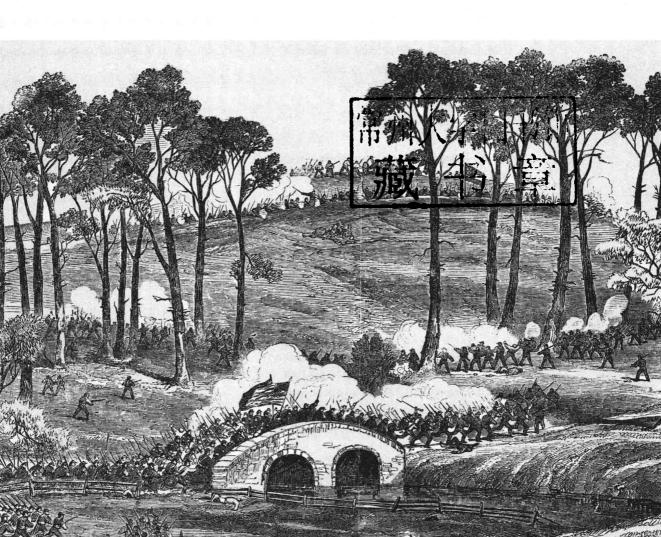
D. SCOTT HARTWIG

To Antietam Creek

The Maryland Campaign of September 1862

D. Scott Hartwig

THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS | Baltimore



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The Johns Hopkins University Press 2715 North Charles Street Baltimore, Maryland 21218-4363 www.press.jhu.edu

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hartwig, D. Scott.

To Antietam Creek: the Maryland Campaign of September 1862 / D. Scott Hartwig.

pages cm

 $Includes\ bibliographical\ references\ and\ index.$

ISBN-13: 978-1-4214-0631-2 (hdbk.: alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-4214-0631-4 (hdbk.: alk. paper)

1. Maryland Campaign, 1862. I. Title.

E474.61.H374 2012

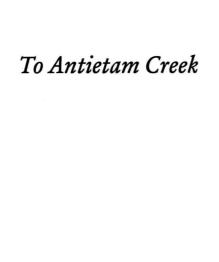
973.7'336-dc23 2012001585

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Title page illustration: Battle of Antietam, Maryland. 1862. Edwin Forbes. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Special discounts are available for bulk purchases of this book. For more information, please contact Special Sales at 410-516-6936 or specialsales@press.jhu.edu.

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To my parents,

Ann Marie

and

G. Douglas Hartwig,

with love

and gratitude

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Introduction

t was September 5, 1862, and Captain Henry Pearson of the 6th New Hampshire Infantry sat down to write to a friend at home about his recollections of the recent Union defeat in the Battle of Second Manassas. Near the end of this long epistle, Pearson gave way to a sense of despair and of the inevitability of Southern independence.

The Northern people get not the faintest idea from the newspapers of the true state of affairs at the seat of operations. The lying reports of our general and reporters beat anything that ever existed among the rebels . . . You need not be surprised if success falls to the rebels with astonishing rapidity. They certainly have the force, the skill and genius to do it. ¹

Many in the army shared Pearson's feelings and expressed them in letters home. The American Civil War had taken an abrupt turn during the summer of 1862; it now seemed a real possibility that the Union would not be preserved and that the Confederate States of America would win their independence. Thus the month of September promised to be a critical watershed in the war's outcome. Across the nation Confederate armies were on the offensive. In eastern Tennessee separate armies under Generals Kirby Smith and Braxton Bragg were preparing to mount an invasion of the border state of Kentucky, while other Confederate forces farther west under Generals Earl Van Dorn and Sterling Price made ready to invade western Tennessee.

But much of the nation focused its attention on the east. The opposing capitals were situated there, as were the major newspapers that covered the war. The east also had been the scene of one of the war's most remarkable campaigns to date—the outcome of which remained in doubt. Its architect was Confederate General Robert E. Lee, who took command of the Confederate army in front of Richmond in early June 1862 and went on the offensive. In two months he defeated two Union armies in Virginia, and by early September his forces stood poised to push across the Potomac River into Maryland, a border state of divided loyalties, and perhaps beyond into Pennsylvania. Lee sensed that opportunity lay north of the Potomac. Confederate victory on Maryland

or Pennsylvania soil would strike a powerful blow at Northern morale, which in turn might influence the upcoming fall elections. Confederate victory north of the Potomac might also lead to recognition of the Confederate States by England and France. But Lee saw the Northern voter, not the slim hope of European recognition, as the Confederacy's best hope for victory. These voters would have a clear choice to make that autumn, either "to support those who favor a prolongation of the war, or those who wish to bring it to a termination."²

The future of human freedom in America was at stake as well that September. Convinced that the policy of limited war had failed, President Abraham Lincoln was prepared to introduce a policy of emancipation of slaves in those states that were in rebellion, which would sound the death knell of slavery in America. But he needed a battlefield victory to issue his Emancipation Proclamation, lest it be seen as a pathetic gesture of a desperate administration and only embolden and empower his opposition.

Lee forced the issue on September 4 when he sent his army splashing across the Potomac into Maryland. The balance would now move one way or the other. The campaign that followed lasted only two and a half weeks, but it contained enough drama and twists and turns that it might have been conceived by a novelist. The climax came on September 17 in the Battle of Antietam, the single bloodiest day of the Civil War. Unsurprisingly, in the years since, Antietam has received the greatest attention in histories of the Maryland Campaign. Yet the first phase, from the Confederate invasion of Maryland to the eve of Antietam—from September 4 through September 16—saw Lee's first defeat in battle, at South Mountain on September 14, and the largest surrender of U.S. troops prior to World War II, at Harpers Ferry. The Union garrison's surrender represented the most complete victory by any Confederate force during the war. Yet these events have been only lightly touched on in previous histories. This volume is the first attempt to give appropriate attention to South Mountain, Harpers Ferry, and the campaign leading up to Antietam. It concludes on the night before the Battle of Antietam because, in a sense, that night marked the end of the first phase of the war, where a negotiated settlement—with slavery continuing intact—remained possible. September 17 and the Battle of Antietam slammed the door on a limited war; there would be no turning back. Either the South would be defeated and slavery in America destroyed, or what Lincoln believed to be "the last best hope on earth," the government and nation created by the Founding Fathers, would be in ruins and the independence of a Southern slaveholding republic a reality. A second volume will complete these events with an in-depth study of the Battle of Antietam, the close of the campaign, and its political and military implications.

This is in part a study of command in war, of Lee and George B. McClellan and their lieutenants. But leaders command men who must obey orders, risk their lives, endure untold misery, and sometimes die or suffer terrible wounds.

The collective experience of the men who made up the two armies that marched forth into Maryland is no less important to our understanding of these events than that of their commanders.

In the end the Maryland Campaign changed the war—and the nation. This is its story.

1

The Return of McClellan

"General, I am in command again"

of artillery thumped and rumbled in the direction of Manassas, 30 miles to the southeast. General George B. McClellan, commanding general of the Army of the Potomac, puffed his cigar while he listened to the guns. An unfinished letter to his wife lay on his writing desk. The sound of the far-off battle tormented him and reminded him of his personal humiliation. He commanded the most powerful army in the nation, but over the previous weeks it had been detached from him piece by piece and sent to reinforce John Pope, a man he detested intensely, until all he had left were some staff officers and orderlies. His men were now in a desperate battle without him. When the guns finally fell silent he resumed the letter. "I have been listening to the sound of a great battle in the distance. My men engaged in it and I away! I never felt worse in my life."

An hour later, at 10:30 p.m., unable to restrain his emotions any longer, he telegraphed Army General-in-Chief Henry W. Halleck to request permission to join his men on the battlefield. "I cannot express to you the pain & mortification I have experienced today in listening to the distant sound of the firing of my men . . . If it is not deemed best to entrust me with the command even of my own army, I simply ask to be permitted to share their fate on the field of battle," he pleaded. Halleck did not reply, and McClellan was left to brood over the remarkable events that had brought him from the pinnacle of power to such an ignominious position in only 13 months.²

McClellan had been the man of the hour in July 1861. In the wake of the Union defeat at First Manassas, President Lincoln had summoned him from western Virginia, where he had recently concluded a successful campaign over the Rebels, to Washington to assume command of the defeated army and make the capital secure from attack. McClellan was only 34 years old. Jacob Cox, who served with him in western Virginia as a volunteer officer, described him as "rather under medium height, but muscularly formed, with broad shoulders and a well-poised head, active and graceful in motion." Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to a cultured family with influential friends, he received an appointment

to the Military Academy at West Point at age 15 and graduated four years later ranked second in his class. His high class standing won him a position in the elite Corps of Engineers, with whom he served with distinction in the Mexico City campaign under General Winfield Scott during the war with Mexico. In the years after that war U.S. Secretary of War Jefferson Davis saw promise in the bright young engineer, and in 1855 Davis saw to it that McClellan was named to a three-man military commission that went to Europe to observe the armies fighting in Crimea. It was a prestigious appointment, and the experience in Crimea deeply impressed McClellan with the need for more professional training and organization of the U.S. Army.

Upon his return and the completion of his report, McClellan was to join his regiment, the 1st U.S. Cavalry, in Kansas, where they were occupied in the thankless task of keeping the proslavery and antislavery Kansans from slaughtering one another. This held little appeal for McClellan, and he had also heard negative comments about the regiment's colonel, Edwin V. Sumner. He decided to resign from the army and accepted a position as chief engineer for the Illinois Central Railroad Company. Within three years—by 1860—he was the Superintendent of the Eastern Division of the Ohio and Mississippi Railroad Company, drawing a generous salary of \$10,000 a year. With his outstanding accomplishments in organization and logistics as a railroad man, as well as his splendid army record, McClellan was in demand when war broke out in 1861. The governors of New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania all vied with one another to secure his services as commander of their state forces. Ohio prevailed. Within two weeks of the firing on Fort Sumter, McClellan was commissioned a major general of volunteers and accepted command of Ohio's volunteer forces. His talent for organizing and training soldiers shone as he quickly brought order to the chaos of the state's mobilization of its manpower. Recognizing his capabilities, the government broadened his responsibility. On May 13 he was placed in command of the newly formed Department of Ohio, which included Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Promotion to major general in the regular army came a day later. Only General Winfield Scott outranked him.3

Late that spring and into the summer McClellan took personal command of a campaign to wrest control of northwestern Virginia (later West Virginia), which had rejected secession, from Rebel forces. The campaign climaxed in the Confederate defeat at the Battle of Rich Mountain on July 7, with McClellan delivering the North's first real military success. It earned him the acclaim of the national press, as well as a joint resolution of Congress thanking him for his victory. Two weeks later the Confederates shocked the North with their victory at First Manassas. In the aftermath of the defeat, Lincoln sought someone who could restore discipline and morale to the demoralized Union army and render the capital secure from Confederate attack. McClellan possessed ideal credentials: military success as a field commander in western Virginia,

administrative success in organizing and training Ohio's volunteers, and experience as an engineer in the regular army. A day after the debacle at Manassas, he received a telegram from the War Department to "come hither without delay" to Washington, D.C. His moment had arrived.⁴

McClellan looked the part of a successful general. Young, handsome, vigorous, strongly built, he moved with the self-assurance and ease of a man who had always known success. His warm and charming public personality easily won people over, and his powerful intellect and capacity for long hours of work were impressive. Jacob Cox recalled how "his manner of doing business impressed all with the belief that he knew what he was about." A member of the U.S. Sanitary Commission who met McClellan wrote that there was "an indefinable air of success about him and something of the 'man of destiny.'" McClellan, in short, had charisma.⁵

Few men in the army could rival his knowledge of military history, and his experiences in Crimea had exposed him to the organization, equipment, and methods of professional European armies at war. A careful student of strategy and modern technology, he advocated the use of sea power to move armies quickly and unexpectedly against strategic points and he appreciated early on the impact that the railroad and telegraph would have on warfare. He appeared to possess the qualities that mark notable leaders, and the government—as well as the entire North—expected great things of him. "By some strange operation of magic I seem to have become *the* power of the land," he wrote to his wife, Mary Ellen, soon after his arrival in the capital. "I almost think that were I to win some small success now I could become Dictator or anything else that might please me."

McClellan's politics were moderately conservative. He had been a Whig as had Lincoln—until that party dissolved. He then became a Stephen Douglas Democrat, enthusiastically supporting Douglas in his famous senatorial race against Lincoln in 1858. McClellan blamed the war on extremists on both sides: the abolitionists in the North and the reactionary secessionists in the South. Although he abhorred abolitionists, viewing them as radicals, he also believed slavery to be a "great evil" and supported gradual emancipation. While the slavery issue had sparked secession and the war, McClellan strongly opposed any notion that the war might provide a platform for an attack on slavery. He believed such a course would be extremist and dangerous, turning the war into a revolutionary struggle and serving only to further unite the slaveholding South against the North. He advocated a limited war that employed carefully applied, overwhelming military strength to convince Southerners of the hopelessness of their struggle. He explained his thinking in an August memorandum to the president: "By thoroughly defeating their armies, taking their strong places, and pursuing a rigidly protective policy as to private property and unarmed

persons, and a lenient course as to common soldiers, we may well hope for the permanent restoration of [a] peaceful Union."

McClellan was assigned to command the Division of the Potomac, which included all forces in northeastern Virginia and within the capital, as well as the field army recently defeated at Manassas. He vigorously applied his considerable energy to his new position, working unsparingly to organize and train his raw volunteers into the most well-equipped and disciplined army in American military history to that date. He named the army that assembled in its camps around the capital the Army of the Potomac. Along with giving structure to this army, McClellan also supervised the construction of a system of fortifications to ring the capital and render it impregnable to assault. Within days soldiers recognized the change that McClellan brought. There was a system to how things were done, and regularity. McClellan made sure that he was seen often by his troops, frequently spending long days in the saddle. It paid off in the loyalty of his men, who sensed that they had a commander who took a personal interest in them.

Yet even in these early, euphoric days there were warning signs of potential problems. Despite his cool, confident exterior, McClellan was sensitive and temperamental, and tormented by insecurities. He had a history of clashes with superiors during his earlier military service and in private industry. Within days of his arrival in Washington he was in conflict with elderly General Scott. In McClellan's opinion Scott did not appreciate the grave danger the capital was in from an advance by the Confederates gathered at Manassas. On August 10 he complained to Mary Ellen that "Genl Scott is the great obstacle—he will not comprehend the danger & is either a traitor or an incompetent." By August 14 he stated that "Genl Scott is the most dangerous antagonist I have—either he or I must leave here—our ideas are so widely different that it is impossible for us to work together much longer." McClellan made no effort to heal the rift, and it widened as summer slipped into fall. By early October Scott was his "inveterate enemy." But Scott was not the only superior to earn McClellan's private contempt, which he revealed in letters to his wife. On August 16 he complained that the president "is an idiot." Nearly two months later he described Lincoln as "nothing more than [a] well meaning baboon," adding that his Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, "is weaker than the most garrulous old woman you were ever annoyed by" and Secretary of State William Seward was a "meddling, officious, incompetent little puppy." McClellan had little patience with people who questioned his judgment or did not see things his way. Stephen Sears, one of McClellan's biographers, thought that the general's abiding faith in predestination lay at the root of these conflicts. McClellan's belief that God had chosen him to save the nation was "at once the prop for his insecurity and the shield for his convictions. With Calvinistic fatalism he believed his path to be

the chosen path; anyone who raised criticism or objections—whether president or cabinet officer or legislator or editor or fellow general—was at best ignorant and misguided and at worst a traitor."8

Some of his early clashes with Scott and frustration with Lincoln and his cabinet had to do with his perception that they utterly failed to comprehend the danger the Confederates at Manassas posed to the capital. McClellan convinced himself that he was overwhelmingly outnumbered by the Rebel army there. On August 8 he reported to General Scott that he believed the Confederate army "has at least 100,000 men in our front." On August 19, in a letter to Mary Ellen, he wrote that the count had now risen to 150,000. Union intelligence sources, however, had placed Confederate strength at approximately 35,000 before the Battle of First Manassas in July. Nonetheless, it is clear that McClellan believed his numbers, because his fear that the Confederates would attack Washington in mid-August is palpable in his private letters to his wife. What makes this so bizarre is that McClellan was a professional soldier who understood logistics and was intimately familiar with the means by which large numbers of troops, equipment, and provisions could be moved rapidly namely, by railroad. As a railroad man he surely must have realized that the South did not possess the rolling stock and rail lines to achieve such a rapid mobilization in northern Virginia or to keep it supplied. The North, with its superior rail system and industry, could mobilize and equip troops faster than the Confederates. Yet he chose to believe otherwise, and this would come to shape his command of the Army of the Potomac.9

By the end of October McClellan had succeeded in wearing down Scott, and the 75-year-old general retired after 53 years of military service. On November 1 Lincoln named McClellan general-in-chief of all Federal armies. McClellan assumed this new position with his typical vigor. But the work to be done training the Army of the Potomac for active operations while also planning and directing the strategic operations of the entire Union war effort—was more than one man could possibly handle. His staff could have helped if he had let them, but he lacked confidence in their ability to manage things to his satisfaction and instead burdened himself with administrative details. "I must ride much every day for my army covers much space, & unfortunately I have no one on my staff to whom I can entrust the safety of affairs," he complained to Mary Ellen. He named his father-in-law, Colonel Randolph Marcy, who was an experienced and competent regular officer, as his chief of staff, but McClellan delegated little authority to him. "I can do it all," McClellan said to the president when Lincoln told him his position would entail "a vast labor." And McClellan did do a great deal.

His correspondence during this period is voluminous, and no detail seemed to escape his attention. But in the first month of his new command McClellan's patience with the president began to wear thin. Lincoln had a habit of

dropping by unannounced at McClellan's headquarters on Jackson Square. McClellan initially tolerated the interruptions, but he soon began to regard Lincoln as a nuisance and grew contemptuous of him. His most famous snub of the president was on November 13, when Lincoln stopped by McClellan's headquarters accompanied by Seward and John Hay, one of Lincoln's personal secretaries. McClellan was at a wedding, so the president's party waited for an hour in the parlor. When McClellan returned he swept by the parlor without a word and ignored his orderly's announcement that the president and the secretary of state were waiting to meet with him. They remained for another half hour and then sent McClellan's orderly upstairs to remind the general that the president was still waiting to see him. The orderly returned to report that McClellan had gone to bed. Four days later McClellan complained to Mary Ellen about having to visit the White House, "where I found 'the original gorilla,' about as intelligent as ever." Lincoln had a good sense for people and he probably discerned McClellan's frustration with him (he could not have failed to perceive the intended slight in the November 13 incident), but he remained patient and retained his trust in the general's military abilities. 10

November passed into December and the Army of the Potomac remained in its camps, drilling and training, with the Confederate army less than 30 miles away at Manassas. As the weeks ticked by with no movement, criticism rose, emanating principally from the more radical Republicans in Congress, who were impatient to take the war to the Rebels. McClellan refused to be hurried or to reveal his plans for the army to anyone. He continued to drive himself relentlessly, and in late December he fell seriously ill with typhoid fever. The problem with having a single individual carry responsibility for the entire war planning of Union military operations was keenly felt as the Federal war effort stalled while the general lay ill. Senator Ben Wade of Ohio, one of a growing number of McClellan's critics, growled, "How can this nation abide the secret counsels that one man carries in his head, when we have no evidence that he is the wisest man in the world?" McClellan was not oblivious of the need to do something to quiet his critics. In mid-January, while recovering from his illness, he wrote to General Don Carlos Buell, commanding the Department of Ohio, that "you have no idea of the pressure brought to bear here upon the government for a forward movement." He advised Buell that he should undertake a movement into eastern Tennessee that McClellan had previously recommended, in order to both place Union forces in a region known to possess Union sentiments and seize the rail line running from Knoxville to Memphis. McClellan considered this as a preliminary movement to a planned grand offensive to strike both the Confederate capital at Richmond, Virginia, and the strategic railroad junction at Nashville, Tennessee. But this movement, which McClellan believed would be decisive, could not be hurried. Hasty action, he felt, was unproductive. "I have ever regarded our true policy as being that of fully preparing ourselves &