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AMERICAN CIVIL WAR INTELLIGENCE: INTELLIGENCE SUPPORT TO THE ARMY OF THE POTOMAC DURING THE 1862 PENINSULA CAMPAIGN

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ABSTRACT

Learning lessons from intelligence activities in previous conflicts and applying them to future operations is one of the ways in which contemporary military intelligence services continue to improve. The purpose of this essay is more than just simply an historical study of a 19th century military campaign. Its true purpose is to bring to light lessons from the American Civil War that could be applicable to intelligence support to contemporary military operations. This essay argues that intelligence support to the Union Army of the Potomac during the 1862 Peninsula Campaign failed for two reasons. Firstly, the Union Army had a decentralized, dysfunctional intelligence service that proved incapable of providing a consolidated intelligence picture to its commander. Secondly, the mindset and cognitive biases of the Union commander diminished his ability to conduct impartial processing of critical intelligence. These two points form the basis for the lessons to be learned for modern operations. However, the two lessons presented here are not panaceas. Even if they were both fully implemented, intelligence failures would undoubtedly continue in the future.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The intelligence officer who has a due regard for his own morale will do well to pass over the history of the American Civil War.
- Edwin C. Fishel – Civil War intelligence historian and former National Security Agency (NSA) officer

And therefore I say, know the enemy, know yourself; your victory will never be endangered. Know the ground, know the weather; your victory will then be total.

- Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (c. 500 BC)

Intelligence has long been considered one of the cornerstones for military victory. In fact, intelligence has directly impacted warfare since the first wars began over 3,500 years ago.[1] Classical military strategists such as Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, and Jomini are frequently quoted concerning the relationship between good intelligence and success on the battlefield. Since the earliest days of warfare, commanders have expended great effort to discover information concerning the capabilities and intentions of the enemy.[2] Today, it is recognized that, "no [military] operation can be planned with real hope of success until sufficient information on the adversary and environment has been obtained and converted into intelligence."[3] Moreover, the possession of accurate and timely intelligence, "affords the commander a critical advantage over the adversary."[4] In order to maintain that advantage, contemporary armies must be continuously seeking to improve their ability to produce intelligence.

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[1] Milan N. Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare* (Newport, RI: US Naval War College, 2007). III-65.

[2] John Keegan, *Intelligence at War: Knowledge of the Enemy from Napoleon to Al-Qaeda* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003). 7.

[3] Canada. Department of National Defence, *B-GJ-005-300/FP-000 Canadian Forces Operations* (Ottawa, ON: Department of National Defence Canada, 2005). 15-1.

[4] Canada. Department of National Defence, *B-GJ-005-200/FP-000 Joint Intelligence Doctrine* (Ottawa, ON: Department of National Defence Canada, 2003). 1-3.

Learning lessons from intelligence activities in previous conflicts and applying them to future operations is one of the ways in which contemporary military intelligence services continue to improve. It has been a tradition for generations of aspiring military commanders and staff officers to apply critical analysis to the successes and failures of historical military campaigns in order to bring to light valuable contemporary lessons. Robert Epstein, an historian and former professor at the US Army Staff College in Fort Leavenworth, argues that the study of military history is important to today's military planners.[5] Even lessons gleaned from a 19th century war can be applicable today.

This essay will examine the use of intelligence by the Union Army of the Potomac during the 1862 Peninsula Campaign of the American Civil War. Through the examination of the Union intelligence efforts during the Peninsula Campaign, this essay will bring to light two important lessons that are as applicable today as they were almost 150 years ago. Firstly, intelligence efforts must be centralized in order to be effective. Secondly, the impartiality of intelligence can be subconsciously compromised by existing mindsets and cognitive biases.

The Civil War has captured the imagination of Americans like few other events in their history. Approximately 50,000 books have been written on the war,[6] not to mention countless articles, and more recently websites and blogs devoted to the study of the Civil War. Despite the plethora of academic research focusing on the war, the domain of Civil

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[5] Robert M. Epstein, *Napoleon's Last Victory and the Emergence of Modern War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1994). 1. Epstein does caution, however, that one must recognize the fact that each historical case is unique with multiple variables. "The history of warfare must be studied comprehensively – in length, breadth, and context. Any understanding of war must be gleaned from understanding that effectiveness in the conduct of war is always relational." (*Ibid*. 8.)

[6] Frank J. Wetta, "Battles Histories: Reflections on Civil War Military Studies," *Civil War History* 53, no. 3 (September 2007), 229-235. 230.

War intelligence is one area that has received only scant attention. What little has been written on the subject tends to lack academic rigor, and can be best described as mere "cloak-and-dagger stories."[7] Authors have tended to focus on spies and cavalry and neglected the much broader realm of Civil War intelligence. This essay will examine intelligence support to the Union Army of the Potomac from a more holistic perspective taking into account the full spectrum of intelligence activities.

THESIS STATEMENT

This essay will argue that intelligence support to the Army of the Potomac during the 1862 Peninsula Campaign failed for two reasons. Firstly, the Union Army had a decentralized, dysfunctional intelligence service that proved incapable of providing a complete intelligence picture to the commander. Secondly, General George B. McClellan, the Union commander, suffered from preconceptions and biases that diminished his ability to conduct impartial processing of critical intelligence. These preconceptions and biases resulted in McClellan's highly inaccurate estimations of the size of the Confederate Army.

ESSAY OUTLINE

This essay will be divided into five chapters. The remainder of this introductory chapter will present a review of the literature that is available on the subject of Civil War intelligence. It will also provide a theoretical framework of intelligence. The second chapter will provide the background to the topic. It will include a brief biographical sketch of Gen McClellan as well as an overview of the Peninsula Campaign. It will further outline the state of military intelligence in the US Army during the antebellum

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[7] Edwin C. Fishel, "Myths that Never Die," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1988), 27-58. 27.

period. The third chapter will delve into the details of the intelligence support provided to the Army of the Potomac during the campaign. It will look beyond the rudimentary view of intelligence that suggests intelligence is solely concerned with estimating the enemy's capabilities and intentions. It will also look at the importance of centralizing the intelligence effort. Chapter four will focus on the cognitive manner in which people process information. It will begin by providing a conceptual overview of the impact of mindsets and cognitive biases. It will then discuss McClellan's mindset and biases and how they seriously affected his ability to provide impartial intelligence estimates. Finally, the fifth chapter will discuss lessons learned from this study that could be applicable to intelligence support to contemporary military operations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Civil War is the single most written about period in American history.[8] Broadly speaking, the books and articles fit into one of two categories; a history of specific campaigns and battles, or an examination of the political, social, and economic aspects of the war. Non-academic historians have tended to focus on the former category, whereas academics have generally focused on the latter.[9] Given that a study of military intelligence during a specific campaign fits into the first category, there is a relatively limited supply of academic writings on the subject. Moreover, the very nature of intelligence work makes researching the subject difficult. Civil War historians are

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[8] James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988). ix.

[9] Gary W. Gallagher, "Two Ways to Approach One War," *Civil War Times* XLVIII, no. 4 (August 2009), 18-20. 18.

hampered by, “the lack of records, the lack of access to records, and the questionable truth of other records” as they pertain to intelligence during the conflict.[10]

Edwin C. Fishel is one of the few authors to devote considerable effort into researching Civil War intelligence. In addition to being an accomplished historian, Fishel is a professional intelligence officer who formerly served with the US National Security Agency. Thus his writings bring together a combination of academic rigour and practical intelligence knowledge. Until Fishel began his research, there was a significant lack of academic understanding with respect to Civil War intelligence.[11] Following Fishel’s discovery of some previously unknown intelligence-related primary documents, he wrote a book and several articles between 1964 and 1996 chronicling Civil War intelligence. His book, *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War,* is arguably the best source in the field of Civil War intelligence studies. His work has discredited some popular myths, and it has brought clarity to the important, but little known subject of Civil War intelligence. Several other historians such as G.J.A. O’Toole, Peter Maslowski, and John Keegan have also written on intelligence during the Civil War, but not to the same extent as Fishel. While he does not focus specifically on intelligence matters, historian Stephen W. Sears is probably the most renowned author on

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[10] United States. Central Intelligence Agency, "Intelligence in the Civil War," https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/additional-publications/civil-war/Intel_in_the_CW1.pdf (accessed 5 February, 2010). 4.

[11] Stephen W. Sears’ forward to Edwin C. Fishel, *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996). xiii.

McClellan and the Peninsula Campaign. It is impossible to conduct a serious study on either McClellan or the campaign without referring to Sears' works.[12]

Given the limited number of secondary academic sources directly relating to Civil War intelligence, this essay has made significant use of primary resources. The single most comprehensive collection for the entire war is the 128 volume *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies.* These volumes, which were compiled by the US War Department between 1880 and 1901, are the largest collection of official Civil War correspondence and reports. The three volumes covering the Peninsula Campaign total over 3,000 pages. In order to gain insight into McClellan's actions, this essay has relied extensively on the hundreds of telegrams between McClellan and his political superiors in Washington that appear in the *Official Records.* The *Official Records* also include McClellan's campaign After Action Report as well as some of the original intelligence reports that were used during the campaign.[13]

Fortunately for students of McClellan, he devoted a considerable amount of time during, and after the campaign, to record his thoughts. While McClellan was "tireless in the saddle," according to his aide-de-camp, "he was equally indefatigable with the pen."[14] Many of McClellan's writings are contained in his autobiography, *McClellan's*

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[12] Both Fishel and Sears' works were used to a considerable extent in this essay to add context and analysis to the primary sources mentioned below.

[13] Not only are the *Official Records* an exceptional research resource, they are also a fascinating read giving the researcher great insight into the major events of the war and a wonderful sample of 19th century writing style.

[14] Comte de Paris Philippe, "McClellan Organizing the Grand Army," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, eds. Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, Vol. 2 (New York, NY: The Century Company, 1884). 113.

Own Story, which was published posthumously in 1887. A number of the documents contained in *McClellan's Own Story* are repeats from the reporting in the *Official Records*; however, McClellan goes to great length to provide his explanation for the controversial actions he took during the campaign. Most importantly, *McClellan's Own Story* contains numerous private letters written to his wife during the campaign which give excellent insight into McClellan's mindset.

While primary documents are considered to be the most valuable source of information within academic circles, they should still be used with some caution. Military historian Carol Reardon warns us that Civil War primary sources can be contradictory and even wrong. [15] In the worst cases, some of the writers have been deliberately misleading in order to portray themselves in a more positive light.[16] Many of the Civil War "spy" memoirs fit into this category. Most of them are so highly fictionalized that they cannot be considered a reliable source.[17] Given the critical role Allan Pinkerton[18] played in the Peninsula Campaign, his autobiography has been used,

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[15] Carol Reardon, "Writing Battle History: The Challenge of Memory," *Civil War History* 53, no. 3 (September 2007), 252-263. 256. Dr. Reardon offers a particularly telling example of how personal accounts of the same event can vary dramatically. During Pickett's Charge in Gettysburg, a Michigan infantryman, who was well down the line, described the Confederate artillery bombardment as two briefs cannonades, the longer lasted only ten minutes. Two Union Colonels, who were more in the line of fire, stated the bombardment lasted four hours. It is generally accepted the bombardment lasted 90 minutes based on the Confederate's ammunition supply and rate of fire. (*Ibid*. 259.)

[16] Michael P. Musick, "Honorable Reports, Battles, Campaigns, and Skirmishes: Civil War Records and Research," *Prologue* 27, no. 3 (Fall 1995), 259-277.

[17] Fishel, *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War* 2.

[18] As we shall soon see, Pinkerton was McClellan's senior intelligence official during the Peninsula Campaign.

but with the utmost caution since it was clearly written more to glorify himself than to provide factual information.[19]

The fourth chapter of this essay focuses on how humans mentally process information. There has been a significant amount of research done in this field since at least the 1950s. This essay has examined a number of the authors, in particular Richards J. Heuer, Jr, Robert Jervis, and Ziva Kunda. Jervis argues that people are influenced by their expectations, i.e. they see what they expect to see. Kunda argues that through a phenomenon she calls "motivated reasoning," people will arrive at the conclusions they want to arrive at. Finally, Heuer looks at much of the psychological research in the field and applies it directly to the business of intelligence analysis.

This literature review has illustrated that there has been only a limited amount of academic research done on the subject of Civil War intelligence. However, there is a massive amount of general material available along with readily available primary documents. Through a combination of these materials, it is possible to develop an accurate picture of the Army of the Potomac's intelligence efforts.

INTELLIGENCE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For the remainder of this essay, it is important that the reader has a basic understanding of the theory behind military intelligence. Despite popular misconceptions, the practice of intelligence only rarely involves spies behind enemy lines risking their lives to gather information by nefarious means. More accurately, the

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[19] Pinkerton even admits he cannot prove all he has written due to a fire that destroyed all of his paperwork detailing his operations with the Army of the Potomac. (Allan Pinkerton, *The Spy of the Rebellion: Being A True History of the Spy System of the United States Army during the Late Rebellion* (New York, NY: G.W. Dillingham, 1883). 246.)

practice of intelligence is largely a mundane and bureaucratic process.[20] While the actual business of military intelligence is arguably somewhat less exciting than some tend to believe, there can be no doubt of its criticality. Military intelligence is commonly accepted as one of the essential ingredients to military success. Military doctrine asserts that, "knowledge of the operational environment is the precursor to all effective action."[21]

The requirement for good intelligence in military operations is probably rather easy to understand, but producing good intelligence is often very difficult. Ideally, the role of the intelligence staff is to, "extract certainty from uncertainty and to facilitate coherent decision [making] in an incoherent environment."[22] That is clearly a tall order, and in many cases, is impossible to fully achieve. However, that is the ultimate goal of the professional intelligence staff. In order to move towards that ideal, intelligence must be broken down into manageable components. Definitions of intelligence differ slightly depending on the country and service, but generally it can be agreed that intelligence, in a military context, is:

> the product of our knowledge and understanding of the physical environment; weather, demographics and culture of the operational area; the activities, capabilities and intentions of an actual or potential threat, or any other entity or situation with which [the military] is concerned.[23]

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[20] Keegan, *Intelligence at War: Knowledge of the Enemy from Napoleon to Al-Qaeda* 4-5.

[21] United States. Department of the Army, *FM 3-0 Operations* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2008). 7-8.

[22] Richard K. Betts, "Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures are Inevitable," *World Politics* 31, no. 1 (October 1978), 61-89. 69.

[23] Canada. Department of National Defence, *B-GJ-005-200/FP-000 Joint Intelligence Doctrine* 1-1.

This definition is important to keep in mind because it dispels the popular notion that military intelligence is merely concerned with understanding enemy forces and predicting their actions. The realm of intelligence is significantly larger and covers three essential focus areas: 1) the enemy (to include the enemy's capabilities and its intentions); 2) weather (to include both forecasting and the impact of weather on operational forces); and, 3) terrain (to include mapmaking and understanding the impact of terrain features).[24] Each of these three components acts as separate building blocks towards creating "certainty" from uncertain situations. While they are separate building blocks, the information they provide must be seamlessly combined in order to produce a holistic intelligence picture for the commander that simultaneously takes into account all aspects of the operating environment.

Many laymen tend to think of intelligence as merely the collection of information through the use of clandestine means (a.k.a "spying"). In actual fact, the intelligence process is much more complex than that, and it can be best thought of as a four-step cycle.[25] The first step is direction. In this step, the commander determines what type of intelligence he will require in order to conduct his planned military operation. The second step is the actual collection of information in accordance with the previous direction. During the Civil War period, military information was collected using a wide variety means such as hot air balloons, cavalry reconnaissance, interrogating prisoners, and intercepting enemy signals. Once the information has been collected from a variety

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[24] In contemporary counterinsurgency operations, the requirement to understand the terrain has been expanded to include the entire operating environment. For example, the nature of the local civilian population is now an important intelligence consideration. However, during a conventional force-on-force type scenario such as the Civil War, an understanding of the enemy, weather, and terrain is likely sufficient.

[25] *Ibid*. 2-3.

of sources, it must be processed, which is the third step. It is during this processing step that information is actually transformed into militarily relevant intelligence. Processing refers to the fusion and analysis of the previously collected information. As this essay will explore in chapters three and four, it is during the processing step that the intelligence failures largely occurred during the Peninsula Campaign. The fourth, and final, step is dissemination. After all, intelligence is of no value if it is not disseminated to the commanders and decision makers that can act upon it.

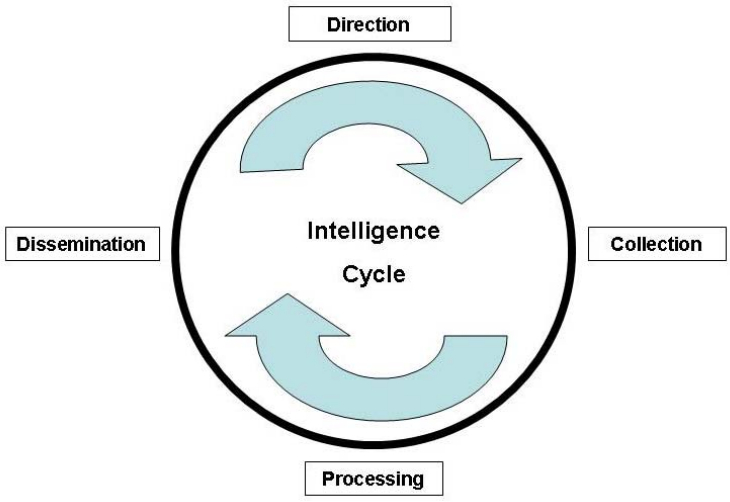

Figure 1: The Intelligence Cycle

As just alluded to, there is a distinction between *information* and *intelligence*. Information refers to anything that can be known, while intelligence is a refined portion of all available information that responds specifically to the commander's needs and stated requirements.[26] The intelligence staff transforms known and collected information into relevant intelligence through a fusion and analytical process. Only once a level of

[26] Amanda J. Gookins, "The Role of Intelligence in Policy Making," *SAIS Review* 28, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 2008), 65-73. 66.

processing has been applied can information be thought of as intelligence. Information should be thought of as data and facts, whereas intelligence is knowledge.[27]

One of the key principles of effective intelligence is the use of an all-source approach to information collecting and processing. Information from as many disparate sources as possible should be used in order to develop the most complete, accurate, and objective picture of the situation.[28] If only single-source information is used, a commander can be easily misled by a piece of inaccurate (or deliberately wrong) information. To guard against this, the intelligence staff should strive to collect as much information as possible from a wide variety of sources. While there are times when only a single source of information is available, the commander must recognize the risk of acting upon it without any corroborating information. The best way to achieve the all-source approach is to centralize the control of intelligence assets. One staff should be responsible to direct all information collectors, and this collected information should be processed at one single point. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, the intelligence effort during the Peninsula Campaign did not follow this all-source approach.

The above section has provided a theoretical framework to military intelligence. It has attempted to dispel the popular misconception that the sole function of intelligence is the clandestine collection of information dealing with enemy forces. In reality, intelligence is a complex four-step process that results in accurate, timely, and relevant knowledge concerning the enemy, weather, and terrain in an operating area.

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[27] During the Civil War era, the two terms were used interchangeably; it was common to use the word information to refer to what we now understand as intelligence and vice-versa. Throughout this essay, the two words will be used according to the contemporary distinction as just described.

[28] Canada. Department of National Defence, *B-GJ-005-200/FP-000 Joint Intelligence Doctrine* 6-5.

CONCLUSION

The overall purpose of this chapter has been to begin laying the groundwork for the remainder of this essay through a literature review and an exploration of the theoretical framework for intelligence. One of the key intentions of this chapter was to explain why conducting an historical study of intelligence can be relevant today. Modern armies are learning organizations that can benefit from the lessons of those that went before them. Some might attempt to argue that the study of 19th century warfare is not relevant to contemporary operations; however, the basic shortcomings of intelligence support during the Peninsula Campaign may still be experienced even today. The following chapter will set the historical scene for the remainder of this essay.

CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND

In order to put the remainder of this essay into perspective, it is important for the reader to have a general understanding of Gen George B. McClellan and the 1862 Peninsula Campaign. This chapter will begin with a short biographical sketch of McClellan focusing on his professional knowledge of intelligence. It will then provide an overview of the actual Peninsula Campaign.

GENERAL GEORGE B. MCCLELLAN

The focus of this campaign is Major General George Brinton McClellan, commander of the Union Army of the Potomac throughout the 1862 Peninsula Campaign. McClellan enjoyed a very high profile, albeit relatively brief career as one of the most senior Union generals during the Civil War. Civil War scholar Stephen W. Sears argues that Gen McClellan was the most influential person in the North during the Civil War period after only President Lincoln and Generals Grant and Sherman.[29] However, McClellan is also one of the more controversial Civil War figures. He has been described as a man "possessed by demons and delusions."[30] He has also been described as a "consummate" general who only failed to achieve a decisive victory because the politicians in Washington conspired against him.[31] The controversy surrounding McClellan is most aptly summarized by former *Civil War History* editor John T. Hubbell when he writes, "the removal of McClellan [as commander of the Army

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[29] Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1999). xi.

[30] *Ibid*. xi.

[31] W. C. Prime, "Biographical Sketch of George B. McClellan," in *McClellan's Own Story: The War for the Union*, ed. George B. McClellan (New York, NY: Charles L. Webster & Company, 1887). 8-13.

of the Potomac] was at once Lincoln's most understandable and possibly the worst advised decision of his tenure as commander in chief."[32]

McClellan began his Army career at the age of 15 when he entered the US Military Academy at West Point. Unfortunately, it is very unlikely that McClellan would have learned very much about the importance of intelligence during his West Point studies. At the time, West Point was regarded first, and foremost, as an engineering school. The purpose of West Point was not to develop professional military officers; its academic programme was designed to produce technically proficient officers to fill the ranks of the Corps of Engineers.[33] Understanding the 'art of war' was an extraordinarily small portion of the four year curriculum since the school's primary purpose was to create lieutenant engineers, not to develop future generals.[34]

Normally, the top graduates at West Point would select the Corps of Engineers upon graduation, and McClellan was no exception. He was commissioned as a lieutenant in the Corps and spent the majority of his pre-war Army career conducting engineering duties. His greatest opportunity to learn about military intelligence came in 1855 when he was sent to Europe to observe the Crimean War and expand his knowledge of the military profession. The French and Russian governments were not particularly

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[32] John T. Hubbell, "To Sum Up," *Civil War History* 50, no. 4 (December 2004), 388-400. 397.

[33] Joseph Ellis and Robert Moore, *School for Soldiers: West Point and the Profession of Arms* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1974). 33. Given the importance of the engineering curriculum it is not surprising that the West Point superintendent, who was always a Corps of Engineers officer during this period, answered directly to the Chief of Engineers for the Army for the management of West Point.

[34] W. J. Wood, *Civil War Generalship: The Art of Command* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1997). 10.

cooperative; however, the British government extended every courtesy to the McClellan party.[35]

In the mid-19th century, the British Army was hardly a stellar example of how to professionally manage intelligence affairs. During this period of British military history, the concept of intelligence was not taught at the Royal Military College, and there were no intelligence doctrine or textbooks in existence because there was a belief that intelligence was nothing more than common military sense. British intelligence historian Jock Haswell notes that during this time, the general belief was that, "there was nothing special about it [intelligence] … any young cavalry officer ought to be able to do this as a routine military duty."[36] Moreover, the idea of collecting intelligence was considered "ungentlemanly," as if the idea of having knowledge of the enemy was somehow cheating.[37] Following the Crimean War, there were a series of scathing reports blasting the British Army for its lack of preparedness to fight a European war due to, amongst other things, a lack of understanding of foreign countries and their armies.[38]

Although McClellan's understanding of military affairs was greatly expanded during his year in Europe, his report hardly mentioned the subject of high command.[39] It is highly unlikely McClellan gained much of an appreciation of the importance of intelligence from his hosts during his European visit. McClellan's military development

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[35] Prime, *Biographical Sketch of George B. McClellan* 2.

[36] Jock Haswell, *British Military Intelligence* (London, UK: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973). 32.

[37] Anthony Clayton, *Forearmed: A History of the Intelligence Corps* (London, UK: Brassey's, 1993). 5.

[38] Haswell, *British Military Intelligence* 30-31.

[39] Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* 48.

as a junior officer ended at this point since he resigned from the Army shortly after completing his European trip report in early 1857. He then embarked on a civilian career as a railroad executive.

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, McClellan returned to the Army and used his political connections to be appointed a major general in the Union Army.[40] At that time, major general was the highest rank in the Army, and McClellan outranked every other Union officer aside from the general-in-chief. Following the Union defeat at Bull Run in the summer of 1861, McClellan was summoned to Washington in July to take command of the Division of the Potomac, which would become the Army of the Potomac, the most powerful of all the Union armies. Displaying some of the arrogance for which he would become famous, McClellan wrote to his wife that Lincoln and others now deferred to him and he had become, "the power of the land."[41] In November 1861, Lincoln named McClellan as the general-in-chief of all the Union armies at the young age of 37. Suddenly, McClellan found himself in a position where he answered only to the Secretary of War and Lincoln himself.

During the months before the commencement of the Peninsula Campaign, McClellan began to fall out of favour with the politicians in Washington.[42] When he finally took to the field in March 1862 to begin the campaign, Lincoln removed him from the position of general-in-chief, ostensibly so McClellan could focus his efforts solely on

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[40] *Ibid*. 72. McClellan had retired from the Army four years earlier at the rank of captain.

[41] George B. McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story: The War for the Union* (New York, NY: Charles L. Webster & Company, 1887). 82.

[42] Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* 147.

commanding the Army of the Potomac.[43] As we shall see in chapter four, McClellan believed that his removal as general-in-chief was one of the first actions taken by the government to ensure his campaign would fail.

McClellan was relieved of command of the Army of the Potomac on 7 November 1862 following the unsuccessful Peninsula Campaign and then his defeat at the Battle of Antietam. He spent the subsequent months working on his After Action Reports and never returned to active duty with the Army. McClellan returned to the public spotlight when he was nominated by the Democratic Party to run against President Lincoln in the presidential election of 1864. Lincoln won that election handily, and McClellan removed himself from public life until he was elected Governor of New Jersey in 1878. Following his single term as governor, McClellan worked on his memoirs until his death in 1885.

Overall, McClellan had a tumultuous career as a military commander. Typical of US Army officers during the antebellum period, McClellan had little opportunity to learn about the importance of intelligence. It was only once he embarked on his grand campaign to save the Union that his lack of intelligence knowledge become highly detrimental.

OVERVIEW OF THE PENINSULA CAMPAIGN

McClellan, always searching for grandiose actions, hoped for a single Waterloo type campaign that would shatter the Confederacy in a single blow.[44] During the winter

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[43] McClellan later indicated that he only learned of his dismissal as general-in-chief through newspapers.

[44] Stephen W. Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992). 6.

months of 1862, McClellan therefore developed a plan to march his Army through Virginia and decapitate the Confederacy by toppling its capital of Richmond.

1862 Peninsula Campaign Timeline

Deployment of the Army of the Potomac	
17 Mar	Embarkation of the Army of the Potomac at Alexandria
1-2 Apr	Headquarters of the Army of the Potomac transferred to Fort Monroe
Army of the Potomac Advances Towards Richmond	
4 Apr	The Army of the Potomac begins its advance up the peninsula
5 Apr – 4 May	Siege of Yorktown
5 May	Battle of Williamsburg
31 May – 1 Jun	Battle of Fair Oaks
Seven Days' Battles	
25 Jun	Battle of Oak Grove
26 Jun	Battle of Beaver Dam Creek
27 Jun	Battle of Gaines' Mill
27 Jun	McClellan orders the Army of the Potomac to retreat to Harrison's Landing
29 Jun	Battle of Savage's Station
30 Jun	Battle of Glendale
1 Jul	Battle of Malvern Hill
Retreat and Redeployment of the Army of the Potomac	
2 Jul	The Army of the Potomac completes its retreat to Harrison's Landing
3 Aug	McClellan ordered to withdraw the Army of the Potomac from the peninsula
26 Aug	The Army of the Potomac completes its withdrawal

Although Richmond lay less than 100 miles south of McClellan's garrison in Washington, McClellan proposed a bold plan that would see his massive Army transported by ship down the Potomac River to Fort Monroe on the mouth of Chesapeake Bay. (See map at Annex A.) The Army would then march from Fort Monroe (which remained in Union hands throughout the war) and conduct an overland campaign to seize the Confederate capital thus ending the war.[45] The campaign, which was fought in south

[45] McClellan's original plan called for the Army to be landed at Urbanna along the Rappahannock River; however, that plan had to be changed once Gen Johnston withdrew his Confederate forces from Manassas in northern Virginia.

eastern Virginia from April to August of 1862, became known as the Peninsula Campaign.[46]

An invasion of this scale had never been seen in the Americas up to this point. In what was referred to as the "stride of a giant," the Union Army of the Potomac landed 121,500 men, 15,600 animals, 1,150 wagons, 44 artillery batteries, and massive amounts of other equipment in Fort Monroe in the last two weeks of March 1862.[47] On the other side, in preparation to defend Richmond from the invading Union force, Confederate General Robert E. Lee eventually assembled the largest Army the South possessed throughout the entire Civil War.[48] In the end, a combined total of nearly a quarter of a million soldiers fought in this five month campaign. It could be argued that if the Union had won the Peninsula Campaign as it was envisaged by McClellan, the entire war would have ended with minimal suffering on either side according to Civil War scholar James McPherson.[49] However, the campaign hardly unfolded as envisaged by McClellan.

The March Towards Richmond

The deployment of the Army of the Potomac was completed without major incident by the first days of April. On 4 April, just 36 hours after completing its deployment to Fort Monroe, the Army of the Potomac began its march up the peninsula towards Richmond. The very next day, the Army reached the Confederate defences at

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[46] The campaign is named after the peninsula of land in Virginia that runs from Fort Monroe in the southeast 80 miles to Richmond in the northwest. The peninsula is flanked on the west by the James River and on the east by the York River. It is only 15 miles wide on average, and at its narrowest point near Yorktown, it is barely over 5 miles wide.

[47] Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* 168.

[48] Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign* 156.

[49] McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* 490.

Yorktown and stalled. Gen Magruder, the Confederate commander at Yorktown did an excellent job of convincing McClellan that there were far more than the mere 13,000 Confederates actually protecting the Yorktown lines. Despite having an Army of over 120,000 at his disposal, McClellan willingly accepted the "fact" that the Confederate defences were too strong, so he decided to lay siege to Yorktown.[50] One month later on 4 May, the Confederates determined that they could no longer hold the line and quietly withdrew from Yorktown and began retreating towards Richmond. That Sunday morning, information collectors onboard a balloon reported that the Confederates had evacuated Yorktown during the previous night.

After this one month delay, the Army of the Potomac finally resumed its march up the peninsula engaging Confederate forces on 5 May in the vicinity of Williamsburg, a battle that was characterized as an accident by McClellan.[51] After a short battle that was won by the Union, the Confederates resumed their retreat towards Richmond with McClellan in pursuit. The two Armies next met on 31 May in an area called Fair Oaks, appropriately six miles outside of Richmond. The Confederates under Gen Johnston went on the offensive and attacked McClellan's forces as they neared the outskirts of the capital. The fighting was so close to Richmond that residents could hear the gunfire and see smoke from the battle. The most significant aspect of the Battle of Fair Oaks[52] was the serious wounding of Gen Johnston and the subsequent assumption of command of the

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[50] Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* 178.

[51] McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story: The War for the Union* 324.

[52] Many Civil War battles have two names. For example, the Battle of Fair Oaks is also known in the South as the Battle of Seven Pines. The Union usually named a battle after nearby geographic features such as a river. The Confederates normally named a battle after a nearby town. Given that this essay is from the Union perspective, it will use the Union names for the battles.

Confederate Army of Northern Virginia by Gen Robert E. Lee. McClellan had previously written Lincoln and stated, "I prefer Lee to Johnston – the former is too cautious and weak under grave responsibility."[53] It is unclear how McClellan came to that assessment of Lee; however, it was quite ironic given that Lee would prove to be highly decisive in the coming weeks whereas it would be McClellan that was extremely cautious.

The Seven Days' Battles

The next month saw only sporadic fighting in the vicinity of Richmond. McClellan had placed his Army on both sides of the Chickahominy River which would prove to be disastrous. Beginning on 25 June, the two sides fought a series of six battles that would become known as the Seven Days' Battles. (See map at Annex B.) The Seven Days' Battles would ultimately be the decisive week of the campaign. The Seven Days began when a fight between opposing pickets broke out at Oak Grove. The minor conflict was a Union victory, and the casualties on both sides totalled slightly over 1,000 men, which was very minor compared to the fighting that lay ahead.[54]

The next day, 26 June, marked the beginning of McClellan's defeat on the peninsula. Lee, determined that his forces could not withstand a siege by the massive Army of the Potomac, decided to split his Confederate Army and go on the offensive. Believing that McClellan was too timid to attack, Lee left less than 30,000 Confederate troops to protect Richmond against the 76,000 Union troops that had amassed south of

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[53] Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* 180.

[54] Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign* 189.

the Chickahominy River. [55] Lee moved the main body of his Army of Northern Virginia north of the Chickahominy in an attempt to cut off McClellan's supply line that ran from West Point Landing. The Confederates attacked the Union forces north of the Chickahominy at Beaver Dam Creek, but it was the superior Union forces that prevailed. Despite the Union victory, and the very small number of Confederates actually left directly protecting Richmond, McClellan missed the opportunity to attack Richmond because he incorrectly believed that he was outnumbered on all fronts.[56] Immediately following the battle, McClellan wrote to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton that, "victory of today complete and against great odds. I almost begin to think we are invincible."[57] And yet, rather than go on the offensive following his victory, McClellan actually decided to retreat in order to reconsolidate all of his forces south of the Chickahominy.

The following day, 27 June, Lee continued his offensive at Gaines' Mill. For the first and only time during the Seven Days, the Confederates won a tactical victory. Over 15,000 men were lost during nine hours of fighting that resulted in the continued retreat of the Union Army. It must be remembered that McClellan's forces actually outnumbered the Confederates in front of Richmond, and McClellan could likely have overwhelmed that meagre defence if he had taken the initiative. Failing to realize he significantly outnumbered the Confederates, McClellan instead moved to regroup his

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[55] *Ibid*. 195.

[56] *Ibid*. 203.

[57] United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 3* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1884). 260.

entire Army and retreat across the peninsula to Harrison's Landing where his forces would be under the protection of Union gunboats on the James River.[58]

Lee, determined to destroy the Army of the Potomac, continued to attack during McClellan's retreat. On 29 June and 30 June, the Confederates attacked the rear of the retreating columns in Savage's Station and Glendale respectively. Both times, the Union won the battle, but continued retreating towards the safety of the James.

The first day of July marked the final day of the Seven Days' Battles. For the first and only time during the Seven Days, the entire Confederate and Union Armies were in the same location. Although the Army of the Potomac was well established atop Malvern Hill, Lee remained determined to destroy the Union forces before they retreated under the shield of the gunboats. While the Union forces were clearly superior and in a better position, Lee assessed that they were demoralized and would not withstand a final assault. Lee was correct that McClellan was demoralized, but that did not extend to his troops.[59] During the assault across open ground to Malvern Hill, the Confederates lost 5,650 men, more than double the Union numbers, and failed to take the Union position.[60] Following the clear Union victory, the Union troops and subordinate commanders were greatly surprised when McClellan ordered the continued retreat to Harrison's Landing.[61] In his After Action Report, McClellan later wrote that, "although the result of the battle

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[58] McClellan was so desperate to retreat rapidly that he ordered, "all tents and all articles not indispensable to the safety or maintenance of the troops must be abandoned and destroyed." He even ordered, "the sick and wounded that are not able to walk must necessarily be left." (*Ibid*. 272.)

[59] McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* 469-470.

[60] *Ibid*. 470.

[61] Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign* 337.

of Malvern was a complete victory, it was nevertheless necessary to fall back still further [to where his supplies could be assured]."[62]

The End of the Campaign

On 2 July, the Army of the Potomac reached the safety of Harrison's Landing which effectively ended the Peninsula Campaign. The Army remained there with McClellan repeatedly reporting to Washington that he was outnumbered and required reinforcements before he could resume the offensive. On 3 July, McClellan wrote to Stanton stating that he needed more than 100,000 additional reinforcements in order to capture Richmond.[63] Lincoln continued to urge McClellan to resume the offensive,[64] but finally on 3 August Lincoln became convinced that McClellan would not resume his operation so he ordered the complete withdrawal of the Army of the Potomac from the peninsula. The withdrawal was completed on 26 August.

CONCLUSION

The end of the Peninsula Campaign meant the end of pressure on Richmond until 1864. In fact, the Union forces would not again come so close to Richmond until the end of the war in April 1865 when the victorious Union forces occupied the Confederate capital following the final defeat of Gen Robert E. Lee by Gen Ulysses S. Grant. In the end, the 160 day Peninsula Campaign was not considered to be a success by either side.

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[62] United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 1* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1884). 70.

[63] United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 3* 292.

[64] For example, on 4 July Lincoln ended a letter to McClellan with, "P.S. – If at any time you feel able to take the offensive you are not restrained from doing so." (United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 1* 73.)

Although the tactical defeat at Gaines' Mill was the only one suffered by the Union, McClellan failed in his objective to capture Richmond and end the war with a single Waterloo type operation. On the other side, Lee was able to save Richmond, but he failed in his desire to destroy the Army of the Potomac. Of the 250,000 men on both sides that participated in the indecisive campaign, nearly one quarter would become casualties, and the war would continue for nearly another three years.[65]

The failure of the Army of the Potomac to successfully capture Richmond cannot be blamed solely on poor intelligence. However, poor intelligence did play an important contributing role in the failure. Until the final days of the campaign, McClellan had convinced himself that he was constantly outnumbered by the Confederates. Despite winning all but one of the tactical engagements, this belief prevented McClellan from seizing the initiative and attacking the numerically inferior Confederates. While it is impossible to accurately predict what would have been the outcome had McClellan gone on the offensive outside Richmond, it is clear that McClellan had a clear numerical advantage throughout the campaign. In the next chapter, this essay will begin to explore the reasons behind McClellan's famously inaccurate intelligence.

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[65] Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign* 355.

CHAPTER 3: WHAT WENT WRONG?

As described in chapter two, the Peninsula Campaign could hardly be described as a success for McClellan and the Army of the Potomac. While the entire campaign failure certainly cannot be blamed on poor intelligence, the lack of accurate intelligence was indeed a contributing factor. Chapter one described intelligence as a combination of knowledge pertaining to three important components – weather, terrain, and the enemy. This chapter will look at each of those three components with respect to the Peninsula Campaign. It will argue that McClellan's Army failed to produce sufficient knowledge in any of the three components. One of the greatest reasons for this failure was the absence of a dedicated intelligence staff that was capable of directing information collection and then processing the information into timely, accurate, and relevant intelligence for the commander. While a significant amount of effort was made to collect tactical battlefield information, limited thought appears to have been given to how to process the collected information into useable intelligence.

WEATHER

The impact of weather on the battlefield has been recognized by military commanders throughout the ages, and it is no exaggeration to say that battles at sea and on land have been won or lost depending on weather conditions. On frequent occasions throughout the Civil War, heavy rains swelled rivers and turned dirt roads into mud pits making the terrain impassable for soldiers and especially towed artillery pieces. Oppressive southern heat limited soldiers' ability to march long distances, particularly for northern soldiers unaccustomed to such high temperatures and humidity. The ability to forecast the weather and predict its impact on military operations is considered an

essential part of military planning. For this reason, weather has been included as one of the three essential components of military intelligence.

From the earliest days of the Peninsula Campaign, the Virginia peninsula experienced much higher than usual rainfall. This rainfall quickly made the roads virtually impassable for the Union artillery, and even the infantry, for significant periods of time.[66] Throughout the months of April, May, and June, McClellan made frequent reference to the weather and the adverse impact it was having on his ability to manoeuvre his forces.[67]

In addition to greatly slowing the advance of the Army of the Potomac, the weather had another strategic impact during the campaign. In order to link-up with possible reinforcements, McClellan was forced to position his Army on both sides of the Chickahominy River which divides the peninsula north-south on the outskirts of Richmond. During normal times, the Chickahominy is a slow moving river approximately 40 feet wide; however, heavy rains would transform the river into a violent volume of water that was absolutely impassable except with extensive bridging.[68] The heavy rains in May and June destroyed several of the bridges built by the Union forces and isolated the two portions of the Union Army on either side of the river. McClellan felt he could not attack Richmond with his Army separated on two sides of an

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[66] United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 1* 10.

[67] See for example *Ibid*. 23, 31, 38, 43, and 46; United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 3* 79 and 193.

[68] George B. McClellan, "The Peninsular Campaign," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, eds. Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, Vol. 2 (New York, NY: The Century Company, 1884). 174-175.

impassable river, so he decided not to pursue the Confederates following their loss at Fair Oaks.[69] This decision had potential far reaching ramifications on how the rest of the campaign unfolded.

Had McClellan been able to forecast the weather, he might not have placed his forces in such a vulnerable position on both sides of the Chickahominy. Unfortunately for McClellan, meteorology was still in its infancy in the United States at the time of the Civil War. In 1849, the Smithsonian Institution began collecting weather observations from observers scattered across key locations in the US. This information was passed to the Smithsonian using a relatively new technology – the telegraph. With this information in hand, the Smithsonian was able to better understand weather patterns as they developed and was able to provide some warning of approaching storms.[70] At the beginning of hostilities in 1861, there were 616 weather observers across the United States and parts of Canada reporting to the Smithsonian.[71] This system of weather observation, and rudimentary forecasting, was however suspended with the beginning of the Civil War as reporting from the South to Washington became unfeasible, and telegraph wires, "from the North and West being so entirely occupied by public business [presumably the war effort] that no use of them could be obtained for scientific

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[69] United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 1* 43-44.

[70] United States. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, "Meteorology," http://www.history.noaa.gov/stories_tales/meteorology.html (accessed 22 June, 2009).

[71] Eric R. Miller, "The Evolution of Meteorological Institutions in the United States," *Monthly Weather Review* 59, no. 1 (January 1931), 1-6. 3.

purposes."[72] While these telegraph observations were temporarily resumed during the war, it was not until the end of the war that they recommenced in earnest. As such, the Civil War commanders were unable to forecast any weather phenomenon that could have had an operational impact on their forces.

As a result of the rudimentary state of meteorology in the mid-19th century, McClellan cannot be blamed for his failure to predict the dire impact that the weather would have on his campaign. The same cannot be said for terrain, the second component of military intelligence.

TERRAIN

The second essential component of military intelligence is the understanding of the terrain in the operating area. The importance of terrain and its impact on military operations is well understood by armies around the world. Commanders must know as much as possible about the battlefield terrain if they hope to operate effectively upon it.[73] The terrain has enormous effects on the way an army prepares for offensive or defensive operations. Generally speaking, the terrain influences an army's ability to construct defensive positions, manoeuvre, conceal itself, and observe the enemy.[74]

Common sense would suggest that before conducting an operation, the commander should have a solid understanding of the terrain and the impact it could have

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[72] United States. Smithsonian Institution. *Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution showing the Operations, Expenditure, and Condition of the Institution for the year 1861*. (Washington DC: George W. Bowman, Printer, 1861), 35, quoted in United States. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, *Meteorology*.

[73] Canada. Department of National Defence, *B-GL-361-015/FP-001 Geomatics Support* (Ottawa, ON: Department of National Defence, 2004). 35-36.

[74] For an in-depth study of the importance of terrain and its impact on contemporary military operations see United States. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *JP 2-01.3 Joint Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Joint Intelligence Preparation of the Battlespace* (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 24 May 2000). II-8 – II-44.

on his forces. In the planning stages for the Peninsula Campaign, the Union information collection effort was rather unfocused. The terrain study done by the Army of the Potomac was superficial and faulty in some key areas. For example, the terrain study stated that the peninsula consisted of "good natural roads" that were sandy and well drained.[75] As indicated above, this was clearly not the case.

Understanding the terrain normally begins with a detailed map study; however, McClellan lacked accurate maps of the peninsula region.[76] In the lead-up to the Civil War, the American landmass had still not been fully mapped. Specific routes for commerce and exploration had been mapped, but there was no comprehensive and accurate survey of the entire US.[77] McClellan's maps were so faulty that he did not even know the path of the Warwick River near Yorktown which proved to be a significant obstacle to the Union advance.[78] McClellan, realizing the severity of the situation, requested an additional 8-10 topographical engineers be sent to his Army in order to accurately map the terrain and road network between Williamsburg and Richmond.[79]

McClellan was fortunate to have a young private in his Army that showed a natural ability for mapmaking. Private Babcock conducted personal scouting during the campaign in order to create detailed tactical maps which were of great value to

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[75] Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign* 10-11.

[76] It is ironic that McClellan went into battle lacking accurate maps given that previously in his Army career he had been part of two major map making expeditions in western US.

[77] Keegan, *Intelligence at War: Knowledge of the Enemy from Napoleon to Al-Qaeda* 75-77.

[78] McClellan, *The Peninsular Campaign* 169.

[79] Ethan S. Rafuse, *McClellan's War: The Failure of Moderation in the Struggle for the Union* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005). 212.

McClellan's forces.[80] However, the lack of an adequate understanding of the road network continued to plague his Army. During the Army's retreat following the Battle of Gaines' Mill on 27 June, poor knowledge of the roads greatly slowed the Army's retreat and allowed the Confederates to engage the retreating Union soldiers.[81]

Given that the Confederates were fighting in their own territory, they possessed a much more intimate knowledge of the local terrain features. Following the campaign, McClellan recognized the significant disadvantage his Army experienced as a result of its limited knowledge of the terrain. In his memoirs, he lamented about this writing, "it may be broadly stated that we had no military maps of any value. This was one of our greatest difficulties."[82]

ENEMY

The third essential component of military intelligence is an understanding of the enemy's intentions and capabilities. While it is impossible to predict all enemy actions, a commander must make every effort to understand the enemy's intentions given the situation at hand. McClellan was very accurate in his assessment of the Confederates' intentions with respect to the defence of Richmond. McClellan correctly assessed that Richmond was the centre of gravity for the Confederate cause, and thus the Confederates would defend the city with as many troops as it could reasonably spare from across the

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[80] Fishel, *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War* 153-154. Babcock would eventually become the chief of intelligence for the Army of the Potomac before the end of the war.

[81] Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign* 257.

[82] McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story: The War for the Union* 253.

South.[83] Confederate commander Gen Robert E. Lee was indeed fully committed to the defence of Richmond in 1862. Lee recognized that the fall of Richmond during the Seven Days would have been a fatal blow to the Confederacy, and it was only his Army of Northern Virginia that could prevent that loss.[84] Lee had no intention to withdraw from Richmond and was prepared to fight the Union to save the capital, which in turn would save the Confederacy.

While McClellan was quite correct in his assessment of the enemy's intentions, he was well off the mark with respect to the enemy's capabilities. Enemy capabilities refer to the number, state of equipment, and quality of soldiers an adversary brings to the field. The single greatest intelligence failure by the Army of the Potomac during the Peninsula Campaign came in the form of estimating the Confederates' troop strength. McClellan had a penchant for wildly overestimating the strength of the Confederate forces he faced. In telegram after telegram, McClellan reported to Washington estimates that overstated the strength of the Confederates by more than a factor of two. In the words of Stephen W. Sears, "McClellan was beaten in the battle for Richmond by an army that existed only in his mind's eye."[85]

Shortly after taking command of the Army of the Potomac, and months before the beginning of the Peninsula Campaign, McClellan estimated the strength of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia to be 100,000, which was almost three times its

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[83] *Ibid*. 344.

[84] Joseph L. Harsh, *Confederate Tide Rising: Robert E. Lee and the Making of Southern Strategy 1861-1862* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1998). 64-65.

[85] Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* 226.

actual strength at the time.[86] As the campaign approached, and the need rose for more accurate intelligence, McClellan continued to drastically overestimate the number of Confederates. He reported to Secretary of War Stanton that the Confederate Army between Richmond and Washington numbered 102,500; the actual number was 48,000.[87] While McClellan's assessment had improved somewhat, he still overestimated the Confederate strength by more than a factor of two.

As the Union Army was sailing towards Fort Monroe to begin the Peninsula Campaign, one of McClellan's generals reported that the Confederates numbered between 15,000 and 20,000 in the defence of Yorktown.[88] McClellan reported the number of 15,000 to Stanton the following day, which proved to be quite accurate given the actual strength of the Confederates was 13,600.[89] Unfortunately for the Union, this was the first and only time throughout the entire campaign that McClellan reported accurate intelligence on the strength of the Confederate forces.[90] His reporting from then on returned to drastic overestimations.

Just over a week later on 7 April, McClellan suddenly reported to Lincoln that, "I shall have the whole force of the enemy on my hands – probably not less than 100,000

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[86] Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign* 98.

[87] Fishel, *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War* 141.

[88] United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 3* 47.

[89] Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign* 30.

[90] *Ibid*. 30.

men, and probably more."[91] Often prone to hyperbole, McClellan stated that, "the line in front of us is therefore one of the strongest ever opposed to an invading force in any country."[92] It is difficult to believe that the Confederate force grew from 15,000 to over 100,000 in only eight days. Yet, McClellan somehow believed it to be fact. The Confederates had indeed reinforced their defences at Yorktown, but they actually numbered only 34,400 at that point and would never grow beyond 57,000 during the month long siege of Yorktown that ended in early May.[93]

Throughout the rest of the campaign, McClellan continued to grossly overestimate the number of forces he faced. He consistently reported that he was seriously outnumbered by an entrenched enemy. After virtually every battle, McClellan claimed victory in the face of superior forces. On 8 May, he reported Confederate forces of 80,000-120,000[94] and then nearly 140,000 only two days later.[95] Somehow the Confederates managed to increase their forces by 20,000-60,000 in a mere two days according to McClellan's estimates.

By the end of the Seven Days' Battles, McClellan was convinced that the Confederate Army had somehow grown again, and he amazingly reported to Lincoln that

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[91] United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 1* 11.

[92] *Ibid*. 13.

[93] Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign* 45, 60. It begs the question why the Confederates would evacuate Yorktown if so strong. McClellan should have begun questioning the accuracy of his assessments, but he did not. He does not really explain his reasoning in his After Action Report or his memoirs.

[94] United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 3* 151.

[95] United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 1* 26.

his Army now faced 200,000 Confederates.[96] In actual fact, the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia never numbered more than 92,400 at any point during the entire campaign, which was the largest Army Lee would ever field for the entire Civil War.[97] When compared to McClellan's Army that numbered 117,721 at its lowest point in the campaign, McClellan was never outnumbered at any time during the campaign.[98]

One must question how McClellan could possibly have been so inaccurate in his official estimates of the Confederates forces. The first shortcoming was the way McClellan organized his intelligence service. The remainder of this chapter will discuss how the Army of the Potomac was structured to collect and process intelligence. It will argue that McClellan's Army had a relatively wide variety of information collection assets; however, the intelligence service was poorly organized and therefore did not take full advantage of the information being collected.

INTELLIGENCE STRUCTURE

There is a common misconception that most intelligence failures throughout history have been the result of an insufficient collection of information – if only we had more information we would have better understood the enemy's intentions and capabilities. Intelligence professional Richards Heuer Jr. makes the bold assertion that, "major intelligence failures are usually caused by failures of analysis, not failures of

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[96] United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 3* 315.

[97] Fishel, *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War* 160.

[98] The strength of the Army of the Potomac was at its lowest on 13 April when it numbered 117,721. (United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 3* 97.) It reached its highest point on 20 July when it numbered 158,314. (*Ibid*. 329.) Of note, these numbers are an aggregate total which includes soldiers not ready for duty (such as wounded).

collection."[99] That is to say, an intelligence service cannot afford to focus too much of its effort solely on collection. Information collection is unhelpful if it is not properly analyzed and put into context for the commander. In intelligence jargon, the intelligence staff must be prepared to provide the commander with the "so what" from the flood of incoming information.

McClellan had not organized his staff to ensure he would be provided a complete intelligence picture. What little focus he placed on intelligence almost exclusively concentrated on collection; there is no evidence that he afforded much thought about how to transform the collected information into useable intelligence. By contemporary standards, it is inconceivable that an army would plan and conduct a major operation without a fully functioning intelligence service. Despite the fact that McClellan commanded the Army of the Potomac for months before embarking on the Peninsula Campaign, he put only limited effort into establishing a robust intelligence capability for his Army. While that may be shocking today, it was hardly surprising during the early years of the Civil War given the very rudimentary understanding of intelligence up to that point in American history.

Pre-War Intelligence Doctrine

The United States initially began with a very solid footing with respect to understanding the need for military intelligence beginning with General George Washington. Gen George Washington, then commander of the Continental Army, has been recognized as an extremely accomplished intelligence manager during the American

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[99] Richards J. Jr Heuer, *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 1999). 65.

War of Independence. [100] Despite the auspicious beginnings of intelligence in the United States, and the successes of Washington's efforts during the War of Independence, he failed in one key area – as president, he did not establish a permanent intelligence service that would perpetuate the intelligence mindset in the newly formed country.[101] Over the next century, those few people that felt the US needed a standing intelligence capability ran up against the prevailing mentality that military intelligence, like the military itself, is only required in times of emergency.[102]

When the Civil War broke out in April 1861, the Union was woefully unprepared for war with regard to intelligence matters. It had no intelligence doctrine and no intelligence corps or even officers that were trained intelligence operators.[103] In fact, in the first half of the 19th century, intelligence as a function did not exist within the US Army.[104] When the war began, the Army was organized according to the *Revised United States Army Regulations of 1861*. The nearly 600 page doctrine manual describes the roles of a number of line and staff functions such as artillery, infantry, cavalry,

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[100] Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *Cloak and Dollar*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003). 11. Through Washington's efforts, the Continental Army's intelligence service had many of the hallmarks of a contemporary intelligence organization such as espionage, counterintelligence, operational security, code-breaking, surveillance, and reconnaissance. (Prather, Lieutenant Commander Michael S., *George Washington, America's First Director of Military Intelligence* (Quantico, VA: United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College Master of Military Studies Thesis, 2002). 32.)

[101] Jeffreys-Jones, *Cloak and Dollar* 21. Interestingly, President Washington and Congress established a Secret Service Fund in 1790 that was largely for foreign intelligence purposes. By 1793, it had grown to over $1 million which represented about 12% of the federal budget. (Christopher Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995). 11.)

[102] Charles D. Ameringer, *US Foreign Intelligence* (Toronto, ON: Lexington Books, 1990). 27.

[103] Fishel, *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War* 8.

[104] Major Todd T. Morgan, *Tactical Intelligence in the Army of the Potomac during the Overland Campaign* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army Command and General Staff College Master of Military Art and Science Thesis, 2004). 13.

engineers, ordnance, chaplains, quartermasters, medical, and pay clerks; however, there is no mention of an intelligence organization or officer responsible for the provision of intelligence to the commander. [105]

While planning an attack, the manual acknowledges the importance of knowing the "supposed plan of the enemy,"[106] but it does not articulate how that knowledge was to be developed or who was responsible for understanding the enemy's plan. The section concerning "troops in campaign" details how reconnaissance parties and "grand guards" should collect information pertaining to the enemy and the terrain, yet no thought appears to have been given to how that information should be integrated by the staff in order to build an accurate intelligence picture. [107] Intelligence appears to have been relegated to merely an uncoordinated information collection activity done largely by infantry and cavalry forces.

Civil War Intelligence Staffs

Due largely to the lack of intelligence training or doctrine in the antebellum US Army, there was absolutely no standardization of intelligence staffs during the Civil War. Intelligence was not considered to be a core portion of an army, and each commander was left to his own devices with respect to establishing an intelligence service. Amazingly, each commander was actually responsible to develop and even hire his own

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[105] United States. War Department, *Revised United States Army Regulations of 1861* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1863). 1-594. It is interesting to note that these *Revised Army Regulations of 1861* were republished in 1863, and despite two years of wartime experience, the concept of an intelligence organization remained conspicuously absent.

[106] *Ibid*. 105.

[107] *Ibid*. 88-96. Examination of this doctrine manual provides fascinating insight into the mentality of the US Army of the mid-19th century. While very little thought was given to intelligence, it offers detailed instruction on how to mow the lawn of Army fortifications.

intelligence staff.[108] As a result, the manner in which intelligence was provided to a commander depended upon the level of importance the individual commander personally attached to the function. This lack of standardization even went as high as the office of the president. Lincoln personally hired his own intelligence agent and paid for his reports on dispositions of Confederate troops in order to verify what his field commanders were telling him.[109]

This lack of standardization may have worked in the peacetime, antebellum Army; however, the onset of the Civil War saw an incredible increase in the demand for timely, accurate, and relevant battlefield intelligence. As a result, the number and complexity of information collection sources increased before the Army was prepared to handle the sudden increase in battlefield information. When most Civil War historians discuss intelligence during the war, they tend to focus on only two methods of information collection; espionage (a.k.a. spying) and cavalry reconnaissance. In actual fact, there was a wide variety of information collection methods that were employed by the Army of the Potomac during the Peninsula Campaign.

One of the more interesting methods of information collection during the campaign was hot air balloons. When the Army of the Potomac landed on the peninsula, it brought with it three hot air balloons. [110] The primary purpose of the balloons was to

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[108] Fishel, *Myths that Never Die*, 27-58. 29.

[109] United States. Central Intelligence Agency, *Intelligence in the Civil War* 17.

[110] The three balloons were under the direction of a civilian named Thaddeus Lowe who personally developed the balloon service. Lowe and his balloonists were not part of the Army. They were civilians under contract to the Army to fly their balloons and collect information. In a dispute over pay, Lowe and his balloonists resigned in April 1863. This ended the use of balloons by the Union for the remainder of the war.

collect visual information on enemy troop dispositions and assist in mapmaking. Troop numbers could be estimated by counting the tents, and at longer distances, smoke from the campfires could be used to estimate troop strength and position.[111] A second source of information for McClellan was provided by newspapers. Throughout the Civil War, newspapers provided an important source of military and political information for both sides of the conflict. A third information source during the Peninsula Campaign was Signals Intelligence (SIGINT). A key component of SIGINT is the interception of communications by those who are not the intended recipients.[112] Both Union and Confederate signals officers realized that they could readily intercept the enemy's visual flag and torch communications and thus SIGINT collection spontaneously began. Both sides attempted to develop ciphers to prohibit enemy intelligence collection; however, the ciphers were so rudimentary that they were easily broken.[113] Human Intelligence (HUMINT), the fourth information collection discipline, probably provided more information than the previous three combined. HUMINT included information that was collected by espionage, interrogation of prisoners-of-war, and interviews with knowledgeable citizens. The vast majority of HUMINT gleaned during the campaign came from the interrogation of Confederate prisoners, deserters, and contraband.[114] In fact, interrogation of prisoners and deserters was the single greatest producer of

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[111] F. Stansbury Haydon, *Military Ballooning during the Early Civil War*, Johns Hopkins Paperbacks ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000). 315.

[112] Canada. Department of National Defence, *B-GJ-005-200/FP-000 Joint Intelligence Doctrine* 2-16.

[113] G. J. A. O'Toole, *Honorable Treachery: A History of US Intelligence, Espionage, and Covert Action from the American Revolution to the CIA* (New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1991). 136-137.

[114] Contraband was a common term used by the Union during the Civil War for slaves.

intelligence in the early years of the Civil War.[115] The final information collection source for McClellan was cavalry reconnaissance. Cavalry reconnaissance eventually became the most important source of intelligence throughout the course of the Civil War.[116] It gave the type of tactical intelligence the commanders on the ground required – enemy dispositions and terrain. Unfortunately for McClellan, the Union cavalry at the time of the Peninsula Campaign was not particularly effective in its vital information collection role.[117]

As the preceding paragraph has illustrated, information collection even during the Civil War was complex and involved numerous sources. During the campaign, McClellan would have likely received hundreds of individual information reports from a wide variety of sources including balloons, newspapers, SIGINT, HUMINT, and cavalry reconnaissance. Many of these reports would be confusing, and many would even be contradictory. These hundreds of reports would have to be confirmed, deconflicted, and analyzed in order to produce a consolidated, accurate intelligence picture. In order to achieve that, a centralized all-source intelligence service was required.

Centralized Intelligence Service

Chapter one stated that one of the key fundamental principles of effective intelligence is centralization. One staff should be responsible to manage all four steps in the intelligence cycle. This staff must be capable of determining the commander's information gaps on weather, terrain, and the enemy and then translating those gaps into

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[115] Fishel, *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War* 5.

[116] Fishel, *Myths that Never Die*, 27-58. 50.

[117] Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* 114.

collection taskings for the most appropriate information collection sources. The intelligence staff must then process the information collected by the variety of sources into a single, fused intelligence product for the commander. Regrettably for McClellan, a staff capable of this did not exist in his Army during the Peninsula Campaign. There was no centralization of the information collection and processing effort. Those responsible for collecting information, whether it was topographical engineers, enemy interrogators, or cavalry officers, directed their own efforts in isolation of the other collection disciplines. There was no one single staff that managed the entire intelligence cycle from direction to dissemination.

Some historians have suggested that the Army of the Potomac did in fact have a centralized intelligence effort under the direction of Allan Pinkerton serving as McClellan's chief of intelligence.[118] This misconception was initially created by Pinkerton who bestowed himself with the title of "Chief of the United States Secret Service" in his memoirs.[119] It was perpetuated by the *Official Records* that erroneously

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[118] Pinkerton was the founder of the Pinkerton Detective Agency that continues to exist to this day. McClellan and Pinkerton first met before the war while McClellan was working for the railroads. When McClellan took command of the Army of the Potomac he decided to hire Pinkerton as his personal intelligence officer. Pinkerton specialized in tracking criminal gangs that robbed the railroads. Pinkerton, and his agents, were not part of the federal government; they were businessmen under contract. Throughout his service with the Union Army, Pinkerton remained fiercely loyal to McClellan. He treated his relationship with McClellan as a private employee of McClellan, not as a professional intelligence officer working for the Union Army. (O'Toole, *Honorable Treachery: A History of US Intelligence, Espionage, and Covert Action from the American Revolution to the CIA* 124.) Pinkerton considered his first loyalty was to McClellan, not to the government. (Fishel, *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War* 585.) When McClellan was relieved of his command in November 1862, Pinkerton and his agents resigned and returned to civilian life in Chicago. They never again worked for the Army.

[119] Pinkerton, *The Spy of the Rebellion: Being A True History of the Spy System of the United States Army during the Late Rebellion.*

refer to Pinkerton as the "Chief of Secret Service Division."[120] In actual fact, Pinkerton was only involved in counterintelligence, espionage, and the interrogation of prisoners, deserters, and contraband. He had no involvement in collecting or processing any of the other forms of information that were gathered by disparate parts of the Army of the Potomac.[121]

When Pinkerton first came to Washington to work for McClellan, Pinkerton's primary role was counterintelligence.[122] Washington was full of Confederate sympathizers, and Pinkerton's detectives were kept busy attempting to minimize the flow of vital intelligence to the South. Pinkerton and his detectives are generally credited with being quite effective in their counterintelligence role.[123] However, as a personal employee of McClellan, Pinkerton's counterintelligence work also focused on protecting McClellan and his reputation. Pinkerton conducted political espionage by collecting information on Lincoln and his cabinet in order to keep McClellan informed about

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[120] United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 1* 264. During the Peninsula Campaign, Pinkerton signed his reports with a nom de guerre of "E. J. Allen."

[121] Fishel, *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War* 55.

[122] Counterintelligence is defined as, "those activities that both identify and counteract the threat to security posed by foreign intelligence services [in this case Confederate] or by individuals engaged in espionage, sabotage, subversion, terrorism, and/or organized crime." Canada. Department of National Defence, *B-GJ-005-200/FP-000 Joint Intelligence Doctrine* 1-5.

[123] Edwin C. Fishel, "Military Intelligence 1861-63: Part I," *Studies* 10, no. 3 (Summer 1966), 81-96. 88. Pinkerton's single greatest counterintelligence success was the case of Rose Greenhow. Greenhow, a Southern sympathizer living in Washington, has been credited with sending intelligence to Gen Beauregard concerning Union troop movements that helped the Confederates win the First Battle of Bull Run in July 1861. Pinkerton and his detectives discovered her and ended her espionage ring in August of that year.

governmental opinions of him.[124] Even during the Peninsula Campaign, Pinkerton left a number of his agents in Washington so that he could continue reporting to McClellan on potential political enemies in the capital.[125]

While Pinkerton was effective in his assigned counterintelligence role, his record with respect to collecting traditional military information is much less positive. Pinkerton's espionage efforts to collect information on the Confederates was an "acknowledged fiasco" according to historian Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones.[126] Despite the numerous Northern sympathizers in Richmond and other Virginian cities, Pinkerton's agents were all Northern transients masquerading as travelling businessmen. He never successfully recruited actual Confederate residents as agents.[127] This meant that Pinkerton's agents could only be expected to provide periodic intelligence during their irregular travels in the South. Between October 1861 and the start of the Peninsula Campaign five months later, there were only a total of 14 known trips into the Confederacy by five of Pinkerton's agents.[128] Of these 14 trips, only Pinkerton's best agent, Timothy Webster, visited the actual peninsula area where the Union forces would fight during the campaign.[129] Unfortunately for the Union information collection effort, Webster was arrested for spying before the Peninsula Campaign began and was executed

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[124] O'Toole, *Honorable Treachery: A History of US Intelligence, Espionage, and Covert Action from the American Revolution to the CIA* 125.

[125] Rafuse, *McClellan's War: The Failure of Moderation in the Struggle for the Union* 108.

[126] Jeffreys-Jones, *Cloak and Dollar* 30.

[127] Fishel, *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War* 55.

[128] *Ibid*. 85.

[129] *Ibid*. 147.

on 29 April 1862 in Richmond. During the actual campaign, the Union had no active agents in Richmond or anywhere else on the peninsula. Overall, very little actionable intelligence was produced by Pinkerton's agents in the lead-up to the Peninsula Campaign that assisted McClellan in his campaign preparations.[130]

To further complicate matters, the information Pinkerton gleaned from interrogating prisoners, deserters, and contraband was also suspect. Many of the people interrogated by Pinkerton and his detectives appear to have told them what they wanted to hear, and Pinkerton seemed incapable of separating rumour from verifiable fact.[131]

Notwithstanding the problems associated with Pinkerton's HUMINT efforts, a greater shortcoming existed within the Army of the Potomac's intelligence process. Despite being the self-proclaimed Chief of the United States Secret Service, Pinkerton largely ignored anything but HUMINT sources. The *Official Records* include several of the most important intelligence reports that Pinkerton produced for the campaign.[132] All of these reports cite HUMINT as the only source upon which Pinkerton based his analysis.[133] There is absolutely no mention of any other type of intelligence source. As previously noted, the Army of the Potomac was actually collecting information from a variety of sources. However, McClellan was the only person that received all of the

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[130] *Ibid*. 100.

[131] Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* 107-108.

[132] United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 5* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1884). 736-737, 763-764; United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 1* 264-272.

[133] The seven reports cite an "operative," a "deserter," or "spies, contrabands, deserters, and prisoners of war" as the only sources used to produce the reports.

reporting.[134] In other words, McClellan became the "analyst-in-chief" for the Army. As commander, McClellan was far too occupied to devote sufficient time to fully process all the incoming information. He required a dedicated intelligence staff to do that on his behalf. The lack of a dedicated intelligence staff to direct the collection effort and process the incoming information into precise intelligence left McClellan attempting to make sense of a constant flow of tactical reports while at the same time leading the largest Army ever seen in the Americas into battle.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has argued that the Army of the Potomac was not well designed to ensure the commander received the timely, accurate, and relevant intelligence that he required to conduct the Peninsula Campaign. The Army failed in all three components of intelligence, namely knowledge of weather, terrain, and the enemy. More importantly, it failed to integrate the information collected in those component areas into a focused, consolidated intelligence picture. McClellan could not be faulted on his inability to forecast the weather's impact on his operations. Weather forecasting was in its infancy during the Civil War making it virtually impossible for McClellan to know that the peninsula was in store for unseasonably high levels of rainfall in the spring and summer of 1862. On the other hand, McClellan and his Army could certainly have done more to develop their knowledge of the terrain before embarking on the campaign. Realizing he lacked complete and accurate maps of the peninsula, McClellan should have directed a specific collection effort to fill this critical information gap before he left Washington.

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[134] Fishel, *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War* 55.

The Army's inability to estimate the strength of the Confederate Army was the most glaring intelligence failure during the campaign. Although the Army had a variety of sources capable of collecting information on the enemy, it lacked a dedicated intelligence staff to process the volume of incoming information. The absence of an intelligence staff meant McClellan was left to decipher countless tactical reports coming in from numerous disparate portions of his Army.[135] Moreover, the lack of a single staff to task the collection sources likely resulted in redundant collection in some areas and missed collection in other areas. The Army was clearly not structured for success from an intelligence perspective.

The lack of a dedicated intelligence staff does not completely explain why McClellan's estimates of the Confederate troop strength were so grossly inaccurate. The second key reason has to do with the mental manner in which people process information. The next chapter will address this issue.

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[135] Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* 162.

CHAPTER 4: MINDSETS AND COGNITIVE BIASES

Chapter three brought to light the shortcomings associated with the structure of the intelligence service in the Army of the Potomac. McClellan did not create a centralized intelligence service that was well designed to manage effectively the four steps of the intelligence cycle from direction to dissemination. While this lack of a centralized intelligence service was certainly problematic, it was not the only factor that led to intelligence failure during the Peninsula Campaign. Political scientist Richard K. Betts contends that, "perfecting intelligence production does not necessarily lead to perfecting intelligence consumption."[136] Betts is suggesting that even if an intelligence staff can produce timely, accurate, and relevant intelligence, the commander's biases can have a significant impact on the ultimate usefulness of the intelligence product. This chapter will explore this aspect of intelligence production and consumption. It will argue that McClellan's mindset and cognitive biases significantly impacted the quality of the intelligence he reported to Washington during the campaign.

POLITIZATION OF INTELLIGENCE

The wildly inaccurate estimates of the Confederates' strength as described in chapter three have often been blamed on Pinkerton. G.J.A. O'Toole is representative of a group of historians that argue Pinkerton was directly responsible for the poor intelligence. O'Toole reasons that Pinkerton's overestimations of Confederate strength encouraged McClellan to be cautious.[137] He further contends that it was Pinkerton's estimate that the

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[136] Betts, *Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures are Inevitable*, 61-89. 63.

[137] O'Toole, *Honorable Treachery: A History of US Intelligence, Espionage, and Covert Action from the American Revolution to the CIA* 123.

Confederates had 200,000 troops that convinced McClellan to retreat from Richmond.[138] This line of reasoning asserts that McClellan was innocently duped by poor intelligence produced by his subordinate.

There is little doubt that Pinkerton was not particularly successful in his production of military intelligence. Despite some rigorous analysis that resulted in a fairly accurate estimate of the Confederate Order of Battle, Pinkerton produced reports for McClellan based on "general estimates" or "medium estimates" of the Confederate strength.[139] These estimates lacked any analytical foundation and appear to have been taken from any prisoner or deserter that would hazard a guess about the Confederate strength.[140] However, as demonstrated in chapter three, Pinkerton was only responsible for a portion of the overall Union information collection and intelligence production during the campaign.

Edwin C. Fishel more correctly lays the blame directly upon McClellan. Fishel contends that McClellan was well aware of Pinkerton's exaggerated figures, and the two men conspired to overestimate the Confederate numbers that McClellan reported to Washington. Fishel further asserts that Pinkerton's exaggerated figures fell short of McClellan's desires so McClellan reported even higher numbers to Lincoln and other

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[138] *Ibid*. 124.

[139] See for example United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 1* 268-270.

[140] Fishel, *Military Intelligence 1861-63: Part I*, 81-96. 86.

officials in Washington.[141] According to Fishel, "intelligence was to McClellan not primarily a weapon against the enemy; it was a level against his superiors."[142] In other words, Fishel believes McClellan purposely manipulated the intelligence so that it would better support his strategic objectives. This would suggest that McClellan was engaged in a politization of intelligence. Military historian Milan Vego claims that politization of intelligence is a common problem in military operations since commanders may interfere with the intelligence process in order to receive the specific intelligence that matches stated strategic desires.[143]

There may be limits to Fishel's analysis, particularly his claim that McClellan's intelligence process was, "an essentially corrupt activity consciously aimed at justifying inaction and failure," as well as his suggestion that McClellan *purposely* manipulated intelligence during the Peninsula Campaign.[144] Rather, this chapter contends that McClellan's inaccurate intelligence estimates were the subconscious result of McClellan's mindset and cognitive biases. In order to argue this point, this chapter will begin with a conceptual discussion on the science behind mindsets and cognitive biases. It will then explain how they specifically impacted upon McClellan during the Peninsula Campaign.

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[141] Fishel, *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War* 2.

[142] Fishel, *Military Intelligence 1861-63: Part I*, 81-96. 88.

[143] Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare* VIII-35.

[144] Fishel, *Military Intelligence 1861-63: Part I*, 81-96. 89.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF MINDSETS AND COGNITIVE BIASES

Since at least the 1950s, there has been a significant amount of psychological research conducted on how the human mind processes information. Much of this research, while not specifically dealing with military intelligence assessments, is very germane to intelligence professionals. Generally speaking, people are rational actors; they have the desire to process information in an impartial manner in order to arrive at an accurate, unbiased judgment. Unfortunately, that task may not be as simple as one might think. In order to arrive at a well reasoned conclusion to a complicated problem, people must employ simplified information processing techniques. While these techniques can be useful, particularly when attempting to assimilate vast quantities of information, these techniques can also lead to severe and systematic errors.[145]

Richards Heuer Jr., a former CIA analyst, was one of the first to take the psychological research and apply it directly to the world of intelligence. According to Heuer, the manner in which people process information is based largely on their past experiences, education, cultural values, etc. When put together, these factors form a lens through which one perceives the world.[146] This lens can be referred to as a mindset, a preconception, or a pre-existing belief.

As already mentioned in chapter three, most intelligence failures are not caused by a lack of information, rather they are caused by the manner in which the available information is processed (regardless of whether that processing takes place at the

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[145] Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases," *Science* 185, no. 4157 (September 1974), 1124-1131. 1124.

[146] Heuer, *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* 4. Heuer's work on how analysts process information and make analytical judgements has made his book practically required reading for contemporary intelligence officers.

intelligence analyst or intelligence consumer level). Scientific studies have shown that people tend to use only a portion of the information that is available. Once a person has a sufficient amount of data to make an informed assessment, additional data does not tend to improve the accuracy of the assessment.[147] New information only seems to increase one's confidence in the original assessment.

To explain this phenomenon, Heuer notes that people readily accept and process new information that supports their hypothesis, but they subconsciously reject new information that is inconsistent with their hypothesis.[148] In his work, Rob Johnston indicates that of all the cognitive biases affecting intelligence analysts, this "confirmation bias" is the most prevalent.[149] Essentially, analysts seek out information that confirms an existing hypothesis rather than looking for information that would refute it. Unfortunately, there is usually some evidence to support any reasonable prediction.[150] Once an individual becomes convinced of something, it is very difficult to become "unconvinced" even in the face of strong evidence that disproves it.[151]

Research conducted by Robert Jervis focusing on political decision makers arrives at a similar conclusion as Heuer. Jervis' research reveals that people's judgments are directly influenced by their expectations; people are inclined to see what they expect to

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[147] *Ibid*. 52-55.

[148] *Ibid*. 61.

[149] Rob Johnston, *Analytic Culture in the US Intelligence Community* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 2005). 21.

[150] Betts, *Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures are Inevitable*, 61-89. 71.

[151] Heuer, *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* 124-126.

see.[152] It takes very limited evidence to convince a person about something they expect because people tend to be quite selective on what evidence they notice, and what evidence they ignore. Evidence that does not conform to one's pre-existing beliefs tends to be subconsciously ignored, whereas evidence that does conform is more easily accepted.[153] In an effort to maintain cognitive consistency, evidence (even in retrospect) is often taken out of context in order to conform to the existing belief.[154] People can be so focused on proving their hypothesis that they neglect to realize the evidence supporting their hypothesis can support a completely contradictory hypothesis as well.[155]

In her research, psychologist Ziva Kunda goes beyond Jervis. While Jervis argues people see what they *expect* to see, Kunda provocatively asserts that people see what they *want* to see. She observed a phenomenon that she refers to as "motivated reasoning." Through a process of motivated reasoning, "people are more likely to arrive at those conclusions that they want to arrive at."[156] This does not imply that people are purposefully manipulating information in order to reach the conclusions they desire. Rather, people tend to subconsciously access only those memories, beliefs, and rules that

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[152] Robert Jervis, "Understanding Beliefs," *Political Psychology* 27, no. 5 (2006), 641-663. 650.

[153] Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976). 143-145.

[154] Jervis, *Understanding Beliefs*, 641-663. 651.

[155] Robert Jervis, "Hypothesis on Misperception," *World Politics* 20, no. 3 (April 1968), 454-479. 478. See also Tetlock and Henik that argue people tend to jump to conclusions too quickly and then are reluctant to change their minds even when faced with contradictory evidence. (Philip E. Tetlock and Erika Henik, "Theory- Versus Imagination- Driven Thinking about Historical Counterfactuals," in *The Psychology of Counterfactual Thinking*, eds. David R. Mandel, Denis J. Hilton and Patrizia Catellani (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005).)

[156] Ziva Kunda, "The Case for Motivated Reasoning," *Psychological Bulletin* 108, no. 3 (November 1990), 480-498.

will permit them to arrive at their desired conclusions. As such, people do not draw self-serving conclusions simply because they hope to, but because these conclusions seem more plausible to them as a result of their given beliefs and expectations.[157] Interestingly, people remain convinced that their judgments are accurate because they do not realize their cognitive processes are being biased by their desired end-state.[158]

In summary, research over the past six decades has shown that mindsets or preconceptions can have a significant impact upon the manner in which people arrive at conclusions. People's pre-existing beliefs affect how they process information, and which pieces of information they believe to be credible. What makes mindsets particularly interesting is the fact that they are inescapable. Every single person processes information through his or her own personal lens. As such, one cannot avoid mindsets; he or she can only be aware of them and understand how they colour one's analytical judgement.[159] Many people believe they approach an intelligence problem with a completely open mind; in other words, they "let the facts speak for themselves." Unfortunately, the "facts" are only a selected subset taken from the possible mass of available data that is subject to an individual's interpretation.[160] Each person's lens influences which "facts" he or she selects to be relevant to the given situation. Mindsets are normally considered to be a negative influence, but Heuer suggests that they are neither good nor bad, just inevitable.

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[157] *Ibid*.

[158] *Ibid*.

[159] Heuer, *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* 170-172.

[160] *Ibid*. 10, 40-41.

MCCLELLAN'S MINDSET

With a better understanding of the diverse influences, we can turn to an examination of McClellan's mindset and cognitive biases. Assuming one agrees with the aforementioned authors stating that mindsets are inevitable and cannot be abolished, then clearly McClellan, like all commanders, suffered from his own preconceptions that affected his processing of critical intelligence. Once he believed that the Army of Northern Virginia outnumbered his forces, psychologically, it probably became very difficult for him to be convinced otherwise.

McClellan's Personal Lens

Heuer argues that the manner in which people process information is affected by their own personal lens. What was McClellan's personal lens through which he viewed the world? When McClellan first arrived in Washington in July 1861 to take command of the Department of the Potomac (later to be renamed the Army of the Potomac), he had a very high opinion of himself and his perceived importance. He wrote to his wife explaining that, "all tell me that I am held responsible for the fate of the nation," and "the people call upon me to save the country."[161] However, the initial euphoria experienced by McClellan quickly dissipated. As the months in the Washington garrison wore on, the criticisms of McClellan and his inaction mounted.[162] A few weeks before McClellan finally deployed, he complained to another general that, "I have but few friends in

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[161] McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story: The War for the Union* 83-85.

[162] Years later, in an attempt to justify the amount of time it took to prepare the Army of the Potomac, McClellan wrote that, "no one cognizant of the circumstances and possessed any knowledge of military affairs can honestly believe that I bestowed unnecessary time and labor upon the organization and instruction of that army…" (*Ibid*. 98.)

Congress. The Abolitionists [anti-slavery proponents] are doing their best to displace me…You have no idea of the underlying hate with which they pursue me."[163]

By the time McClellan took the Army of the Potomac into the field in March 1862 to begin the Peninsula Campaign, he was convinced the politicians in Washington were conspiring against him. In his memoirs after the war, McClellan explains that his overriding purpose during the war was the defeat of the Confederate Army and the restoration of the Union, not the abolition of slavery.[164] For the "radical" politicians in Washington, the abolishment of slavery was one of their primary war aims. They had to ensure that the war continued until such time as the Northern people were prepared to accept that view.[165] McClellan reasoned that if he had been successful during the Peninsula Campaign, the war would have effectively ended before slavery could have been abolished. Therefore, McClellan believed that many politicians, including Edwin Stanton, the Secretary of War, took whatever measures possible to ensure McClellan failed during the campaign.[166] McClellan believed that the radicals had even co-opted Lincoln, and "henceforth directed all their efforts to prevent my success."[167] By the

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[163] United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 3* 8.

[164] In the final days of the Peninsula Campaign, McClellan gave President Lincoln an unsolicited letter outlining McClellan's grand strategy to win the war. The so-called "Harrison's Bar Letter" became one of the most famous, and controversial, pieces ever written by McClellan. In it, McClellan clearly states that he was opposed to the forced abolition of slavery as one of the Union's war aims. (United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 1* 73-74.)

[165] McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story: The War for the Union* 150-151.

[166] *Ibid*. 149-151.

[167] *Ibid*. 159.

opening days of the campaign, McClellan had fully recognized the perceived conspiracy against him.

The supposed desire to see McClellan fail manifested itself very quickly in McClellan's mind. The first action to encourage the ultimate failure of McClellan was the removal of him as general-in-chief as soon as he took to the field.[168] As a result of this action, McClellan lamented that he no longer controlled either his mounting base (Washington) or his base of operations (Fort Monroe). More importantly, McClellan now had concrete reason to believe that the Lincoln administration, and more specifically Stanton, "did not desire my success."[169]

The second event in the opening days of the campaign that "proved" the conspiracy against McClellan was Lincoln's decision to hold back 35,000 troops. Lincoln was not convinced that McClellan had left sufficient forces to protect Washington, so he ordered one corps to remain in Washington.[170] This decision by Lincoln would prove critical to the remainder of the campaign, but not because it left McClellan with less soldiers than he expected. More importantly, it was this incident, coupled with his previous concerns, that was the cornerstone of McClellan convincing

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[168] *Ibid*. 225.

[169] *Ibid*. 241-242. In his campaign After Action Report written in 1863 while McClellan was still in the Army, McClellan was more charitable and stated, "to this day I am ignorant of the causes which led to it [the removal of Fort Monroe from his authority]." (United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 1* 8.)

[170] Upon learning of Lincoln's order, McClellan replied to Lincoln by writing, "the enemy are in large force along our front, and apparently intend making a determined resistance…Under these circumstances I beg that you will reconsider the order detaching the First Corps from my command. In my judgment the success of our cause will be imperilled…" (United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 3* 71.) In numerous telegrams to follow, McClellan complained to Washington about the reduction of his forces.

himself that the Union government was part of treasonous conspiracy that hoped to see him fail.[171] In a letter to his wife on 5 April, McClellan wrote about Lincoln's decision to deprive him of 35,000 soldiers and stated that, "it is the most infamous thing that history has recorded."[172] Several days later he wrote his wife that, "history will present a sad record of these traitors [in Washington] who are willing to sacrifice the country and its army for personal spite and personal aims."[173]

The validity of McClellan's conspiracy theory is highly questionable, and it has been largely discounted by Civil War historians such as Stephen W. Sears.[174] The key point, however, is McClellan very much believed it to be true at the time. McClellan's delusions that Washington hoped he would fail would be the lens through which he would view the entire Peninsula Campaign.

MCCLELLAN'S COGNITIVE BIASES

As noted above, what people expect and want to see will have a major subconscious impact on how they process incoming information. So, what did McClellan expect to see when he embarked on the Peninsula Campaign? McClellan was convinced that the Confederates were determined to defend Richmond and would therefore concentrate their forces around the city.[175] Even before deploying to the peninsula,

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[171] Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* 175-176.

[172] McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story: The War for the Union* 308.

[173] *Ibid*. 310.

[174] Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* 177.

[175] McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story: The War for the Union* 356.

McClellan predicted a "desperate fight" for Richmond.[176] McClellan told his superiors in Washington that the Confederate forces were collecting troops from across the South to defend Richmond and they intended to "dispute every step of our advance."[177] Clearly, McClellan believed that Richmond was the "heart of the rebellion" and expected the Confederates to concentrate massive forces in the city's defence. At this point, McClellan likely fell victim to a common cognitive bias referred to as "mirror-imaging."

Mirror-imaging occurs when people assume that others necessarily think like they do. In order words, one expects others to do what he or she would do in those particular circumstances.[178] McClellan was guilty of mirror-imaging when he applied his own logic to Lee and the Confederates. McClellan was a very cautious military commander and would only go on the offensive if he had overwhelming numbers. Therefore, when the Confederates did not immediately retreat at Yorktown, attacked at Fair Oaks, and went on the offensive during the Seven Days, McClellan could only believe that the Confederates must have superior numbers.[179] It was difficult for McClellan to comprehend that the Confederates would actually attack the massive Union Army with inferior numbers since that was something McClellan would probably not risk. As a result of mirror-imaging, McClellan likely assumed the Confederates had overwhelming

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[176] United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 3* 7.

[177] United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 1* 26.

[178] Heuer, *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* 181.

[179] Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign* 217.

numbers given their actions. Mirror imaging goes a long way towards explaining what McClellan expected to see.

McClellan was an extraordinarily risk-adverse commander. According to Civil War historian Ethan Refuse, McClellan's approach to warfare, "emphasized limiting the influence of chances as much as reasonably possible."[180] McClellan disliked taking risks when it came to sending his Army into battle. His writings repeatedly allude to his cautious nature in battle. For example, even before the beginning of the Seven Days' Battles, McClellan explained to his wife that, "I must not run the slightest risk of disaster, for if anything happened to this army our cause would be lost."[181] As a result of his cautious nature, McClellan could not bring himself to commit his Army to a large-scale attack because that would risk potential defeat. Defeat in battle could not be risked because the loss of the Army of the Potomac would mean the end of the Union according to McClellan.

In addition to his cautious nature, McClellan had become rather defeatist. Even following his first victory during the Seven Days, McClellan wrote to the Secretary of War essentially predicting his own eventual defeat saying, "I will do all that a general can do with the splendid army I have the honor to command, and if it is destroyed by overwhelming numbers, [I] can at least die with it and share its fate."[182] His writings to

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[180] Rafuse, *McClellan's War: The Failure of Moderation in the Struggle for the Union* 132.

[181] McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story: The War for the Union* 407.

[182] United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 1* 51.

his wife in June illustrate his lack of enthusiasm for war.[183] Following the Battle of Gaines' Mill, McClellan most clearly displayed his defeatism when he wrote to the Secretary of War stating:

> Had I 20,000 or even 10,000 fresh troops to use tomorrow I could take Richmond, but I have not a man in reserve, and shall be glad to cover my retreat and save the material and *personnel* of the army…I have lost this battle because my force is too small. I again repeat that I am not responsible for this…As it is, the Government must not and cannot hold me responsible for the result. … If I save this army now, I tell you plainly that I owe no thanks to you or to any other persons in Washington. You have done your best to sacrifice this army.[184]

McClellan's defeatism and his cautious nature likely played a part in developing "motivated reasoning" as described by Kunda. McClellan's desire to avoid risk probably made him want to belief that he was outnumbered since if he was outnumbered, he would have good reason not to attack.

SELECTIVE USE OF INTELLIGENCE

The previous section described what McClellan likely expected and wanted to see. As a result of mirror-imaging, McClellan probably expected that the Confederates outnumbered his Army. As a result of McClellan's cautious nature, it could even be argued that he probably wanted to believe he was outnumbered since that would give him a plausible excuse not to risk attacking the Confederates. Once McClellan was motivated

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[183] For example, the day after the Union victory at the Battle of Fair Oaks, McClellan wrote his wife that, "I am tired of the sickening sight of the battlefield, with its mangled corps and poor suffering wounded! Victory has not charms for me when purchased at such cost." (McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story: The War for the Union* 398.) Several weeks later he wrote, "every poor fellow that is killed or wounded almost haunts me!" (*Ibid*. 408.)

[184] United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 1* 61. Interestingly, when the telegram was deciphered in Washington, the telegraph officer deleted the final sentence before delivering it to the Secretary of War because the telegraph officer believed the accusation of treason to be false. The entire telegram was not made public until McClellan (long since relieved of command) wrote his official After Action Report and included the full version. (Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* 214-215.)

to believe he was outnumbered, he most likely employed a confirmation bias to subconsciously select information that indicated he was outnumbered while simultaneously rejecting information of a contradictory nature. In the words of Fishel, "McClellan did not just *believe* he was badly outnumbered; he *knew* it."[185] To make matters worse for McClellan, he was quite stubborn. Sears argues that throughout McClellan's career, he displayed, "no flexibility of mind or judgment, no room for the change of an opinion once formed."[186] Once McClellan believed he was outnumbered, no evidence to the contrary would convince him otherwise.[187] McClellan appeared consumed by a self-fulfilling defeatist logic and was nearly paralysed by his paranoia of a conspiracy against him. Devoid of confidence, he assumed the worst and his subsequent decisions helped to ensure operational failure.

These tendencies manifested in McClellan's subconscious selective use of intelligence. There is considerable evidence in McClellan's telegrams to suggest that he was quite selective in the intelligence he chose to believe. McClellan would "cherry-pick" information that indicated the Confederate Army was larger than it actually was. For example, once McClellan had committed himself to laying siege to Yorktown, his pride prevented him from altering his course of action even if new information came to light.[188] He was so convinced that he was outnumbered that even when he inspected the

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[185] Fishel, *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War* 585.

[186] Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* 134.

[187] Even years after the war, McClellan continued to believe that he was outnumbered on the peninsula in spite of the evidence to the contrary. (McClellan, *The Peninsular Campaign* 180.)

[188] Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* 178-179.

meagre Yorktown defences following the Confederates' retreat, he remained unmoved by the obvious evidence of the small numbers of Confederate defenders. He wrote, "I am now fully satisfied of the correctness of the course I have pursued [sieging Yorktown]. The success is brilliant."[189]

McClellan was prone to accept single source reporting if it confirmed his beliefs. For example, on 16 June McClellan reported to the Secretary of War a single source report from a deserter of unknown reliability that stated the Confederates had 130,000 troops in the defence of Richmond.[190] Yet, he rarely forwarded any reports to Washington that suggested the Confederates were that ones actually outnumbered. McClellan received intelligence that Yorktown was only defended by 10,000 Confederates; however, McClellan appears to have ignored this reporting probably because it did not concur with his beliefs.[191]

McClellan did not trust any intelligence provided by "negroes" and wrote that, "their estimates of [Confederate] numbers were almost ridiculously inaccurate."[192] Yet, McClellan frequently cited negroes as a reliable intelligence source if their information corroborated high numbers. For example, in his After Action Report, McClellan notes negroes as one of three sources that indicated that the Confederates outnumbered

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[189] United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 3* 134-135.

[190] *Ibid*. 231. For other examples of single source reporting sent to Washington see *Ibid*. 201 and 253.

[191] *Ibid*. 121.

[192] McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story: The War for the Union* 253-254.

McClellan's Army and that the Confederates intended to "dispute every step of our advance."[193]

Judging by the above examples, McClellan was guilty of selectively using intelligence based on his motivated reasoning. As a result of McClellan's incorrect belief that he was outnumbered, the Army of the Potomac was paralyzed. McClellan refused to attack the inferior Confederate forces defending Richmond until his Army was further reinforced. Between early April and early August, McClellan requested Washington send him reinforcements an incredible 37 times.[194] According to McClellan's motivated reasoning, the government realized how powerful the Confederates were and purposely refused to reinforce McClellan's Army so that the government could dismiss McClellan for failing to act.[195] Lincoln did not share McClellan's hesitancy to engage the enemy, and repeatedly urged McClellan to go on the offensive.[196] Lincoln soon tired of McClellan's constant demand for more troops, and a letter to an Illinois senator sums up Lincoln's thoughts with respect to McClellan. In the letter, Lincoln complained that if he could send 100,000 reinforcements to the peninsula, McClellan would suddenly claim the

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[193] United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 1* 26.

[194] *Ibid*. 11, 26, 27, 35, 36, 45, 46, 61, 72, 75, 75, 78; United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 3* 71, 74, 86, 150, 189, 192, 230, 234, 253, 254, 257, 266, 281, 282, 287, 291, 292, 317, 322, 334, 337, 342; McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story: The War for the Union* 283, 294, 490, 497.

[195] *Ibid*. 450.

[196] Within days of beginning the campaign, Lincoln was already alarmed by McClellan's inaction. Lincoln politely urged McClellan into action by writing to him that, "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 consistency can. But you must act." (United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 1* 15.) In the following weeks, Lincoln's attempts to press McClellan into action became more urgent.

next day that the Confederates now had 400,000 men defending Richmond.[197] In other words, McClellan was so convinced that he was outnumbered, he would always find the evidence to prove it.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has refuted the belief that McClellan purposely manipulated intelligence during the Peninsula Campaign in order to achieve his strategic objectives. It has argued, instead, that the wildly inaccurate intelligence produced by the Army of the Potomac was more the result of McClellan's mindset and his cognitive biases.

The manner in which a person processes information depends a great deal upon his or her mindset and cognitive biases. The ability to process information is subconsciously affected by what people expect and want to see. Once people have arrived at a judgment, they will subconsciously select information that supports that judgment while rejecting information that does not. McClellan commenced the campaign under the delusion that the Union government actually hoped he would fail. This delusion influenced how he viewed the entire campaign. Moreover, as a result of mirror-imaging, McClellan believed he was outnumbered since he could not fathom that a commander of an inferior force would be so bold as to attack the Union Army. In addition, as a result of his cautious nature, McClellan wanted to believe he was outnumbered since that would afford him an excuse not to risk attacking the Confederates. These beliefs directly influenced how McClellan processed incoming

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[197] Fishel, *The Secret War for the Union: The Untold Story of Military Intelligence in the Civil War* 581. Lincoln was not the only one who was unconvinced by McClellan's reporting. On at least three occasions, Gen Wool, commander of Fort Monroe, wrote to Washington questioning McClellan's assessments. (United States. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series 1, Vol 11. Part 3* 143 and 182.) In May, Wool even wrote to the Secretary of War emphatically stating that, "the forces of the rebels are by no means equal to his [McClellan's]." (*Ibid*. 189-190.)

information. He subconsciously accepted information that indicated he was outnumbered and rejected information that indicated the opposite. McClellan's mindset and cognitive biases hampered his ability to impartially process incoming information. It was this inability to impartially process information that largely caused the wildly incorrect estimates that he forwarded to Washington.

CHAPTER 5: LESSONS LEARNED

In order to constantly improve, modern armies employ a process known as "lessons learned." Simply stated, this process involves the systematic examination of previous military operations in order to incorporate best practices into contemporary operations. The purpose of this essay has been more than just simply an historical study of a 19th century military campaign. Its true purpose has been to bring to light lessons from the Civil War that could be applicable to intelligence support to contemporary military operations. This concluding chapter will summarize the findings of this essay and draw lessons applicable to modern military operations. Some readers might question the validity of drawing lessons from the 19th century and applying them to 21st century. While the technology and sophistication of intelligence collection has certainly evolved since the 19th century, intelligence fundamentals have remained relatively constant. Therefore, lessons drawn from the Civil War with respect to intelligence structure and information processing are germane even today.

Timely, accurate, and relevant intelligence has long been recognized as one of the key elements for successful military operations. Without sufficient knowledge of the enemy and operating environment, a commander would be forced to conduct operations very much at a disadvantage. This essay has argued that intelligence support to the Army of the Potomac during the 1862 Peninsula Campaign failed for two reasons. Firstly, the Union Army had a decentralized, dysfunctional intelligence service that proved incapable of providing a consolidated intelligence picture to its commander. Secondly, the mindset and cognitive biases of Gen George B. McClellan diminished his

ability to conduct impartial processing of critical intelligence. These two points form the basis for the lessons to be learned for modern operations.

LESSONS RELATED TO INTELLIGENCE STRUCTURE

Notwithstanding popular misconceptions, the realm of intelligence is much broader than merely collecting information regarding the enemy on the battlefield. Even as far back as the days of Sun Tzu, enlightened commanders understood that intelligence was a combination of knowledge pertaining to weather, terrain, and the enemy. The intelligence failures of the Army of the Potomac illustrate the importance of establishing an intelligence service that is capable of developing knowledge in all three components of intelligence. Focusing too many, or too few, resources on understanding the enemy can be a recipe for disaster. Contemporary commanders must recognize the importance of understanding each of the three elements within their operating environment.

Many historians have overlooked the importance of all four steps in the intelligence cycle. The few academics that have dealt with Civil War intelligence have tended to focus their research efforts on the information collected by cavalry and spies. They largely pay only limited attention to the variety of other information collection assets that were available during the Civil War.[198] As described in chapter three, information was collected during the campaign by a variety of sources including balloons, open source intelligence, signals intelligence, human intelligence, and cavalry. The ability to direct and process the information emanating from this wide variety of

[198] One notable exception to this trend is Edwin C. Fishel. His research takes a more holistic view of information collection; however, he pays only limited attention to the structure of intelligence services during the Civil War.

sources required a centralized intelligence service that was sadly lacking in the Army of the Potomac.

In order to most effectively manage the intelligence effort, a single centralized intelligence service working with all four steps of the intelligence cycle is essential. One staff must be capable of understanding all the information requirements of the commander and then directing the information collectors accordingly. Permitting individual collectors to establish their own priorities could result in redundant collection in some areas and missing collection in other areas. Similarly, a centralized intelligence staff must be capable of receiving all the incoming information from across an army in order to develop a coherent, consolidated intelligence picture for the commander. This was not the case for the Army of the Potomac. Despite Pinkerton's self-imposed title of Chief of the United States Secret Service, there was, in reality, no chief of intelligence for the Army under McClellan. The information collectors were left to develop their own priorities and report directly to the commander. This left McClellan in the position of attempting to decipher literally hundreds of tactical reports.[199]

Students of contemporary military operations might be tempted to argue that modern armies have already learned this lesson. Indeed, many modern Western armies have a professionalized intelligence service that provides centralized direction to the intelligence effort. However, contemporary doctrine still does not adequately place the

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[199] The Union Army later learned the importance of centralized intelligence, and Gen Hooker, the third commander of the Army of the Potomac, established the Bureau of Military Information (BMI) in early 1863. The BMI functioned as the first real intelligence service in the Union. It was an all-source intelligence service that was capable of managing all four steps of the intelligence cycle. (O'Toole, *Honorable Treachery: A History of US Intelligence, Espionage, and Covert Action from the American Revolution to the CIA* 172-173.) Regrettably, Gen Hooker did not seem to recognize the potential of the intelligence service he built, and he largely ignored the professional intelligence products that the BMI produced. (Morgan, *Tactical Intelligence in the Army of the Potomac during the Overland Campaign* 19.)

management of information collection assets under a single authority. For example, current Canadian Army doctrine has an Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition, and Reconnaissance (ISTAR) manual which is separate from the intelligence doctrine manual.[200] Despite the fact that the key output of the ISTAR process is information to feed the intelligence cycle, Canadian Army doctrine makes it clear that the intelligence staff does not "own" the ISTAR process.[201] ISTAR is managed not by the intelligence staff, but by a coordination centre which controls the formation's integral information collection assets.[202] In other words, the entire intelligence effort is not centralized under one single authority. It is split between the intelligence staff and the ISTAR coordination centre. Clearly, the Canadian Army of the 21st century has still not fully learned the lessons of the 19th century with respect to the importance of centralizing intelligence.

It could be argued that too much centralization of battlefield intelligence may actually be detrimental. A duplication of effort might be helpful in eliminating error, regardless of whether the error is the result of purposeful politization of intelligence or subconscious biases. While there are merits to that argument, a complete duplication of effort is rarely practical and may actually be counterproductive. The greatest challenge associated with a separate ISTAR coordination centre and a separate intelligence staff is the limited number of collection resources. Whether it is the 19th or the 21st century, rarely does a commander find himself in a position where he has a surplus of resources to

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[200] ISTAR is defined as, "a grouping of information collection, processing, dissemination and communication assets designed, structured, linked and disciplined to provide situational awareness, support to targeting and support to commanders in decision making." (Canada. Department of National Defence, *B-GL-352-001/FP-001 Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition, and Reconnaissance (ISTAR)* (Ottawa, ON: Department of National Defence Canada, 2004). 1.)

[201] *Ibid*. 4.

[202] *Ibid*. 27.

collect on weather, terrain, and the enemy. More commonly, collection resources are so scarce that they must be carefully managed in order to avoid redundant collection. A second intelligence staff that would be responsible to independently collect information and then process it into useable intelligence for the commander might be able to provide a "second opinion"; however, it would be impractical at the tactical level. This would result in two disparate agencies competing over the same pool of finite resources. The end result would likely be a less productive use of the limited collection assets. A commander seldom has sufficient collection resources that he can afford that they be double-tasked by two separate intelligence staffs.

During the processing stage, there is, however, more room for redundancy. The duplication of analytical effort is commonly referred to as "red-teaming" or "team-B analysis." In these cases, a separate analytical team reviews the available information and conducts their own independent analysis to either verify the original assessment or arrive at a different conclusion. Red-teaming has been used to some success at the strategic level where a decision maker has a considerable amount of time to weigh multiple scenarios. However, forming a red-team is by no means a guarantee of more accurate intelligence. In fact, there have been several examples in recent history where red-teams have been established purposely to manipulate intelligence.[203] At the tactical level when a commander such as McClellan is engaged in active combat, time constraints often do not permit the luxury of competing analyses. The commander requires a single, accurate intelligence picture from which he can base his decisions. The commander must

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[203] See Gordon R. Mitchell, "Team B Intelligence Coups," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92, no. 2 (May 2006), 144-173. Mitchell describes cases during the Cold War and in the lead-up to the 2003 Iraq War when team-B intelligence units were formed by policymakers purposely to manipulate intelligence.

have confidence that his analytical staff is sufficiently non-partisan and is well trained in information processing techniques.

A stronger argument could have been made for a red-team to have been established in Washington in order to verify McClellan's reported assessments. However, it is unlikely this team would have had access to the timely battlefield information required to adequately advise the President and the Secretary of War.

LESSONS RELATED TO INFORMATION PROCESSING

The second key lesson to be learned from the Peninsula Campaign deals specifically with information processing. Most intelligence failures are not caused by a lack of information; rather, they are caused by the manner in which the available information is processed. Chapter four has explained how mindsets and cognitive biases directly impact on how people process information. While most people attempt to "let the facts speak for themselves," that is virtually impossible since the so-called facts are only a subset of all the available information. In order to process vast quantities of information, people must use mental processing techniques that often lead to subconscious systematic errors.

Every person approaches a situation equipped with a mindset or previously held belief. This mindset invariably affects how new information is incorporated into existing hypotheses. In addition, cognitive biases such as mirror-imaging and confirmation biases dramatically affect one's ability to impartially process information. This is largely what happened with McClellan during the Peninsula Campaign. As a result of his mindset and cognitive biases, he erroneously convinced himself that he was outnumbered by the Confederates. He subconsciously accepted information that indicated he was

outnumbered and found plausible reasons to refute contrary information. This was not, however, a purposeful manipulation of intelligence by McClellan in order to secure additional reinforcements. Rather, it was a subconscious process of flawed reasoning based on what McClellan expected and wanted to see. McClellan's wildly inaccurate estimations of the Confederates' strength serve as a glaring example of the degree to which mindsets and biases can impact upon judgments.

Nearly a century and a half after the Civil War, intelligence analysts and decision makers are still prone to biases and few employ formal analytical methodologies designed to improve their analytical accuracy.[204] The ability and willingness to apply critical thinking about how information is processed is a key lesson learned from this campaign. While there has been significant psychological research done over the past number of decades on the subject of mindsets and biases, intelligence analysts have only recently been given training on the subject.[205] Ultimately, mindsets and biases are natural and cannot be eliminated altogether.[206] However, conscious and critical thinking of how information is processed and how decisions are made can help reduce the impact of cognitive biases. There are some specific techniques that can be employed in order to reduce the impact of mindsets and cognitive biases.[207] Regrettably, many analysts and decision makers remain unaware of the potential impact of mindsets and biases on their

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[204] Johnston, *Analytic Culture in the US Intelligence Community* 21.

[205] Author's personal experience gained during his involvement with NATO and Canadian Forces intelligence training.

[206] Betts, *Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures are Inevitable*, 61-89. 83.

[207] See for example Heuer, *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* 31-110 and 173-184.

judgments. Consequently, this lesson of the Civil War has still not been fully adopted by contemporary armies.

CONCLUSION

This essay has brought to light two important lessons that are applicable to intelligence support to contemporary operations. Firstly, the intelligence service must be structured for success. This implies a single centralized staff that is responsible for all four steps of the intelligence cycle. One staff must be responsible to recognize the commander's information requirements and translate those requirements into information collection taskings. The same staff must then be responsible to process the collected information into accurate and relevant intelligence for the commander. Finally, the staff must be capable of disseminating the intelligence to the commander in a timely and useable format. The Peninsula Campaign serves as an example of the shortcomings that could occur if there is a lack of a centralized staff. Unfortunately, extant Canadian Army doctrine illustrates it has still not completely learned that important lesson.

Secondly, all humans are vulnerable to information processing errors caused by mindsets and cognitive biases. People subconsciously tend to use only a portion of all the available information when they make judgments as a result of their mindsets and cognitive biases. While these can never be wholly avoided, intelligence analysts and commanders must be cognisant of their own personal mindsets and biases and strive to implement measures to reduce their impact. Said another way, intelligence analysts and commanders must apply critical thinking to their thought process. They must examine not only the information, but also the techniques they use to process the information. Unfortunately, this second lesson has not yet been fully learned either.

This essay has focused on the intelligence failures of the Army of the Potomac during the 1862 Peninsula Campaign in order to draw lessons for future military operations. However, the two lessons presented here are not panaceas. Even if they were both fully implemented, intelligence failures would undoubtedly continue in the future. Military operations are conducted in a world that is complex and confusing. If not, there would be no requirement for intelligence. Given the unlimited number of variables, it is not surprising that there are frequent intelligence errors. In fact, Richard K. Betts argues that, "intelligence failures are not only inevitable, they are natural."[208] Even the best structured intelligence service armed with the most thoughtful critical thinkers will still be vulnerable to intelligence failure. As such, contemporary military commanders must be willing to accept intelligence failure and be prepared to mitigate the risks associated with those errors.

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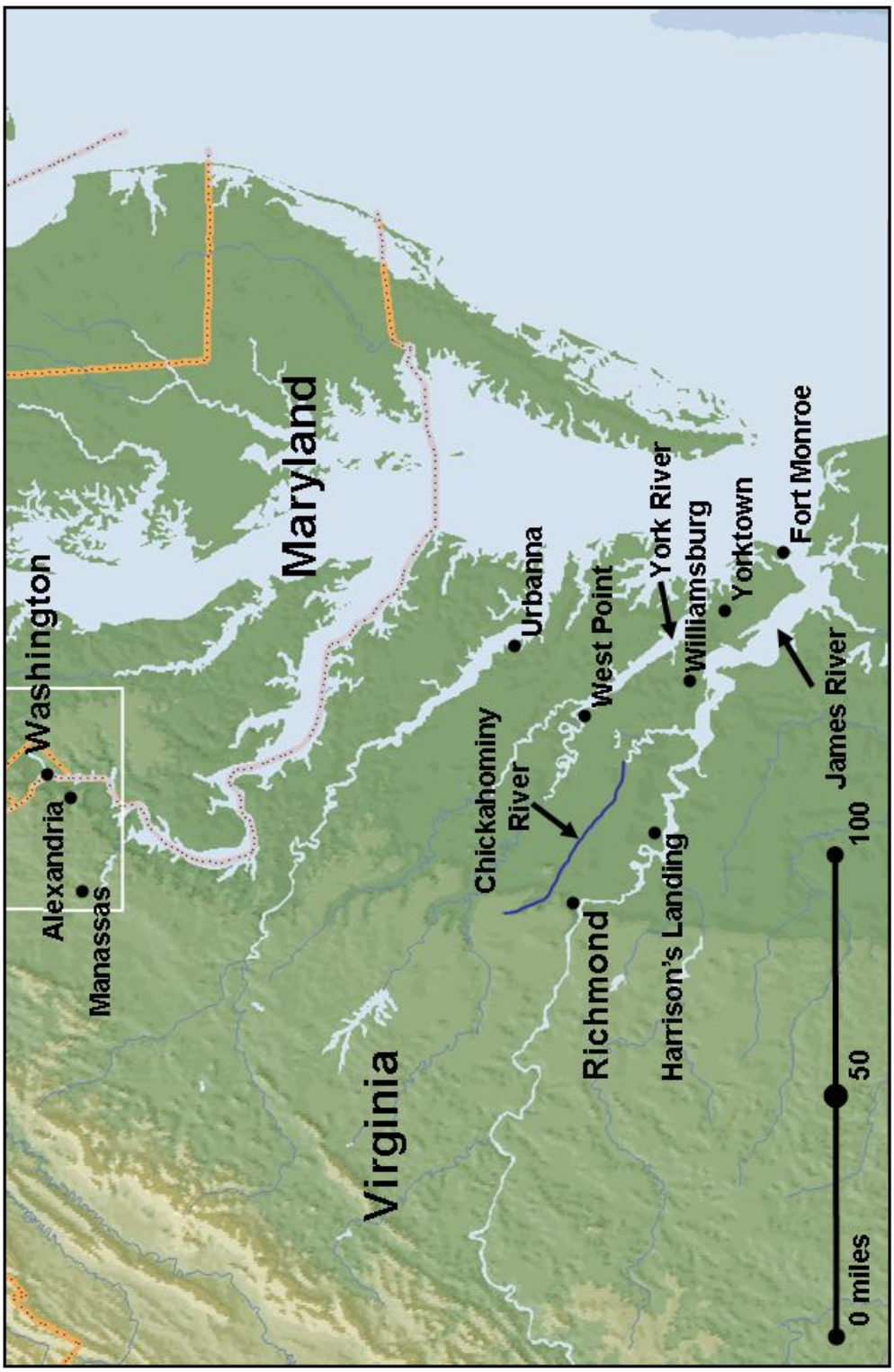
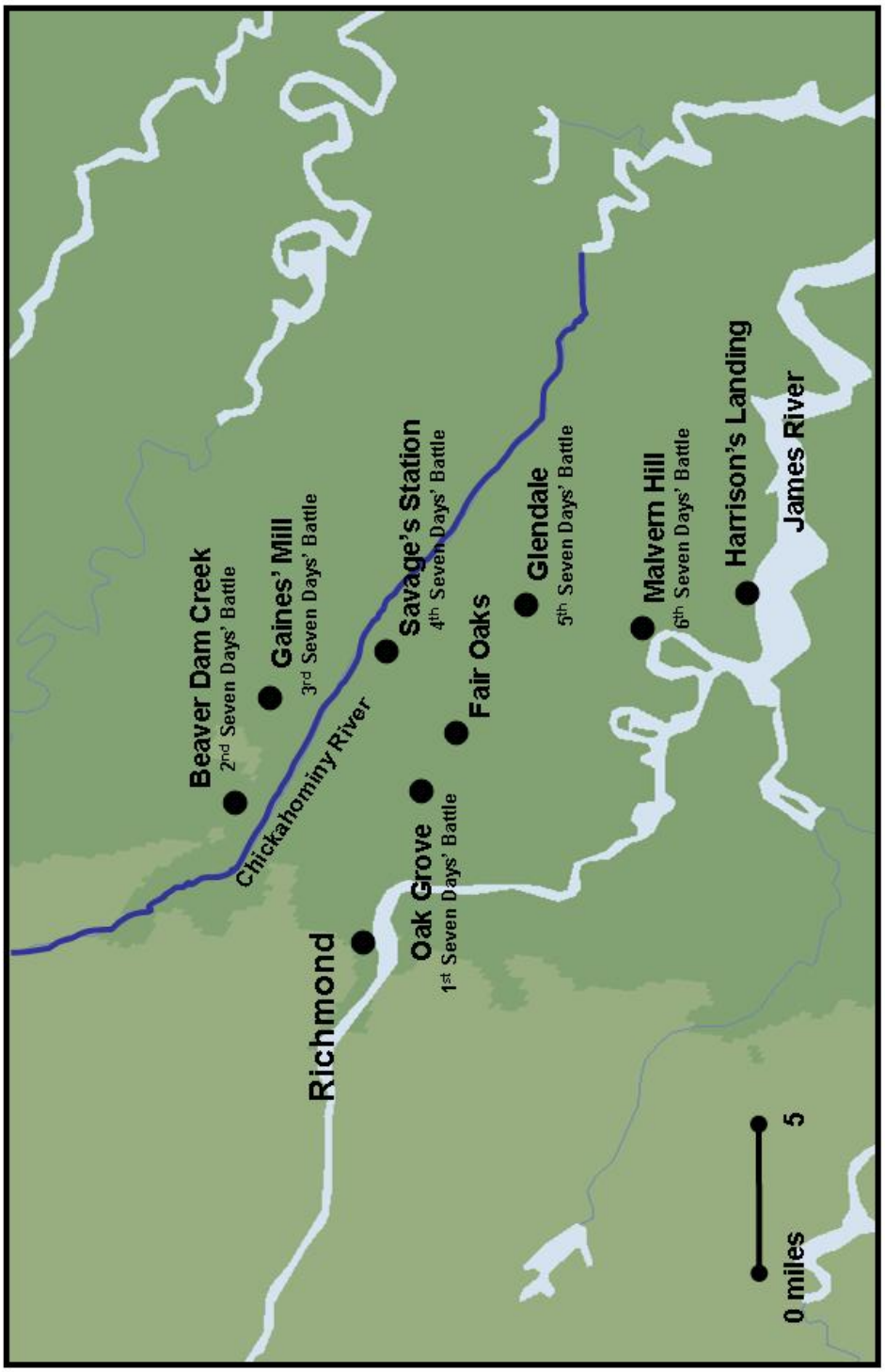
[208] Betts, *Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures are Inevitable*, 61-89. 88.

Annex A: Map of Eastern Virginia



Annex B: Map of Richmond Area and the Seven Days' Battles



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