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WHO SHALL COMMAND?

The Cult of Genius versus the Primacy of the Professional

In late 1863 an exasperated Northerner remembered that, in the exciting first days of the Civil War, “it was the fashion to sneer at those who had made the profession of arms their study, and an experience in Congress was apparently regarded as a more essential qualification to command than a course of study at West Point.” Indeed, he recalled with dismay a time when a “conscientious regard for the essential principles of military science” might be deemed a hindrance.¹ The commentator clearly regretted those sentiments, but he barely hinted at the heated disagreements that inspired them. Just as Northerners had argued over the planning of Union military strategy, they also disagreed sharply about who should be entrusted with its execution.

The dual nature of the nineteenth-century American military tradition lay at the base of the controversy. From the early days of the Republic, the United States maintained a small standing army in peacetime but expanded it exponentially with citizen-soldier volunteers in times of national crisis. Each wartime mobilization revealed inherent tensions between the “professionals” and the “amateurs,” and the process for commissioning general officers during the Civil War provided an especially contentious illustration of that phenomenon. Over time, additional dichotomies suggested themselves. Historian Thomas J. Goss, for instance, has explored the Lincoln administration’s selection of “professional” and “political” generals for the necessary skills each group could bring to the conduct of a “people’s war.” The modern American military profession uses Civil War generals as examples to make distinctions between “leaders” and “managers.”² But all of these dichotomies serve as specific illustrations of a far

broader nineteenth-century cultural framework that shaped the North's public, political, and professional discourse on the selection, promotion, and assignment of generals to command the Union armies. This framework pitted faith in the inspiration of "genius" against the authority of "intellect."³

To antebellum Americans, the concept of "genius" represented a specific innate quality present in an individual from birth. Formal education could not introduce genius into a mind not already possessed of it; indeed, it was generally believed that the formalism of the classroom might block its full development. Military writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries regularly identified genius as the element that set the era's most successful generals apart from their peers. Well before Napoleon's rise to prominence, for instance, Welsh military theorist Henry Lloyd, a veteran of the Austrian army during the Seven Years' War, noted that the best generals followed no sets of formal rules for choosing key positions, claiming that "genius alone can do it, and precepts are in vain."⁴ Most military writers recognized that any given age produced few men blessed with genius, and a nation could count itself fortunate if the commanding general of its armies was one of them. After all, as Napoleon himself famously proclaimed, in war, "men are nothing; it is the one man, the master mind, that sways the multitude." Most Europeans equated military genius with the possession of a finely honed coup d'oeil, essentially an inner eye that permitted a general to look at a map, grasp the situation at a glance, and intuitively know how to plan and secure victory, often employing bold and creative methods to achieve it.

A belief in military genius also thrived in antebellum American culture. After all, the history of the young nation certainly seemed to validate it. The rise of George Washington during the Revolutionary War, followed by the ascendancy of Andrew Jackson during the War of 1812, fit the model of the untutored genius who rose from the people to lead American armies to victory. It also reflected the spirit of Jacksonian Democracy that touted advancement based upon individual merit rather than the benefits of privilege, fortune, or education.

The strength of this popular conviction revealed itself regularly during annual congressional hearings over the funding and future of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Controversial since its founding in 1802, the school regularly became a target of fiscal conservatives who complained of its expense, antimilitarists who opposed any institution that supported a standing army, and antielitists who feared the creation of a

permanent American warrior class. But the most telling criticism simply asserted that a school for soldiers was irrelevant. As Senator Thomas Hart Benton, an ardent critic of the school, frequently asserted, the Military Academy's strict discipline and rote pedagogy "blocks up the way against genius." He, and many others, did not doubt that, if war threatened, the nation could count on "barefooted genius—such as this country abounds in, and which the field alone can develop" for its protection.⁵ The popular understanding of the concept of genius also rested on a belief that the quality lay dormant until a man possessing it found an opportunity to express it fully.

Noting the rising power, wealth, and ambition of the world's greatest nation-states, however, a small number of Americans interested in military affairs warned against a continued reliance upon the timely appearance of a Washington or a Jackson at the first hint of national crisis; they viewed it as a misplaced confidence that carried an unacceptably high degree of risk. Starting in the aftermath of the War of 1812, they began to consider options for improving the quality—but not the size or cost—of the Regular Army, and officer education, in particular, attracted their interest and advocacy.

From their readings in European history and military theory, these reform-minded individuals understood that the iconic geniuses Napoleon and Frederick the Great had not won wars single-handedly; they had required subordinate commanders and staff officers capable of translating inspiration into decisive action. By midcentury, every major European military power had developed at least the rudiments of an officer education system. Even Jomini had included the establishment of "an organization calculated to advance the theoretical and practical education of its officers" among his twelve conditions for a perfect army and frequently proclaimed a "well-instructed general staff" to be "one of the most useful of organizations."⁶

The military-education reform impulse produced no lasting positive results during the antebellum years, however. Congressional appropriations committees generally proved hostile, and even the army's senior leaders did not demand change. Education proponents damned the shortsightedness of their critics. As Captain Henry W. Halleck wrote in 1846: "If professional ignorance be a recommendation in our generals, why not also in our lawyers and surgeons? . . . Is it less important to have competent [officers] to command where the lives of thousands, the honor of our flag, the safety of the country depend upon their judgment and conduct, than it is

to have competent surgeons to attend the sick and the wounded?”⁷ But the U.S. Army did not follow the example of its major European counterparts.

The useful dichotomy of “genius” versus “intellect” could be entirely disrupted by a third element—indeed, a wild card—that, depending on individual circumstances, could supersede either of the others in importance: the influence of character. Jomini himself had explained its overarching importance by creating an imaginary situation in which he had to choose between two senior officers to fill a corps commander’s billet. One candidate was an officer of long service with little formal military education but a solid record of boldness and success in leading troops—enough to suggest the possibility of genius—while the other was a very well-schooled senior staff officer with highly effective service in successful campaigns but without significant command experience. Jomini equivocated in the end, admitting that his selection had to be guided by each man’s unique blending of military knowledge (however acquired) and his character.⁸ As he wrote: “Two very different things must exist in a man to make him a general: *he must know how to arrange a good plan of operations, and how to carry it to a successful termination.*” The first might be the product of either genius or intellect, but the second depended almost entirely on individual character.⁹ Indeed, Jomini argued that, for generals, sometimes “the character of the man is above all other requisites.”

Specifically, Jomini wrote, a general must possess “*A high moral courage, capable of great resolution; Secondly, A physical courage which takes no account of danger.*”¹⁰ As Jomini concluded: “He will be a good general in whom are found united the requisite personal characteristics and a thorough knowledge of the principles of the art of war,” irrespective of the manner in which he acquired such knowledge.¹¹ European military writers considered a whole range of desirable character traits and personal attributes in an effort to define the ideal military character—from age, emotional stability under stress, and endurance to such affectations as maintaining a string of the finest horses to serve as an ornament of pride to his troops—but only two qualities stood unchallenged: physical and moral courage.

When Fort Sumter fell in April 1861, all three elements—genius, intellect, and character—factored into Northerners’ discussions about who should lead their armies, but genius reigned supreme. Indeed, some believed that the North already possessed its genius: the seventy-five-year-old general in chief of the U.S. Army, Brevet Lieutenant General Winfield Scott.¹² In many ways, Scott neatly fit the accepted definition. A native

Virginian, Scott originally planned to practice law. Unimpressed by his prospects, however, and inspired by his brief stint with a Virginia militia after the *Chesapeake v. Leopard* incident in 1807, he leveraged his family's political connections the next year to obtain a direct commission into the U.S. Army as a captain. Thus, Scott began his distinguished career with no formal military education. His advancement did not suffer, however. His battlefield heroics during the War of 1812 at Chippewa and Lundy's Lane—where he fell badly wounded and secured his reputation for physical courage—made him a general and a national icon. According to a member of his staff, Scott “was profoundly learned in the campaigns of Turenne, Condé, Saxe, Frederick the Great, by Jomini, Napoleon and others.” He maintained a traveling library of military tomes for quick reference. But, as one of Scott's modern biographers has argued, the general seldom showed evidence of deep reflection upon the material he read. While he frequently quizzed subordinates on their military knowledge, he did not make it a priority for himself or for the U.S. Army to cultivate the habit of professional study.¹³ If his readings in military theory inspired his decisive, daring, and innovative Mexico City campaign of 1847—closely followed and much remarked upon by European military writers—he did not acknowledge it.¹⁴ Thus, to most Americans, Scott represented the born soldier whose patriotism and personal energy had served him and his nation well. In the war's first days, the North briefly embraced him as its first hero-general, lavishing copious amounts of praise upon him, sometimes undeservedly and often entirely disproportionate to the results achieved. In late June, a Pennsylvanian gave Scott complete credit for the nearly bloodless capture of Harpers Ferry by a small Union force, proclaiming the win “as a greater triumph of military genius than though thousands had been slain in capturing the place.” A Philadelphia account echoed those sentiments, according to Scott the laurels of “a victory of superior generalship. It is an achievement of pure military genius.”¹⁵

Scott did not enjoy the national limelight for long. His age, among other factors, triggered doubts about his capacity. While a New York evangelist offered prayers that Scott might continue to “preside at the centre, with his clear eye looking out as on a map over the whole theatre of war,” a New Hampshire editor struck a more common note when he opined that “too many grave misfortunes have occurred in our own and other nations' histories from the employment of generals in whom the fire and energy of youth had burned out.” The North needed to avoid the error of Napoleon's enemies in throwing against him generals who were, “says Jomini, ‘ex-

humbled from the Seven Years' War, whose faculties were frozen by age."¹⁶ Public reports of both lethargy and confusion emanating from Scott's headquarters disappointed those who hoped for rapid, decisive action. "There are a few plodding pedants, with maps, rulers, and compasses," one visitor reported, while "some ignorant, and not very active young men" in uniform loitered around aimlessly, the whole effect suggesting "no system, no order, no knowledge, no dash!"¹⁷ Scott's loyalty also came under public scrutiny after Virginia's secession triggered rumors of his resignation. Despite the general's repeated denials and his eagerness to take a public oath of allegiance—one commentator facetiously explained to readers that Scott willingly took it "after every meal, and the first thing when he gets up in the morning"—the general's character lost much of its former luster.¹⁸

If Scott were to give way to a younger general, as seemed increasingly likely, Northerners openly wondered who might fill his place as general in chief. Would he be a West Point graduate of long service, or might he be one of the newly commissioned generals who entered the army directly from civilian life with no military education or experience? The unpredictability of the operation of genius suggested that neither pool could claim any particular advantage over the other. Two Union reverses in Virginia in June 1861 at Big Bethel and Vienna, however, launched the war's first substantive public discussion about the responsibilities of high command.

On 10 June Benjamin F. Butler, an influential Massachusetts Democrat with militia experience whom Lincoln recently promoted to the rank of major general of U.S. Volunteers, ordered a force of 3,500 troops from Fortress Monroe to advance against Southern troops blocking the road to the Confederate capital at Richmond. After a sharp fight at Big Bethel, the Union forces withdrew from the field, losing seventy-nine men to only eight Southern casualties. The numbers shocked the sensibilities of Northerners still new to war's destructive power, and the deaths of two men—First Lieutenant John T. Grebel, the first Regular Army officer and West Point graduate to fall in battle, and Major Theodore Winthrop, a promising young author from a prominent Massachusetts family—led to public funerals, flowery eulogies, and a demand for answers. Northerners heaped most of the blame upon Butler's senior subordinate, Ebenezer W. Pierce, a brigadier general in the Massachusetts militia who had exercised actual field command that day. Few defended Pierce's performance, but Grebel's death particularly infuriated his fellow Regulars. A Philadelphia editor noted the drawing of battle lines over the qualifications for high

command, noting that “subordinate officers and privates in the regular army” made it known that “they are unwilling to be butchered through the incompetence of civilians holding posts as field officers.”¹⁹

A brief skirmish at Vienna, Virginia, on 17 June unleashed a torrent of similar complaints, this time targeting Brigadier General Robert C. Schenck, an Ohio politician and ardent Lincoln supporter who had helped to deliver his state’s votes for the Republican ticket the previous year. Possessing neither military experience nor military education, Schenck commanded a brief reconnaissance outside the Washington defenses, falling back in disorder after Confederate soldiers ambushed his small force near Vienna. The Northern press made much of the “disaster.” The *New York Herald* dubbed it another Big Bethel and attributed the defeat to the same cause: “another ambuscade of the enemy fallen into by the incompetence of militia generals.” The editor warned that such disasters would “continue to befall our army to the end of the chapter if civilians are placed in high command,” concluding: “You cannot improvise a general.” While he admitted that a schooled soldier would not “always make a good officer, just as study and practice of law will not always make a good lawyer,” he also believed that “without such study and experience the chances are one hundred to one against success. A genius may arise here and there who is a natural general, but such men are extremely rare, and even they would be vastly improved by education.”²⁰ These two early Union defeats briefly undermined the popular faith in genius and triggered a popular demand for generals who had received an education in the art of war.

The public’s new embrace of intellect took many forms. In a common reaction to recent events in Virginia, the Pennsylvania legislature in June 1861 passed a resolution urging all Northern governors to choose brigadier and major generals for state troops only from men who were “*competent persons of military education, experience and skill.*” Likewise, it encouraged the War Department in Washington to refuse to commission generals based on “private friendships or associations,” along with “all political hacks, all contractors who have neither capital, character or credit, and all mere politicians.” With little appreciation for Lincoln’s need to build broad-based public support for the war effort even among Democratic Party loyalists, these Pennsylvanians argued that political affiliation had no place in the selection of generals. Instead, they urged every man seeking high rank to consider this question before further pursuing his quest: “Can I drill a company or a regiment, or carry a brigade successfully into action without first looking at Scott’s Tactics?”²¹ If recent

events did not convince all Northerners of the wisdom of such a change, advocates of military education quickly pressed their case by compiling for their local newspapers long lists of distinguished generals who graduated from French military schools before they rose to prominence on Napoleon's victorious battlefields.²²

The course of military events during the summer of 1861 seemed to augur well for a popular conversion from a trust in genius to the embrace of intellect. The loyal North welcomed good news from Missouri, where a mere colonel named Franz Sigel—a German immigrant, former soldier, and prominent leader of St. Louis's German-American community—effectively stopped the pro-Confederate Missouri Home Guard from taking control of the state and leading it out of the Union. An admiring observer attributed Sigel's "quickness of combination, which disclose the practiced eye and the fertile mind" to his education at "one of the best military schools of Europe."²³ Brigadier Generals Irvin McDowell and Nathaniel Lyon both had graduated from West Point, but neither the former's defeat at Bull Run on 21 July nor the latter's death in a losing effort at Wilson's Creek in southwest Missouri on 10 August triggered significant public outcry against Military Academy graduates. While a few Northerners condemned Regular Army officers who "talk[ed] learnedly of the art of war" but possessed too much "pride in uniform and gold lace" to "soil them in the smoke and gunpowder," others continued to voice their disapproval of entrusting positions of great military responsibility to those intellectually unprepared to accept it.²⁴ Indeed, after Bull Run, a Massachusetts editor demanded to know why so many Regular Army officers, including West Point graduates, served as subordinates to more senior political appointees "who really knew no more about the science and art of war than children."²⁵ Northern newspapers circulated lists of recent defeats suffered by generals selected directly from civilian life and victories achieved by West Pointers to demonstrate that "every step of the war which has been of important advantage to us has been accomplished by regularly educated military men," while "every *fiasco* . . . has resulted from the incapacity of civilian appointees."²⁶

In the turmoil after the defeat at Bull Run, President Lincoln ordered Major General George B. McClellan to Washington.²⁷ No hint of future controversy greeted his arrival in the nation's capital. A Pennsylvanian and West Point graduate, McClellan had enjoyed a solid antebellum military career as an engineer and military observer before he resigned his commission in 1857 to enter the railroad business. He took command of Ohio's

state troops soon after Fort Sumter and won a quick promotion to the rank of major general in the U.S. Regular Army the next month. In June, Union forces in western Virginia under his nominal command defeated a series of small Confederate armies, including one led by Robert E. Lee. Although McClellan's personal role in these fights remained murky, his reports of success had delivered good news when the North needed it. His performance in the western Virginia mountains had stamped him "as a commander of first class military genius." Interestingly, however, the journalist who reported the victory corrupted the usual definition of genius by attributing the general's capacity in part to his thorough education "in every department of military science."²⁸

Now, with banner headlines blaring "McClellan Must Come Here," Little Mac answered the call. "We want such a leader as McClellan," a correspondent avowed, adding a plea that the general weed out the army's incompetents.²⁹ Editors, politicians, and the Northern public at large praised his military education, professional knowledge, commanding presence, youthful energy, and recent battlefield success as clear evidence of his readiness for his new posting. McClellan's flaws still remained largely hidden from public view. The praise bestowed upon him stoked his ambition and his confidence. He showed great impatience with those who did not share his breadth of vision, and he felt real frustration that he lacked the authority to shape the course of the war to his liking. He never doubted that he would succeed Scott as general in chief, but until his superior retired, Little Mac could do nothing but perfect the defenses of Washington and organize his Army of the Potomac.

With Scott still at the helm, however, an ugly Union defeat at Ball's Bluff near Leesburg, Virginia, in October 1861 ignited a series of events that had profound consequences for future discussions about the qualifications of generals. During that fight, Union soldiers had crossed the Potomac River and climbed a steep cliff on its south side. When the soldiers emerged in the open fields at the top, Confederate infantry advanced upon them and pushed them headlong off the crest in precipitous retreat. The specter of the bodies of dead Union soldiers floating down the river and the cries of wounded men drowning in its currents created a special horror, one compounded by the death of Brigadier General Edward D. Baker, a popular senator-turned-general and close friend of Lincoln. While Baker bore much of the blame for the circumstances leading to his demise, public opinion placed most of the responsibility on Baker's immediate superior, Brigadier General Charles P. Stone, a West Point graduate. An out-

raged Northern public quickly vented their anger upon Stone, as well as upon McClellan and other West Pointers who rose to his defense. Now damning professional soldiers, a number of editors reversed a tactic used successfully during the summer by advocates of military education, publishing lists revealing the backgrounds of some of Napoleon's other "most renowned captains and commanders," including a hairdresser and a drawing teacher, to demonstrate that soldierly proficiency did not require "any scientific military education" whatever.³⁰

Congress, too, demanded answers, and after Ball's Bluff, the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate passed legislation creating the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War. Under the leadership of its most vocal members—Radical Republican senators Benjamin Wade and Zachariah Chandler and Congressman George Julian—the Joint Committee quickly became a haven for the Congress's most strident enemies of professional soldiers. As historian Bruce Tap has asserted, most of the committee's members "were woefully ignorant of military matters and seemed particularly unqualified to pass judgment on military issues." From the start, they reduced the complexities of the military art and science to an oversimplified trust in offensive action, best led by generals animated by the Radicals' goals to preserve the Union and end slavery.³¹ They did not understand the time, effort, specialized knowledge, or resources required to build, train, move, and command a people's army. Instead, they regularly attributed a general's delay, missteps, or defeats to a real or alleged political allegiance to the Democratic Party or, just as often, to the treasonous influence of West Point, an institution most of the committee members heartily opposed. They consistently took the side of the citizen-soldier, and they also searched for that general of genius who possessed not merely innate military talent but, it would seem, also strong Radical Republican political views. From the start, the Joint Committee threw its support behind generals such as Major General John C. Fremont, who supported emancipation, and launched vicious personal attacks on those such as McClellan and his senior subordinates, who did not.

The committee quickly made its authority felt. After General Scott retired on 1 November 1861, Lincoln and much of the Northern public hoped that McClellan's ascendance to general in chief would portend a swift advance and decisive victory. As civil engineer Charles Ellet wrote to Lincoln: "Mr. President, *winter is approaching*, and the delay still continues. These are truly precious moments, richer than the mines of California in golden opportunities."³² But McClellan did not move, and as 1861

gave way to 1862, the public's frustrations aimed at professional soldiers after Ball's Bluff continued to grow. The Joint Committee, already critical of McClellan's defense of General Stone, openly chafed at his refusal to inform them of his plans or his timetable for action. As Joseph T. Glatt-haar has argued, McClellan also demonstrated clear signs of paranoid personality disorder, becoming increasingly distrustful, secretive, and unresponsive to those with legitimate authority over his actions.³³ A bout of typhoid overwhelmed him in late December 1861. Congress did not care about McClellan's mental or physical well-being, however. In January 1862, on the floor of the House, Representative John A. Gurley of Ohio—not a member of the committee—aimed his ire directly at McClellan: "Our army has long been ready, and our soldiers were burning and panting for the battle-field. We had earnestly cast about for a bold and daring leader, ready for the great contest, and it was painful to confess at this late day, that the country had looked in vain for a Commander-in-chief exhibiting the will and the requisite enterprise and genius to lead our forces on to victory."³⁴ Even some of Little Mac's own troops—who truly admired their general for his concern for their welfare—openly wondered if he was the commander who would lead them to great victories. "Why has not a Napoleon appeared on this scene?" one soldier asked. "Why have not the great issues involved in this struggle created the military genius necessary to overwhelm this rebellion? Why has not this social earthquake thrown up the great men which revolutions always produce . . . the Cromwells, the Napoleons, the Washingtons of other revolutionary times?"³⁵

The erosion of public confidence in Stone, Scott, and especially McClellan spawned a distrust of professional soldiers as a class and restored the popular faith in innate military genius. In January 1862 the congressional debate on annual legislation on the U.S. Military Academy's budget sent the school's most ardent critics to the floor to oppose all such measures. Late in the month, Congress voted down a bill to enlarge the corps of cadets. Senator Wade, who long believed the academy served as a haven for the Democratic Party, continued to demand the school's closure. Although his motives clearly served a political purpose, his public argument relied upon the strength of an enduring cultural belief: "There is no doubt, if the war continues, that you will have men of genius enough, educated in the field." Others continued to argue that the school's emphasis on mathematics and engineering habituated its graduates to systematic and deliberate thought processes, incapable of creativity and spontaneity. "Take off your engineering restraints," a frustrated Senator Lyman Trumbull de-

manded, and “dismiss from the army every man who knows how to build a fortification.”³⁶ The acerbic Count Adam Gurowski, who closely followed the congressional hearings, added: “Engineers are the incarnation of defensive warfare” and belonged to a military specialty “which does not form captains and generals for the field.”³⁷

Ever-impatient Northerners far from the seat of power also continued to seek signs of genius anywhere they might appear. Some indulged in nostalgic glances back to the Republic’s past, when untutored military geniuses rose from the masses to lead the nation’s armies to victory. “Who led our army successfully through the Revolution? A Virginia planter, without a Regular military education,” wrote a *New Yorker*. “Who were the ablest generals that served under Washington?” he asked. “Not [Charles] Lee and [Horatio] Gates, who were bred in the British army . . . but [Nathanael] Greene, the son of a Quaker anchor-smith . . . [Israel] Putnam, a Pomfret farmer,” and a long list of other men of “strong faculties and native energy.”³⁸ Other commentators cast their net wide and manufactured evidence of genius in Union generals who did not graduate from the Military Academy. Franz Sigel—his German military education now forgotten—surfaced once again, now impressing western observers with his possession of “something neither to be taught nor learned—a something seen you know not where, and you know not how—that high, incommunicable gift, prized, like the diamond, even more for its rarity than for its splendor, and which men call GENIUS.”³⁹ Western generals with West Point educations experiencing genuine success—especially Brigadier General Ulysses S. Grant—enjoyed brief flurries of positive popular notice, but they did not reverse the damage to the public trust in the authority of the professional soldier caused by reports of McClellan’s refusal to cooperate, communicate, or act.

In mid-March 1862, a frustrated President Lincoln relieved McClellan of his position as general in chief, limiting his authority to the command of the Army of the Potomac. Little Mac finally took the field, transporting his army by ship to Fortress Monroe, at the tip of the Virginia peninsula bounded by the York and James Rivers, from which he intended to advance and take Richmond. Once he began to move, his most ardent supporters—and he continued to inspire many, especially among Democratic Party loyalists—railed against those who had diminished their hero and expressed admiration for his stated intention to protect property rights of Southern civilians, his opposition to emancipation, and his commitment to protecting his soldiers’ lives. They lauded his ability to mass his forces

in front of Yorktown in such strength that the Confederates evacuated it without the need for a costly Union assault. In his apparent preference for maneuver over battle—to take Richmond with the smallest possible loss, in conformity with the military thought of the day—his partisans claimed that his “genius triumphed over gunpowder.”⁴⁰

But in July 1862, McClellan’s campaign ended in defeat, and Northern anger erupted. Little Mac had promised a quick victory, but his cautious advance up the peninsula ended in a stunning reverse that pushed the Army of the Potomac from the gates of Richmond to a defensive position at Harrison’s Landing. Worse, he showed no sign of renewing the offensive. McClellan had to be held accountable for the 5,000 Union casualties at Fair Oaks on 31 May and 1 June, the additional 16,000 casualties suffered during the Seven Days Battles from 26 June through 1 July, and the thousands of soldiers felled by disease in the fetid Chickahominy swamps—all sacrificed to no effect. During the summer and fall of 1862 and then again during his 1864 presidential run—and to a degree no other Union general ever experienced—McClellan, and his performance on the peninsula, became the focus of intense public scrutiny that eclipsed for a time the usual nature-versus-nurture dichotomy of “genius” versus “intellect.” As Brigadier General John G. Barnard, McClellan’s chief engineer during the Virginia campaign, concluded: “The question of Gen. McClellan’s responsibility for our disasters ceased to be a mere abstract question about which men might differ without prejudice to the public interests; it became a national question, and one of vast import.”⁴¹

Toward the end of 1862, William Henry Hurlbert divided the massive amount of public commentary about McClellan’s performance on the peninsula into four general classes: comments on “the constitutional unfitness of General McClellan for the conduct of operations requiring boldness in the conception and decision in the execution”; criticisms relating to “the presumed bias of that commander’s political opinions”; comments supportive of McClellan and centering on “the constant interference of an ‘Aulic Council’”; and praise of the “superior military abilities of the Southern commanders.”⁴² Of the four, only the first category truly rested on the triad of genius, intellect, and character as described in the military classics.

Public consideration of McClellan’s fitness for command demonstrated that he could still elicit support from a large army of ardent admirers, but his critics carried the day. Their most vehement condemnations began in one of two ways. Some used the results of the recent campaign to deny

categorically that Little Mac possessed military genius. George Wilkes, editor of the popular tabloid *Wilkes' Spirit of the Times* and once an admirer of Little Mac, recalled the days when “nine-tenths of the hopes of the nation were centered on his genius.” Now, however, he concluded that McClellan “is either a genius or he is nothing, for he follows none of the ordinary theories, and does everything by inversion. He does not believe at all in the policy of attack; he sees no moral loss or disadvantage in enduring siege from inferior numbers; and, with a principle of strategy, not very well established, prefers to fight against heavy odds, to having them.”⁴³ Wilkes clearly concluded that McClellan was no genius. Others outlined the progress of his recent operations to demonstrate an absence of evidence of the general’s vaunted intellect. Such accusations inspired West Point’s opponents to demand once again that the institution be closed, since McClellan’s rigidity, caution, and unimaginative approach to his campaign once again validated their most serious concerns about the school’s curriculum. After reading about McClellan’s command performance on the peninsula, a Union man in far-off Utah declared: “Nothing is more mathematically proven than the plans of attack taught to boys at West Point and other academies,” as long as “armies can be reckoned into blocks of stone, which will stand still to be measured, weighted, calculated, and then one to be lifted over another as if by cranes and pulleys.”⁴⁴ Whether critics attacked McClellan’s genius or his intellect, they met on common ground to assault his character. Reports of his frequent absences from the front lines, leaving his soldiers “uncheered by the personal presence of the Commander-in-chief, where whizzing shot and screaming shell baptized them in the fires of battle,” helped to label him a coward, and cartoons of the general observing his army’s battles from the safety of a Union gunboat in the James River dogged him for years.⁴⁵ The antebellum years had supplied three main touchstones for evaluating fitness for generalship—genius, intellect, and character—and, as his many critics loudly proclaimed, McClellan failed on all counts.

Arguments that Hurlbert applied to his fourth category actually complemented those he placed in the first. Because Robert E. Lee had commanded the Army of Northern Virginia only since 1 June 1862, few Northerners made direct personal comparisons between his command ability and that of Little Mac. It seemed to be sufficient simply to assert that the Confederate army had been handled far more competently than had the Army of the Potomac. McClellan’s scattered deployments during the Seven Days Battles had allowed the Confederates to demonstrate a superior use

of the principle of concentration at Gaines Mill, Mechanicsville, and other fights, resulting in the smashing of isolated elements of the Army of the Potomac. Even the general's complaints about the superiority of Southern numbers never convinced these critics, who argued that "the country has no evidence that McClellan was outnumbered, but only that he was out-generaled."⁴⁶

Hurlbert's second and third categories, however, had no foundation in the European military classics or in the traditional way in which Americans previously considered fitness for high military command. McClellan's critics now accused him of permitting his personal political views to exert inappropriate influence on his professional military decisions. Rather than blame the defensive legacy of Dennis Hart Mahan or other military theorists whom McClellan might have studied, critics blamed his unwavering stance that Southern noncombatants and their property, including their slaves, should be protected—a stance directly opposed to the public and political demands of Northerners with strong Radical Republican leanings—for cultivating in him a caution that precluded boldness. His public disagreements with his commander in chief made him increasingly vulnerable to such charges. On 7 July, less than a week after he pulled back to Harrison's Landing, McClellan addressed a letter to the president to summarize his own views on the current state of the conflict, a missive that Lincoln read in the general's presence. McClellan now declared that the rebellion "has assumed the character of a War," and "it should be conducted upon the highest principles known to Christian Civilization." Thus, he opposed any "war upon population," advocating violence only "against armed forces and political organizations," and he opposed "confiscation of property, political executions of persons, territorial organization of states or forcible abolition of slavery." Furthermore, he added, "a declaration of radical views, especially upon slavery, will rapidly disintegrate our present Armies" and turn his soldiers into criminals.⁴⁷ McClellan's trespass into policy did not go unchallenged. "If this rebellion could possibly be put down by conciliatory means," wrote a Northern pamphleteer, "we believe General McClellan qualified to command our armies. . . . [But] we believe this rebellion will be put down by fighting, and kept down by a radical change in the feelings and aspirations of the ruling class of the South." If McClellan could not command his army on these terms, then he must be relieved.⁴⁸

McClellan's friends found their voice in Hurlbert's third category, blaming the results of the recent campaign squarely on political interference

from Washington. For months, they had targeted the members of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War for their uninformed military views. As McClellan had inched his way up the peninsula with politicians' criticisms dogging his every move, one of his advocates countered that if Little Mac had responded the way the committee demanded, "perhaps they would have over again the catastrophes which befell Burgoyne at Saratoga or Cornwallis at Yorktown."⁴⁹ On the very day McClellan delivered his views on the war to Lincoln, Senator Chandler unleashed a personal attack on the general on the floor of the Senate, condemning the general's open embrace of antiemancipation views and his opposition to the recently enacted Confiscation Act. In retaliation, McClellan's advocates condemned the Michigan senator and the entire Joint Committee for their partisan approach to military matters. As one stated bluntly: "These politicians were unacquainted with military tactics, and were not competent judges of the movements of a great army."⁵⁰ They also charged Secretary of War Stanton—and, by extension, the president himself—for conspiring to deny McClellan the resources his army needed, especially by refusing to send McDowell's corps from Fredericksburg to the peninsula, a reinforcement Little Mac repeatedly had requested. They made sure that the general's telegrams pleading for additional support became available to the public, along with his blunt accusations of Washington's perfidy. The *New York Herald*, always sympathetic to McClellan, painted Stanton especially as "the tool of the abolitionists, the organizer of disasters, the author of defeats," blaming the secretary's "reckless mismanagement and criminal intrigues" for McClellan's discomfiture and the needless loss of Northern lives.⁵¹

The public dissection of McClellan's recent operations came at a time when the way in which Lincoln selected his generals for promotion or assignment had begun to change. In 1861 Lincoln's attention had centered on the officer accession process, his choices shaped as much by his need to satisfy various political constituencies to build broad popular support for the war effort as by his need for proven soldiers. By the summer of 1862, he now had his choice of dozens of experienced army, corps, division, and brigade commanders and senior staff officers with a year or more of active service—some professionals and some not—to fill important posts. Even more important, the summer and early fall of 1862 witnessed a fundamental change in the Union war effort. The wishful thinking of 1861 that fed expectations for a short and comparatively bloodless war had evaporated, and the conciliatory approach of that first year had begun to give

way to “hard war.” During the summer of 1862, Congress had passed the Confiscation Act that prohibited the return of slaves to their Confederate masters. Lincoln circulated within his cabinet a draft of a preliminary emancipation proclamation. Reports of involuntary conscription and the possible raising of regiments of African American soldiers for the U.S. Army had begun to filter into Northern newspapers. In short, the Lincoln administration had raised the stakes, and, as Jomini had long ago suggested, it became imperative that Lincoln now find proven generals who supported his expanded war aims—or at least who would not permit their personal political views to color their professional duties. Members of the Joint Committee, however, continued their practice of pushing forward the careers of generals who shared their political views, even if a year or more in command had revealed them to be lackluster talents at best.⁵² Since Congress retained approval authority over presidential nominations of general officers, politicians’ interests could not be ignored.

During the politically charged atmosphere of mid-July 1862, Lincoln named General Halleck to fill the post of general in chief. In many ways, the president had made a logical selection. Halleck graduated from West Point ranked third in the class of 1839. While he had not seen combat in Mexico, he served in California and became known as one of the army’s foremost experts, not only in military theory but also in international and mining law, harbor defenses, and other military subjects. He had resigned his commission in 1854 to enter business and start a law practice, and he parlayed his background and experience into a major general’s commission soon after Fort Sumter. In the fall of 1861, as General Scott’s retirement date approached, Halleck had emerged as the only significant challenger to McClellan for elevation to general in chief. Scott, in fact, stated a strong preference for Halleck, largely due to his reputation as a military intellectual and his experience in civil-military relations. When Little Mac received the nod, however, Halleck quickly received a plum assignment to command the western theater. In November 1861 the Northern public had welcomed the appointment. “As a statesman, as a lawyer, as a man, he has shown himself to be just the person for that Western Command,” a Philadelphian asserted, confident that the general could restore order to the chaos reigning in fractious Missouri.⁵³ His soldierly qualities merited positive comment, as well. A New York reviewer of his *Elements of the Military Art and Science* touted the work as “esteemed in Europe as well as here [as] one of the great standard modern works on military polity and strategy.”⁵⁴

But Halleck's tenure in the west had not gone smoothly. He won a modicum of public praise as the architect, if not the executor, of the Union victories at Forts Henry and Donelson and at Shiloh, but he also bristled at the Northern press's fawning over his field commander, Brigadier General U. S. Grant. While a Northern editor dubbed Grant as "a Napoleon of military genius and daring," Halleck openly criticized his subordinate's military professionalism, citing his inattention to proper administrative procedures, his failure to report regularly, and his tendency to take action without obtaining his superior's expressed permission.⁵⁵ The slowness of Halleck's advance on Corinth and the lack of aggressiveness and imagination in his operations suggested that he, like McClellan, might suffer from both a bad case of "the slows" and the absence of even the most obvious signs of true genius. But others saw in his caution "a triumph undimmed by blood; and this is the highest glory of the soldier."⁵⁶ Halleck had not made a point of publicizing his political views—he proved far wiser than McClellan in that regard—but that left an open question that members of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War could not ignore. They pushed instead for the appointment of John C. Fremont, who clearly shared their commitment to emancipation. But Lincoln had prevailed.

Public reaction to the news of Halleck's selection showed neither great enthusiasm nor significant discontent. Northerners simply adopted a wait-and-see attitude about their new general in chief. As a Massachusetts man concluded, Scott and McClellan "have had to give way. Halleck is now tried. The third time never fails, they say; but if the third does fail, we still have John Charles Fremont, and with him, if not without him, will come liberty and victory." He ended his narrative pessimistically, however, concluding that it was probably good that candidates for the nation's most important military post were "not confined to the major generals."⁵⁷

Lincoln hoped he had found a general in chief who could do two things for him: plan a unified "hard war" strategy consistent with the administration's new war aims and actively exert his authority over the commanders appointed to lead the various individual Union armies to advance the war effort. Unfortunately, Halleck excelled at neither of these things. Colorless and quirky, he showed far more willingness to advise than command, to act primarily as an intermediary to pass on presidential wishes to his field commanders, and to allow his subordinates to develop and execute campaigns of their own design without ordering that they conform to a single master plan. But he did embrace the "hard war" philosophy that McClellan had abhorred, and he made his subordinates aware of it. Soon after he

acceded to command, Halleck had advised Grant to handle Confederate sympathizers in Mississippi and Tennessee “without gloves, and take their property for public use. . . . It is time they should begin to feel the presence of the war.”⁵⁸ Halleck might not have possessed the fire that Lincoln sought, but he was thoughtful, thorough, and well-read in the military classics. He also proved to be a capable and useful administrator. Besides, Lincoln could identify no viable alternative.

Because Halleck preferred to “advise” rather than “command”—and because Lincoln had learned to deal directly with field commanders during the period between March and July 1862, when he left the general in chief slot unfilled—the president now took a deep interest in Halleck’s senior subordinates: the generals who led his individual armies. Since this pool of men might, in time, produce a future general in chief, Lincoln took their measure. Nearly all of them had graduated from West Point, accumulated years of experience in field and staff assignments, and successfully commanded large units in battle. Even if the public still indulged in a search for military “genius,” Lincoln had opted for men of military intellect.

Students of the Civil War are familiar with the long list of failed army commanders of 1862 and 1863. At Second Bull Run in late August 1862, a bloody defeat of Major General John Pope’s Army of Virginia resulted in his quick relief. Even though the Joint Committee applauded his enthusiasm in carrying out a “hard war” policy in Virginia, Pope’s battlefield performance did not match his aggressive rhetoric and led to his quick reassignment to Minnesota. With Lee already advancing into Maryland, Lincoln reluctantly authorized McClellan to take command of the combined Army of Virginia—Pope’s old command—and the Army of the Potomac, drawing howls of protest from cabinet members and the Joint Committee alike. Lee’s unchallenged return to Virginia after the war’s bloodiest day at Antietam on 17 September—yet another failing that would be well documented in committee hearings later that fall—counted as only one reason for Little Mac’s relief from command on 7 November, however; Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation after Antietam, and McClellan’s open opposition to the changing political goals of the war made his removal necessary.

In the west, the bloodletting at Perryville in October ultimately led to the sacking of Major General Don Carlos Buell, whose lack of boldness and strong preference for maneuver over combat finally terminated his acceptability to the Lincoln administration. Major General Ambrose E.

Burnside's costly Union defeat at Fredericksburg, compounded by the poisoning of the senior command climate of his army—Stephen W. Sears labeled it “the revolt of the generals”—quickly terminated his army command.⁵⁹ Lincoln appointed the aggressive Major General Joseph Hooker to command the Army of the Potomac in January—despite his qualms about the general's outspokenness, his conniving ways, and his seeming inability to grasp the president's vision to target Lee's army and not Richmond. But Hooker, too, failed at Chancellorsville in May, and even his cultivation of the most influential members of the Joint Committee could not save him from his relief from army command in late June. Through it all, Halleck simply watched, without much sympathy for the plight of men he could have helped but failed to support. As he once observed: “The Government seems determined to apply a guillotine to all unsuccessful generals. It seems rather hard to do this where the general is not in fault, but perhaps with us now, as in the French Revolution, some harsh measures are required.”⁶⁰

The fates of two army commanders—Major General George G. Meade of the Army of the Potomac and Major General William S. Rosecrans of the Army of the Cumberland—deserve a closer look. A West Point graduate, a topographical engineer, and a successful brigade, division, and corps commander, Meade defeated the Army of Northern Virginia at Gettysburg after less than a week in command and then basked in celebratory praise that only a victory over Lee could inspire. But the accolades did not last. After Lee recrossed the Potomac unmolested to the security of Virginia, a critic used Meade's inaction to summarize Northern frustration over its inability to find an aggressive and decisive leader: “If any foolish one, unmindful of the sore lessons of two years' warfare, expected [in Meade] a wonderful military genius . . . a new Napoleon ready made for the crisis, he must be disappointed.” Meade, like his recent predecessors, did not lack “in science or skill—all that the books can teach he has, and in addition, boundless bravery, fine judgement, and experience won on many a bloody field.” But that had not been enough. The critic ended with the most generous assessment he could muster: “Meade is not a great General . . . [but] he is a good one now—a safe one, a brave one, and he will not disgrace his government by his conduct.”⁶¹

While Meade won at Gettysburg, Rosecrans conducted his Tullahoma campaign, an operation marked by a series of rapid flanking marches, minimal fighting, and low casualties that resulted in pushing General Braxton Bragg's Confederate army out of Tennessee. Some Northern ob-

servers, noting the creativity of his plan, attributed Rosecrans's success to military genius. Others, more familiar with the military classics, saw in his actions the purest distillation of the teachings of Jomini and the other great European theorists of the era. Moreover, proponents of both genius and intellect found common ground in their shared approval of his comparatively bloodless road to victory. John Watts de Peyster, the New York military writer, singled him out for favorable comparison to major European generals of the previous two centuries who successfully had employed similar methods.⁶² General John Wool identified "Rosecrans . . . perhaps, more than any other" as the Union general most capable of handling large bodies of troops without excessive loss of life.⁶³ When Rosecrans and large portions of his army crumbled under the ferocious attacks of Bragg's army at Chickamauga in September 1863, however, his star fell quickly.

Both Meade and Rosecrans enjoyed reputations as men of character and integrity. Meade had impressed no one with his genius, and he won no accolades for his intellectual accomplishments, but he won a major battle at Gettysburg. In Lincoln's mind, Meade's failure rested with his lack of aggressiveness during the pursuit. Rosecrans, on the other hand, had impressed great numbers of his countrymen with either his genius or his intellect, and he skillfully maneuvered an entire Confederate army out of Tennessee with little loss before losing at Chickamauga. Meade stayed in command; Rosecrans was relieved. Neither man had proved to be an abject failure as a soldier. Mostly, they seemed to lack a killer instinct. Lincoln had come to believe that the war would end only when the Confederates lost their main means of armed resistance. Both Meade and Rosecrans had opportunities to smash their opponents or at least display an aggressive spirit toward that end. But Meade's reluctance to attack Lee at Williamsport during the retreat from Pennsylvania and during much of the following autumn convinced Lincoln that the general once described as a "damned old goggle-eyed snapping turtle" was not his man. Likewise, Rosecrans's plaintive complaint to Secretary of War Stanton not to overlook the decisive result of his Tullahoma campaign "because it is not written in showers of blood" did nothing to help his standing with Lincoln, even before Chickamauga.⁶⁴

As Rosecrans's and Meade's experiences demonstrated, the clash between genius and intellect that shaped the antebellum and early-war controversy about generalship proved less and less useful as the war continued. In those heady days in early July 1863, however, when news of victories at

Vicksburg and Gettysburg—both achieved by West Point graduates—sent the North into a grand euphoria, those who had embraced intellect over genius sensed an opportunity to revisit the original cause that the antebellum military reformers had espoused. During the first two years of the war, so much interest had swirled around the qualifications of the commander of the army that military reformers essentially forgot their commitment to the professional development of the entire officer corps. The time had come to reinvigorate their push for a military education system for the intellectual betterment of army officers of all ranks. The same two publications that revitalized the midwar consideration of Union military strategy now took up the cause of officer education.

When the *Army and Navy Gazette*—the predecessor to the more influential *Army and Navy Journal*—published its first number in May 1863, editors William R. Dyer and Sitwell Harris voiced the desperation of Northerners still seeking the nation’s military genius. “A great general, like a great poet, is born, not made,” one editor wrote, as he lamented the North’s rapidly dimming prospects for finding one. After all, he surmised, only five men—Wellington, Nelson, Washington, Scott, and Decatur—“represent the military genius of the Anglo-Saxon race, during a period of a thousand years.” While Hooker and other recent army commanders served as well as their skill allowed, “we have not yet had that man who could step forward, with a mind sufficiently comprehensive to grasp the contest in detail, and to lead a noble, intelligent, patriotic and enthusiastic army to complete and unconditional success.”⁶⁵ The Union’s generals were simply “men of fine talents” who could carry out “the mandate of some commanding genius,” but they “cannot create.” The only Union general in whom one author saw genius was politician-turned-general Benjamin Butler.⁶⁶

When the *Army and Navy Gazette* quickly fell into dire financial straits and William Conant Church took over, however, the editorial position of the newly renamed *Army and Navy Journal* changed immediately.⁶⁷ From the start, Church declared himself to be exhausted by public complaints about the nation’s failure to find in the army’s ranks “an unmistakable master mind, capable of directing the strategical movements of large bodies of troops.” Moreover, he condemned Northerners—from partisan editors and journalists to political stump speakers and loyal but unreflective readers—for continuing to accept the validity of the concept. Church had become convinced that unless Northerners interested in military affairs developed a sound grasp of the requirements of generalship, they de-

served to be dismissed as “would-be military critics without the ability to fill the most inferior military positions” who had no right to damn even one general for failing to “leap into the field as a full-fledged Napoleon.”⁶⁸

Church found a ready ally in the like-minded Henry Coppee, editor of the new *United States Service Magazine*. For the rest of the conflict, these two men welcomed the submissions of all interested parties—serving officers and civilians alike—who wished to discuss objectively, and without the intrusion of political agendas, the benefits and limitations of military education. Additionally, they provided an important service in regularly recommending recently published military literature from the United States and Europe that supported their position, and they utilized their reviews as an additional forum for proeducation commentary. While not particularly impressed by John Watts de Peyster’s use of historical example, for instance, a reviewer expressed his entire concurrence with the *New Yorker*’s assertion that, since very few generals could ever equal Napoleon, it was foolish for the Union army, the government, and the Northern people “to *sit waiting* for a Napoleon” to rise from the masses.⁶⁹ In 1864, amid his decidedly mixed feelings about the quality of General Halleck’s translation of Jomini’s *Life of Napoleon*, another reviewer took the opportunity to observe that, “in our days, we no longer believe in what Chatham called ‘heaven-born generals.’” Indeed, he asserted, “It is the MIND, DISCIPLINED AND INSTRUCTED, which leads armies and builds up empires; mind, not stultified with pedantry, but the development of thought and inward will, conferring the power of discerning, analyzing and combining means essential to . . . [the] self-culture of the soldier.”⁷⁰

A War Department proposal in the fall of 1863 to replace the army’s seniority-based officer promotion system with a new one based on merit quickly won the support of Church and his readers. Although suggested reforms only targeted officers below the rank of major, contributors openly wondered why merit-based standards could not be applied to officers of all ranks, even to the promotion and assignment of general officers. “Good corps commanders are invaluable men, and as rare as they are invaluable,” an officer wrote, claiming that a significant number of the army’s current major generals likely could not master “the educational discipline” to command so large a unit. The army’s chances for success stood to improve greatly if the contemplated changes blocked the assignment of ill-prepared—but very senior—generals to corps or army commands. Although he did not choose a particularly apt example, he looked back upon General Meade’s appointment to command the Army of the Potomac—a

move that jumped him over Major Generals John F. Reynolds, John Sedgwick, and Henry W. Slocum, all his seniors in lineal rank—as evidence of the benefits of merit-based postings.⁷¹ Since any objective standards might interfere with Congress’s ability to influence senior appointments, however, the proposals failed.

The controversy, however, encouraged interested soldiers and civilians to give greater attention to measuring merit, and educational attainments offered one potentially useful standard. In the fall of 1863, Church began a year-long discussion—taken up by Coppee’s journal after it began publication in January 1864—by requesting contributor input on one small piece of a very large issue: the need for educated staff officers. He had made an astute decision. Jomini, Halleck, and other influential military writers frequently addressed the qualifications for the specific position of “chief of staff,” the officer appointed to serve as senior military adviser and head of the official family of an army commander. The chief of staff of a field army, Jomini believed, should be a general officer of “recognized ability” capable of working in “perfect harmony” with the commanding general to advise and update him on the condition of his army and to transform his vision—whether it be inspired by genius or the product of intensive study of the art of war—into practical orders to move and fight. The Civil War generation had begun to value the importance of the man assigned to that position. Indeed, that posting—and not the position of general in chief—demanded a knowledgeable senior officer possessing strong administrative skills. The chief of staff and not the commanding general, noted Lieutenant Colonel C. W. Tolles, “is really the head of the organization, the director of all the business of the command . . . [and] the official medium through which the commanding officer communicates and acts.”⁷² To strengthen their argument, soldiers and civilians alike cited the example of the French, who educated their staff officers both in the classroom and in two-year assignments with field units before joining a general’s official family.

From discussion about the qualifications for a general’s chief of staff came a wide-ranging exploration of the need to sharpen the expertise of all officers assigned to supply, transportation, ordnance, communication, intelligence, finance, and medical efforts and other logistical requirements. Some argued for the establishment of a specialized staff school; one reformer even drew upon the authority of Jomini himself to argue for a small and highly selective program to identify a small group of officers already “thoroughly trained in the three arms, acquainted with logistics

. . . versed in topographical engineering, and above all, gifted with the *coup d'oeil militaire*” and prepare them for immediate assignment as staff officers at the division, corps, and army levels.⁷³ If such a process existed, then citizens of privilege could no longer leverage their political clout to obtain comfortable and comparatively safe staff billets for their sons or “any boy fresh from college, whose idea of military duty is confined to wearing good clothes and riding a good horse.”⁷⁴

As readers and contributors warmed to the subject, they continued to expand their thoughts on military education far beyond the discussion’s starting point. One of Coppee’s active-duty contributors explained how he already had begun to incorporate military education as a key discriminator in evaluations of all his subordinates. He split his officers into three groups. “Regulars” possessed a West Point education and had put their knowledge into practice. “Irregulars” entered service directly from civilian life with little previous military education, but they committed themselves to learning necessary skills through experience and study. “Defectives” included those officers “without necessary brains” for their responsibilities and for whom schooling offered no cure. This contributor understood that the current crisis required an increase in the number of Irregular officers, but he lamented that so many Defective officers, too often “rich men’s worthless sons, and the relatives of influential politicians,” still remained in the army during the war’s third year.⁷⁵

The cause of military education benefited from a successful experiment in officer accession. The army’s need to find capable company and regimental commanders for newly raised units of the U.S. Colored Troops (USCT) offered a chance to make specialized schooling a requirement for commissioning. Building on early-war review boards that had evaluated the performance of volunteer officers, Major General Silas Casey oversaw a Philadelphia-based school of instruction for officer candidates seeking commissions in USCT regiments. Classroom instruction centered on the administrative duties and tactical roles of company-grade and field-grade officers, and successful applicants had to complete all curricular requirements and pass a rigorous examination for commissioning. Importantly, the school report noted that “every candidate stands upon his merit,” and the test score largely determined if a graduate would receive a second lieutenancy or be commissioned at a much more senior rank. After the first round of testing, 560 candidates passed, but 491 were rejected. As one of the school’s instructors proclaimed, the nation had tired of political interference in military affairs and now “appreciates the worth of a sys-

tem [designed] to end forever the emptying into our regimental and brigade commands the unsifted grist of [state governors' offices] that grind out commanders."⁷⁶ The school won the endorsement of all supporters of military education and even the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War.

Unfortunately, the detailed, provocative, and constructive discussions about military education for commissioned officers that filled the pages of Church's paper and Coppee's journal seldom engaged a wider public audience. Indeed, during the war's final eighteen months, only three issues related to leadership—ongoing concerns about the mission and future of West Point, the campaigns of Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman, and the presidential aspirations of George McClellan—captured the interest of both the regular readers of the military publications and the Northern public at large in sufficient measure for open exchanges of conflicting ideas.

Despite important victories won by Union armies commanded by West Point graduates at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, criticism of the Military Academy continued unabated. As late as June 1864, Senator Benjamin Wade still denied any need for the institution, noting that young men straight from home made the best fighters and "the old idea that a soldier must be in training for several years before he is fit for the field is not at all applicable to our soldiery."⁷⁷ During annual deliberations over appropriations, popular opposition to the expense, elitism, or militarism of the Military Academy continued to fill the public press. Now, however, Church reprinted the most outrageous charges leveled against the academy to encourage his readers to respond. In turn, the public press reprinted—and often condemned—the defenses of West Point offered by Church's readers.

Nonetheless, emboldened West Point graduates and their friends launched their most substantial counteroffensive of the war years. Captain Edward C. Boynton, adjutant of the Military Academy, adopted a positive tone in his popular new history of West Point, a volume that emphasized the school's military and engineering contributions to the building of the nation and not simply its service in national defense.⁷⁸ But most authors chose instead to confront specific criticisms. West Point graduates long had objected to accusations that the Military Academy taught treason. As one alumnus asserted, "the doctrine of our perpetual nationality was ever placed at the forefront of instruction and practice there."⁷⁹ Brigadier General Truman Seymour, an alumnus, wrote a widely publicized letter to proclaim that at West Point, "no peculiarity of sentiment as to political affairs

has ever been inculcated. In my day politics were never even referred to.”⁸⁰ In the *North American Review*, a friend of West Point took on another set of critics, the “ignorant men” who feared that the institution might become “a miniature praetorian guard” and still believed “the pruning-hook is in great danger from the sword; a uniform is the Devil’s livery, and an army only a howl in Pandemonium.”⁸¹

Friends of West Point tried especially hard—and not always successfully—to convince their countrymen to respect the Military Academy’s primary mission: the education of American army officers to fight and win the nation’s wars. They launched eloquent counterarguments against those critics who continued to blame the Military Academy for failing to produce a military genius to win the current conflict. One supporter turned the complaint back upon those who lodged it, asserting: “The question might be asked, does ever any school produce the genius?” He then rejected the validity of the critic’s challenge, pointing out that “it is contrary to the definition of genius to be produced by such instrumentality.”⁸² Another friend of the Military Academy adopted the same line of argument, noting that, by definition, West Point could not provide genius to a single one of its students because that quality had to be considered “a gift of God to individuals; it is only soldiership that is an acquisition.” That said, West Point’s partisans then took great pains to emphasize that, even if they conceded that the Military Academy could not create genius, it remained true nonetheless that “no uneducated genius has been found to take the place of [those the school has] educated.”⁸³ Several years of war had proven that West Point-educated officers, more than any others, best combined the two important virtues of loyalty and ability. “Grant, Meade, Rosecrans, Thomas, Gillmore, and a hundred others” had already earned far more respect from their soldiers for the competence they brought to their duties than the nation at large accorded them.⁸⁴

At the time that this man wrote, however, not one of these vaunted figures yet had emerged as the general possessing a demonstrated capacity to win the war. In March 1864 the long-suffering Northern public had every reason for at least a measure of cynicism when President Lincoln announced U.S. Grant’s selection for promotion to the rank of lieutenant general and appointment to the position of general in chief of the U.S. Army.⁸⁵ Grant, at least, came to his new assignment with more than merely promise. The victor at Forts Henry and Donelson and at Shiloh in 1862 and at Vicksburg and Chattanooga in 1863 already had convinced many Northerners that he could meet the challenge. After Grant sent

Bragg's Confederates retreating from Missionary Ridge, a Philadelphian had celebrated the general's "genius which places him in the first rank of modern soldiers. For once, we have proof that strategy means something more than an unwillingness to fight, or a fixed resolution not to move an army out of a swamp."⁸⁶

From the start, however, Grant seemed difficult to categorize. Although he had graduated from West Point in 1843, observers recognized in him more glimmers of genius than erudition. As Brigadier General Orlando B. Willcox wrote while serving under the general in Tennessee, Grant "disregards abstract rules and formularies. . . . He scarcely seems to know whether he has violated principles laid down in the books, but unconsciously carries out new principles." Perceiving this creative spirit, Willcox logically considered Grant's ability to be "a gift; not the gift of inspiration, but the intuition of prodigious common sense, genius bounded by utility."⁸⁷ Indeed, Grant seemed bent on downplaying his intellectual prowess. Early in the war, he had enjoyed telling correspondents that he had never even read the tactics manuals he used to drill his troops. His friend and subordinate William T. Sherman, who clearly deemed himself to be intellectually superior, admitted in early 1864 that he had entertained doubts about Grant's "knowledge of grand strategy, and of books of science and history," but then he acknowledged that Grant's "common-sense seems to have supplied all this."⁸⁸

Sherman's comment illustrates the manner in which Grant made his greatest impact on the people he met: he impressed them not through genius or intellect, but through strength of character. His modesty, simple habits (except for nagging rumors of a drinking problem), plain-spokenness, and steadiness under stress suggested an inner strength to see the war through to victory. Even the editors of the military press chose at first to emphasize the strength of Grant's character rather than make premature claims for military prowess. Henry Coppee limited his comments on the eve of active campaigning in May 1864 simply to his approval of Grant's "busy energy" as he engaged in planning "with a singleness of purpose."⁸⁹ Church—and many other editors, politicians, and soldiers in the ranks—likewise chose to await further events before taking the measure of their new general in chief.

The first few months of the Overland Campaign quickly turned both Coppee and Church—and most of their regular readers—into ardent supporters of Grant. But the source of Grant's success continued to defy easy classification. His slow and costly advance toward Richmond turned some

Northerners—especially those in Democratic strongholds—against him. While Coppee and Church praised his strategic vision in ordering a concentration of effort by all Union armies, they found little creativity or boldness in his aggressive hammering of Lee’s army to suggest the operation of genius. Nor could they discern in Grant’s maneuvers against the Army of Northern Virginia any evidence of a plan produced by the finely honed intellect of a professionally educated soldier. Thus, they fell back again and again on Grant’s personal and professional character to explain his actions. Coppee, for one, found much to admire, since Grant, more than any of his predecessors, represented Coppee’s military ideal: a “strong, iron, living, busy, honest, capable, self-sustained commander, who will plan wisely, fight terribly, follow up his victories, and leave the rest to Providence.”⁹⁰ The public press—at least that part of it that did not lose faith as casualty lists lengthened—adopted the same approach. As a New York journalist wrote, Grant possessed an “inconquerable tenacity of purpose. He is a soldier who cannot be shaken or daunted; whose imperturbable coolness cannot be ruffled by the most unexpected and threatening incidents.”⁹¹ Even Lincoln himself admired Grant’s “perfect coolness and persistency of purpose.” To a White House visitor, the president observed that his new general in chief “has the *grit* of a bulldog! . . . It is the dogged pertinacity of Grant that wins.”⁹²

If Grant remained a bit of a mystery, even fewer Northerners could make very much of his senior subordinate, Major General William Tecumseh Sherman, commander of the combined Union armies advancing toward Atlanta.⁹³ Concerned about operational security and already harboring a strong dislike of the press, Sherman essentially silenced it, denying passes to correspondents and sending most war correspondents out of his camps.⁹⁴ Thus, Northern press coverage of the march from Chattanooga to Atlanta paled in comparison with the detailed descriptions of the Overland Campaign. Indeed, Northern editors clipped much of the campaign narrative that appeared in their papers from Southern sources. Still, reports about the activities of Sherman’s forces clearly showed progress. As Grant’s and Sherman’s campaigns had unfolded during the late spring and summer, observers of Union military affairs attributed the two men’s successes to different root causes. While Grant pinned down Lee around Petersburg and held him there with unyielding tenacity, the few snippets of reliable information coming from Georgia suggested that Sherman relied upon creativity and boldness to design maneuvers and launch aggressive attacks. But when both campaigns bogged down during the summer,

the familiar complaints about unfulfilled promise once again arose from the Northern public.

This low point in popular confidence in the progress of the war coincided with the peak of the heated presidential campaign. The race pitting Lincoln against his onetime general in chief George McClellan temporarily diverted public attention from the battlefield to the unfolding political spectacle. Historians of the election of 1864 have documented in detail the highly charged political environment that pervaded all elements of Northern society during that summer, and both campaigns seized upon yet another opportunity to consider Little Mac's tenure as general in chief.⁹⁵ McClellan's service provided the substance for dissection by political friends and foes alike—with entirely predictable results—but now the military publications established since his relief added new and informed voices to the fray.

Both Church and Coppee threw their support to Lincoln early on, but they generally succeeded in avoiding the personal vitriol of the partisan political press; they based their critiques of McClellan's generalship on recognized tenets propounded in the classic works of military theory. Their comparatively moderate tone did not bar hyperbole, however, nor did it signify a refusal to reach highly critical conclusions about the former general in chief. Coppee, for instance, lamented the nation's willingness early in the war "to accept a hero on trust" rather than on results, especially since McClellan had shown himself not to be a bold eagle but merely a weak "eagle chick." Creativity represented one defining trait of genius, but Coppee saw McClellan's greatest demonstration of inventiveness not in his war plans but in his "every excuse . . . except the true one, that our chicken was no eagle after all." The change-of-base maneuver from the York River to the James River during the 1862 Peninsula Campaign's Seven Days Battles—an act that McClellan and his partisans touted as incontrovertible evidence of his outstanding military skill—reminded Coppee of "a bad novel in weekly installments, with 'To be continued' grimly ominous at the end of every part." If one persisted in acknowledging genius in McClellan, he argued, one must also admit to the existence of two different kinds of genius: "The first finds the enemy, and beats him; the second finds him and succeeds in getting away." McClellan, of course, "had the second kind." Another contributor to Coppee's journal noted simply that McClellan "failed to prove his title to at least one of the indispensable qualities of a great captain," notably "the difference between the ability to plan and the ability to execute—between thought and action."⁹⁶

However much the editors and contributors to Church's and Coppee's publications wanted to trade on the authority of the classic works on the art of war to inform their critique of McClellan's generalship, however, the Northern public accorded their judgments no greater credibility than those of any other citizen. An editor in Bangor, Maine, who supported Lincoln's reelection just as much as Church and Coppee did, nonetheless believed that he and his fellow "editorial generals" had every right to advance their own opinions and then let the common sense of the masses "weigh this pretended Napoleon in the balances, and give him his just due." He made clear that the people had learned much about the conduct of war over the past several years. "We believe in Grant and Sherman and Hancock and Farragut, because their deeds speak for them," he noted, adding: "We did believe in Gen. McClellan *in advance*. . . . We do not believe in him now because he has proved himself utterly wanting"—not in knowledge, but in courage and decisiveness.⁹⁷ Neither genius nor intellect worked for the man from Maine. Similarly, Philadelphia correspondent "Occasional"—a volunteer officer—attested that, early in the war, he and most of his West Point-educated comrades believed in McClellan's military genius, the academy men doing so chiefly "because such a belief was fashionable, and skepticism would have been a reflection upon the dignity of their own profession." Many of the graduates had changed their minds about McClellan by now, but he, for one, still believed that genius existed. As evidence, he claimed that only some innate quality in Grant, Sherman, Sheridan, and others—and not their West Point education—allowed them to gather "the harvest from soil that McClellan and Buell declared to be barren."⁹⁸ The rhetoric of the 1864 presidential campaign revealed, first, that the familiar nature-versus-nurture dichotomy on military leadership that had divided public opinion since the start of the war still had its uses; and second, among the general public—other than the readers of Coppee's and Church's publications who believed intellect to be the central trait of successful military leaders—the split showed few signs of narrowing.

McClellan's defeat and Lincoln's reelection quickly returned public attention to military operations. With Grant still besieging Petersburg, the drama of Sherman's march from Atlanta to the sea, his capture of Savannah, and the Confederate reaction to the general's bold strokes fascinated Northerners. Unaccountably, and quite out of character after nearly sixteen months of attacking the concept, Church began to apply the term "genius" freely to Sherman. By splitting his forces to send Major General George Thomas to confront Confederate General John Bell Hood's

late-1864 offensive into Tennessee while still pressing on with his own advance to Savannah, Sherman, “with the instinct of genius, and the skill of a thorough-bred soldier, took the offensive, and, out of the nettle danger, plucked the flower safety.” Thomas smashed Hood near Nashville in mid-December, but in Church’s view, the Confederate commander in fact was “thwarted only by the genius of Sherman.”⁹⁹ The public press and the military press alike cited the novelty and daring of the march to the sea. If a measure of luck “equal to one half his genius and his skill” accompanied Sherman, Church predicted, then an “inestimable victory awaits the Nation.”¹⁰⁰ In the war’s final months, it seemed that even the military press had finally found its genius, as that generation described it—and it was not the general in chief.

By early 1865, with the end of the war only weeks away, the success of the Grant-Sherman team had captured the North’s collective imagination.¹⁰¹ As Sherman began his march north into the Carolinas, the *Army and Navy Journal* anticipated his linkup with Grant in the most convincing demonstration of the effectiveness of the concentration strategy. As the editor reported, “whatever may be the detailed route which he might pursue,” Sherman’s “ultimate object could only be Richmond—at present the point on which the whole military and political existence of the Confederacy hangs.”¹⁰² But Lee’s army surrendered before the two Union armies combined, leaving Northerners to wonder about the spectacle they missed. The Northern public continued to voice admiration for Grant’s perseverance, but in an unexpected turn of events in late April 1865, they all but relieved Sherman of his crown of genius—not for a military decision, but for a political one. When he offered terms of surrender to General Joseph E. Johnston that far exceeded his authority, he set off a storm of public condemnation. “Sherman committed an enormous blunder. If it was his first, it was, nevertheless his fatal error,” editor Church wrote, adding: “Where shrewd, intelligent, common-sense mediocrity walks safely, genius may plunge, slip and fall.” Church was certain that “not a soldier in Sherman’s Army, would have made his mistake.”¹⁰³ His decision seriously undermined popular confidence in his judgment. And, in the end, if Northerners felt compelled to credit genius for the victory—and many remained entirely satisfied merely to extend the primary credit to the soldiers in the ranks who carried the fight directly to the enemy—then, by default more than from enthusiasm, Grant won the laurel.

In an eloquent summary of Northern views on generalship as they stood at the end of the conflict, war correspondent William Swinton—very well-

read in the military theory of the era—testified to the endurance of popular faith in genius by offering three tests to identify it in an army’s senior commander. First, the general must have the ability to direct large numbers of troops effectively over large spaces in a timely manner. Second, he must demonstrate complete self-possession in disaster. Finally, he must possess “such fertility of resources as to attain success by means or movements entirely unexpected.” Good generals without military genius may pass the first two tests, Swinton argued, but “the last *is* military genius.” In Swinton’s mind, Grant came closer than any other Northern general to passing all three tests.¹⁰⁴ Popular belief in the existence of generals possessed of military genius clearly survived the national trauma of the Civil War.

At the same time, advocates of a military education system designed to cultivate the intellectual competence of army officers ended the war with little to cheer. Even before Appomattox, lively exchanges about the structure, size, and composition of the postwar U.S. Army and its officer corps filled the civilian and military press. An article penned by citizen-soldier Thomas W. Higginson in the *Atlantic Monthly*—a widely reprinted and highly praised piece—argued that the war had erased most distinctions between West Point graduates and volunteer officers. While the former still offered discipline and “specific professional training,” the latter infused “the knowledge of human nature and the habit of dealing with mankind in masses—the very thing from which the younger regular officers at least has been rigidly excluded.” During the war, amateurs and professionals had combined their different habits of command to lead the world’s most intelligent troops to victory. Therefore, Higginson asserted, the army should continue to draw its officers from both sources.¹⁰⁵

The pages of the *Army and Navy Journal* teemed with critiques of Higginson’s piece. Most contributors argued that any degree of reliance upon citizen-soldier volunteers—especially as officers—established an entirely unsound foundation for the future U.S. Army. One correspondent remained convinced that “a soldier, no matter what his natural abilities, must needs learn his trade, if he do not wish to be overshadowed by men of less native but more acquired power.”¹⁰⁶ A correspondent who signed himself as “Volunteer” actually took the side of the Regulars to assert that, from experience, he now realized that he and his peers shared two great weaknesses: an inability to “enforce implicit, *blind* obedience” and “ignorance.” The paltry efforts of the “noble sons of Harvard, Yale, Amherst, and other colleges” to master the duties of lieutenants and captains entirely

unimpressed him, and he now placed his trust only in educated Regular officers.¹⁰⁷ Plans of all kinds surfaced, including one suggesting that one-third of all vacant lieutenantcies in the postwar Regular Army be set aside for the promotion of promising sergeants with at least three years of service who could pass muster with a board of examiners. The rest, the author of the plan believed, should be filled only by West Point graduates.¹⁰⁸

The reaction of the public press to Higginson's article proved that a distrust of professional soldiers still thrived outside military circles. The *New York Tribune* demanded clarification. If the question asked whether it was "advisable that military officers should be educated for their vocation," then the editor would answer in the affirmative. If the query was restated, however, to ask if "a monopoly of all the commissions in our Army" should "be secured to the graduates of a single school," then "on that question we vote no."¹⁰⁹ A civilian reader of Church's journal, bothered by the political nature of congressional appointments to West Point, concurred with the *Tribune's* view, arguing that any established university could produce graduates capable of passing a commissioning examination and thus open up military careers to ambitious and capable young men whose families simply lacked connections.¹¹⁰ In the end, the postwar battle lines drawn over the question of educating the nation's army officers looked little different from those that existed before Fort Sumter.

The seeds of change had been planted, however, and patience rewarded those whose commitment to professional military education never wavered. They cherished a vision already laid out for them in Jomini and other classic writers on the art of war who, in their own ways, encouraged professional soldiers to work toward "an *aristocracy of education*" in their officer corps to make their army into "a living machine, to be put in motion and moved at the will of the *controlling intellect*, its commander-in-chief."¹¹¹ Regular officers visited, compared, and reported on the course of study at military schools around the world to prepare for that day when the United States was ready to take those important steps.¹¹² But until that day came—and the first glimmers of the new dawn took at least fifteen years to arrive—they bided their time as the citizen-soldiers who exchanged army life for the halls of government kept alive the spirit of the "heavenly born genius" for another generation.