

Fall from Grace:



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The Parallel Careers Of General of the Army Douglas MacArthur And MG George B. McClellan

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Since its founding in 1775, the U.S. Army has fielded a formidable array of warriors led by distinguished commanders. Few of these leaders have proved as controversial as MG George B. McClellan and General of the Army Douglas MacArthur. Though both had considerable military talent and achieved enormous popular support in their time, MacArthur and McClellan are remembered today more for their challenges to civilian authority and their removal



A 1901 print depicts the Cadets' quarters at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., where George B. McClellan graduated second in the Class of 1846 and Douglas MacArthur graduated first in 1903.

from command than for their military prowess. Through their extremely rapid rise to the pinnacle of the military profession, these remarkable commanders also exemplify the limitations of unrivaled egotism and insatiable ambition. History loves comparisons, and McClellan and MacArthur provide abundant parallels.

The Rise to Fame

Both men established enviable records at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. McClellan graduated second in the Class of 1846, while MacArthur graduated first in the Class of 1903. As junior officers, both men established reputations for courage under fire: McClellan in the Mexican-American War of 1846–48 and MacArthur in the Vera Cruz expedition of 1914. Fifteen years following graduation from West Point, both achieved general officer rank as they burst on the national scene and captured the public imagination.

The excessive vanity that characterized both future commanders was evident early on while they were cadets at West Point. At the U.S. Military Academy, his peers elected McClellan president of the Dialectic Society, the intellectual cream of West Point's upperclassmen. As he approached graduation, McClellan felt that his overall achievements entitled him to first place in the class of 1846. He wound up second to Cadet Charles S. Stewart, and McClellan did not accept his runner-up status gracefully. "I must confess that I have malice enough to want to show them that if I did not graduate head of my class, I can nevertheless do something,"

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he wrote his family. True to his word, McClellan would command 19 of his classmates in the Army of the Potomac.

MacArthur mirrored McClellan's defense of his presumed rights and easily wounded egotism. MacArthur missed several of the weekly tests in mathematics during his second year due to illness. When he was informed that he would have to take a special examination with the "goats" of the class to avoid failing the course, Cadet MacArthur went directly to the instructor and demanded his name be removed from the list due to his superior standing on the tests he had already taken. Told that his stance was challenging a direct order, MacArthur informed the officer, "I will not take the test." The next morning an orderly arrived at MacArthur's room and informed him that his name had been removed from the list. The instructor had backed off his demand, not as much due to MacArthur's insistence as to the in-

structor's desire not to alienate MacArthur's father, MG Arthur MacArthur Jr., who was expected momentarily on a well-publicized visit to see his son.

The similarities between McClellan and MacArthur are even more apparent when considering the public adulation that accompanied their rise to fame. As he took command of the defenses of Washington in the summer of 1861, McClellan wrote, "I find myself in a new & strange position here—Presdt, Cabinet, Genl Scott & all deferring to me—by some strange operation of magic I seem to have become *the* power of the land." Dubbed the Young Napoleon by the press and Little Mac by his soldiers—McClellan was only 34 years old when Lincoln conferred on him the title of general in chief of all Union armies—McClellan assuaged Lincoln's fears that "this vast increase in responsibilities ... will entail a vast labor upon you" by assuring him, "I can do it all"—and then did nothing.

MacArthur, too, savored the adulation that greeted his "escape" from the Philippines in March 1942, just after President Franklin Roosevelt directed his transfer to Australia so that MacArthur could eventually play an integral role in leading the Allies to victory against the Japanese in World War II. Though Roosevelt was not personally fond of his Far Eastern general, he released a public statement that said, "Every man and woman in the United States admires with me General MacArthur's determination to fight to the finish with his men in the Philippines." He added, however, that "all important decisions must be made with a view toward the successful termination of the war," so that is why, Roosevelt explained, "every American, if faced individually with the question as to where General MacArthur could best serve his country, could come to only one an-

swer.” At the urging of Army Chief of Staff GEN George C. Marshall, Congress then bestowed the Medal of Honor on MacArthur for his heroic defense of the Bataan peninsula. George Gallup’s American Institute of Public Opinion discovered in a poll in early May that MacArthur had suddenly emerged as one of the top five men considered by the people as “Presidential material for 1944.” Not surprisingly, MacArthur bathed in the limelight and ensured that he remained on center stage by monopolizing all the press releases emanating from his headquarters in Australia.

MacArthur was showered with the praise he so earnestly coveted following his pledge, “I shall return!” (to the Philippines). In the aftermath of his arrival in Australia, a reporter with *The New York Times* announced that 13 babies born in the city between March 1 and April 8 were given the first and middle names of Douglas MacArthur. Shortly thereafter, the Newspaper Guild of New York voted to award him its most prestigious honor, the Column One, Page One Plaque.

Fighting Their Own Battles

Neither McClellan nor MacArthur worked well with civilian authority, and, in particular, neither respected the prerogatives or the problems of the Presidents they served.

Embroiled in a bitter civil war, all Lincoln wanted was a field commander who was not afraid to engage the enemy—a general who would fight and use the superior resources of the North to grind down the Confederacy. The enemy army—not Richmond—must be your objective, the President emphatically stated to every commander of the Army of the Potomac.

Speed in engaging the Confederate army was also essential in Lincoln’s estimation. “It is of great importance you should move as soon as possible,” the President informed MG Ambrose E. Burnside, a McClellan favorite, on December 26, 1861. “Consumption of time is killing us.”

Although Lincoln’s call for action would become a familiar refrain, the commanders he appointed often dallied and wasted the best months for campaigning, and no commander tried the President’s patience with the slow pace of combat more than McClellan. Supremely convinced of his martial prowess, Commander McClellan would move against the enemy only when *he* felt conditions warranted it.

Dissatisfied with McClellan’s unwillingness to attack Confederate forces entrenched at Manassas Junction astride the battlefield of Bull Run, Lincoln took an extraordinary step at the end of January 1862 and issued Special War Order No. 1, directing the Army of the Potomac to



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MacArthur and McClellan, both excessively vain, did not work well with civilian authority and failed to respect the prerogatives or problems of the Presidents they served. Each officer enjoyed a meteoric rise to the top of his profession but was limited by his egotism and unbridled ambition.

move against the enemy on or before February 22. Again McClellan vacillated, prompting another Presidential visit to encourage his advance. By the time McClellan finally moved his army to the base of the James River-York River peninsula in the spring of 1862, Lincoln was already questioning his indispensability.

Six months later, in the aftermath of Confederate GEN Robert E. Lee's failed invasion of Maryland, Lincoln paid a final visit to McClellan's headquarters to urge him to cross the Potomac and attack the enemy. After several additional weeks of inaction, McClellan transmitted a report about his lame and sore-tongued horses to the War Department to justify his slow pursuit of Lee. Lincoln exploded: "Will you pardon me for asking what the horses of your army have done since the Battle of Antietam that fatigues anything?"

McClellan finally crossed the Potomac into Virginia, but by then, Lee's Army of Northern Virginia was firmly entrenched in the northern Virginia countryside. For Lincoln, Lee's escape proved the final straw. In a private conversation with Francis Preston Blair, Lincoln said he had "tried long enough to bore with an auger too dull to take hold. I said I would remove him if he let Lee's army get away from him, and I must do so. He has got the 'slows,' Mr. Blair."

Lincoln's lack of confidence in McClellan mirrored Little Mac's disdain for the President. McClellan was astonished when Lincoln issued his preliminary emancipation proclamation on September 22, 1862, in the immediate aftermath of the Union victory at Antietam. Two days later Lincoln suspended the privilege of habeas corpus and specified military trial for anyone charged with discouraging enlistments and militia drafts or with any "disloyal practice" of giving aid and comfort to the enemy.

Lincoln's pronouncements ran counter to McClellan's own political philosophy. In a July 1862 letter written to the President, McClellan had already expressed his firm opposition to emancipation and had even warned that the Army might "disintegrate" if the war became a fight for abolition as opposed to a fight for the union. On September 17, following the Battle of Antietam, the general was fast to voice his opposition to the administration's path. McClellan professed to his wife that he would never fight for the "accursed doctrine ... of a servile insurrection," writing that "it is too infamous."

On September 26, just four days after Lincoln issued the proclamation, McClellan wrote William Aspinwall, a wealthy and influential Democratic Party leader. He told Aspinwall that he wanted to know how Northern governors viewed the President's proclamations "inaugurating servile war, emancipating the slaves, and at one stroke of the pen changing our free institutions into despotism." McClellan would continue to cultivate the favor of high-ranking Democrats throughout the war, and in 1864, he accepted the Democratic nomination for the presidency.

As did McClellan, MacArthur demonstrated little respect for his commander in chief. While serving as Army Chief of Staff in 1932, MacArthur faced the dilemma of confronting the Bonus Army that began descending on Washington in late May. The unemployed "army" of World War I veterans sought early payment of pledged bonuses to offset joblessness and financial insecurity. By the end of June the ranks of the so-called Bonus Expeditionary Forces (BEF) had swollen to more than 20,000. The situation had become a political embarrassment to President Herbert Hoover. On July 28, the situation erupted, prompting Secretary of War Patrick Hurley to call upon MacArthur to take appropriate action to "maintain law and order in the District [of Columbia]."

MacArthur donned his military uniform—senior officers on duty in the War Department usually wore civilian attire while in Washington—and accompanied the troops against the bonus marchers, "not with a view of commanding the troops, but to be on hand as things progressed, so that he could issue necessary instructions on the ground," according to D. Clayton James in *The Years of MacArthur, Volume I: 1880–1941*. To avoid the impression that the U.S. Army was abridging free speech, President Hoover directed Hurley to order MacArthur not to pursue the BEF across the Anacostia River, where the billets of the Bonus Army were located. According to MAJ Dwight D. Eisenhower, serving as MacArthur's aide, the Chief of Staff ignored the Presidential order. "In neither instance," wrote Eisenhower, "did General MacArthur hear these instruc-

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President Lincoln visited MG McClellan on the Antietam battlefield in 1862. McClellan's vacillation and slow pace of combat tried the President's patience and prompted his visits to urge the general to advance.

tions. He said he was too busy and did not want either himself or his staff bothered by people coming down and pretending to bring orders.”

Two decades later, commanding troops in the Korean War, MacArthur again followed McClellan’s path by rejecting the decisions of his civilian leadership. MacArthur simply refused to acquiesce to President Harry Truman’s strategy to fight a limited war. In MacArthur’s eyes, success required total military victory. While Truman and Secretary of State Dean Acheson sought viable alternatives, MacArthur proposed an “annihilation or evacuation” scenario once the People’s Republic of China entered the conflict. Despite MacArthur’s insistence that the war be expanded into Manchuria, Truman felt strongly that a negotiated settlement was a legitimate substitute for military victory. MacArthur’s blatant refusal to accept these evolving war aims made his subsequent relief from command unavoidable.

Like the frustrated McClellan, MacArthur was in frequent contact with political opponents of the current administration. Just as McClellan had solicited support from the Democratic opposition to President Lincoln, MacArthur courted the support of Truman detractors, freely criticizing administration policy in communiqués to Republican Party House members. Long considered the darling of the Republican Party, he was frequently mentioned as a possible Presidential candidate in 1944 and 1948.

The Error of Their Ways

While both McClellan and MacArthur actively opposed the policies of their civilian leaders, both commanders committed serious military errors, making it politically feasible for their respective commanders in chief to relieve them from command.

Because he frequently overestimated the strength of Lee’s army, McClellan squandered the chance of a crushing victory at Antietam, throwing away one of the best opportunities any general had in the Civil War to achieve a Napoleonic-style victory. His subsequent delay in pursuing Lee into Virginia finally caused Lincoln to lose patience.

MacArthur also mistook the size of the enemy, but whereas McClellan consistently overestimated the size of his foe, MacArthur underestimated the size of his enemy. As Chinese Communist forces prepared to attack United Nations forces as they approached the Yalu River in October 1950, MacArthur assured the President in their only face-to-face meeting on Wake Island on October 15 that there was little chance of Chinese intervention. “Only fifty to sixty thousand could be gotten across the Yalu River.



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President Truman and GEN MacArthur met face-to-face for the first time in October 1950 on Wake Island to discuss the Korean War. The general’s resistance to Truman’s aims led to MacArthur’s dismissal.

They have no air force. ... If the Chinese tried to get down to Pyongyang, there would be the greatest slaughter.” Weeks later, the initial reports of Chinese intervention were received, but MacArthur summarily dismissed the reports even though battlefield commanders confirmed the presence of significant numbers of Chinese troops. The result of MacArthur’s refusal to face reality was a bloody repulse at Unsan and the Chosin Reservoir in North Korea and a prolonged retreat of the United Nations armies south of the 38th Parallel.

The Accountability Deficit

Neither general accepted accountability for his respective military defeats. Harboring a disdain for the nation’s political leadership, McClellan and MacArthur ignored their own misjudgments and accused their civilian authorities of snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

As McClellan’s Army of the Potomac advanced up the Virginia peninsula toward Richmond in May 1862, McClellan wrote: “When I see the hand of God guarding one so weak as myself, I can almost think myself a chosen instrument to carry out his schemes,” and later: “I know that God may even now deem best to crush all the high hopes of the nation and this army—I will do the best I can to insure success and will do my best to be contented with whatever result God sees fit to terminate our efforts.”

By the time he reached the outskirts of the enemy capital, however, McClellan was already predicting disaster. Infuriated that Lincoln held back MG Irvin McDowell’s corps to defend Washington, D.C., in the aftermath of Stonewall Jackson’s Valley Campaign of 1862, McClellan cabled, “I will do all that a General can do with the splendid Army I have the honor to command and if it is de-

MG McClellan (center, right), conferring with his staff of eight, earned a reputation for courage under fire during the Mexican-American War of 1846–48 and was commissioned a major general in the regular Army in 1861.



National Archives/Mathew Brady

stroyed by overwhelming numbers ... the responsibility can not be thrown on my shoulders—it must rest where it belongs.” After Gaines’ Mill on June 27, McClellan wrote, “If I save this Army now I tell you plainly that I owe no thanks to you [Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton] or any other persons in Washington—you have done your best to sacrifice this Army.” Small wonder why Lincoln and Stanton found McClellan so irritating.

MacArthur also sought to escape accountability when his military fortunes were reversed by the enemy’s action. Before the Chinese Communists entered the war in the late autumn of 1950, MacArthur ordered the bridges across the Yalu River, over which armies of Chinese Communists might cross to reinforce the North Korean forces, to be immediately bombed to sever lines of communication between Manchuria and North Korea. An immediate dispatch from Secretary of Defense George C. Marshall countermanded MacArthur’s order and directed him “to postpone all bombing of targets within five miles of the Manchurian border.” MacArthur informed his chief of staff, “For the first time in military history, a commander has been

denied the use of his military power to safeguard the lives of his soldiers and safety of his army.” If he were forced to withdraw, MacArthur had found his scapegoat.

Relief From Command: Their Shared Fate

In retrospect, the most striking similarity between McClellan and MacArthur is that both commanders were summarily relieved of their commands.

In the aftermath of the Seven Days’ Battles, McClellan predicted that the Lincoln administration would force him to resign. If they did, McClellan wrote, they would “begin to reap the whirlwind that they have sown.” He wrote his wife, Ellen, on July 27, 1862: “I am confident that he [Lincoln] would relieve me tomorrow if he dared do so. His cowardice alone prevents it. I can never regard him with other feelings than those of thorough contempt—for his mind, heart and morality.”

Such blatant insubordination, albeit in private correspondence, coupled with his well-publicized refusal to bring the President into his confidence and his unwillingness to address the enemy, merited McClellan’s immediate relief. Why Lincoln did not relieve McClellan earlier than he did was quite clear. Despite McClellan’s failure before Richmond, Lincoln needed the popular commander at the point of the country’s greatest crisis after Second Manassas. When Lee invaded Maryland in September 1862, the President felt compelled to restore McClellan to command even though he had serious misgivings. When Ben-



U.S. Army

MacArthur (seated), observes the shelling of Inchon from the U.S.S. McKimley with BG Courtney Whitney (left), Far East Command, and GEN Edward Almond (right), commanding general of X Corps, in September 1950.

jamin Wade, the chairman of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, denounced McClellan's reappointment and demanded that anyone but McClellan should be put in command, Lincoln responded, "Wade, anybody will do for you, but not for me. I must have somebody." Lincoln thus gave McClellan one more chance to redeem his reputation, but McClellan failed to meet Lincoln's expectation. Then and only then, Lincoln relieved McClellan of command of the Army of the Potomac and sent him to New Jersey to await orders that never arrived.

Once relieved, McClellan could only say, "They have made a great mistake—alas for my poor country—I know in my innermost heart she never had a truer servant ... I do not see any great blunders—but no one can judge of himself." Naturally he found blame elsewhere: "We have tried to do what was right—if we have failed it was not our fault."

MacArthur's stubborn unwillingness to accept Truman's war aims—and execute military strategy consistent with it—lay at the heart of his command failure. In addition, his defeatist-sounding communiqués in the aftermath of Chinese intervention (and resulting battle failures in North Korea) did nothing to increase his prestige among the highest-level decision makers in the Truman administration. The final straw in MacArthur's dismissal was his penchant for public chatter: Against direct orders to clear public pronouncements with the administration, Mac-

Arthur repeatedly released press statements that interfered with potential truce negotiations.

MacArthur's criticism of President Truman following his abrupt relief from command paralleled that of McClellan. In his memoirs, MacArthur noted that Truman's nerves were at the breaking point—"not only his nerves, but what was far more menacing in the Chief Executive of a country at war—his nerve." What rankled MacArthur most was the manner in which he was notified after the press had already leaked the news. "No office boy, no charwoman, no servant of any sort would have been dismissed with such callous disregard for the ordinary decencies," he later wrote. "No slightest opportunity was given me to explain my position, to answer allegations or objections, to present my future concepts and plans," MacArthur recalled in his postwar reminiscences.

Their Last Years

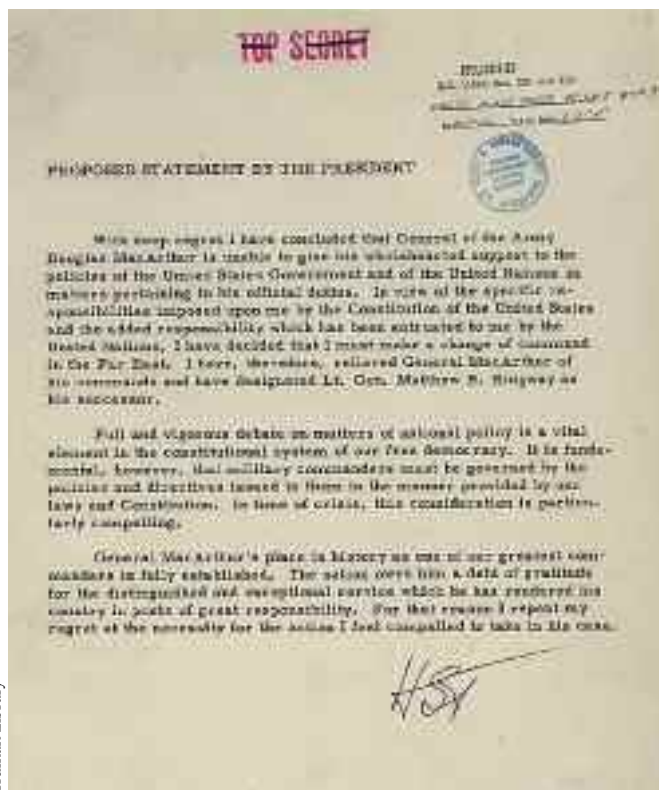
Given their refusal to acknowledge civilian control of the military, it seems remarkable that McClellan and MacArthur harbored Presidential ambitions of their own.

McClellan ran against Lincoln in the Presidential race of 1864 and was soundly defeated. He retired from active military service and subsequently served as governor of New Jersey for a single three-year term. He was only 58 years old when, on October 29, 1885, he died from complications following a severe attack of angina pectoris. His death, an-



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A Currier & Ives print promotes McClellan's (failed) Democratic run for the Presidency in 1864. Truman's proposed statement on the dismissal of GEN MacArthur expresses regret at having to relieve the commander, whose public criticism of American policy necessitated the action.

nounced just three months after the nation's greatest military hero, Ulysses S. Grant, had passed away, attracted national attention and appeared on the front page of every major newspaper across the country.

Following his relief from duty as military commander, MacArthur returned to the United States to a hero's welcome and gave a historic address to Congress. His luster began to dim, however, after congressional hearings disclosed some of the complexities faced by the administration in the Far East. His advocates hoped that MacArthur's keynote address at the Republican Convention in Chicago would propel him to his party's nomination for president in 1952. The nomination fell instead to Dwight D. Eisenhower. "The best clerk I ever had," MacArthur allegedly remarked once Ike entered the White House. Other than a highly publicized address to the Corps of Cadets at West Point in May 1962 on the occasion of his receipt of the Sylvanus Thayer Award, MacArthur faded into obscurity. He spent his last decade in an elaborate suite in the Towers of the Waldorf Astoria in New York City. On April 5, 1964, he died of biliary cirrhosis. Not surprisingly, he planned every detail of his funeral. MacArthur lies today in the magnificent MacArthur Memorial in Norfolk, Va.

Attributes Unshared

Despite the similarities between McClellan and MacArthur, there were important differences as well. MacArthur's career spanned half a century, including service in two world wars and the Korean conflict. Over the course of the Great War, he was repeatedly cited for heroism by his senior officers. The recipient of two Distinguished Service Crosses, the Distinguished Service Medal, seven Silver Stars and two *Croix de Guerre* medals, MacArthur emerged from World War I as the most highly decorated officer in the

American Expeditionary Forces. Upon his own elevation to corps-level command, MG Charles T. Menoher said of his former chief of staff, "MacArthur is the bloodiest fighting man in this army." Command of the Southwest Pacific theater in World War II and of the United Nations command during the initial months of the Korean War only added to MacArthur's laurels.

No biographer, no matter how pro-McClellan, ever mistook McClellan for a fighting general. McClellan's rise to fame was far more meteoric than even MacArthur's. In contrast to MacArthur's sterling battlefield record, McClellan's star shone brightly for a scant 18 months before he fell into disfavor with the Lincoln administration. In many ways, Little Mac was a victim of his initial success against mediocre opposition. Battling Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia proved a far more daunting task than fighting his initial opponents in western Virginia in 1861. What is most revealing in McClellan's case is how rapidly he fell from grace following his arrival in the nation's capital in July. What the public and Lincoln demanded was action, and McClellan's refusal to act decisively weakened his position as general in chief from the outset.

McClellan never comprehended that to defeat the enemy, he would have to witness the loss of a portion of the very army that he had so skillfully created. Every observer noted that McClellan proved an adept trainer of troops. What his generals recognized was something the public could not possibly know: Their favorite general lost confidence once the battle was joined. There is little doubt that McClellan's true genius lay in organization, not in tactics. Both before Richmond and along the banks of Antietam Creek, McClellan designed elaborate plans, but then he abandoned them as soon as his army made contact with the enemy. According to Stephen Sears, McClellan's fore-

A pencil drawing on brown paper by Civil War artist Alfred Waud depicts McClellan, accompanied by GEN Ambrose Burnside, taking leave of the Army of the Potomac in November 1862. Lincoln tapped Burnside to succeed McClellan as commander of the Army of the Potomac.





On his first visit to the United States in 14 years, MacArthur addresses an audience of 50,000 at Chicago's Soldier Field in April 1951, the month he was relieved of command.

most biographer, Little Mac had “lost his inner composure and with it the courage to command under the press of combat.”

Loss of confidence was almost never a problem for MacArthur. In the summer of 1950, when the military fortunes of the United Nations seemed at their nadir, MacArthur conceived and, later in September, boldly executed a turning movement deep into the North Korean rear at Inchon. The plan to invade Inchon was MacArthur’s military masterpiece and gave him the opportunity to force his will on the unconvinced Joint Chiefs of Staff. Most opposed to MacArthur’s plan were Army Chief of Staff J. Lawton Collins and Chief of Naval Operations Forrest P. Sherman, but he was confident that, in spite of the odds, Inchon would succeed.

Inchon, of course, succeeded and further convinced MacArthur that he had a better grasp of strategy than Washington bureaucrats, whose fear of failure was greater than their drive for success. Said MacArthur biographer Geoffrey Perret, “The most fitting conclusion to MacArthur’s life would have been to die a soldier’s death in the waters off Inchon at the height of his glory with his legend not simply intact, but magnified beyond even his florid imaginings.”

Simply stated, MacArthur believed in the hard hand of war. McClellan did not. Schooled in the Napoleonic art of war, which sought a single, decisive battle of annihilation, McClellan failed to recognize that he could achieve exactly that when he trapped Lee’s army at Sharpsburg, Md., on September 17, 1862. Badly bruised, Lee’s army remained intact when a single push, using readily available reserves, would have destroyed it and might have ended the war in one bold stroke similar to MacArthur’s success at Inchon 88 years later. Unlike MacArthur, however, McClellan

could not order himself to make the attack, and thus Lee’s battered army escaped to Virginia to fight another day.

In contrast, MacArthur’s proposal to establish a nuclear belt five miles on each side of the Yalu River risked a nuclear war that the Truman administration wisely wished to avoid. In the bitter fighting in Manila and later in Seoul, MacArthur demonstrated his willingness to wage total war, regardless of collateral damage. Such escalation of potential casualties would have found no place in McClellan’s heart.

Putting It All in Perspective

So where does this analysis leave us? McClellan and MacArthur were certainly the military heroes of their days. Both commanders viewed themselves as preeminent military strategists. Both demonstrated admirable military attributes and were greatly admired by their troops. Yet both McClellan and MacArthur overstepped their bounds by crossing the invisible line that separated civil-military control of the armed forces.

In summing up his services to MacArthur both in Washington and the Philippines, GEN Eisenhower could just as easily have been describing McClellan when he stated emphatically: “Most of the senior officers I had known always drew a clean-cut line between the military and the political. Off duty, among themselves and close civilian friends, they might explosively denounce everything they thought was wrong with Washington ... and propose their own cure for its evils. On duty, nothing could induce them to cross the line they, and old Army tradition, had established. But if General MacArthur [and for purposes of comparison, General McClellan as well] ever recognized the existence of that line, he usually chose to ignore it.”

Leave it to Ike to place things into perspective. ★