″We Learned that We are Indivisible″

"We Learned that We are Indivisible"

Sesquicentennial Reflections on the Civil War Era in the Shenandoah Valley

Edited by

Jonathan A. Noyalas
and Nancy T. Sorrells

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

"We Learned that We are Indivisible": Sesquicentennial Reflections
on the Civil War Era in the Shenandoah Valley

Edited by Jonathan A. Noyalas and Nancy T. Sorrells

This book first published 2015

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-7175-3
ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-7175-4

This book is dedicated to Congressman Frank Wolf and Howard Kittell—two men whose tireless devotion to historic preservation made the Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation a reality.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Four years before the Civil War's centennial, historian Bruce Catton explained to a British book club that the Civil War "was the biggest experience" the United States "ever had, and the average American's response to it is something instinctive, bred in the bone and growing out of a very complex network of national memories and ideals."[1] While Catton recognized the Civil War's prominence in American life as the centennial neared, he was greatly troubled by the oversimplification of the conflict for public audiences. "We take what we know of the war… as it recedes in the distance [and] as we get farther and farther away from it, we tend to oversimplify it," Catton mused. He continued: "The motives and causes, desires, hatreds, and anxieties seem clearer now than they did to the people who had to live through them."[2] For Catton the centennial offered a magnificent opportunity to address some of the Civil War's complexities. In the first year of the centennial Catton wrote: "The story means so many different things. It emphasizes the point that any great historic truth has many facets."[3]

While the centennial did, in the estimation of eminent Civil War scholar William Garret Piston, provide "a wonderful visual experience" with reenactments and souvenirs it failed to delve into the conflict's complex social, political, and military dimensions.[4] Furthermore, the centennial failed to meaningfully analyze any of the aspects of Civil War memory, a part of the conflict southern writer Walker Percy hoped would be examined during the Civil War's one hundredth anniversary. In the same year that Catton explained the Civil War's meaning to individuals in England, Percy wrote optimistically that the upcoming centennial would produce a "history of the shifting attitudes toward the War." Percy believed that histories of the conflict's memory "would be enlightening" and a welcome reprieve from the "somewhat boring" focus on a sentimentalized version of the conflict.[5]

Instead of addressing the many complex facets of the Civil War, however, the centennial turned into, as historian Robert J. Cook labeled it, "a… pageant."[6] A number of individuals involved with the Civil War centennial commemorations, including Catton, knew that by 1965 it had numerous deficiencies. When officials of the centennial commission gathered for their final meeting in Springfield, Illinois, in late April 1965,

they breathed a sigh of relief that it was over. In fact the words printed on the back of matchbooks—"Thank God it's Finished!"— exemplified how many members of the commission felt as they reflected on the centennial's shortcomings.[7]

Fifty years after the Civil War centennial, members of the Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation's Committee on Interpretation and Education, were keenly aware of the historical inadequacies played out half a century before. Determined not to repeat the mistakes of the past, the committee members instead looked for ways to not only address the Civil War's complexities in the Shenandoah Valley, but do so in a way that made those intricacies accessible to the general public through engaging symposia throughout the sesquicentennial's four years.

After a successful 2012 conference—"A Chapter in History Without Parallel": Perspectives on "Stonewall" Jackson's 1862 Valley Campaign held at Shenandoah University in Winchester, Virginia, the committee on interpretation and education decided to compile some of the best, and most groundbreaking presentations from the various conferences into a published volume, hence this book.

The essays in this compilation, authored by some of the most august scholars working in the field of Shenandoah Valley Civil War era history today, are not meant to present a complete history of the Civil War era in the Shenandoah Valley. Rather the intention is to highlight aspects of the Valley's Civil War experiences that have not received significant amounts of scholarly attention prior to the sesquicentennial or to illuminate aspects of the region's wartime saga that have not been seriously reassessed for decades.

The twelve essays in this volume examine aspects of generalship, the African American experience in the context of emancipation, the conflict's toll on the region's demographically diverse population, political aspects of the war, and issues related to the conflict's memory and postwar reconciliation.

The editors and contributors to this volume hope these essays will help individuals better understand the varying ways the Civil War impacted the Shenandoah Valley. Additionally, we intend these twelve chapters to provide keen insight into how the conflict in the Shenandoah Valley helped play an integral role in the transformation of this country from a mere conglomeration of states into a unified, indivisible nation thus lending credence to an observation made in 1945 by author Julia Davis in her book *The Shenandoah*. Davis penned in the book's opening pages: "During four autumns and five springs, Federal and Confederate, Blue and Gray, they died in the Valley… and the soil is sacred now…Out of their…

pain… rose a united nation welded by blood and fire… In the Valley of the Shenandoah we learned that we are indivisible."[8]

Notes

[1] Bruce Catton to Mary Griffith, April 25, 1957, quoted in David W. Blight, *American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era* (Cambridge: MA: The Belknap Press, 2011), 96.
[2] John Leekley, ed., *Bruce Catton: Reflections on the Civil War* (New York: Berkley Books, 1982), 4.
[3] Bruce Catton observation in Willard Webb, ed., *Crucial Moments of the Civil War* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1961), 7.
[4] Robert J. Cook, *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961-1965* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 264.
[5] Walker Percy, "The American War" in Patrick Samway, ed., *Walker Percy: Sign-Posts in a Strange Land* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), 71-73.
[6] Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 262. For additional analysis of the Civil War as pageant see Michael Kreyling, *A Late Encounter with the Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 28-58.
[7] Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*, 262.
[8] Julia Davis, *The Shenandoah* (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1945), 3-4.

CHAPTER ONE

ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S TELEGRAPH OFFICE BLUNDER: THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF ON MAY 24, 1862, AND HIS DIRECT IMPACT ON THE SHENANDOAH VALLEY CAMPAIGN

GARY ECELBARGER

The decisions made by wartime presidents can be evaluated based on how those decisions affected the conduct of the war. A president's performance studied purely in hindsight risks over crediting him for military successes and erroneously absolving him for military failures. It is at least as important to dissect a decision based on the factors that induced it. Applying both forethought and hindsight to Abraham Lincoln on May 24 leads to the conclusion that this day marks his worst performance as a commander-in-chief.

At 5:00 a.m. on Saturday, May 24, 1862, a lone steamer carrying the U.S. commander-in-chief and the Secretary of War pulled into and docked at the Washington Navy Yard. Abraham Lincoln and Edwin M. Stanton disembarked from the craft and headed to the War Department to obtain an update on military affairs.[1]

No time appeared more optimistic for total Union victory than this particular weekend, the end of the second week of the second month of the second year of the Civil War. Significant successes had been achieved in all theaters throughout the spring season. West of the Alleghenies, Union troops had closed in on the vital Confederate railroad hub at Corinth, Mississippi; it would fall into Union hands in a week. After seizing New Orleans from Confederate control, Admiral David Farragut had begun to work up the Mississippi River—toward Vicksburg—with a fleet of warships. In the Alleghenies, Colonel George Crook routed a small Confederate force at Lewisburg, which offered a gateway for the Union

advance on the Confederate rail lines at Salem, Virginia. Notwithstanding his setback at the Battle of McDowell on May 8, Major General John C. Fremont was prepared to steal the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad from Confederate control, and direct his army toward Richmond.[2]

All boded well across the country for Union success. Most important for Lincoln was the progress of the Army of the Potomac as it closed in on Richmond. Major General George B. McClellan's advance was more akin to a crawl, but on this Saturday morning, May 24, 1862, 90,000 Union soldiers had crept within ten miles of the Confederate capital; part of his advance had closed to within six miles from Richmond. Although his forces outnumbered Confederate general Joseph E. Johnston's 74,000-man Army of Northern Virginia five to four, military doctrine still favored the Confederates in their defense. McClellan requested more troops in an effort to outmuscle his opponent, capture the Confederate capital, and declare checkmate.[3]

Lincoln had agreed to supply McClellan with those reinforcements. The President and Secretary Stanton had just returned from an overnight in Falmouth, Virginia, across the Rappahannock River from Fredericksburg and fifty miles from Richmond. There they held a grand review of the Army of the Rappahannock, commanded by Major General Irvin McDowell. Reinforced by Brigadier General James Shields's division from the Shenandoah Valley, McDowell's Falmouth army swelled to 38,000 soldiers present for duty and eighty cannons. Lincoln was impressed by what he saw during the review, for these troops were set to march on May 26. They were ordered to head overland down to Richmond to swell McClellan's ranks close to 130,000, buttressed with the firepower of 350 cannons.[4]

As he made his way to the U.S. War Department, Lincoln appeared confident that the Confederate War Department had no means to counter the behemoth that was destined to threaten Richmond. Salmon P. Chase, the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, noted that both Lincoln and Stanton were "highly gratified by the condition of [McDowell's] troops and anticipating an imposing & successful advance on the Monday following."[5]

That gratification and anticipation recessed in the minds of Lincoln and Stanton as soon as they stepped past the columned entranceway and entered the modest brick building that housed the U.S. War Department. There they met Assistant Secretary of War Peter H. Watson, who had much to discuss with his boss and his President. Since the previous evening of May 23 and through the night Watson had attempted to glean as

much information about a potential disaster transpiring in the Shenandoah Valley.

A small division of Major General Nathaniel P. Banks's Army of the Shenandoah had been stationed there, a force of two infantry brigades (neither of which had yet fired their guns in a Civil War battle more than a year after the commencement of the war), a brigade of cavalry, and sixteen cannons. Banks had the task of guarding the northern Valley, particularly the Manassas Gap rail line that stretched from Strasburg past Front Royal and over the Blue Ridge Mountains, where the responsibility was picked up by a detachment of McDowell's army commanded by Brigadier General John W. Geary at Rectortown, east of the mountains. Banks had most of his men stationed near him at Strasburg, leaving about 1,000 men and two cannons at Front Royal to cover the mouth of the Luray Valley south of the town. The Front Royal garrison was attacked and routed throughout the afternoon and evening of May 23, and Assistant Secretary Watson had spent the night fielding telegrams transmitted from Banks at Strasburg northward to Harpers Ferry, then eastward to Washington.

Banks had yet to learn that Major General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson's entire army—eight infantry brigades and forty-eight cannons—had slipped unnoticed into the Luray Valley and swept away Banks's flank at Front Royal. By the time Lincoln and Stanton entered the telegraph room on Saturday morning, they could read the early–morning dispatches from Banks that "the enemy's force is undoubtedly very large and their possession of Front Royal complete." Watson had followed up on this message shortly after 2:30 a.m. promising Banks reinforcements. "Do not give up the ship before succor can arrive," ordered Watson to the endangered general.[6]

Watson had begun to arrange for men and ammunition to head to Harpers Ferry, where Colonel Dixon S. Miles was stationed with a brigade. From this point, beginning at approximately 6:00 a.m., Lincoln and Stanton took over the duties from the beleaguered Watson and would remain in the telegraph room for most of that Saturday. They were clearly concerned about what had and was transpiring in the Valley. Colonel John S. Clark, an aide to Banks on a special assignment in Washington, stepped into the war department at this time to note "the great council of wise men with elongated faces [was] just getting the news" about the previous day's attack on Front Royal. All were waiting for news from Banks.[7]

That news was wired in from Strasburg minutes after the 7:00 a.m. hour. Banks surmised that the Confederate force that struck Front Royal "was very large; not less than 6,000 to 10,000." But Banks maintained that this was General Ewell's wing that struck his flank, and he erroneously

believed that Stonewall Jackson was still directly south of Strasburg with an equal-sized force. Believing that the Confederate attackers remained at Front Royal, Banks went on to inform the war department that he had begun to move all the army supplies from Strasburg to Winchester, but the Union army remained at Strasburg. Two hours later, the war department received another telegram from Banks, this one addressed to Peter Watson. Clearly a response to Watson's hours-old plea to "not give up the ship until succor has arrived," Banks responded, "We shall stand firm." But he also added that the Confederates were "on the road to Winchester."[8]

The greatest error in Banks's intelligence was the mistaken belief that only Ewell was on his flank. In fact, Jackson and Ewell together had overtaken Front Royal on Friday with a combined force in excess of 14,000 men. At the time Lincoln and Stanton received the last telegram from Banks, Jackson's entire army was on the Front-Royal Winchester Pike, almost halfway to Winchester. Thus, Banks had underestimated the strength of the threat, but was essentially correct on the movement of the enemy fifteen miles northeast of him. What Lincoln and the war department did not know was that the message they received at 9:45 a.m. was outdated (Banks sent it more than two hours earlier). Concerned about the threat to his position, Banks abandoned Strasburg and had set his entire 6,000-man force on a twenty-two-mile trek northward along the Valley Pike to Winchester.[9]

The Confederate threat to the Northern Valley that morning was also a result of Confederate strategic planning. Confederate President Jefferson Davis's brainchild was to use Jackson as an offensive weapon in the Valley to paralyze planned Union efforts to reinforce McClellan on the Yorktown Peninsula. Davis had first proposed this in April, at a time when Stonewall Jackson was not strong enough in numbers to conduct the operation. But by mid-May all in Richmond were in agreement to set Jackson loose upon an unsuspecting (and half-strength) General Banks. "Whatever movement you make against Banks do it speedily," spelled out the mission wired to Jackson on May 16, "and if successful drive him back toward the Potomac, and create the impression, as far as practicable, that you design threatening that line."[10] Barely one week after receiving the message, Jackson was complying with his new mission, moving against Banks with strength and celerity.

President Davis and General Robert E. Lee (Davis's military advisor, "charged with the conduct of military operations in the armies of the Confederacy") planned Jackson's mission specifically with McDowell's impressive army in mind. Their plan was to prevent McDowell from leaving his base at Falmouth and adding all his men and cannons to

McClellan's advance upon Richmond. But all indications existed as the noon hour approached on May 24 that Abraham Lincoln remained steadfast in his intention to send General McDowell down to reinforce McClellan. The Confederate success at Front Royal, and the perceived threat upon Banks's flank, had barely altered Lincoln's promised reinforcements to McClellan.

Shortly after 11:00 a.m., Secretary Stanton reiterated to McDowell by wire the President's intention to send him off on Monday morning in a march toward Richmond. McDowell had previously agreed to leave a small covering force behind at Falmouth. Stanton fed McDowell new instructions to leave one more brigade—"the least effective of your command" behind as well—"In view of the operations of the enemy on the line of General Banks." McDowell acknowledged the new order in a telegram received by Lincoln and Stanton at 1:00 p.m.[11]

While Secretary Stanton wired questions, responses, and updates to commanders peripheral to the Shenandoah Valley, President Lincoln personally provided General McClellan with assurances that his campaign was not to be affected by the turn of events in the Valley. No time has been attributed to Lincoln's briefing, but based on the chronological evidence surrounding it, it appears to have been constructed and sent by noon. After opening his message to inform McClellan that he had personally reviewed McDowell's army, Lincoln added, "We have so thinned our line to get troops for other places that it was broken yesterday at Front Royal, with a probable loss to us of one regiment infantry, two companies cavalry, putting General Banks in some peril."

Notwithstanding the acknowledgment of danger to Banks, Lincoln's closing lines to McClellan clearly indicated that this did not affect what was promised to the army general: "McDowell and Shields both say they can, and positively will, move on Monday morning. . . You will have command of McDowell, after he joins you." Most shocking about Lincoln's message to McClellan is an admonition disregarded by most historians: *"I wish you to move cautiously and safely."* Why would Lincoln advise caution with his army within striking distance of Richmond? Obviously, he wanted McClellan to await McDowell's arrival before he launched a full-scale attack upon the Confederate capital and its defenders.[12]

No known messages were wired by the war department to McClellan or McDowell early that afternoon, thus acknowledging that the plan was still in effect to transfer nearly 40,000 soldiers and four-score cannons to the right flank of the Army of the Potomac. The Confederate offensive in the Shenandoah Valley had only affected this plan by one "least effective"

brigade. The rest of McDowell's army, including top-notch troops such as the Pennsylvania Reserves and what would later be christened the Iron Brigade, and headed by Shields's division—to this point the most experienced and successful troops in the eastern theater—was expected to reinforce McClellan by May 30.

Lincoln's misinterpretation of a series of poorly written and ill-conceived messages caused that plan to unravel over the remainder of the afternoon. It all began with a curious telegraphed message that reached Washington shortly after noon. From Harpers Ferry, Colonel Miles notified the war department that "General Banks has just informed me at Strasburg that the rebels are passing Middletown in large force, from 6,000 to 10,000 on the turnpike to Winchester." The relayed telegram from Banks never had a time placed upon it, but it must have been close to three hours old, for Banks had departed Strasburg about 9:30 a.m. The message was very close to the one Banks transmitted earlier that morning, except that Colonel Miles used the words "passing Middletown . . . on the turnpike to Winchester." (Banks had not mentioned Middletown and used the word "road" to describe the expected route the Confederates would take to Winchester).[13]

Both messages from Banks and Miles relayed the exact same information, and they were both accurate. Throughout the morning, most of Jackson's army, in large force exceeding 10,000, was marching toward Winchester on the Front Royal-Winchester Turnpike, a reliable Valley toll road that ran northward from Front Royal to Winchester for approximately twenty miles. Troops heading north on this road would pass by Middletown on a route seven miles east of the small community. Unfortunately for Lincoln and Stanton, the message from Miles never specified what turnpike the Confederates were using. It is clear from Stanton's follow-up wire to Colonel Miles that he—and by extension, Lincoln—feared that the rebels were passing ***through*** Middletown and seizing the Valley Pike that carried both Banks's supplies and his army instead of passing ***by*** Middletown on the Front Royal-Winchester Pike. "If the enemy is on the line between Banks and you," queried Stanton to Miles at Harpers Ferry, "how is Banks able to telegraph you?"

The question was an obvious one if the conclusion was drawn that Jackson had struck the Valley Pike. Indeed, Stonewall would eventually do this, but not for several more hours. At 12:30 p.m. General Ewell was still ten miles away from Winchester, idling with the vanguard with orders to stay put, while General Jackson had just begun a seven-mile westward advance to intercept the Union retreat at Middletown, an advance that would take three more hours to complete. Stanton and Lincoln obviously

did not know this, nor did they know that most of Banks's supply train was entering Winchester at this time, safe and secure, while the tail of Banks's infantry had just cleared Middletown on its northward trek to the confines of Winchester. The U.S. War Department had not received any dispatch from Banks timed after 7:15 a.m.—the one that proclaimed, "We shall stand firm." Therefore, believing Banks was still in Strasburg, it is clear that Stanton and Lincoln had begun to entertain the notion that Jackson had just cut Banks off from his supply train.

Those concerns intensified over the next two hours. A catalyst for concern was General John Geary, commander of the large brigade on the Manassas Gap Railroad near the eastern foothills of the Blue Ridge. Geary sent a series of wild and seemingly preposterous messages, informing the war department of Stonewall Jackson's exploits and his deep penetration into—and now out of—the Shenandoah Valley. Lincoln deemed Geary's reports credible, so much so to relay them to General Rufus Saxton, who was ordered to Harpers Ferry to supersede Dixon Miles and command the troops heading to that locale. "Geary reports Jackson with twenty thousand, moving from Ashby's Gap, by the Little River Turnpike through Aldie towards Centreville," reported Lincoln to Saxton at 1:00 p.m.; "This he says is reliable." The fact that Lincoln relayed that ominous report, one that was entirely false, bears evidence that he considered it reliable as well.[14]

As startled as Lincoln must have been about reports of Confederates pouring out of the Valley, the President was still in the dark about the fate of General Banks and his army early that Saturday afternoon. At 1:30 p.m. Lincoln wired Colonel Miles in Harpers Ferry, asking, "Could you not send scouts from Winchester, who would tell whether enemy are North of Banks moving on Winchester? What is the latest you have?"[15]

The questions were sent to Miles partially to prod him to explain Secretary Stanton's earlier inquiry of how Banks could be communicating by telegraph from Strasburg "if the enemy is on the line between Banks and you." Stanton sent that message at noon, demanding an immediate response. Colonel Miles's answer did not come for two hours, but when it finally arrived near 2:15 p.m., it only deepened the dread about Banks's ability to fend off the Confederate onslaught: "In answer to your telegraph I have the honor to state I gave this morning what Major Perkins [Banks's assistant adjutant general] telegraphed to me. He also said he should do so again at noon. I have not heard from him since. The wire has ceased to work within the two last hours."[16]

No news from Banks was bad news for the war department. Puzzle pieces were falling in place to present a more convincing case that General

Banks sent his supplies toward Winchester while he and his army stayed at Strasburg, where he was cut off by a huge Confederate force that not only penetrated Banks's communication and supply line at Middletown [six miles north of Strasburg], but was large enough to send Southern soldiers through a northern gap of the Blue Ridge towards General Geary's position. Still believing that another Confederate force, perhaps led by Jackson himself, was threatening Banks from a point south of Strasburg, Lincoln had come to the conclusion that he had made Banks a target for the Confederates by weakening his strength when he ordered Shields's division out of the Valley.

Perhaps the single most important piece of intelligence that tipped the scale for Lincoln to react to the threat arrived at the war department at 3:00 p.m. It was another message from General Geary, whose scouts roamed upon the foothills of the Blue Ridge, looking and listening for any sign of activity within the Shenandoah Valley corridor. Geary relayed what was ostensibly picked up by their ears: "We can distinctly hear cannonading in the vicinity of Winchester from this point." Cannonading meant a battle, and given the suspected numbers and direction of opposition, Lincoln was now likely convinced that Banks was no longer in "some peril" as he forecasted to McClellan that morning; rather he believed that Banks was in grave danger.[17]

In reality, Banks was relatively safe at 3:00 p.m., as were five hundred of his supply wagons and most of his infantry and artillery that had moved from Strasburg in mid-morning. Because his wagons began rolling at first nautical light, Banks enjoyed a miraculous spell of serendipity. Except for a fifteen-minute strike at Newtown by Confederate cavalry at 10:00 a.m., Banks's retreat from Strasburg had been smooth and uneventful for several hours. The brief Confederate cavalry success that morning (they lit upon the ambulance portion of the retreat line, scooping up a few hundred infirmed and unarmed soldiers) had instigated a short-lived panic in the wagon train, revealing how vulnerable Banks supply line was if a force greater than three hundred Southern horse soldiers intercepted it.

Five hours of retreat had commenced before that cavalry strike, and five more hours had passed after it with no subsequent threats to the line. Given that an aggressive commander like Stonewall Jackson enjoyed a three-to-one infantry advantage over Banks's seven regiments at Strasburg as he sat perched a dozen miles east of the Union position throughout the previous night, the fact that most of Banks's supplies and his army escaped a major flank strike by 3:00 p.m. as they entered Winchester in a twenty-two-mile line of march seems nothing short of miraculous.

But Lincoln did not know this because Banks had not sent any dispatches to the U.S. War Department in eight hours. Geary's command did indeed hear cannonading at 3:00 p.m. The only artillery that had fired to this point on May 24 can be isolated to one specific point—Providence Church—on a road that ran from Cedarville (on the north-south Front Royal-Winchester Pike) to Middletown (on the northeast-southwest Valley Pike). There, two miles east of Middletown, Confederate artillery had unlimbered and fired upon Union cavalry between 2:30 and 2:45 p.m. It was the only cannons fired thus far that day and it represented the approach of Stonewall Jackson with the bulk of his army as it closed in on the Valley Pike.

Jackson would intercept the Valley Pike at Middletown between 3:15 and 3:30 p.m. with an enfilading artillery barrage and cavalry attack, trapping the rearguard cavalry portion of Banks's retreat line. Half an hour later, Jackson enjoyed the capture of dozens of cavalry wagons (including twelve tons of horseshoes and horseshoe nails within them), as well as more than two hundred fresh horses. More than two hundred Union cavalrymen were killed wounded and captured in the melee at Middletown. The half-hour, one-sided skirmish was accurately picked up by Winchester scouts who relayed the information to Colonel Miles at Harpers Ferry. At 4:00 p.m., he wired the war department: "The telegraph operator reports firing within 8 miles of Winchester."[18]

Even before Lincoln read this message at 4:15 p.m., he had already put in motion an entire change of strategy in Virginia, one destined to shift its focus on the Shenandoah Valley. He first wired General Fremont, stationed at the town of Franklin, west of the Valley in the Alleghenies. Lincoln made it clear that his fears for Banks's safety had grown beyond the "some peril" characterization he portrayed it that morning. "The exposed condition of General Banks makes his immediate relief a point of paramount importance," instructed Lincoln to Fremont without mincing words; "You are therefore directed by the President to move against Jackson at Harrisonburg and operate against the enemy in such [a] way to relieve Banks. This movement must be made immediately."[19]

Lincoln's decision changed Fremont's ultimate course from Richmond into the Valley. It still appears a sound decision, for it freed 10,000 soldiers who were suffering and starving more in May of 1862 than any equivalent number of troops in the Western Hemisphere. The order would transfer them from the harsh mountain conditions and commit them to a lush Valley floor. And although Lincoln's order postponed Fremont's mission to Richmond it did not necessarily kill the plan, depending on the outcome of the Valley campaign.

But why send Fremont to Harrisonburg, a town fifty miles south of Strasburg? The answer may be found in a communication received in the telegraph office one hour before Lincoln issued the new order to Fremont. The telegram came from General Shields, who was more highly regarded as a successful general at this stage in 1862 than he should have been. (Earlier in the year Secretary Stanton had actually recommended sending Shields out west to replace William Tecumseh Sherman!) The war department had yet to learn that Shields's claim to have called all the shots that produced the Union victory over Stonewall Jackson at Kernstown back in March had been disproven by testimony before the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War held on May 22. Because of this lag time, Shields's advice remained highly valued, much higher than it would be three weeks later after he was held responsible for his division's defeat at the Battle of Port Republic.[20]

Shields informed Stanton by telegraph at 3:00 p.m. on May 24 that "If Jackson and Ewell have moved against Banks they have placed themselves in a position to be caught by Milroy, Blenker, and Schenck [Fremont's infantry]. If the troops of the Mountain Department are not now in position to throw themselves into the Valley of the Shenandoah and cut them off, they must have changed their direction. They have but one thing to do: Cross to Waynesborough, seize Charlottesville and destroy the railroad; then with one body and another follow the turnpike to Strasburg, and the enemy will be caught." Shields's advice was too timely with Lincoln's subsequent directive to Fremont to be dismissed purely as a coincidence. And Lincoln need only peer at a map to notice that Harrisonburg was the town that sat on the line between Fremont's headquarters at Franklin and Shields's recommended destination point of Waynesboro.[21]

Had Lincoln stopped there on May 24 his role as commander-in-chief would not come under scrutiny, regardless of Fremont's or Banks's fate. But Lincoln went one step further, a fateful step that broke promises, defied logic, and jeopardized ultimate success in Virginia. Perhaps immediately after telegraphing Fremont, Lincoln notified McClellan that the army that was earmarked to reinforce him in front of Richmond was going to go in a different direction. "In consequence of General Banks' critical position I have been compelled to suspend General McDowell's movements to join you," came Lincoln's stunning message to McClellan; "The enemy are making a desperate push upon Harper's Ferry, and we are trying to throw General Fremont's force and part of General McDowell's in their rear."[22]

General McDowell's instructions made it clear that Lincoln considered "part of" to equate to half of his force. Lincoln wired McDowell, "You are

instructed, laying aside for the present the movement on Richmond, to put 20,000 men in motion at once for the Shenandoah . . . Your object will be to capture the forces of Jackson and Ewell, either in co-operation with General Fremont or, in case of want of supplies or if transportation interferes with his movements, it is believed that the force with which you move will be sufficient to accomplish this object alone."[23]

At that moment—4:00 p.m. on May 24, 1862—Jefferson Davis caught Abraham Lincoln in his trap by using his most effective weapon, Stonewall Jackson. The Confederate War Department had hoped to hamper the Union drive to Richmond ever since McClellan embarked upon his Peninsula Campaign in mid-March. Back then they sought a "rapid forward movement" to "threaten Washington and thus recall the enemy." Two months later, Davis still sought the rapid forward movement, although he knew it was too late to recall McClellan. The best he could hope for was to stall reinforcements from swelling McClellan's ranks. Jackson's rapid forward movement achieved this goal. Davis and the Confederate War Department never anticipated that half of McDowell's army would be sent to the Shenandoah Valley, thus wiping out any chance that he could provide ample reinforcements to McClellan for several weeks.[24]

The Confederate plan was designed for the U.S. War Department to overreact to the threat to Washington. Lincoln, however, never acknowledged this to be the reason for sending McDowell away from McClellan and to the Shenandoah Valley. The consistent theme of Lincoln's telegrams was his concern for the safety of General Banks and his army, not the safety of Washington. He alluded to Banks's dilemma several times during the afternoon of May 24, and made it clear again in the evening. Responding to General Henry W. Halleck's request for reinforcements for his army near Corinth, Lincoln testily responded that he had been bombarded with requests from all sectors of the country for additional troops. Lincoln's guilt over General Banks's plight was apparent when he explained: "Under this pressure we thinned the line on the upper Potomac, until yesterday it was broken with heavy loss to us, and General Banks put in great peril, out of which he is not yet extricated, and may actually be captured."[25]

Lincoln's admission to Halleck was revealing on two fronts. It elevated Lincoln's concern for Banks's safety from "some peril" to "great peril," at the same time confessing his culpability in Banks's possible capture. Equally striking about Lincoln's dispatch is the time it was sent to Halleck—7:30 p.m. The time and content of Lincoln's communication to Halleck proves that Lincoln still did not know that Banks and his army had

been concentrating in the Winchester environs. This relieving news was finally received shortly after 8:00 p.m.[26]

Lincoln's decision to change McDowell's course was viewed by the affected commands as mindless meddling by their commander-in-chief. McDowell was clearly upset, venting to Stanton that Lincoln's order "is a crushing blow to us." Lincoln saw McDowell's response and countered, "The change was as painful to me as it can possibly be to you or to any one." General McClellan would have disagreed with Lincoln's characterization. He essentially told Lincoln that the President had played perfectly into Confederate strategy: "The object of enemy's movement is probably to prevent reinforcements being sent to me." Lincoln disagreed. "I think the movement is a general and concerted one," he explained to McClellan, "such as could not be if he was acting upon the purpose of a very desperate defence of Richmond."[27]

On this point, McClellan's judgment proved correct while Lincoln's was in error. Jackson swept Banks from Winchester after a four-hour battle on the morning of May 25. Banks's army and supplies crossed the Potomac the following morning to the safety of Maryland. This exceeded Jackson's mission to "drive him to the Potomac and create the impression as far as practicable that you design threatening that line." Jefferson Davis wrote his wife shortly after this Valley victory to thank her "for congratulations on the success of Jackson." He revealed, "Had the movement been made when I first proposed it the effect would have been more important." The "effect" to which Davis referred was the suspension of McDowell's march to Richmond. Thus, Davis had repeated what had occurred by happenstance after the battle of Kernstown—the temporary suspension of reinforcements sent to McClellan—this time by planned strategy.[28]

It is apparent that Lincoln's decision to re-direct General McDowell's army was a rash response to poorly worded and subsequently misinterpreted telegrams that convinced him that General Banks was in imminent danger during the afternoon of May 24. His decision reversed his intention to support McClellan with a strong, artillery-laden army, an intention that remained steadfast until the afternoon of May 24 when the confusing telegrams from the Valley and from General Geary entered the war department.

Would Lincoln have sent McDowell to the Valley if he stayed away from the telegraph office on May 24, not read the exaggerated alarming telegrams, and evaluated the situation after dark? Would he have committed two armies to the Valley if he knew at 3:00 p.m. that Banks had escaped annihilation when transferring his army and supplies twenty miles

from Strasburg to Winchester? It is difficult to comprehend the same decision made by Lincoln with at least a few hours of hindsight as benefit.

Most puzzling about Lincoln's orders is his contention that McDowell or Fremont would be able to salvage Banks's command if Banks was in as much danger as Lincoln expected during the mid-afternoon of May 24. Several days would be necessary for either force to enter the Shenandoah Valley. Lincoln could only expect this to be worthwhile if he believed that Banks was under siege within the confines of a large fort constructed on the heights west of the Valley Pike at Strasburg.

A full day after the fateful decision, Lincoln contended that McDowell's Shenandoah Valley mission, like Fremont's, was intended to "get in the enemies [sic] rear." This after-the-fact claim is not supported by the evidence available to him at the time he changed McDowell's direction from Richmond to the Shenandoah Valley, but Lincoln may have been hedging his bets. If Jackson routed Banks south of Winchester on the twenty-fourth, he might attempt to follow up on the victory by heading toward Harpers Ferry, where 7,000 Northern troops had coalesced by the morning of May 26. Considering that large portions of two Union armies were ordered to enter the Valley fifty miles apart from each other with no place designated to unite their commands (Lincoln never provided General McDowell a destination point for his army), Lincoln was exhibiting incredible faith that Fremont and McDowell—two commanders with less than stellar achievements by the spring of 1862—would cooperate to serve the Union better there than by supporting McClellan's Peninsula Campaign.[29]

Did it all matter in the end? Critics of McClellan need only point to his mediocre record as a battlefield tactician to claim that McClellan would have found a way to waste McDowell's army once it joined him in front of Richmond. Still, one must wonder how successful the Confederate offensive at Fair Oaks/Seven Pines would have been if those eighty cannons and 38,000 men were available to General McClellan on May 31-June 1, 1862.

It is more important to evaluate the soundness of Lincoln's decision in the context of the time during which he made it. Although Lincoln did not worry for the safety of Washington, his concerns for the safety of General Banks—". . . put in great peril, out of which he is not yet extricated, and may be actually captured"—appears to have fueled Lincoln's strategy more than any other factor. One day after the decision, Lincoln used the realignment to spur McClellan to action: "You must either attack Richmond or give up the job and come to the defence of Washington."[30]

Is taking away troops from a general in an active campaign a feasible method to inducing him into action? The "anti-McClellanization" of modern scholars and enthusiasts must be tempered in evaluating Lincoln's decision. Subsequent history will attest to McClellan's utter failure as a field commander, but it should be noted that in May of 1862, he was in the midst of a huge campaign with the largest army in the Western Hemisphere and a record of success that led up to that situation. He indeed was slow; Secretary of Treasury Salmon P. Chase sarcastically snipped to Horace Greeley on May 21 that "McClellan is a dear luxury—fifty days—fifty miles—fifty millions of dollars—easy arithmetic but not satisfactory."[31]

But on May 24 McClellan was less than ten miles from the endpoint of his planned campaign, anticipating the addition of McDowell's army to complete it, a force held back from him since the inception of the campaign in March. Back on May 21 Lincoln agreed to release McDowell to McClellan and on the morning of the twenty-fourth, McClellan—still promised those troops—expected them to complete their five-day march on May 30, where they could anchor the right flank of the Army of the Potomac. From this point, McClellan—quite reasonably—would not launch an attack until those earmarked troops arrived. Lincoln ostensibly agreed when he warned McClellan to advance safely and with caution. Stunningly, Lincoln's message to McClellan just thirty hours after this warning was to attack—without McDowell's army to assist that assault.[32]

Rather than prod McClellan by taking those promised troops away from him, Lincoln's maneuver antagonized him. It also diminished the capabilities of the President in the eyes of the commander of his prized army. "Some of the Presdt's dispatches for the last two days have been amazing in the extreme," relayed McClellan to his wife on May 26; "I cannot do justice to them so I shall not attempt to describe them. I feared last night that I would be ordered to the defense of Washington!" Put in the identical situation, it is difficult to comprehend any Union army commander not harboring the same negative opinion of Lincoln that was expressed by McClellan to his wife.[33]

In evaluating Lincoln's May 24 decision, we have the benefit of hindsight to realize that the fate of McDowell's detachment from McClellan's command—losers at Port Republic, Cedar Mountain, and Second Manassas—provided no benefit for Union success. The circumstances that led to the erroneous decision were wrapped both in faulty intelligence and the subsequent overreaction to it; thus, the forethought indicates its flaws even more than does hindsight. After Secretary Stanton explained the May-June portion of the Shenandoah

Valley campaign to Major General John Pope a month after its fruitless close, Pope interpreted the bungled opportunity as follows:

> He [Stanton] gave a rapid and at times humorous account of the campaign against Stonewall Jackson. . . Although [Stanton] did not admit it or even intimate anything of the kind, this was really a campaign conducted from Washington by the President and the Secretary of War, in which the generals played no part except to obey orders it left matters no better certainly than they were before, except that the troops under Banks, Fremont and McDowell, which had been scattered widely and beyond any possibility of supporting each other, were brought by these movements sufficiently near together to be easily united and so far as their force went, made capable of effective work. Of course these troops, never having served together and having also been subjected to every different kind of service and very diverse modes of discipline, had ideas and ways as wide apart as their training had been and could not, without time and practice be amalgamated into that compact and harmonious body essential to such work as it was intended to do. In his account of this comic campaign against Jackson, Mr. Stanton's humor did not spare the President or himself, much less any of the generals, who, as I said were entirely innocent of any responsibility for those operations.[34]

Whether viewing the decisions and actions of May 24, 1862, and beyond in foresight or hindsight, the same conclusion can be drawn. The person most responsible for the tactical success of Stonewall Jackson's Shenandoah Valley Campaign within the region itself was General Jackson. The person most responsible for the campaign's strategic success for the Confederacy east of the Blue Ridge Mountains was Abraham Lincoln. The commander-in-chief's blunder in the telegraph office on May 24, 1862, may have prolonged the Civil War by three long and bloody years.

Notes

[1] Earl Schenck Myers, ed., *Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology, 1809-1865* (Washington, D.C.: Lincoln Sesquicentennial Commission, 1960), 3: 116.

[2] John S. Bowman, ed., *The Civil War Almanac* (New York: Bison Books, 1983), 94-99; U.S. War Department, *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series 1 [Hereafter cited as *OR*, followed by volume number (part):page], 12(1): 10, 804-13.

[3] Present for duty opposing army strengths obtained from Joseph L. Harsh, *Confederate Tide Rising: Robert E. Lee and the Making of Southern Strategy, 1861-1862* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1998), 83, 230 (n36-37); the

name of Johnston's army obtained from Special Orders No. 6, April 12, 1862. See *OR,* 12(3): 846.
[4] *OR*, 12(3): 214, 309.
[5] John Niven, ed., *The Salmon P. Chase Papers* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1993), 1: 345.
[6] *OR*, 12(1): 526.
[7] Clark to "Dear Friend Underwood," June 25, 1862, John S. Clark Papers, The Cayuga Museum, Auburn, New York.
[8] Ibid., 526-27.
[9] *OR,* 12(1): 547.
[10] Harsh, *Confederate Tide Rising*, 189; OR 12(3), 892-93.
[11] *OR*, 5: 1099; *OR*, 12(3): 219.
[12] Lincoln to McClellan, May 24, 1862, in Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, NJ.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 5: 231-32. (Hereafter cited as *CW*).
[13] *OR,* 12(3): 225.
[14] Lincoln to Saxton, May 24, 1862, *CW*, 5: 234.
[15] Lincoln to Miles, in ibid.
[16] Miles to Stanton, Telegrams Received by the Secretary of War, National Archives, Washington, D.C. [Hereafter cited as TRSW]
[17] Geary to Stanton, May 24, 1862, TRSW.
[18] *OR,* 12(1): 724; Miles to Stanton, May 24, 1862, TRSW.
[19] Ibid*.,* 643.
[20] Stanton's mid February letter suggesting Shields replace Sherman rests in the Edwin M. Stanton Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
[21] *OR,* 12(3): 222.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] R. E. Lee to J. E.Johnston, March 20, 1862, Lee's Headquarters papers, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA; *OR,* 12(3): 892-93; Harsh, *Confederate Tide Rising*, 189.
[25] Lincoln to Halleck, May 24, 1862*, CW*, 5: 231.
[26] *OR,* 12(3): 224.
[27] Ibid.; Lincoln to McClellan, May 25, 1862, *CW*, 5:235-36; McClellan to Lincoln, May 25, 1862, in Stephen W. Sears, ed., *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1989), 276.
[28] Davis to his wife, May 30, 1862, in Linda L. Crist, Mary S. Dix, and Kenneth L. Williams, eds., *The Papers of Jefferson Davis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 8: 203. The editors of Davis's papers claimed that he suggested Jackson's offensive in a May 12, 1862, meeting. This assertion has been convincingly challenged and corrected to an April 14 meeting. See Harsh, *Confederate Tide Rising*, 188-89, for the evidence placing the meeting to the April date.
[29] Lincoln to McClellan, May 25, 1862, Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

[30] Lincoln to Halleck, May 24, 1862, *CW*, 5: 231; Lincoln to McClellan, May 25, 1862, *CW*, 5:235-36.
[31] Chase to Greeley, May 21, 1862, in Niven, ed., *The Salmon P. Chase Papers*, 3: 203.
[32] Lincoln to McClellan, May 21 & 24, 1862, *CW*, 5: 226, 232.
[33] McClellan to Mary Ellen McClellan, May 26, 1862, in Sears, *Papers of George B. McClellan*, 278.
[34] Peter Cozzens and Robert I. Girardi, eds., *The Military Memoirs of General John Pope* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 118-19.