Lincoln’s Do-Nothing Generals

By MARK GREENBAUM

Disunion follows the Civil War as it unfolded.

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The Civil War’s first year was one marked by inactivity and battlefield frustration. There was just one major battle, at Bull Run, and only a handful of minor engagements, most of them semi-guerrilla fighting in and around Missouri.

Yet as the leading Union generals in the field refused to directly engage Confederate troops, President Lincoln began to display an almost intuitive understanding of the aggressive military strategy that would win the war, a wisdom that would lead him to bring in new generals and push for more aggressive engagements in 1862. How did Lincoln, a lawyer by training with no military background to speak of — get the nature of the conflict so right, and his seasoned generals get it so wrong?

The Civil War was a West Point war. Even though the academy’s alumni made up a tiny fraction of the Union’s fighting force, West Point graduates dominated the general staff from Fort Sumter to Appomattox. Out of the approximately 560 Union generals to serve during the war, about 220 were West Point graduates (in the Confederacy, the ratio was a little lower but still significant, 140 out of 400). Given how rapidly and large the two armies grew, the dominance by West Point graduates of the top leadership positions is striking.

Nevertheless, virtually no one in the Union Army had any experience that could prepare him for the Civil War. In 1860, the Army numbered just over 16,000 men, a quarter of whom would soon resign. No wartime American army had ever exceeded 14,000, such that when Irvin McDowell took the field at Bull Run in July 1861, his 30,000 troops made up the largest force ever led by an American general. The Army thus lacked the experience to provide its cadets with proven doctrinal training.

Instead, in the decades leading up to the war, American military thought was overwhelmingly influenced by the French experience. Though eventually defeated by his European allies, Napoleon had left behind a world-class martial structure that other countries rushed to replicate. From the Army’s uniforms, to its hard emphasis on drills, to its translated training manuals, French ideas pervaded and in many ways defined America’s still-fledgling military, particularly in the nation’s premier military education center.
Modeled on L’Ecole Polytechnique, West Point’s curriculum emphasized mathematics and engineering almost exclusively. The school’s only course on strategy, taught by Dennis Hart Mahan, was only a few lessons long and focused on the superiority of defensive postures and the building of fortifications and fieldworks. Mahan was a fierce student of the Napoleonic campaigns and helped found the Napoleon Club, probably West Point’s only real extracurricular group.

Mahan also taught the work of Antoine-Henri Jomini, a Swiss-born strategist who somehow managed to hold commissions from both the French and Russian armies during the Napoleonic wars. Widely regarded as the leading military theorist of the early 19th century, Jomini viewed war in precise, almost mathematical terms and believed that an enemy’s territory was the primary objective of an army, not the opposing force. As a result, wars could be won through one large, well-planned battle.

The Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia

The influence of Jomini’s thinking in particular on Civil War battlefield strategy has long been controversial. While there were generals who studied and referenced his works, most had limited exposure to him. To directly impute his teachings to failed wartime maneuvers, therefore, is difficult. Still, the general ideas that pervaded his thinking — that modern wars could be limited affairs divorced from politics, defined by a few set-piece battles with little consequence to civilians — were an integral part of the foundations of American military teaching before the war.

But if the influence of Napoleonic campaigns was obvious, their relevance to the Civil War was not. Napoleon enjoyed several advantages the Union didn’t, including shorter conflicts, narrower geography and population density, pockets of friendly population support, closer supply lines and an ability to defeat opposing armies completely (something that was achieved only once in the Civil War, at the Battle of Nashville in late 1864). The military’s thinking circa 1861 was perhaps best delineated by Confederate Gen. Richard Ewell, who, reflecting on his West Point education, purportedly noted that it “taught officers of the ‘old army’ everything they needed to know about commanding a company of fifty dragoons on the western plains against the Cheyenne Indians, but nothing else.”
Adding to their inexperience and inadequate education, Union officers also lacked a central command structure, trained troops and military maps, and suffered from the readjustment of generals returning from civilian life, harsh press coverage — particularly in the Eastern Theater — and a failure of strategic and tactical imagination.

Not surprisingly, when George B. McClellan took over command of eastern forces in July 1861, he was greeted as a savior. Here, finally, was a young man who seemed to understand the necessities of modern warfare, or at least spoke like he did. He quickly built up an army demoralized by the First Battle of Bull Run into a capable force of over 70,000. But with these men at ready, McClellan refused to move all through the year, despite mounting pressure from the press and Lincoln. A one-time member of the Napoleon Club, McClellan saw the conflict as one with limited objectives, minimal focus on the enemy army and battles never fought far from his supply base. He believed that the war could be won through quick battles and territorial expansion, leaving Southern civilians and property unmolested. Later, he would seek to concentrate all of his forces to capture Richmond by essentially going around the rebel army. His appointment of Henry Halleck and Don Carlos Buell as the commanders in the Western Theater led to similar approaches in Tennessee and Kentucky.

Nicknamed “Old Brains,” Halleck was arguably the nation’s leading military thinker. He had written extensively on strategy and had even translated Jomini’s multi-volume biography of Napoleon. A by-the-book general who despised political interference, Halleck failed to move aggressively on Confederate positions throughout his western tenure. Buell followed a similar pattern, repeatedly finding excuses not to move, and focusing on taking Nashville over more strategic targets.

The generals’ notions of what it would take to put down the rebellion ran counter to Lincoln’s, whose pragmatic strategy would ultimately form the blueprint for Union victory. He had his
work cut out for him: when he took office there wasn’t just an absent system of command, but there had been no planning whatsoever by the previous administrations for war; no preparatory memos or regular briefings by the top brass awaited him.

But Lincoln — whose military experience was limited to a short and uneventful stint in the Black Hawk War — actively filled the void, soaking up military texts and regularly visiting with advisers, including General-in-Chief Winfield Scott and Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs. Scott became a particularly important influence in Lincoln’s military education. The leader of forces in the Mexican War and a veteran dating back to the War of 1812, he may have been the only man in history who knew both Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. The old general believed that latent Southern Unionist sentiment, together with a coastal blockade and control of the Mississippi River, would eventually topple the rebel government. While Lincoln disagreed, believing that a large army would be central to subjugating the South and rejecting Scott’s overarching “Anaconda” design as insufficient, Scott did much to help him understand the scope of the war.

From the beginning, Lincoln viewed every military decision through the single objective of defeating the rebellion and unifying the nation. Probably the clearest expression of Lincoln’s views came in a letter to Buell and Halleck as he prodded the generals to move: “I state my general idea of this war to be, that we have the greater numbers … that we must fail unless we can find some way of making our advantage an overmatch for his; and that this can only be done by menacing him with superior forces at different points at the same time.”

While there is no evidence that Lincoln ever read his work, his views resembled the ideas of another 19th century theorist, Karl von Clausewitz. The Prussian officer emphasized the relationship between military strategy and politics, calling war “the use of engagement for the purpose of the war.” He defined the new style of war as one based on broad objectives like taking over countries and overthrowing sitting governments through the annihilation of an enemy’s center of gravity, generally its standing army.

Lincoln recognized the government’s core policy (total defeat of the rebellion), the size of the conflict (unlimited, across two theaters), the South’s keystone center of gravity (its army) and the Union’s inherent advantage (manpower and industrial production) together in concert and divined a simple strategy: Directly engaging Southern armies repeatedly, and ignoring the alluring prize of rebel cities in favor of seizing strategic points like railroad hubs and lines of communication. His intuition soon proved right, as the capture of major Southern cities like New Orleans, Nashville and Memphis by mid-1862 did nothing to hasten the end of the war.

Lincoln’s strategy was already taking shape by mid-1861. In late April he discussed a potential blockade, the importance of holding Fort Monroe on the tip of the Virginia Peninsula and even an attack on Charleston, S.C. Undaunted by the First Battle of Bull Run, in late July he pushed for dual offenses along the South Carolina coast once the Army was ready, and eventual joint movements on Memphis and East Tennessee. In early October, he called for large troop concentrations in Missouri, Louisville, western Virginia and Cincinnati, pushing Halleck and Buell to seize a crucial rail juncture between Tennessee and Virginia and later needling them to invade western Kentucky and Knoxville simultaneously.
The historian T. Harry Williams notes that Lincoln’s generals rejected these ideas as “the product of a mind that didn’t know the rules of war.” But it was men like McClellan, Buell and Halleck, students of the old army, who were ill-equipped for unlimited war. Lincoln would have preferred his generals to dictate effective military strategy. They couldn’t, and he performed well as an unofficial general-in-chief until he was able to find generals who could. In so doing, he supplanted the old army and built a modern force.

As McClellan, Buell and Halleck floundered in the field, the prospect of victory appeared remote in 1861. But just as McClellan began to shape the plans for his doomed Peninsula plan, Ulysses Grant won Forts Henry and Donelson. The great general who shared Lincoln’s strategic outlook and understood unlimited war was emerging just as 1862 began.
Lincoln’s Do Nothing Generals

1. How many battles occurred during the first year of the war? What was the name of the battle?

2. How many Generals from the Union and the Confederacy were West Point graduates?

3. What was the primary curriculum at West Point? How many classes were focused on strategy? How do you think this education influenced Union Generals at the beginning of the war (this is not in the text it a question that is asking you to apply your previous knowledge).

4. How did Antoine-Henri Jomini believe a modern war could be won?

5. How did the Napoleonic wars and the Civil War differ?

6. What did Union commanders lack in the Eastern theater?

7. How did George McClellan believe the war could be won? Do you agree or disagree with this theory and why?

8. How did Lincoln educate himself on military strategy?

9. After his crash course in military strategy how did Lincoln view every military decision? How did this differ from the Union Generals in the field?

10. Who would be the eventual commander to take control of the Union armies and was winning battles at the Donelson and Henry?