Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief

Overview: In this lesson students will evaluate and assess Lincoln's performance as Commander-in-Chief.

Materials:

Letter from Lincoln to George B. McClellan, February 3, 1863

Letter from Lincoln to George B. McClellan, April 9, 1862

Letter from McClellan to Edwin Stanton, July 8, 1862

Letter from George McClellan to Mary Ellen McClellan, July 20, 1862

Letter from Lincoln to McClellan, October 24 (25), 1862

Letter from Lincoln to Gen. William Halleck, November 5, 1862

Letter from McClellan to Abraham Lincoln, November 7, 1862

Letter from McClellan to Mary Ellen McClellan, November 7-8, 1862

Citations

http://www.historyplace.com

http://www.swcivilwar.com

Letter from Lincoln to George Gordon Meade, July 14, 1863 (Never sent)

Letter from Meade to Mrs. Meade, July 1863

Letter from Meade to Halleck, July 8, 1863

Citation

http://www.historyplace.com

"Abraham Lincoln" Don Fehrenbacher p. 231, Stanford University Press, 1964 Excerpt from "Drawn with the Sword," James McPherson, pps.170-171. Oxford University Press,1997.

Excerpt from *Lincoln's War* by Geoffrey Perret, pg. 363, Random House, 2004.

Letter from Lincoln to Ulysses S. Grant, April 30, 1864

Donald Fehrenbacher p. 259.

Letter from Ulysses S. Grant to President Lincoln, May 1, 1864.

www.authorama.com/life-of-abraham-lincoln-36.html

Casualty figures from the battles of the Wilderness, Spotsylvania Court House and Petersburg, http://www.americancivilwar.com

Aim/Essential Question: Was Lincoln an effective Commander-in-Chief?

Background Information:

Confederate shore batteries in Charleston opened fire on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, commencing a Civil War that would bleed the nation of 625,000 lives, roughly 2% of the nation's population at that time.

In an effort to better understand military strategy and tactics, Lincoln read books on past battles and wars. In 1862, Lincoln and his newly appointed Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, led a successful weeklong campaign in and around Newport News and Norfolk,

Virginia. An enthusiast for inventions and technology, Lincoln often visited the Washington Naval Yard to witness demonstrations of new weapons.

The commander of all United States military forces at the outbreak of the Civil War was the respected but aged, Winfield Scott. A few months after a Confederate victory at the First Battle of Bull Run on July 21, 1861, Scott would retire, so that a younger general could coordinate command of the Army. The task of finding a competent Union general would be a task of great frustration for Lincoln. It would take him three years to finally find a general whom he believed would fight in a fashion to his liking. From 1861-1864 Lincoln struggled with a parade of military leaders who were unsuited to the task. These included George B. McClellan, Ambrose Burnside, Joseph Hooker and George Meade. Then in 1864 he brought Ulysses S. Grant from the Western Theater. Lincoln appreciated Grant because, as he said, "he fights". The close collaboration between Lincoln and Grant combined with the latter's dogged determination finally led the Union to victory over a determined opponent.

Objectives:

- 1. Students will be able to explain why Lincoln's early appointments of commanders were unsuccessful.
- 2. Students will explore the role played by Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief.
- 3. Students will evaluate Lincoln's effectiveness as Commander-in-Chief.

Motivation: Examine Article II, Section 2 of the Constitution. What power does the President have with regard to military matters? Based on your knowledge of past wars how have presidents used their power as Commander-in-Chief? What criteria would you use to evaluate whether or not a president was an effective Commander-in-Chief?

Procedures:

- 1. Students will play the role of historians in writing an essay evaluating Abraham Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief during the Civil War. On the first day of the lesson, students will:
 - Brainstorm as a class the topic, "What makes a good Commander-in-Chief?" focusing on the criteria described in the Motivation above.
 - Read the documents and take notes related to Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief and draw connections between the lists compiled by students and Lincoln's actions.
 - Answer the questions at the end of each document.
 - Evaluate each of Lincoln's actions in assigning and removing generals.
 - Write a draft of an essay evaluating Abraham Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief.
- 2. On the second day, using their essays as a source for content, the class will participate in a discussion evaluating Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief.
- 3. At the end of the session the class will re-write their essays incorporating new knowledge gained from the lesson.

Discussion Questions:

- 1. After the battle of Antietam where both sides suffered great casualties, Lincoln removed McClellan as Commander of the Army of the Potomac because he failed to pursue the retreating Confederates. Do you believe Lincoln was justified in this action? Explain.
- 2. Was Lincoln justified in his disappointment in George Meade after the Battle of Gettysburg? Why or why not?
- 3. Given the staggering casualties, was Lincoln correct to stick with General Grant in the aftermath of the Battles of the Wilderness and Cold Harbor?
- 4. The media today has brought the horror of war into the living rooms of the American people. With that in mind, do you think Lincoln and Grant could have brought closure to the Civil War in the same way today as they did in 1865?
- 5. Is there evidence in Lincoln's writings that supports the idea that he was a good leader? Explain.

Summary:

Students consult their essays and document notes to select the best argument on whether or not Lincoln was an effective Commander-in-Chief.

Application Questions:

- 1. Research the changes that Lincoln, Grant, and William T. Sherman brought to the concept of war, essentially creating modern total war (war waged against civilians and the economy). To what extent did these three men change the face of warfare?
- 2. Research the battlefield photographs of Mathew Brady, Alexander Gardner, and Timothy O'Sullivan and recreate their respective shows in their New York and Washington, D.C. galleries. Have students role-play the photographers as well as the visitors to the studios. Have the photographers design exhibition brochures and the visitors write newspaper editorials or reviews. How do these photographs depict warfare? How do they depict soldiers?
- 3. Write a letter to an eminent Civil War historian presenting your views on Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief. Ask for a response from the historian.

Class Activity: Organize a class debate around the following hypothesis: Lincoln was a great Commander-in-Chief whose example should be followed today.

DOCUMENTS LINCOLN & MC CLELLAN

Historical Context:

As the Civil War progressed during 1862, a split began to develop between President Abraham Lincoln and General George B. McClellan regarding the direction of the Union Army. Lincoln, as well as his Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, felt that an aggressive approach, particularly with the so-called "Peninsular Campaign" towards Richmond, would lead to a Northern victory. General McClellan, despite his highly regarded abilities as an organizer, was slow-acting and painfully deliberate. On September 17, 1862 the Battle of Antietam would be fought to a tactical draw, but not before 23,110 Americans were either killed, wounded, or listed as missing, making it the single bloodiest day in American history. McClellan's failure to pursue General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, after the battle of Antietam would ultimately lead to his dismissal from the top post in the Union Army. After his removal, McClellan, who was very popular amongst his troops, went on to become the Democratic candidate for President (against his former boss) in 1864. McClellan was against emancipation and had abandoned the Democratic Party's platform on ending the war prior to the election. Subsequently Lincoln defeated him soundly.

Document A

Lincoln to McClellan

Washington, February 3, 1862

My Dear Sir:

You and I have distinct and different plans for the movement of the army of the Potomac... If you will give satisfactory answers to my questions, I shall gladly yield my plans to yours...

Yours, truly, Abraham Lincoln

Document B

Lincoln to McClellan

Major General McClellan. Washington, April 9. 1862

My Dear Sir:

Your dispatches complaining that you are not properly sustained, while they do not offend me, do pain me very much.

I suppose the whole force which has gone forward for you, is with you by this time; and if so, I think it is the precise time for you to strike a blow. By delay the enemy will relatively gain upon you---that is, he will...

I beg to assure you that I have never written you, or spoken to you, in greater kindness of feeling than now, nor with a fuller purpose to sustain you, so far as in my most anxious judgment, I consistently can. *But you must act*.

Yours, very truly,

Abraham Lincoln

Document C

McClellan to Stanton

Headquarters, Army of the Potomac

Camp near Harrison's Landing, Virginia, July 8, 1862

Dear Sir:

...When you were appointed Secretary of War I considered you my intimate friend and confidential advisor. Of all men in the nation you were my choice for that position...

But from the time you took office your official conduct towards me as commander-inchief of the army of the United States, and afterwards as the commander of the Army of the Potomac, was marked by repeated acts done in such manner as to be deeply offensive to my feelings and calculated to affect me injuriously in public estimation.

After commencing the present campaign your concurrence in the withholding of a large portion of my force, so essential to the success of my plans, led me to believe that your mind was warped by a bitter personal prejudice against me...

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

George B. McClellan, Major General Commanding

Document D

McClellan to his wife

July 20...

The President, of course, has not replied to my letter, and never will. His reply may be, however, to avail himself of the first opportunity to cut my head off. I see it reported in this evening's papers that Halleck is to be the new general-in-chief. Now let them take the next step and relieve me, and I shall once more be a free man... I shall have to remove the three stars from my shoulders and put up with two. *Eh bien!* It is all for the best, I doubt not. I hope Halleck will have a more pleasant time in his new position than I did when I held it...

Document E

Lincoln to McClellan

Washington City, D.C.

October 24 [25]. 1862

Majr. General McClellan

I have just read your dispatch about sore tongued and fatigued horses. Will you pardon me for asking what the horses of your army have done since the battle of Antietam that fatigues anything?

A. Lincoln

Document F

Lincoln to Halleck

To Henry W. Halleck

Executive Mansion, Washington, [November 5, 1862].

By direction of the President, it is ordered that Major General McClellan be relieved from the command of the Army of the Potomac; and that Major General Burnside take the command of that Army.

Document G

McClellan to his wife

November 7, 11:30 P.M.

... They brought with them the order relieving me from the command of the Army of the Potomac, and assigning Burnside to the command. No cause is given... Of course I was much surprised... They have made a great mistake. Alas for my poor country! I know in my inmost heart she never had a truer servant... I have done the best I could for my country; to the last I have done my duty as I understand it. That I must have made many mistakes I cannot deny. I do not see any great blunders; but no one can judge of himself...

- 1. How would you characterize the tone of correspondence between Lincoln, McClellan and Stanton throughout 1862?
- 2. What do you see as Lincoln's concern's
- 3. What do you see as McClellan's concerns?
- 4. Based on the evidence, do you feel McClellan's dismissal was justified?
- 5. McClellan states, "of course I was much surprised" (by his removal). Should he have been? Explain.

DOCUMENTS

LINCOLN & MEADE

Historical Context

After the Battle of Chancellorsville, Lee once again invaded the North in an effort to threaten Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, an important rail center or once again to outflank Washington, D.C. The Civil War had been fought for two years by the time the decisive three-day battle of Gettysburg took place. This, the largest battle ever fought in the Western Hemisphere was an important victory for the Union, sometimes referred to as the turning point of the war. Lincoln had appointed General George Gordon Meade to command the Army of the Potomac only days before the battle left over 55,000 casualties. Despite a Union victory Lincoln remained concerned about his army's leadership due to Meade's slowness to pursue Lee's army in order to push for an end to the war. Lincoln wanted more from his commanders than a trade of land and territory; he wanted to restore the Union. In Meade's defense, his desire to give chase to Lee was hampered by rain and inclement weather. Meade had achieved a great military victory

and with it the loss of many soldiers. Lincoln was dissatisfied, nonetheless. As a result, Lincoln drafted the following letter explaining his frustrations to Meade. In the end, however, Lincoln chose not to sign or send the letter.

Document A

Lincoln to Meade

Executive Mansion, Major General Meade Washington, July 14, 1863.

I have just seen your dispatch to Gen. Halleck, asking to be relieved of your command, because of a supposed censure of mine. I am very---very---grateful to you for the magnificient success you gave the cause of the country at Gettysburg; and I am sorry now to be the author of the slightest pain to you. But I was in such deep distress myself that I could not restrain some expression of it. I had been oppressed nearly ever since the battles at Gettysburg, by what appeared to be evidences that yourself, and Gen. Couch, and Gen. Smith, [2] were not seeking a collision with the enemy, but were trying to get him across the river without another battle. What these evidences were, if you please, I hope to tell you at some time, when we shall both feel better. The case, summarily stated is this. You fought and beat the enemy at Gettysburg; and, of course, to say the least, his loss was as great as yours. He retreated; and you did not, as it seemed to me, pressingly pursue him; but a flood in the river detained him, till, by slow degrees, you were again upon him. You had at least twenty thousand veteran troops directly with you, and as many more raw ones within supporting distance, all in addition to those who fought with you at Gettysburg; while it was not possible that he had received a single recruit; and yet you stood and let the flood run down, bridges be built, and the enemy move away at his leisure, without attacking him. And Couch and Smith! The latter left Carlisle in time, upon all ordinary calculation, to have aided you in the last battle at Gettysburg; but he did not arrive. At the end of more than ten days, I believe twelve, under constant urging, he reached Hagerstown from Carlisle, which is not an inch over fifty-five miles, if so much. And Couch's movement was very little different.

Again, my dear general, I do not believe you appreciate the magnitude of the misfortune involved in Lee's escape. He was within your easy grasp, and to have closed upon him would, in connection with our other late successes, have ended the war. As it is, the war will be prolonged indefinitely. If you could not safely attack Lee last Monday, how can you possibly do so South of the river, when you can take with you very few more than two thirds of the force you then had in hand? It would be unreasonable to expect, and I do not expect you can now effect much. Your golden opportunity is gone, and I am distressed immeasurably because of it.

I beg you will not consider this a prosecution, or persecution of yourself. As you had learned that I was dissatisfied, I have thought it best to kindly tell you why.

Document B

Meade to his wife

Lincoln may have wanted too much of Meade. Meade's army was in terrible shape after the battle. They had fought hard, endured heavy casualties and thousands were without shoes. Note his words below in his letter to his wife of July, 1863.

"From the time I took command until today, now over ten days, I have not changed my clothes, have not had a regular night's rest ad many nights not a wink of sleep and for several days did not even wash my face and hands – no regular food and all the time in a state of mental anxiety. Indeed I believe that I have lived in this time as in the last thirty years.

I suffer very much from anxiety and responsibility. I can get no reliable information of the enemy and have to grope my way in the dark – it is wonderful the difficulty in obtaining correct information – I want corps commanders.

It is hard after working as I have and accomplishing as much to be found at fault with for not doing impossibilities."

Document C

Meade to Halleck

The following is an excerpt of a letter written by Meade to General Henry Halleck, Lincoln's principle military advisor at the time.

July 8, 1863, 2 P.M.

"Be assured I most earnestly desire to try the fortunes of war with the enemy on this side of the river, hoping, through Providence and the bravery of my men to settle the question, but I should be wrong not to frankly tell you of the difficulties encountered. I expect to find the enemy in a strong position, ...

I wish in advance to moderate the expectation of those who; in ignorance of the difficulties to be encountered, may expect too much. All I can do under the circumstances, I pledge this Army to do."

Questions:

- 1. In each letter, who does Meade suggest may have unrealistic expectations of the Army?
- 2. From Meade's perspective why should the Army not pursue Lee vigorously?
- 3. Do you think Lincoln sees things more clearly than the generals? Explain.
- 4. Was Lincoln right to place the letter to Meade back in his drawer? Explain why?

DOCUMENTS

LINCOLN & GRANT

Document A

Annotation and Letter to Ulysses S. Grant, July 13, 1863

On July 4, 1863, after more than a month of siege, the Confederate commander in Vicksburg surrendered. Lincoln, gratefully aware that a first rate Union general at last emerged, sent this delightfully informal note of congratulation to the victorious Grant. (Fehrenbacher, p. 231.)

Major General Grant My dear General Grant, July 13, 1863.

I do not remember that you and I ever met personally. I write this now as a grateful acknowledgment for the almost inestimable service you have done the country. I wish to say a word further. When you first reached the vicinity of Vicksburg, I thought you should do, what you finally did---march the troops across the neck, run the batteries with the transports, and thus go below; and I never had any faith, except a general hope that you knew better than I, that the Yazoo Pass expedition, and the like, could succeed. When you got below, and took Port--Gibson, Grand Gulf, and vicinity, I thought you should go down the river and join Gen. Banks; and when you turned Northward East of the Big Black, I feared it was a mistake. I now wish to make the personal acknowledgment that you were right, and I was wrong. Yours very truly

A. LINCOLN

Document B

McPherson analysis regarding Grant and Lee (Drawn With The Sword)

"As Grant departed Washington a year later to set forth on what became from the Wilderness to Appomattox, he told President Lincoln that "whatever happens, there will be no turning back." What happened in the Wilderness, however, might have caused other Northern commanders to turn back; indeed, similar events in the same place caused Joe Hooker to turn back exactly a year earlier. On May 6, Confederate attacks on both flanks drove them back and gave Lee's army an appearance of victory. The next day Grant ordered preparations for a movement. Men in the ranks who had fought the battle

of Chancellosville in these same woods thought it was another retreat. But when they realized that this time they were moving south, the scales fell from their eyes. It was not "another Chancellorsville... another skedaddle" after all. "Our spirits rose," wrote a veteran who recalled this moment as a turning point in the war. "We marched free. The men began to sing." When Grant cantered by one corps, the soldiers recognized him and sent up a cheer. For the first time in a Virginia campaign, the Army of the Potomac was staying on the offensive after its initial battle.

Grant did not tell the story of the men cheering him in his memoirs. Though he kept himself at the center of the story, his memoirs exhibit less egotism than is typical of the genre. Grant is generous with praise of other officers (especially Sherman, Sheridan, and Meade) and sparing with criticism, carping, and backbiting. He is also willing to admit mistakes, most notably: "I have always regretted that the last assault at Cold Harbor was ever made... No advantage whatever was gained to compensate for the heavy loss we sustained.

But Grant did not admit culpability for the heavy Union casualties in the whole campaign of May-June 1864. Nor should he have done so, despite the label of "butcher' and the subsequent analysis of his "campaign of attrition." It did not turn out to e a campaign of attrition, but that was Lee's choice, not Grant's. The Union commander's purpose was to maneuver Lee into an open field for a showdown; Lee's purpose was to prevent this by entrenching an impenetrable line to protect Richmond and his communications. Lee was hoping to hold out long enough and inflict sufficient casualties on attacking Union forces to discourage the people of the North and overturn the Lincoln administration in the 1864 election.

Lee's strategy of attrition almost worked. That it failed in the end was owing mainly to Grant, who stayed the course and turned the attrition factor in his favor. Although Confederates had the advantage of fighting on the defensive most of the time, Grant inflicted almost as high a percentage of casualties on Lee's army as vice versa. Indeed for the war as a whole, Lee's armies suffered a higher casualty rate than Grant's. Neither commander was a "butcher," but measured by that statistic, Grant deserved the label less than Lee."

Document C

Excerpt from Lincoln's War by Geoffrey Perret

"The next morning brought the first reliable reports of a huge bloodletting in the Wilderness. Lincoln was caught by a paroxysm of guilt: another enormous loss of life and nothing gained. "My God! My God! Twenty thousand souls sent to their final account in one day!" he told one congressman. "I cannot bear it!" Speaker of the House Schuyler Colfax found him pacing his office, agitated and wrapped in despair. "Why do we suffer reverses after reverses! Couldn't we have avoided this terrible war! Was it not forced upon us! Is it never to end!" He seemed half convinced that Grant would break off the offensive."

Documents D

Fehrenbacher, p. 259

On March 17th General Grant assumed command of the armies of the United States with headquarters in the field. He was evidently in earnest. As Lincoln had cordially offered help and encouragement to all the other generals, so he did to Grant. The difference between one general and another was not in Lincoln's offer of help, or refusal to give it, but in the way his offers were received. Note the following exchange of letters:

Executive Mansion

Washington, April 30, 1864

Lieutenant General Grant:

Not expecting to see you again before the spring campaign opens, I wish to express in this way my satisfaction with what you have done up to this time, so far as I understand it. The particulars of your plan, I neither know nor seek to know. You are vigilant and self-reliant; and pleased with this, I wish not to obtrude any constraints or restraints upon you. While I am very anxious that any great disaster or capture of our men in great numbers shall be avoided, I know these points will be less likely to escape your attention than they would be mine. If there is anything wanting which is within my power to give, do not fail to let me know it. And now, with a brave army and a just cause, may God sustain you.

Yours very truly, A. Lincoln

Document E

Grant letter to Lincoln (authorama.com)

Headquarters Armies of the United States

Culpepper Court House, May 1, 1864

The President

Your very kind letter of yesterday is just received. The confidence you express for the future and satisfaction with the past in my military administration is acknowledged with pride. It will be my earnest endeavor that you and the country shall not be disappointed. From my first entrance into the volunteer service of the country to the present day, I have

never had a cause of complaint – have never expressed or implied a complaint against the Administration, or the Secretary of War, for throwing any embarrassment in the way of my vigorously prosecuting what appeared to me my duty. Indeed since the promotion which placed me in command of all the armies, and in view of the great responsibility and importance of success, I have been astonished at the readiness with which everything asked for has been yielded, without even an explanation being asked. Should my success be less than I desire and expect, the least I can say is, the fault is not with you.

Very truly, your obedient servant

U.S. Grant, Lieut.-General

CASUALTY CHART

Battle of Antietam, Maryland

Date: September 16-18, 1862

US Commander: Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan

CS Commander: Gen. Robert E. Lee

Forces Engaged: 162,920 total (US 101,895; CS 61, 025)

Casualties: 29,800 total (US 18,400; CS 11, 400)

Winner: Inconclusive

Battle of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

Date: July 1, 2, & 3, 1863

US Commander: Maj. Gen. George G. Meade

CS Commander: Gen. Robert E. Lee

Forces Engaged: 162,920 total (US 101,895; CS 61, 025)

Casualties: 29,800 total (US 18,400; CS 11, 400)

Winner: Union

Battle of Vicksburg, Mississippi

Date: May 18-July 4, 1863

US Commander: Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant CS Commander: Lt. Gen. John C. Pemberton

Forces Engaged: 110,000 total (US 70,000; CS 40,000)

Casualties: 35,825 total (US 4,550; CS 31,275)

Winner: Union

Battle of the Wilderness, Virginia

Date: May 5-7, 1864

US Commander: Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant and Maj. Gen. George G. Meade

CS Commander: Gen. Robert E. Lee

Forces Engaged: 162,920 total (US 101,895; CS 61, 025)

Casualties: 29,800 total (US 18,400; CS 11, 400)

Winner: Inconclusive

Battle of Spotsylvania

Date: May 8-21, 1864

US Commander: Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant and Maj. Gen. George G. Meade

CS Commander: Gen. Robert E. Lee

Forces Engaged: 152,000 total (US 100,000; CS 52,000) Casualties: 30, 000 total (US 18,000; CS 12, 000)

Winner: Inconclusive

Battle of Cold Harbor

Date: June 3, 1864

US Commander: Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant and Maj. Gen. George G. Meade

CS Commander: Gen. Robert E. Lee

Forces Engaged: 168,000 total (US 109,000; CS 59,000)

Casualties: 8,500 total (US 7,000; CS 1,500)

Winner: Confederacy

Battle of Petersburg

Date: June 15-18, 1864

US Commander: Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant and Maj. Gen. George G. Meade

CS Commander: Gen. Robert E. Lee and Gen. P.G.T. Beauregard

Forces Engaged: 104,000 total (US 62,000; CS 42,000)

Casualties: 11, 386 total (US 8,150; CS 3,236)

Winner: Confederacy

Ouestions:

- 1. Why did Lincoln believe that in Grant he had a general who could win the war?
- 2. Examine the chart on the battles of the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, Cold Harbor, and Petersburg. Imagine that you are living in either the Confederacy or a Union States during this time period. How would the outcomes and the casualties in these battles have affected your view of the war? Explain.
- 3. Grant and Lincoln continued the offensive against Lee despite heavy casualties. Were they justified in these actions? Explain.
- 4. In Grant's letter to Lincoln, he implied that the president was an outstanding wartime leader. Would you agree or disagree with Grant's assessment? Explain.
- 5. In your opinion, has the American perception of war and casualties changed today?
- 6. The American Civil War had more casualties than any other war in American history. Was Lincoln right to continue the fight to the end or should he have sought a negotiated peace? Support and defend your answer?