

Lincoln and His Generals

Developed for the Abraham Lincoln Association [link:
<http://abrahamlincolnassociation.org/default.htm>]

by Richard Schwartz
Coordinator, Social Studies
Whippany Park High School
Whippany, New Jersey

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(All documents cited in these lesson plans are from the Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln accessed from the main page of the Abraham Lincoln Association web site)

Background: As Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces of the United States, President Abraham Lincoln bore ultimate responsibility for the conduct of the Civil War. Insisting that the conflict was a war of rebellion, Lincoln nonetheless had to mobilize the loyal segment of the American nation for a major war effort. After the fall of Fort Sumter in April, 1861, the President called for 75,000 volunteers to quell the uprising. A humiliating defeat of Union forces at First Bull Run in July, 1861, followed by the two-day bloodbath at Shiloh in April, 1862 made clear that the conflict would be longer and more deadly than Northerners and Southerners had initially thought.

At the war's outset, Lincoln saw many gifted US Army and Navy officers resign their commissions so as to serve the Confederacy. He also confronted the fact that his commanding general, Winfield Scott, was simply too old and infirm to direct the Union armies to victory (although Scott's much-maligned "Anaconda Plan" would prove to be the ultimate recipe for Union victory by 1865.) Consequently, Lincoln had to constantly search for military leaders who could win victories and hasten reunion.

Lincoln had more good fortune with the Union Navy than with the army. (To be fair, the Union enjoyed significant naval superiority throughout the war, especially with the advent of ironclad warships, which the North could produce more easily than the Confederacy.) Admirals David Glasgow Farragut, David Dixon Porter, and Andrew Foote proved able officers as the navy administered a coastal blockade and participated in the seizure of river and port cities.

Army leaders proved more frustrating. Lincoln resembled nothing so much as the owner of a big-league baseball team trying to find the right manager through the war's early years, and the documents that your students examine will show Lincoln's early frustrations, his prodding nature, and eventually, a growing confidence when he had finally found the men best suited for the work.

No one frustrated Lincoln more and for a longer period than General George B. McClellan, commanding general of the Army of the Potomac (the main Union army in

the East) for much of the period through the autumn of 1862. McClellan's approach to the war was a product of his study of European strategic doctrine, his affection for his soldiers, and his Democratic politics. He certainly hoped to win the war, but he tried to do so through maneuver rather than through bloody collisions with the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia. McClellan, like most Democrats, saw no reason to eliminate slavery, either. He hoped to restore the Union "as it was." Cautious by nature, highly sensitive to criticism, McClellan quickly grew to resent Lincoln's prodding. **(Document Group 1.)** Lincoln experienced similar frustration with other Union generals, such as Don Carlos Buell and William Rosecrans, **(Document 2)** but it was McClellan's lack of aggressiveness that drove the President to distraction. As the war in the East failed to produce much encouraging news, Lincoln elevated various generals to command positions after consultation with General-in-Chief Henry Halleck and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. But men such as John Pope, Ambrose Burnside, and Joseph Hooker proved inadequate. Hooker, for his part, opined upon assuming command that the nation might need a "dictator" to rescue it from the crisis. Lincoln's response was immediate **(Document 3.)**

When, after the victory at Gettysburg, General George G. Meade failed to pursue aggressively a badly-mauled Army of Northern Virginia, Lincoln again voiced his frustration **(Document 4.)** He also decided before year's end to appoint General Ulysses S. Grant to command all of the Union armies. The conqueror of Vicksburg, victor at Chattanooga, and above all a dogged, persistent fighter, Grant opted to come east to oversee the Army of the Potomac in its Virginia theatre of war. Working alongside Meade, Grant left the aggressive and driven William Tecumseh Sherman in charge of the invasion of Georgia.

Grant plunged down into the Virginia woods. His aim was not to maneuver Robert E. Lee into checkmate; it was to destroy Lee's army. Your students will notice the starkly different tone in Lincoln's messages to Grant when compared to those sent earlier to McClellan, Rosecrans and Hooker **(Document Group 5.)**

Meanwhile, Sherman and George Thomas won victories in Georgia and Tennessee, respectively. When Sherman took Atlanta, he burned to the ground a key industrial and rail center, and commenced a still-controversial "March to the Sea." He also aided Lincoln's reelection hopes, which were also aided by measures taken to encourage voting by Union troops **(Document Group 6.)** Pursuing a scorched earth strategy, Sherman arrived in Savannah in middle December, wiring President Lincoln that he was presenting the Commander-in-Chief with that city as a Christmas present. Lincoln's response indicates yet again his growing confidence in his commanders. **(Document 7.)**

Less than a year after their opening battle, at the Wilderness in May of 1864, Grant accepted Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House, Virginia. By early April of 1865, just prior to Lee's surrender, Lincoln offered his final advice to Grant **(Document 8)**. On April 9, Lee surrendered; within the week, Sherman took the surrender of Rebel forces in North Carolina. By that time, however, the Commander-in-Chief had been assassinated, the war's final casualty.

The main rationale for this lesson is to help students to understand the intensely political nature of this war. As commander-in-chief, Lincoln—who had at best negligible military experience, having served as a militia officer in the short-lived Black Hawk War—had to judge military talent, and he had to determine just where and when to intervene in the day-to-day conduct of the war. He also knew that a lack of military success would cost him his office. Had Lincoln been defeated in his bid for re-election in 1864, history might have been very different. The Democratic platform called for a negotiated end to the war, and the Democratic nominee, George McClellan certainly viewed the war in different terms than did Lincoln. For his part, by 1864 Lincoln could accept nothing less than unconditional surrender by the rebels; nor would he reverse the direction he'd staked out on slavery with the Emancipation Proclamation (see the lesson on “Lincoln and Emancipation.”)

The central inquiry question(s) for this lesson: *Lincoln had the constitutional duty of Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. What were his priorities, and how did he pursue these aims? How do you account for Lincoln's changing tone over time? What if Lincoln had lost to McClellan in 1864—how would subsequent American history have been different?*

Sample Lesson: Lincoln and His Generals

Documents for this lesson

Document Group 1: Lincoln to George B. McClellan, June 26, 1862; July 1, 1862; July 2, 1862; September 15, 1862; October 13, 1862; October 24, 1862; October 27, 1862;

Document 2: Lincoln to William S. Rosecrans, August 10, 1863

Document 3: Lincoln to Joseph Hooker, January 26, 1863

Document 4: Lincoln to George G. Meade, July 14, 1863

Document Group 5: Lincoln to Ulysses S. Grant, July 13, 1863; April 30, 1864; August 3, 1864; August 17, 1864

Document Group 6: Memorandum on Probable Failure of Re-Election, August 23, 1864; Lincoln to William T. Sherman, September 19, 1864; Lincoln to William Rosecrans, September 26, 1864

Document 7: Lincoln to William T. Sherman, December 26, 1864

Document 8: Lincoln to Ulysses S. Grant, April 7, 1865

Start-up Activity: **As the students enter the classroom, call their attention to a list on the chalkboard. Include the following names:** Winfield Scott; Irvin McDowell; George McClellan; John Pope; Ambrose Burnside; Don Carlos Buell; William Rosecrans; Henry Halleck; Joseph Hooker; George Meade; Ulysses S. Grant; William T. Sherman. **Ask students to speculate on what these men had in common; if your students don't recognize the better-known names, explain that all were Union Army generals. Move toward the notion that at one time or another, Lincoln turned to each to exercise an important command during the war. Then ask: “What questions does this list raise?”**

Student questions should be chalked up on the board. Your students may raise questions such as: ‘Why did Lincoln use so many different people?’ ‘Did the Confederacy go through so many generals?’ ‘Were some of these men more successful than others?’ ‘Did Lincoln himself ever take command?’ ‘When Lincoln got rid of a general, what happened to the man?’ Any and all student questions should be transcribed on the chalkboard; if time and your own confidence with the material allow, you may choose to take a few minutes to answer these questions briefly.

Document analysis: Raise a multi-faceted question of your own:

Lincoln had the constitutional responsibility of Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. What were his priorities, and how did he pursue these aims? How do you account for Lincoln’s changing tone over time? What if Lincoln had lost to McClellan in 1864—how would American history have been different?

Divide the students into eight groups. Six of these groups will read a single document, and two will read three-or-four document “groups.” You may wish to assign more students to the latter sets of documents.

Have each group read quietly its assigned documents, reading with the above multi-faceted question in mind.

Upon completion of the reading, each group member should participate in a brief discussion summarizing the document(s) and Lincoln’s point of view, as well as his tone. The tone should be characterized by a word or phrase.

Group members should then locate the single passage that best captures the spirit of the document. Passages should be long enough to provide context, but not so long that they lack punch.

Each group is given a corner of the chalkboard, with group 1 getting the far left, and group 8 the far right. The group should chalk up the year of the document(s), Lincoln’s correspondent’s name, and the passage that the group has chosen.

Large-group sharing: Call students’ attention to each passage as group spokespersons identify a) the correspondent; b) the year; and c) the tone. The spokesperson should read aloud the passage. Each group will report in this fashion. So as to allow each group time, try to move the students at a brisk clip; you may have little time for discussion of each document.

As the last group finished its presentation, return students to the multi-faceted “inquiry question” that you posed at the beginning of the lesson. If time allows, give them five minutes to reflect on the various documents, and complete a “directed free-write” response to the question(s) in their notebooks. If time is tight, go straight

into the question. *What were Lincoln's priorities? How did he pursue these aims? How do you account for Lincoln's changing tone over time?*

Bringing Closure: **Invite students to take up the last segment of the inquiry question: *Let's assume that Lincoln's premonition was right, and that Democrat George McClellan won the presidency in 1864. In what ways did "President" McClellan's victory change the course of history?***

Try this as a brainstorming exercise. After taking some student ideas—and perhaps tossing in a few of your own—ask them this wrap-up question: What grade would you give President Lincoln for his performance as Commander-in-Chief of the Union armed forces from 1861-65? Some historians reject the “great individual” approach to history—just how essential was Lincoln to this period in history, and to the nation's survival? **Press the students to draw upon their reading and evaluation of the documents.**