

Dana K. Smith
A More Perfect Union: The Origins and Development
Of the U.S. Constitution, CCC Second Year
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A McPherson Summer: Book Reviews on *Tried by War*, *Antietam*, and *Lincoln*

It was a McPherson summer. Despite having already read James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* when it was published in 1988, I still found considerable pleasure and professional gains in reading it again last spring for our class. This pleasure and these gains were magnified this past summer when we had the chance to meet with Professor McPherson to discuss his books on Lincoln and the Civil War. The summer's pleasures and gains were further enhanced while completely reading McPherson's *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief*, *Antietam: Crossroads of Freedom*, and his brief biographical essay *Abraham Lincoln*. Although I have not yet completed *This Mighty Scourge: Perspectives on the Civil War*, it, too, has been a pleasurable means to enhance my teaching of U.S. History. With a total of nearly six McPherson books having passed my eyes over the last nine months, it is quite easy to recommend everything of his to anybody; his scholarship, supporting evidence, clarity of writing, great topics and interesting story lines are engrossing. Three and a half McPherson history books contributed to an excellent summer and a much better understanding of Lincoln and the Civil War, and even of human nature and the courses of great political and military events!

The three McPherson books that I completed over the summer, McPherson's *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief*, *Antietam: Crossroads of Freedom*, and his brief biographical essay *Abraham Lincoln*, are the subject of this review. Each addressed well the severity and the complexities of the events that Lincoln faced, and

each exposed well Lincoln's manner and processes through which he faced and solved the formidable problems these events generated. In each, Lincoln is portrayed as studying the issues, events and problems; researching tomes and probing experts for advice; sorting fact from fiction; remaining calm, patient and deliberate in dealing with subordinates (even when they're insubordinate!), adapting and adjusting, and following through on plans and strategies. McPherson supports his points very well using letters, period articles, journals, telegraph messages and other primary sources throughout all of his books that I have read. These are priceless lessons to convey to my students.

Tried by War was frequently referenced by Professor McPherson in our seminars this summer. Its thesis is that Lincoln was able to evolve into an effective and successful Commander-in-Chief by steadfastly grappling with the enormously complex and severe political and military situation that evolved by Lincoln's first inauguration in March 1861. South Carolina and six other states, driven by the concerns that abolition of slavery was about to be imposed on them with Lincoln's election, had seceded. The Union Army was unprepared for war with only 16,000 men. Most of the generals were from the South or were Democrats somewhat sympathetic to the South. (*Tried*, pp 11-12, The North was split between Radical Republicans, Cotton Whigs, War Democrats, and "Copperheads" or Peace Democrats. Lincoln confronted what seemed to be insurmountable circumstances, yet, as McPherson reminds us, Lincoln understood that war was "too important to be left to the generals". (*Tried*, p.7)

McPherson outlines fairly clearly from the outset that Lincoln had had very little military training and no military experience prior to becoming Commander-in-Chief. (*Tried*, pp 1-3), while his opponent, Confederate President Jefferson Davis, had had

considerable training and experience as a West Point graduate, Mexican War veteran, and former Secretary of War. (*Tried*, p.2) Lincoln, determined to master his new critical role as Commander in Chief, trained himself as he had trained himself earlier in learning the law: he frequently consulted the experts – his generals – and he read scores of classics of the subject – military strategy. (*Tried*, pp 3-6)

Throughout the *Tried by War*'s introduction and first chapter, McPherson portrays Lincoln at the outset of his new administration as developing a political and military strategy that consolidated his political support in the North, kept the border states with the Union, reassured what southern unionists who remained that slavery was not the immediate issue, and stressed the preservation of the Union while raising men and material for the fight, sorting through the war plans of his generals, hampering foreign recognition of the Confederacy, and trying to defuse the crisis at Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. Lincoln, I believe after reading McPherson, eventually played this like a fiddle, even though he had difficulties in the beginning learning the instruments of his military.

McPherson points out that Lincoln was stuck with many generals who were either from the South, had family connections with the South, were Democrats and unsympathetic to abolition, or were political appointments with political aspirations and who lacked military experience. (*Tried*, 44-46) General Scott, a Mexican War vet who was in his seventies by 1861, given to pomp, and lacked the verve to lead an entire army, was Lincoln's first general-in-chief. Scott was inept, unfocussed, indifferent and very outdated; and Scott seemed to be a bit of a caricature of our military's leadership prior to 1861 and of a small (16,000), antiquated military.

McClellan succeeded Scott. He was near the top of his West Point class, was a very young successful Mexican War officer, was hailed without his discouragement as the new American Napoleon (*Trial*, p.44), and had been promoted early and often. He had yet to meet with any personal or professional failures before 1861. McClellan, McPherson frequently points out, failed to meet expectations, practiced a siege mentality against his opponents (*Trial*, p.115), was overcautious and never quite ready to fight (*Trial*, 136-139), was famously reluctant to act and to attack the enemy directly, often exaggerated the gravity of his situations and inflated dramatically the Confederates' forces (*Trial*, 48, 51, 79-80), tried through his Democratic political friends to undermine Lincoln politically (*Trial*, 75) (and later opposed Lincoln in the 1864 election), and was actually directly insubordinate in ignoring directives from Lincoln to act. (*Trial*, 52-53, 75-76, 113-114) McPherson supports this thoroughly throughout the book with the correspondence of Lincoln and McClellan.

McClellan's inability to initiate attacks against the Confederate forces was astounding for me, as was his unwillingness to follow up and pursue retreating Confederate forces. McPherson illustrates this and Lincoln's exasperation with McClellan to the reader clearly regarding McClellan's Peninsula Campaign (*Tried*, 82-83), the Second Bull Run (*Tried*, 120-121), the disaster at Harper's Ferry (*Tried*, 75), Antietam (*Tried*, 139-141), and Lincoln's direct order that McClellan ignored to cross the Potomac and destroy the rebel army. (*Tried*, 134)

Lincoln, when he realized that McClellan failed to grasp that the military objective was to destroy Lee's rebel army, not to capture Richmond, repeatedly advised McClellan through letters, telegrams, intermediaries, and in person that it was imperative to destroy

the rebel force. (*Tried*, 180,200, 211) When he realized that McClellan lacked the moral courage to face an enemy directly on a battlefield and to be accountable for failures, at first tried to encourage him, to bolster his general, then would issue peremptory orders to him, directives, and then eventually dismissed McClellan, he canned him! This experience with McClellan seemed to have galvanized a policy for Lincoln as a Commander-in-Chief in dealing reluctant subordinates. Lincoln had evolved as the Union's general-in-chief.

McClellan's successors – Meade, Burnside, Halleck, Hooker – had their own severe shortcomings and conflicts. Lincoln, though, had less patience with them than he had with McClellan. Lincoln, it seems, had now learned from his mistakes. Throughout much of *Tried by War*, McPherson illustrates that Lincoln often delayed dismissing an incompetent general either due to Lincoln's patience and understanding or since Lincoln was often politically shackled to these military personnel problems. But after the formative McClellan experience, Lincoln seemed to have evolved into a true Commander-in-Chief. How much sooner would the Union victory have been, freedom realized, and lives spared if the Union's generals were not its own worst enemies?

In contrast to his accounts of the incompetence of some of the Union generals in the east, McPherson weaves throughout *Tried by War* the modesty, effectiveness, and successes of General Grant. Grant acted and was victorious at Corinth (*Tried*, 96), Shiloh (*Tried*, 84-85), Vicksburg (*Tried*, 153-154, 166-170) and elsewhere by the time Lincoln selected Grant to become the general-in-chief of the Army. (*Tried* 198-200, 212) Lincoln and Grant communicated effectively, and they frequently seemed to be in agreement, which is what McPherson demonstrates through examples of their

correspondence. With Grant, Lincoln had found a general; and with Grant, Lincoln was able to be a more effective Commander-in-Chief.

Regarding Lincoln's suspension of some Americans' constitutional rights, McPherson points to the condition of a rebellion underway at the time; and it was right here in the United States. Maryland was particularly a concern since it sits between the capitol and the northern states and had remained a slave state with some strong Confederate support. Lincoln had to take extraordinary measures. McPherson also points to the Constitution's provision in Article I, section 9 that the writ of habeas corpus may be suspended in times of rebellion. (*Tried*, 27-30) Lincoln later found it necessary to allow some rebels and insurgents to be tried by military tribunals. (*Tried*, 132-133) McPherson discussed the topic last summer, further elaborating that these military courts allowed the defendants representation and that due process was not hindered. Yet Lincoln also refused to prevent the Maryland legislature to convene and act, despite its large number of Confederate sympathizers, for, Lincoln reasoned, "They have a clearly legal right to assemble." (*Tried*, p.28) Interestingly, and since Lincoln's measures have been cited often in recent years by the Bush administration, there is no reference to any torture among Lincoln's extraordinary measures.

Regarding slavery, Lincoln's greatest concern was the preservation of the Union. It was not abolition. (*Tried*, 129-130) The Emancipation Proclamation was as much a military act as it was an act of justice; it took slave labor, which was a military resource, and placed it on the Union side as a free labor resource and source for military recruitment; it also extinguished foreign support for the Confederacy four months after Antietam dampened foreign governments' beliefs that the Confederacy would be a

legitimate nation. Although he had sought voluntary abolition of slavery in the Border States early in the war (*Tried*, 86-88, 107-108), Lincoln delayed publicly advocating the 13th Amendment to abolish slavery until late in the war. (*Tried*, 156-157)

Professor McPherson offers in *Tried by War* a rich resource for me and for my students in understanding how complex matters were for the Union and for Lincoln. It illustrates through a study of Lincoln and his general how Lincoln developed into a military leader – a Commander-in-chief. Further, it offers invaluable lessons in human nature and in management.

McPherson's *Antietam: Crossroads of Freedom* ("the book") is in some sense an expansion of his chapter on Antietam in his *Battle Cry of Freedom*. (*Battle Cry*, pages 542-571) Both the book and the chapter describe the very bloody battle of September 17, 1862 very well, describing effectively the movements among the opponents and the extent of the battle's gore. Both the book and the chapter give great credibility to the notion that this was the Union victory that Lincoln needed to convince the foreign powers that the Union would win, and to vest in the President the political clout he needed to go forward with the Emancipation Proclamation.

The major differences between the book and the chapter are that the book expands much further into the causes and consequences of the Battle of Antietam, gives greater detail of Lincoln's expectations and disappointments relating to the battle, and conveys further the foibles of both sides relating to this battle, but especially those of McClellan.

McPherson's thesis in *Antietam* is very clear. He contends that this battle was the true turning point of the Civil War. Lee had hoped that this battle was to be for the Confederates against the North as the battle of Saratoga was for the Revolutionary

Americans against the British. Lee had hoped that his army would win this battle decisively, that it would be *the* decisive battle of the Civil War, or would at least convince the European powers, whose support and recognition the Confederacy craved, that the Confederate States were a legitimate nation that could win this war. McPherson further illustrates – to the point that it would be considered a secondary thesis – that the mistakes made by both sides determined the battle's outcome; that, if any of those critical mistakes were not made, then the outcome of the battle and perhaps of the Civil War would have been different.

McPherson begins by going back to a year prior to this battle and he narrates the pendulum effect the war had: the Confederates had a series of victories, and then the Union had a series of victories – it was back and forth. Both sides had experienced some form of euphoria and some form of feeling vanquished. Lincoln again, just as in other Civil War histories was described as exasperated with his generals, especially McClellan.

By the conclusion of the Seven Days' Battle of McClellan's Peninsula Campaign with mixed results, with the Confederate thrusts and Union counter-thrusts in Tennessee and Kentucky, with Confederate raids into Maryland and Pennsylvania, and with Lee's costly victory at the Second Manassas or Bull Run, both sides knew that the kid gloves were off. It was then September; a month of good fighting weather was ahead before autumn set in. Both knew that decisive battle was soon at hand. Yet McClellan remained in his annoying old habit of now following up on a battle.

General Lee sent General Stonewall Jackson north to raid Maryland almost immediately after the Confederate victory at Manassas. Lee and the rest of most of the Army of Northern Virginia followed Jackson into Maryland fairly undetected within a

few days, and were soon near Frederick, Maryland. Lee sent Jackson to capture strategic Harpers Ferry to the southwest, where there is the confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac and a key railroad bridge, and which was poorly held by a disgruntled Union general and 12,000 poorly trained, green Union troops. Jackson found that the strategic heights above this crossroads town were essentially undefended, and he took it easily.

When the Union's Army of the Potomac realized that there was some Confederate activity, McClellan mobilized. By sheer fait, a Union soldier discovered a lost copy of Lee's orders on a roadside. McClellan upon reading these orders exclaimed publicly his glee and confidence in an early end to the war as a result of this booty within earshot of a Confederate sympathizer. Lee was aware of the situation within hours. (*Tried*, 108-109)

Meanwhile, McClellan delayed mobilizing his forces for another 18 hours, allowing Lee the chance to react. Lee, knowing that McClellan's force would soon be coming through Maryland's western mountain passes, adequately arranged his army to meet the Union forces there. McPherson presents quite a bit of evidence for constructing the sequence of events from the primary sources of both sides. The Battle of Antietam ensued. (*Tried*, 109-115)

McPherson further illustrates many of the mistakes that the Union generals made during the battle. For example, McPherson demonstrates that the concentrated crossing by Union troops across "Burnsides' Bridge" was unnecessary bloody since Burnside had better options for a crossing up and down stream of that bridge; instead, Burnside directed his troops to cross at that bridge and straight into the teeth of Georgian sharpshooters. (*Tried*, 125) Despite the much larger Union force, these mistakes

resulted in far greater losses. It was and has remained the most lethal single day of battle in U.S. military history.

McClelland hailed this as a great Union victory and allowed himself the accolade of having saved Washington, D.C. (*Tried*, 130-131) However, McClellan again left unrealized gains on the battlefield by again allowing the retreating Confederate forces to escape to safety. This enraged Lincoln to the point that McClellan was soon dismissed from his command. (*Tried*, 131-134)

McPherson concludes in *Antietam* that the battle was one of several turning points in the Civil War. He points out that the Union's Army of the Potomac clearly won the battle, despite its mistakes, that it frustrated the Confederate attempt for a decisive victory, that it convinced foreign powers not to recognize and support the Confederacy too soon, that perhaps McClellan did save Washington as he had bragged. But McPherson also concludes that McClellan did not capitalize on his victory by chasing down and destroying the rebel force, and this perhaps prolonged the Civil War by another two and a half years. The victory allowed Lincoln the political capital to release the Emancipation Proclamation; the McClellan's failure to capitalize on the victory also allowed Lincoln the political capital to dismiss him. (*Tried*, 153-154)

About the time of Senator Ted Kennedy's funeral was when I had spent a few quiet hours at the harbor reading McPherson's biographical essay, *Abraham Lincoln*. Since I grew up in the Kennedy era, it was a poignant August afternoon for me to be reflecting on the Kennedys and reading what in a great sense is a wonderful, concise, informative, beautifully crafted essay on Lincoln that could very well have been a sweet eulogy of

Lincoln. Interestingly, McPherson dedicates this book to his son Donald, who was a Vietnam veteran, an historian himself, an FBI agent and who died last year.

In McPherson's 68 pages divided into eight well-annotated chapters he covers succinctly, crisply, and even sweetly Lincoln's birth and early family, his adolescence and courting of Mary, his early professional life, his political career, and his trials as president. It is so well written with so many supporting passages from primary sources that my wife and I had read portions of it aloud to our daughter.

The theme or thesis throughout this book appears to be hindrances and sufferings that Lincoln encountered throughout his ambitious life, coupled with the solutions and humor Lincoln employed toward his accomplishments. Lincoln had overcome great obstacles. Toward the end of the essay, McPherson seems to conclude eloquently, despite being "scorned and ridiculed by many critics during his presidency," Lincoln's "words and deeds lived after him," that "it seems quite likely that without his determined leadership the *United States* would have ceased to be." (*Lincoln*, p.62) The republic was fragile, most others had failed, and it would be a very long time before another may evolve if ours were to have failed.

Last August, before the school year even began, McPherson's *Abraham Lincoln* became a lesson for my daughter, who has successfully insisted that we give her more about Lincoln. Lincoln is such a great lesson on human woes, human trials, and ultimate victories. I enthusiastically plan to read passages from this biographical essay on Lincoln during our high school lessons as well. We had a great and fruitful summer.

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