

# McCLELLAN AND THE PEACE PLANK OF 1864: A REAPPRAISAL

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HISTORIANS TODAY treat George B. McClellan, presidential candidate, with scant respect. This is particularly evident in their analyses of McClellan's acceptance of the Democratic nomination. When on August 31, 1864, the Chicago convention chose the general to head its ticket, it presented him with a platform containing a plank terming the Northern war effort a failure and calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities. Confronted by this so-called peace plank, James A. Rawley writes, McClellan "weakly vacillated over his acceptance letter." Jean H. Baker remarks his "uncertainty about the platform." The general's first reaction, according to Larry E. Nelson, was to consider "offering the South an unconditional armistice and unrestricted peace talks." In Joel H. Silbey's account, "McClellan wavered, for a time, as to what to do"; in William F. Zornow's, he wavered and "shifted his ground twice." James M. McPherson explains that initially McClellan "endorsed an armistice qualified only by a proviso calling for renewal of the war if negotiations failed to produce reunion," an action that "would have satisfied" the peace plank's author, Clement L. Vallandigham.<sup>1</sup>

Although in the end McClellan's letter accepting the Democratic nomination did not embrace the idea of an unconditional armistice, thus rejecting Vallandigham's peace plank, the picture of the general in the

<sup>1</sup> Edward McPherson, *The Political History of the United States of America, During the Great Rebellion* 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Philp & Solomons, 1865), 419; James A. Rawley, *The Politics of Union: Northern Politics during the Civil War* (1974; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 160; Jean H. Baker, *Affairs of Party: The Political Culture of Northern Democrats in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983), 285n; Larry E. Nelson, *Bullets, Ballots, and Rhetoric: Confederate Policy for the United States Presidential Contest of 1864* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1980), 121; Joel H. Silbey, *A Respectable Minority: The Democratic Party in the Civil War Era, 1860-1868* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 135; William Frank Zornow, *Lincoln & the Party Divided* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), 136; James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 775.

throes of indecision has persisted. It suggests that this trait so marked in him on the battlefield also marked him as a presidential candidate. It suggests as well that President Lincoln was remarkably prescient in characterizing General McClellan when he wrote in his famous "blind memorandum" of August 23 that he expected to be defeated if McClellan was nominated, and in that event the cabinet must join him "to save the Union between the election and the inauguration" for his opponent "will have secured his election on such ground that he can not possibly save it afterwards."<sup>2</sup> To those aware of McClellan's vacillation over the peace plank in the platform, it seemed a sure forecast of future vacillation over the paramount issues of peace and reunion had he gained the presidency. The outcome of the 1864 election takes on even greater significance thereby.

The unflattering appraisal of candidate McClellan by these historians is perfectly understandable, for all of them utilized the same source in describing the general's agonizing experience composing his acceptance letter. This much-cited source is Charles R. Wilson's article "McClellan's Changing Views on the Peace Plank of 1864," published in the *American Historical Review* in 1933. Making use for the first time of documents on the 1864 presidential contest in the McClellan Papers deposited in the Library of Congress, Professor Wilson, of the University of Cincinnati, called into question the then-current interpretation that in his acceptance of the Democratic nomination "the general at no time wavered in his 'Union at any price' position." Documents in the McClellan Papers, Wilson wrote, "throw doubt upon the validity of this assumption."<sup>3</sup>

Wilson grounded his argument in what he described as four early drafts by McClellan of his acceptance letter. Previous to the convention, the general had seemed entirely consistent in his attitude of staunch Unionism; indeed, he expressed contempt for the very idea of an armistice. When he began to compose his acceptance letter under the shadow of the peace plank, however, he is pictured by Wilson as aligning himself with Vallandigham and the ultra peace men in the party in his willingness "to accept the doctrine of an unconditional armistice and to risk the resumption of hostilities in case negotiations should break down." He thus "placed himself in a dangerous position" and betrayed the trust

<sup>2</sup> Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953-55), 7:514.

<sup>3</sup> Charles R. Wilson, "McClellan's Changing Views on the Peace Plank of 1864," *American Historical Review*, 38:3 (April 1933): 498-505, quotations on 498. While in *The Politics of Union* Rawley does not specifically cite Wilson's article, his account of the acceptance letter acknowledges Zornow's *Lincoln & the Party Divided*, which does cite it.

of the many Unionist Democrats who supported him. "The general was gambling with the gods," Wilson concluded.<sup>4</sup>

He speculated that when McClellan showed this first draft of his letter to "older and possibly wiser heads" among his advisers, they warned him of the "disaster involved in chaining up the dogs of war without definite assurances from the South on the question of the Union." Under this new pressure, McClellan shifted his ground a second time and returned to his original stance making reunion a precondition of peace talks. The second draft of his acceptance letter represented "an entirely fresh start," Wilson wrote, the third draft "embodied a fundamental change in attitude," and after further refinements in diction the fourth draft became the final acceptance letter that rejected Vallandigham's peace plank.<sup>5</sup>

"Did he change his attitude to conform with changing conceptions of the relative strength of the factions in his party?" Wilson asked. Or was he simply unable at first to fathom the dangers of an unconditional armistice? "Did he carry over into political life the indecision which characterized his military career?" Or did he change "consciously and deliberately in an endeavor to do what he honestly thought was best for the people of the North?" Wilson offered no answers to these questions. "As in so many other cases, the records are silent as to the human aspects of the matter." Nevertheless, appearing as it did in the august pages of the *American Historical Review*, Wilson's portrayal of weak-willed candidate McClellan was exceedingly convincing.<sup>6</sup>

In fact his portrayal was entirely false. There was never a moment when George McClellan wavered or vacillated or was indecisive in rejecting the platform's peace plank. That he struggled with the composition of his acceptance letter is true enough—his struggle was even more prolonged than Wilson imagined—but these efforts were devoted entirely to putting the best possible face on his split with the peace wing of the party. Professor Wilson's argument rested upon a false premise: what he took to be the pivotal first draft of McClellan's acceptance letter, which has him approving Vallandigham's unconditional armistice, was neither the first draft nor was it written by McClellan.

The document in question is unsigned and undated and bears no notation concerning its purpose or authorship. The handwriting, however, identifies it as the work of A. Banning Norton, a political refugee from Texas who spent the war years in Mt. Vernon, Ohio, and who was an active delegate on the Conservative Union National Committee that

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 498, 499, 502.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 499, 502.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 504-5.

promoted McClellan for the presidency well in advance of the Democratic convention. Norton carried on a busy political correspondence with such figures as former Tennessee governor William B. Campbell and with McClellan's political manager Samuel L. M. Barlow. Writing to McClellan himself six months before the convention, he predicted the general would gain the November election if conservative Democrats could be rallied to his cause. After the Chicago convention wrote its platform and chose its nominee, Norton sent McClellan a model acceptance letter for his guidance.<sup>7</sup>

In view of Wilson's misreading of this letter, there is no small irony in the discovery that A. Banning Norton was actually a vigorous opponent of the peace wing of the Democratic party. Following the November election he would write McClellan, in reference to the armistice advocates at the Chicago convention, "I felt that it was a cursed shame to have a miserable set of malcontents, a contemptible minority of factionists ride rough shod over an overwhelming majority." In his model acceptance letter he simply suggested to the general a way to render Vollandigham's handiwork politically palatable. He sought to defuse the whole armistice question by pointing out that it was customary and proper among civilized nations at war "now & then to suspend hostilities temporarily for purposes of negotiation and mutual explorations." Sometimes such suspensions "resulted in satisfactory settlements and returns to peace, and at other times in renewal of the contests." In the case of the American war then raging, Norton continued, it would be the duty of the new Democratic president "to hold out the olive branch to those men in arms against this Government," but if the negotiations failed, "we shall be obliged to appeal again to the God of battles."<sup>8</sup>

For the North to declare an unconditional armistice such as Vollandigham's peace plank demanded would all but guarantee the South its independence, and no one was more aware of that fact than General McClellan. Under a relaxation of the blockade the Confederacy might rejuvenate its war resources from overseas and make any resumption of the fighting a dubious prospect for the Union. As a young lieutenant

<sup>7</sup> "Meeting of the Conservative Union National Committee, at Cincinnati, Thursday, December 3, 1863," broadside, Filson Club, Louisville, Ky.; Norton to Campbell, Mar. 7, 29, 1864, Campbell Family Papers, Duke University Library; Norton to Barlow, Mar. 25, 1864, Barlow Papers, Huntington Library; Norton to McClellan, Feb. 28, 1864, McClellan Papers, Library of Congress. In addition to its distinctive chirography, Norton's model letter bears no resemblance, in style or content, to any of the drafts McClellan did write.

<sup>8</sup> Norton to McClellan, Jan. 2, 1865, McClellan Papers; [Norton to McClellan], undated, McClellan Papers. There is a second such advisory letter from Norton, also unsigned and undated, in the McClellan Papers. In it Norton urged the general "to plant himself squarely upon the *Union & Constitution of the Fathers*, and eternal opposition to Disunionists and Traitors, whether living in the South or in the North, and whether the pretext for the treason be Slavery or Anti-Slavery."

McClellan had witnessed the nation's most recent—and unhappy—experience with an armistice, during the Mexican War. The lesson was not lost on him. The Mexican general Santa Anna utilized the time to rebuild his forces and strengthen his defenses, and the subsequent battle for Mexico City was all the more bloody for the truce. Only a few weeks before the Chicago Convention McClellan had responded with scorn to a proposal from a peace Democrat that he call for a cessation of hostilities and thereby assure himself of the nomination. "Morgan is very anxious that I should write a letter suggesting an *armistice*!!!!" he wrote one of his advisers. "If these fools will ruin the country I won't help them."<sup>9</sup>

McClellan did not depart from that stance during the composition of his acceptance letter, although he labored through six drafts before he was satisfied with the result. Nor did he give serious thought to rejecting the nomination outright because of Vollandigham's peace plank. Earlier in the summer, when as a result of intense political maneuvering the Democratic convention was postponed from July 4 to late August, he interpreted the move as a manipulation by the peace faction and threatened to withdraw his candidacy. He was persuaded to remain in the race, however, and at the convention his managers assured the delegates he would accept if nominated. On the day the convention opened, he affirmed his intentions to a Boston supporter; only in the event his name was coupled to conditions "distasteful" to him, he wrote, would he resign the ticket. In the event, any distaste he felt for the peace plank was overridden by the conviction that it was his patriotic duty to repudiate it. On September 6 he wrote his mentor William H. Aspinwall:

I will either accept on my own terms (you know what they are) or I will decline the whole affair. In my judgment my letter will be acceptable to all true patriots, & will only drive off the real adherents of Jeff Davis this side of the line. . . . You are perfectly right. . . . that the platform will be "the Union at any cost." Rest assured that I have the boldness to speak out my own mind, & the nerve to risk anything for my country. . . . I both am & shall continue to be unpledged to any men except the real patriots of the land who value the "Union" above all things on earth.<sup>10</sup>

In this election year he had retreated from his residence in Manhattan to the privacy of a rented house atop Orange Mountain in northern New

<sup>9</sup> John S. D. Eisenhower, *So Far From God: The U.S. War With Mexico, 1846-1848* (New York: Random House, 1989), 328-32; George W. Morgan to McClellan, Aug. 4, 1864, McClellan Papers; McClellan to William C. Prime, Aug. 10, 1864; Stephen W. Sears, ed., *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan: Selected Correspondence, 1860-1865* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1989), 586.

<sup>10</sup> McClellan to Manton Marble, June 25, 1864, *ibid.*, 580; Marble to McClellan, Aug. 10, 1864, McClellan Papers; James Laurence to McClellan, Aug. 31, 1864, McClellan Papers; McClellan to Aspinwall, Sept. 6, 1864, *McClellan Civil War Papers*, 594.

Jersey, and it was there, without consultation with his advisers, that he worked through the first three drafts of his acceptance letter. To be sure, he did not lack for unsolicited advice. On September 6, a week after the nomination, he told his wife that he had his letter "in admirable shape," and added, "I found 32 letters awaiting me tonight—all but about 4 on this subject & all agreeing in sentiment." In addition to Norton's model letter, suggestions arrived from former members of his military family, from political savants of various stripes, and from such party figures as Samuel Barlow, William Aspinwall, John Van Buren, and August Belmont, the party's national chairman. Insiders privy to the deliberations at the convention offered counsel, including Clement Vallandigham himself. "Do not listen to any of your Eastern friends who in an evil hour, may advise you to *insinuate* even, a little war into your letter of acceptance," Vallandigham warned him; "if any thing implying war is presented, two hundred thousand men in the West will withhold their support, & many go further still."<sup>11</sup>

McClellan reasoned quite differently, and with a considerably surer grasp of the political realities of his position. Those states where Vallandigham's call for an armistice had the most impact—Ohio, Indiana, Illinois—were certainly important to McClellan's candidacy, but Pennsylvania and New York, which between them contained exactly half the electoral votes he needed for victory in November, were absolutely essential. In justifying his acceptance letter to his Ohio supporter Samuel S. Cox, McClellan later explained that "nothing less than that letter would have answered in this part of the world—without it, on the simple platform, there was no chance whatever for Penn & New York." Thus his eminently practical political reason for rejecting the peace plank. Of more importance to McClellan personally was the principle involved. As he told Cox, "I could not have run on the platform as everybody interpreted it in this part of the world without violating all my antecedents—which I would not do for a thousand Presidencies."<sup>12</sup>

In his "1st rough draft," as he labeled it, McClellan set the tone for his repudiation of the peace plank. "Union is the real the only object for which the war should be waged," he wrote, and in so doing distanced himself from Lincoln by rejecting emancipation as a condition of any peace settlement. Three years of warfare was enough to satisfy all military honor and satiate the most vindictive, he went on, and he gave his terms for a cessation of hostilities and peace talks:

<sup>11</sup> McClellan to his wife, Sept. 6, 1864, *ibid.*, 593; Vallandigham to McClellan, Sept. 4, 1864, McClellan Papers. Among the various letters of advice, all in the McClellan Papers, see those from Martin T. McMahon, Sept. 1; Thomas M. Key, Sept. 4; George Ticknor Curtis, Sept. 1; Edwin Bartlett, Sept. 5; Barlow, Sept. 3; Aspinwall, Sept. 4; Van Buren, Sept. 4; Belmont, Sept. 3; Amasa J. Parker, Sept. 5.

<sup>12</sup> McClellan to Cox, Sept. 15, 1864, *McClellan Civil War Papers*, 598.

It is therefore my opinion that while the restoration of the Union is & must continue to be the indispensable condition in any settlement of the questions at issue in this war, we should use our best endeavors to attain a pacific solution of the controversy without further effusion of blood. . . . But if an honest & frank effort to obtain this end results in failure then I am of the belief that we must again resort to the dread arbitrament of war. For it is better to fight upon the question of the Union than for the adjustment of the inevitable question of a boundary line. . . . and I for one, could not look in the face of my comrades of the Army & Navy who have survived so many bloody battles & tell them that their labors and the sacrifice of such numbers of their brothers had been in vain—that we had abandoned the Union for which we had so often risked our lives.

He would repeat this sentiment in each of the five drafts that followed, although steadily softening the bluntness of his declaration.<sup>13</sup>

In these succeeding drafts his message underwent other changes. Substantial revisions were made in drafts four, five, and six after three days of meetings in New York with his advisers, including Democratic party leaders Barlow, Belmont, Dean Richmond, and Samuel J. Tilden; lawyer George Ticknor Curtis; newspaper editor William C. Prime; and even his pastor, the reverend William Adams. Verbiage was eliminated and the other planks acknowledged. Vallandigham's advice was accepted, at least in a literal sense; by the final draft, the word "war" was not to be found in the acceptance letter. Any Southern state individually seeking to return to the Union would be welcomed "with a full guarantee of all its Constitutional rights." Although a spirit of compromise and conciliation would mark his new administration, McClellan wrote, "the Union must be preserved at all hazards." That point was made succinctly in phrasing added by Barlow: "The Union is the one condition of peace. We ask no more." Having thus rewritten the platform's peace plank, McClellan blandly concluded, "Believing that the views here expressed are those of the Convention. . . . I accept the nomination."<sup>14</sup>

"My letter was not handed in until midnight last night," he wrote his wife on September 9. "The effect thus far has been electric—the peace men are the only ones who squirm,—but all the good men are delighted

<sup>13</sup> Of McClellan's six drafts, drafts one (Wilson's draft two), two (Wilson's draft three), three, and five (Wilson's draft four) are in the McClellan Papers, and drafts four and six are in the Barlow Papers. Draft two, essentially a clean copy of the first draft, and draft six, a clean copy of the much altered draft five, are printed in *McClellan Civil War Papers*, 590–92, 595–97.

<sup>14</sup> Quotations from draft six, *ibid.*, 595–96. The acceptance letter in its final form was printed in newspapers and in broadside as a campaign document. It also appeared in a pamphlet, in an edition of 200,000, containing an address by Robert C. Winthrop and other documents, published by the Society for the Diffusion of Political Knowledge, printed in Frank Freidel, ed., *Union Pamphlets of the Civil War, 1861–1865*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 2:1076–1118.

with it." Earlier he had assured her, while drafting the acceptance letter, that he was "not afraid to go down to posterity on it," and that is a determination history must respect. General McClellan accepted the Democratic presidential nomination on his own terms, and they never included, in thought or deed, the acceptance of peace at any price. As he expressed it to his friend Samuel Barlow a year after the election, "I can't tell what the secesh expected to be the result of my election—but if they expected to gain their Independence from me they would have been woefully mistaken."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> McClellan to his wife, Sept. 9, 1864, *McClellan Civil War Papers*, 597; McClellan to his wife, Sept. 6, 1864, *ibid.*, 593; McClellan to Barlow, Nov. 12, 1865, Barlow Papers.



# CIVIL WAR H·I·S·T·O·R·Y

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